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'Because it's easier to kill that way': Dehumanizing epithets, militarized subjectivity, and American necropolitics

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the blunt conceptual instrument of dehumanizing American military terms for the enemy in the context of the Vietnam War and the Global War on Terror. I examine language that dehumanizes American service members themselves, who are semiotically framed as expendable. Next, I explore the essentialist, semi-propositional qualities of derogatory epithets for the enemy and the affectively charged, deadly stances they encourage. I examine how generic references to the enemy during training make totalizing claims that risk encompassing civilians in their typifications. And I show that, in the context of war, the instability of derogatory epithets can manifest itself when the servicemember is confronted with the behavioral idiosyncrasies and personal vulnerabilities of actual 'enemies' on the ground. The putative folk wisdom found in generic references to the enemy can thus fall apart when confronted with countervailing experience; in such cases, service members may shift stance by renouncing military epithets. (Military language, epithets, slurs, generics, othering, dehumanization, necropolitics)*

INTRODUCTION

In late 2019, I had an email exchange with a Vietnam veteran named Marc about dehumanization in war. I had been paging through a book on military ethics and came across this passage written by two philosophy professors.

> Our troops cannot and should not avoid dehumanizing their enemies to some degree. Just as it is their responsibility to only kill certain people in certain ways at certain times, it is the responsibility of leadership to help them accomplish this by training them to only dehumanize certain people in certain ways at certain times. (French & Jack 2015:194)

I knew the moral agility described here would sound absurd to Marc. He went through basic Army training in 1970 and was a willing killer within a month of his arrival in the jungles of Vietnam, in a messy war with thin lines between enemy aggressors and civilians. 'I read [these] lines and laughed', Marc responded. 'Was this written as a joke? The thinking is so out of touch with reality it's frightening'. In principle, humans can compartmentalize their affect within a category; in

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many societies, for instance, some people may be considered worthy of empathy and care while others may be considered dispensable. But historically, American military control over this process has been sloppy at best. Finely tuned togglings of dehumanization are hard to control among heavily armed young adults who are terrified or exhausted, possibly vengeful, and conditioned since their basic training to withhold empathy from certain types of people. And those 'types' are often labeled, even by military authorities themselves, with a dehumanizing epithet that can be used with such broad extension (in the sense of: the set of all things to which a term refers) that it can encompass civilians.

War may sometimes look like an orgy of senseless violence, but as Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois (2004:3) remind us, 'Sadly, most violence is not senseless at all'; it is always mediated by meaning. National discourses leading up to war often encourage the projection of negative qualities onto the enemy 'other'. Conditioning during military training and service does still more to disinhibit the act of killing. In the United States military, in fact, this disinhibition has a famous history. General S. L. A. Marshall claimed after WWII that the vast majority of service members had declined to fire at the enemy, and those who did fire often missed intentionally (Grossman 1995:3ff). Though the accuracy of Marshall's claims remains in some question, the American military responded to them with new attention to training tactics. Human silhouettes replaced bulls-eye targets on firing ranges, target practice required quicker response times, and camaraderie in training was enhanced so that combatants would be more willing to kill on behalf of their unit.

But a key training mechanism all along has been a widely used verbal strategy to dehumanize those who need to be categorized as targets. Occasionally, the category term is the catch-all 'enemies', but in backstage military talk not for public ears—not these days, anyway—racial, religious, and other slurs have often been used, tapping into and augmenting a culturally widespread pattern of using derogatory epithets for social others. (Rhetoricians use *epithet* to mean a descriptive term or phrase that can be positive or negative, but I use it in what has become a colloquial American sense of a prejudicial or abusive term such as a racial slur or a creative derogatory phrase.[1]) Military epithets have included 'slants', 'gooks', 'dinks', and 'zipper-heads' during the Vietnam War, for instance, or 'towel-heads', 'hajis', even 'sand n***ers' during the ongoing Global War on Terror, or GWOT. (I opt for indirect typography for the racial epithet that, spelled out directly, feels particularly inflammatory in the context of current US racial politics. The other words are potentially just as offensive, though some readers may be less familiar with them, so I write them out in full in spite of their appalling connotations.)

Epithets selectively foreground some putative element of a person, reducing them to that negative description. According to Wierzbicka (1988:475), natural language tends to categorize the world into 'a number of kinds', each one 'characterized by, but not reducible to, a cluster of properties'.[2] At the same time, writes Wierzbicka,

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> If a speaker goes against this tendency and categorizes a person in terms of a single property, using a noun such as fool, fatso, or liar, he does it, so to speak, on purpose: he wants to stress, hyperbolically, the property in question, and his own emotional reaction to it; he wants to exaggerate that property, and to show that in his eyes it looms so large that it determines his way of seeing the referent, to the exclusion of other properties. (Wierzbicka 1988:475)

Like the nominalizations Wierzbicka lists, epithets for the enemy draw attention to caricatured racial and other properties. Emergent from nationalist histories, they (re) invoke stances of xenophobia, Islamophobia, racism, and ethnocentrism. They are simplifying and essentialist, sometimes cutting the world into polluting versus pure people. In so doing, they obscure the complexity of human beliefs, intentions, motives, and experiences—human minds, in other words—attenuating empathy and enhancing us vs. them thinking. Anthropologist Hal Levine (1999:169), discussing language-in-use, describes how labels can reify differences on the fly.

> The very act of classifying transforms perceptions of reality. Individuals become depersonalized, transmuted from unique persons to exemplars of named groups. This group reification is typically accompanied by a dual accentuation: a magnification of the differences between groups and an emphasis on homogeneity within a group.

Epithets for the enemy thus dehumanize and help create what Grossman has called 'psychological distance' (1995:160) that can facilitate the act of killing (see also Holmes 1989).

By *dehumanize*, I mean depriving a person of positive human characteristics, which can apply by degrees and take a spectrum of related forms. Dehumanizing may involve denying the presence of someone's feelings and thoughts; refusing a person agency; denying their individuality; denying their self-definition (including misgendering them); or denying their relational embeddedness in a community. It can involve likening a person to an animal or object, and/or treating them as if intrinsically polluting. It can involve hypersimplifying a person's complexity and/or negatively essentializing them, reducing each token of a dehumanized type to some putative deep defining quality, while rendering each token exchangeable.

