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Critical Military Studies as Method: An Approach to Studying Gender and the Military

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Critical Military Studies (CMS) is a burgeoning interdisciplinary sub-field which 'turns a critical lens onto military practices and institutions through which nothing about the military is taken for granted' (criticalmilitarystudies.org). This contrasts with the wider field of military sociology and military studies which instrumentalises critique as a means through which to generate recommendations for the improvement of military policy. However, CMS is also a productive and proactive field of inquiry in its own right (Basham, Belkin and Gifkins 2015). At the centre of CMS is a commitment to questioning military power, processes, and institutions, in their multiple forms 'as the outcome of social life and political contestation ... at a range of scales from the embodied to the global, rather than as given, functional categories beyond interrogation' (Rech et al., 2015: 48). In this chapter we introduce CMS with a focus on what CMS *does* (or can do) when considering gender, rather than trying to define what it is, and we pay particular attention to its value for feminist enquiry. We understand the intersections between CMS scholarship and feminist analyses to

provide significant opportunities for asking different questions and rendering familiar “feminist fables” about militarisation and militaries strange (Stern and Zalewski, 2009). In this chapter we show that a CMS approach to gender and the military enables what we see as three main possibilities for the contestation of gendered military power. Firstly, it asks us to remain critical and reflexive about common feminist “short-hands” we often use when we analyse gender and the military. Terms such as “militarised masculinity” and traditional narratives about gender and war are revisited and their limits and complexities explored. Secondly, like much feminist scholarship CMS deconstructs and destabilises the gendered boundaries routinely drawn in our analyses of war and militarism, showing where they fail, are negotiated or are resisted. However, because much CMS work involves fieldwork or close encounters with military institutions and the people who inhabit them, CMS can open up opportunities to engage in a ‘messier’ form of deconstruction. We also focus our attention on the ways in which knowledge production is already gendered and how a CMS approach can challenge conventional methods and generate new insights. Third we explore the ways in which a CMS approach to gender and the military opens up space to think differently about resistance. Whilst CMS scholars have a normative commitment to critiquing militarism in all its forms, they do not foreclose or pre-define what that resistance might look like or how it might be constituted. Through these three lines of enquiry we demonstrate that CMS problematises and complicates some of our longstanding assumptions as feminist scholars about the nature of military power and its effects, and encourages a feminist praxis that gets closer to militarism, military organisations and military personnel in order to seek to change it.

Rethinking feminist fables about gender and the military

There is a wealth of feminist research which has interrogated the relationship between war, militarism and gender (*inter alia* Stiehm, 1982; Reardon 1985; Enloe 1988; Elshtain, 1987; Yuval-Davis 1997; Sjoberg and Via 2010; Eichler 2012; Kronsell & Svedberg, eds., 2012). Stern and Zalewski (2009: 621) identify a ‘basic storyline’ about militarisation and gender that runs through many of these and that has ‘made a great deal of sense’ for some time to those interested in critiquing war and militarism’s gendered power relations and dynamics. This storyline is based upon heteronormative discourses which produce men as masculine and women as feminine and which attribute stereotypical characteristics to each “gender”. Typically men are associated with war, soldiering and violence and they are the “protectors” of women, who are associated with nurturing, the home front and the reproduction of the nation. As Stern and Zalewski (2009: 621) summarise ‘militarisation depends on “men” and “women” being, acting, identifying, even thinking as men and women as constituted through these intersecting discourses. If “men” are not men, and “women” are not women, then the rationale driving militarisation might unravel.’ It is notable that although the way gender relations are constituted is always contextual and intersectional, this storyline has proven to be broadly salient across geographical space, time and different communities (*inter alia* Enloe 2000; Cockburn 2007). It is not our intention here to suggest that this knowledge is wrong; on the contrary we have drawn on this research in our own work (Basham 2013; Bulmer 2013) and believe it has made a significant contribution in denaturalising both gender and military power. However, we think that these fables have the potential to create blind spots in feminist knowledge about militaries because following Stern and Zalewski (2009: 613) we believe they entail ‘the ongoing implicit and explicit expectation that a central task of feminism is to produce effective and productive knowledge in a conventionally recognisably temporal and political manner’. Moreover, as Duncanson and Woodward

(2015:4) urge, feminist scholars need to avoid overly ‘deterministic approaches towards the gender–military nexus that deny the possibilities for change within military institutions.’

