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VIOLENCE AND THE CONTEMPORARY SOLDIERING BODY

Abstract

This article asks what is the significance of making the soldiering body (hyper)visible in war. In contrast to the techno-fetishistic portrayals of Western warfare in the 1990s, the recent counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan witnessed a re-centring of British soldiering bodies to the visual grammars of war. In the visibility of this body, violences once obscured were rendered viscerally visible on the bodies of British soldiers. Locating the analysis in the *War Story* exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, London, the article details two moments of wartime violence experienced and enacted by British soldiers, tracking how violence was mediated in, on and through these hypervisible soldiering bodies and attending invisibility of 'other' bodies. The article argues that during the Afghanistan campaign, soldiers' bodies became not just enactors of military power, but crucial representational figures in the continuance of violent projects abroad and their acceptance back home.

Soldiers' bodies, and the violences they enact and encounter in war, have long been rendered in/visible by various means and to greater and lesser extents. Focusing on the 'Long War' in Afghanistan (2001-2014), this article uses the 2011-2012 *War Story* exhibition at the Imperial War Museum (IWM), London, to track how violences during this conflict were rendered visible to the visiting public and mediated through the bodies of the British soldiers depicted within it. Unlike the high-technology wars waged by Western nations during the latter years of the twentieth century, for the British public at home watching the recent Afghanistan conflict unfold via a range of mediums, British soldiering bodies, as well as the violences inflicted on them, was central to the war's depiction. In this article I use the concept of *hypervisibility* to describe this heightened 'seen-ness' of British soldiering bodies during the conflict¹ (and attending invisibility of other bodies), and argue this was crucial both for how wartime violences were mediated and understood, and for putting in place the conditions of possibility for their continuation.

¹ While a focus on British soldiering bodies and their (hyper)visibility is to produce an argument that is situated, perspectival and political, it is also a personal argument. I chose this position because it was the position I experienced the Afghanistan conflict from: these were the soldiers I (along with the rest of the UK public) was told were fighting for *my* security and I want to critically engage with the operations and effects of this.

My use of ‘hypervisibility’ draws from the work of Jean Baudrillard (1983) and Julianne Pidduck (1990; 2011). Pidduck, borrowing from Baudrillard, coins the term ‘hypervisible’ to register changes “in epistemological, cultural, political and economic regimes governing the re/production and dissemination of images...[whereby] the prefix ‘hyper’ points to a new order of *excessive* visibility” (Pidduck 2011: 9, original emphasis). In this article I specifically focus on the hypervisibility of British soldiering bodies and their discursive representation (and idealisation) in the *War Story* exhibition, as well as the effects of this (hyper)visibility. I ask what the significance is of making British soldiering bodies hypervisible in war? What work does this hypervisibility do to our understandings of war and its violences, and what bodies remain invisible? The article starts by tracking the in/visibility of British soldiering bodies to their home publics from the First World War onwards, connecting the hypervisibility of the contemporary soldiering figure to understandings of a more humanised and embodied form of warfare. It then proceeds to locate its argument in two broad literatures: one that places the body and embodied experiences at the centre of theorising about war, and the militarised masculinities literature. Building on the insights of these two bodies of scholarship, a specific soldiering subject produced through the doctrine of counterinsurgency in Afghanistan is introduced. As a body that both borne and enacted violence, it was through this particular militarised masculinity that war’s violences were rendered visible to the British public. Locating the analysis in the IWM’s *War Story* exhibition, the article details two specific moments of violence in Afghanistan, demonstrating how it was in, on and through this soldiering body that the violence was rendered visible and understood. The article finishes with a discussion of the bodies that fail to materialise in this regime of hypervisibility: the thousands of Afghan civilians killed and injured, and those soldiers and veterans who fall outside the intelligibility of a discursively idealised warrior. Through this regime, hypervisibility occludes that it is often British soldiers who are the direct or indirect cause of Afghan suffering, while their representational status helps makes possible the continuation and acceptance of violence abroad.

At this point it should be noted that violence is by no means a stable ontological phenomenon and has engendered a vast amount of scholarship (for example Arendt 1969; Fanon 2001; Cavarero 2009). This article does not seek to engage in a definitional debate of violence, rather, its concern with violence is quite straightforward: it is concerned with the *physical* violence of war – with how war is enacted through the firing of guns, the dropping of bombs, and injuring of bodies – and, in particular, the visible bodily *effects* of this physical violence. This is not to suggest that this is the only or singular way that violence emerges in/through war (think, for example, of the indirect violence caused through the damaging of infrastructure or the destruction of crops), or that violence is only something that is *done* rather than something that is inherent to our *being* a ‘woman’, ‘man’, ‘citizen’ and so forth (see Frazer and Hutchings, 2008: 105). Furthermore, and as the article will go on to explore, when (physical) violence is rendered visible in the *War Story* exhibition (as well as broader representational framings of soldiers within British society) it does not emerge in the abstract, rather, it is mediated by and through the bodies, context and relations it materialises in/on/through. It is this mediation and the effects it has that the article tracks.

