

## ***Father Soldier Son:* American Masculinity and the Impact of the Patriarchal War Machine on the Family**

Sara Martín  
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona



**NOTE:** This is the text and part of the PowerPoint presentation I offered at the conference *Rewriting War and Peace in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries: Contemporary British and American Literature* (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain, 8-9 September 2021). I reproduce it here with a warning about **spoilers**.

The paper here presented, '*Father Soldier Son: American masculinity and the impact of the patriarchal war machine on the family*', is focused on analyzing this particular documentary, but also generally on calling attention to the importance of this film genre in the current rewriting of war. How we represent war and its aftermath today cannot be understood without documentaries as outstanding as *Taxi to the Dark Side* by Alex Gibney, *My Country, My Country* by Laura Poitras, *Restrepo* by Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington, and many others.

VINDICATING THE DOCUMENTARY IN THE REWRITING OF WAR

The image displays three documentary film posters arranged horizontally. The first poster on the left is for 'Taxi to the Dark Side', featuring a green background with a red, white, and blue American flag at the bottom. The second poster in the middle is for 'My Country, My Country', showing a man in a suit standing in a dusty, outdoor setting. The third poster on the right is for 'Restrepo', depicting a soldier in a combat helmet in a dark, war-torn environment.

The documentary I am introducing, while not first-rank, is indeed an excellent film. Directed and produced by Catrin Einhorn and Leslye Davis, two *New York Times* journalists, *Father Soldier Son* was released on Netflix on 17 July 2020. Their film originates in a 2010 article for, precisely, *The New York Times* by Einhorn and James

*Father Soldier Son: American Masculinity and the Impact of  
the Patriarchal War Machine on the Family*  
Sara Martín

Dao about a battalion deployed in Afghanistan. The film itself follows First Class Sgt. Brian Eisch of the United States Army for nine years, until 2019. It narrates the consequences of his deployment for him and for his sons, Isaac (initially 12) and Joey (7), as Eish is a single father after a bitter divorce. Following events in Afghanistan, the film portrays Eisch's painful healing after being wounded in combat and Isaac's gradual embrace of his father's military values.

Einhorn and Davis' documentary is unique not only in its heartfelt, intimate portrait of this American father and his two sons, but also in how it illustrates and clarifies the process by which a father's shattering combat experience not always leads to pacifist reactions in the family but quite the opposite. Occupying a subtle anti-war position, the two women filmmakers show how the patriarchal American war machinery benefits from the reproduction of key values connected with masculinity, still transmitted from father to son in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*FATHER SOLDIER SON (2020), THE NEW YORK TIMES/NETFLIX*



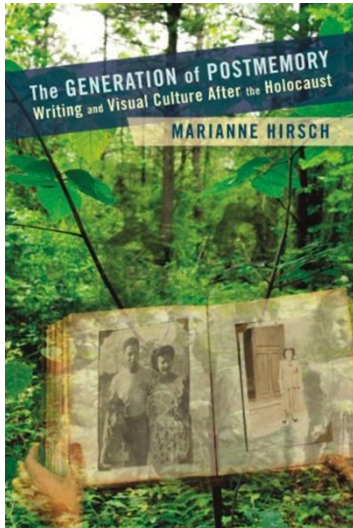
Directors Catrin Einhorn, Lesley Davis, and editor Amy Foote

FIRST CLASS SGT. BRIAN EISCH, UNITED STATES ARMY  
(SONS ISAAC, 12, AND JOEY, 7), DOCUMENTED 2010-2019



*Father Soldier Son: American Masculinity and the Impact of  
the Patriarchal War Machine on the Family*  
Sara Martín

In this sense, Isaac's experience of postmemory and loss is as relevant as his father's combat experience, for thanks to this boy's growing conviction that he can only be a good son by being a good soldier the spectator may understand how patriarchy ensnares young men into toxic, potentially deadly roles. These endanger their lives and, above all, help the truly powerful patriarchal individuals who wage war to go on damaging countless lives, both in America and whenever the American soldiers intervene.



