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Rech MF, Bos D, Jenkins KN, Williams A, Woodward R. [Geography, Military Geography and Critical Military Studies](#). *Critical Military Studies* 2014.

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DOI link to article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2014.963416>

Date deposited: 28-10-2014



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On: 27 October 2014, At: 07:33

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Critical Military Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcms20>

Geography, military geography, and critical military studies

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Published online: 09 Oct 2014.

To cite this article: Matthew Rech, Daniel Bos, K. Neil Jenkins, Alison Williams & Rachel Woodward (2014): Geography, military geography, and critical military studies, *Critical Military Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/23337486.2014.963416](https://doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2014.963416)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23337486.2014.963416>

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Geography, military geography, and critical military studies

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(Received 14 July; accepted 4 September 2014)

This paper is about the distinctive contributions which contemporary military geography might make to the wider critical military studies project. The paper notes the relative absence of the study of military topics across Anglophone human geography in the second half of the twentieth century, and the resurgence of interest in the spatialities of militarism and military activities over the past decade or so in tandem with the emergence of critical geography. The paper then goes on to examine three key tropes of geographical inquiry to illustrate how a critical military studies alert to spatiality might develop further. These are geography's rich tradition of research and writing about landscape, geography's engagement with concepts of representation, and geography's theorizing on scale. The paper argues that a geographically informed critical military studies can be illuminating on matters of war and militarism because of its attention to the located, situated, and constitutive natures of military power and its effects. The paper concludes with a reflexive commentary on what critical military studies might take from ongoing debates in human geography about the necessity of engagement and co-inquiry with research subjects, when a focus on military topics raises ethical questions about collaboration. We argue that transparency, accountability, and awareness of the multiple and complex politics of academic inquiry are necessarily part of the wider critical military studies project.

Keywords: military; geography; landscape; representation; scale

1. Introduction: critical approaches to the military in human geography

This paper is about the specific contributions which geography and contemporary military geography might make to the broader critical military studies project. In this paper, we are not arguing for the supremacy of a geographical perspective. Rather, our intention is to illustrate how approaches to the study of military activities and militarism which foreground the spatiality of these phenomena can contribute to the development of critical military studies. Geographical approaches do this through an understanding of war, armed conflict, militarism, militarization, military activities, and military institutions, organizations and capabilities as both geographically constituted and geographically expressed. By this, we mean that there is a spatiality inherent and active in the processes which bring these phenomena into being, and in turn these phenomena operate to shape places, spaces, environments, and landscapes. We argue that the insights a geographical approach brings has something to add to the broader conversation about what a critical military studies might constitute and how it might evolve. We do this by exploring three key tropes of geographical enquiry – landscape, representation, and scale. These tropes are not mutually

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exclusive but, considered separately for the purpose of this paper, they help illustrate what a critical military studies approach might achieve with the inclusion of geographically informed approaches. We then go on to discuss how aspects of geographical praxis, particularly approaches emphasizing co-inquiry and collaboration with research subjects which have emerged from a wider critical human geography, sit in relation to issues around engagement with military institutions and subjects.

In this paper, we use the term “militarism” to refer quite loosely to ideologies which prioritize military capabilities in the resolution of conflicts, and “militarization” as a multi-dimensional and diverse set of social, cultural, economic, and political processes and practices unified around an intention to gain both elite and popular acceptance for the use of military approaches to social problems and issues (see Flusty et al. 2008; Woodward 2014). Our purpose in drawing this distinction here is not to map out arguments about the differences and distinctions between the terminologies and associated conceptualizations of militarism and militarization – we recognize and welcome the idea that these terms are open for debate as part of the wider critical military studies conversation. Rather, we wish to emphasize the significance of social practices as well as ideological constructs to the wider project of military geographies (and, by extension, to critical military studies). Furthermore, we emphasize here the importance military geographies place on the sheer range of processes and practices through which armed conflict ultimately becomes possible; this tendency towards inclusion reflects, we think, an awareness within the sub-discipline of the multiplicity of processes and effects shaped by military activities, militarism, and militarization. This awareness of diversity has in turn shaped our understanding of critical military studies as an approach to military, defence, conflict, and security issues which foregrounds an understanding of military processes and practices as the outcome of social life and political contestation in multiple ways and at a range of scales from the embodied to the global, rather than as given, functional categories beyond interrogation. Critical military studies, for us, is about opening up possibilities for unlimited questioning of the ways in which military, defence, conflict, and security issues are not only manifest as social phenomena, but become apparent as foci for scholarly critique. We return to these ideas throughout the paper.