One of the ways in which feminist knowledge seeks to make itself intelligible and heard is through our lexicon of key concepts. The telling of feminist fables can however, render once useful and productive concepts and terms, such as ‘militarised masculinity’ convenient short hands for feminist scholars which undermines efforts to reconsider their value in light of research developments. As Parpart and Partridge (2014) point out, work on military or militarised masculinities by Connell, Messerschmidt and others has provided valuable tools for gender analysis through their focus on multiplicity, hierarchy and hegemonic ideals. However, as Parpart and Partridge (2014) also note, this work and its application by others has been critiqued for underestimating the significance of interactions between different masculinities and their effects, for ignoring or detaching women from the study of masculinities; for lending itself to the production of static typologies of masculinities; and for facilitating a broad, sometimes implicit, acceptance in much feminist and gender scholarship of masculine dominance over the feminine. As Kimberly Hutchings (2008: 29) warns, the logic of “masculinity” ‘locks our social scientific imagination into a very familiar world’, and we too suggest that we need to be equally vigilant about the logics of our own conceptual framings, such as militarised masculinities, lest they too become ‘cognitive short cut[s] in our frameworks for understanding the world’. Recent CMS scholarship, such as that by Ken MacLeish (2013) and Zoe Wool (2015) seeks to avoid such shortcuts, pointing instead to lived experiences and examples of ‘the unmooring of masculinity from men’, to ‘queerings of heteronormativity’ in military settings (MacLeish 2013:20) and the analytical potential of thinking about war, militaries, and militarisation in an ‘expansive way – coextensive with things like gender, sexuality, and personhood rather than intersecting or overlapping with

them' (Wool 2015: 24). Such work can complicate our tendencies to typologise and offer unitary and binary depictions of gender relations and what is also interesting about this work is that whilst these scholars talk about gender in military settings throughout, neither utilises the term "militarised masculinity". For us, this raises questions about its value, its potential to conceal and reproduce more of the same than to shed light on, and develop, our feminist knowledge.

Recent CMS work illustrates well therefore the need for feminist scholars of armed force and forces to remain reflexive about our ways of seeing and making sense of the world. After all, if we rely only on established ideas, we risk losing opportunities to actually effect social change. This is not to say that feminist scholars are not making any such interventions, they are. At a 2015 conference held at Newcastle University, for example, Amanda Chisholm and Joanna Tidy prompted participants to avoid cognitive shortcuts, to reconsider militarised masculinities 'at the margins' and to rethink the limits and bounds of our conceptualisations. Claire Duncanson's recent work (2013) also stands out as a particularly good example of the opportunities for critique that come from reimagining military masculinities; and as Parpart and Partridge (2014) have recently argued, much emergent scholarship is raising serious questions about how we depict the military and can start to complicate our understanding of militarised masculinities. We argue that this work is vital and necessary and should be encouraged because, as Stern and Zalewski have made clear, familiar fables risk reifying gender by reproducing its categories in feminist analyses. We suggest that a CMS approach offers opportunities to intervene in this process of reproduction; CMS work queers the military, renders it strange and exposes its contradictions. As such it is not concerned with making sense of the military through the application of existing concepts but rather at unmaking common sense understandings of military power and showing how military power

often makes *little* sense. We feel that CMS scholarship can provide a prompt for us as feminists to engage in deconstructing and destabilising the boundaries routinely drawn in analyses of war and gender, to instead show where they fail, are negotiated or resisted. For example, CMS scholars want to broaden and complicate the militarised masculinities storyline, to question where its limits lie, where attempts to make it neat are manifest and to find the spaces within it to open up new possibilities for feminist critique. People enact boundaries passively and actively, and military institutions in particular expend much effort in drawing and policing them. Whilst we engage in a critique of these processes so must we be attentive to our own attempts at boundary drawing and the dangers of so doing.

