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# Remaining 'in-between' the divides? Conceptual, methodological, and ethical political dilemmas of engaged research in Critical Military Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Critical Military Studies (CMS) has emerged as an important subdiscipline in international security studies and an interdisciplinary field in its own right. In this article, we offer a close reading of foundational CMS literature to reveal its distinct approach to the critical study of military power. We argue this foundational literature is characterised by a commitment to a series of 'in-between' and 'engaged' positions on conceptual binaries between civilian and military spheres, questions of methodological proximity to or distance from military actors, and ethical political support for or opposition to militarism. While CMS makes important contributions to analyses of military power and security, we argue it too often re-centres white western male military subjects and agendas while marginalising antimilitarism. In this way, we argue, it reproduces a form of epistemic and 'methodological whiteness' that limits its potential to offer a sustained critique.

## KEYWORDS

Militarism; Antimilitarism; Engaged Research; Methodological Whiteness

## Introduction: militarism in international security

Militarism remains foundational to practices and experiences of in/security in world politics. As we write, Russia's expansionist invasion of Ukraine has resulted in protracted fighting, decimated cities, and millions of people displaced. Western and NATO allies seek to shore up Ukraine's defence, turning the conflict into a war of attrition, as global food prices soar and stock markets crash. Elsewhere, Israel's Defence Forces continue to bomb Palestinians in Gaza and conduct deadly raids in the West Bank. In Syria and Yemen, civil wars stoked by international actors have caused humanitarian disasters for populations living there. Yet, the EU, Britain, and USA continue to fuel record arms imports to the Middle East.

In our own research, we have seen international security actors entrench their military presence in Africa under the umbrella of 'security sector reform', while European borders have been progressively militarised and outsourced to neighbouring authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, the last few years reminded us how militarisation pervades society: from Trump's spectacular deployment of 17,000 national guard troops to pacify Black Lives Matter protesters to the mobilisation of military metaphors by politicians and the media in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Writing from a UK context, we have watched successive governments take civil-military relations as a key site of policy intervention in response to public disillusionment with foreign wars since Iraq. For example, the Armed Forces Covenant seeks to champion the armed forces

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community across British society. Amidst rising authoritarian nationalism, the government houses asylum seekers in disused military barracks while the Home Secretary refers to refugee arrivals in Kent as an ‘invasion’. The continuing power of military symbolism was particularly highlighted for us by the UK public’s nostalgic enthrallment with Captain Tom, a World War II veteran who raised £32.9 million for NHS charities by walking laps of his garden.

Militarism also pervades the institutions where we work and teach. Weapons companies, defence departments, security agencies, and army recruiters maintain close ties with higher education in what has been termed the ‘military-industrial-academic complex’ (Smart 2016). While collaborations in science and engineering on developing military hardware are most visible, social science research also informs military strategies in relation to counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Universities are not only implicated in the co-production of military weapons systems but also the normalisation of military violence (Stavrianakis 2006, 149–50).

As critical, feminist, queer and postcolonial scholars have argued, ‘martial politics’ has been fundamental to the formation of a post/colonial world order and intersecting global inequalities. This literature reminds us that you do not have capitalism without military colonialism and the enslavement of millions of people from Africa or the genocide of indigenous populations (Grosfoguel 2013). Patriarchy does not exist without the logic of masculinist protection, which finds one of its clearest expressions in military claims to defend the nation (Young 2003). The nation-state itself, the bedrock of International Relations, is best understood as a post/colonial creation that perpetuates the militaristic and racist logics of empire in the divisive martial form of national ‘camps’ (Gilroy 2000). Nor can key institutions of Western liberal society, such as the police or university, be understood separately from their historical implication in racialised military projects of colonial domination and population control (Howell 2018). Similarly, militaries in the global south often retain their historic colonial functions to ‘supress[] anti-colonial dissent’ and secure international extraction of wealth (Amina and Okazawa-Rey 2012, 98).

Furthermore, militarism remains central to new forms of imperialism shaping developments in international security today. Since 2001 the ‘war on terror’ saw the US aggressively pursue its neoliberal interests alongside a massive global expansion of militarism persecuted against gendered, sexualised and racialised subjects constructed as securitised threats to Western civilisation (Mohanty 2011). At the same time militarised practices overlap with carceral systems, surveillance technologies, criminal policing, and border controls to establish a ‘militarized security apparatus built to maintain racialized hierarchies’ and secure unequal access to capitalist profit through the global policing of ‘risky’ populations (Besteman 2020, 101–102). This global apparatus entails international ‘alliances between certain governments, corporations, and extra-state actors’ that resemble a new form of militarised ‘security imperialism’ (122).

Given this centrality of militarism to international security, it has perhaps surprisingly been overlooked in recent International Relations and Security Studies (Stavrianakis and Selby 2012). During the Cold War, realist ‘strategic studies’ presented itself as the ‘policy science’ of war (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, 128), rationalising the use of military violence as a means of achieving state security, while rarely engaging with oppositional stances existing within peace studies or peace movements (Jutila, Pehkonen, and Väyrynen 2008, 629). The 1990s saw the emergence of explicitly ‘critical’ approaches aiming to expand our understanding of security beyond a narrow focus on military power. As Stavrianakis and Stern 2018, 7–8) show, this ‘turn away from the Cold War “mirror image” [...] between peace research and strategic studies’ coincided with critical scholars largely dropping militarism from their analyses, with the important exception of feminist scholars.

In this context, a revived critique of military power with ‘a reinvigorated focus on the mutual constitution of militarism and security’ (Stern and Stavrianakis 2018, 235) is welcome. Critical Military Studies (CMS) promises to do just that, defining itself as ‘a transdisciplinary community of scholars and activists raising questions about, and seeking to challenge, military power’ (Critical Military Studies n.d.). It comprises an academic journal, a book series, a stream at the annual European International Studies Association Conference, as well as a loosely affiliated collection of

research hubs, institutes, and networks. Distinct CMS modules now appear on degree programmes, attracting research funding and PhD proposals. This growing authority has the potential to influence the parameters of research projects seeking a ‘critical’ stance on security, military power, and militarism. It is because of the promise and prominence of CMS that we find it necessary to ask what is meant by ‘critical’ here, and what sorts of research and politics in relation to military power, institutions, and ideology are promoted or disavowed under this definition.