In this article, I examine the blunt conceptual instrument of dehumanizing American military terms for the enemy, primarily in the context of the American war in Vietnam, with some supplementary material from the ongoing Global War on Terror. I examine some of the essentialist, semi-propositional (or half-understood) qualities of these epithets and the affectively charged, deadly stances they encourage. While the ethical ideal described by the philosophers quoted above would be for service members to dehumanize only those who could 'justly' be killed in a war, the military faces a challenge delimiting the tokens of the 'killable' category.[3] Some of the problem stems from the use of epithets that sweep like a terrible net across a diverse human landscape, gathering people indiscriminately into the same abject type. The broad application of these dehumanizing categories is a crude linguistic-conceptual act that sometimes turns into a problem of war crimes.

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Part of my argument, too, is that the military has an interest not only in typing the enemy, but also in making their own participants, as much as possible, into types. The prequel to dehumanizing the enemy is the dehumanization of American service members themselves, who over the course of their training become semiotically framed as both expendable and exchangeable. My argument thus suggests under-explored connections between dehumanizing slurs used ABOUT and BY American military recruits (or draftees).

I connect all of these epithets—those used against and by American service members—to what Mbembe (2003:40), inspired by Agamben (1998) and Foucault (2004), calls *necropolitics*, the power of the sovereign state to create 'forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead'. Arguably, American combat soldiers occupy a condition of necropolitical abjection (a phrase I borrow from MacLeish 2013), encouraged by the dehumanizing epithets wielded against them during basic training, while their own use of dehumanizing epithets aspires to foist a still more severe abjection upon the enemy Other.

Before I go further, it is worth disentangling two senses of the term *generic*, and how they bear on my argument. *Generic reference* is the primary focus of this special issue; it is a referential act that takes the form of a generalization, such as 'Marines never lie', or 'Gooks don't bleed'. It is distinct from *specific reference*, for example, 'Two gooks came at me'. *Generic types*, though, are types of people or things that are or appear unidimensional, or lack individual specificity. Schutz (1970:228–29) suggests that when generic typing categorizes an 'other', it adopts a 'pure They-orientation', in which 'They' are understood in terms of a stereotyped 'ideal type', and therefore not 'apprehended… as a real living person'. Note that people can make *specific* (as opposed to generic) *reference* while still invoking a *generic type* (as in 'Two gooks came at me'). When people conform to expectation of a social role, they can appear 'more generic' in the sense of orienting to a type ('a soldier', for instance), but the appearance of genericity is still instantiated in a specific person. By contrast, generic reference invokes a concept in the abstract, without any here-and-now.

Epithets can be used with generic reference ('Hajis don't fight fair') or specific reference ('He was just a haji'). In both cases, the epithet invokes a generic type, inviting us to think of the person as unidimensional. There is an important difference, though. Generic references to the enemy make essentializing generalizations, and can allow the typification of the enemy to be built up in military minds without resistance in the form of counterexamples or the complexities of any real individual. During basic training, for instance, when superior officers issue generalizations about what to expect, and when rumors circulate among those who have not yet been in the field of combat, epithets for the enemy tend to take the form of generic reference (e.g. 'Gooks don't feel pain'; 'You can't trust a haji'). Such contexts give no affordance for humanization; they simply make totalizing claims about an (ostensible) class of people, and encourage stances of pure derogation.

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But in the context of war itself, when specific reference to 'an enemy' is being made, there is more room for the instability of epithets to manifest itself. The servicemember may be confronted with the behavioral idiosyncrasies and personal vulnerabilities of actual human beings on the ground, and if they notice the enemy does not conform to type or somehow exceeds the boundaries of narrow characterization, the reductions of an epithet may fall apart. Sometimes, for instance, the enemy's skill or bravery in fighting make themselves indubitably known, and disdain must be interwoven with grudging respect. Sometimes, the individuality, complex motives, or suffering of those on the other side announce themselves, forcing American combatants to reckon with the mismatch between epithets for the enemy and the humanity before them. To be sure, many American combatants continue to apply epithets to particular people they encounter and assail in war. Others, as we see below, shift their stances by moving away from those epithets. Some regret ever having used them. Much of my data, in fact, stems from regretful post-hoc discussions of the language of war, from veterans in conversation with me about what it meant to learn the terms without question, and how shocking it is for them to look back on the fact they ever used them.

This article draws an analytical arc between the racist language in the American War in Vietnam and the Global War on Terror, offering an argument about necropolitical consequences of military slang while exploring the quasi-pedagogic function of generic generalizations about social kinds. The speech patterns I discuss here emerge from a much broader context of widespread and familiar derogatory language in the USA. In the last fifteen years or so, a growing body of literature in semantics (e.g. Hom 2008; Croom 2013) and linguistic anthropology (e.g. Hill 2008; Alim, Rickford, & Ball 2016; Bax 2018) has been reckoning more closely with racist and other socially offensive slurs, as well as the shifting American context when it comes to the (un)acceptability of insulting people based on their social category (cf. McIntosh 2020b). But it is rare for such literature to closely examine social slurs in the context of military training or war. We know that the infamous 1990s genocide in Rwanda involved a rise in terms such as 'cockroach' (*inyezi*) and 'snake' (*inzoka*) in Hutu references to Tutsi people, paving the way for their extermination (Tirrell 2012), and that historically, derogation of the enemy during basic military training in Europe and the United States has often reduced the enemy to 'mad dogs', 'vermin', and other dehumanized categories (Verrips 2004), including some of the slurs I invoke here. What has not been examined is how these derogatory terms appear in folk truisms and quasi-pedagogic statements prior to combat, twinned with a derogation of recruits themselves that lays the semiotic groundwork for dehumanization of the enemy and, sometimes, civilians alike. These generic references give the impression of bearing timeless knowledge (cf. Gelman's, Sidnell's, and Zuckerman's contributions to this issue), when in fact, they emerge from cruel ideologies that experience may give the lie to.