For us what all of this highlights is that feminist praxis should be our goal, what Stanley and Wise (1993: 231) call ‘an enhanced political engagement’, rather than a preoccupation with the conceptual for its own sake. As they also point out we ought to ‘keep in mind that a part (but not the whole) of such a praxis is a feminist *political* engagement within *academic life itself*: we are here to change it’ (1993:231, emphasis in original). Patti Lather (1986:262) further argues that our concepts and theories must be ‘adequate to the task of changing the world’; they ‘must be open-ended, non-dogmatic, informing, and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life; and, moreover...must be premised on the deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed’. It is important that we are careful about who we assume counts as dispossessed because it is always contextually contingent. Veterans, for example, can be seen as a privileged group within society, particularly where they have special status or rights within their countries (Mumford 2012) or are constructed as heroes (Kelly 2013). However they can also be understood as individuals whose voices are rarely heard within the mainstream media, policy or third sector narratives (Bulmer and Jackson 2015). There is, we believe, a disruptive potential in listening to those voices.

To listen carefully to those voices requires generosity, humility and a willingness to challenge and be challenged both intellectually and emotionally. It requires you to have a conversation with another person. As Bulmer and Jackson (2015) have argued ‘a conversation is not about reproducing pre-conceived assumptions. It is about the ability of the conversation to take you on a journey, and this involves risk and empathetic trust.’ As Zoe Wool (2015: 25) argues, CMS scholarship creates space for ‘a different mode of critique, one less driven to denunciation than bound to exploring, describing- and not necessarily resolving- the ambiguities and contradictions that animate war, military action, militarisation, and their logics and lived experiences’. One of the key ways in which we believe that it does this is through ‘the possibility of engagement with the forces and institutions responsible’ (Rech et al, 2015: 56). Although that often takes the form of ethnographic fieldwork, it is not a single method that defines CMS. Rather it is a methodological and epistemological commitment to situatedness and proximity to that which we study. As Donna Haraway argues (2004: 237):

The point is to make a difference in the world, to cast our lot for some ways of life and not for others [and] to do that one must be in the action, be finite and dirty, not transcendent and clean. Knowledge-making technologies, including crafting subject positions and ways of inhabiting such positions, must be made relentlessly visible and open to critical intervention.

We are concerned that feminist fables about war and gender risk reinstating the politics of the gaze, that is to say a view from afar, or what Donna Haraway would term a “God trick” (1991). Instead we advocate that a researcher should try to be a figure ‘of interrelationality, receptivity and global communication that deliberately blurs categorical distinctions’

(Braidotti, 1994: 105). This is not to say that we believe that CMS' commitment to fieldwork, lived experience and to a plurality of voices, is somehow superior or purer - this too would be a "God Trick" - but that we believe that we can use fieldwork and other forms of engagement to rethink how difficult it is for the military to reconstitute itself and to ask different questions. All encounters with those we research are mediated by and become discursive representations; the worlds of those we research are still there even if we no longer are. Researchers discover elements of the worlds of those that they research through the discursively and socially constructed concepts that are available to them so that whenever 'we speak or write about reality, the language we use is not the reality to which it is supposed to refer' (Skeggs 1994: 75). This conditionality and partiality should be celebrated as the place from where we can speak, for to suggest either that one can look from above or have *the* authentic ethnographic experience is actually masculinist; it, like disciplinarity, relies upon an idea of order, categorization and rationality, of what can be said and not said; it squeezes out messiness, connections and innovation. For CMS scholars critique is never a gaze from afar precisely because they seek messiness over order. To seek messiness is to pay acute attention to confusion, paradox and failure and to resist the disciplining of ways of thinking that so often occurs within academic institutions and practices. As Braidotti (2002:2) notes, our theoretical reasoning is dominated by 'concept-bound' approaches, making it harder to consider flows and interconnections rather than fixed problems and entities. The limits of our conceptual frameworks are brought into sharp relief when undertaking empirical work but within CMS these limits are reconceptualised as opportunities to rethink our use and reliance on those concepts to make sense of the world.