As we will argue in this paper, the CMS project was initially founded on commitments to ‘engagement’ and ‘in-betweenness’ in critical research on militarism. While these have been contested by some CMS work recently, they remain definitive of the subfield in ways that potentially constrain its parameters. At stake here are questions concerning which research subjects and sites we choose to engage with, and in doing so whose voices and perspectives we foreground, what methods we employ, and how we position ourselves as researchers in relation to institutions of military power and violence. Drawing on postcolonial and feminist scholarship on militaries and militarism, as well as growing critical voices within CMS itself, we argue that these commitments to engagement and in-betweenness risk perpetuating the whiteness and militarisation of critical research.

This article starts by outlining the context of racialised world politics and the epistemological and methodological whiteness of international relations and security studies in which critical military scholarship takes place. It then provides an outline of the CMS project and its central commitments to ‘engagement’ and ‘in-betweenness’ while acknowledging the diversity of critical military research that exists within and in conversation with the subfield. The main body of the article, then, develops three main critiques of engaged CMS research. First, we argue CMS privileges the experiences and voices of veterans, reservists, and recruits, thereby portraying military-affiliated subjects as possessors of unique insights into military-civilian relations. Second, we argue CMS’s emphasis on engagement and ‘critical friendship’ with military actors incentivises research projects palatable to state military agendas. Third, we argue that by appropriating critical concepts while untethering them from their radical political context, CMS marginalises antimilitarism as a valid starting point for critical military research. In doing so, we argue, much CMS research risks refocusing a familiarly white, western, masculine, military figure as the primary political subject of concern, producing knowledge that supports military efforts to reaffirm its relevance in contemporary society, and ultimately leaving unquestioned assumptions about the necessity, legitimacy, and accountability of state military institutions

### Critique and the racialisation of world politics

Postcolonial and feminist scholars writing on militarism provide important insights into questions of positionality, knowledge production, and methodology emphasising their gendered, racialised, and sexualised dynamics. Yet within IR and Security Studies, the deep implication of militarism in the creation of a violently unequal racialised world politics has received less attention (Manchanda and Rossdale 2021). As Gani (2021, 547) argues, ‘the need to address the *constitutive role of race* in militarism is long overdue’. Unless we do so, scholars risk missing what is at stake ethically and politically in how we study militarism ‘critically’: whose perspectives and experiences we centre, what methods we employ, and whether in our critique we explicitly oppose militarism or not. It is also important to acknowledge how post/colonial racism continues to shape the epistemic and political contours of the wider disciplines of IR and Security Studies (Agathangelou and Ling 2004). As Henderson (2013) details, IR has been shaped by inherited western philosophical traditions that saw the world in terms of ‘a racist dualism’ between white civilisational order and non-white primitive anarchy that amounted to ‘little more than an intellectual justification for colonialism and imperialism’ (71–72, 83–85).

Furthermore, as decolonial scholars have shown, the way we conduct (critical) research is itself shaped by epistemological and ‘methodological whiteness’ (Bhambra 2017). Firstly, this involves a

failure to confront how world politics, and our understandings of it, are shaped by ongoing legacies of post/colonial racism. Secondly, ‘white experience’ is assumed to be the ‘standard state of affairs’ and treated as a ‘universal perspective’ while others are seen as ‘parochial and lesser’ (Bhambra 2017) or simply overlooked. Just as ‘methodological nationalism’ entrenches the ‘naturalness’ of the nation-state system, methodological whiteness reifies a world order premised on white supremacy as the norm (indeed the two are mutually re-enforcing). Studies that fail to critically reflect on how racism structures their knowledge production risk (unwittingly or otherwise) reproducing this privileging of white subjects, experiences, values, and interests while marginalising others.

In an early intervention into feminist CMS debates, Henry (2017) argues this is particularly a risk when researching militaries that are so intimately bound up with reproducing structural oppressions in world politics. Discussing the use of black feminist theories of ‘intersectionality’ to analyse (predominantly male) military subjects and spaces, Henry cautions that ‘when “radical” or revolutionary theories of emancipation (from patriarchy, capitalism, and racism) become detached from those marginalized within these very structures of power, they may end up serving the interests of the ruling class’ (186). She asks us, for example, to reflect on what it means to foreground analyses of intersecting inequalities between subjects within the Israeli military without interrogating the role of this institution in enforcing the violent racialised oppression of Palestinians. The same, we could say, goes for many other militaries such as the British or US and the victims of their imperial wars, in Iraq or Afghanistan for instance. Decontextualising critical analytical frameworks from the radical politics which underlies them can ‘contribut[e] to a space in which privilege is *covered over*, rather than *revealed* and *challenged*’ (183).

For those of us who are white western critical scholars, which includes the authors, methodological whiteness is something we can reproduce without thinking, even despite our explicit opposition to racism. Indeed, this lack of awareness is fundamental to the epistemic dynamics by which a world politics premised on white privilege is maintained as natural and self-evident (Mills 2007). Part of what it means to be ‘critical’, therefore, is to be self-reflective about our complicity in reproducing epistemic and methodological whiteness and to consider how we might research otherwise to challenge these dynamics. However, as Rutazibwa (2016) notes, there has been a ‘strategic reluctance’ to name ‘the R-word’, arising from a desire not to ‘offend or alienate’ other critical scholars who might misconstrue reminders of our complicity in structural racism as accusations against individuals for being racist (193). But in our efforts to avoid hurting people’s feelings, we need to ask: ‘whose feelings are we systematically valuing more than others?’ and how might this reaffirm ‘the colonial status quo and the expendability of certain experiences and lives’ (196)? For us, critical analyses of world politics, security, and militarism must grapple with these racialised, gendered, and sexualised dimensions in our theory and practice. This requires we identify and challenge the persistence of these dynamics in each other’s research and as well as our own to develop its critical potential. It is in this positive constructive sense of critique that we ask after the limits of undertaking ‘engaged’ research with military institutions and subjects while also remaining ethically and politically agnostic concerning the role of military violence in maintaining an unequally racialised world politics. We see our arguments here as complementing recent efforts in critical security studies to interrogate the role of academic knowledge production in upholding or challenging the structural racialisation and coloniality of world politics (Barkawi 2016; Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2019, 2020; Salter et al. 2021).

### Critique in CMS: engagement and critical ‘in-betweenness’

In the introduction to the CMS journal, the editors argue a ‘sceptical curiosity’ about military power is central to a *critical* analysis of militarism. This entails ‘approaching military power as a question, rather than taking it for granted’ (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1). CMS emphasises remaining open to empirical discovery, rethinking taken-for-granted concepts, and suspending ethical political judgement on militarisation in society. Critique involves uncovering the ‘complexity’ and

‘nuance’ of military power in its entanglement in wider social relations, revealing the messy lived experiences and subjectivities of military personnel, and interrogating common assumptions underlying militaristic ideology (Basham and Bulmer 2017, 64; Gray 2016, 75–76; Woodward, Jenkins, and Williams 2017, 204). We show how these founding commitments lead CMS scholars to adopt a position of engagement<sup>1</sup> and ‘in-betweenness’ in relation to military power that is conceptual, methodological, and ethical political.