We start, though, with a brief overview of human geography’s engagement with military matters (see also Woodward 2004). As an academic discipline, geography has always been intimately associated with the practice of armed conflict, the deployment of armed forces, and the maintenance of military capabilities. Its roots co-mingle with the origins of the global trading, colonial, and later imperial ambitions of the British state, because in order to project power and dominate territory, that territory has to be understood. Accordingly, the defensive and expansive projects of state-sponsored military ambition, the mapping of spaces for conquest and control, and the practice of identifying and delimiting the territorial extent of sovereign space have required geographical knowledge and geographical techniques. The nineteenth-century military-geographical nexus is evident most visibly through the involvement in British geography’s professional association, the Royal Geographical Society, of senior ex-military officers, and that organization’s ethos of exploration and “discovery” (see for example Cornish 1916; Cole 1930). This process of discovery has always included assessment of geomorphological, geological, environmental, social, and cultural terrains.

A sub-discipline identifying itself as military geography emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century consolidating these endeavours around a specific objective, that of explicitly applying the tools and techniques of geographical inquiry (both physical and human) to assist in the pursuit of military objectives. This approach, which we term here “traditional military geography”, continues to be an active strand of scholarship that

favours the more established aspects of geographical knowledge development and their application for military purposes, and focuses on how terrain and military power impact upon each other to effect how states fight wars. It has a continued presence in the United States through the Association of American Geographers' Military Geography Specialty Group, which comprises geographers working in both civilian higher education institutions and military training establishments (see for example Collins 1998; Palka and Galgano 2000; O'Sullivan 2001; Galgano and Palka 2011).

From the late 1960s onwards, reflecting the increasing influence of Marxist political theory in geography, the development of scholarly sensibilities advocating an emancipatory politics, and the emergence of post-structuralist social theory so influential across the social sciences and humanities, human geography in the UK (where geography has remained a strong and popular discipline in higher education institutions) was for many decades very reluctant to engage directly with military-related topics. Traditional military geography may have continued as a small, niche area for inquiry in the US, but mainstream human geography moved on. In doing so, an emergent critical approach in human geography from the early 1990s, with its critiques of power and its attendant effects on inequalities and social justice at scales from the individual to the global (Best 2009; Berg 2010; Berg and Best, *forthcoming*), appeared increasingly reluctant to engage with questions of military activity and militarism (Woodward 2005). However, the wars of the first decade of the twenty-first century in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with mounting evidence for the effects of the exercise of global military ambitions primarily (though not exclusively) by the US, have started to effect change in the agendas for human geography. Contemporary human geography is now more concerned with militarism and its effects than it has been for decades (see for example Flint 2005; Cowen 2008; Gilbert and Cowen 2008; Cowen and Smith 2009; Bernazzoli and Flint 2010; Dalby 2010; Farish 2010; Gregory 2010; Williams 2011a; Barton and Irarrázaval 2014).

Geography's disciplinary engagements with military issues from a critical perspective have been complemented in no small measure by insights into military spatialities originating in other disciplinary traditions. This is a significant point to note, because the spatial turn across the social sciences (Warf and Arias 2008), and geography's long disciplinary tradition (because of its potential breadth of scope – see Bonnett 2008) of engagement with conceptual insights originating in other social science and humanities disciplines, have meant that we cannot consider the study of military geographies to be the sole preserve of geography as a discipline. The insights of researchers working within critical international relations and within contemporary sociology are particularly significant for the ways in which spatiality has been explored as a facet of militarism and military activities (see for example Gillem 2007; Coward 2009; Higate and Henry 2009; Graham 2010; Sylvester 2010; Belkin 2012; Dudley 2012; Ware 2012; Basham 2013). We are not claiming, therefore, that contemporary military studies has hitherto been ignorant of the significance of thinking spatially. What we *are* doing here is pointing to some specific conceptual traditions within geography as a discipline, because we think that greater engagement with these within the emergent critical military studies project can only enhance and strengthen it.