THE IN/VISIBILITY OF SOLDIERING BODIES IN WAR

While, as I will argue below, it has only been in recent years that British soldiering bodies have become hypervisible, the specific contexts and historical ‘realities’ of war have long produced different degrees of soldiering in/visibility to their publics at home. For example, in Britain during the First World War – considered the first large-scale industrial or mechanised war – the war wounded were rendered visible on a scale never seen before, with over 41,000 men having limbs amputated during this period and limblessness becoming normalised (Bourke 1996: 33; see also Carden-Coyne 2014). With the development of powerful weaponry during the Second World War this trend continued, with the scale of disability during the war leading to the

creation of rehabilitation facilities and, as such, greater visibility of disabled individuals in the workforce and sometimes within the armed services (see Anderson, 2011). While a limited and tightly controlled media presence during the Falklands/Malvinas conflict meant only a highly mediated view of the war was presented to the British public (see Tumber, 2004: 191-4), it was during the 'techno-warfare' of the 1990-1991 Gulf War that Britain's soldiering bodies and war's violences were most memorably (not) seen. For the British public who watched the war unfold in their front rooms, the war appeared as "a largely celebratory account of surgical strikes that accurately targeted and precisely destroyed enemy locations, without obvious casualties" (McSorley, 2012: 48). Rhetoric surrounding the war and the so-called 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA) fetishized the military technologies on display and made claims that the human body in war was being eclipsed "by the growing importance of machines in general and weapons in particular" (Gray, 1997: 47). The signature motif was not that of (masculine) soldiers, but "footage from the pilots' display-screens of their so-called 'smart' bombing raids" (McSorley, 2012: 47-8). While the soldiering body was not erased from the war's visual grammars in its entirety – appearing as a technologically enhanced "cyborg soldier" (Masters 2005) – in this techno-fetishistic portrayal of war, the bloody, broken, lifeless human bodies of British and American service personnel, and the tens of thousands of Iraqi troop and civilian casualties, were absented, leaving in their place a seemingly bloodless war of machine-to-machine combat.

With the introduction and increasing use of drones, Afghanistan offered, in some respects, a continuation of these techno-scientific discourses with the even further removal of British soldiering bodies from the battlezone. However, despite the use of drones and the continued reliance on airstrikes, for the watching public at home the British soldiering body was far more present in Afghanistan – or at least visible – than it was in the Gulf or Kosovo conflicts. For as Afghanistan hovered somewhere between war and occupation, and as the

insurgency failed to be quelled, it was the bodies of soldiers, not their technologies, which became central to the military doctrine initiated.

Codified in the *US Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3-24 (FM 3-24)* in 2006 and its British equivalent three years later², population-centric counterinsurgency – or ‘COIN’ as it came to be known – built on the experiences of European and British colonial war-fighting and imperial policing, prioritising political as opposed to military goals (see Galula 1964; Thompson 1966; Kitson 1971). Implemented as the central military doctrine in Afghanistan in 2009, COIN signalled a sharp diversion from the force-heavy strategies of the Gulf War and Kosovo campaign, as well as the ‘shock and awe’ tactics that had brought down Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003. COIN was a military strategy that, in rhetoric at least, purported to have not the destruction of enemy forces at its centre, but the winning of the ‘hearts and minds’ of the civilian population. This meant the establishment of security through military means was only part of the strategy. ‘Non-kinetic’ activities such as the building of infrastructure, the provision of jobs, and the creation of a functioning legal system all also needed to be put in place. *FM 3-24* was explicit in its rejection of the commonly held view within some American military circles that success in war was achieved through technological advantage and overwhelming force alone, emphasising instead the multiple dimensions needed to defeat an insurgency – military, political, civic and even psychological. It was a doctrine that could not be carried out (solely) from the skies, but one that expected counterinsurgents to expose themselves to greater risks (US Army, 2007: xxvii). In the shift from force to civilian protection, counterinsurgency soldiers patrolled on foot rather than in heavily armoured vehicles, saw their rules of engagement tightened, and spent significant time engaging with the local population. For the soldiers enacting this doctrine, such a shift came with an increased exposure to harm.

² *British Army Field Manual 1-10 Countering Insurgency* (MoD 2009).

Despite proclamations that COIN was a distinctly humanised form of warfare, those responsible for enacting it took great care to distance it from perceptions that it was a more passive form of fighting. Addressing the US Government Counterinsurgency Conference, David Kilcullen (2006a), an Australian counterinsurgency expert stated:

If this [counterinsurgency] sounds soft, non-lethal and non-confrontational, it is not: this is life-and-death competition in which the loser is marginalized, starved of support and ultimately destroyed... There is no known way of doing counterinsurgency without inflicting casualties on the enemy: there is always a lot of killing, one way or another.

COIN, then, was not a straightforward shift from a techno-strategic to a humanised form of warfare; rather, it brought both logics to bear. Policies of reconstruction and development existed alongside increasing numbers of combat-trained troops, and soldiers would spend their deployment both living amongst the local population, and engaging in firefights and calling in airstrikes. As Derek Gregory (2010) has pointed to, COIN demonstrated significant continuity with many of the developments of the RMA (see also McSorley 2013a).

What had shifted, however, was the visibility of the on-the-ground NATO combat soldier³, both in official military doctrine and the media- and culture-scape of Afghanistan projected back to the UK public. From a relative *invisibility* during the Gulf War and intervention in Kosovo, during the conflict in Afghanistan depictions of British soldiering bodies proliferated. While, as documented above, military doctrine expected the combat soldier to take a more visible and exposed role in counterinsurgency operations, at home in Britain the counterinsurgent's soldiering body emerged as hypervisible through an abundance of representations of soldiers and soldiering. In this "new order of *excessive* visibility" (Pidduck, 2011: 9, original emphasis), the British public were flooded with images and narratives about the

³ Other types of armed forces personnel remained far less visible. For example, despite the exponential increase in the use of drones during the conflict, those piloting them did not regularly feature on the front covers of newspapers or become the subject of countless documentaries or photography projects. For the British public it was the soft-hatted on-the-ground counterinsurgent who became the 'face' of the conflict.

(mostly) men who fought via print and television media; numerous documentaries and films⁴; museum and art exhibitions⁵; the proliferation of soldier memoirs (see Duncanson 2013); and in Armistice Day and Armed Forces Day events (see Åhäll 2016 and Basham 2016).