First, CMS scholars complicate conceptual binaries between military/civilian and militarised/demilitarised, exploring how these are embodied by in-between subjects such as veterans, reservists, and recruits. Second, this leads them to stress the importance of conducting engaged research with military subjects and the armed forces community within their methodologies ‘to adopt a critical stance that also advocates *working with* militaries’ for the ‘co-production of knowledge’ (Rech et al. 2016, 6; 10). Third, and relatedly, CMS scholars aim to occupy an ethical political position in-between opposition to or support for militaries. Rather than adopting a stance of pro- or anti-militarism, they remain open to the possibility that militaries can be not only engaged as sites of critical investigation but also political reform, and that military power might remain necessary for achieving security in a dangerous world.

These three research commitments have been formative of CMS as a connected yet distinct field of research. By adopting what we term ‘critical in-betweenness’, CMS provides an innovative approach to the critical study of militarism. However, the commitment to engagement and to remaining in-between these conceptual, methodological, and ethical political divides, we argue, limits critique by recentring military power in terms of the familiar actors, institutions, and agendas it focuses on. Furthermore, we argue this risks reproducing epistemic and methodological whiteness. In the rest of the paper, we analyse each of these ‘in-between’ positions in turn.

Before we do so, however, it is important to address the parameters of the field. Given its multidisciplinary, CMS can be understood as a ‘scholarly landscape characterised by little consensus but much possibility’ (Rech et al. 2016, 2). In this article, we focus on scholars who are self-consciously involved in the formation of CMS, examining work explicitly contributing to debates about defining the field or outlining its engaged methodology. We also examine prominent CMS research projects which champion this engaged approach and in some cases are designed in collaboration with the military community. However, it is important to recognise the blurred boundaries of the field as well as the contestation and debate that exists within it over its central aims, methods, and politics.

From its beginnings, CMS has sought to be an interdisciplinary field bringing together researchers from IR, security studies, geography, sociology, criminology, and anthropology. It has been particularly indebted to and remains in conversation within feminist scholarship on militarism which it has been influenced by, responded to, and in some cases set itself apart from (Wibben 2018),<sup>2</sup> much of which aims to decentre whiteness and eurocentrism in its analyses of militarism (e.g., Chisholm 2014; Baaz, Maria and Verweijen 2017; Rashid 2022; Welland 2014). Furthermore, some of these feminist IR and Security Studies scholars have also been directly involved in the CMS project through their participation in its publications, sponsored panels, and editorial boards. On the other hand, not all academics critically researching militaries or publishing in CMS outlets necessarily consider themselves part of a specific CMS community. As such, we want to resist calls to sharply delineate the borders of belonging under the label of ‘CMS’ but instead to emphasise how the field remains complexly intertwined and also in tension with wider critical research on militarism.

With this in mind, while the majority of publications defining the subfield of CMS have advocated an engaged and in-between approach to critical military research, it is important to note the growing number of scholars working with non-western contexts and post/colonial perspectives who challenge some of these initial commitments as well as raise concerns about the reproduction of racialised and military power (Furtado 2020; Henry 2017; Howell 2018; Manchanda and Rosedale 2021). Our critical analysis of the epistemological and methodological



whiteness of dominant approaches to CMS, therefore, are inspired by and seek to support these efforts to open up and extend the critical study of militarism.

### **'The spaces in-between': complicating the civilian/military divide?**

CMS seeks to 'problematise' conceptual binaries informing our understandings of military power, its operations as well as its perceived il/legitimacy. Much CMS work challenges the distinction between civilian/military as separate spheres of activity, instead showing how they are intertwined and how subjects are formed and navigate 'the spaces in-between' (Gray 2016; Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015). Rather than seeing military institutions as separate from society, CMS seeks 'to capture the range of social practices through which armed conflict comes into being' (Rech et al. 2015, 57). Portraying the military as a social institution, scholars reveal how militarism is deeply rooted in civilian life and the intimate roles civilians play in supporting it (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1).

CMS scholars also complicate distinctions between militarisation/demilitarisation. For example, Bulmer and Eichler (2017) argue distinctions between militarised and civilian spaces and subjects do not hold up empirically (172–73). They point to the figure of the 'veteran' as an embodiment of the 'ambiguities and tensions of lived experience which exceed such a straightforward categorization' (Ibid). Since veterans frequently possess 'ambivalent' attitudes towards the military, both critical and 'loyal', they are portrayed as 'simultaneously militarized and non/demilitarized' (Ibid). Bulmer and Eichler reject this 'dichotomous choice' of de/militarisation, instead emphasising the 'complexity and fluidity' of gendered military identities and power relations, understanding them as always incomplete processes of construction and 'unmaking.' As they assert: 'A key element of this agenda is to hold in focus, and work with and through, the "inbetweenness" and co-extensiveness of military/civilian worlds and masculinities/femininities' (175).

Other CMS scholars explore 'the everyday' as a productive site for analysing the interlinkages of military/civilian worlds, the lived realities of subjects formed 'in-between', and the coexistence of practices that reproduce and resist military power. Basham and Catignani (2021a) examine the everyday practices of reservists and their families, revealing how the normalisation of state militarism takes place on a more contested terrain of social relations, and is carried out by subjects navigating complex gendered and militarised identities, than is recognised by common narratives of de/militarisation. Showing how reservists experience war preparation duties as 'serious leisure' rather than selfless sacrifice for the national 'greater good', and how they negotiate criticism from partners at home, Basham and Catignani 'trouble the military and heteropatriarchal normal' by questioning the validity of assumptions on which militarism in liberal societies is justified (Basham and Catignani 2021a, 112). Elsewhere, they argue the reliance of militaries on gendered domestic labour and tolerance of soldiers' partners highlights the 'precarious' and 'contingent' nature of military power (Basham and Catignani 2018, 166) and 'the capacity for women, through their everyday practices, to destabilize it' (156).

In their work on University Armed Service Units, in which students enlist as reservist cadets, Woodward, Jenkins and Williams argue against 'pejorative conceptualisations of militarisation' which assume civilian institutions to be 'separate and distinct' from military ones with 'markedly different missions' and 'constructed as morally quite different' (2017, 204). This framing, they argue, portrays militarisation as a 'contamination' of civilian spaces 'by invasive ideas, priorities and practices which originate in state requirements for the organisation of lethal legitimized violence' (204). However, if we look at how universities and military institutions historically developed together and continue to inform each other's operations, in terms of disciplinary knowledge, research collaborations, professional overlaps, and recruitment initiatives, this separation becomes untenable. Instead, we see a multi-faceted 'military-university' nexus (204). For the authors, this means universities 'need to be seen as always already militarised' (210).