Inherent to geography, and within critical human geography in particular, are not only conceptual approaches and theoretical positions, but also – and quite significantly – an understanding of the importance of reflexivity in the practice of research. This may not be specific to human geography – a reflexive turn is identifiable in much of Anglophone social science towards the end of the twentieth century. What is more specific to the discipline is reflexivity's emergence as a response to geography's roots as a discipline in

service to state power, manifest in ideas of fieldwork and data collection as potentially exploitative pursuits, and concerns about research engagement with other people, places, contexts, countries, and cultures as potentially destabilizing of the very thing researchers seek to study. A significant component of the critical human geography project more generally, then, is an understanding of the necessity to address questions of power, participation, and collaboration as they are faced in fieldwork and data collection situations (see for example Pain 2004; Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2008, 2010). So, whilst contemporary human geography is becoming increasingly alert to the significance of research agendas around military phenomena, it is doing so within a broader intellectual context (rapidly becoming an orthodoxy) which insists on a degree of reflexivity amongst its practitioners as they go about their work. We return to this question in our concluding section.

To summarize, geography's engagements with military matters are not unproblematic. That said, we want to turn now to considering what, exactly, geography might contribute to the broader critical military studies project. Rather than exploring this question at a purely abstract conceptual level, we focus here on the localized, the specific, the situated, and the contextual, and draw primarily on our own experiences in research and teaching about military geographies to do so. The three tropes of geographical inquiry which we have chosen for discussion are, first, geography's landscape tradition; second, geography's perennial questioning of representation and the workings of geographical imaginations; and, third, geography's ongoing fascination with matters of scale, and what consideration of scale might bring to our understandings of space and spatiality. We consider each in turn, in the next three sections, and noting from the outset the intersections and overlaps between the three. Our argument is essentially that a geographically informed critical military studies can be illuminating on matters of war and militarism because of its attention to the located and situated natures of military forces and their activities, for its insistence on looking at these as socially constituted practices with their categorization meriting study alongside their effects, and for its insistence that such practices take place across a diverse range of spaces.

2. Geography's landscape tradition

"Landscape" is a defining concept in human geography. However, rather than being fixed and singular, it has been and continues to be a debated and disputed notion, with a number of schools of thought within and beyond geography debating its constitution and analytical perspectives (see Wylie 2007). Our interest draws from two key concerns within landscape research – the representational and the experiential – both of which enable us to critique the imagined geographies of military activities in specific ways (see also Woodward 2014).

From a representational perspective, landscape research within geography is linked to the traditions of mapping, exploration, and making spaces known in order to control them. With specific reference to military activities and warfare, this form of landscape research is clearly linked to traditional military concerns of reading the terrain and practicing fieldcraft. In this sense, landscape has been a defining concept in geographical explorations of militaries and military activities, and continues to be important in contemporary analyses of how modern military forces understand their battlespaces and their training environments (see for example, Galgano and Palka 2011).

"Military landscapes" thus allow us to locate, place, and situate militaries and their activities, and to inquire as to the more-often-than-not deleterious effects of (sometimes

anachronistic) military presences *in* landscapes. But critical geographies of militaries and military activities which have been inspired by the landscape tradition have (at least since the 1980s) also allowed a self-critical understanding of how geography *itself* – as a discipline with a history within what Felix Driver (2000) calls *Geography Militant* – is part and parcel of modern military logics and spaces. Put differently, the landscape tradition enables geographers to conceptualize geography’s militarized past, its current manifestations, and how the ways in which the spaces and places in which military forces operate have been represented. Recent work on the geographies of military air shows, for example, acknowledges the importance of the landscapes that are both created and represented at these events, and considers how the placing of military activities within particular locations elucidates the processes of militarization that surround us (see Rech 2014). In the case of air shows, it is by interrogating the simultaneously spectacular and the mundane which allows exploration of the many ways in which militarization is enacted at the events, with their complex recruitments of civilian personnel to the notion of the acceptability of the deployment of air power as a solution to global problems.

