



PHOTO

# MOSSLESS IN AMERICA: CLAIRE BECKETT

Written by: Mossless

*Mossless in America is a column featuring interviews with documentary photographers. The series is produced in partnership with **Mossless magazine**, an experimental photography publication run by Romke Hoogwaerts and Grace Leigh. Romke started Mossless in 2009, as a blog in which he interviewed a different photographer every two days; since 2012 the magazine has produced two print issues, each dealing with a different type of photography. Mossless was featured prominently in the landmark 2012 exhibition Millennium Magazine at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; it is supported by **Printed Matter, Inc.** Its third issue, a major photographic volume on American documentary photography from the last ten years, titled **The United States (2003–2013)**, will be published this spring.*



*Medina Jabal Town, Fort Irwin, CA, 2009*

**Claire Beckett** is an American photographer and anthropologist. She worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin and now photographs American military training camps and young recruits, as well as Americans who have converted to Islam. Her photographs humbly confront the hypocrisies of the established attitudes toward her subjects. We asked her about the tensions present in the work and within the subjects she photographed.

***Mossless:*** You were a member of the Peace Corps in West Africa about ten years ago, before you went on to study photography. Did something during your time there compel you to start shooting photographs?

**Claire Beckett:** I've actually been photographing since I was 16 years old, though I didn't decide to make photography my life until after my Peace Corps experience. Going into Peace Corps, I was unsure of what to do career-wise, and I'd thought of continuing on with

anthropology—which I'd studied as an undergrad—or perhaps working in humanitarian relief. As a volunteer in Benin, I worked as a public health educator, focusing on HIV/AIDS education, malaria prevention, and girls' empowerment. Living in Benin proved to be very clarifying. Being so far from home and so immersed in the host culture, I gained a new perspective on both myself and my home country. While in Benin I also did a lot of photography and had an abundance of time to think, read and write. After a while I just realized that being an artist was the most personally meaningful thing that I could do.



PVTs K. Duffy, A Bronner, and J. Layug, 2006

**You have three main projects on your website, and they are all relevant to one another. Let's begin with your photographs about young soldiers in your series, *In Training*. What are they going through?**

The soldiers that I photographed for *In Training* were all newly enlisted and had yet to be

deployed to a war zone. The photographs were made from 2004 to 2007, during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, so it was likely that many of these soldiers would see combat. I focused on the time between enlistment and deployment, with an emphasis on Basic Training, because I was fascinated by the transformation of young people from civilian teenagers to fully trained soldiers. These soldiers were learning the vocation of soldiering, but they were also being shaped by the culture of the Army. I particularly enjoyed seeing the very young and very green soldiers because they would behave in ways that no seasoned veteran ever would. For example, I remember one soldier who was still in high school, whom I met while he was participating in a pre-Basic Training exercise with the National Guard (older teens can join the National Guard in a provisional way with a guardian's consent). This young man was wearing an armful of colorful rubber bracelets along with his uniform. Of course rubber bracelets are not part of the Army uniform, and it is actually forbidden to wear them. I knew that if I ever saw this soldier again he would be totally transformed by his training and, potentially, by fighting in a war. The bracelets would be gone, and a much more profound change would have taken place, on the inside.



*Civillian Afghan-Americans as Afghan Villagers, 2009*

**In *Simulating Iraq*, American soldiers and civilians play the roles of Iraqi insurgents and civilians, for training purposes. Did you ever ask the participants how they felt about the roles they were playing?**

Yes, I often asked participants about what they thought of their roles. I was fascinated to find that most participants absolutely relished the roles that they played. For some, it seemed like a case of playacting, like high school theater wrought on a grander scale. For others, there was a fascination with Arab culture and language. I was surprised to learn at one facility that the female civilian roleplayers were spending their own money to purchase fancy Arab-style clothing on the internet. I think that it made them feel glamorous. Among the soldiers there often seemed to be a bias towards playing the “bad guys,” typically identified as “jihadis” or “terrorists,” because it was exciting. The bad guys generally ran amok, used unique weaponry, and got to blow things up. Of course, I am generalizing, but this is the spirit of things that I

observed.

### **How large are these training grounds? Are they used frequently?**

The training facilities are huge. Fort Irwin in California's Mojave Desert, where I made a lot of this work, has approximately 1,000 square miles of training grounds, and the Marine Corp's Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, California is of a similar size. For perspective, the state of Rhode Island is very close in size at 1,033 square miles. And yes, when I was photographing, they were used very frequently. The bases as a whole were in continuous use, and I observed the simulated villages to be in use about 50 percent of the time. Of course, that could have changed now with the winding down of the wars.



*Salih, 2013*

**You've also photographed Americans who've converted to Islam. Is there a personal link to this? It must be incredibly difficult for some converts (as you've put it in your statement) to traverse the imagined line between the supposedly diametrical opposites "Muslim" and "American." What was a particularly notable experience you heard from one of your participants?**

My interest in *The Converts* does not come from a direct personal connection to the subject matter in the sense that I am not a Muslim convert and, prior to embarking on this project, I did not personally know any converts. The project stems largely, I think, from what I observed of the way that Muslims (or "Muslim-looking" people, if there is such a thing) were treated in the United States in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. I was in my early 20s at the time, and seeing the bigotry and hatred directed at Muslims really caught my attention. It took me a long time to figure out how to deal with these ideas in my work, and it wasn't until I'd had a series of other experiences with Muslims, including living in a mixed Christian/Animist/Muslim community in Benin, that I was more ready to grapple with the subject.

In terms of the experiences of the participants in my project, I'm struck over and over again by stories of how converts relate to their birth families. I know one heartbreaking situation of a family who has completely rejected their daughter as a result of her faith. This experience is so painful for her because she loves her family and wants to maintain ties with them. On the other hand, I know a family that was initially shocked by the daughter's decision to become Muslim but eventually came to warmly accept her and her Muslim husband. Now the convert's mother goes out of her way to purchase a Halal (Islamically permissible) turkey for Thanksgiving so that the Muslim family members can be included in the meal.

*Born and raised in Chicago, Claire Beckett earned a BA in anthropology at Kenyon College. She then worked as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Benin, West Africa, before going on to earn an MFA in photography at Mass College of Art. She is represented by **Carroll and Sons** gallery in Boston.*

*Follow Mossless magazine on **Twitter** and support its new book on **Kickstarter**.*

## RECOMMENDED

---



**'Mossless' Magazine's  
Mammoth Third Issue**

**Mossless in America:  
Curran Hatleberg**

**Mossless in America:  
Kathya Landeros**

**Mossless in America :  
Morgan Ashcom**

---