### *In-between subjects: veterans, reservists, recruits*

Despite their conceptual ‘in-betweenness’, prominent CMS analyses frequently privilege subjects with close (albeit conflicted or ambiguous) relations to military institutions as possessors of superior critical insight into militarisation and its limits, potentially excluding those with less direct connections to militarism. Especially noticeable is the centring of the (predominantly white, western, male) veteran, usually injured and suffering, as both object of analysis and privileged critical voice, while there is a comparative marginalisation of non-military (and non-western, non-white) casualties, refugees, and resisters of military violence. In places, veterans are framed as ‘flesh witnesses’, their embodied experiences and war stories valued as sources of particularly authoritative knowledge about the ‘realities of war’ (Caddick 2021b; Dyvik 2016). While veterans’ narratives are not the only ones available, they remain disproportionately focused upon within CMS research.

We see the privileging of veterans’ insights in numerous articles and chapters, research on military memoirs, the establishment of veteran research hubs, and efforts to engage with veterans as co-producers of knowledge in publications. Prominent in this literature is a belief that veterans’ experiences are ‘ineffable’ to others (Bulmer and Jackson 2016, 29). Both veterans and researchers speak of a ‘gulf’ in understanding between those with and without military experience (Eichler and Wiebe 2019, 86), and that veterans’ experiences ‘seem to resist understanding and academic interpretation’ (Caddick, Cooper, and Smith 2019, 99). Reflecting on the difficulties of speaking on veterans’ behalf, CMS scholars employ methods of ‘empathic dialogue’ that foreground their unfiltered voices. In these dialogues, veterans themselves often assert the importance of shared experiences of war and trauma (109), usually expressed in terms of ‘brotherhood’, as a prerequisite for knowledge and understanding (108; Bulmer and Jackson 2016, 29). Despite being explicitly gendered and nationalist, veterans’ voices are presented as providing unique insights into the workings and ‘weight’ of militarism because they straddle the civil/military divide and occupy the space in-between de/militarisation (Eichler and Wiebe 2019). By ‘illuminat[ing] the embodied dimension of military lives and afterlives’ veterans are also seen as offering ‘an important glimmer of hope’ for de/reconstructing civilian/military relations and creating a more peaceful society (Reeves 2021, 104–5).

As ‘in-between’ civilian-military subjects, veterans (and reservists and cadets) have understandably preoccupied much CMS scholarship. However, this results in a critique of military power primarily articulated from a position of direct military experience and closeness to military institutions. CMS replaces a civilian/military binary with a civilian-military continuum that nonetheless prioritises military subjects as possessors of expertise and agency when it comes to reproducing or undoing military power in society. The danger is that other voices with less formal affiliation to these institutions are granted less authority or value, and so their critiques of military power get overlooked.

Exemplary here is Eichler and Wiebe’s (2019) article on their collaborative performance ‘The Weight We Share’. Engaging audiences as participants in ‘uncomfortable’ dialogue, they sought to challenge common assumptions about war and reveal how we all share its burdens. However, we find some moments in their staged conversation jarring because of the lack of reflection on other subjects who bear the costs of war besides soldiers/veterans. Reflecting on her reservations prior to deployment in Afghanistan about being able ‘to actually pull the trigger when the time presented itself’, Wiebe says: ‘my biggest fear was having to aim my rifle at a child’ (86). The weight of war we are being asked to consider is the one shouldered by the white Canadian soldier/veteran rather than the Afghan civilians who find themselves on the potentially lethal end of encounters with Western militaries. Eichler reinforces this unequal consideration by responding with her own reservations about representing the voices of the soldiers/veterans she interviews rather than challenging the absences within their narratives. Absent also is any critical reflection on how military intervention in Afghanistan served to further western imperialism in world politics and the disproportionate



expendability of racialised subjects this entailed. In the paper they mention ‘the lively and empathetic but discordant discussion that followed the performance’ between audience members: ‘academics, activists, artists, refugees, students, members of the military and veteran communities, and the general public’ (84). Yet we are offered little insight into the substance of these ‘tense moments’ of ‘dialogue’ and ‘disagreement’ or how they might challenge the authors’ narrative of shared burden (87).

Returning to Basham and Catignani’s (2021a) work on everyday militarism and reservists’ families, while offering important insights into how ‘disruption’ and ‘destabilisation’ are imminent within the social processes by which militarism is reproduced in civilian life, once again it is subjects with intimate connections to military institutions whose actions are deemed most meaningful and effective for un/making military power. The agency to disrupt or reshape military power comes from subjects’ proximity to military institutions, and *not* from any ethical political stances on military power they might hold:

Whether they see how their labor sustains military power or not is not the issue, nor is the fact that many of these women would also be most likely to withdraw their support for pragmatic and personal reasons rather than lofty ideals like “disrupting war.” [...] examining the details of their lives it becomes possible to overcome tendencies to cast women as either passive receptors of geopolitical power or active opponents to it (166)

Finally, for Woodward, Jenkins, and Williams, seeing the military as intimately intertwined with society leads them to set aside demilitarisation in favour of examining ‘the generative, productive capacity of militarisation’ (2017, 208–9; 210). They point to how students in University Armed Service Units develop ‘transferable skills’ such as ‘leadership, teamwork, and self-management’ that are valued in non-military employment sectors (208), especially ‘corporate’ ones (2015, 168). They emphasise the individual agency of students who engage in militarisation ‘with reflexivity as active participants [...] not as passive automatons, cultural dopes or vulnerable victims’ (211). Thus, the military itself becomes a privileged space for reforming military power in wider society, and an important collaborator and co-producer of knowledge.

In sum, this overview of several core publications shows how CMS usefully complicates our understandings of civilian-military relations beyond a simplistic binary. However, each of these examples demonstrates a tendency within CMS research to prioritise engagement with subjects and perspectives with close proximity to western military institutions and power. We therefore question how this might limit the extent of our critical analyses of militaries and their implication in racialised violence and broader structures of imperial power in world politics? How might foregrounding the experiences of practitioners of militarism over and above those who are targeted by its violence around the world contribute to the epistemic and methodological whiteness of the discipline?