Going beyond representational analyses, a number of recent engagements with phenomenological landscape encounters, and with “landscape as experience” (drawing particularly on the work of geographer John Wylie) offer some exciting possibilities for this element of military geographies. One key example in this area is James Sidaway’s (2009) descriptive account of the military geographies of the Plymouth section of the UK’s South West Coastal path. Drawing on non-representational theory in geography, and the concepts of affect and psychogeography, Sidaway explores how military geography and security/insecurity emerge as master keys to how, in this case, the urban topography of Plymouth has been shaped. Indeed, it is often noted that a military landscape is hardly ever far away in the UK, and thus by adopting an experiential approach to spaces, we can surmise that “repercussions of militarism, war and death are folded into the textures of . . . everyday urban fabric[s]” (Sidaway 2009, 1092). Above all, however, Sidaway’s work demonstrates that militarism emerges *in place* as part of an immediate landscape – one which is shot through with histories and memories, and affected by military activities both (spatially and imaginatively) near and far. Sidaway’s explorations are a good example of how military geography’s emphasis on personal and social practices at a local scale can inform more abstract understandings of militarism’s geographical effects.

This experiential approach to understanding military landscapes can also be extended to the analysis of virtual worlds (see Dittmer 2010; Shaw and Warf 2009; DerDerian 2009) and, more specifically, military first-person shooters such as *Call of Duty*, *Battlefield*, and *Medal of Honor*. These video games allow players to explore militarized landscapes which mirror contemporary and ongoing conflicts. Moving beyond a purely representational account of landscapes to consider how gamers experience the environment they are placed in within the game, opens up discussion about the ways virtual landscapes and environments cultivate emotional, affective, and experiential states within the player and how military ideologies can be seen to work beyond a discursive framing (Bos, forthcoming). By looking at virtual military landscapes from the perspective of the affectual (by attending to what Lorimer (2005) terms the “more-than-representational”), we can explore whether, and how, gamers engage emotionally with the ideologies of militarism that emanate through these games. This requires methodological innovation yet is certainly an area in which geography, and more specifically emerging work by geographers working under the rubric of non-representational theory, can offer new perspectives on how military landscapes are experienced as part of popular culture.

Furthermore, this concern with military video games also enables critiques of how military organizations are utilizing simulations and computer-based training technologies to provide realistic landscapes of conflict. Whilst the use of simulators has a long history within certain parts of military forces (notably in aircrew training), the production of militarized landscapes in popular entertainment has been mirrored by, and has worked in tandem with, the development of increasingly sophisticated virtual training environments for military forces. For example, a videogame engine, *Cry Engine 3*, produced by Crytek – a German-based commercial games company – has recently been modified for the purpose of military training. The engine, used by the company RealTime Immersive, provides the basis for creating a simulator that realistically maps the environment, terrain, and landscape that replicate current places of military deployment (see www.rt-immersive.com). This relationship between the military and gaming sectors in terms of research and development is complicated, with the use of military experts in the development of a number of commercial games, coupled with the use of game developers to aid in the production of military simulators. Furthermore, a number of military forces have recognized the importance of the video game to the specific age groups which comprise the military recruitment pool. Indeed, the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD) has admitted that it felt it necessary to change military simulators in order to keep up with the technologies, software, and graphics familiar to the Xbox and Playstation generation (Harding 2008).

Studies of the ways in which landscapes are both represented and experienced by and through military forces offer important opportunities to consider the spatiality and complexity of how practices of militarism and warfare impact not only upon the places in which battles are fought, but also the places in which popular cultural representations of those activities are experienced. Thus, analysing the landscapes of war provides a key way to consider how the spaces and places of war are expanding and how the boundaries of the battlespace are blurring, as an approach to investigating what Derek Gregory (2011) has termed the “everywhere war”. Looking at the landscapes of war is not the only way to comprehend this, of course. What is distinctive, though, about explorations of the representational and experiential capacities of video games (and in popular culture more generally) with attentiveness to their spatialities, from the scales of the individual and the embodied to the global and representational, is that we can thus tease out the nuances as to how, exactly, militarization operates at a range of scales. We can also map the distances and differences between the realities of the virtual world, and those of our “real” militarized world, and explore these as the outcome of social life and practice, and of political contestation.