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DEHUMANIZING EPITHETS IN BASIC TRAINING: THE RECRUIT AS ABJECT

Recruits to the United States military come from all over the nation, bringing personal back stories and idiosyncrasies. The ritualistic context of basic training, though, takes specific people and semiotically renders them members of a generic type, the uniformed 'recruit', stripped of the individuating markers of their former life and treated as liminal (Turner 1970) during their training period. At Parris Island Marine Corps recruit training center in South Carolina, for instance, arrivals are disgorged from a bus onto neat rows of painted 'yellow footsteps'. Each pair of footsteps assumes the same position, heels nearly clicked together, toes pointed slightly outward, forcing the body to start standing at attention as the recruits first embody their new collective identity. Through exhausting repetition, recruits' bodies will subsequently be biopolitically entrained into strength, endurance, and synchronized movements as their agency is utterly subordinated to the state's agenda (cf. Foucault 2004; MacLeish 2019).

Alongside the reconditioning of the body is what might be called 'psychopolitical retraining' in how recruits imagine themselves and their ascribed enemies. Language plays a vital role in this psychopolitical drama. During their thirteen weeks of basic training, before they can be deemed 'Marines', recruits are merely 'recruits', sometimes referred to with their individuating surname (e.g. 'Recruit Larson') but sometimes with denigrating nicknames or epithets. Such insulting language is not officially permitted in the Recruit Training Order (RTO), but by all accounts, verbal violations of the RTO are fairly common, depending on the Drill Instructor (DI). Between personal conversations with DIs (active duty and retired) and published accounts (e.g. Smith 2007), I collected a litany of insults used as appellations for recruits, many of them in circulation since before the Vietnam War era. These include 'whiners', 'weaklings', 'wusses', 'lazy bastards', 'crybabies', 'snowflakes', 'maggots', 'hogs', 'crayon-eaters', 'clowns', 'retards', 'shit-bags', 'shitbirds', and a raft of gender-troubled (and homophobic and transphobic) insults, such as (to male recruits especially) 'ladies', 'little girls', 'faggots', 'pussies', 'pansies', 'buttercups', 'cupcakes', and 'sweethearts'. Infantilization, feminization, animalization, and objectification are common. The terms dance somewhere between the play of absurd metaphor and ostentatious disregard for the humanity and lived reality, especially the suffering, of the recruits. Indeed, some DIs will amplify their use of epithets against recruits precisely when recruits show signs of suffering or vulnerability. And though it is now a high-risk speech act, a few DIs still target ethnic, racial, or religious group members with intense cruelty. (A well-known case of identity abuse took place in 2016 when a young recruit from the Detroit area, Raheel Saddiqui, took his own life after repeatedly being called a 'terrorist' by his DI and asked if he 'needed his turban' (Reitman 2017).)

Epithets for recruits are routinely used (with specific, as opposed to generic, reference) as appellations or taunts, as in: 'Faster, hogs', or 'What are you, little girls?'.

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Alongside these epithets, new verbal rituals and repertoires further discourage recruits' sense of individuation. Recruits must avoid the first-person singular pronoun and yell responses to DIs' yes-no questions, while any backtalk is met with verbal berating and painful 'IT' (incentive training). DIs recognize that the point is to create a transformed being. In conversation with me, two active-duty DIs spontaneously used the word 'dehumanization' in the context of recruit training, though they also signaled awareness that such framing could be controversial in the public eye. Said the first: 'We need to de-, dehumanize, but that isn't the right word, but…what you THOUGHT you were, what you came with, we need to wash that off. We need to just wash it right off'. A second, in the context of a discussion about profanity, told me that UNLIKE some DIs he knows, he follows the spirit of the Recruit Training Order: 'You're not meant to dehumanize a recruit by insulting them, like, "Why didn't you do what I said, you fucking bitch?"'. (It was clear from context that he was invoking an exchange with a male recruit.) Twice evoking dehumanization to deny it, these DIs implied that at least some recruit training practices live right on its edge.

Elsewhere (McIntosh 2020a), I have referred to this verbal drama of recurrent insults as a process of 'semiotic callousing'. DIs say it anneals the recruits to combat hardship. But I suggest that semiotic callousing through epithets contains a subtler pedagogic lesson, like Victor Turner's (1970) *sacra*—those deeds, displays, and statements presented to the neophyte during a rite of passage to instruct them about what type of person they are to become. Not only do the epithets grind down the recruit to make them more amenable to learning a new role, but they also send several messages. They clarify that personal sensitivity must be expunged and that the individual must be sacrificed for the unit; they encourage, in other words, a position of necropolitical abjection.[4] And they clarify that language need no longer honor individual lives on their own terms, for just as the DI typifies and dehumanizes recruits through epithets and uncompromising orders, so too will the recruit typify and dehumanize 'the enemy'. The callousing, in other words, is of both recruits' personal sensitivity, and their sensitivity to those framed as Others. One might argue the epithets used against the recruit start the cycle in which the verbally abused become verbal abusers, constituting a semiotic loop that places BOTH military participants AND their targets into the condition of the living dead, offered up to kill or be killed.

There is some cross-cultural precedent for this conflation of soon-to-be killers with those-who-are-killable. Male initiation rites in many small-scale societies involve violent imagery in which the initiate is symbolically victimized, wounded, or sacrificed before being 'reborn' or otherwise rebounding into a position of strength, including, sometimes, that of a killer (Bloch 1992). Bloch sees this as part of a species-wide dynamic with a religious dimension, arguing that the sacrifice of the young self allows initiates to partake of a kind of immortal external vitality; violence in ritual is thus 'an attempt to create the transcendental' (Bloch 1992:7). Yet at the pragmatic level, the machinations of American basic training seem less about yearning for the transcendental and more about retraining the

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self into an affective and cognitive zone in which death (one's own and that of others) is thinkable. In this regard, I see American basic training as having intriguing resonance (however partial) with the Atavip pre-war rituals in New Guinea described by Simon Harrison (1993). According to Harrison, aggression is so antithetical to Atavip norms and ordinary identity that a 'temporary ritual transformation of the self' is required to carry it out (1993:27). Historically, their ritual system involved 'war magic'—including consuming magical leaves—that would place men into a state of dissociation, so they could kill for the good of their community but be relieved from personal responsibility for killing. Put another way, 'it was not only the enemy who had to be depersonalized, but, much more importantly, themselves' (1993:96). Epithets for the recruit in the US seem to play a somewhat analogous depersonalizing role, even if the maneuver is not metapragmatically recognized as such the way it was among Atavip.