Hypervisibility, however, does not simply signal towards increased visibility. First, through its excess of visibility, a “constitutive outside” is simultaneously produced in which there is a relative, or even complete, absence of images and voices (Pidduck, 2011: 11). For Pidduck, who tracks the shift in visibility of same-sex desire and identities in Western European and North American cinema and television, this constitutive outside includes areas away from “international gay commercial culture”, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb and the Antilles, and demonstrates the “*political* nature of LGBT representation” (ibid: 11, original emphasis). As will be detailed, in this article this constitutive invisibility is made up of the tens of thousands of Afghan civilians killed and injured by the war and those British soldiering bodies who do not fit the discursively idealised and hypervisible representations. Hypervisibility’s second effect refers to the fact that while hypervisibility may mean an excess of visibility, this explosion is “[m]ore a mark of desire and fantasy than [an] anchor of ‘realness’” (ibid: 10). Looking at LGBT-authored and themed visual culture, Pidduck notes that the images of lesbians and gay men found within them proliferate at “increasing remove from [the] lesbian and gay lives and communities” they supposedly depict and reflect little of the ‘realities’ they are supposedly anchored within (ibid: 10). Thus, just as Baudrillard used the term ‘hyperreal’ to detail the severance of the postmodern image from its referent in the ‘real’, that which is rendered hypervisible through its continuous reproduction and reiteration – be it the everyday experiences of gay and lesbian communities or British soldiering bodies – is done so at an ever-increasing remove from the ‘realities’ that it purports to represent. In effect, the hypervisible image or subject is one “without origin or reality” (Baudrillard, 1983: 2).

⁴ For example, the BBC *Our War* documentary series, which narrated the conflict through the eyes of British soldiers.

⁵ For example, the IWM’s *War Story* exhibition detailed later in the article.

Hyper/visibility relies, of course, on visibility – the ability to see and that there is something/someone to be seen – and there is a vast literature that grapples with the social and cultural processes associated with this (see Berger 1972; Jenks 1995a; and Mirzoeff 2013 for overviews). As Pidduck recognises, what/who is rendered hypervisible and what/who is invisible is always political. In this article, visibility and ‘seeing’ are understood as socially constructed and culturally located, with the “conditions of visibility” (de Lauretis cited in Pidduck, 2011: 12) producing not just who is represented and excluded, but also spectatorship. In respect to British soldiering bodies during the war in Afghanistan, the ‘conditions of their (hyper)visibility’ in which they were (and continue to be) represented and ‘seen’ across a range of mediums is a contemporary British society marked by an ever-increasing degree of militarisation (see Tidy 2015; Åhäll 2016).

Concomitant with this heightened visibility of British soldiering bodies was that violences of war once concealed in techno-fetishistic discourses and imagery were now similarly (hyper)visible upon these bodies. Throughout the conflict service personnel returned to the UK displaying the brutality of war in their disablement and disfigurement, and repatriations became public and publicised affairs. Injuries and deaths sustained by improvised explosive devices (IEDs) were particularly visible⁶, and as mutilations of the First World War reflected the increasing use of artillery fire, hand grenades and small firearms, the injuries of Afghanistan reflected the specific violence of IEDs. Unlike the IEDs used in Iraq, which tended to be aimed at coalition troops’ vehicles, in Afghanistan IEDs were designed to detonate under foot. The shockwave that occurred after a detonation would instantly pulverize flesh, bone, tissue and muscle of one or both of the lower limbs (Drury, 2011: 159), with traumatic amputations below the waist amongst coalition troops so frequent that during the conflict the injury became known as the war’s ‘signature wound’ (Drury 2011). The hypervisibility of these injuries was propagated

⁶ From 2004 onwards, IEDs became a major cause of death amongst NATO troops, with the devices responsible for around sixty per cent of NATO fatalities during the years 2008-2010 (see icasualties.org).

by military charities such as *Help for Heroes*, who ran high-profile campaigns documenting the traumas and recoveries experienced by service personnel, and popular television shows such as *X Factor*, which featured stories of personal triumph. As with the immediate aftermath of the First and Second World Wars, the wounded British soldier moved from the margins of public consciousness to the centre⁷, “discursively constructed as the epitome of heroic sacrifice for the nation” (Caso, 2016: 4).

As noted above, in this article I trace the hypervisibility of British soldiering bodies in the *War Story* exhibition at the IWM in London and explore how wartime violence – both that experienced by British soldiers and enacted by them – was represented, and what bodies and violences remained *invisible*. Before going on to detail the exhibition and its (hyper)visibilities and invisibilities, I want to locate my analysis within two broad literatures. The first is a literature that takes bodies and embodied experiences of war seriously. The second, the militarised masculinities literature, with its focus on the gendered production of soldiering subjects and their intimate links with violence in international relations.

SOLDIERING BODIES

In recent years, and predominantly among feminist scholars, there has been a move away from grand and abstract theorising about war, to an understanding of war that places the human body and embodied experiences at the centre of theorising. It is how a body experiences war, both physically and emotionally, that is used to provide a fuller conception of war, its effects and the conditions of its possibility (for example see: McSorley 2013b; Åhäll and Gregory 2015; and Dyvik 2017). Despite the fact that the body is both the enactor and target of war’s violence

⁷ In the case of the First World War in particular, this public consciousness was short-lived, with the respect awarded to war-mutilated men ending by the late 1920s (Bourke, 1996: 31). It remains to be seen how long public and political concern for the contemporary veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq will last.

