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Feeling and Militarism at Ms Veteran America

Abstract: This article examines US women service members’ and veterans’ feelings about their military lives and afterlives as they participate in and attend the annual Ms Veteran America (MVA) contest. Drawing on observations and qualitative interviews, the article explores the workings of gendered power within the US armed forces, and US militarism more broadly, through the tensions and contradictions of these women’s experiences. The article makes two contributions: First, MVA is shown to be a rich site for feminist analysis, with the contest constituting a distinct political space, which permitted the expression of emotions and affects that contestants felt otherwise unable to express in their everyday military lives. Second, through its attention to the range of emotions and affects felt by the women, the article complicates stories of militarised desire as contestants are simultaneously drawn towards and pulled away from their military lives and US militarism. The article argues that the everyday functioning of US military life relies on, and is productive of, particular feelings of its women members, and that these affective experiences matter for understanding US militarism and military power.

Key words: US military; militarism; women; emotions; affect

Ms. Veteran America: Showcasing ‘The Woman Beyond The Uniform’

“We just kind of feel like we’re invisible.” (Louise, Air Force, former member)

“And then I met the women of Ms Veteran America and for the first time in my life I actually connected to other women veterans who had served and had the same stories as me – I didn’t feel alone.” (Michelle, Air Force, former member)

“My last name is ‘Army’, my first name is ‘United States’. It is me.” (Tasha, Army, serving member)

It is the evening of 8 October 2017 and I’m standing in a fairly non-descript hotel lobby in Washington DC. People are checking into their rooms at the reception desk behind me, and to my right, a hotel bar is visible with a number of its customers dressed in tuxedos and evening gowns. The atmosphere is generally quiet, though occasional bursts of excited chatter and laughter can be heard, as well as glimpses of women wearing bright red dresses and combat boots. Moving through the reception area and towards the back of the hotel lobby, the numbers of guests in tuxedos and evening gowns increases, as well as men and women in formal military dress. Here, a corridor leads off to the right and into a room where a makeshift stage and catwalk have been constructed, as well as chairs laid out in rows, inviting an audience of – I would guess – around 150. At the entrance to the room a modest sign announces the event that

1 All names are pseudonyms.
will be held that evening, as well as the reason I have taken a research trip to Washington DC: ‘Ms. Veteran America’, ‘The Woman Beyond The Uniform’, ‘Grace, Poise, Beauty, Service’.

Started in 2012 by US Army veteran, Jas Boothe, the annual Ms Veteran America (MVA) contest seeks to showcase “The Woman Beyond The Uniform” and celebrate the “strength, courage and sacrifice” of US women veterans and service members (MVA Home, n.d.). From an initial pool of hundreds, 25 women veteran and service member finalists are selected to compete for the honour of being crowned ‘Ms Veteran America’ and to act as a spokesperson for homeless women veterans for one year. Selected in July, finalists are expected to spend the three-month run-up to the finale advocating on behalf of homeless women veterans and raising money for the beneficiary of MVA, Final Salute Incorporated (https://www.finalsaluteinc.org), the charity founded by Boothe, whose mission is to provide homeless women veterans with safe and suitable housing. In October, finalists are brought together in a weekend that will see them tested on their knowledge of US military history, interviewed by a panel of prestigious US women veterans, and take part in the culminating evening finale – the event I attended in October 2017.

Mimicking several of the performances and aesthetics of a ‘traditional’ pageant, including an evening dress round and talent contest, MVA also plays on the military identities of its contestants and actively seeks to subvert what is ‘familiar’ in beauty pageantry. For example, while contestants may have walked and twirled down a catwalk in evening wear or chosen the familiar pageantry talents of singing or dancing, the 2017 finale simultaneously included a push-up contest, combat boots adorned the feet of contestants, and the talent round was used not just to showcase the vocal and dancing talents of participants, but performances that documented experiences of military sexual trauma, post-traumatic stress, and suicide. MVA also upends arguably the most dominant aesthetic norm of traditional US beauty pageantry: that of the exclusively slim, predominantly white, young, heterosexual and middle-class woman (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006). Amongst the 24² finalists of MVA 2017, there were a range of body-shapes; contestants included both mothers and grandmothers; and in-line with the broader demographics of the US armed forces, Black women accounted for just under a third of the finalists³. One of the 2017 finalists appeared on stage with her helper dog and the evening’s co-host and 2013 MVA finalist, Marissa Strock, self-describes herself as a ‘Glamputtee’, having had both legs amputated below the knee following an improvised explosive device blast in Iraq in 2005. Such bodies are unfamiliar, if not altogether absent, in traditional pageantry.