Yet, as Howell (2018) shows, starting from the same position of rejecting the civilian/military binary, we can go in a different direction that more radically interrogates the ‘martial politics’ underlying western liberal society and specific institutions within it. This requires us to not only engage with subjects with lived military experience, but instead draw connections with other subjects and communities. Importantly, while Howell reminds us we are all already ‘of war’, she also highlights how martial politics is never neutral but unequally targets racialised, gendered, sexualised, and disabled subjects who have historically been ‘constituted as a threat to civil order’, both internal and external (118). By tracing the martial politics of policing, from its origins in enforcing colonialism and slavery to the war on terror, and the continual complicity of universities in upholding white supremacist knowledge and imperial power internationally, Howell is less making a point about how military subjects are also civilian ones than revealing how military violence pervades liberal society and shapes its injustices. Rather than seeking deeper engagement with and truer representation of military(-civilian) voices, Howell calls for building links with anti-racist, queer, disabled, and decolonial activist struggles as essential to a critique of military power (131).

Howell's arguments here raise important questions about who we prioritise in our research engagements and how this research operates within a society already saturated with military power in ways that might either perpetuate or challenge it. If engagement is reserved for subjects and institutions invested in the business of reproducing military power, how might this limit the potential for a critique of the deeply racialised post/colonial structures in which militaries are embedded and their role in upholding them? We welcome the growing number of critical military scholars who are already engaging with such alternative voices and perspectives suggested by Howell (e.g., Agathangelou 2017; Çaltekin 2022; Caso 2017; Furtado 2022; Johnson 2019; Quinn and Meiners 2019). However, as we show in the next section, within CMS there remains an emphasis on methodologies prioritising 'closeness' to and collaborations with military subjects and institutions as the model for 'critical' military research in ways that limit the potential force and scope for these recent interventions to move from the margins to the centre of the field.

### **Working in-between: engaged military research methods**

Alongside this centring of military-civilian voices as the subjects of research, many CMS scholars also centre military institutions, personnel, and agendas within their methodologies. Key publications explore the importance of 'informed critique' in which the inner workings of military institutions and processes are interrogated to reveal their complexities (Rech et al. 2015; Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015). To achieve this, CMS scholars prioritise 'engagement' with military institutions and subjects through employing qualitative methods of observation, fieldwork, and ethnography, and designing collaborative research projects (Basham and Bulmer 2017). Engagement is seen as necessary to gain access to notoriously closed and secretive institutions and collect 'reliable empirical evidence' (Rech et al. 2016, 56). It is also seen as necessary for building the 'trust' and 'dialogue' (Ibid; Baker et al. 2016, 144) required for scholars' critiques to effectively motivate positive change. As Basham and Bulmer (2017) state, adopting an 'in-between' position provides valuable 'proximity' and 'openness' to military institutions (64) encouraging 'a feminist praxis that gets closer to militarism, military organisations and military personnel in order to seek to change it' (60).

Much CMS work is reflective about the risks and responsibilities of these engaged methods. Some focus on questions of positionality and representation arising for them as individual researchers navigating the 'close encounters' (Ibid) of engaged qualitative research. Others reflect on how to balance researchers' access, impact and independence by adopting a position of 'critical friends' (Woodward et al. 2021) working *with* rather than *against* military institutions. While CMS attempts to remain 'in-between' military and civilian worlds, as well as opposition or support for military agendas, we argue prioritising engaged methodologies frequently foregrounds military perspectives and interests while simultaneously limiting what counts as properly critical research. Combined with funding pressures in the competitive context of neoliberal higher education, this can have a profound effect on the shape critical research into military power might take.

### **Close encounters: dialogues with military subjects**

Several CMS scholars reflect on the methodological and ethical issues of conducting fieldwork with militaries. For example, gaining access through formal channels as well as utilising informal relationships and family connections (Baker et al. 2016), or performing gender, race, and class in particular ways to navigate military-civilian, insider/outsider statuses, and to appear unthreatening to gatekeepers (Gray 2016, 78). Some reflect on the possibility of militarisation through engaged research during which scholars develop both 'professional relationships and personal friendships with military personnel', learn to 'speak the language', and assume military perspectives (Baker et al. 2016, 147). Yet despite these misgivings, or indeed because of them, they see the messiness of engaged research as necessary for producing critical knowledge about military power. As Bulmer

puts it: ‘it is precisely in the discomfort, the unease, and the ethical quandaries that these encounters with the military are so valuable’ (142).

Basham and Bulmer (2017) argue these ‘close encounters’ allow scholars to listen to military subjects with ‘generosity, humility, and a willingness to challenge and be challenged both intellectually and emotionally’ (63). A common goal is to “highlight[] the human stories behind militaries, militarism and militarisation” (Rech et al. 2016, 9), seeing them as “messy, social, *human* processes” (Gray 2016, 75). While it is necessary and useful to understand military institutions as “made up of *people*” (Ibid) we argue this emphasis on humanising military subjects has the unintended effect of producing a field in which complexity, empathetic understanding, and humanity appears reserved for white male military western subjects while the everyday lives, insecurities, and nuanced world-views of nonmilitary black non-western women barely figure (Henry 2017). Humanising militaries can unwittingly lead us to overlook those who are dehumanised by them. This is acknowledged by Caddick (2021a) who argues that CMS has remained “soldier-centric” (1). Reflecting on his own research on British veterans’ narratives of war, Caddick states:

I feel ignorant of how war has effected the people who are subjected to our military violence. Afghans do, of course, feature in British soldier narratives of the war, but rarely if ever do they appear as fully rounded characters with needs, desires, and stories of their own (1)

When reading CMS literature, we notice that while non-western subjects are present, analytical focus and sympathies often quickly return to western soldiers’ experiences. This is not to say research into the complexities of militarised subjectivities and institutions is not valid or necessary, it is. But perhaps we should pause to consider what wider discourses are (re)produced by CMS as an entire field and what familiar narratives of international security are reiterated. How might humanising militaries contribute to the normalisation of military violence as necessary and legitimate in world politics? And how might this obscure its role in upholding global racialised, gendered, and sexualised oppressions? The solution, however, cannot simply be to add more ‘non-western’ voices. Indeed, we question the critical potential of humanising individual subjects, whether western military, non-western civilian, or researcher, either through presenting unfamiliar voices or through reflecting on interpersonal encounters, *without critically interrogating the structural context in which this research takes place*. Here, again, we argue it is important to interrogate both the role of militarism in violently maintaining an unequal order of world power and the epistemic and methodological whiteness which shapes our knowledge production. This is particularly pertinent considering the close collaboration with the ‘military community’ which underlies some prominent CMS work and which we argue limits the power of critique.