(Sylvester 2013), and that war shapes, travels on and through, and destroys so many, bodies have often remained absent from analytic engagements with war. For Elaine Scarry, this is “the key paradox that constitutes the structure of war” (McSorley, 2013a: 3): that while war in its injuring is “the most radically embodying event in which human beings ever collectively participate” (Scarry, 1985: 71), recognition of this injuring and embodiment is continually displaced. This article confronts this paradox head-on, locating one particular body – the discursively idealised British soldiering body – at the centre of its analysis, as well as this body’s experiences of injuring (as both victim and perpetrator).

I am not, of course, the first to foreground soldiering bodies. Given their centrality to the waging of war, these bodies have received an unsurprising degree of attention. While it has not just been feminists who have studied the figure of the soldier (see Grossman 1995; King 2013), feminists and other gender-aware scholars have offered the most sustained interrogation of the (predominantly masculine) soldiering body and the gendered/racialised/sexualised/classed discourses it is produced through (for example see Whitworth 2004; Basham 2013; and Welland 2013). Feminist scholars point to the link between masculinity and the military, arguing it is constructed and maintained for the purposes of waging war, with traits stereotypically associated with masculinity acquired and proven via participation in military service and combat in particular (for example Eichler 2011, Duncanson 2013 and Welland 2013). While characteristics associated with militarised masculinity have traditionally included “toughness, violence, aggression, courage, control, and domination” (Eichler, 2014: 82), scholars working with this subject position have revealed it, and those who embody it, not to be fixed or monolithic, but to encompass a range and diversity of traits and behaviours (see Higate 2003; Eichler 2011; Duncanson 2013). Feminists who have tracked the production and operation of militarised masculinities have frequently done so within the context of a specific war or military intervention, paying attention to the ways in which a discursively idealised militarised

masculinity shifts in-line with the perceived needs of the conflict they emerge for, in and through (see Niva 1998; Masters 2005; Welland 2015a). Thus, against the backdrop of COIN, a reconceptualised militarised masculine subjectivity was embodied.

THE LIBERAL WARRIOR

Laleh Khalili has written about the ways in which the counterinsurgency doctrines of Afghanistan and Iraq were gendered in how they were formulated, put into practice and experienced (see also Dyvik 2017). Presented as the opposite of a “hyper-masculine” and “more mechanised, technologically advanced, higher-fire-power form of warfare”, Khalili argues that the doctrine was itself gendered feminine. Looking to where COIN policy and doctrine was produced, Khalili identifies a “new form of masculinity” emerging: “the humanitarian soldier-scholar”⁸, whose “softened” masculinity “over-shadows the hyper-masculinity of warrior kings” (2011: 1474-75). Unlike the raw physical masculinity of a warrior, these soldier-scholars “are not interested in chest-thumping gestures”, instead they “deploy the language of ‘hearts and minds’...and see their wont as being the wielders of softer or smarter power” (ibid: 1487). Building on Khalili’s insights on counterinsurgency and its production of new masculinities, but extending it from the location where COIN doctrine was produced to the everyday spaces in Afghanistan where it was enacted, I trace a particular conceptualisation of militarised masculinity: a soldiering figure who was understood to both fight wars and build nations – a *liberal warrior* (see also Howell 2015; Welland 2015a; and Furneux 2016).

Over the past thirty years, Britain has involved itself in numerous “Wars of Choice” (Duncanson 2013: 54), in the name of protecting the territorial integrity of another state in the first Gulf War (1990-1991), preventing ethnic cleansing in Kosovo (1999), and ‘liberating’ the

⁸ So-called because a number of the key architects of COIN held doctorates: General Petraeus has a PhD in International Relations and David Kilcullen a PhD in Political Science.

Iraqi population from their despotic leader (2003-2011). The waging of these wars was not for British self-determination, sovereignty or independence, nor were they for territory, wealth or plunder; rather, these wars proclaimed a humanitarian logic. Some theorists, drawing on the later writings of Michiel Foucault, have argued that these wars correlate to liberalism's original commitment to 'making life live' and wage war on behalf of life, making use of the liberal way of rule and its legal armature in order to rationalise and provide a narrative for its violence (see Dillon and Reid 2009; Evans 2011; Gregory 2015). Because of their humanitarian logics these 'liberal wars' frequently take place and are operationalized at the level of the population. COIN, with its focus on the civilian population, was archetypal of the war doctrine these theorists refer to, and, as such, required soldiering subjects who embodied these idea(l)s – *liberal warriors* – for its enactment.

Given that the priority for counterinsurgents in Afghanistan was to engage with the local community and create an environment where governance and development could flourish, everyday counterinsurgency practices included soft-hatted foot patrols, ensuring the provision of humanitarian relief, and contributing towards infrastructure projects. Thus, in this context, a liberal warrior was better served not by traits such as dominance, aggression or toughness – those conventionally associated with militarised masculinity – but by encompassing more typically 'feminine' attributes such as compassion, restraint and cooperation. In this respect, both the counterinsurgents and the soldiering they were doing were 'softened', presented akin to a caring profession, or as "armed social work" as David Kilcullen termed it (2006b: 107). However, just as ideas that COIN was a more passive form of warfare were vociferously denied, so too were any attempts to portray counterinsurgency soldiers as anything less than masculinised warriors⁹. *FM 3-24* describes the counterinsurgency environment as "inherently dangerous" (ibid:

⁹ It is worth noting that the discursively idealized liberal warrior outlined here, despite taking on a number of 'feminised' traits, was still presumed to be coded as cismale. Cisfemales, however, were invited to take up (in part) the identity 'liberal warrior' through their involvement in the all-women 'Female Engagement Teams' (see McBride and Wibben 2012 and Dyvik 2014).

xxvii) and infantry troops continued to engage in close combat, called in airstrikes, and disgorged an incredible amount of ordnance. COIN in Afghanistan, therefore, required military personnel who could not only win the 'hearts and minds' of the local population, but who also resembled the more traditional highly masculinised combat soldier. It was not, then, that violence was absent or concealed from a liberal warrior's performances in war, rather, that in the shift from force to civilian protection, and the change from maximum possible to minimum necessary force, the notion of restraint and the use of controlled and proportionate violence became integral to their imagining.

