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Extract from forthcoming essay, 'Paternity and Intertextuality in Christine Dixie's *The Binding*'

One of the key effects of *The Binding* is Dixie's creation of a dream-like space where the meaning of masculinity, and the father-son bond, proliferates through the viewer's simultaneous experience of resemblance and disparity. At the foot of each of her six prints of a sleeping child is a bed or altar on which lies his wounded reflection: a three-dimensional shadow created entirely from plastic toy soldiers. Seen from a distance these installations estrange the viewer. They seem, at first impression, almost animal – the rows of tightly regimented soldiers that make up the shapes of the sleeping boys can give the effect of reptilian scales. The spikes of the toy soldiers' bayonets extending from the shadows provide some of the boys' feet with inhuman claws. These ghostly doubles, each of which is missing a leg, evoke the carnage and chaos of the modern battle field and, in their unresolvable near-symmetry to the images in the prints on the wall above, echo, only to call into question, the continued safety of the sleeping boy. Each reiteration suggests the inevitability of gender roles, in suggesting that the boy's nursery is always already the killing field, wartime hospital ward, or sacrificial altar.

War is the spectacle of the sacrificial son writ large. The language of sacrifice pervades descriptions of modern conflict just as it marked the epics recording the battles of empires past. Dixie's installation makes vividly present both the energies that motivate patriarchal paternity and its cost: the continued loss and death of young men. The shapes of the boys made of toy soldiers are the logical consequences of such a sacrificial paradigm.

In order to reach the prints and sculptures, the viewer needs to move through a series of soft, embroidered lace veils and on each of these are representations of the boy child at play in his role as man. The veils are printed with photographic images depicting Dixie's six-year son playing soldier, dressed up in a helmet and carrying the tools of warfare: a variety of guns, harnesses, and binoculars. Here Dixie makes reference to the tradition in both literature and portrait painting of the *puer senex* or elderly boy: a tradition in which the male child simulates manhood and thus earns the award of adult affection and praise. But, in her concern with a stage in a boy's life in which he begins to shift away from his infant connection with the body of his mother and into the realm of the father, Dixie interrogates the implicit submission to ready-made roles that this form of play involves.