In fact, what interested me in *Father Soldier Son* is how it seems to frontally contradict Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory. As she writes,

Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences. (22)

I believe that Joey's and Isaac's reactions to their father's war experience is not one in which these events are neither understood nor recreated. In fact, because they are understood, the events are recreated to the point that the military discourse is sustained and replicated for the following generation, though not without problems, as I will argue.

I am also interested in how, unlike what Paul Achter claims is habitual in audiovisual representation, in this documentary the veteran's disabled body remains 'unruly' and not at all domesticated: 'Veterans of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq with visually identifiable injuries possess 'unruly' bodies that render the story of war in efficient, emotional terms' (46), Achter says. Three strategies of representation are, thus, followed:

First, dominant discourses invoke veterans' bodies as metonymy of the nation-state at war—bodily well-being operates as a metonym for both the nation's health and for the condition of the war. Second, veterans are domesticated by strategic placement in contexts that regulate their range of movement, especially amputees, who are often framed as having already overcome any limitations imposed by their war injuries. Third, dominant visual discourse domesticates veterans' bodies by ascribing a strategic telos to them, shifting the meaning of the injuries away from their origins in state policy and toward wholeness and 'normalcy'. Representations of whole-bodied and injured veterans tame the harshness of war and erode the argumentative grounds for questioning it. (46)

My contention is that this does not happen in *Father Soldier Son*, in which the physical wound is never truly overcome and the veteran is, for that, profoundly harmed in his self-esteem as a man. In no way does the film question 'the harshness of war', quite the opposite, despite documenting the life of a man who fully accepts it. The forced domestication of the veteran's body because of its wound, rather than its unruliness appears to be the issue here, above all because, from what we gather, Eisch is tied to the Army's policy by which being on benefits seems incompatible with having a paying job. There is, after all, no clear reason why a man missing a leg cannot be fully employed, veteran or no veteran, though this situation is never openly discussed.

*Father Soldier Son: American Masculinity and the Impact of  
the Patriarchal War Machine on the Family*  
Sara Martín

Brian Eisch had been in the military for 17 years, with no combat experience, when he was sent to Afghanistan in his mid-thirties as part of President Obama's decision to deploy 30000 more troops there, a decision taken in 2009.



The film's first segment discusses the cost for American families of sending parents away for long tours of duty. This cost is three-fold: for the parent, for the children, and for the caregivers, whether they are the other parent, or another relative (in Joey and Isaac's case, their paternal uncle Shawn, who is not featured in the film but who played a key role).

HOME FOR TWO WEEKS ON LEAVE (14 MONTHSTOUR)

The work of war is very much a family affair. Nearly 6 in 10 of the troops deployed today are married, and nearly half have children. Those families –more than a million of them since 2001– have borne the brunt of the psychological and emotional strain of deployments. Siblings and grandparents have become surrogate parents. Spouses have struggled with loneliness and stress. Children have felt confused and abandoned during the long separations. All have felt anxieties about the distant dangers of war. (Einhorn & Dao, 2010)

The second segment narrates how Eisch was wounded and the subsequent amputation of his leg, four years later. During combat in a Taliban-controlled village, an Afghan Police officer was severely wounded. Eisch tried to rescue him but was himself wounded by machine-gun fire. He and the Afghan officer were then saved by an American medic, whom Eisch characterizes as the real hero, as he probably is.

A HEROIC ACTION (BUT WHO'S THE REAL HERO?)



- Eisch was wounded trying to rescue an Afghan Police officer (topic of relations US troops – Afghan fighters little explored)
- Who is the hero? a) Eisch for trying to rescue this man, b) the medic that saved them, c) both

The next segment covers Eisch's return as a wounded warrior, a label actually used by the US military. Early in the film, Eisch says 'I'm very glad I deployed cause I'm part of something now bigger than myself' but he also expresses his fear that, like other veterans, he might change. 'I wanna be the same fun dad', he says. His constant pain, however, changes him and inevitably affects the relationship with his boys, so far based on sharing plenty of outdoors activity together. Isaac feels relieved that his father is safe home but still fears losing him because he fears losing the bond they had. Joey's wish to go to Afghanistan and shoot the bad guys, childlike as it is, shows how the military discourse is reproduced in the family.