As British soldiering bodies were rendered hypervisible in the warscape, for the UK public at home it was primarily through a discursively idealised liberal warrior body, as well as hypervisibility's concomitant rendering invisible of other bodies, that the Afghanistan conflict came to be understood. It was through a liberal warrior's performances, injuries and death, represented and reiterated across a range of mediums in British society, which the public came to 'see' the war. In the hypervisibility of this body, violences of war were not concealed: they materialised in the frequently depicted firefights and in the rising body counts of British service personnel. Violence, however, is inherently relational and does not dis/appear in the abstract. It is rendered in/visible and becomes un/comprehensible through wider relations, processes and discourses. As the dominant body in the visual grammars of the conflict, and one that both experienced and enacted violence, a liberal warrior's body was crucial to violences' in/visibility and mediation.

***WAR STORY* AND TWO MEDIATIONS OF VIOLENCE**

Focusing on the *War Story* exhibition at the IWM in London as one specific site of representation of the liberal warrior, the article now explores the particular ways in which liberal

warriors were rendered hypervisible within it and the effects of this hypervisibility in relation both to how wartime violence was mediated and understood, and what was silenced and rendered invisible through this hypervisibility. A Ministry of Defence-supported initiative, *War Story* ran from October 2011 to December 2012 and was part of a series of events, exhibitions, and broadcasts that marked the decade British troops had been stationed in Afghanistan. The exhibition was explicit in its focus on the experiences of British service personnel serving in Afghanistan and, as such, provides an exemplary site in which to trace representations of contemporary British soldiering subjects.

Although generally understudied within the discipline of International Relations, museums are key sites for the representation and performance of global politics (see Sylvester 2006; 2009). Museums not only shape national and ethnic identity and play a key role in nation-building (Anderson 1991), but also have the potential to offer creative and imaginative methodologies for researching and understanding global politics. My own analysis comes from a visit to the exhibition in 2012 in which I took numerous photographs and wrote detailed notes about the exhibition and my own responses to it, supported by a range of IWM online resources and a small collection of academic articles that have also engaged with the exhibition (see Maltby and Thornham 2012; McSorley 2012; Parry and Thumim 2016). While at the exhibit and when reviewing materials about it, I deployed what Christine Sylvester has termed “feminist gazing” (2006: 218). Although Sylvester outlines her methodology of ‘feminist gazing’ in relation to looking at fine art, it can equally be applied to attending and looking at museum exhibits. As with the ‘male gaze’ identified by feminist art historians (see Broude and Garrard 1992 and Kleinfelder 1993), the feminist gaze is not neutral. Rather, it seeks to understand how an artwork or particular museum exhibit “works” (ibid: 204), and what “excesses...a certain visualization, characterization, or measurement tries to control or keep out” (ibid: 210). In this respect,

feminist gazing is attuned to the socially constructed and culturally located act of ‘seeing’, and is well placed to uncover the operations and effects of hypervisibility.

Taking the form of a freestanding structure set among the permanent exhibits, *War Story* was organised around the themes ‘First Impressions’, ‘Daily Life’, ‘On the Ground’, ‘Coming Home’ and ‘Loss’. Visitors were encouraged to walk around the structure, to physically touch some of the exhibits, and could engage in more depth via listening posts, which held recordings of soldiers’ voices and stories from the conflict. It was an exhibition that familiarised and presented the visitor with intimate knowledge of the service personnel involved, and, by extension, members of the British armed forces as a whole. However, while the exhibition may have “principally render[ed] the Afghanistan conflict in terms of private, disaggregated experiences” (McSorley, 2012: 52), this did not preclude violence from the exhibition. What follows is an analysis of two specific visibilities of violence and their mediation through the hypervisible liberal warrior body within the exhibition.

MEDIATION 1: IED VIOLENCE AND THE LIBERAL WARRIOR BODY

In 2009, with only ten days of his tour of duty in Afghanistan remaining, Corporal Andy Reid stood on an IED, sustaining injuries that led to him to lose both his legs, his right arm, and the index finger on his left hand. Reid was one of the participants of *War Story*, featuring in some of the video interviews of service personnel that both played on loop on the display walls and could be listened to via visitor touch-screen television sets. In his interview Reid talks about how he hoped his involvement in the exhibition would help children understand why they see injured soldiers back in the UK. Despite Reid’s remarkable recovery (he spent just two weeks in hospital before returning home), his disabled body serves as a corporeal reminder of the level of violence British service personnel – particularly those in ground combat teams – were exposed to during

their deployments in Afghanistan. Such violence, however, while visceral in its effects and visibility, does not emerge in the abstract. Rather, it was Reid's body that was the surface upon which the violence of an IED was rendered visible on *and* understood through. The hypervisibility of a liberal warrior (and thus Reid) is significant here as it is through this figure's excessive visibility that who they are and what they signify is already known – their representation is, to use Chris Jenks' term, "pre-received" (1995b: 10). Thus, violence rendered visible on a liberal warrior's body is impossible to disentangle from wider understandings of this subject, with the violence read and understood in relation to it. In *War Story*, this 'known-ness' of a liberal warrior works to mediate how the violence inflicted on Reid is read in two particular ways.