### **Critical friendship: collaborating with the military community**

Leading UK CMS scholars have argued for ‘impartial academic researchers’ to act as ‘critical friends for the defence community’ encouraging reluctant military actors to ‘reflexively’ engage in ‘potentially difficult public debate’ surrounding the role of the military in society (Woodward et al. 2021, 3–4). This is seen as benefitting the MOD, Armed Forces, and wider military community of soldiers, reservists, veterans, their families, and third sector organisations that support them. Military actors are likewise considered ‘critical friends’ to academics, ‘providing advice and constructive input’ or access to research sites and sitting on ‘steering group[s]’ for CMS projects (Woodward, Jenkins, and Williams 2015, xiii). Against this backdrop of critical friendship, several CMS scholars have been awarded sizeable public funding grants to conduct research valuable to the military community. Two particularly large grants are of note here.

The first is the 2014–2017 *Future Reserves Research Programme*, commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council, British Army, and MOD, which awarded £1.35 million to four institutions (Newcastle, Edinburgh, Lancaster, and Exeter) ‘to address some of the issues facing the Armed Forces’ and its efforts to integrate reservists and regular forces into a new ‘whole force’

structure (Future Reserves Research Programme n.d.). Two CMS projects received funding within this programme: *Keeping enough in reserve* focuses on issues of integration and employment of reservists (UK Research and Innovation n.d.-a); *Sustaining Future Reserves 2020* looks at obstacles to reservist retention with a specific focus on family life and civilian employment (UKResearch and Innovation n.d.-b). This research is designed to ‘profit’ (ibid.) military institutions, with British Armed Forces and MOD identified as ‘direct beneficiaries’ (UKResearch and Innovation n.d.-a) of greater understandings of the socio-economic issues facing reserves. These research impacts are closely aligned with the UK government’s Future Force 2020 vision which will invest £1.8 billion to expand the reserve forces by 50% and further integrate them within the armed forces. Here, military-civilian relations are key sites of military intervention to build ‘a new relationship with society’ (Ministry of Defence (MoD) 2013, 7), blurring the military-civilian divide by creating new forms of ‘hybrid citizen-soldier’ (ibid.).

The second grant is for the 2020–2022 *Stories in Transition: Examining the role of arts, culture and sport in supporting veteran transition to civilian life* which received £658,078 from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UKResearch and Innovation n.d.-c). Bringing together academics from Anglia Ruskin, Exeter, and Manchester Metropolitan Universities with Armed Forces Charities, *Soldiers Arts Academy*, *Turn to Starboard*, and *Waterloo Uncovered* (Veterans and Family Research Hub n.d.), the project explores ‘the role of arts, sports and culture activities in supporting military-to-civilian transition’ (UKResearch and Innovation n.d.-c). This project seeks to ‘empower’ veterans through producing ‘veteran-created knowledge’ and exploring more creative forms of transition support. While aimed at ‘the wider military charity sector’ it explicitly seeks to ‘inform and improve the development of policy’ (ibid) on the UK government’s 2018 *Strategy for our Veterans* which identifies military-civilian transition as a key focus for intervention and changing ‘public perception and understanding’ of veterans as crucial to sustainable future Armed Forces recruitment (HM Government 2018, 5;14).

Here, the military charity sector plays an important role in government strategies for reconfiguring military-civilian relations. Forces in Mind Trust and the Confederation of Service Charities (Cobseo) are partners with whom ‘to jointly maximise positive messaging around the contribution of veterans’ (HM Government 2020, 34). In turn, close links between researchers (including some prominent CMS scholars), the charity sector, and the defence community are evident in the Forces in Mind Trust Research Centre and Veterans and Families Research Hub hosted in the Veterans and Families Institute for Military Social Research at Anglia Ruskin University, ‘set up specifically to support the research needs of the Armed Forces Community’ (Forces in Mind Trust 2017).

The appeal of critical friendship is not only access to research sites and lucrative grants but also the opportunity to influence military policies. The desire for our research to be effective, to *do* something, to make political change, is strong for many of us. And the promise of producing policy-oriented research for influential political institutions, of infiltrating the halls of power with our ideas, is a seductive one. However, this seduction is based on familiar problematic assumptions about who are the important and effective actors in international politics. It is also based on related liberal assumptions about the necessity of military violence for securing the social order, the accountability of military institutions to civilian society, and the role of academic researchers in fostering democratic oversight and dialogue.

But what possibilities really are there for such accountability and dialogue with institutions that have historically evaded scrutiny and justice or routinely fabricate, falsify, censor, and deny access to information? Furthermore, accountability is mostly reserved for national subjects rather than non-citizen victims of military violence abroad, a point reinforced by recent UK efforts to restrict prosecutions of service personnel for human rights abuses overseas, for example in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Northern Ireland. In such circumstances, what hope is there of impacting military policies in ways that fundamentally shift their agendas in progressive directions? As Enloe puts it: ‘it is risky indeed to imagine that scholars can fashion a cooperative engagement with – not just access to – the [US] military on sufficiently transparent, autonomous and equal terms’ (Enloe 2010, 1107).

These concerns are confirmed by Basham and Catignani's (2021b) experience of researching British Army Reserves and their partners for the *Future Reserves Research Programme* discussed above. During their project, they encountered numerous obstacles including masculinised cultures, bureaucratic scrutiny, military gatekeeping, refusals to engage and ultimately indifference. Yet despite this 'cautionary tale', they remain committed to the idea that 'in liberal democratic contexts like the UK' such engaged research, that seeks to 'produc[e] knowledge about military power [rather] than producing knowledge for it', remains 'crucial to ensuring meaningful democratic oversight of martial power' (230).

Despite their self-reflection, CMS discussions on engaged methodology retain an assumption about the role of academic knowledge in holding military power accountable that reproduces a methodological nationalism where 'the framework of the nation has still tended to be the main reference point' (Duriesmith and Ismail 2019) for understanding military-civilian relations. Missing is a consideration of militarism's global reach and the international harms for which we might want to hold particularly western militaries accountable. Combined with a tendency to recentre the perspectives and humanity of those who participate in militarism above those who are forced to live with its violent effects, often a national as well as gendered and racialised distinction, this perpetuates a methodological whiteness where 'war's others' (Caddick 2021a) barely figure as subjects of academic or ethical political concern. Finally, collaboration depends on researchers tabling ideas that already fit within existing military agendas in ways that risk normalising militarism as ordinary politics and policy (Altnay 2019). These dynamics are particularly concerning when engaged research is presented as *the method* for researching militaries 'critically'. The final section of this article, then, explores how despite drawing on critical ideas originating within traditions and movements opposed to militarism, CMS scholars end up untethering critique from its radical roots and thereby neutralising it.