3. Representation and its critique

The concept of “representation” is, just like “landscape”, central in human geography, and has been pivotal for research into military geographies. There are two strands of critique we would like to emphasize here. Firstly, understanding “representation” *qua* the military, as Woodward (2004) suggests, is important because representation is a means by which the mechanisms and strategies of military control are explained, normalized, and naturalized. Within a range of disciplines, including war studies, international relations, and traditional military geography, exploring this particular contention has involved analysing the textual documents of war, and the maps, battlefield reports and aerial photographs that represent and record the actualities of conflict. But more recently, military geography research has shifted the focus to how (as with military-themed video games) the entertainment industry and media are involved in the representation of militaries and their activities

in popular culture. This research draws on geographies of literature, the geographies of reading and consumption, and work within popular geopolitics. It is in this vein that military geographers have studied, for example, the figure of the soldier in UK print media and newspapers (Woodward, Winter, and Jenkins 2009), and the scripting of the war in Afghanistan in and through popular military memoirs (Woodward and Jenkins 2012). In the case of the latter, reading memoirs through a critical lens has involved explicit focus on these texts as representational, carrying with them singly and as part of a genre a politics and intentionality in the ways in which Afghanistan is portrayed, in contrast to a more traditional military studies approach, which sees their value primarily in the recording (or re-ordering) of historical “fact” or the demonstration of the utility (or otherwise) of specific strategies or tactics.

A second strand of critique considers representation as not simply a matter of texts and images, but also as a set of practices including, but not limited to, production, distribution, and consumption. In this sense, insofar as we consider representation a set of practices through which *meaning is made* at the point where people engage with texts, images and other media, it follows that representation is inherently geographical and spatial, for meaning must be made *somewhere*.

One example which demonstrates clearly the important geographies and spatialities of representation and militarism is the media coverage of the now-renamed Royal Wootton Bassett. Wootton Bassett, a market town in southern England, gained national prominence because of social practices which emerged, seemingly spontaneously, around the passage through the town of hearses carrying the repatriated remains of British armed forces personnel killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. We examined how Wootton Bassett became a spontaneous site of memorialization and, through tracing the British print media coverage, we noted how the space was represented, understood, and ultimately politicized by various actors, commentators, and groups (Jenkins et al. 2012). The repatriations of soldiers through the market town received widespread coverage often depicting the site as a space of collective grieving and commemoration. However, as an analysis of the media coverage illustrated, the meaning and representation of this space became difficult to control. As such, it became a space imbued with different meanings including personal grief, respect for the military, anger at the government underfunding of the British Armed Forces, and opposition to, or support for, British foreign policy. Highlighted here was the indeterminacy of attaching a single political meaning to what had ostensibly appeared as a spontaneous site of memorialization. Noted also was the fact the repatriations came at a time when the MoD was actively attempting to reconnect the military and public (through the invention of “Armed Forces Day”, suggested changes to the national curriculum, and the instigation of a “military ethos” in schools, for example) in the wake of the unpopular war in Iraq. As such, this example opens up a reflection on the militarization of civilian spaces, but also prompts questions about how broader cultures of legitimation and popular militarism can be seen to emerge as part of everyday negotiations of place.

