Brittany Ramos DeBarros:

Thank you everyone, Peace Movement Family. . . . I am grateful I can still be here with you today. I am grateful for the opportunity to keep building with you all. Yet I also find myself incredibly dissatisfied—giving talk after talk about these systems and feeling so overwhelmed by the visceral reality of what we are up against.

I think that sometimes it feels in the peace movement like we are disembodied; like these matters become these intellectual exercises. These ideological beliefs are disconnected from the flesh and bone of ourselves and from our comrades that are being assaulted every day. I am here to talk about the intersection between racism and militarism. I am excited for the opportunity to be able to speak to that today. I think that one of the answers to our ability to build a movement that feels powerful in confronting what we are up against, (and in continuing to strengthen a movement that was labored upon and developed and built by generations before me) in this moment, in this generation, is not to talk about these systems [racism and militarism] as if they are separate systems.

We’ve started to use an analogy in About Face [About Face: Veterans Against the War] to describe these systems and their relationships to each other. I think that many of us know of the kind of symptomatic racism that shows up within the military, in the ways that state violence is enacted, and yet we often don’t talk about the core relationship between these systems. And so we started to talk about this as a house of oppression. I think that to truly understand these relationships and these systems we have to go back to the founding of them, the development of them. How can we understand truly in detail how we can contrast what is part of this system and what is not if we don’t actually understand the origin? And the
origin, we talk about as the purpose of a house, a shelter, is the roof. And the roof of this
house of oppression, in my view, when we look back at those origins was economic
exploitation.

We talk about this roof of economy, of exploitation. The point is exploitation of bodies, of our
labor, of the land, of these things that we call resources, and it always has been, . . . since
colonial powers sent ships that landed on this land, enslaved people—my ancestors, many of
our ancestors, indigenous people—committed genocide, etcetera. These were all the origins
of these systems on this land that we are on. And the drive for that—contrary to the origin
story we are so often taught—was always about economy. We do hear these little tidbits
about this Spanish search for gold and the plantations that were set up in my homeland of
Boriken or Puerto Rico—many other islands across the Caribbean and many other places as
well as here. And then the plantations that were created and run by enslaved people in order
to develop the foundations of the economy that we have, that would transform into the
economy that we have today—all was based on these exploitations.

If we think of that as the roof as a system of exploitation, it needs mechanisms for social
control. We think about this as these two pillars that are holding up this shelter, this house.
They are twin pillars. They are mutually reinforcing. When one starts to falter, the other covers
down, and vice versa.

One of those pillars is a system of white supremacy that creates a social stratification, social
hierarchy, based on proximity to a political definition of whiteness. We all understand that the
concepts of whiteness and blackness are political concepts. They are not stable concepts. They
have evolved and changed many, many times throughout the history of our society. The
purpose of this is to stratify us, to create this hierarchy that keeps us separated along these
lines.

The other pillar is a system of patriarchy, or a system of gender hierarchy, a system of social
stratification that creates hierarchy based on proximity to a political definition of manhood.
Again, when you think about sex and gender, when we are talking about this, we are talking about a political definition that has changed and evolved and is not stable. It is different across societies. It has been different throughout the history of this society. This other pillar stratifies us based on a hierarchy based on that proximity. Those pillars cover down for each other. We have a situation, which I’m sure many other women, black women, and women of color have experienced in a movement, in which we are still to this day often put in a difficult position of being up against white supremacy in the context of the anti-racist movement, but [at the same time] we are also up against this patriarchy—even within our black or people of color spaces as women. There is a real struggle sometimes and vice versa. We’ve seen women rise up throughout history many times, the way that white women have risen up against patriarchy only to turn around and reinforce the white supremacy that allows them to feel that they are not on the bottom rung of these social hierarchies and stratification intentionally and not intentionally. And that is the power of these hierarchies, that they don’t have to be intentional. They are conditioned from birth. They are built into our structures and our systems. Obviously, that includes our government and military systems, as well as our social and economic institutions. When I think of those pillars upholding . . . so much of that is automated through the use of that conditioning. But there are times when those conditionings do start to falter, where there are real, powerful coalitions being built to dismantle those hierarchies across distance. There are so many powerful examples of that throughout history—the Rainbow Coalition in many ways, the Poor People’s Campaign that was brought up, that is being revived today. And there are so many ways that those coalitions struggle, even though they were setting out to build power across difference. We struggle to grapple with the manifestations of those conditionings within the spaces.

