

Book Review: McIntosh, Janet. *Kill Talk: Language and Military Necropolitics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2025. 360 pages. Hardcover, \$99.

Necropolitics is a social-political theory which concentrates on a nation's power to kill. In this unique study, Janet McIntosh applies the theory to the American military's use of language. Focusing on infantry troops within the Marines and Army over two recent periods of war, she endeavors to trace the connection between military nomenclature and extreme behavior by combatants. In doing so, she uncovers the inconsistency between the military's rhetoric about honor on the one hand and its depraved linguistic employment on the other.

McIntosh is a professor in the African and African American Studies Department and the Department of Anthropology at Brandeis University. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 2002 and previously taught at UM, Harvard University, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. As a cultural anthropologist, her previous studies have probed populations from personhood, religious, ethnic, psychological, ideological, and post-colonial perspectives. Her first two books examining religious and race issues in Kenya earned major ethnological and anthropological awards.

The book is divided into four sections. Section I contains the Preface and Chapter 1. The wars which form the basis of the study encompass the Vietnam War and the post-9/11 Global War on Terror (GWOT). McIntosh conducted fieldwork for almost a decade, visiting the Marines training facility at Parris Island, South Carolina among other locations. She interviewed dozens of veterans of the aforementioned conflicts along with attending focus groups and reading military writings, social media posts, and news. Among her goals expressed is to "help critics of the military better understand how ordinary people become capable of committing brutal acts, while military enthusiasts might recognize that the noble ideals the military defends in principle are sometimes contradicted by the dynamics I describe." (p.12.)

Section II includes Chapters 2 through 5 and deals with the training period of military life. From yelling to insults to swearing, degrading language is regarded as a part of military culture. While the purpose of using “kill chants” is ostensibly to harden the troops, it likewise serves to dehumanize a targeted enemy by removing empathy and encouraging violence. McIntosh notes the disconnect between the military’s formal rules and its informal but tenacious training traditions.

Section III encompasses Chapters 6 through 8 and describes the utilization and consequences of military talk in combat situations. Slang and mock language toward enemy troops is often extended to civilians. Profanity may be used out of frustration, but it also hastens violence, according to the author. Further, the military’s dark humor about killing--as seen in devices like Zippo lighters, death cards, and memes—exacerbates the conflicting messages.

In Section IV, covering Chapters 9 and 10, McIntosh relays interactions with veterans negatively affected by the military’s harsh language infrastructure. She depicts various efforts, including poetry and writing workshops together with artistic projects. In all these ways, vets can express grief, anger, and guilt in an attempt to heal, thereby “rehumanizing” both the wartime enemy and themselves.

Over the last two decades, a plethora of books have been published which have reviewed military language and slang objectively (Schading and Schading, 2006; Taylor, 2009; Bufalo, 2010; Rottman, 2011; U.S. Department of Defense, 2015; Summers, 2023; United States Department of the Army, 2026). However, those studies which are best compared to McIntosh’s work must start with Achille Mbembe’s 2019 work introducing the necropolitics theory, in which a state’s power to kill and expose target populations to death are explained. Ben Schrader’s 2019 study similarly highlights activities by veterans who sought to recover from the

brutality of combat. Marc Levy's 2020 book, a collection of Vietnam-related stories, examines how soldiers used language to cope with war and how veterans have composed literature as a way to reflect on their experience. From the standpoint of how language can perpetuate conflict in settings other than the military, William Davies' 2018 book delineates how language is used as a tool in ethnic and national conflicts; Janet McIntosh and Norma Mendoza-Denton's 2020 edited book applies linguistic anthropology methods to political discourse during Donald Trump's first term as president; and Jacinta Mwendu Maweu's 2022 study investigates the impact of ethnicity and media framing on electoral controversies in Kenya.

The most basic question emanating from McIntosh's research is the specific correlation between the military's employment of "kill talk" in training and its contribution to extreme actions in combat. Clearly, the evidence coming from interviews with veterans from the Vietnam War and the Global War on Terror is strong. Yet, such initial findings should be subjected to more systematic analysis in order to be replicated.

In the Preface, McIntosh expressed several hopes for her study. These goals could have been assessed in a separate and full Conclusion to the book instead of an abbreviated Coda. Ideas for future research along the same lines include evaluating different conflicts than those chosen here and comparing the views of active versus veteran military personnel.

McIntosh responds to the claim that her research has only focused on the problem by showing examples of how the military itself can be part of positive change are called for.

Still how veterans have sought to counter the military's linguistic culture. Although she does document changes in military policy and procedure instituted to reduce discrimination, other, McIntosh's study effectively addresses "unresolved tensions and hypocrisies," (p. 254) which confront both present and past members of our armed forces.

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