So, to return to the central focus of this paper, the concept of representation has been important to studies of militaries and their activities in relation to official accounts and recordings of conflict. But emergent work offers the opportunity to go beyond this to engage with popular media and unofficial accounts, and, importantly, to think about how representation as a set of practices helps us understand the spatialities of militarism. “Representation”, therefore, offers some interesting directions for future critical military work which has the potential to situate an understanding of militaries, and, in this case, imaginative military geographies, amidst the people and places they affect and are constituted by. To return again to the ideas proposed at the start of this paper, we see

the contribution of military geography to critical military studies as lying in part with geography's insistence not only on the range of practices through which representations are made and articulated, and the ways in which personal responses may be constitutive of or resistant to this, but, above all, about the fact that such representations are spatial. As the outcome of social practice, these representations take place. Questions which follow from this include interrogation of the power politics which determine, allow, or deny this, and the consequences for shared imaginaries of place which follow on from the associations between a particular politics of militarism and particular places.

4. Geography and questions of scale

Questions of scale are increasingly prevalent in current theorizing in critical international relations – the recent challenges posed by Christine Sylvester's *Experiencing War* book series and associated papers will be familiar to many. Here, we are asked to reconfigure our scalar imaginaries (imaginaries which are constituted predominantly by our academic disciplines), and to theorize war from the multi-pointed view of experience rather than the view of states, strategies, and international relations. To this effort we might add the inspiration of geographers such as Lorraine Dowler, seeking to take military geographical studies beyond a more traditional concern with the macro-scale, state-level impacts of military actions and capabilities, and towards an understanding of militarism as a "type of gendered sovereignty . . . not only fixed at the scale of international hierarchies, but . . . rooted in embodied place-making practices" (Dowler 2012, 492). Similarly, scholars of feminist geopolitics – Joanne Sharp, Jennifer Hyndman, and Sarah Koopman, for example – call for a more "epistemologically embodied account of war that more effectively conveys the loss and suffering of people affected by it" (Hyndman 2007, 36).

What all of this literature does – in different ways, though with shared aspirations – is to align studies of the "state", "sovereignty", "militarism", and "militarization" with that of trying to understand how these concepts are manifest as personal and individual affects. Thus, it seeks to problematize the *scale* at which we assume militarism and war to operate, and to reimagine our critical categories, and moral responsibilities, accordingly. This is a point, we argue, at which geography can offer significant insights.

One key example of how a geographical approach, sensitive to scale, can enhance understanding can be found in discussions on the use of drones by the US and British military, amongst others. Whilst there has been considerable attention in more traditional paradigms in political science, international relations, and political geography on the perceived ability of these aircraft to prosecute clean, surgically precise, operations, and to offer states the ability to secure their homelands against asymmetric threats without the need for ground troops (and the concomitant issues that territorial invasions bring), an alternative perspective, sensitive to scale, has focused on the minute and personal geographies of being a drone pilot (Williams 2011b). This work has illuminated the complex and controversial practices of "flying" an aircraft which is located thousands of miles away from the pilot, and has also focused on the implications for the pilots of being confronted by a radically different set of technologies than they are used to in traditional combat aircraft. Here, then, consideration of the spatial and scalar offers the ability to consider the effects of combat on individual combatants rather than only focusing on the successes or failures of campaigns, squadrons, or technologies.

Other examples show how consideration of scale enhances explorations of the ways in which military knowledge and military skills seep through society and form another, significant yet under-researched, part of the implicit militarization of society (Rech 2012,

2014). In ongoing work, we are analysing how University Service Units (USUs – the armed forces units found in many British universities and comprising primarily undergraduate students) provide, and inculcate within their members, a military awareness that is subsequently distributed through society by graduates (Williams, Jenkins, and Woodward 2012). Here, we are consciously seeking to understand the specificities of place and scale in the British military’s desire to maintain these organizations through an analysis of graduates who were members of these units but who did not go on to join the Armed Forces. We are concerned to understand the ways in which their explicit military experience and knowledge become part of their employability, and how the personal experience of being a member of these units translates into awareness of military activities that is then implicitly spread throughout civil society. Thus, for example, we are interviewing former unit members about their careers, and the extent to which both their military skills and knowledge, and the transferable skills that the military foregrounds in these units, have impacted upon their working lives both explicitly and implicitly. Key here are the geographies – down to the micro-geographies of embodied experience – through which these processes *take place*. So, we are interested, for example, in how former USU participants consider their movements through military spaces as civilian students, and indeed might construct for themselves, on the basis of these experiences, the categories of “military” and “civilian”.