RETURN OF THE WOUNDED WARRIOR

- From Military.com  
Wounded veterans face additional issues when attempting to go back to school. The DoD and Department of Veterans Affairs have several programs designed to help them achieve their education and career goals.  
Select any of the following links to learn more about veteran education [Wounded Warrior](#) education support programs offered by the DoD and VA and other support programs organizations.



- Was it worth it? Losing your leg?  
- Oh, yeah.



DISABLED VETERAN ON BENEFITS: A NEW IDENTITY



- 'All my self-worth comes from physical stuff, what I can and cannot do physically'
- 'I absolutely wish I was still in the Army. (...) I had some power. I had some authority. I had an identity. And now (...), who am I?'
- 'Sometimes I feel guilty because I'm not mission-capable anymore. Like now I'm a burden to the VA and to the military because now they had to treat me and take care of me, and now I'm, you know?, collecting benefits. I'm just a 'use-to-could'. I can't do that stuff anymore, so I call it 'I-used-to-could-do' that stuff'
- The price of a leg: Eisch bought his fishing boat with the compensation money for the loss of his limb

Eisch shows no signs of PTSD, perhaps because he does believe that his wound is part of how well he performed his duties. However, he is a man for whom self-worth connects with physical activity and his disability soon leads to chronic depression. He also suffers from a sudden loss of identity. As he says, 'I absolutely wish I was still in the Army. (...) I had some power. I had some authority. I had an identity. And now (...) who am I?' His personal happiness with Puerto Rican girlfriend Maria is partly undermined by an unmanly sense of dependence, not from her but from the Army: 'Sometimes I feel guilty because I'm not mission-capable anymore' Brian says. 'Like now I'm a burden to the VA and to the military because now they had to treat me and take care of me, and now I'm, you know?, collecting benefits. I'm just a 'use-to-could'. I can't do that stuff anymore, so I call it 'I-used-to-could-do' that stuff'. There is some ugly irony in that he regains part of his outdoors mobility and physical identity when the compensation he gets buys him a fishing boat.

Although the veteran's experience of disability is specific, it is nonetheless framed by more general notions. In this sense, Steve Robertson explains that:

Indeed, for those men whose impairment is a result of their involvement in sport [or for that matter any physical activity sanctioned by hegemonic masculinity], the preservation of hegemonic masculine identities can be exceptionally difficult, but so can discarding them. Thus the rehabilitation process, and possibly disability in general, may be seen as gendered with 'passive acceptance' for disabled women and 'heroic effort' for disabled men. (78)

As he further warns, 'It is clear that the relationship between masculinity and disability is complex and that a single coherent identity as a 'disabled man' does not exist. Yet society's defining of men through action, doing rather than being (...), provides only a limited public narrative for disabled men to draw on (or reject)' (79). Current research, therefore, has an intersectional foundation, dealing with how the diverse masculinities intersect with the diverse types of disabilities. Researchers such as Lisa Silvestri Carlton (2012), on the other hand, have warned against the excessive pathologizing of the veteran, whether s/he is physically disabled or suffering from PTSD, on the grounds that this is a serious obstacle for healing and re-integration in the community.

REACTING TO THE FATHER'S DISABILITY



- Eisch notes Joey wants to do things 'with me' and Isaac 'for me'
- Isaac: 'I don't mean to sound like a cry baby, but I've been through a lot. I mean, sacrificing yourself to go fight a war for your country is definitely a noble cause. But at the same time, I'm not sure his injuries for the rest of his life were worthy it all'
- Eisch: 'If there's a negative that's come out of this with the boys, I don't see it. Either I don't see it, or I refuse to see it. I got some mentally-strong boys'

Eisch summarizes his new bond with his sons by explaining that whereas Joey wants to do things 'with me', Isaac wants to do things 'for me', which he resents as this stresses his dependence. Isaac concludes that 'sacrificing yourself to go fight a war for your country is definitely a noble cause. But at the same time, I'm not sure his injuries for the rest of his life were worthy it all'. He worries that his father will be depressed forever. Absurdly, Eisch claims that 'If there's a negative that's come out of this with the boys, I don't see it. Either I don't see it, or I refuse to see it. I got some mentally-strong boys'.