### **In-between opposition and support? Ethical political dilemmas**

The final foundational claim of CMS is the need to maintain an ethical political in-betweenness in relation to military power. This can be summarised as a desire to be engaged with militaries but not necessarily supportive of them, and to be critical but not necessarily oppositional to their agendas. In the journal's inaugural edition, the editors state CMS aims to 'move[] beyond a simple oppositional stance' to militarism by exploring the complexity and ambiguity of its reproduction (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015, 1; Baker et al. 2016; Gray 2016). As Wool (2015) suggests, this allows analyses to move beyond 'practices of denunciation' and simple binaries of war/peace which often 'plac[e] us at loggerheads of left and right, hawk and dove' (26). Rejecting antimilitarism is foundational to how the CMS project has been articulated, something it defines itself against, justified with the refrain that 'to be critical is not to be dismissive' (Rech et al. 2015, 56). In this way, CMS contributes to 'subjugating' anti-militarist politics within international relations and security studies (Jackson 2018).<sup>3</sup> We argue it also contributes to the 'methodological whiteness' of critical military research.

### **Critiques of antimilitarism**

Antimilitarist scholars and activists are frequently portrayed in key CMS publications as being overly judgemental (Duncanson and Woodward 2016, 6) by 'shunning' (Rech et al. 2016, 10) militarisation and military institutions as 'pernicious or malign'. This is supposedly an 'a priori' position arrived at from moral assumptions rather than empirical observation (Woodward, Jenkins, and Williams 2017, 209–10). Research explicitly oppositional to military power is framed as methodologically 'simplistic' and ethically politically unnuanced (Ibid; Rech et al. 2016, 9; Duncanson and Woodward 2016, 6). In diminishing antimilitarism and justifying engaged research through appeals to empiricism, nuance, and the potential of the military to be 'recognised as a



public good' (Woodward, Jenkins, and Williams 2017, 208–9; 210), CMS strikes a defensive tone stressing that scholars 'should not be bashful' about working with militaries (Rech et al. 2015, 56).

These portrayals of antimilitarism are evident in Duncanson and Woodward's (2016) article on 'regendering the military' which critiques the idea militaries are 'inherently and irredeemably masculinist and violent' (10). Specifically, they argue antimilitarist feminist stances 'have too readily dismissed the possibilities for change created by women's military participation' (3). According to them, 'militaries of many economically advanced capitalist economies' (Duncanson and Woodward 2017, 5) are increasingly foregrounding 'human security' and so feminists should engage to 'push for reform rather than eradication' (Duncanson and Woodward 2016, 13).

Depicting antimilitarist feminism as 'deterministic', Duncanson and Woodward claim it assumes an 'essentialist' understanding of women as a homogeneous group (ibid, 3; 6). For them, antimilitarist feminism emphasises the 'valorization of a different, "womanly" way of doing things' (7), reproducing problematic assumptions about 'women's non-violence' (10). They warn that 'to argue *as women* for nonviolent alternatives to war risks reifying women's age-old association with peace and pacifism' (6), suggesting this not only 'ignores the diversity of women's experiences and aspirations' but also closes off avenues for feminists to achieve transformative change since it 'makes women less likely to be taken seriously in public life' (Ibid).

While challenging automatic associations of women with peace is important, as is acknowledging women's participation in political violence (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007), we reject Duncanson and Woodward's reductive depiction of antimilitarist feminism as essentialist and uncomplex. Firstly, to say diverse women have reasons to oppose militarism because of their experiences *as women* is not equivalent to saying women are essentially peaceful or share the same experiences. Secondly, we should be wary of assuming people of any gender engaged in antimilitarist struggles always protest in peaceful ways. Thirdly, it is problematic to suggest that to be taken seriously feminists must give up antimilitarist commitments and become palatable to policymakers with the hope of reforming institutions from within.

The paternalistic tone of these arguments is striking. It reminds us of Runyan's (2015) observation that framing anti-militarism as 'passé [...] naïve, even childish' has been central to the move by some scholars to relocate their feminist praxis 'from marginal wild and rag-tag protest to centers of power' (218). This is especially concerning in a context where much antimilitarist work is conducted by postcolonial feminists who are often already marginalised in international security studies and practice. Postcolonial feminism consistently challenges the 'universality' of women's experiences of militarism through critiquing white western feminists' complicity in imperialist interventions in the 'global South' and insisting on women's diversity as the basis for global feminist antimilitarist alliances (Riley, Mohanty, and Pratt, Minnie 2008). It also refutes the idea that only women are impacted by military violence, drawing attention to the militarisation of police and targeting of black men, immigrants, and Muslims (Ibid). These approaches are not 'simplistically' oppositional or essentialist but rather provide complex analyses of the global workings of military power and the differential exposure of people to gendered, racialised, capitalist, imperialistic violence. They reveal the need for anti-militarism within wider movements for global justice and imagine new forms this might take (Amina and Okazawa-Rey 2012). Given this breadth of feminist work, it is surprising how quickly Duncanson and Woodward pass over postcolonial feminists' 'troubled' critiques of militarism and western intervention in the global South, arguing 'it is nonetheless hard to suggest alternative ways to protect civilians and refugees, to arrest war criminals, to safeguard the distribution of aid, and so on' (2016, 13). However, as Jaleel (2021) shows, in pathologizing particular 'nationalities, geographic regions and peoples' (79) as requiring governance by 'civilised' international forces, these feminist interventionist narratives contribute to the unequal racialisation of world politics and the legitimising of ever-expanding 'carceral and militarized humanitarian regimes' (179) that themselves produce widespread insecurity for globally displaced, abandoned, and imprisoned populations.



### Untethering critique from radical opposition

Alongside this devaluing of complex antimilitarism work, CMS scholars operationalise critical concepts including intersectionality, performativity, embodiment, and governmentality to destabilise the boundaries between military/civilian and complicate our understandings of military institutions. However, they do so in ways that risk untethering them from their radical politics and marginalising populations most exposed to military violence. In doing so, they potentially overlook important critiques of the intimacy between militarism and the unequal racialisation of world politics. Building on Henry's (2017) reading of the (mis)use of intersectionality, we examine how Butler's critical concepts are drawn on in CMS literature in ways that untether them from her ethical political commitment to critiquing structures of power and promoting non-violence.