Epithets for the recruit not only signal their abjection, but also can give them a foil to push against; the terms are simultaneously nihilistic and motivating (what soldier wants to be a 'crybaby' or a 'cupcake'?). Both of these states of being serve the interest of the military. Service members must accept that they are in a newly killable category, but if they are to function successfully, they must strive against their own weakness and demise. It is no coincidence that so many of the epithets, for instance, are feminizing, and implicit within them is a taunt that the recruit must overcome (whether they are male or female) by proving their toughness and aggression.

My conversations with veterans themselves affirmed some of the effects I describe, such as the way that verbal berating leads to a kind of nihilism. One Vietnam veteran, Preston, was trained as a Navy Seal to hide in wait and kill his targets by the dozens, numb to feeling ('the feelings', he tells me ruefully, 'came later'). He explains the effect of being insulted during basic training (original emphasis).

> The insults get you down in that core of BLACKness where you, you can do anything. They want you to be able to say, think you can do anything. And when they train you that way, I think the language is part of it, just to get you to do it… even though it was disrespectful… I really feel that they need to have it. You have to [use that kind of] language in order to train them to be killers.

Preston was left with crushing guilt about having become a killer, but when he adopts a militaristic stance, he recognizes that the insults of basic training lay the groundwork for doing the job. I have heard similar arguments from veterans less peace-loving than Preston: the dehumanizing language of basic training toughens recruits to the peril they will face, while making it easier for them to subtract the humanity of others. And just as recruits become 'types', so too does their conceptual system typify 'the enemy'.

ENEMY EPITHETS AND THE POLITICS OF EXTENSION

At the same time that new military recruits are being infantilized, likened to animals, and so forth during basic training, they may hear their highers-up

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pontificating about the enemy with a dehumanizing lexicon. In one of several conversations, Preston and his friend Vlad (who served in the Army in the central highlands of Vietnam in 1969–70) told me about the language they heard in basic training. 'Gooks, hooches [abrasive slang for a dwelling], you dehumanize humans. They still do that in training'. Preston added, 'The way I was trained, if you didn't have that you wouldn't be a good killer'. During this training phase, before a draftee or recruit enters combat, such epithets were often accompanied by generic referential claims such as: 'They don't grieve for their dead the way we do', or 'They're not human' (Sallah & Weiss 2005:47). Other generic referential claims in circulation included 'Gooks don't bleed, gooks don't feel pain, gooks don't have any sense of loyalty or love', 'The only good gook is a dead gook', and 'Dead gooks [have] a special stink' (Park 2007:28–29). Some of these will have been highly familiar to American servicemembers, disguising themselves as entextualized, citable folk wisdom.

Generic assertions about 'types' seem to be easy to learn and think with (Gelman 2010) and do not constitute 'generalizations from experience'; in fact, there could hardly be less experiential data when recruits first learn these terms, before they have encountered a single Vietnamese or, in the era of the GWOT, Iraqi, or Afghan individual. Many who fought in Vietnam report having readily internalized the hostile lexemes they were given, and the generic claims associated with them. Vlad, for instance, thinks back on the war with profound regret, and now realizes that basic training indoctrinated him with racist concepts.

> You heard gooks, chinks, and stuff of that nature. So, it just falls on your ears and you just absorb it… I was naïve, it didn't register as being racist or anything at the time… that's how they basically get you to think of the enemy, so you don't have any problem killing them or wanting to.

Enemy epithets are semi-propositional, or half-understood, concepts (Sperber 1982), suffused more with affective stance than with conceptual clarity. As Marc tells me about learning a term for the enemy, VC (short for Viet Cong, an ostensibly neutral name for the National Liberation Front of Vietnam, but saturated with prejudice when it issued from American mouths), he speaks of a mystified, uncanny essence placeholder. (I use italics when Marc shifts into a hushed voice.)

> That one drill sergeant… he talked about *the VC*… It was like something out of the movies. The VC, you know, *they weren't real* [to us recruits]… the way he said it, they were just something taboo… *There's something mythic about them.* They had some kind of aura around them.

Later, Marc added, 'when you hear that [word], gooks, it's dread'. Characterizing the epithet with his whole body, he gesticulated with his hands around his upper arms as he shuddered. The term is infilled with suspicion; to go back to Mbembe (2003:18, original emphasis), it implies that 'the EXISTENCE of the Other [is] an attempt on my life… [their] biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security'.

Generic reference is pedagogically useful to the military before combat, loading military epithets with meaning. Referring to the enemy with these epithets can

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subsequently be emotionally convenient for soldiers in the brutal encounters of combat itself. In Ken Burns' series about Vietnam, for instance, Marine Corps veteran John Musgrave—who became a poet, a counselor, and a highly reflexive person after the war—explains the role of epithets in his own psyche. After his first experience of killing, he recovered his ability to function by telling himself,

> I will never kill another human being as long as I'm in Vietnam. However, I will waste as many gooks as I can. I'll wax as many dinks as I can find… but I ain't going to kill anybody. Turn the subject into an object. It's Racism 101. And it turns out to be a very necessary tool when you have children fighting your wars, for them to stay sane doing their work. (Vognar 2017)

In Musgrave's self-talk, here, the phrase 'I ain't going to kill anybody' is striking along several lines. Ventriloquizing his earlier self, steeped in working-class and grunt informalities, he recalls a clear conceptual distinction between human beings ('subjects', or 'somebodies', who think and feel) and non-humans ('objects') who absolved the guilt one might feel in 'killing' them, for instead, they could be 'wasted' or 'waxed'.[5] As one of my respondents, Doug Anderson, affirms in his unpublished poem 'Kill them with a name': 'We were taught to call them gook, / slope, slant, and worse, / because it's easier to kill / that way, easier to sleep at night / if you've merely crushed a roach / under your boot heel'. Language and concept formation are intimately bound together, and the military euphemisms that sidestep human suffering not only make certain ideas more or less thinkable, but also certain deeds more or less do-able (cf. Cohn 1987).

