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Embodying Militarism: Exploring the Spaces and Bodies In-between

Synne L. Dyvik and Lauren Greenwood

'My body knows unheard-of songs'
(Cixous, 1976: 876)

This Special Issue of *Critical Military Studies* creates an inter-disciplinary space to explore embodied experiences of militarism, militarisation and war, and engages with some of the challenges faced when studying the military. Through the myriad ways that embodiment conceptually informs each contributing author's research, collectively these pieces examine the deep bodily interconnectedness of everyday lived experience, the multiple ways militarism intersects with society, and how this interweaves with the 'generative capacity' of war (Barkawi and Brighton, 2011). The contributory disciplinary perspectives range from anthropology, the creative arts, political geography, history, international relations, and sociology.

The pieces reflect, in part, different attitudes and approaches to the study of embodiment, militarism, militarisation, and, by extension, war. Mascia-Lees, drawing on Van Wolputte (2004: 259), outlines embodiment as the connections between bodies and their lived experience: 'a way of inhabiting the world as well as the source of personhood, self, and subjectivity, and the precondition of intersubjectivity' (Mascia-Lees, 2011: 2). With this comes the recognition that embodied selves are "mediated" and "hybrid"; "they" are constituted by, and constitutive of, political economic formations, whether colonialism, post-socialism, late capitalism or neoliberalism' (ibid.: 2). The articles in this issue of *Critical Military Studies* highlight different ways of engaging with and studying embodiment and the multiple and contested conceptualisations of militarisation and militarism (see for example the debates presented by Stavrianakis and Selby, 2013). Through this, and the exploration of the additional themes of 'methodology and positionality' and 'complicity and co-option', each author illustrates reflexively their own engagement and negotiation with the emerging field of critical military studies.

Militarism and militarisation have in recent years often been side-lined in much academic debate, consequently creating a gap in research across the social sciences. For instance, in International Relations (IR), while these were important concepts of analysis during the Cold War, they have since fallen out of fashion. This is likely in part due to the political and intellectual hegemony of liberalism, the rise of 'new wars' and 'failed states' literature, along with an increased emphasis on 'security' (Stavrianakis and Selby, 2013a: 6; see also Barkawi, 2011; Reich et. al Forthcoming). As a starting point, militarism might broadly be understood as 'an ideology that prioritizes military force as a necessary resolver of conflict' (Woodward, 2014: 41) or as 'the social and international relations of the preparation for, and conduct of, organized political violence' (Stavrianakis and Selby, 2012b: 3). Relatedly, militarisation might be understood as 'that multi-faceted set of social, cultural, economic and political processes by which military approaches to social problems and issues gain both elite and popular acceptance' (Woodward, 2014: 41).

While embodiment has been a central focus in anthropology, notably during the 1970s and 80s paradigmatic shift towards the 'anthropology of the body', there is a distinct lack of

anthropological work that connects these themes with militarism. Likewise in IR, which has, only relatively recently begun to explore how ‘the international’ is also an embodied and emotional space (Crawford, 2000; Edkins, 2003; Shinko, 2010; Holmqvist, 2013; Åhall and Gregory, 2015). Within sociology, attention has predominantly been on the quantitative, with military sociology a side-lined sub-field. As Hockey has noted, a sociology of the body for the most part has conceptualised ‘the body as a terrain of signs and discourses which to be read as a text, with the material flesh seemingly dissolved’, this he argues has resulted in a ‘sensory lacuna’ and a neglect within studies of the ‘interrelationship between social and sensory processes’ (Hockey, 2009: 478, see also McSorley, 2014).

An interest in these themes, stemming from our personal and scholarly engagement and experience of military research, provided the impetus for a workshop in September 2014 to highlight, explore and contribute to addressing this research gap. This workshop was held in Cardiff, and was generously funded by the Body Health and Religion Research Group¹ (BAHAR), and supported by the Sussex Centre for Conflict and Security Research (SCSR). Participants were invited to write creative and personal papers guided by the following themes: Experiences, narratives and stories from ‘the field’; Exploring Methods; Using Embodiment, Emotion and Empathy in Research; Negotiating insider/outsider perspectives and the politics of co-option; and, Militarism, Identity and the Everyday. Three key themes emerged from the workshop: ‘embodying militarism’; ‘methodology and positionality’; and ‘complicity and co-option’. This issue of *Critical Military Studies* represents an outcome of this process and these themes were subsequently taken forward to shape seven articles and four *Encounters* pieces.