² While 25 finalists were selected in 2017, only 24 took part in the finale.
³ According to data collected by the US Defense Department, 31% of enlisted women in the US armed forces are recorded as Black, broadly twice their representation in the civilian population (https://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/23/us/black-women-enlist-at-higher-rates-in-us-military.html).
Given this rendering of the familiar unfamiliar – both in terms of the aesthetic sensibilities of pageantry and what ‘cultural’ militarism is assumed to look like or the stories it tells (see Basham 2015; Åhäll 2016) – to dismiss MVA as a site in which US military women are presented first and foremost as feminised (and thus implicitly not-military), or as a site in which US militarism is straightforwardly celebrated and (re)produced, would be to miss or disregard the complexities of the workings of gendered and affective power relations during the event. It is through attention to these relations that this article traces the affective experiences of women’s military lives, detailing what this ‘felfness’ reveals about these women’s relationship to and of US military power, as well as contributing towards (and complicating) understandings of militarised desire and militarism more broadly. Drawing on non-participant observation of the 2017 MVA finale and in-depth interviews with seven participants from the 2016 and 2017 contests, the article argues that for the women I spoke with, despite personal recognition of the gendered harms and challenges associated with membership of the US armed forces, they continued to want to be enmeshed in its relations and affectively invest in it. Giving notice to these feelings of women service members and veterans furthers knowledge about the workings of gendered power both within the US military and in relation to conceptual understandings of militarism, while MVA reveals itself to be a rich arena for feminist research. As will be unpacked below, not only does the physical and emotional intimacy of MVA make possible an environment whereby the women involved speak openly about sexism in the ranks, sexual harassment, military sexual trauma, mental health, and their experiences of loneliness and isolation – echoing a number of themes discussed by feminists who have studied US women’s inclusion in their national military (inter alia Herbert 1998; Enloe 2000; MacKenzie 2015) – but the site also generates feelings of comfort, friendship, support, and a desire to remain in and of military relations.

At this point it is worth noting that while MVA draws attention to the gendered harms and challenges faced by women service members and veterans, as well as providing a forum in which contestants can gain and offer support to one another, it is not a site beyond critique. Most notably, while MVA renders visible some of the multiple effects of the privileging of (cis-)men and masculinity within the US military, a deeper critique of the processes, practices and effects of militaries, military power and militarism is avoided. In MVA, the US armed forces are implicitly positioned as an unquestioned good, and its violences go unspoken and unacknowledged. While as a feminist I remain troubled by the ways in which sites of ‘cultural’ militarism such as MVA may operate more broadly to facilitate wars, militaries and their

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4 While the number of women I spoke with is relatively small, this article is not seeking to make large, generalizable claims. Rather, it employs “a feminist ‘grounded theory’ approach that seeks to center women’s voices and experiences and theorize their wider significance” (Basham and Catignani 2018: 3).
violences as an accepted part of (inter)national life, I am also interested in the everyday experiences of the individuals who are tasked with enacting the work of national militaries. As an obvious and visible counter to the assumed norm of the (cis)male recruit, as well as the target of internal discriminations and violences, paying attention to the experiences and negotiations of women service members offers insight into the everyday workings and (re)productions of gendered power within military structures.

Before providing a roadmap for the article, I want to introduce three of the terms I will be using, as some come weighted with debates and disagreements as to their meanings and use. The first two terms I want to introduce are ‘emotions’ and ‘affect’. Over the past decade, and across multiple disciplines, a burgeoning literature on emotions, affect, and the distinctions (or not) between them has emerged. While there is not the space here to do justice to the depth and complexity of this literature, some working definitions are warranted. In this article, “emotions are typically understood as the conscious manifestation of bodily feelings” (Hutchison 2016: 16) – for example, love, fear, happiness, sadness. Affect, meanwhile, is understood to encompass “a more complete range of nonconscious, noncognitive ‘inner states’ and sensory experiences, including mood, disposition and attachment” (ibid: 16). So while emotions are cognitively recognised (‘I am happy’, ‘I am sad’), affects are more ephemeral – intensities and feelings experienced at an embodied level. Although for some scholars this distinction results in an insistence on a ‘hard’ difference between emotion and affect (see Gregg and Seigworth 2010), following a rich feminist literature (Hemmings 2005; Ahmed 2014 [2004]; Åhäll 2018), I refuse such a clear-cut division. Instead, I understand emotion and affect as “inextricably linked” (Hutchison 2016: 16), with emotions “involv[ing] bodily processes of affecting and being affected” (Ahmed 2014: 208), and affective bodily enactments “fram[ing] and guid[ing] more conscious, cognitive emotional evaluations” (Hutchison 2016: 16). In this sense, an analysis of one of these phenomena cannot be done without an examination of the other. The third term I want to introduce is ‘feltness’. My own term, feltness, is an attempt to convey the mix of emotions and affects experienced by – in this context – the women service members and veterans of MVA. That while these women recognise and articulate certain emotions (love, anger, sadness) in relation to their time in the US military, these more familiar emotional states exist alongside more unintelligible, harder-to-grasp feelings, sensations and affects – or, to use Linda Åhäll’s phrasing, a “what-goes-without-saying” (Åhäll 2018: 43). Feltness, then, is this overall embodied sense and feeling of emotion, affect, sensation and mood.

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5 The literature is vast, but for an indicative selection see: Gregg and Seigworth 2010; Leys 2011; Ahmed 2014; Åhäll 2018.
In tracing the feltness of women’s military lives, as well as the effects of this feltness, the article proceeds as follows: In the first section the feminist literature on ‘war as experience’ is brought into conversation with recent scholarship on militarism that pays attention to how militarism is felt. This conceptual work provides the framework for asking how MVA contestants feel (about) their military lives, as well as what these feelings mean for understandings of militarised desire and militarism more broadly. The second section details the significance of MVA as a site for analysis, positioning the contest as a distinct political and gendered space, which permitted the expression and accumulation of emotions and affects that contestants felt otherwise unable to express in their everyday military lives. In the latter half of the article, empirical insights from my fieldwork are drawn on to track the specific feelings experienced by MVA contestants during their military lives and afterlives, revealing these women’s complicated relations with US militarism. The argument forwarded in this article – that the affective experiences of women service members and veterans matter for understanding the functioning of US military power – contributes to feminist scholarship on the interrelationship of gender, militarism and violence, and also furthers knowledge on the conceptualization and workings of contemporary (US) militarism.

