Critical Military Studies

ISSN: 2333-7486 (Print) 2333-7494 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rcms20

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To cite this article: Aiko Holvikivi (06 Nov 2025): An 'ironic compromise': feminist research in military institutions, Critical Military Studies, DOI: 10.1080/23337486.2025.2583759

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2025.2583759

Published online: 06 Nov 2025.

CRITICAL MILITARY STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2025.2583759

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

An 'ironic compromise': feminist research in military institutions

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ABSTRACT

Research in critical military studies recognizes that processes of knowledge production are themselves political, with attendant debates focusing on the ethics of conducting research with military institutions. Arguing for the need to produce critical knowledge about these powerful institutions, recent work that employs ethnographic methods thus emphasizes the need to critically examine researcher location and the research process itself. This article contributes to these deliberations by examining feminist concerns around militarization in engaged research with/in military institutions. Drawing on original ethnographic reflections, which it places in dialogue with feminist accounts of conducting fieldwork with militaries, this article interrogates what the politics of such research are. Written from an anti-militarist stance, this analysis insists on the importance of attending to the micro-politics of both militarization and subversion in knowledge production. The article traces the workings of contradictory political forces at play in the ethnographic research process. It proposes thinking of these dynamics with the help of Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of mimicry as 'an ironic compromise' as a guide for resisting militarized thinking in the research process.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 27 August 2024
Accepted 29 October 2025

KEYWORDS
Ethnography; methods; feminist; militarization; mimicry

> 'Never run. It scares the troops',[1] I said to Hans[2] as he came jogging up to me during a coffee break. Hans was in a rush to check something for the training session after the break. My quip threw him a bit: he laughed and asked me where I had learned this military officers' adage. We struck an instant rapport.

Hans was a lieutenant colonel based at a Western European military installation that was hosting a week-long course on gender for military personnel. I was there to observe the course as part of my research on gender training for military and police peacekeepers. Over the past thirteen years, first my professional life in an international non-governmental organization and then my ethnographic research as an academic have brought me into military spaces to provide training and to conduct participant observation. These experiences have made me somewhat conversant with military jargon and culture, which has been helpful in securing access to research sites, establishing rapport

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

with research participants, and understanding some of the logics that animate these institutions. But this exchange with Hans gave me familiar pause. Had I crossed a line? Had I betrayed my feminist political commitments? Had I allowed myself to become militarized?

This pause resonates closely with the dilemmas many anti-militarist feminist researchers grapple with in relation to their chosen methods. They are most famously described by Carol Cohn in her 1987 article 'Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals'. In it, Cohn presents her ethnographic work with U.S. defence intellectuals and observes of the process of becoming literate in their language:

> . . . talking about nuclear weapons is fun. I am serious. The words are fun to say; they are racy, sexy, snappy . . . Some of us may have spoken with a self-consciously ironic edge, but the pleasure was there nonetheless. Part of the appeal was the thrill of being able to manipulate an arcane language, the power of entering the secret kingdom, being someone in the know. (1987, 704)

While Cohn was describing research on nuclear strategic analysis, her warning regarding '[m]echanisms of the mind's militarization' (1987, 715) has provided guidance to successive generations of critical feminist researchers whose work focuses on military organizations. The anxieties that surfaced following my exchange with Hans will thus be familiar to many critical (and) feminist researchers who examine military power from an oppositional stance, who seek to understand how these organizations work in order to better resist them.

Indeed, a growing body of literature in international relations and critical military studies draws on insights from feminist theorizing on epistemology and method to demonstrate that *how* we do research matters (Catignani and Basham 2021; Holmes et al. 2018). Examining the conditions of knowledge production in critical military studies – or any other field – is crucial because it uncovers what processes and power relationships shape our lines of inquiry. The factors that shape knowledge production include both material structures (such as funding or access requirements) as well as epistemic perspectives and social location. Attending to the conditions of knowledge production reveals that the researcher's positionality shapes every step of the research, from what questions we ask, where we look for answers, what research sites are available to us, what research participants will say to or in front of us, what we are able to see, hear or understand, and how we determine what makes it into our writing (Gray 2016; Haraway 1988; Madhok 2020). Attending to the politics of location and conditions of knowledge production should further hone our attention on the question of whose experiences inform the knowledge that we produce (Alcoff 1991; Bhambra 2017; Massey and Tyerman 2023; Rich 1986). Paying close attention to the dilemmas emerging during the course of research is thus an urgent question for critically interrogating the politics of the knowledge produced. In the process of examining the politics of knowledge production, we also learn something about how militarization takes place, and how it might be resisted.

In this article, I explore the intertwined epistemological questions of how knowledge is produced and what the politics of this knowledge production are. I approach these questions by drawing on autoethnographic observations from my own research. These observations stem from fieldwork I conducted for a research project that explores the

practice of providing gender training for uniformed peacekeepers (Holvikivi 2024). This research involved attending seven different training courses between November 2016 and December 2017. The courses were held in military installations in the Nordic countries, the Western Balkans, Western Europe, East Africa, and West Africa.[3] This endeavour amounted to a total of eight weeks spent in military spaces. I conducted twenty-three semi-structured interviews with further participants involved in gender training for uniformed peacekeepers outside of my observation of training courses.[4] Prior to undertaking this research, I spent five years working in international organizations and the non-governmental sector on gender and security sector reform. While my professional experiences in the field do not form a part of the research archive proper, this experience nonetheless has implications for the depth of my engagement with military space (including, for example, opportunities to learn the language of these institutions). In what follows, I place my analysis of these encounters in conversation with a body of literature in feminist critical military studies that provides reflexive accounts of conducting research in military spaces and with military personnel. In this article, I foster a dialogue with this literature on feminist anxieties about militarization and its epistemological impacts.