Butler's work is adopted within CMS to analyse the embodied, performative, and contingent ways militarism is socially reproduced and contested (Basham and Catignani 2021a) and therefore capable of positive transformation (Duncanson and Woodward 2016, 4). As Wool (2015) argues, CMS draws on Butler's queer theory to provide 'a different mode of critique, one less driven to denunciation than bound to exploring, describing – and not necessarily resolving – the ambiguities and contradictions that animate war, military action, militarization, and their logics and lived experiences' (34). Wool points to a quote from Butler stating the purpose of critique is 'not to evaluate whether its objects – social conditions, practices, forms of knowledge, power, and discourse – are good or bad, valued highly or demeaned, but to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself' (Butler in Wool 2015, 34). However, in the original Butler (2001) continues: 'What is the relation of knowledge to power such that our epistemological certainties turn out to support a way of structuring the world that forecloses alternative possibilities of ordering?' This concern with how power orders society and structures what is knowable and possible within it is crucial to Butler's project of critique. And it is importantly an ethical political critique that not only interrogates how particular frames produce an unequal distribution of precariousness, in ways that are themselves deeply racialised, but also champions non-violence and a politics of 'livability'.

In Butler's (2020) recent work on the 'force of nonviolence', while she acknowledges that categories of violence and non-violence are unstable, and that 'violence is circulating all the time', she nonetheless asks: 'what would it mean to dispute the inevitability of its circulation?' (8). For her, this requires engaging in collective struggles for social justice rooted in an understanding of our inseparable relationality, rather than *a priori* principles:

Nonviolence can now be understood less as a moral position adopted by individuals in relation to a field of possible action than as a social and political practice undertaken in concert, culminating in a form of resistance to systematic forms of destruction coupled with a commitment to world building that honours global interdependency of the kind that embodies ideals of economic, social and political freedom and equality (21)

Across her work, Butler points to the centrality of the state, militarism, racism and neoliberalism in bringing about intersecting insecurities and how these are resisted by disproportionately targeted bodies and populations: from Guantanamo Bay prisoners in the 'war on terror', to Palestinians living under occupation, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Given this commitment to non-violence, it seems questionable to use Butler's works to produce research that not only accepts that 'militaries are not going to disappear any time soon' but are also 'forces for good' (Duncanson and Woodward 2016, 13).

By positioning themselves against 'simplistic opposition', we argue those who have sought to define CMS in terms of engagement and in-betweenness constrain what 'critical' research might be undertaken in the field more broadly. While there is excellent individual work on anti-militarism, there appears limited room for antimilitarism to act as a political motivation or analytical framework underlying CMS critique *generally*. While complicating categories of military/civilian, de/militarisation, pro/antimilitarism is valuable, it is necessary to recognise the political context where research is done, where society is infused with various forms of militarism, where militarised institutions wield enormous power over people's lives and deaths,

and where people struggle with and against the harms of militarised violence. Within this power-ridden and racialised context, to remain ‘in-between’ divides of anti/pro-militarism does not escape their importance as nodes around which political contestations are defined (Furtado 2022, 13). We question the tenability of researchers adopting an ‘in-between’ critical position that accepts ‘further down the line, these engagements of course may lead to the application of lethal violence and negative consequences’ (Woodward, Jenkins, and Williams 2017, 210), especially when we remember that such ‘application[s] of lethal violence’ are disproportionately targeted at non-white persons in the global south in service of Western post/colonial imperial ambitions. We point this out not to tell people how they should position themselves in relation to the military but to provoke further reflection on ethical political questions that continue to haunt the critical study of militarism, especially concerning researchers’ involvement in imperialist institutions and racialised systems of power and knowledge.

### Conclusion: de/centring power in critical scholarship

CMS makes valuable contributions to critical analyses of military power. It draws attention to nuanced operations of gender in military spaces; sheds light on veterans’ experiences of trauma, disability, and transition; reveals the significance of the everyday in reproducing and contesting militarisation; and promotes creative research methods. These are important interventions that challenge traditionally narrow parameters of military research as well as addressing the absence of militarism within critical studies of IR and security.

However, in this article we detailed how scholars central to the CMS project portray military-affiliated subjects as possessors of unique insights into military-civilian relations; emphasise engagement and close collaboration with military actors, incentivising research projects palatable to state military agendas; and explicitly or implicitly reject opposition to military power as a valid starting point for critique. In doing so, we argue, much of the research carried out under the banner of ‘CMS’ refocuses a familiarly white, western, masculine, military figure as the primary political subject of concern, produces knowledge that supports military efforts to reaffirm its relevance in contemporary society, and ultimately leaves in place assumptions about the necessity, legitimacy, and accountability of state military institutions.

At the same time, there appears limited room within CMS for other subjects and perspectives that provide important insights into military power, including non-military, non-western, non-white casualties, refugees and resisters of military violence. Nor has it yet fully and substantively interrogated the implication of military institutions in violently upholding *global* political relations of racialised imperialism and inequality in ways that make us question the desirability of engagement with them. In addition, while many CMS scholars draw on concepts from critical traditions and struggles, they are often too quick to dismiss the possibility of *radical* alternative visions for world politics that are anti-militarist. Ultimately, we argue, this risks entrenching a form of ‘methodological whiteness’ within the field.

These are risks that all critical researchers of security or military power should be concerned with. As Peterson reminds us, academia has long been implicated in ‘centering and reproducing norms and “knowings” that elites have prioritized, including what constitutes appropriate inquiry, credible research, and quality scholarship’ (Peterson 2021, 23). Such epistemological and methodological centring is always also a *political* act of *decentring* non-elite marginalised perspectives and people, maintaining structures of disempowerment and violence. CMS scholars’ attempts to grapple with these dynamics mostly remain confined to personal reflections on positionality and privilege and how this informs their ability to conduct research and shapes their inter-personal encounters in fieldwork settings. What is missing is a more sustained interrogation of the *structural* relations of racism, power, and privilege that form the wider context in which research is undertaken, and ethical political questioning of the role of critical research in relation to them.

As with recent interventions in IR and Security Studies, an honest confrontation with how our epistemological, methodological, and political commitments are deeply bound up with these global inequalities of power and continue to uphold a particularly white and western vision of world politics has become urgently necessary. Doing so would open up space for a more expansive understanding of what critical military studies might entail, and for existing and emerging scholarship from more radical and oppositional perspectives to become a central part of the conversation.

## Notes

1. The language of ‘engagement’ is used widely in CMS literature (e.g. Baker et al. 2016; Caddick, Cooper, and Smith 2019; Rech et al. 2015). We note the heteronormative, gendered, and also militarised connotations of ‘engagement’ as a word to describe entering a close relationship but also as a euphemism for targeted killing.
2. We analyse this conversation in the final part of the paper.
3. While publications on anti-militarism (e.g. Rossdale 2019) might seem to undermine this argument, there is currently no direct substantive critique of the foundational claims of CMS which continue to define the engaged field as involving a rejection of oppositional stances on militarism. As such, antimilitarism remains marginalised as a basis and motivation for critical military research.

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