**Experiencing war, feeling militarism**

Feminists within IR have long debated the possibilities and pitfalls of women’s inclusion in national militaries (inter alia Stiehm 1996; Enloe 2000; Sasoon-Levy and Amram-Katz 2007; MacKenzie 2015). While the debate can be crudely defined as between, what Claire Duncanson and Rachel Woodward have termed, feminists who argue for women’s “right to fight”, emphasising women’s equality with men, and “anti-militarist feminists” who argue that “women’s military participation...merely legitimizes an institution that is antithetical to the goals of feminism” (2016: 4), such a distinction – as Duncanson and Woodward note – does a disservice to the complexity and nuance of this broad church of feminist interrogations. Rather, in the attention levelled at the specific experiences, practices, and sometimes violences women service members encounter (Herbert 1998; Sasoon-Levy 2003; Woodward and Winter 2007); the degree to which the masculinist structures of military institutions may – or may not – change in-line with the growing number of women members (Ruddick 1983; MacKenzie 2015; Duncanson and Woodward 2016); and the multitude of ways state militaries have always relied on women’s labour, whether as service members or in other ways women may be ‘attached’ to the institution (Horn 2010; Hyde 2017; Basham and Catignani 2018), taken as a whole, this body of research highlights the complicated and contradictory relationship between women
service members and military institutions, as well as militarism and military power more broadly.

Despite this rich feminist scholarship, thus far there has not been sustained engagement with the everyday emotionally and affectively felt experience of military service for its women members. This is despite a recent ‘turn’ in feminist IR towards understanding and conceptualising war and its associated practices through the prism of ‘experience’, foregrounding war’s lived and embodied aspects (inter alia Sylvester 2011 and 2013; Parashar 2013; Dyvik 2017), as well as increasing interest across IR on the significance of emotions and affects in global politics (inter alia Crawford 2000; Åhäll and Gregory 2015; Hutchison 2016). For the ‘experiential’ scholars, war is studied not as “abstract and disembodied debates about strategies of warfare, weaponry, and the political ideologies that enable war”, but as the ways in which “people themselves experience war” (Dyvik and Welland 2018: 348). Such a focus means the embodied, intercorporeal and affective are placed at the centre of theorising and – in line with broader feminist, queer and postcolonial literatures – the mind/body separation, explicitly or implicitly present in much existing scholarship, challenged. Oftentimes drawing on insights garnered through ethnographic fieldwork and/or qualitative interviews, as well as research methodologies that make use of more ‘unconventional’ sites of knowledge such as fiction, museums or artwork, if a “grand theme” were to unite this still-taking-shape body of feminist scholarship it would be “the concept of the ordinary lives of the bodies in war...involved in an intimate relationship with the ‘everyday’” (Parashar 2013: 619). In this respect, this research has sought not to try and explain why particular wars were fought, won or lost, or reveal and uncover ‘new’ sites of militarisation, but rather, give attention to the feltness of these phenomena by the people ‘touched’ (Sylvester 2013) by them.

This focus on the embodied experiences of war shares in common a curiosity of the significance of emotions and affects with a small but growing number of (predominantly feminist) scholars who have begun to conceptualise militarism not (just) according to its values, ideas and institutions, but as something embodied and felt: militarism as affect (see Burridge and McSorley 2013; McSorley 2016; Basham 2018; Rossdale 2019; Rashid 2020; Chisholm and Ketola forthcoming). In its broadest sense, militarism can be understood as “the social and international relations of the preparation for, and conduct of, organized political violence” (Stavrianakis and Selby 2013: 3), and while there is no singular definition of militarism, scholars working with the term tend to conceptualise it in terms of “correspond[ing] to distinct theoretical assumptions or perspectives” (ibid: 12). For example, militarism can be understood through material and/or economic forces (see Murshed and Mamoon 2010; Kinsella 2013); as “embodied within and produced through a series of institutions”, including the military itself,
government ministries and the arms industry (Rossdale 2019: 45-46; for examples see Brown and Zanardi 2013; Kruijt and Koonings 2013); or as a political and sociological process. In relation to this latter conceptualization, in which militarism’s institutional, material and/or economic dimensions are understood to be “underpinned by a deeper penetration of certain ideas and practices into the social fabric” (Rossdale 2019: 53), feminists have been at the forefront in their forensic detailing of the interrelationships between gender, sexuality, militarism and violence – and relations of race, nation, dis/ability and class. In doing this research, feminists have leveled their gaze at war, military institutions and the bodies that populate them (inter alia Cohn 1987; Masters 2005; Teaiwa 2005; Parashar 2014), as well as a far broader range of ‘everyday’ sites and subjects, including fashion (Tynan 2013); the food on supermarket shelves (Enloe 2000; Tidy 2015); and public events of remembrance and commemoration (Basham 2015; Åhäll 2016).