Close encounters of a military kind

The desire to trouble our conceptual boundedness and our assumptions about boundaries generates an openness to encounters with militaries, military personnel and militarism more generally. This openness demands that we embrace messiness, complexity and nuance in our engagements with military power and we can do this in many ways. For example, Bulmer's ongoing research with David Jackson, a war veteran, independent researcher and activist, explores a shared frustration about conventional research methods which they feel objectify, categorise and depersonalise veterans in problematic ways that flatten out and reduce their lived experiences within existing conceptual frames whose explanatory power is taken for granted. They argue that specific frames of the veteran exist which tend to pathologise veterans and reify them as heroic figures in ways which erase complex human experience. To challenge this they engage in dialogic methods that reintroduce messiness into the research praxis. This has included conference presentations where they stage a conversation, and an article where they experiment with writing forms to disrupt traditional academic categories and practices (Bulmer and Jackson 2015). As a collaboration between a civilian and feminist scholar and a war veteran who recognises the trauma of his military past but is still proud of his military service, they are unlikely allies. Yet the research they are producing together has fundamentally shifted their research praxis and understanding of what it means to critique military power. It has brought into sharp relief the limits of concepts like 'militarised masculinity' for understanding and engaging with someone else's complex lived experience.

However being open to encounters with military power, personnel, practices and institutions is not without its dangers. CMS scholars frequently find themselves subject to anxieties and discomfort. As MacLeish (2015: 16) points out it is often incredibly daunting when encountering "the military" to locate the object of analysis, 'the place where war showed up

and was made real'. Basham's fieldwork has demonstrated to her that close encounters with the military can often elicit multiple and contradictory feelings from unease and confusion about the nature of critique to joy about the opportunities of openness to those we research. Being told by an interviewee that 'the way you approached it [the interview] in a relaxed manner...seems like you're just interested really in someone's life or the way they do things, rather than you know, a set format of ideas' (Basham 2006, interview with Adam, White Sergeant, Royal Marines, January 2006) can be enticing; it invites the researcher to embrace openness and all its messiness. Sometimes this messiness leaves the researcher anxious and uneasy though. Basham's encounter with a woman Reservist encapsulates this well:

Susie's just left - what a lovely, friendly person. A single mum who's recently gotten out of an abusive relationship and moved away from him and her home town, staying with relatives, looking for work. She's joined the Reserves because she wanted to be in the regular Army when she was younger but it "wasn't an option" with the kids. Now they're a bit older she's signed up to "do something for herself and give my girls something that they can look up to, be proud of". My first reaction was to bristle – military service as something to be proud of? But that's disingenuous. Who the hell am I to patronise this woman as naïve for thinking that military service will empower her and her children? I haven't walked in her shoes (Basham - Fieldwork Diary, June 2015).

It is precisely this messiness that opens up possibilities for the more engaged form of critique that CMS scholarship seeks to facilitate. Yet, an equal sense of longing to belong to a wider scholarly and feminist community that may question that very openness, and express frustration at the messiness that so often follows from it can easily lead to the denial of messiness in favour of the retelling of feminist fables. For example, Basham frequently feels

pulled in multiple directions when faced with the all-too familiar question from a fellow feminist scholar: ‘so you’re a feminist but you actually interview soldiers?’. She finds herself defending this approach as a means of complicating feminist assumptions but is still troubled that many still tell insist: ‘I don’t think I could do it though, engage with them that directly. It’s kinda brave. But don’t you worry about getting too close?’ The assumption that feminism and being in close proximity to military personnel are somehow incompatible constitutes one of feminism’s most problematic fables. Yet these sentiments still haunt the feminist military scholar who seeks to build a career and to be taken seriously as part of a wider scholarly community.

We know from our conversations with and readings of other feminist fieldwork researchers of the military and war that such feelings often haunt these scholars too as they try to negotiate the value they place in established feminist critiques of military power and the everyday acts of friendliness, kindness and generosity of those whose lives they seeks to critique (Baker et al 2016; Ware 2016). At the same time however, such encounters can produce important revelations; they can highlight ‘that the glaringly obvious presence of the military... [is] an object of soldiers’ own constant commentary and critique’. In such encounters the military itself is revealed as being simultaneously predicated on ‘distinctions and sharp boundaries’ and self-contradictions (MacLeish 2015: 17). What CMS work like this illustrates is that encounters with military institutions can offer ‘a view not of the imagined inside, but of the constant policing, performing, and imagining of the boundaries between in and out’ (MacLeish 2015: 17). Thus we see our own research journeys as encounters that continue to be fraught with contradictions and tensions that are largely productive. However, we have also both struggled to balance retaining the messiness of our