This type of inquiry into the politics and ethics of knowledge production is crucial because ethnographic research lays bare the microphysics of power involved in militarization. I concur with Alexandra Hyde, who writes: 'it is only by looking at how militarisation is negotiated at the micro-level that we can understand more of its complexities' (2023, 2). An examination of militarization at the micro-level of research points to complex processes that are not always intentional, that are often contradictory, and that are politically ambivalent. Ethnographic engagement with these powerful institutions produces both complicities with the exercise of military power, at the same time as it opens up opportunities for subversion. In analysing these dynamics of complicity/subversion, this article builds on existing feminist engagements with the politics of fieldwork to examine how we might interrogate its dynamics beyond a binary structure that tends to view research as *either* militarized *or* critical. In navigating the messy politics of fieldwork engagements, I think with the help of Homi K. Bhabha's (1984) concept of mimicry as an 'ironic compromise', which, I posit, allows us to theorize modes of ambivalent political engagement in our research endeavours and points to new avenues for resisting militarization.

To that end, this article unfolds as follows. The next two sections engage how feminist critical military studies have grappled with the politics of conducting ethnographic research with/in military institutions. This discussion highlights the insights of this work, while at the same time noting the need to develop ways of theorizing the complex politics of research beyond strictly causal frames. The next two parts of the article then take up this challenge. The section 'Feminist failure' examines processes of militarization at work in field research through a Foucauldian approach to the microphysics of power. The section 'Rethinking failure: militarization as mimicry' then turns to examine the ways in which feminist research in military institutions disrupts and destabilizes these processes of militarization. This section identifies disconnections and disruption with militarized norms in feminist research, and thinks through the politics of these subversions with the help of Bhabha's conceptualization of mimicry. Though Bhabha's analysis pertains to the relationship between colonized and colonizer, I suggest that it is helpful

for understanding the ways in which feminist researchers resist militarization and perhaps even enact forms of subversion during and through their research encounters. The concluding discussion unpacks what this attentiveness to complexity and contradiction in the research process means for grappling with the politics of knowledge.

Dilemmas of ethnographic engagements

In the field of critical military studies, a key area of debate centres around the question of whether or not to engage directly with military institutions and with those who currently serve in them or have served in the past. On the one hand, the field itself has been described as characterized by a commitment to 'in-betweenness', simultaneously critical of military power as well as engaged with it (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015; Massey and Tyerman 2023; Woodward et al. 2020). Some scholars in this field argue that the point of being critical is not to dismiss the military altogether (Rech et al. 2015); many call attention to what they argue is the necessity of military force for limited and justified purposes (Kronsell 2012; Rosamond Annika and Kronsell 2018); and some vest their engagement in the notion that the institution could be reformed to serve ethical ends (Duncanson and Woodward 2015). For these scholars, 'in-betweenness' manifests as a reluctance to write off the military or engagement with it completely.

In contrast, many critical, anti-militarist, and pacifist researchers are less optimistic about potential for change, and focus instead on the worrying ways that proximity to military institutions influences scholarly engagement.[5] On the one hand, negotiating access to these institutions sometimes requires researchers to follow official channels and procedures set by military gatekeepers and therefore to frame their research objectives, methods, and findings in ways that are acceptable to the institution (Catignani and Basham 2021). On the other hand, scholars like Cohn (1987) expose how engagement with the institution subtly (perhaps even subconsciously) shapes the researcher's relationship to or acceptance of the use of military power through what she refers to as to the 'mind's militarization'.

Feminist and postcolonial scholarship has continued to feel uneasy with such proximity, noting further how methodological choices to deal with militaries and with veterans tend to re-centre military subjectivities. As Massey and Tyerman note in a recent intervention, ethnographic research in this field has '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' (Massey and Tyerman 2023, 75). A notable feature of the field as it currently stands is the preponderance of literature on the Global North/minority world countries, in particular the United States and the United Kingdom, meaning that the centring of military subjectivities tends to focus on normatively white actors. Because research so often facilitates a white gaze that fixates on the complexity of those wielding imperial violence over the experiences of those at its receiving end, scholars like Massey and Tyerman advocate for a disengagement from the military in our research practices.

A third position emerges among those scholars who share the postcolonial, feminist, and anti-militarist concerns described by Massey and Tyerman, but who nonetheless see value in engaged research (Gray 2016; Holmes et al. 2018). This body of work opposes military power and does not argue for engaged research as a means for opening up

avenues for dialogue and internal change. Instead, it sees the pervasiveness and sheer force of military power as a reason to study it – to understand, as Sherene Razack evocatively put it – how people 'are interpellated into practices that leave the trails of violence in their wake' (2004, 57). Researchers working in this vein, in other words, contend that engaged research is necessary to interrogate how powerful institutions to work, not because they are committed to seeing institutions of state violence as reformable, but rather to inform resistant strategies.