I think about the mothers of queer, black, feminism who wrote about the revolution within the revolution in the 60s and 70s—a reminder for me as a young person building on the legacies so many have invested in, that these are not new struggles or experiences that people like me,
or so many people, face. But I think when those conditioned hierarchies do falter, this is where I think about militarism.

We talk about militarism, if the economic exploitation is the point, the roof, and these systems of gender and racial hierarchy are upholding that roof, the enforcement mechanism, the foundation, is a system of militarism. We talk about militarism as differentiated from militarization—the spread of military structures, ideologies, practices, operational techniques, and equipment—militarization—the things that we see with our eyes as we see the military equipment spread to the police, the choices of punishment and violence as solutions to problems in our schools, and so many other examples. We separate that from militarism because it is this system of ideologies. It is a logic that we are conditioned to believe is the only true logic. That the only way to create peace is through violence, that the only way to address justice is through punishment. When we see the power building of people’s movements—every time there has been a people’s uprising reaching critical mass to the point that it could actually challenge economic and state power, which are one in the same because the corporatism and the fact that our state is built around this system of economic exploitation, we have seen what? The National Guard get called out, or we have seen an aggressive militarized police response. We have seen literal bombings in the cases of Philadelphia and Black Wall Street—so many examples.

We also see the logic part come out when it is not necessarily literal state repression. We see this logic come out in the kind of plastic patriotism and nationalism it is promoting. When we think about Colin Kaepernick, we saw militarism cover down to make sure that pillar of racial hierarchy was protected in that suddenly the flag and veterans and the military were being weaponized--- standing up to the very rights that this country prides itself on upholding—claiming to uphold. Those issues actually had nothing to do with what he was talking about. We know that. Nothing he did was directly disrespectful to the flag or veterans, and frankly it would have been fine if it was, but it wasn’t. A protest is a protest is why I say that. A protest is
not meant to be reverent and respectful sometimes. It’s meant to be confrontational and irreverent in a lot of ways. And yet what we saw was the making of this connection in order to leverage the enforcement mechanism of the logic of militarism to protect this racial hierarchy. This racial order. And you also see that in the wars. I mean I don’t have to tell you all that. The logic of this massive amount of violence that is being carried out is necessary to keep us safe, is necessary to protect democracy. Even the amount of times I’ve had the question asked to me as the Afghanistan withdrawal has unfolded “what about Afghan women?” is mind boggling to me—particularly, not because it is an irrelevant question, but because it always flags for me this kind of erasure of how devastating this war has been for Afghan women also.

We’ve killed tens of thousands of people and that is not good for women. We’ve bombed schools and hospitals and mosques and infrastructure—and that is not good for women. We know that the impacts of war are disproportionately felt by women because of the way we are so often positioned in society—the kind of socialized roles that we often have as kind of glue and administrators for families, childcare, homebuilders, so many different things. And for other reasons, the way we are often disenfranchised etcetera. This is true across racial lines. These violences are unsurprising, the wars—we’ve been bombing seven plus countries and all of them are black and brown countries.

I know that these are all things that you know, but I wanted to introduce that framework. When I was asked to speak, this was the first thing that came to mind because I think so often when we do talk about militarism, we don’t create a definition around what it means, not a literal “here’s the dictionary” definition, but a description that is around what is the purpose of this system. I think that until we really build a momentum around challenging the logic of what that system claims to be for, we can never transition to a different actual logic in how we address these very real problems in our society. The last thing I’ll say is that when you see the systems in relationship with each other this way, when you see the manifestations of racism within the military, and also gender oppression within the military, you see the purpose of the
system still at play even within that system differently. These are no longer interpersonal problems that can be addressed through training and other mechanisms. These are systems of power that are playing a particular role to protect power. If we understand the military as an enforcement mechanism ultimately for economic exploitation, then when we think about the targeted recruitment in impoverished and particularly black and brown communities, but impoverished communities broadly, that makes a lot of sense through a different lens. Where there is a particular purpose that is being manifested in this system, justifying itself through the incorporation of black and brown communities in order to whitewash itself. I think about this, the way systems protect themselves through these lenses as there are two main mechanisms. There is exclusion, when we think about segregation, when there was a fight to allow the existence of black soldiers and black battalions—even though there have always been black soldiers in the history of this military. I think about that as an example—of how we try to keep people out—as a mechanism of maintaining power. When that no longer is effective, institutions, systems of power, adopt (for lack of better terminology) cooption.