The pieces collected here, in their own ways, stretch the concepts of militarism and militarisation in directions that pay attention to its emotional, embodied, sensed and corporeal manifestations. They recognise the ways in which processes of militarisation are not always conscious, not always deliberate, but in the words of Kevin McSorley (this issue: 3), ‘something that is *felt*, as much as, if not at times more than, something that is explicitly *thought* about’. In so doing, these pieces demonstrate some of the different ways in which the social sciences and humanities should begin to reengage with the study of militarism/militarisation and military forces more specifically. Crucially, they raise questions and open out understandings of how bodies and embodied selves are - and become - militarized, highlighting some of the most pertinent issues surrounding the relationships between militarisation and militarism.

The first article is a co-authored piece by Peter Adey, David Denney, Rikke Jensen and Alasdair Pinkerton (Royal Holloway, University of London), entitled *Blurred Lines: Intimacy, Mobility and the Social Military*, in which they explore the impact of social media on the British Armed Forces. They show how the increased use of social media effects intimate and affectual military spaces in ways that are not only surprising, but can also pose potential challenges to prevailing notions of military cohesion. In so doing they challenge conceptions of embodiment in virtual and non-virtual spaces, while reflecting on their own embodied experiences of doing ethnographic fieldwork on board the highly militarised space of a British Royal Navy warship.

¹ Special thanks must go to Geoffrey Samuel and Santi Rozario of BAHAR for the initial set of conversations that led to this workshop.

In *Writing about embodiment as an act of translation*, Catherine Baker (University of Hull) reflects on the challenges of writing about embodied experiences. Through the analogy of the audiovisual translator and learning from scholars of translation, this *Encounters* piece unpacks the process of imagination and feeling that writing (about) embodiment involves. The codes involved in this form of work, through theory and critique is particularly important when writing about militarism and the military in order to see how ‘the military produces, disciplines, treats, and unmakes bodies’ (Baker, this issue).

Torika Bolatagici’s (Deakin University) photo essay in *Encounters* entitled *Somatic soldier: embodiment and the aesthetic of absence and presence*, is a reflection on her own art practice and research into Fijian military embodiment. Through exploring the tensions within the visible and invisible, the lived and the represented, the absent and the present, she shows how art can encourage us to nurture our ‘critical curiosity in exploring and presenting the lived experience of the contemporary soldier’ (Bolatagici, this issue).

The focus on this lived experience and negotiating engagements between ‘civilian’ and ‘military’ bodies is taken forward in the innovative co-authored piece by Sarah Bulmer (University of Exeter) and David Jackson (Independent Researcher, UK) – ‘*You do not live in my skin’: Embodiment, Voice and the Veteran*. Taking issue with current research on veterans in the UK, they set out to promote engagement and dialogue through structuring their piece as a conversation between themselves. Through searching for the ‘spaces-in-between’ they alternate between being researchers and researched, thus pushing embodied research in new directions and challenging the monologue style of academic writing.

Paying attention to the various roles afforded the veteran and the soldier body is continued in Jesse Crane-Seeber’s (North Carolina State University) piece, *Sexy Warriors: The Politics and Pleasures of Submission to the State*. He argues that critical military studies scholars should pay more attention to the soldier as an object of desire, not just violence. Drawing on queer scholarship, he explores the intimate links between submission and desire, opening up a space to ask questions about how embodied ‘kink’ practices can help us interrogate the links between sexiness, sexuality and militarism.

The challenge of reading and writing embodiment that begun in Baker’s piece is carried forward in Synne L. Dyvik’s (University of Sussex) piece, *Of Bats and Bodies: Methods of Reading and Writing Embodiment*. It explores how the concept of embodiment can help scholars working with military memoirs to bridge the schism between the ‘author’ and the ‘reader’ that military memoirs often insist on. Through framing embodiment as a series of ‘entanglements’ (Mensch, 2009) and through learning to pay attention to her own embodied reading of these memoirs, she argues that this can help us in critically understanding and translating embodied experiences charted in military memoirs and the political work they do.