The conceptualization of the enemy as pestilent is also evident in a combat anecdote from Marc. A man walking point in his squad was a few meters into the jungle when he came running back into a clearing, 'screaming, 'Dinks! Dinks!'". Marc describes taking cover and listening as his buddies switched from an overtly racist to a profane epithet in the heat of the moment of firing their rifles: '[They] would raise up and scream and curse, "You motherfuckers!" *Ba-ba-ba-bom*, and down. "You motherfuckers!" and down'. (Marc later described the profanity as a way of 'gearing themselves up'; it was bound up with the viscerally hostile energy they were mustering for their deadly act, perhaps similar to the way American soldiers in the GWOT have used heavy metal and rap music to 'pump' and 'charge' themselves up to kill (Pieslak 2009:50–51).) A young woman survived not only this hail of bullets, but a second one shortly thereafter. As Marc walked past her, she gripped at his thermos for water. Marc admits at this point he could not imagine her as human. He didn't care if she lived or died, and if she touched his thermos, he told me, he wouldn't drink from its 'contaminated' opening again.

When Army Lieutenant Conrad Braun gave a televised interview shortly after a battle with the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) in Vietnam's central highlands in February 1967, he used the epithet 'dinks' in several ways that emphasized the enemy's homogeneity and interchangeability.[6] Describing how his unit was overrun, Braun said,

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> They just tried this sneaky stuff… One time, one dink crawled up on the platoon perimeter and uh, Owen Mapes shot him, shot him in the leg and just uh, left him out there. Dink's two buddies came up to help him out and Mapes just emptied a magazine [of] automatic fire and killed all three of 'em.

In the above excerpt, Braun drops the article to use 'dink' as if it is a proper name for any NVA fighter, highlighting the interchangeability of one to the other. Later in the interview, too, Braun describes how he planned to destroy the personal effects of his fallen comrades as his unit was outnumbered. 'I was about to just blow it all up with me rather than let dink get it. He definitely wasn't going to get us'. In such statements, 'dink' becomes a mass noun, a singular 'he', as if all 'dinks' have become one entity, comprised of some not-quite-human, sneaky enemy principle.

If sometimes 'dink' is a mass noun, elsewhere in Braun's interview 'dinks' are not only count nouns, but also mentioned precisely in a context of being counted. The quantification, too, is profoundly de-individuating. 'There were dinks in threes and fours piled up outside that platoon perimeter', says Braun. And later, 'He'd kill about ten, eleven, twelve dinks I think, out there. I think I personally can account for three'. This pattern of numbering was doubtless encouraged by the United States' emphasis on 'body count' as a way of gauging American success in Vietnam ('The [NVA] body count now, I think, is eighty-three', says Braun near the interview as he sums up the carnage). The death of a 'dink', in Braun's discourse, is primarily a matter of quantification rather than suffering or the dissolution of a full life (cf. Frank, Slovic, & Vastfjall 2011). Meanwhile, Braun names his own buddies —'Owen Mapes', 'Spec-4 Jones', 'Sergeant Brown'—and describes some of their acts of valor in the face of grave injuries.

While the politics of epithets have shifted in ways I describe below, the Global War on Terror launched after 9/11 has been a breeding ground for equally vicious generic typing of the enemy. In 2003, for instance, when Ryan came to Parris Island for Marine Corps training, she tells me that 'from the minute you arrived, towelheads, sand n****r, that kind of thing, were pumped into you' (notice that in the second epithet, one racial slur piggybacks on another, presumably for semantic and affective leverage). Other common Islamophobic epithets included 'camel jockey', 'raghead', and 'haji', from the Arabic term for a person who has made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Army veteran Anna describes the rules of thumb as she learned them a decade ago, using generic references. '[We heard it] in the sense of, like, an Iraqi is potentially a haji, [and] a haji in that context is not a good person… You should be wary of them, because you never know'.

Anna's sense that 'you never know', any Iraqi is 'potentially a haji', gets at the heart of why military epithets for the enemy are incompatible with the delicate ethical ideals described at the start of the article. The epithets hyperbolically draw attention to racial, religious, or national features, and can readily be scaled up to encompass allies and civilians in a context of uncertainty about who is allied with whom (well-known dilemmas for the American military in the Vietnam War and the GWOT). Some veterans describe how such ambiguous terms tended to blur fighters and civilians, dehumanizing all of them. Marine

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Corps veteran Matt Young (2018) explains that during his training in the mid-2000s, 'The infantry taught us to use language like 'haji' and 'raghead' and 'target' and 'towelhead' to dehumanize not just enemy combatants, but every Iraqi or Arab person we encountered'. Army sergeant Sean Davis (2014:131) describes an American colonel in Iraq talking cynically about his interpreter: 'I can't trust the fucker. He's a raghead too'.

The net of extension in military epithets was also flung widely across Vietnam (and neighboring countries such as Cambodia, where some American troops fought just over the border). According to Army veteran Haywood Kirkland, 'As soon as I hit boot camp in Fort Jackson, South Carolina, they tried to change your total personality. Transform you out of that civilian mentality to a military mind. Right away they told us not to call them Vietnamese. Call EVERYBODY gooks, dinks' (Terry 1984:90–91, emphasis added). Sallah & Weiss (2005:47), in their Pulitzer-Prize winning account of the war crimes of one American unit in Vietnam, describe the wide extension of the epithet in the minds of the Army men: 'These Vietnamese were no better than the Vietcong, they said. They were all gooks, and none of them could be trusted'. As Holmes (1989:391) describes the 'mere gook rule', killing a Vietnamese civilian 'did not count' in the minds of many American combatants, because the extension of the dehumanizing term so readily extended to encompass them.

In fact, to return to Lieutenant Braun's 1967 NBC interview, we see a telling (if inadvertent) confession of how widely enemy epithets could stretch. Correspondent Howard Tuckner breaks in at one point during his narrative to ask a metalinguistic question: 'By dinks you mean North Vietnamese?' Braun smiles slightly, and looks down as he replies. 'Yeah. Dinks are uh NVA, North Vietnamese, communist, Charlies, anything'. Braun's smile, his only expression of facial affect in a seven-minute interview, might reflect his sudden awareness that the term might sound startling, even shocking, to some Americans watching from their living rooms. As he defines 'dinks', he lists a series of expanding social categories, starting with the 'NVA' or the formal North Vietnamese Army, and ending up at 'anything' (including 'communist', which could encompass vast numbers of civilians). Clearly, many common epithets for the enemy militate against the ethical principle described by the philosophers at the beginning of this article; namely, that service members should be carefully selective about who is dehumanized and when.