Sorry about the **spoilers** but shockingly, Joey dies, aged 12, in a road accident shortly after Maria and Brian's wedding. This shatters his parents and brothers (including Maria's youngest son Jordan), but also pushes Isaac in an unwanted professional direction.

LOSING JOEY, REINFORCING THE MILITARY  
DISCOURSE



*Father Soldier Son: American Masculinity and the Impact of the Patriarchal War Machine on the Family*  
Sara Martín


Joey's manifest patriotism and firm desire to join the military condition Isaac, who wanted to go to college and become a Police officer. His father constantly questions Isaac's academic skills and assumes that he will join the military. Isaac resists this assumption but soon after Joey's death (and even before graduation) he signs up with the military.

FATHER AND SON(S): JOEY'S LEGACY, ISAAC'S FUTURE




Isaac: 'It's definitely hard to have a father that did so much in his life, for me to catch up with that. I fully believe that if Joey was still here today, he'd be my dad's successful story'

BROTHERS, GONE AND NEW



[Film's final words]: 'I know my dad is proud of me for joining the military, but I do feel that I'm letting him down sometimes because I'm not living up to what he did. I'm just the bottom-of-the-line soldier. But I do wanna go to war... someday. This is what I was grown up to do'



'I think one of the hard things about being a boy is being tough enough'; Brian wants Jaxon to be tough, and 'I do want him to serve'


The film's end suggests that Isaac, a private for two and a half years, might be eventually deployed, in Afghanistan or elsewhere. Documentaries about living persons are, however, always open-ended and, as happens, Isaac abandoned the military to make his own choices right after the film's release (in 2020). Relentless, Brian expresses a determination that his and Maria's baby Jaxon, then 2, will be a boy tough enough to serve (what Isaac implicitly is not).



Behind Brian's patriotism there is, however, a harsh economic reality. Eisch's father wanted one of his four children to enlist but, ultimately, Brian's poor grades were decisive in his choice. His dad ordered him to enlist as a way out of a life as a Walmart employee, and this is how Brian's adult life started at seventeen.

**BRIAN'S DISCOURSE: PATRIOTIC DUTY AND ECONOMICS**


- 'My dad wanted one of his kids to be in the military and I was the last one, so it was kind of me by default' (the third generation serving in the USArmy)
- Brian's own grades were not good for college. When he started working at Walmart, his dad ordered him to enlist ('You're not working at Walmart for the rest of your life!')
- 'It's lot easier being a platoon sergeant than it is raising two boys by yourself'
- 'I question myself everyday if I'm doing the right thing for my kids'
- Isaac should sign up, not 'out of love' but because 'if you do your job, you get promoted'



Naturally, Eisch is often torn between his duties as a single father and his duties as a soldier. 'I question myself everyday' he says, before being wounded, 'if I'm doing the right thing for my kids', stressing how nobody considers their suffering. Despite his genuine patriotism, ultimately Brian is worried about Isaac's future and the lack of jobs. He should sign up, he says, not 'out of love' but because 'if you do your job, you get promoted'. The military values disguise, then, the same economic limitations that also affected Brian in his youth and a serious concern about his son in economically depressed America.

**JOEY'S DISCOURSE: LEARNING WARFARE IN CHILDHOOD**

- Joey, aged 7: 'My dad is in Afghanistan to make this country how it is. He said, if he's not doing this right now, then we'll have bullets fly over our heads at night'
- Joey, aged 11 (as he plays a war videogame): 'I really like the military life and that's kind got me into wanting to join the Army, 'cause I love the Army life. I probably won't even graduate, I'll probably join when I'm 17. I wanna run around shooting guns, doing fun stuff (...) I'll bet you we'll be in a really cool war somewhere else. I'd feel ok with getting shot in the middle of the battle. I bet it wouldn't feel good and I'd know I'd done something right'