There is a process of hand picking particular peoples from our communities, and leaders in particular, who are recruited to be a part of these systems, but who are kept from power, kept from real power, even when they are technically in positions of power, there are structures built around them that limit the scope of operation that they are able to enact in terms of the way power flows through those institutions. You can see that in the military by the fact that the military has such high percentages of Black, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native and Indigenous people who have been recruited to serve within it, yet the vast majority of officers, as you go higher up the officer ranks, are Whiter and Whiter. This is a very effective strategy because then you have the complicated dynamic in which racial justice and racial equity is perceived of as Black generals. “Oh look, we have new Black generals that have finally made it up through the ranks despite all of the odds and structures that have been put in place to prevent this.” That becomes this kind of empty celebration—which is complicated. When I look and see it—to this day, even as an anti-war and people’s activist, I feel this weird,
complicated kind of pride because I know what that person must have had to go through—how exceptional and excellent they probably had to be, to be allowed into that role. And yet I understand exactly that, that they are being allowed to be in that role for a particular purpose that will ultimately be weaponized to protect this system that is doing massive amounts of violence to black people, to stay with that example. . . . Or in the case of women, the goal of feminism in my view is not for more women to be making the calls to drop bombs on women all around the world. That is not a victory for feminism and yet this is the complicatedness of how these racial and gender dynamics play out within the system of the military. That’s why I think it is so important that we always talk about the relationship of these systems to each other, because it makes it so much easier for us to have a rooted analysis, a grounded analysis about what is happening in relationships of power as these dynamics play out.

There are so many other examples. We know that for example that within the military justice system the vast, vast majority of cases that are brought forward against troops for all number of issues, are brought against lower enlisted troops. The higher up in the ranks you go, the less likely you are to being actually held accountable for violating the UCMJ [Universal Code of Military Justice] unless you have done something that is publicly threatening the stability of the ability of that system to operate and to be protected and its logic to be protected, like we saw with this lieutenant colonel recently that was court-martialled and convicted. When we know that is how that system is playing out, of course that means that a wildly disproportionately high number of Black, Brown and Indigenous troops are the ones that are actually suffering at the hands of that justice system, in similar ways as we are seeing in our broader justice system in the United States. And so, I will stop there. I want to make sure there are a few minutes for questions. I just want to offer this framework—this house of oppression framework—as an offering to our movements as we continue to teach and popularize an analysis that is rooted in an understanding of a system of power, so that we can build power to challenge those power dynamics. Thank you so much.
Question One: I am really appreciative of the concise and powerful framework you just laid out to us. What do you suggest is a powerful counternarrative that might undermine it?