While this strand of critically engaged scholarship does not transcend the overwhelming Western-centrism of critical military studies, it critically interrogates its workings. First, this literature hones our attention to the importance of context in informing our political assessment of militarization. Cynthia Enloe rightly reminds us that when thinking about (researchers') militarization, it matters whether we are dealing with the Norwegian military or the contemporary US military (2010, 1109). This is not to say that we should understand some militaries as benign, but rather that the comparative material and cultural power of the military in broader society, as well as the operations it is involved in does matter. Our assessment of what kinds of complicities we find acceptable are likely to differ depending on whether we are conducting research with South African military peacekeepers or with the Israeli Defence Force. Second, this strand of literature carefully traces how colonial histories and contemporary power differentials inform dynamics of militarization, both in the former imperial metropole as well as in former colonies (for excellent examples of such work, see Gani 2021; Rashid 2020; Ware 2012).

I situate my own work among this third strand of literature, which is characterized by a vigilance about whether engaged research is leading to militarization – in other words, about whether the researcher is failing their political commitments. This is not simply a question of the researcher's political credentials (we shouldn't assume that we are the protagonists of our research), but an epistemic question, as the politics and ethics of the research shape the knowledge that is produced, through the focus of the analysis, and the resultant arguments put forward. In line with critical commitments to attending to context, it is worth noting that the research I discuss here on peacekeeper training is situated among militaries for whom international peacekeeping – an ostensibly[6] benevolent exercise of force – is an important part of their institutional identity. While the research sites I engaged with span countries in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, East Africa, and West Africa, the building of peacekeepers' knowledge and capacity remains an exercise imbued with Global North privilege (Holvikivi 2024). Accordingly, the analysis that follows is attentive to how imperial histories and associated racializing processes inflect the dynamics of militarization at work. This inquiry, in other words, shares the troubled concern of critical literature with the complexities of militarization, and thus asks about ethnographic work with militaries: What are the politics of this research and of the knowledge is produces?

Assessing militarization

So far, approaches to the politics of research in the feminist anti-militarist literature have tended towards what I suggest resembles a cost-benefit model of analysis. Critical researchers have sought to trace or predict what the effects of proximity to the military are in terms of tangible outcomes. In Cohn's famous piece, she describes the language of

nuclear strategists as dominated by 'words so bland that they never forced the speaker or enabled the listener to touch the realities of nuclear holocaust that lay behind their words' (1987, 690). She traces how learning to speak this language necessitates a tacit acceptance of its underlying logics, how speaking this language effects shifts in one's own political horizons. Further, Cynthia Enloe and Harriet Gray have both cautioned that collusion with the military institution in exchange for access may cause a shift in feminist research agendas, as the institution thus gains a say in what counts as serious or useful research (Enloe 2010, 1107; Gray 2016, 72). Indeed, Catignani and Basham offer a 'cautionary tale' about how military control over their research dictated who they were allowed to involve as participants and how they could discuss their findings (2021, 230). In other words, feminist scholars concerned about the dynamics of militarization in research have sought to identify tangible outcomes that are militarized, whether in the logic of analysis or in the goals of the research itself.

Against this backdrop of attending to the dangers of militarization, the authors concerned consider ways of weighing the risks of co-optation against the benefits (from the point of view of anti-militarist politics) of conducting research with/in military organizations. Cohn identified in her formative piece a reason for feminists to learn militarized language: 'If we refuse to learn the language, we are virtually guaranteed that our voices will remain outside the "politically relevant" spectrum of opinion' (1987, 716). In a similar vein, Baker et al. discuss the need 'to be "taken seriously" (Enloe 2013) by the military and those around it, in order to *impact* discussions in a meaningful way, and yet retain our political stance as critics of the institution' (Baker et al. 2016, 151, emphasis added). In order to counter-balance the perceived militarizing effects of such research, reflexive feminist accounts have examined the ways in which the practice of conducting engaged research with military institutions enables the researcher to disrupt the hegemonic logics at work by enacting 'a feminist ethics of critique' (148). Sarah Bulmer suggests that feminist praxis involves '[e]ngaging the military community in a genuine dialogue that deepens our understandings of militarization and war, and actively intervening in the processes and subjecting them to critique' (in Baker et al. 2016, 144).

Feminist researchers have thus sought to contest the dynamics of militarism in the research encounter itself. Bulmer reports asking her informants to deconstruct their own understandings of appropriate expression of sexual orientation within the interview setting (in Baker et al. 2016, 148). In agreement, Hyde mentions building interviews into her ethnographic study, with the intention of creating space for her participants to respond to her observations, asking questions such as: 'Why would you make that racist, homophobic, sexist joke? What is the function of all this "banter"?' (in Baker et al. 2016, 149). This is a strategy that I also found myself employing during fieldwork. For example, one male military officer in a Nordic country, whom I call Kalle, explained in our interview that the training he delivered was definitely not feminist, seeming to assume that I would agree with him that feminism should be avoided at all costs. I responded by noting that this was interesting, because there are a lot of different understandings about what feminism means, and that we feminist academics also have different approaches to the topic. When I then invited him to explain what he meant by 'feminism', Kalle began to backtrack. He said his comment referred to a 'caricature' of feminism as angry women who hate men and want all the power for themselves. He distanced his approach from feminism, he explained, because this 'stereotypical' view of feminism made the men he

was training uncomfortable. In effect, Kalle was admitting that the feminism he had disparaged was in fact a straw woman borne of male discomfort and seeking to distance himself from that view. The problem thus became one of male paranoia rather than of feminism per se (Weber 1994). I think of moments such as this one as micropolitical delinkings from the hegemonic logics at work. I do not claim to have transformed Kalle's thinking, and I do not know whether this exchange made him less likely to disparage feminism in the future. It did, however, momentarily subvert the hegemonic narrative that portrayed feminism as self-evidently evil and to be avoided.