Building on these ‘everyday’ interrogations of militarism, scholars who understand militarism as felt/affect consider how particular emotions, affects and ‘commonsense’ are integral to the functioning and (re)production of militarism. As Kevin McSorley has written:

> “Despite the fact that militarism is rarely made sense of in terms of a clearly thought through set of rational principles, a type of militarism does nonetheless ‘make sense’ to many people as something that is simply felt to be instinctively right” (McSorley 2016: 105, original emphasis).

For McSorley then, it is important to try and understand militarism in terms of feltness,

> “...as much as, if not more than, something that is explicitly thought about, and that analysis needs to be attentive to how forms of militarism may be unreflexively assumed, embodied and summoned through physical idioms, intercorporeal interactions, structures of feeling and sensory practices” (ibid: 105, original emphasis).

In conceptualizing militarism as affect or felt, a tracing of its “plural and intricate, fleeting and shifting” expressions, practices and sensations is made possible, with accounts likely to be ‘messier’, less straightforward, than those that look to uncover a particular set of ideas or logics within an institution, cultural site, or performance. It means taking account of physical movements and sensations, circulating emotions, and affective resonances, and thinking about how these fleeting, and oftentimes contradictory, feelings (re)produce, sustain and sometimes challenge the maintenance of military power. Crucially, understanding militarism as felt means placing bodies and embodied experiences at the centre of analysis – a concern, I would argue, that is specifically feminist (see Parashar 2013; Sylvester 2013; Åhäll 2016).

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6 Although as Alison Howell demonstrates in her critique of the concept ‘militarisation’, when feminist research foregrounds the working of gendered power, other systems of power such as race, disability, poverty or sexuality risk being subsumed or fail to be captured as to “how they might work differently to gender” (Howell 2018: 120).
Building on these insights, this article asks how MVA contestants feel (about) their military lives and afterlives, and what this feeling tells us about US service women’s and veterans’ relationship to and of US militarism. Tracing contestants’ affective experiences of their time in the US military and on the MVA circuit, the article reveals how US military power and militarism both produce and rely upon women service members’ and veterans’ mixed feelings of belonging and alienation, attraction and repulsion, love and hate, in relation to the military institution.

Giving notice to this feltness of military life and the use of MVA as an analytical site offers two main contributions. First, the specific gendered and affective relations of power present during MVA, as well as the physical intimacy of the contest, constitutes MVA as distinct political site in which it is possible for contestants to speak candidly about their military experiences, and for feelings such as anger, pride, frustration, loneliness, and comfort to circulate and be voiced freely. Second, by paying attention to this feltness, contestants are shown to both pull away from, and draw towards, military life, while stories of militarised desire and the concept of militarism are complicated.

As noted in the introduction, the insights gathered here emerged from my own attendance of the 2017 MVA finale and in-depth qualitative interviews with a number of contestants from the 2016 and 2017 contests. At each point of ‘the research process’ – the non-participant observation, conversations with contestants, and the synthesizing of ‘data’ into argument – I encountered methodological and ethical puzzles that I continue to grapple with. I want to reflect on these challenges through a brief discussion of my positionality, both as a researcher of US militarism and in relation to my research participants – the women of MVA. While there is a long history within social research (and feminist research in particular) of the “politics and power…[of] the researcher-researched relationship” (Caddick et al 2019: 96; for example Acklerly et al 2006), within the relatively new field of Critical Military Studies (CMS), more specific discussions have taken place around the possibilities, challenges and ethics of research with military communities (see Bulmer and Jackson 2015; Baker et al 2016; Williams et al 2016; Caddick et al 2019). Much of this research has centred broadly around ideas of ‘insider-ness’ and ‘outsider-ness’ and what is at stake in being “a civilian researcher in a…military world” (Caddick et al 2019). As a ‘civilian’ researcher and – as noted in the introduction – one that is ‘troubled’ by militarism, I attended the finale of MVA with not an insignificant amount of (feminist) skepticism. However, as the evening unfolded, and in my conversations with contestants in the months that followed, my skepticism was replaced by surprise. Surprise at contestants’ clear-sighted awareness of the gendered harms involved in being a (woman)

7 Although by no means the ‘final word’ on research ethics, this research was approved by the University of Warwick’s Humanities and Social Science Research Ethics Committee (Ethical Application Reference: HSSREC 74/16-17 AM01) and received informed consent from all participants.
member of the US armed forces; at the critique leveled at the structures of the US military itself; and at contestants continued affective investment in the armed forces. This surprise, coupled with the reflexive insights of CMS scholars, committed me to an ethic of “compassionate representation” (Bulmer and Jackson 2015: 30) in my research and writing. A commitment to not claim to ‘know’ or ‘understand’ military service members’ and veterans’ experiences, but rather to do my best to demonstrate the complexity of these women’s lives and their relations to and of militarism. This compassion is not intended to displace feminist analysis and critique, but to inform and sit alongside it, and my negotiation between these impulses is an incomplete and on-going process, of which this article is part. Turning now to the experiences of my research participants, the article next details the significance of MVA as a site for analysis, positioning the contest as a distinct political and gendered space, and what was made possible through this.