This research illustrates our wider point: that military geography (in its contemporary critical guise) offers critical military studies the opportunity to adopt a smaller-scale, more localized and individualized study of militaries and their activities. This offers a counter-balance to the state and international, strategic-level research that often forms the focus in studies of military forces. Though not suggesting that these are not also of worth, we do suggest that shifting scales to include a focus on the spaces and places in which militarism and militarization emerge enables us to more fully understand how they operate – the core objective of a critical approach.

5. Researching the military: the significance of engaged critique

Moving beyond the questions of foci and intersecting spatialities, our final point concerns the understandings that we bring as geographers to research practices, and the necessity of engaging with military actors and institutions as part of that practice. We have already noted the reflexivity around research practice prevalent in much geography and across the social sciences, particularly around the politics and ethics of fieldwork and engagement with research subjects, and the wider purposes to which academic research may be put. Given the longstanding relationship between the pursuit of military power and the pursuit of geographical knowledge, it is unsurprising that this kind of work continues – and that it might be subject to critique. A good example is the case of the Bowman Expeditions in the USA – surveying exercises of territories, undertaken by geographers and funded by the US Department of Defense – which have been roundly critiqued by those taking a critical human geography approach (Wainwright 2013). Another might be the legacies for Chilean geographers of the Pinochet dictatorship and its influences on the form and scope of Chilean geography (Barton and Irarrázaval 2014). But there are more generalist critiques around the idea of geographers’ engagements with the military-industrial-academic complex, including around publication (see Chatterton and Featherstone 2007, and responses), and around educational contexts (see Mitchell 2005). Although not reaching the levels of visibility attained by anthropology scholars in the US through their critique of the US military’s engagement of anthropologists in “human terrain” assessments in

occupied Iraq and Afghanistan, these critical voices within the geographical community raise some provocative questions about how one might proceed, as a critical human geographer and as a researcher working within a critical military studies approach, in engagement with military institutions, organizations, and personnel in the course of undertaking research.

We argue that the study of the military, of militarism, and of processes of militarization, should not be undertaken solely for its own sake, but should also be guided by the possibility of engagement with the forces and institutions responsible, and should not be bashful about doing so. There are two reasons for this. First, to be critical is to be engaged in critique; it is not to be dismissive. Critical engagement with military forces, and military and militarized institutions, can be underpinned by an understanding of these institutions as accountable to the civilian world, and necessarily understood as potentially open to collaboration and knowledge exchange, even where this idea may initially appear ridiculous. Our backgrounds in human geography and sociology, with their rich methodological traditions of fieldwork and of co-inquiry and recognition of the necessity for academic labour as a communicative and engaged social practice, prompt us to return continually to questions about the possibilities and limits of collaboration with military institutions. The question which follows, then, is about the opportunities a critical military studies might provide for envisioning and promoting possibilities for change within the institutions and practices which constitute its focus. This is not a simple issue. There are issues of visibility and voice at play, of making critiques heard not just within scholarly communities but more broadly within social debates. Critiques are often complex entities, arguments drawing on a range of empirical evidence and political positions which may be nuanced in ways that more simplistic positions (such as “pro-military” or “anti-military”) might find hard to accommodate. Far better that they are conducted with an intention in mind to inculcate change, even where that seems on the face of it to be unlikely, than not at all. That seems, to us, to be the point.

The second reason for wanting to open up a space for considering the potential of engagement with military institutions, organizations, and personnel as part of the critical military project concerns issues of access. Military-related research can be quite different from other social scientific inquiry in other social contexts because of issues of secrecy and security (some justifiable, some less so) in these institutions (see Williams et al., [forthcoming](#)). To be engaged in informed critique may require the collection of reliable empirical evidence. This is partly a question of access and trust. This may also be a question of direct collaboration around research, including through the provision of defence funding.¹

In our view, the critical military studies project has to develop on the basis of *informed* critique in which the nuances and complexities of civil-military relations are identified, rendered transparent (or as transparent as any other complex social phenomenon might be) and shared across academic, military, and other civilian spheres. This requires direct engagement with military forces, and a critical approach to those encounters. Thus, critical military geography offers opportunities to strive for progressive change in social sciences’ engagements with the military, militarism, and its processes of enactment, which enable us to undertake critical inquiry into military phenomena.