On another one of the courses I observed, I was hanging out with course participants as they prepared presentations to the class in small working groups. A young male officer from a Western European military, whom I call Tom, showed me the PowerPoint presentation he was putting together, and asked for my thoughts on how he could improve it. The presentation included many pictures of peacekeepers in mission areas, and I immediately noticed that all of them were men. I suggested Tom could include some pictures that showed women as peacekeepers too. He responded with a chuckle: 'You would say that'. I have subsequently spent a lot of time thinking about what exactly those four words meant. Perhaps they were intended as a dismissal, a suggestion that I was a broken record, insisting on the same things over and over again. If Tom already knew what I was going to say, but still had not changed his approach until I said it, did he think my point was moot? Did he think that by bringing up a problem that he did not experience, I was in fact the one causing the problem? Sara Ahmed famously argues that the labour of being a 'feminist killjoy' – the one who insists on pointing out problems – results in the fact that the problem becomes embodied by the killjoy: 'It is as if these problems are not there until you point them out; it is as if pointing them out is what makes them there' (Ahmed 2017, 39). But also, and more optimistically, I pondered, did Tom also reflect on this exchange afterwards, wondering why I would bring up such seemingly superfluous details over and over again? Might he reflect on the significance and politics of representational practices? At the very least, what these encounters show, is that engaged research opens up space to debate the dominant assumptions of the institution at work.

In other words, when feminist researchers enter military institutions, they also gain an opportunity to contest the gendered logics of meaning-making at work. Enloe suggests a way of calculating whether such opportunities are worth the risk: 'The more likely one is to internalize – often unconsciously – militarized assumptions, fears, and ambitions, the less likely one is to be able to sustain one's autonomous stance in dealings with the military as an institution' (2010, 1109). Gray suggests a similar method – to 'chart a course which strives to mitigate and balance these risks and opportunities' (2016, 74). These moves to assess outcomes and balance risks and benefits seek to render the dangers of militarism known and measurable against the benefits to be gained in terms of anti-militarist resistance.

While eminently reasonable, there are limitations to an accounting-oriented approach to assessing the politics of feminist research in militaries. At its core, it implies a causal approach to research that is otherwise typically interpretive in its approach. As Catignani and Basham explain: 'As interpretive researchers, we make claims . . . that are not readily amenable to the evaluation, measuring and monitoring often required' (2021, 213). Because both the effects of militarization and resistance to it operate in diffuse and subtle

ways, it is difficult calculate which one comes out on top. Further, because military institutions are reluctant to share information of their internal workings, any changes and shifts within the institution might not be observable by outside researchers after the research encounter is over (Woodward et al. 2020, 510). Given these difficulties, this article explores a way of navigating the same political commitments from a different epistemic stance. The analysis that follows sketches a picture of the dynamics of complicity and resistance in research that moves away from investments in causality, and thus a knowable future which would assure that the research is either militarized or not. Instead, the sections that follow propose modes of attending to the politics of the research project that allow us to theorize a messy politics of the present. In so doing, it attends to the micro-politics of the research, and suggests that the politics of the research are constantly in the making, rather than assured from the outset or even at the point when the research is completed.

Feminist failures

What happens when anti-militarist feminist researchers enter the spaces of military institutions and engage with the people who live and work there? What does fieldwork do to the politics of this research? In this section, I suggest that this process leads to a series of failures of those anti-militarist political commitments. Access to these institutions, shrouded in the secretive aura of national security, is closely guarded and must be negotiated (Gray 2016; Rubinstein 2012). But even once access is formally granted, establishing rapport with individuals within the institution requires the researcher to perform in a manner that means she can be taken seriously. Research access is not a one-off formal process, but rather an ongoing series of efforts to persuade research participants to engage with and confide in the researcher. In this negotiation, the researcher navigates the rules of institutional culture in a way that is intended not to alienate their research participants. The performances that lend themselves to this 'politics of seriousness' (Enloe 2013) are those that precipitate, I argue, a failure of political commitments. Continuing with my move away from cost-benefit models of assessing political risks outlined above, I suggest here that feminist failures do not necessarily or only present about as foundational, paradigm-shifting changes in politics or epistemology. Rather, thinking in a Foucauldian (1979) mood, these failures come about through a process whereby the feminist researcher becomes subject to the minute disciplinary techniques of the military institution. These techniques are both embodied and psychic.

The moment of physical entrance into the military space provides an excellent example of how the body of the feminist academic is subject to military discipline even after formal access is negotiated. Military spaces are enclosed within fortified walls that delimit the parameters of the institution. Entrance is through a closely guarded gate. To access this space, the visitor must declare herself at the gate, have her identity documents checked, obtain a visitor's badge, and wait for her host to come and collect her. This is the first test of whether the visitor can be taken seriously, and it feels like one too. The researcher must know that she needs to have identification documents at hand and produce them at the right moment. She must demonstrate she knows someone on the inside, who has placed her name on the list. Even with these formal requirements, the process is rarely

straightforward. On more than one occasion in my experience of visiting military installations in different countries I was told at the gate that my name was not on the list – an experience which is also reported by other feminist researchers (Wright and Hurley 2017, 390). In response to this repeated experience, I found myself taking measures in advance: having my documents ready, checking the institution's civilian dress code and trying to look the part of a serious researcher, phone numbers of contacts (as high ranking as possible) at hand. These were all measures to build up the confidence to ask, politely but insistently, that the guard check again, that they look for other potential lists, that they ring their superior. They are ways that a researcher might adjust her behaviour and presentation to seem like somebody who would pass through this gate, measures taken to be more *of* the institution.