**Ms Veteran America as a distinct political site**

For women service members and veterans, membership of the US armed forces is framed by the gendered stereotypes, exclusions and violence that have shaped and continue to shape understandings of the US military, its militarised subjects, and service within it. For example, the multitude of ways that an ‘innate’ association between masculinity and war has historically and continues to be stated (inter alia Reardon 1985; Elshtain 1987; Ruddick 1989); the formal and informal exclusions of women and femininity from the military institution, whether manifesting as the (until recent) US combat exclusion ban for women (MacKenzie 2015), the denigration of ‘feminine’ attributes in recruits (Whitworth 2004), or the difficulties and obstacles faced by women looking to progress through the ranks (Barry 2013); as well as past and present violences leveled upon the bodies of women and others marked as ‘feminised’ (see Richter-Montpetit 2007; Turchik and Wilson 2010; Belkin 2012). Such social histories both inform and are compounded by more ‘everyday’ instances of loneliness, exclusion, difference, and lack of recognition that women service members’ experience (discussed in more detail below). MVA, however, operated as a radically different site to the US military writ large, and the women involved felt permitted to express certain emotions they felt otherwise unable to in their everyday military lives. Central to this production of MVA as a distinct political site were the physical and emotional intimacies of the contest, as well as its specific gendered space.

As the only period in which the finalists are physically together as a group, the final weekend of MVA is marked by a ‘togetherness’ – both in terms of the physical proximity and emotional intimacy experienced by the contestants. The women are brought together in a “non-stop”
(Rachel, Army, former member) weekend of interviews, photoshoots, and performance, as well as the evening finale. Contestants share hotel rooms, prepare for the interview together, and go out for drinks, dinner and dancing. While many of the women I spoke with confessed to feeling nervous, all spoke fondly about the fun, friendship and support that was felt during the weekend:

We were in a holding room together the day we got there and immediately we were going into the interview portion, and so everyone’s really nervous but we’re all just studying together and quizzing one another… You knew everyone was in the same boat as you so it was like a bonding thing but also very nerve-racking (Stacey, Air Force, serving member).

[I]t was almost like, um, Sex and the City, um, because it was like 24 women together all the time…so it was like you were all one big camaraderie of sisterhood and you were able to share stories with people that you hadn't been able to talk about forever (Rachel, Army, former member).

Physical proximity and touch are central for generating intimacy (Hardy and Cruz 2019: 251). In my conversations with contestants, numerous stories were told of touch, physical closeness, and intimate shared moments over the course of the weekend. Contestants cried, hugged, laughed and prayed together, with the backstage environment of the finale described as a hive of activity: contestants hooked one another’s dresses, made last-minute adjustments to evening gowns, and helped one another in and out of talent costumes. One interviewee spoke about how she walked a fellow contestant out on stage; another about her roommate saying it was because the ‘connection’ the two of them had made that meant she had the confidence to perform her talent. As Hardy and Cruz write in relation to the “affective organising” of Argentinian sex workers, physical intimacies (such as – in the case of MVA – a hand held on stage or fastening someone into a dress) as well as “empathetic attention” between the women, “set new affects in motion” (ibid: 251).

It was in and through the particular ‘togetherness’ engendered by MVA – the physical and emotional intimacies, the specifically gendered space – that it was possible for contestants to share their experiences and feelings of military life, and that affective relations to and of US militarism were produced and accumulated. In the physical closeness generated by MVA – a packed schedule; shared hotel rooms; eating, studying and praying together – and its explicit focus on the lives and experiences of women service members and veterans, intimacy was generated between the contestants and with it the ability to speak openly and candidly of their military lives and afterlives. ‘Togetherness’, after all, does not guarantee bonding or comfort. As many of the women attested, while their military lives were marked by ‘togetherness’ in terms of the long hours worked, close living quarters and collective goals, this did not necessarily
secure camaraderie or friendship. Rather, at MVA it was a sense of shared commonality of experience that made the sharing of personal stories possible:

...these women get it... all these women, like, you just feel an immediate bond because you know that you're all service veterans or that you're serving and that just kinda breaks the ice completely (Stacey, Air Force, serving member)

It was just emotional because every single person had a story. There wasn't a person there who was like, 'My military career went so well that I got out because I was happy'. It was all, 'I deployed', 'I got PTSD', 'I got blown-up by this thing', 'I had a sexual trauma incident', 'I lost my husband to this'... Everyone had a story, and that's what was nice to know that – you don’t want to look at everyone and think their life is so perfect and how can I compete against that?! (Tasha, Army, serving member)

In contestants’ shared stories and experiences, and via touch and physical and emotional intimacies, feelings of anger, pride, love, frustration, loneliness are expressed and circulate. As will be detailed in the sections below, it is by paying attention to these circulating emotions and affects that the feltness of these women’s military lives is revealed, as well as the ways in which they are both drawn towards and turn away from US militarism.