Brittany: Thank you for that question. I think actually our movements have done an incredible job articulating counternarratives already. I think of Dr. King’s narratives... I think that we don’t call out the contradiction enough in the way that Dr. King is so widely quoted in his conversation about violence begetting violence, as if it is interpersonal, as if you only talked about that as an interpersonal dynamic—or a dynamic in how we choose to confront violence. I’m sure that most, if not everybody here knows that one of the most powerful things about his Beyond Vietnam speech is that he articulated the parallel between the flawed logic of creating peace through violence to nation states, and that--this logic that we could cultivate peaceful engagement and respectful engagement between nation states or between governments and their people through invasion, colonization, warfare, violence--was as flawed as it is at the interpersonal level. So I think that we have these other narratives that center on cooperation and collaboration. That’s the way I talk about it. We have to figure out how to create respectful and peaceful engagement at every level of society, within our movements even—within our institutions through clear expectations and accountability. Accountability and boundaries are about how we decide we will engage with each other and treat each other, and how we will seek to be accountable to each other when we make mistakes. I think that is really an opportunity, an alternative way for us to talk as we see climate crisis really taking root... The perfect example, as we see this endless competition or strong man approach to international relations and dealings between nation states or indigenous nations and other states is actually a death march. We die if we continue on this path—all of us. We have to find ways to have structure that supports cooperation and collaboration instead of coercion because that is another language I try to talk about. Our policy is one of coercion -- multiple ways—economic coercion, violent coercion, etcetera. I think we need to be talking about these systems, like I said, so that we can help people see the current narrative. I think that is part of the problem. Folks, even when they understand the
pieces of these systems through the stories that we tell and the actions that we take, are often not connecting those to directly challenge the logic between the relationship of these systems.

Question Two: Two things. First of all, Brittany, we were really taken by the simple but straightforward and real presentation of two important things. We get brainwashed [that] the only way to create peace is through war, and I can’t remember the second thing. Could you please say that one again?

Brittany: I was talking about punishment. The only way to create justice is through punishment.

Question Two, continued: Incarceration. Thank you very much. Secondly, I would love it if you would give us one of the more egregious things that you personally saw in your involvement with the military. We’ve a very young woman and she’s very seriously contemplating . . . What would you say . . . is there any hope for the military being good for women? If you have something you could give as a description of a really egregious thing that you personally experienced, or if you want to. You don’t have to.

Brittany: I think the short answer, I would argue, to the question “Is there any hope of the U.S. Military is good for women?” is no. I think that is because it is an institution that is designed to enforce violent patriarchy. You can’t have an institution that is fundamentally . . . [whose purpose] it is a part of. And to think that you can have gender equity training, and that is enough to change the fundamental DNA of the institution is . . . So I think that’s what they mean, that women can’t have good experiences in all of these things. But I guess it also begs the question of how one define “good for us.” It’s certainly not good for women around the world, and I don’t think there’s any hope that it could be.

In terms of my personal experiences, I will be honest with you; I am emotionally exhausted. I don’t think I’m in the place where I feel like trotting out some of that trauma. But if there are young folks, I am so happy to speak with them directly. And I would also be happy to follow up
and share some of those more personal stories in a more intimate capacity, when I can be kind of emotionally prepared for that.

Question three:

Brittany, I wish you relief from your emotional exhaustion because you’ve got a big campaign you are working on there. I was struck by what you said about people of color and women go up through ranks so they can learn . . . they can be more involved in the killing and so forth. I’m wondering if there are attempts or ways of reaching out to people that are going up through the ranks—such people, to sort of change the mindset . . . help them . . . maybe influence the mindset of the military to maybe make it true defense instead of something like the kind of aggression we’ve seen in the American military. Just some way to change how that’s approached.

Brittany: I think that it is always worth doing harm reduction work in whatever ways we can, and that’s how I would characterize that endeavor. It is trying to reduce the current harm of the U.S. military given the reality that at least in the foreseeable future its existence is inevitable. I don’t think that is true forever. I think influencing people like that has to happen through relational organizing, has to happen through building relationships and trust with people, understanding their core motivations, and building analysis in conversation with folks over time. But I think that it is difficult to do that because if folks stay in the military more than likely they’ve bought in to some degree to the culture that currently exists. It’s also drilled into you in the military that you’re supposed to be this apolitical institution, that your job is just to carry out the orders that are given to you by officers above you and politicians – whatever party or ideology they are from. And I think that is fundamentally dangerous. It’s difficult because you are organizing ultimately the pathway to encouraging folks to engage differently—leads down a path . . . that folks confront their own moral injury from being a part of our own really toxic, abusive and violent system, beyond where there are opportunities to organize within; that’s not a priority that we focus on. In most of the work I do, we focus on
harm reduction through GI resistance, truth telling, and organizing—yes, maybe for folks to do the right thing maybe in that moment, but that usually leads to a pathway to them getting out of the military. So that is a tricky thing.