First, while Reid's body is seen and recognised by the visiting British public as a softened and humanised counterinsurgent, this figure is juxtaposed with the (invisible) technologized and injuring IED. Using a 'feminist gaze' to uncover how this juxtaposition 'works', the demarcation relies on and reproduces familiar colonial and orientalist discourses that were ever-present during the military intervention, whereby the cruelty, barbarism and irrationality usually ascribed to the Arabic or Islamic (masculine) 'other' (see Said 1978; Gregory 2004; Welland 2015a) were transferred and re-inscribed onto the IED and its destructive power. In his study of military orientalism, Patrick Porter details how 'oriental' warfare is framed as "different and apart from European warfare", with those in the West historically having preferred to fight battle without guile, while "the 'Islamic' way of war chose standoff weapons, deceit and attacking enemy cohesion" (Porter, 2009: 11). In this context an IED emerges as the (low) technological embodiment of an orientalist discourse, and unlike the disembodied and technologized form of warfare associated with the West and the RMA – presumed to *increase* the possibility of morality in/on the battlefield (see Gregory 2010) – an IED is understood as profoundly cruel and dehumanising in its violence.

Second, not only is the violence of an IED read as cruel or beyond the pale, but in *War Story* and on Reid's body, it is also rendered visible as a singular event, disconnected from the context of war it emerges from. For while an IED's violence may be rendered hypervisible via Reid's body, the reciprocal and concomitant effects of liberal warrior enacted violence failed to materialise in the exhibition. However, just as 'feminist gazing' can reveal how a particular representation 'works', it is also attuned to what is "strategically missing" (Sylvester, 2006: 209) from its depictions. The absence in *War Story*, for example, of the estimated 2,412 *recorded* civilian conflict-related deaths in Afghanistan in 2009, 2,790 in 2010 and 3,021 in 2011 (UNAMA 2012). In 2015, a year after NATO combat missions ended and demonstrating the long shadow the intervention has cast, the number of recorded civilian casualties was a record high of 11,002: 3,545 deaths and 7,457 injured (UNAMA 2016). These mounting civilian casualties, however, did not appear in the exhibition¹⁰ and thus remained disconnected from Reid and the other liberal warrior soldiering bodies depicted within it.

It was then, in and through the hypervisibility of Reid's body that the violence of an IED was rendered visible and understood. Through Reid's 'pre-received' subjectivity as a liberal warrior his humanity was positioned in opposition to the disembodied and technologized violence of an IED, while the warzone and wider context of violence – including that enacted by liberal warriors such as Reid – it emerged within, as well as the ('other') bodies they were directed at, failed to materialise. Violence read through Reid's body in these ways thus produced an understanding of violence in which it was hypervisible in its injuring, cruel in its enactment, and ignorant of its other deployments and victims.

¹⁰ It should be noted that in more recent iterations of the *War Story* project – both online and within the museum – space has been given to voices that do not belong to the British armed forces, including NGOs, Afghan National forces and embassy workers (Parry and Thumim, 2016: 107). The voices and experiences of civilian casualties, however, remain absent.

MEDIATION 2: LIBERAL WARRIOR ENACTED VIOLENCE

Although the bodies of dead and injured Afghans did not appear within *War Story*, nor were liberal warriors presented as defenceless victims of war. As already stated, violence and destructive power is written into understandings of a liberal warrior, and in *War Story* liberal warriors were shown as active participants of war. The exhibition included stories of firefights, soldiers' helmetcam footage of combat, and display units showcasing bullet casings and combat body armour. In-line with wider representational practices of soldiering and the conflict in Afghanistan, *War Story* depicted liberal warriors as (sometimes) violent actors who engaged in violent acts.

Read and mediated through liberal warriors' bodies, however, this enacted violence was rendered visible through very different frames of intelligibility than the violence of an IED detonation. Crucial to this was not just a liberal warrior's simultaneous desire and disavowal of violence – that they are both war-fighter and nation-builder – but that violence was enacted by a body that was both a soldier *and* familiar and personalised to the visiting public. Violence emerged, therefore, not in a singular moment of obscenity as the IED detonation did, but within a “master narrative” of the “resilient, professional, [and] heroic” (Parry and Thumim, 2016: 106) liberal warrior and a body that was intimately known. This ‘knowing’ of soldiers – of who they are, their familial relations and personality – was a key feature in the broader regime of the hypervisibility of soldiering bodies. Throughout the conflict British service personnel were identified not as faceless soldiers in a homogenous mass of military bodies, but as individual and familiar subjects. One of the ways this occurred was through the personal and personalising presentation of soldiering figures, in which the British public were introduced to not just soldiers' regiment, rank and role, but their family ties, motivations for joining, and their hopes

for the future (see Zehfuss 2009). In its intimate portrayal of British soldiers *War Story* worked very much within this personalising and familiarising frame.

For example, one of the most striking parts of the exhibition was a series of photographic portraits of some of the participants in the project. The portraits, taken by Richard Ash, an artist commissioned by the museum, were “identical in composition and form (lighting, tone, colour palette); [consisting of] a close-up of the subject’s face, with direct gaze and only subtle markers of facial expression or emotion” (Parry and Thumim 2016: 101). On information boards book-ending the portraits, Ash writes about the uniformity of the portraits and that while they were originally intended as purely an administrative record, they “demanded reassessment” (War Story 2011-12):

The subjects were all photographed against a clean white background and, where possible, without berets or insignia identifying their units. All of the images were composed and processed in exactly the same way. An approach that was intended to produce consistency and conformity has instead highlighted the variety and individuality of the subjects. Their direct gaze into the camera lens – and towards the viewer – is unsettling yet intriguing. It invites us to wonder about the nature of their experiences and offers us a glimpse of the person behind the uniform (ibid).