The researcher's process of subjecting to embodied military discipline continues when inside the walls of the institution. One may note, and then become accustomed to, the visual landscape that is dotted with paintings or photographs depicting weapons and scenes of battle and to the acoustic landscape in which gunshots can be heard in the distance. Everyone's behaviour continues to be regulated. The researcher must adapt to military time. This is an institution that takes punctuality very seriously (as also observed by Higate and Cameron 2006, 227). Some military personnel are specifically trained to be at the agreed meeting point 10 minutes early, because 'on time is late'. At the beginning of one of the training courses I observed, we were all asked to synchronize our watches at the start of the week. That we all acquiesced to this exercise – which, in an era of automatically coordinating smartphones, can be seen as a ritualistic performance – was telling of the importance, in terms of institutional culture, placed on punctuality. If the researcher in this setting is to be taken seriously, she too must follow military time.

The researcher's behaviour is likewise monitored when she partakes in other institutional rituals. In the training courses I observed, the group photograph was a standard agenda item. For this photograph, everyone must remove their identity badge for security reasons. Participants line up according to height (measured from the shoulder rather than the top of the head) to be arranged for the photograph, albeit a researcher will sometimes be invited to sit with the instructors and high-ranking officers in the front. For this, she is expected to adopt the same position as the others (ankles crossed, hands placed palms down on the lap). Another common ritual on these training courses was the handing out of certificates at the end. On several occasions, I was presented with a certificate of appreciation. In this situation, the officer handing out the certificates also gifted me the institution's commemorative coin. The process to do so involves the officer placing the coin in the palm of their hand and passing it through a handshake (oddly, though perhaps unintentionally, echoing the passing of a bribe or a tip). This is another thing the researcher should be prepared for – if she isn't, she might drop the coin and disrupt the ritual.

Fitting into the institution is also assessed outside of these choreographed rituals. In conversation, as so astutely observed by Cohn, the researcher's knowledge of the institution will be an indicator as to whether she can be taken seriously (Cohn 1987, 708). In the military, this is often gauged through testing the researcher's understanding of the function and culture of the different services (army, navy, air force), knowledge of the rank structure of officers and non-commissioned officers, familiarity with different job

specializations, and capacity to decipher an endless array of jargon and acronyms. An ability to engage in institutional humour, as the vignette that opens this paper alludes to, is often advantageous in establishing rapport (see also Baker et al. 2016, 143).

This is a small selection of a large volume of notes about how one adjusts to institutional disciplinary techniques and military culture when conducting fieldwork, that will ring true to many researchers involved in such engagement. If these examples seem mundane, that is precisely my point. Foucault (1979, 153) famously drew our attention to the function of the military drill: the repetition of a sequence of movements so many times that the actions become automated and unthinking, designed to ensure adherence to the process even in the most stressful circumstances on the battlefield and to override the perfectly rational response of fleeing from fire (see also Ware 2012, 106). The drill thus produces a 'docile body' that can be regulated in time and space. The drill reveals that '[d]iscipline is the political anatomy of detail' drawing our attention to a 'multiplicity of minor processes':

> Small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion, subtle arrangements, apparently innocent, but profoundly suspicious, mechanisms that obeyed economies too shameful to be acknowledged, or pursued petty forms of coercion. (Foucault 1979, 138, 139)

The ways of being co-opted into military institutions I describe above may *feel* innocuous because they do not conjure up in any obvious way the actual practices of warfighting or the worst forms of gendered violence that these institutions produce. However, and to extend the Foucauldian mood of this reflection, we might consider his argument: 'Discipline increases the forces of the body (in terms of economic utility) and diminishes the same forces (in political terms of obedience)' (1979, 138). In the case of the feminist researcher in the military institution, we might consider the utility increased by discipline as bountiful research data; and we might consider political obedience as the ways in which the researcher becomes co-opted into following the rules, and eventually the logics, of the military institution.

As observed by Cohn, there is a pleasure to partaking in the language (and, I would extrapolate, rituals) of military institutions (1987, 704). This pleasure stems from the feeling of accomplishment that derives from getting in through the gate of an institution imbued with male privilege, both literally and metaphorically. This is not necessarily the case because one valorizes the institution itself, but because it is a necessity for research. It is not so much a question of admiring the military, as what Hyde describes as 'ethnography and its curious compulsion to join in' (2023, 82). But in this joining in lies the danger that '[p]articipation becomes assimilation, tipping into complicity, raising the question of resistance' (82). What exactly partaking in militarism entails is, then, not only a question of conscious valorization of martial force and the symbolism that accompanies it, but a more complex process. Moreover, it is a complicity that draws attention to the plural structures of oppression that military power is based on. Militarization is, as critical and postcolonial feminist analyses have demonstrated, a logic that is gendered, racialized and classed (Enloe 2000; Gani 2021; Millar 2022; Rashid 2020).