Question Four
Thank you for the great presentation. My question was how long were you in the military and at what point did you realize what was happening, you know truly with the military in terms of comparing to why you joined? I also considered joining the Air Force when I was 18 and out of high school. I was raised in El Paso, Texas, and I saw it as my way of getting out of El Paso to join the Air Force. Luckily for me I went to California, where they had free college, and so I went there instead. And many years later I went to work for a nonprofit agency in the Civil Rights movement, during the War on Poverty days with Johnson that gave a lot of money to the communities and a colleague there told me, “Do you realize if you joined the Air Force you might be sent somewhere where you might have to kill your own people?” and, oh my god, I hadn’t realized that. And so that did it. I said nope. There goes my idea. But anyway, that’s when my bulb kind of opened up with the reality, and so anyway that’s why I was asking the question of you.

Brittany: Yes. Thank you. And I’m so sorry, but I will have to run after this question. But for me, I joined the Army because I got an ROTC scholarship and it was an opportunity for me to yes, have a job, get a college degree—all of that. From the time I signed that contract to getting out, I was subject to a military contract for 12 years. My time in service technically was 8 years because they don’t count those ROTC years even though you’re subject to your contract and all of these commitments, which I always think is kind of a strange thing. But, yes, I knew . . . so that’s the thing I always make a note of – because most people don’t know that we have 17- and 18- year-olds that sign contracts in order to pay for college that they won’t be out of until they are 30. Think about that. That’s wild. Your brain is not even fully formed when you are that young. And that’s why they do that.
I knew that I was against the war when I was there. And when I came back from the war I knew I was against what I had participated in—that I didn’t feel proud of it, that I didn’t want to be in the Army anymore. And I had never met anyone in the anti-war movement. I had never heard of an anti-war veteran really. I really spent a long time thinking I just had to keep my head down and go through the motions because otherwise I thought that there was no way for me to get out. And I couldn’t afford to pay back hundreds of dollars—hundreds of thousand of dollars for that scholarship—and whatever else would happen to me. So I thought I had to just keep my head down and go through the motions until my contract was over. I had been doing economic and racial justice work, and not really talking a lot about being a veteran of the war other than ranting to my friends “how can this not even be in the news that this is still happening?” And the moment that it really changed for me, was when Colin Kaepernick took a knee. It suddenly hit me like a bolt of lightning—a connection—we would never get racial or economic justice if we didn’t address this plastic patriotism, this nationalism that was being weaponized (and I didn’t even have that language then). I also realized in that moment that my voice as a veteran had power, that I should be using it to tell the truth about what I had seen in the war, about how unjust they were, how driven by corporate profits they so obviously were. And how it is a lie when these politicians stand up and say “oh we support the troops and veterans and then they turn around and they cut our healthcare, they cut our SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] benefits that over 40,000 active military are on etcetera, etcetera. That’s what led me to go searching. I literally Googled “veteran anti-war” or something like that, and I found About Face and just jumped in with both feet. Then was on a journey of being supported by veterans within About Face to speak out against the military while I was still in uniform myself.

Brittany on Running for Congress:

Folks who know me from anti-war organizing and movement, who are born and raised in my community here, asked me to run. It was not on my radar to run at all. I am doing this for
several reasons, and one of the reasons is I think we need someone who can speak from the perspective of the multiple intersections that I have been speaking to from lived experience—but particularly from being a combat veteran and speaking out for the need for us to not just be tinkering around the edges of a change to the way that we approach our military and foreign policy—but a complete transformation. That is something I would really like to be a champion for in that place of power. I’m not taking any corporate PAC money. I’m not taking real estate money. And so it is going to take a lot of grassroots volunteering and donations in order for us to be able to do this, and we’re on a roll. We’ve had really an exciting momentum already. I think we have a real shot at winning this against the Trump Republican that I am running against. But we are going to need all hands on deck. And what I hope is that my candidacy and certainly, if I was elected, would be a real lightning rod and energizer for our peace movement. I hope that we can all see this as a part one tactic in our broader movement.