Ash goes on to state: “They are just like you or me. They are your brother, your dad, your sister, your best friend, your husband, your wife” (ibid). Indeed, as Katy Parry and Nancy Thumim note in their own analysis of *War Story*’s portraiture, portraits in this style and this context “do not merely present or represent the person depicted, they are also like a mirror returning the gaze of the museum visitor”. The repetition of form compels the viewer to “seek out the differences...and even to ponder the experiences behind those eyes” (Parry and Thumim, 2016: 101). Thus, in these portraits, military personnel were disconnected from a “militarized, technologically enhanced, uniformed body” (Maltby and Thornham, 2012: 41), presented instead as distinctly humanised.

Like the violence of an IED rendered visible on Reid’s body, in *War Story*, violences enacted by liberal warriors were read and understood through the hypervisibility of their

bodies. A feminist gaze is attuned to the ‘working’ of these representations and how liberal warrior-enacted violences appeared alongside their familiarity, personalisation and a whole host of non-violent everyday activities. In *War Story*, while British soldiers were depicted enacting violence, they were also portrayed as a reader of books, a letter writer, completing a rubric cube, and as someone’s brother, dad, sister, best friend, husband or wife. Indeed, despite violence marking much of the exhibition, a great deal of effort was simultaneously made to construct these soldiers as something other than, and more than, bodies inextricably entangled in relations of violence. Thus, when violences did emerge, they appeared as qualitatively different to that endured by Reid. In comparison to the singularity of an IED explosion, violences engaged in by *War Story’s* liberal warriors emerged as contextualised and reciprocal, and the hypervisibility and associated ‘known-ness’ of a liberal warrior’s body was central to this mediation. Violence perpetrated by this body was never *just* violence; it was never only destructive. Just as what a liberal warrior *does* is central to its subject formation, who a liberal warrior *is*, is central to understandings of their practices. So while a liberal warrior may have been depicted as disgorging armoury and engaging in deadly combat, the ‘known’ and pre-received body of a liberal warrior scripted this violence as purposeful and necessary – the war-fighting required for the possibility of nation-building. Just as violences perpetrated by a liberal warrior did not define or flatten out its subjectivity, the familiarity of a liberal warrior mediated the violence they enacted as something more than straightforward destruction.

INVISIBLE BODIES

While the hypervisibility of the bodies of British soldiering subjects in *War Story* meant that violence enacted by these bodies materialised as radically different from the brutality of an IED detonation, as the absence of Afghan civilian casualties from the exhibition demonstrates, hypervisibility has other effects. First, as Pidduck notes, hypervisibility’s “constitutive outside”

is the relative absence of other images and voices, and in its practice “these inequities, invisibilities and silences are reiterated, [and] perhaps even amplified” (2011: 11-12). Thus, in the excess of visibility afforded to liberal warriors via news reports, documentaries, soldier memoirs, exhibitions, and highly publicised repatriations, the body of the ‘other’ – or more specifically, the broken, bloody and lifeless body of the ‘other’ – failed to materialise in the visual grammars of the war. Although UNAMA’s annual reports on the protection of civilians provided statistics of *recorded* civilian injury and death, the reports make it clear that such figures may under-estimate the ‘true’ figures due to the difficulty collecting statistics in one of the most dangerous countries in the world. More significantly, however, is that,

[i]n contrast to the deaths of [NATO] soldiers, the lives of Afghan civilians do not seem to merit...attention. The number of civilians killed remains unknown and there is nobody to line the streets to acknowledge their passing. They are unnamed, unidentified and, increasingly, unexceptional. The deaths of Afghan civilians are not officially counted; their lives do not seem to count (Gregory, 2012: 328).

Thus, while depictions of liberal warriors, as well as the violences they endure, proliferate across numerous mediums, rendered invisible are the violences inflicted on the bodies of the Afghan population, as well as the recognition that it is often liberal warriors themselves who are the direct or indirect cause of this injuring. Furthermore, an additional effect of this hypervisibility may well be an increase in calls for more high-technology weaponry and war at remove¹¹.

It is not, however, just the bodies of Afghan ‘others’ that are obscured through the hypervisibility of a liberal warrior. Absent from the warscape and from depictions of the soldiering bodies that populate it are the bodies of soldiers that fall outside the frames of intelligibility of a liberal warrior. For example, while liberal warrior bodies appear as tough and tender counterinsurgents, disabled but resilient survivors, and as fallen heroes, invisible are the

¹¹ Arguably seen today in the continued use of drones in numerous countries across the Middle East and a commitment by the British, American and French authorities to only engage in airstrikes, not ‘boots on the ground’, in Syria and Iraq.

veterans who experience a range of mental health problems, engage in substance abuse, commit suicide, encounter social problems such as homelessness, or simply feel their experiences are “unheard” (see Bulmer and Jackson 2016). Alison Howell and Zoë Wool have explored the costs of the militarised response to 9/11 for US veterans and their families and have found

...that soldiers exposed to violent combat, intense human trauma, or who kill another person are more likely to engage in a wide array of risky behaviors, including alcohol abuse and verbal and physical aggression, putting both themselves and those around them in danger (2016: 252).

For both American and British military personnel, much of the Afghanistan campaign was conducted alongside a military deployment in Iraq (2003-2011), which meant significant numbers of troops experienced (multiple) tours of duty and returned home to overstretched militaries, inadequate health services and “a macho attitude that stigmatized help-seeking” (ibid: 252). This, in turn, is where hypervisibility’s second effect can be traced: that the hypervisibility of a liberal warrior’s body is reproduced and reiterated at an increasing remove of the ‘real’ – the everyday lived realities of those who inhabit this body and subjectivity. Thus, in its hypervisibility a liberal warrior is a figure “without origin or reality” (Baudrillard, 1983: 2); a subject who is both ‘seen’ and ‘known’, but whose representations are not anchored in the experiences and ‘realities’ of counterinsurgency warfare or military afterlives.