**Experiences of difference and lack of recognition in military lives and afterlives**

Central to MVA is the celebration and making visible of US women service members and veterans, whose service in the US armed forces and presence as veterans frequently goes unrecognised and unacknowledged both within the military and by the wider US public. While increasing numbers of women may be joining the ranks of the US armed forces (Pew Research Center 2017) and – at least until some of the pronouncements of President Donald J. Trump – there has been a growing emphasis on the official acceptance of ‘non-traditional’ recruits (for example, the repeal, under President Barack Obama, of ‘Don’t Ask Don’t Tell’ and allowing transgender individuals to openly serve\(^8\)), what a member of the US armed forces is presumed to look like has remained remarkably consistent with that imagined during the early- and mid-twentieth century. As one of my interviewees stated, “when you hear the word ‘veteran’, what comes to mind is the white, Vietnam-era man” (Rachel, Army, former member). For all of the contestants I spoke with, their ‘unrecognizability’ as service members and veterans stemmed from the fact that as women they do not fit with expectations about what a member of the US armed forces looks like. Frustration with this lack of recognition marked many of my conversations with MVA contestants:

\(^8\) Under President Trump, the ability for transgender individuals to openly serve has since been revoked.
I remember being out with Ms Veteran America, promoting our platform, and people would just go up to my husband and tell him ‘Thank you for your service’, and completely bypass me. And I’m thinking, this is all of my stuff here! There’s my face...there’s a banner right here with my name on it, and they would just assume. (Louise, Air Force, former member)

Recently I got on a flight...and I went with my friend, who’s a male, and of course all of the veteran stuff is applied under my name – our bags are free, we got upgraded to first class for free. And as soon as they announced it, they announced his name as the veteran and thanked him for his service... When it was under my name... My seat was upgraded because of me! My bag was free because of me! (Tasha, Army, serving member)

Even when women service members or veterans are acknowledged as service members and veterans, what they did on a tour of duty or in the armed forces is not recognised or understood in the same terms of reference as their male counterparts. As one of my interviewees noted, while women service members are “viewed [by the public]...they [the public] still don’t get the concept”; male soldiers remain more “realistic” and female service members are “not comparable in [the public’s] mind” (Tasha, Army, serving member). Signalling the resilience of Jean Bethke Elshtain’s (1987) now three decades-old insights of masculine ‘Just Warriors’ and feminine ‘Beautiful Souls’, in these instances, while women have entered the public imaginary as service members, this has not extended to viewing them as actively involved in warfare. As one of my interview participants stated:

I remember coming back from Afghanistan and someone saying, ‘oh what were you doing over there?’ And I was like, well I can’t really tell you what I was doing, I was with special operations. And they’re like, ‘oh, were you a secretary for one of the generals?’ (Michelle, Air Force, former member)

While MVA contestants’ experiences with those outside the military was oftentimes marked by an invisibility and failure to be recognised, during their time within the military, their difference from the (assumed) norm often led to an excess of visibility, with MVA contestants commenting on the sheer amount of work it took to not be recognised as different, lesser, or simply – as one contestant put it – “That Girl” (Rachel, Army, former member). Another commented on the labour it took to simply ‘get by’ and be accepted as a colleague:

I had to do everything ten times better in order to be recognised as average... You had to basically shed every bit of femininity around you. If you were seen as too much as a – quote/unquote – ‘female’ – if you were seen as too pretty, you tried to hard, if you were seen as flirty, you were a whore... I started working 24/7 and never wore make-up and just really tried to be as plain as possible so I could be seen as masculine and as one of the guys. I worked out all the time because if I could beat a guy running round the track, you know, that was one less thing they could say I was weak on. (Michelle, Air Force, former member)
For the women I spoke with, however, being marked as different could lead to not only a lack of recognition and acknowledgement, but – echoing feminist research (Nagel and Feitz 2016) and official Department of Defense figures (US Department of Defense 2018) – also violence, sexual harassment and military sexual trauma. Throughout the MVA finale and in all of my conversations with MVA contestants, multiple references were made to experiences of sexual harassment and/or military sexual trauma, whether this was in relation to personal experience or that of other women members of the US military. For those who had personally experienced sexual harassment and/or violence, this ranged from what one of my interviewees described as “low levels” of sexual harassment:

Like catcalls. Like knowing people have a bet to see who could sleep with me. Or just things behind my back that were brought to my attention. Just like those kinds of things, just very low level... Once I was cornered somewhere and asked to do something, but I didn’t give in, I just [indistinguishable] my way out the situation (Stacey, Air Force, serving member).

Others spoke about being inappropriately touched or insulted after refusing the advances of male colleagues, and one of my interviewees had personally experienced military sexual trauma, having been drugged and raped by two fellow (male) service members.

In the MVA contestants’ shared experiences of lack of recognition and acknowledgement, as well as the harassment and violence that some were subjected to, military life is experienced and felt in a multitude of ways: It is felt as indignation, frustration and righteous anger that their service is viewed as lesser, different, or even outright ignored. And it is felt as resignation and inevitability of the ubiquity of sexual harassment and military sexual trauma. In contradistinction to familiar narratives and recruitment promises of (masculine) military belonging and camaraderie, in which (white) (cis)male recruits experience friendship, familial-like relations and self-belief, for the women of MVA, their affective relationship to military membership and military life is not one that straightforwardly ‘feels right’ (McSorley 2016). Rather, these women’s intimate relationship with US militarism and military power involves experiences that mark them as ‘bodies out of place’ (Ahmed 2017: 33), and being exposed to dismissal, exclusion and denigration by their peers and seniors. Several of the women I spoke with talked about the adverse effects of military membership on their physical and mental health, as well as insufficient support from the institution itself in dealing with these issues: The failure, for example, of senior personnel to respond to bullying or harassment within the ranks; a cancer diagnosis delayed because of a lack of gynaecologists within VA (Veterans Affairs) hospitals; and a culture of silence and ‘unspeakability’ of mental health issues. In these respects, for the women of MVA, membership of the US armed forces was not a place of affective comfort or fulfilled militarised desire. Instead, these everyday slights and hardships led to a distancing
from military life, and a complicated and contradictory relationship with and to US militarism. However, as the next section details, despite these experiences, all of the women I spoke with, as well as the contest of MVA itself, celebrated the US armed forces and continued to affectively invest in participation in it.