research and the desire, and sometimes need, to somehow make our research “fit” with familiar feminist fables. We have both tried to make the data “fit” in order to be heard by other feminists, to be heard beyond feminism, to be identified as belonging to a scholarly community and in a crowded academic “market”, and simply to be regarded as employable. However, as we move forward with our research, we both hope to more actively engage in what Patti Lather (2007:1; see also Stern and Zalewski 2009) has called a ‘generative undoing of a certain orthodoxy that is a necessary part of feminism making itself coherent and authoritative’. We aim to be more vigilant to our attempts to make familiar concepts “fit” where they simply do not and to embracing complexity, unease and what could be construed by some as “failure” as productive, valuable and sources for political intervention. To do this is risky, for as Judith Halberstam (2011: 6) explains the ‘desire to be taken seriously is precisely what compels people to follow the tried and true paths of knowledge production.’ However we believe that CMS, with its emphasis on the disorderly and on the revisiting of the familiar, will help us to remember that failure ‘is not just a sign of epistemological crisis but also an epistemological construct that signals the need for new ground verses repetition on the same terms’ (Lather, 2001: 203). After all, by ‘approaching military power as a question’ (Basham, Belkin and Gifkins 2015: 1) rather than taking it as a given critical military studies already engages in a sceptical curiosity about how military power works, or indeed, breaks down.

Reconceptualising resistance

Stemming from the different ways to understand and critique militarism that a CMS approach enables is also an opportunity and necessity to think differently about feminist resistance to militarism. Diverse feminist theory and activism has an important and enduring history with

peace and anti-war activism. They recognize, in different ways, that a reconfiguration of gendered ideas is integral to such resistance (see Part One of this volume). CMS approaches recognise and continue that tradition but they try to remain openly curious about where, when and how such resistance may arise. We acknowledge that there is a legitimate suspicion around engaging with military power not least because some feminist ideas have been co-opted by state institutions to wage war (Shepherd 2006; Riley, Mohanty and Pratt eds 2008). However, like others in the social sciences who have engaged with participatory methods (*inter alia* Kindon, Pain & Kesby, eds., 2007), CMS scholars are open to the possibility of engaging with military institutions and the people involved in facilitating military power. A primary reason for this is that:

to be critical is to be engaged in critique; it is not to be dismissive. Critical engagement with military forces, and military and militarised institutions, can be underpinned by an understanding of these institutions as accountable to the civilian world, and necessarily understood as potentially open to collaboration and knowledge exchange, even where this idea may initially appear ridiculous ... the question which follows, then, is about the opportunities critical military studies might provide for envisioning and promoting possibilities for change within the institutions and practices which constitute its focus. This is not a simple issue ... Critiques are often complex entities, arguments drawing on a range of empirical evidence and political positions which may be nuanced in ways that more simplistic positions (such as ‘pro-military’ or ‘anti-military’) might find hard to accommodate. Far better that they are conducted with an intention in mind to inculcate change, even where that seems on the face of it to be unlikely, than not at all (Rech et al 2015: 56).

The civilian and the military, the militarist and the peace activist, war and peace; these are all sites of mutually co-constituted practices that ‘make possible the continual definition and redefinition of what is within the competence’ of one or the other (Foucault 1991: 103) and in so doing risk undermining the complexity of military power and violence. CMS acknowledges that researchers are always already proximate to and implicated in relations of power that complicate and indeed, undermine, the very notion of the distinctively “civil” and “military”. We suggest that CMS can prompt us to think in more complex ways about resisting war and militarism, specifically by moving away from such binaries of military/civilian, co-option/subversion and militarisation/demilitarisation. The political economy of war alone should easily confer that there simply is no ‘outside’; military personnel may be complicit in militarism in different ways to taxpayers but war makes societies as much as societies make war (Basham 2013). Researchers are always already implicated in militarism in many ways, not least that those of us who study it build careers and lives on it, and solicit material and social goods from doing so. If there is no outside of militarism as we suggest then that points to a different analytical strategy, to asking different questions from within rather than looking in from the outside and assuming we know or can even recognise what the “outside” or the “non-militarised” is. Moreover, as we have already argued the “inside” is itself contradictory and full of failed attempts to police its boundaries that offer up opportunities to complicate our analyses. As CMS work like Jo Tidy’s (2015) reveals, tracing people as figures of relationality rather than as sitting on one side of a fence or another is far more productive. Tidy’s compelling work demonstrates that much of the power of anti-war veterans comes from the fact that ‘military authority is simultaneously the target of and [their] means to dissent’ (Tidy 2015: 455). Their interventions therefore are neither simply reaffirming of the military nor anti-it but are *simultaneously* privileging of veteran’s voices over other anti-war voices *and* productive of