In her account of conducting research with the British military, Gray (2016, 79) observes how her traditional gender presentation, and the ways in which the gatekeepers who facilitated her access to the British military read her class status, both lent themselves to a perception of her as somebody who belonged in the fold. In a similar manner, my

ability to imitate the rituals of the institution is facilitated by being read as a cis-gendered woman who often passes as white. Further, my being a researcher from a well-regarded university appeals, at least in the British context, to an officer class who typically understand themselves as officers and gentlemen (for an in-depth discussion of the British military, rank, and class, see Chapter 2 in Hyde 2023). My demonstrating knowledge of military humour likely challenged prevailing stereotypes of the angry feminist. These embodied forms of acquiescence to the norms patriarchy imposes on women allow one to be perceived as a 'good girl'; a feminist who 'has a sense of humour' (Brown and Syme-Taylor 2012, 459; Weber 1994). My entry, like Gray's, into the institution, was premised on not upsetting the military's strong preference for adherence to traditional gender norms. In this sense, engaging with these norms through fieldwork fails the more radical promise of feminism as disrupting patriarchal gender politics and class hierarchies.

Militarism is not only gendered and classed but also, as Gani (2021) shows, inherently racialized. This is of course not a separate question: the class politics and gendered norms discussed above are always already racially encoded as white (Hyde 2023, 84). While it is true that a large amount of the literature on militarization is developed around the United States and Europe, in particular the UK, this does not mean that militarization does not deploy racial hierarchies and imperial power relations in complex and varied ways outside of the Global North (Christensen Maya 2015; Gani 2021; Henry 2012; Rashid 2020). The insights of this literature became real to me during my ethnographic fieldwork. While observing a gender training course for police peacekeepers in West Africa, at the end of a teaching day, I wanted to visit the city centre to go shopping. Two West African policemen on the course, whom I call Afi and Kojo, offered me a ride in their car; they were headed that way anyway. En route, they asked what I was looking to buy, and how I was planning on making my way back to my hotel. I said I was going to walk home – it was only just over a kilometre – and asked whether they thought this was a sensible idea. They assured it me it was, that the city was safe. Afi noted: 'Anyway, nobody will bother a white woman'. Kojo concurred: 'If somebody tried, other people would intervene. Nobody wants that trouble'. There it was. I cannot know whether these two police officers were simply trying to reassure me, or whether they intended to offer a commentary on the continued operation of colonial power in such international cooperation.[7] What I do know is that although I wanted to formulate a postcolonial critique of the training course I was observing, I had to confront the fact that my access to this research site was enabled by the well-worn colonial trope of the need to protect white womanhood. This experience stood in contradiction from those documented by other feminist researchers: for example, in her recent book on peacekeeping, Marsha Henry recounts instances of being disciplined and regarded with suspicion in her research, noting 'I was not always granted the authority a white researcher might have been allowed' (2024, 18). Whatever my own disidentification with whiteness might be, I was nonetheless participating in the racialized norms of militarization.

In sum, ethnographic research in military institutions precipitates a series of failures of critical feminist political commitments. In this section, I have traced how feminist researchers come to partake in military language and rituals in order to facilitate their access to the institution and establish rapport with the people who work in it. This participation fails feminist political commitments not only in its relation to the use of martial force, but also in upholding the gendered, classed, and racialized hierarchies that

underpin militarism. Attentiveness to these structures of power highlights that the feminist researcher is in a position where she is both disempowered and empowered by these structures. On the one hand, her access to the military space is at the discretion of those in power in the institution. In some ways, she is thus required to act the part of the 'supplicant' (Martin de Almagro in Holmes et al. 2018, 224) who must play by the institution's rules to obtain research access. On the other hand, this research is typically carried out from positions that also benefit from these power hierarchies – as the example of white womanhood above demonstrates, this is a subject position that is both marginalized *and* privileged under the logics of white supremacy and coloniality. The epistemological impact of these processes are not easily discernible in any kind of causal schema of research goals or findings, but they nonetheless point to the complicities of those doing research in or with military institutions.

Rethinking failure: militarization as mimicry

When feminist researchers adopt the dress code and mannerisms of military institutions, this can constitute a failure of feminist and anti-militarist political commitments. However, this behaviour is also open to another reading, insofar as it brings to mind Bhabha's (1984) account of colonial mimicry.[8] In his famous essay, Bhabha discusses how colonial administrators wanted colonial subjects to emulate the dress, manners, and general comportment of their oppressors, but at the same time, they needed colonial subjects to remain distinctly different. Upholding the logics of difference was a foundational necessity to the violent logics of racial superiority and a justification of the colonial project. This resulted in 'colonial mimicry' as 'the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*' (1984, 126, emphasis in original). Mimicry is distinct from simply copying and assimilating because it is premised on the simultaneous re-production of difference. Politically, however, it is not straightforwardly or only an exercise of oppressive power: it also menaces colonial authority by revealing ambivalences within its discourse. In producing a subject that *almost* qualifies as human under coloniality, mimicry exposes the limits of nineteenth century liberal discourses. It quite literally undermines the pronouncement of universal rights and freedoms by upholding a difference that allows imperial power to disqualify the colonized from the category of the universal. Accordingly: 'The menace of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also interrupts its authority' (Bhabha 1984, 129). While Bhabha's focus is largely on unintentional and subconscious effects of mimicry, given its destabilizing potential, some readers of Bhabha identify in his concept an opening for thinking about possibilities of agency and resistance on the part of the colonized (Huddart 2006, 61).