Then-presidential candidate and Vietnam Veteran John McCain got into trouble in February 2000 when he tried to argue he could personally limit the extension of an ethnoracial military slur. McCain was criticized for using the word 'gooks' to refer to North Vietnamese. From his 'Straight Talk Express' bus, McCain tried to clarify that he was referring only to the interrogators who had held him captive and tortured him for five years. Perhaps he felt his personal experience gave him authority to control the limits of the word's reference. But as philosopher Hilary Putnam (1975) once put it, 'meaning just ain't in the head', since dubbings that establish reference rely on broader social context.[7] Here too is where Bakhtin's (1983) invocation of word history as part of word meaning is illuminating. 'Gooks'

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has historically been used by US occupation troops to refer to a wide breadth of Asian nationalities, from Chinese to Korean, and as we see it was often extended to encompass all Vietnamese. A speaker's intentions do not refine the extension of an epithet, making finely grained distinctions between who is and is not caught in its dehumanizing reductions. Military generics have been regimented in quite the opposite way, in fact, by their historical and pragmatic use.

Another reason McCain ran into trouble has to do with broader shifts in language ideology in the decades since the 1980s (cf. Cameron 1995), shifts that have framed some of the national dismay as Americans look back at the terminology of the Vietnam war era. Racist and xenophobic language was in wide circulation in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, and a word like 'gooks' would not have caused an American pile-on in the 1960s. After all, Howard Tuckner mediated Lieutenant Braun's translation of the term 'dink' for viewers without a hint of judgment. And immediately after Braun's interview (in which he uses the term 'dink' no fewer than eleven times), the camera cuts to NBC studio anchor Bill Ryan, who endorses Braun's 'professionalism':

> These men… have raised American military tradition to the highest level in our history, and they have done it by becoming thoroughly professional soldiers. They could not do less than that and have a reasonable chance to survive in a strange land and a type of war strange to American military experience.

In the 1960s, an NBC anchorman, a figure of cultural authority and respect at the time, seemed to accept that epithets for the enemy were the argot of military expertise, perhaps even necessary to warfare and to making do in a 'strange land'.

One would be hard pressed to find mainstream media apologists for such epithets today. American language politics have changed sufficiently that epithets for both recruits and 'the enemy' have grown controversial. In fact, it is not unusual to hear official or public messaging from various military authorities that epithets for recruits are no longer allowed, though they are still used fairly often on the ground. As noted, Recruit Training Orders in the Marine Corps urge Drill Instructors to use respectful language in addressing recruits, and Jeff, who attended Officer Candidate School for the Army in 2000, tells me that it was officially 'prohibited' for officers to use epithets against privates in training. 'We're trying to turn them into soldiers, not degrade them and make them subhuman', he told me. Yet many still believe that such concessions to recruits' feelings, or indeed broader national sensitivity to word choice, can compromise national security (cf. Gutmann 2000). A number of Marine Corps Drill Instructors told me directly that to eschew epithets for recruits is to risk weakening the nation's fighting force.

As for epithets for the enemy, the Army veteran Tom (who served in Afghanistan) says his friends in basic training over the last five years told him, 'Okay, you can't say haji. We can't call them raghead anymore'. A former Marine in his mid 20s, Lennie, tells me 'I heard a lot of terms like 'towel heads' BEFORE entering the Marine Corps, from movies and from other people talking, but when I definitely

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went into boot camp, there was, like, less emphasis on race [from the Drill Instructors] and just more emphasis on 'the enemy'. While this verbal shift has played out unevenly across military branches and platoons, there has been a subtle ideological shift, overall, in public-facing military culture when it comes to verbal sensitivity. Overtly racist and Islamophobic epithets for the enemy are now expected to live a more clandestine existence.

What labels for the enemy remain, then? One hides its troubling politics in plain sight: 'terrorist'. The term does not overtly attach to a particular racial, ethnic, or religious group, yet is highly reductive—caricatural—in its characterization of negative motives and morality. (This is why some veterans tell me epithets like 'primitive terrorist' were common when they served in Iraq or Afghanistan.) 'Terrorists' are framed as barbaric, hate-filled, and vicious enough to target civilians, in contrast to putatively civilized and just 'soldiers' in war—yet as Asad (2007) has extensively argued, the contrast is untenable given that legal-moral guidelines are often breached in war, and wartime strategy often necessarily kills civilians. Through its history of use in the US, too, the term 'terrorist' very often connotes a Muslim religious extremist. The simple term 'enemy', while still reductive and imputed with an almost evil frisson, at least does not bundle in racial connotations or assumptions about religious motives. The term is racially, ethnically, religiously, and geographically neutral; it does not attach to the putative biological qualities of its targets, nor lump by any simple, single attribute, and as such, its extension seems less likely to be extended to entire demographic categories (e.g. all Vietnamese; all Muslims or Arabs; and so forth).

Some service members make a personal language-ideological decision to eschew racialized or religious epithets for the enemy in their discussions of the GWOT. Consider Sean Davis (2014:39), for instance, who during training at Fort Hood was instructed by a captain that 'The ragheads don't have the common courtesy to give the American soldier a fair fight'. But, perhaps in connection with having bought a copy of *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Understanding Iraq* out of nascent curiosity, Davis opts in his memoir to describe Iraqi combatants—particularly when they were shooting at him or his buddies—not as 'ragheads', 'hajis', or the like, but with the religiously, racially, and ethnically neutral pejorative: 'shitheads' (Davis 2014:86–87, 107).

THE WAY OUT: THE SPECIFICITY OF CONTACT AND THE ABANDONMENT OF EPITHETS

Sallah & Weiss (2005:272) spoke to the mother of one GI who had come home from Vietnam deeply disturbed. He would sometimes rant about how 'the gooks were all the same and how he should have killed more', but later express regret about opening fire on 'unarmed men, women, and children'. Evidently, here was a man wrestling with the question of where his dehumanizing and perhaps even his

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labels should have been bounded. Were they really all the same? Was a child, or an unarmed civilian, a 'gook'?