As for Joey, clearly his enormous admiration for his father conditions his love of the military, though Brian exposes him to a toxic discourse. Aged 7, Joey explains that 'My dad is in Afghanistan to make this country how it is. He said, if he's not doing this right now, then we'll have bullets fly over our heads at night'. Later, aged 11, Joey says as he

plays a war videogame that 'I really like the military life and that's kind got me into wanting to join the Army, 'cause I love the Army life. I probably won't even graduate, I'll probably join when I'm 17. I wanna run around shooting guns, doing fun stuff (...) I'll bet you we'll be in a really cool war somewhere else. I'd feel ok with getting shot in the middle of the battle. I bet it wouldn't feel good and I'd know I'd done something right'. The future soldier is present here, having completely absorbed the paternal military discourse, though his naivete is dismaying and heartbreaking.

ISAAC'S DISCOURSE: RESISTING THE COST OF PATRIOTISM

- [Issac, aged 15] 'When my dad was in Afghanistan, I felt like I had, like, a 25-pound weight on my shoulders. And then when my dad came back it was, like, gone' (but he still worried)
- [why he wants to be a Police officer]: 'When I was younger, I was 100% the military. Let's go, let's go. Military. Put on a uniform and go overseas. But when I actually thought about it, I'd like to be closer to family. I do want to have kids eventually and I don't want my kids to go what I went through'.
- [Before Joey's death] He would accept Joey's choice of the military but 'It's just that losing family does not seem very appealing to me'
- 'I don't know what started the war in Afghanistan. I don't know if Al-Qaeda is based in Afghanistan. I don't really follow that side of politics very much. I don't really follow why wars happen. All I know is, I love my country'



Isaac, however, has resisted this discourse. He wants to be a Police officer because, even though he used to love the military, 'I'd like to be closer to family. I do want to have kids eventually and I don't want my kids to go what I went through'. Before Joey's tragic death, Isaac claims he would worry about Joey's safety but accepts that brother wants to be a soldier: 'It's just that losing family does not seem very appealing to me'. Surprisingly, given his father's experience, Isaac knows next to nothing about Afghanistan, just connecting war with the love of one's country.

The directors' decision to focus on the personal has divided the reviewers. Lee complains that 'There's a conscious decision to avoid any overt form of political discussion despite proudly stated patriotism running throughout (a quick glance of Brian's Facebook page shows him to be an impassioned Trump supporter) and while it's mostly irrelevant to the day-to-day dramas of the family, at times it feels like an elephant in the room' (2000 online). Alm disagrees. He writes that 'Perhaps one of its most moving aspects consists in what isn't there. At a time when everything from food to deadly viruses have been politicized, and when the military is often associated with the political right, a tale of one little family from Wisconsin offers unexpected respite' (2000 online).

Knowing that the personal is always political, I believe that the central discourse of the film is expressed in the scene, towards the end, when Eisch's wife Maria confides to the directors: 'Don't let Brian fool you, he's not doing good. He's angry. He's angry about our son being dead. He's angry about being a 'used-to-could'. He's pissed-off that he can't walk around. He doesn't feel manly, he doesn't feel masculine enough. I don't know what to do for him'. Nobody does, the film hints, but those responsible should indeed how to treat all veterans.

*Father Soldier Son: American Masculinity and the Impact of  
the Patriarchal War Machine on the Family*  
Sara Martín

*Father Soldier Son*, to sum up, questions how the decisions of the most powerful man in the USA –here President Obama– condition the lives of American men and boys. Brian’s story shows that economics and not just patriotism turned him into a career soldier. Joey’s and Issac’s life is also conditioned by this mixture, even though Isaac’s case shows that when boys join the military for personal, emotional reasons rather than for more pragmatic considerations, or out of pure chauvinism, unsolvable tensions arise.