In this section, I propose a re-reading of the feminist failures identified above through the lens of mimicry. Mimicry and militarization both constitute 'a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power', providing for a useful analogy (Bhabha 1984, 126). Of course, there are important contextual differences that need to be marked: highly educated, often white feminist researchers in military spaces are not in an equivalent position to the colonized under imperial rule. They are disciplined and perhaps dominated by the military, but on different terms, terms which also afford some privileges under what Young (2003) calls

a patriarchal protection racket. My point here is not whether the militarized behaviour of critical feminists conducting ethnographic research in militaries 'is' mimicry or not. This is not a question of a strict application of a theory outside of the context it originates on, but rather, the focus is on whether we can learn useful lessons from thinking with Bhabha's analysis of mimicry. It is analogy, a form of 'productive catachresis', as Gayatri Spivak puts it (Spivak 2010, 49). There are nonetheless some instructive lessons to be drawn. Where colonial mimicry reveals the limits of liberal universalism, the mimicry of military institutions continues to niggle the totalizing power of military discourse. Perhaps, it can interrupt logics of racial militarism that hold that martial force is a necessity against the threat of an unruly 'Other'.

The first analytical insight that emerges when thinking about feminist failure through the lens of mimicry, is attentiveness to the fact that the repetition of military norms and behaviours is always impartial and incomplete. This much was made clear to me in a workshop in which I presented an earlier draft of this paper. In that draft, in discussing the anecdote with Hans that opens the paper, I claimed to have developed a level of fluency in military language. Present at the workshop were several serving military officers, who took issue with my claim to fluency (amid general umbrage with the paper as a whole), arguing (rightly) that I couldn't be fluent in the language of a total institution I had only ever visited for limited periods of time. Indeed – and here the resonances with Bhabha's conceptualization of mimicry are clear – the military institution and its personnel simultaneously demand that civilian personnel and researchers mimic some of the mannerisms of the institution (Brown and Syme-Taylor 2012), while insisting that there is a fundamental, perhaps even ontological, distinction between the two (see also Tidy 2016). This distinction was observed and its correct application debated during the course of my research as well. In one training course, two military officers debated whether I should rise to stand when a general enters the room. Military personnel are expected to do so, but they were divided on whether it was appropriate or not for a civilian to observe this custom. In this imperfect emulation of military norms, we can see that while feminist academics may adopt some of the mannerisms of the institution, this does not necessarily entail that in the process they become *of* the institution. The difference between being military and being militarized is analogous to Bhabha's description of mimicry as the 'difference between being English and being Anglicized' (1984, 130). The feminist failure sketched out in the previous section thus become a form of double failure,[9] resembling but never faithfully reproducing the norms of the institution.

In terms of its political effects, feminist researchers' entry into the military institution can expose and thus undermine some of the foundational myths surrounding it. This is an institution that presents itself as highly effective and serious. However, the feminist researcher's induction into the institution's dress codes and highly choreographed rituals also works to undermine this image. One civilian staff member on a course I observed remarked quietly to me that the military loves dresscodes and rituals, which, she noted with a sigh and amused smile, involve a spectacular display of male vanity. We may also recall the repeated incidents at the gate, described in the previous section, where guards are unable to locate the researcher's name on an authorized entry list. Their lacklustre efforts to do so may well be an attempt to undermine the researcher, but it can also be seen as a failure of the prized notions of effectiveness and competence. In other words,

these encounters can expose the bungling military institution, with its displays of pomp and circumstance undermined by episodes of bathos (for a similar observation see Hyde 188).[10] This effect resonates with Bhabha's observation that mimicry can come to pose a menace to colonial power – on slightly different terms here, feminist researchers mimicking the military institution reveal the levels of effort to produce its image and frequent failures in living up to it.

There is also a comic element to the exposure effected by mimicry (as also observed by readers of Bhabha's work, see e.g. Huddart 2006, 58). This comic effect is sometimes identified and worked by researchers through a consciously incomplete or inappropriate imitation of military norms. Here, researchers cross the 'area between mimicry and mockery' that Bhabha identifies (Bhabha 1984, 127). In consciously navigating the line between mimicry and mockery, feminist researchers demonstrate the potential for agency and subversion that readers have extrapolated from Bhabha's theorization (Huddart 2006, 76). I mentioned above that over the course of my research, I took to dressing in business wear that fit the institution's civilian dress code. Similarly, civilian women working in military education reported to Katherine Brown and Victoria Syme-Taylor that they felt they were 'putting on armour' when wearing a suit, thus diminishing their association with femininity and civilians (2012, 456). At the same time, I noticed that several of the civilian women who worked in military spaces had dyed their hair in various unnatural colours, bright pinks and purples. Hair colour seemed to be a blind spot in otherwise extensive sartorial regulation. I also enjoyed playing with colour in these spaces. Over the time that I visited military institutions, I acquired a business casual wardrobe that included a magenta blazer and bright tangerine orange slacks. When wearing these colours, I took pleasure in the fact that, though the form of dress is correct, the colours stand out. On a training course where everyone else was wearing camouflage, one participant insisted that I be placed in the back row of the group picture so that my orange trousers would not ruin the aesthetic.