Harriet Gray’s (University of Gothenburg) article, *Researching from the spaces in-between? The Politics of Accountability in studying the British Military*, explores the embodied experience of doing feminist research within a military institution. It evaluates the difficult negotiations between the opposing and often unhelpful poles of ‘collaboration’ and ‘disengagement’, showing how the complexities of ethnographic research and a sense of responsibility and accountability towards ones research subjects should invite a more nuanced position ‘in-between’.

Exploring the spaces ‘in-between’ also runs through Lauren Greenwood’s (University of Sussex) paper entitled *Chameleon Masculinity: Developing the British Population-Centred Soldier*. She explores some of the practices and processes that become embodied by specialist ‘population-centred’ soldiers, through her participant observation as an anthropologist and Officer in the Royal Naval Reserves. Touching on her own experience of ‘in-betweenness’ she sees this mirrored in the experiences of her research subjects, leading her to develop the concept of ‘chameleon masculinity’, a form of militarisation where agency is directed through a range of embodied masculine practices and performances.

Examining how stories and memories make both people and war, in her *Encounters* piece, Susanna Hast explores different and embodied forms of bringing insight to international relations, and in so doing, she challenges the dominance of academic language. Hast reflects on the method she happened upon, of exploration through performance (song and movement) connecting with the ‘unheard-of songs’ (Cixous, 1976: 246) that her body knew. In doing so, she finds that ‘music touches what cannot be said’, and through this visceral in-between space stimulates insight and feeling (Hast, this issue).

Doing Military Fitness: Physical Culture, Civilian Leisure and Militarism, by Kevin McSorley (University of Portsmouth) analyses the growing trend of military themed fitness training in the UK. Through participant observation he reflects on the embodied regimes, experiences and interactions between civilian and ex-military personnel. He argues that commercial military fitness rearticulates collective military discipline within a late-modern culture that emphasized the individual body as a site of self-discovery and personal responsibility.

The final contribution to the Special Issue is the *Encounters* piece entitled ‘Diary of a plastic soldier’ (extracts of and commentary to). It is a piece of poetry and prose by Pip Thornton, an academic and former British Territorial Army soldier. Thornton uses this piece to explore her own embodied sensory experience and the inseparability of this from the bodies and perceptions of those she was serving alongside, whilst deployed operationally to Iraq in 2003.

These articles and *Encounters* pieces all illustrate what it might mean to understand the concepts of militarism, militarisation and war, through the concept of embodiment. This challenges prevailing ideas of how militarism is often understood as an ideology disconnected from the body and the everyday. Discussions raised in these contributions trouble the binaries of insider/outsider and civilian/military in various productive ways, offering an understanding of militarism and war that is responsive to the complex and interconnected ways in which it colours all our lives. With a view to neither privileging the ‘mind’ over the ‘body’, nor to treat these as disparate entities, the contributions rather analyse how embodiment is a term that captures the intricate webs spun between senses, emotions, experience, individuality and collectivity.

The second contribution this issue makes connects to method. Authors’ unique subjectivities and range of academic backgrounds provide a rich arena of methodological approaches, all of which highlight the challenges of positioning. Debates raised herein capture the negotiation of empathic ‘closeness’ and critical ‘distance’ through participant observation, in-depth interviewing, reflexivity, oral histories, photography, song, the analysis of military memoirs, and the development of ‘ethnographic imagination’. Those with former military identities engage with their military membership in relation to service, rank, branch and operational

experience, and their use of this identity and knowledge when examining and negotiating power and gender in their research.

Discussion on method also connects with the third contribution the issue seeks to offer, specifically in relation to negotiations of ‘complicity’ and ‘co-option’. Including embodied selves into research invites both reflexivity and transparency, helping to reveal some of the hidden and embodied complexities and politics of working on, alongside or with militarization and militarism. In so doing, these texts challenge *Critical Military Studies* to think beyond these concepts and trouble the often-assumed binary of ‘closeness/complicity’ and ‘distance/critique’.

The introductory quote above - ‘*My body knows unheard-of songs*’ - from Helen Cixous (1976: 876) has inspired our work with this Special Issue from the outset. In her seminal feminist text, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous encourages women firstly to write and, secondly to write themselves into how they write. Through the pieces we’ve collected here we hope to show that learning to listen, see, and feel a variety of embodied selves, their stories, their images, and their songs, is a critical, productive and powerful way to study militarism, militarisation and war.

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