6. Conclusion

In summary, a geographical approach, as we have argued, has much to offer critical military studies, not just by emphasizing that key foci – war, militarism, militarization,

and military organizations, institutions, capabilities, and activities – take place, in places, but also by insisting on the multiplicity of ways in which these phenomena are geographically constituted and expressed. At the heart of the critical military studies project is an understanding of these phenomena as the outcome of social practices, rather than as given categories beyond interrogation, in direct contrast to the normative approaches prevalent in much traditional military geography (and, indeed, traditional military and war studies). We see the inclusion of issues of spatiality as central to this wider intellectual project, and have focused in this paper on just three of these (landscape, representation, and scale) in order to try and illustrate the ways in which the social and political construction of military activities, militarism, and militarization might be more fully understood with reference to the spaces and places in which they are constituted, and through which they are expressed. Taking a spatially aware approach is important, for us, because we consider that it offers insights into an increasingly diffuse, pernicious, and, above all, global militarism and militarization. For example, this is a militarism that is inflected through many aspects of popular culture and which blurs the edges of reality and simulation; it is a militarism which, by virtue of its increasingly corporate nature, divests its inherent “military-ness” amongst a growing, global culture of “security”. As geographers, we argue that whilst it is important to understand the phenomena of this global militarism and militarization, to truly grasp the importance of these phenomena we must focus on the people, and the places, which militarism affects, and the processes of militarization through which it is constituted and expressed. In this paper, we have illustrated the centrality of geography to this task through our exegesis of the significance of analysing the role and place of landscape, representation, and scale in conducting military research. Here, we also need to emphasize the interlinking nature of these three areas and reiterate that our separation of them in this paper has been undertaken for clarity of explanation rather than because of their mutually exclusive nature. Indeed, one of military geography’s strengths is its willingness to take multiple aspects into account in order to render a more nuanced perspective of militarism and its spatialities.

Above all, *locating* militarism amidst the people and places it affects is to realize that these everyday, local, and personal sites of militarization are not just reflective, or just a consequence of, militarism “writ large”, but that they are *constitutive* of militarism, and are central to not only its effects, but its reproduction. This, importantly, offers the opportunity to reveal the more-often-than-not damaging nature of militaries and their activities, and the limiting aspects of the imaginations/representations that sustain them. Implicit in this idea of militarism as a multi-scalar phenomenon, to us, is a question also about the range of foci – including the act of war itself, security and securitization, militarism and militarization, military institutions and organizational practices – with which the critical military studies project might be concerned. It is axiomatic to us that the study of all these phenomena constitutes the purview of what a critical military studies might be. Military geography, for us, is about attempts to capture the range of social practices through which armed conflict comes into being, and all the things which surround, support, and sustain the pursuit of war. It follows that critical military studies too should be about much more than war itself. Whilst we recognize the importance of acts of armed conflict as a focus, critical military studies, for us, has a much wider reach.

Acknowledgements

Previous versions of this paper were presented at the Critical War Studies workshop, Centre for Conflict and Security Research, University of Sussex, September 2013, and the Critical War/

Military Studies workshop, School of Geography, Politics & Sociology, Newcastle University, May 2014.

Note

1. In the interests of transparency, note that the ideas informing this paper have emerged in part from research which has had a British Ministry of Defence funding element. These are: *Gendered bodies, personnel policies and the culture of the British Army*, Rachel Woodward and Trish Winter, 2001–2002, funded under the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – Ministry of Defence Joint Grant Scheme, reference R000223562; and *Keeping enough in reserve: the employment of hybrid citizen-soldiers and the Future Reserves 2020 programme*, Rachel Woodward, Tim Edmunds, Paul Higate, John Hockey, and Neil Jenkins, 2014–2017, funded by the ESRC in collaboration with the British Army and Ministry of Defence, reference ES/L012944/1.

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