opportunities from the experiential for the creation of platforms from which multiple voices may eventually be heard. This necessarily means letting go of our comfortable beliefs that we already know who is resisting war and militarism, and how they are doing it, and being brave enough to remain open to alternative possibilities from people and places we least expect.

CMS scholarship does not assume that the researcher has the sole claim to criticality. Rather it starts with the assumption that people engaged with military power have their own critical capacities which they use to reflect on their experiences, something which is too easily lost when we, as feminists, “apply” our categories to their life worlds. As Krebs (2004:97) argues, the military, like other cultural systems, ‘always contain[s] enough contradictory material so that individuals can challenge hegemonic projects.’ As MacLeish (2015: 17, emphasis in original) notes, there is so much scope for critique in recognising this:

Soldiers and those close to them know how capable the Army is of defining and redefining the boundary between inside and outside, between its institutional obligation and the personal accountability of the individuals who labour on its behalf. And they themselves constantly and variously assert, with words and actions, their own boundaries, their own notions of what the Army is or ought to be responsible for, what they do or do not owe it, what it can and cannot claim of their lives. They may claim ... that they are damaged *and* dignified, proud *and* in need of help, or cynical about *and* satisfied with their work. If such boundaries cannot be taken for granted, then it is the constantly shifting and melting, looming and receding edges that call out for attention, that actually define the object in question.

The acknowledgement of this complexity and the ways in which criticality can be found even in those most militarised of spaces encourages us think differently about what it means to practice critique in this context. This recognition has profound implications for feminist praxis because it compels us to ask the question: What remains hidden if we fail to get closer to that which we critique?

To be clear, we are not suggesting that because we are all militarised that we should give up critique, quite the contrary. We seek instead to acknowledge the constant need that exists to keep reasserting boundaries that fail and it is because of that, and because we are always already militarised, that spaces for intervention are made possible. In the very act of trying to solidify boundaries that are fluid, space opens up for contestation and political intervention. This is vital not least because such boundaries and attempts to police them are gendered; they constitute gendered subjects who are expected to act in differently gendered ways. They mask the continuities and continuums of violence and they also work to conceal the modernist and masculinist assumptions that lie behind a story in which the West produces itself as progressive and in pursuit of peace in contradistinction to the barbaric non-West. As CMS scholars, we want to query and disrupt such familiar and reductive spatial, temporal, and discursive moves; to open up space for multiple readings that are simultaneous; to recognise contingency and possibility. The constantly shifting terrain of military power and its gendered formations and expressions, as Zoe Wool (2015) again illustrates, can help us avoid exceptionalising war and military power and as a result, we can learn much about the norms and wider social processes that facilitate war and its violence.

We have found that the ways that CMS scholarship pays particular attention to the tensions between abstract concepts and the everyday lived experiences of those touched by military

power, including soldiers themselves (Basham 2013), has made our research journeys productive, messy and at times uneasy, and we want to invite other gender and military scholars to consider the opportunities of such an approach. CMS, with its focus on experiential knowledge and research encounters is in many ways a very feminist approach. For us, the call to engage with militaries and society in complex ways, to offer up informed critique (Rech et al, 2015), is a hallmark of feminist praxis. In remaining critical of academic forms and methodologies, CMS creates space for alternative engagements with the artistic, dialogical and testimonial (for example, see Hyde 2014 and the Encounters section of *Critical Military Studies* journal). We thus offer up CMS as a methodology for researching gender and the military because with it and through it, we have come to realise the limits of our own critical engagements and our desire to go beyond them.

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