CONCLUSION

Unlike the ‘techno-warfare’ of the 1990s that purported to remove (risks to) British soldiering bodies from the conduct of war, the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan saw their re-centring. With COIN promising a less militaristic form of warfare and one that placed the

needs of the civilian population, rather than military operations, at its centre, British counterinsurgents – what this article has called ‘liberal warriors’ – became hypervisible in the warscape. This article has argued that wartime violences, concealed from British publics during the 1990s, were now viscerally displayed on soldiering bodies and mediated through their hypervisibility. Locating my analysis in, and deploying a ‘feminist gaze’ at, the 2011-2012 *War Story* exhibition at the London IWM, two specific mediations of violence were explored: the detonation of an IED under the foot of Corporal Andy Reid and the day-to-day kinetic force engaged in by British soldiers. While violence inflicted by an IED and on Reid’s body was scripted as obscene and relation-less in its targeting, violences engaged in by liberal warriors were read as reciprocal and purposive. In both these readings the hypervisibility of liberal warriors’ bodies – both in the exhibition and more widely – was central and, as detailed below, integral for putting in place the conditions of possibility for the continuation of violence. While in the detonation of an IED it was the physical destruction of Reid’s ‘pre-received’ softened and humanised body that scripted the technologized violence as beyond the pale of ‘ordinary’ warfare, violence perpetrated by liberal warriors was understood as qualitatively different. As a body that is deeply familiar, violence enacted by this figure could not be separated from wider understandings of a liberal warrior subjectivity. Who a liberal warrior is and what they are presumed to signify, mediates the violence, suffusing it with meaning drawn from its body. Violences performed by this soldiering subject therefore transcend their destructive capabilities, signalling instead to a purposive nature and nation-building potential.

However, both in the context of *War Story* and the Afghanistan counterinsurgency campaign as a whole, the hypervisibility of liberal warrior bodies has produced two other effects. First, in its hypervisibility other bodies disappeared or were relegated to the margins. While the violence of the Afghan war may not have been fully obscured, it been rendered visible in the injuries inflicted on the bodies of liberal warriors and in the violent potential their bodies held,

the ‘other’ bodies such violence was directed towards remained – and continues to remain – resolutely absent. These bodies who have failed to materialise include the estimated 26,000 Afghan civilians who are believed to have died a violent death as a direct result of the military intervention, and the thousands more who have died indirectly or suffered ill health due to the exacerbated effects of poverty, malnutrition, lack of sanitation and poor access to healthcare that the conflict has both increased and caused (Costs of War 2015). Furthermore, bodies of soldiers unrecognisable as tough and tender, resilient and heroic, liberal warriors also failed to materialise. Counterinsurgent veterans’ multitude of experiences that may include mental health problems, alcohol and drug abuse, and other social difficulties are obscured in the hypervisibility of this discursively idealised subject. Both these absences point to hypervisibility’s second effect: that in the reproduction and reiteration of the hypervisible image or subject, it becomes ever further removed from its referent in the ‘real’. In this case, the lived realities of British soldiers, both in the warscape and on their return home. The hypervisible liberal warrior is disconnected from the violence of counterinsurgency, both directly and indirectly targeted at the civilian population of Afghanistan, as well as removed from the ways in which the violence and trauma of the conflict ‘comes home’ (Howell and Wool 2016) with the counterinsurgents themselves.

A longer shadow of this hypervisibility, however, lies in its putting in place the conditions of possibility for the continuation of violent projects abroad and their acceptance at home. Throughout this article it has been argued that for the British public, the majority of them far removed – both physically and emotionally – from the warscape, it is through the hypervisible bodies of liberal warriors that war comes to be understood. Such bodies were rendered visible across a range of mediums in an increasingly militarised British society, and one in which wider narratives and discourses circulated about the benevolence of the British state and military, and violence of Arab and Islamic ‘others’ (see Bennett 2012; Basham 2013; Welland 2015a). Thus, while the tens of thousands of disabled and disfigured WWI veterans told of the

brutality of industrialised war and the 'cyborg soldiers' of the 1990-1991 Gulf conflict signalled towards the technological superiority and dominance of Western nations, in the counterinsurgency environ of Afghanistan a liberal warrior's body narrated a softer and gentler approach to war-fighting. As the central figure in the war's visual grammars and (re)produced and (re)iterated through its continuous representation, it was through and in relation to this body, its experiences, and what it came to signify, that the war came to be 'seen' and understood by the British public. And what publics 'see' and 'know' about war is integral for its social acceptance and the possibility of its continuance. For example, mediated through the humanised and familiar hypervisible bodies of liberal warriors, violences enacted by the British state were capable of signifying something more than straightforward destruction, allowing COIN's doctrinal claims of population protection to remain intact even when the population being protected were being killed, injured, and their livelihoods devastated. The body of a liberal warrior was (and is) therefore central to the stories and narratives of twenty-first century British military interventions and militarism. Its hypervisibility communicated the discursively idealised soldiering narratives constructed around, in and through its (re)production, and rendered *invisible* those bodies, violences and effects that fell outside its frames of intelligibility. Liberal warriors therefore became not just the militarised and weaponized bodies that enacted the warfare and military power of the British state, but a central representational figure in ensuring the continuance of its violent projects abroad and their acceptance back home.

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