The generic references issued during the training phase (e.g. 'Gooks don't feel pain'; 'The ragheads don't have the common courtesy to give the American soldier a fair fight') make existential claims detached from real events and people, and don't have to answer to contradictory data. They instruct more-or-less naïve recruits in what to expect. Once service members have been in the theater of operations, many continue to use the same epithets in specifically anchored (or 'deictically selective'; Agha 2007) contexts, as in, 'I shot that dink on the spot'. When they attach the label to a specific person or people, the label can still drag the dehumanizing reductions—the generic typing—bundled into the lexeme (see also Zuckerman, this volume).

At times, however, when the specificity of the human being in question rises up to meet the presuppositions and simplifications of the epithet, the mismatch between the label and the manifest qualities of the 'enemy' person becomes evident to the speaker. The speaker takes note of some quality or qualities of that person, some aspect disregarded by the epithet, to move toward a different stance in their verbal practice. Apparently, several types of encounter or realization can prompt this shift.

Preston, for example, explains that the skill Vietnamese showed in battle helped him to move away from the epithets he'd received during training. 'We were told 'Get the gooks, slant-eyed bastards', you know, and this and that… [but] I never felt like calling them anything because I appreciated… what kind of firepower we had versus what they had. [We had] like four or five times what they had or more, but they still beat us'. Braun also moves momentarily away from enemy epithets when he foregrounds Vietnamese prowess in battle. His interview with Tuckner had been in process for several minutes and Braun had already clarified he considered 'dink' a synonym for 'NVA' (the North Vietnamese Army) and indeed for any Vietnamese. But near the end of the interview, Braun shifts stance to enunciate a certain respect. 'What do you think of this war?' asks Tuckner. Braun replies,

> War stinks, I think. I'd like to go home, but I'll stay it out. We'll win, no sweat. I'm just—just hanging on over here. We got—they say we fought crack NVA troops. Well, we lost some crack troops ourselves, but there's no doubt in my mind about winning. We'll never be whipped over here. But, just a, just a funny thing. I have the greatest respect in the world for the NVA. They've got their fine soldiers. They're good shots, they come charging at anything.

Braun's first shift into using 'NVA' (instead of his preferred 'dink'), here, makes a more positive reference to the enemy, in the context of what might be reported speech ('they say we fought crack NVA troops'). He indicates the incongruity of praising them— 'just a funny thing'—before going on to concede he has 'the greatest respect in the world for the NVA', including their competence and bravery. The term 'NVA' here highlights their status as members of a trained military force, rather than pestilent racial others, and Braun's stance has shifted from disparaging to

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admiring. Braun's interview clarifies the way an epithet congeals 'as-if' abstractions that a speaker can move away from by choosing a different lexeme.

In other accounts, an interaction with an 'enemy'—looking them in the eye, seeing and hearing their suffering, witnessing their relationality, or grasping that they possess the capacity to reason, plan, even worry—seems to activate a richer in-filling of the other mind, and a corresponding reluctance to use the grotesque caricature of the label.

Sean Davis (2014:111–12) recounts a series of events in Iraq in which he came to question the dehumanizing conceptualizations he had learned in training. A Humvee in his convoy was ambushed and Davis and his squad rushed into a nearby grove trying to find the triggermen. They found 'an old man in a white dishdasha talking to a boy in dirty hand-me-down clothes', and his squad buddy whispered, 'Let's get these motherfuckers'. It wasn't clear if they were the culprits, says Davis. At some level he 'wanted to kill them', but there was a certain beauty to how 'the sun cut through those orange trees and fell on the old man's white robes'—and Davis was moved to approach them to speak. 'After talking to them', he writes, 'I didn't see them as enemies—just a grandfather taking his grandson for a walk'.

Some weeks later, Davis was moving door to door on a search for insurgents, and encountered an Iraqi man in his forties who spoke excellent English. The man says he had studied at University of Illinois in Champaign, but moved back to Iraq to bring his father to the hospital for kidney dialysis. He told Davis that Iraq had not been as bad under Saddam, who 'left most people alone' (Davis 2014:133). Later, says Davis, 'I couldn't stop thinking about what the English-speaking man out on the road had said before taking his father to the hospital in Baghdad. Were these 'terrorists' just fatherless sons wanting revenge?' (Davis 2014:137).

Shortly thereafter, Davis was assigned to an air assault QRF, flying over villages in a helicopter. 'Looking down at the houses I realized that each one held a family, each one was a home, each home had children, mothers, fathers, grandparents. That wasn't something I thought about in training and now it was something I couldn't avoid thinking about' (Davis 2014:137). Not long after, when Davis was instructed to shoot a group of men in a sector he had been assigned to, he finds himself 'staring' at the men around a campfire. 'I lost my breath and the bottom of my stomach dropped out. We were really going to have to kill these men' (Davis 2014:143). His reluctance to shoot is evident in his noun choice: they are *men*, their equal ontological footing foregrounded by the word. Davis opted to engage them verbally before shooting, and learned they were merely security for the Baghdad zoo. Nobody died there that day.

Davis' descriptions repeatedly connect humanizing the enemy other to recognizing their relationality with other people. Similarly, Ryan, the Marine, was highly trained in close combat skills (she tells me 'I have seventeen confirmed kills'), but lives with profound regret today: 'I was so brainwashed into 'it's us or them'… [but] you're just killing people, because they were born someplace else… It was still somebody's dad, and somebody's son, and somebody's uncle,

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and somebody's brother'. Rather than vilifying the enemy with epithets, Ryan now conceptualizes Iraqis through tekonyms that thickly embed them among their kin.

Preston, the Navy Seal who killed so many in Vietnam, had a humanizing encounter he spoke to me about on three occasions, and on all three he referred to the Vietnamese individual involved as 'a boy'. Preston was inside a village home, engaged in a firefight, and the 'boy' came at him with an AK-47. Preston shot him and began to walk out the door, then glanced at 'the boy, who was just dying'. Listening to the boy's moans, Preston was overtaken by a feeling that he wanted the boy's death 'not to be awful'.