'Sisterhood' and MVA

Irrespective of the experiences detailed above, for the women of MVA previous or on-going membership of the US military remained an integral part of their identities. During the finale frequent references were made to 'the greatest military on earth' and contestants demonstrated membership to a particular branch through shouted mottos or identifying 'battle cry'. For the contestants I spoke with, joining the military was akin to becoming part of a “family” (Stacey, Air Force, serving member), with one interviewee stating that the US Army was not just part of her identity, but the defining feature of it:

I am United States Army. I identify more than being a female, more than being a Black female, more than being a brown-eyed Black female – I identify as being a soldier. That is my identity because I’ve done it for so long. I’ve done it since I was 13 years old... So when I look in the mirror, the first thing I see is a soldier... So I truly believe that that’s what I’m about. (Tasha, Army, serving member)

Military scholars and commentators, as well as service personnel and veterans themselves, have long noted the close bonds and identity inculcated through military service (Hockey 1986; Hennessey 2009; King 2013). Feminists and other gender-aware scholars have taken this analysis further, pointing to the specifically gendered character of these bonds – a "warrior brotherhood" (Whitworth 2004: 158) – produced not just through formal training practices, but also through the exclusion and denigration of that which is considered ‘outside’ the militarised and masculinised norm, be that femininity, queerness, or other markers of difference (Welland 2013). Significant to this article, however, is that while all of my interviewees valued their military service, it was through MVA that they experienced the camaraderie frequently denied to them during their service by virtue of their gender. In particular, MVA provided the site for an emergence of what many of my interviewees described as a ‘sisterhood’ of women service members and veterans.

As a marginal(ised) group within the US armed forces, all of the women I spoke with described having little contact with other women service members during their time in the military. While

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9 For example, members of the US Army would shout ‘Hooah!’; a battle cry with (settler)colonial roots reaching back to 1841, when it was supposedly first used by the US Army during the Second Seminole War between the US and groups of Native Americans.
a number described their particular field as particularly male-dominated, in which women were almost entirely absent, others spoke about a conscious pulling back from relations with other women because of preconceptions about ‘feminine’ behaviour, internalised misogyny, or due to the simple need to ‘survive’ the military environment itself:

I’ve never really had much of a female interaction and I didn’t really know, um, sometimes it’s hard to work with other females because there’s drama whatever... I kind of had a stigma about what it would be like... (Stacey, Air Force, serving member)

I came, basically a misogynist. Like I just developed this deep hatred for women, even hated myself... like I hated that I was a woman... When I came back home [from deployment] I had no female relationships, I couldn’t stand females. It was really hard. It was really difficult for me to build relationships with other females again. (Anna, Army, former member)

...when I was in the military, that was the time in my life I had the fewest friends, because I felt like I couldn’t...trust anyone, because the world I was in was so cut-throat and ruthless that I felt like anyone could turn on me... And the other women around me they were the same way...always working to keep their façade up as well so we didn’t confide in each other... We just kept to ourselves. (Michelle, Air Force, former member)

Being a woman service member, therefore, was often an experience marked not by camaraderie and fraternity, but by a profound loneliness. In contradistinction to these experiences, MVA offered contestants the opportunity to not only meet other women service members and veterans, but also provided the emotional support that had been lacking within their time in the military. An enduring theme across my conversations with MVA contestants and the night of the finale itself was that MVA was not a pageant, but rather – in the words of its founder, Boothe, during the finale – a movement to bring military women together. All of the contestants I interviewed spoke passionately about the transformative effect this coming together of military women had on them, speaking variously about the ways in which it worked as “therapy” (Louise, Air Force, former member), made them realise it was okay to ask for help (Tasha, Army, serving member), and provided them with a support network:

I wish I had this [support network] in the military. I wish I had had this because then I wouldn't have felt so alone and isolated.... I probably would have even got mental health support earlier. I probably would have reached out, maybe I wouldn't have had my breakdown if I’d had Ms Veteran America support network beforehand. (Michelle, Air Force, former member)

For the women of MVA, therefore, the contest, unlike the US military, provided a site in which they were permitted to be both woman and service member. While (cis)male service member’s ‘manliness’ is actively encouraged and supported within the armed forces, as well as providing the foundations for the fraternal bonds at the centre of military life (Higate 2012), women
service members’ ‘womanhood’ is not only viewed as anathema to the institution, but an identity ‘marker’ to avoid or actively reject in both themselves and others. Such rejection meant that the camaraderie and ‘brotherhood’ of service promised to (cis)male recruits was not afforded to women in the same way, with experiences of isolation and loneliness commonplace amongst my interviewees. In this respect, for the women I spoke with, there was something of a disconnect between their identity as a woman and their identity as a service member. It was this separation between womanhood and service that MVA acted as a bridge between; the contest’s distinct political space providing the camaraderie and comfort denied during these women’s service, and the opportunity for contestants to feel a deep sense of pride in service and identification as service member or veteran. Thus, irrespective of the emotional and personal challenges encountered by these women during their military membership, through their participation in MVA they could experience and feel ‘military values’¹⁰ and be a “representative of the world’s greatest military” (Casey, Air Force, active reservist).