In a similar vein, in her reflections of conducting ethnography in a British Army base in Germany, Hyde (2023, 22) notes that the usual way for military personnel to move around the base was by bicycle. She recounts adopting the preferred mode of transportation, but buying an upright, Continental-style bicycle that was a noticeably different genre from the mountain bikes used by military officers. In Hyde's account, she recalls both how her research participants noted that the bicycle made her stand out, and how she enjoyed this way of marking her distinction from the military personnel she was studying. As with modes of dress and hair styles that mess with the military colour palate, these examples demonstrate an imitation of military norms while self-consciously building difference into the repetition. Here, rather than the dominant institution marking distinction, the researchers and civilians are self-consciously enacting a repetition with a difference: they are 'almost the same, *but not quite*' (Bhabha 1984, 127). This hardly constitutes a principled stand against organized, collective violence, nor does it amount to particularly effective sabotage, but it nonetheless does a form of subversive work that defies precise articulation.

Thinking with Bhabha's concept of mimicry thus demonstrates that feminist researchers adopting the dress and mannerisms of the institution is not only or straightforwardly a rapprochement with military power. Their repetition of military norms is not a faithful repetition of the original, rather, they are caught between contradictory demands to be

the same (as the imperial power/military institution) but also different (as a colonized subject/as a critical civilian). It is in this persistent difference that space emerges, both to expose the inner workings (and sometimes absurdities) of the military organization, as well as to engage in an exaggeration of difference that crosses the bridge into mockery. In this sense, mimicry of the institutional norms of the military – as well as the choice to do engaged research itself – presents itself as 'an ironic compromise' (Bhabha 1984, 127). The compromise of the feminist research in partaking in military rituals is ironic both because it rests on an incongruity between modes of thought and values, but also because of its comic quality (Huddart 2006, 59). Mimicry's subversive potential can serve to remind us that there are modes of being and thinking outside the logics of militarism, and its resonances with colonialism, heterosexism and patriarchy. In thinking with this analogy, Bhabha reminds us: 'in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference' (1984, 126). The lesson for critical feminists is therefore to embrace the *not quite-ness* of their relation to the military. In such a context, their quotidian practices of disidentification serve as an important reminder to consciously situate the politics of their research.

Conclusion

This article took as its point of departure the argument for examining processes of knowledge production as inherently political. The politics of knowledge is a question that is of particular interest to anti-militarist feminist research on or in military institutions. It informs debates over the ethics of conducting engaged research with military actors or in military spaces, and the impact the research process has on the knowledge that is produced. Against the backdrop of an insightful body of literature that traces the observable, material, ways in which direct engagement with the military shape research agendas and processes, this article set out to develop an alternative but complementary strand of inquiry into the operation of Foucault's 'microphysics of power' in the research endeavour.

Examining the everyday operations of power in field research in military institutions, the analysis in this article has demonstrated the co-existence of two seemingly contradictory processes. Research in these settings requires feminist researchers to be complicit with the workings of the military institution, and the gendered, classed, and racialized hierarchies that underwrite militarization. In this sense, field research with/in militaries precipitates a series of failures of feminist political commitments. However, I have argued that these kinds of political failures are also open to an alternative reading, one in which even emulation of the institution's norms remains always imperfect (intentionally or not), thus effecting ruptures in and exposure of dominant norms. In other words, rather than researchers becoming 'of' the military, militarization of feminist researchers can be thought of as a mode of mimicry.

Thinking with Bhabha's conceptualization of mimicry, I argue, provides an analytical frame for feminist researchers to remain critically attentive to the politics of their research. It is a mode of cultivating and nurturing critical distance to the military's rules-of-the-game that researchers might need to abide by. Of course, what forms of disruptive behaviour will be tolerated – or what level of veneration/gratitude will be required of civilians – will depend on the military

institution in question. Accordingly, an analytical frame that allows us to identify moments of complicity/failure and to cultivate disruption/subversion does not provide a ready-made answer to what is ethically or politically acceptable or desirable. Rather, it recognizes that the politics of knowledge are constantly in the making, and that they require on-going, contextual judgements. It invites the researcher to admit and embrace the quality of unknowability and unpredictability of the politics of their endeavours. Ultimately, the work that this framing does is to serve as a reminder to recognize that what is at play is an 'ironic compromise'.

Notes

1. The actual saying I was taught is 'Never run. It scares the men'. I couldn't quite bring myself to repeat it faithfully.
2. All names have been changed.
3. In order to protect the collective anonymity of research participants, I do not specify locations/institutions further.
4. Details of this research archive are held by the UK Data Service (Holvikivi 2021). This research went through a research ethics approval process at the London School of Economics in 2016. All research participants received both an oral and written explanation of the research and its goals as well as details for contacting the researcher. Interviewees provided written consent. Where this was not practicable (e.g. in the case of training participants), oral consent was obtained.
5. The typology developed here is best understood as characterizing strands of argumentation rather than fixed individual stances – the careful reader may not that some authors' work is referenced across different positions.
6. Ostensibly, because while the countries themselves as well as some scholars see peacekeeping as a way to mitigate the harms of war (Duncanson 2009; Rosamond Annika and Kronsell 2018), much critical scholarship on peacekeeping regards it as an exercise imbued with colonial logics (see for example, Henry 2024; Razack 2004).
7. A West African instructor on this course addressed the issue in his presentation, where he provided an historical overview of the establishment of police services in the region, highlighting the importance of attending to the historical fact that these forces were instituted by the British to protect colonial interests (Holvikivi 2024, 112–113).
8. Hyde makes a similar observation of her own participation in military activities (2023, 1–2).
9. This double failure could also be interpreted as similar to Halberstam's (2011) advocacy of queer failure, understood as the failure to enact hegemonic heterosexist norms.
10. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the UK Data Service ReShare at http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-855287, reference number ES/V006126/1.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/V006126/1].

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