> I said hey look you deserve a good death. I don't know where that came from, out of my killer instinct and all of a sudden that appears… If I'd shot him dead then it would have been nothin' but then I saw him moanin' and everything like that, and- we were evacuating… we might even have been leaving under enemy fire on that one, and I just gave him a shot of morphine and took off.

In one conversation about this incident, I asked Preston to clarify how old 'the boy' might have been. It turns out he was probably a teenager, well on his way to young adulthood, but the word 'boy' connotes someone so young they require the care of others, emphasizing his vulnerability and perhaps his relative innocence. Later, Preston says that the moment he could be humane to that boy was the moment he began to relocate 'my own humanity'. It is a familiar refrain; one that Young (2018) describes decades later in reference to his time in Afghanistan: 'while I'd been dehumanizing the Arab world, I'd been dehumanizing myself as well'.

Preston's friend Vlad, also a Vietnam veteran, says his encounters with Vietnamese suffering made him question 'the lies that were told to us'. 'You know, just driving through the villages and seeing the looks on their faces, you could see the horror and terror and sorrow of the people… they didn't want us there… driving past the graveyard listening to their howling and crying. Wasn't easy'. Vlad came to question all the epithets he had learned in the Army, and when he describes the civilian deaths he witnessed at American hands, he is overcome by emotion as he describes the small intact features of 'a girl and a boy', including the shiny straight hair of the girl, and the children's innocent faces, just before their bodies are taken apart by weapons.

When American service members or veterans conceptually infill an 'enemy' with full human lives and vulnerabilities, it seems to become harder to use the epithets they learned in basic training. I finish with an example that captures the very moment one Vietnam veteran, a medic in the Marine Corps, realized he could no longer use such a term. Doug Anderson's poem describes how his men had been setting a village on fire 'to kill its vermin'. But they dragged a man out of a hole —and his vulnerability became visible in pathetic detail.

> and he blinked
> in the glare, all five feet of him
> covered in mud so that even his
> black pajamas were gray with it

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he didn't look like anything
you'd want to kill…
He just stood there, maybe hoping
for a quick death, just a shot
to the back of the head,
no interrogator to slip a hat pin under his nail.
I knew then I couldn't say *gook* again.

For Doug, as for many veterans I have spoken to, the act of moral recuperation is often bound up with re-humanizing people through the language used to characterize them. Those who find themselves broken by remorse after service are often not merely guilty about what they (and the entire military apparatus) did to others, but also how they LABELED AND CONCEPTUALIZED them. Wartime epithets seem to have collateral damage—not just those sanctioned to be killed in war, and not only all those civilians whom even the military itself would not have wished to be killed, but also, more subtly, some of the servicemembers who labeled people cruelly enough to disregard them. When they look back in hindsight, they are appalled by their deeds and also, as evident in the statements above, their own mindset, established in part by their lexicon. Recovery requires new language, new stances, a 'Thou-orientation' (Schutz 1970:185; see also Buber 1937) that grasps the human existence of the other person once so vilified.

Derogatory epithets are a pernicious problem, here, but they are not the only linguistic culprit. The connotations of an epithet are infilled, in part, when the terms are used in generic referential statements. Such generalizations render an idea 'portable'; readily entextualized and spreadable, masquerading as wisdom from someone's experience. Yet in military contexts, such claims bring the full weight of hostile nationalist ideology to bear on impressionable minds, posing as aphorisms to live by, when in fact they are statements for the soul to die by.

NOTES

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[1]Linguistic and philosophical work on racist language also uses *epithet* in an implicitly negative sense, though the relationship between the terms *epithet* and *slur* is a contested one. Bianchi (2014) and Hom (2008) treat *epithet* as more or less synonymous with *slur*. Hedger (2013:206) divides derogatory epithets into two classes, one being *slurs*, which 'express contempt but don't say anything about or describe their content', and the other kind of epithet including both descriptive and expressive content (presumably this would include something like referring to Donald Trump as 'mango Mussolini'). Croom (2013:22) proposes that unlike slurs, some racially loaded epithets (such as referring to an Asian American as a 'banana') are terms that are primarily used 'as non-derogatory terms applied to non-humans', and thus trigger a different and more 'exploratory' interpretive process. For my purposes in this essay, I use *epithet* to encompass both well-known slurs and more novel pejorative words and phrases.

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[2]Note that although Wiezbicka does not discuss essentialism here, her statement that kinds are 'characterized by, but NOT REDUCIBLE TO, a cluster of properties' is compatible with the notion that kinds also tend to be conceptualized in terms of essences that predict those properties (Susan Gelman, p.c.).

[3]I refrain from disputing here whether there is any such thing as just killing in war. For purposes of this article, I entertain the American 'rules of engagement' (or ROE), the directives among military forces that stipulate the way in which force and violence may legitimately be applied in a given conflict. ROE generally require evidence of 'hostile intent' or the positive identification of an 'enemy fighter' to legitimately use force. Of course, the question of who counts as an 'enemy fighter', and why, should be subject to debate.

[4]According to Das (2008), it is in the state's interest to have the recruit appear to sacrifice themselves of their own free will; it lends the appearance of legitimacy to the war. Paradoxically, I would add, the training process grinds down recruits' agency, but this does not seem to compromise the national narrative that soldiers willingly lay themselves on the line for the nation.

[5]It was not unusual for American soldiers in Vietnam to talk about their own buddies being 'wasted', too, further evidence that they were dehumanizing their own type to some degree as well.

[6]https://www.nbclearn.com/portal/site/learn/cuecard/65336; accessed April 20, 2020. This site appears to have been de-activated in 2021, removing the video from public view. The original transcript by NBC that accompanied the video was copied and saved by the author and is in the author's possession.

[7]To be sure, Putnam's famous article focused on natural kind terms defined by way of a linguistic 'division of labor' in which qualified experts know how to recognize what actually counts as an instantiation of a kind such as 'gold' or 'water'. In the case of epithets for the enemy, I am more interested in a broader implication of Putnam's argument; namely, that speakers' intentions do not generally control the extensions of the terms they use.

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