For my interviewees, military life was rendered difficult – and in some cases, ultimately unmanageable – not by the hardship (living in close quarters/lack of sleep/separation from loved ones) or inherent violence of the work, but by the profoundly masculinist structure of the military and the feeling of not really being wanted there. As one of my interviewees stated, forging a career in US military as a woman was akin to “following a dream [that] doesn’t want you” (Tasha, Army, serving member). Another described her involvement with the US armed forces as a “toxic” relationship, which involved simultaneous feelings of love and hate towards those who systematically bullied and abused her (Anna, Army, former member). In this sharing of experiences of exclusion, isolation and loneliness, it is evident that these women have not simply been ‘seduced’ by the promises of militarism. Instead, all of the women I spoke with (and the contest as a whole) displayed a clear-sighted awareness of the gendered harms and challenges women service members and veterans encounter, and yet continued to desire to be involved in military life and intimately enmeshed in relations of US militarism. Over the course of MVA, contestants spoke about experiencing pride, patriotism, purpose, love, camaraderie, support, understanding and friendship, with the circulation of these emotions and affects generating an ‘optimistic’ attachment to US military life and militarism (Berlant 2011; see Chisholm and Ketola forthcoming). Thus, despite the exclusions, loneliness and inequities of the women’s service, MVA actualised the promises and possibilities of military life. Such affective investment by the women of MVA is not, therefore, a straightforward story of militarised desire

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¹⁰ A number of my interviewees spoke about MVA in reference to the ‘official’ values of their particular branch, such as the US Army’s commitment to never leaving a fallen comrade or the Army’s seven core values: loyalty; duty; respect; selfless service; honour; integrity; and personal courage.
or seduction, but rather one of complex and contradictory assemblages of emotions and affects, and the dual moves of pulling away from and being drawn towards military life.

Conclusion

Building on insights from the ‘war as experience’ literature and scholarship that conceptualises militarism as felt, this article has used the site of MVA to trace the range of affective registers its women contestants feel (about) their military lives and afterlives, asking what this feltness tells us about US service women’s and veterans’ relationship to US military power and militarism more broadly. Created by US Army veteran, Jas Boothe, and promising to showcase ‘the woman behind the uniform’, MVA offers its contestants the opportunity to celebrate their military experiences, as well as sharing challenges and harms experienced through their service. As such, to be present during MVA is to be exposed to a multitude of emotions and affective sensations. In the stories shared by contestants of the lack of recognition during their military lives and afterlives; the sexual harassment, violence and military sexual trauma directed towards them; and their exclusion and denigration from military peers, their time in the US armed forces is marked by, and felt as, righteous anger, indignation, frustration, and loneliness. At the same time, the centrality of their military identities to their sense of self, pride in their service, and the camaraderie and support experienced through MVA meant that sensations of patriotism, love, joy, and friendship were equally felt.

I argue that recognising the feltness of women service members’ and veterans’ military lives and afterlives reveals the complex workings of gendered power within the US military and militarism more broadly, and that MVA itself is a rich and productive site for feminist research. First, it is the physically and emotionally intimate, and specifically gendered, space of MVA that makes possible contestants’ candid sharing of their military experiences. Through the ‘togetherness’ of the contest – the hotel rooms shared, the significance of touch between contestants, and the affective bonds of ‘sisterhood’ engendered between the women – a space is created for conversations contestants were not having elsewhere and a camaraderie and support network denied to them within the military itself. Second, through these women’s complicated and contradictory feelings towards their military lives, the affective effects of the masculinist structure of the US armed forces are revealed, and easy or straightforward stories of militarised desire or seduction complicated. While all of the women I spoke with, as well as the contest of MVA itself, were fully cognizant of the inequalities, discriminations, and even violences aimed at women service members and veterans, all continued to affectively invest in the US armed forces and US militarism more broadly. For the contestants of MVA, their
experiences of military life were felt as familial and comforting, and as that which destroys and ‘toxic’ to those enmeshed in its relations. Tracking this feltness reveals the emotional shifts and negotiations women service members and veterans do in their military lives and afterlives, and how they simultaneously draw towards and pull away from military life. US militarism appears here not as straightforwardly desirable or seductive, but rather as both productive and reliant on women service members’ mixed feelings of belonging and alienation, attraction and repulsion, love and hate. These insights contribute to feminist (and wider) IR debates around gender, militarism and affect by furthering knowledge on the workings of gendered power within the US armed forces, revealing how the masculinist structure of the US military is experienced and felt by women who populate its ranks. A broader contribution is made to understandings of the ‘slipperiness’ (Zalewski 2013: 7) of (US) militarism; as something that may not always feel ‘right’ or ‘good’ (McSorley 2016) to those intimately enmeshed in its relations, but still that which attracts, sustains and captures the bodies and live(lihood)s of so many.
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