Other lessons are learned. Against expectations, the father’s crippling combat experience reinforces the family’s military discourse. The veteran’s depression is not tied here to PTSD, but to issues of masculine self-esteem connected with the fully able body. We learn above all that the USA’s foreign wars are fought by the American citizens who would not enlist if good jobs could free them from the toxic patriarchal military culture which entraps them, at home and in the nation.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Achter, Paul. 'Unruly Bodies: The Rhetorical Domestication of Twenty-First-Century Veterans of War'. *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96.1 (February 2010): 46-68.
- Alm, David. 'Review: *Father Soldier Son*'. *Forbes* 21 July 2020. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidalm/2020/07/21/review-father-soldier-son/>
- Carlton, Lisa Silvestri. 'Together We Stand, Divided We Fall: Building Alliances with Combat Veterans'. *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 95.3 (2012): 284-308.
- Coleman, Nancy. 'The *Times* Story That Grew Into a Movie, Over 10 Years'. *The New York Times* 17 July 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/insider/father-soldier-son.html>
- Deer, Patrick. 'Mapping Contemporary American War Culture'. *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 43.1 (Winter 2016): 48-90.
- Einhorn, Catrin and James Dao. 'Families Bear Brunt of Deployment Strains'. *The New York Times* 31 December 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/31/world/asia/31families.html>
- Hirsch, Marianne. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*. Harvard University Press, 1997 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition).
- Holyfield, Lori. *Veterans' Journeys Home: Life After Afghanistan and Iraq*. Paradigm Publishers, 2011. EPUB
- Junger, Sebastian. 'What's the Matter With the American Military?' *The Atlantic* 23 February 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/02/whats-the-matter-with-theamerican-military/385735/>
- Lee, Benjamin. '*Father Soldier Son* Review – Intimate Netflix Military Documentary'. *The Guardian* 14 July 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jul/14/father-soldier-son-netflix-documentary>
- Mann, Bonnie. *Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror*. Oxford: OUP, 2014.
- Minow, Neil. '*Father Soldier Son*'. *RogerEbert.com* 17 July 2020. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/father-soldier-son-movie-review-2020>
- Prividera, Laura C. and John W. Howard. 'Soldiers and Fathers: Archetypal Media Representations of Service, Family, and Parenting'. *Deconstructing Dads: Changing Images of Fathers in Popular Culture*, Laura Tropp and Janice Kelly, eds. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. 51-75.
- Saito, Stephen. 'Interview: Leslye Davis and Catrin Einhorn on Capturing the Internal Struggle Back Home After Fighting Abroad in *Father Soldier Son*'. Moveable Fest 17 July 2020. <https://moveablefest.com/leslye-davis-catrin-einhorn-father-soldier-son/>
- Taurel, Douglas. 'Part 1 of my Interview with Sgt. First Class Brian Eisch'. *The American Soldier Solo Show*. 11 November 2020. <https://www.theamericansoldiersoloshow.com/blog/2020/11/11/laf4mpzlojoseafzxi19tqwx4vi6nq>
- Walsh, Tovah B.; Caroline J. Dayton, Michael S. Erwin, Maria Muzik, Alexandra Busuito and Katherine L. Rosenblum. 'Fathering after Military Deployment: Parenting Challenges and Goals of Fathers of Young Children'. *Health and Social Work* 39.1 (February 2014): 35-44.

## DISCLAIMER

I have not received payment of any kind for the presentation of the paper here reproduced. The images are used to support my main aim, which is promoting *Father Soldier Son* as a documentary film deserving of academic attention and of further general attention among worldwide audiences.

## CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE



### Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (by-nc-nd)

**You are free:** to Share — to copy, distribute and transmit the work under the following conditions:

**Attribution** — You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).

**Non-commercial** — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

**No Derivative Works** — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. You're specifically forbidden to generate academic research and publications based on this paper, though you may quote from it. If you wish to cite it, the correct **citation** would be:

Martín Alegre, Sara. '*Father Soldier Son: American Masculinity and the Impact of the Patriarchal War Machine on the Family*'. Bellaterra: Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2021.

This should be followed by the DDD web address of the document where you found it.

**Notice** — For any reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. If in doubt, contact the author, Sara Martín Alegre ([Sara.Martin@uab.cat](mailto:Sara.Martin@uab.cat))