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The power of love: how love obscures domestic labour and shuts down space for critique of militarism in the autobiographical accounts of British military wives

Harriet Gray

Department of Politics, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT
The British military institution, like other armed organizations worldwide, relies heavily on the unpaid domestic labour performed by civilian women married to its servicemen. This labour does not often feature in public understandings of how the military functions, and feminists have argued that its invisibility contributes to the naturalization of military power. The silence surrounding military wives' unpaid labour, however, is not complete, and this article explores how such labour is represented in autobiographical accounts written by British military wives. These texts are often centred around descriptions of domestic labour and, moreover, make overt claims about its importance to the institution itself. In my analysis, however, I explore how the texts simultaneously make claims about the importance of this labour and make it invisible *as labour* by positioning it, instead, as acts of love. Taken together with the idea that outsiders cannot fully understand life in a military family, I demonstrate how this framing serves to close down space for critique of the military. In addition, I argue that paying attention to how militarism functions not only through fear and suffering but also through love helps to flesh out our analyses of militarism and war as social institutions.

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Introduction

As feminist scholars have now compellingly demonstrated, armed organizations of multiple types, including the British military, rely heavily on the unpaid reproductive labour of civilian women married to servicemen. Like women's domestic labour in other settings, however, this labour is often made invisible, so that its importance to the functioning of militaries, and therefore to the exercise of military power on the global stage, goes unseen. Feminists have argued that the invisibility of this labour in public narratives contributes to the normalization of military power. The silence that blankets military wives' labour, however, is not complete. So what happens when the labour performed by British military wives *is* recognized in public narratives? Does this open up space for a critique of gendered militarism?

CONTACT Harriet Gray Harriet.Gray@York.ac.uk Department of Politics, Derwent College, University of York, York YO10 5DD, UK

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In this article, I analyse published autobiographical accounts charting the lives of civilian women married to servicemen that, on the face of it, make strong, public claims for recognizing the importance of the domestic labour performed by these women. I argue, however, that even while military wives' labour is highlighted in these narratives, it is simultaneously made invisible *as labour* through its framing, instead, as acts of *love* (see Basham and Catignani 2018, 160; Hyde 2014). In civilian settings, the framing of domestic labour as love serves to obscure women's contributions to political economic structures. In the British military context specifically I argue that the framing of this labour as love, interwoven with the idea that outsiders cannot understand life in a military family, contributes to the closing down of space for critique of the military. My analysis, that is, reveals how labour is hidden in plain sight in these autobiographical narratives, and that this has a depoliticizing impact. Moreover, it also creates space to think about how militarism is enacted through love. That is, when I say that labour is hidden by the label of love, I do not wish to suggest that love and labour are always easily separable things or that one can simply conceal the other, love placed in front of labour like a mask. Rather, it is not always possible to disentangle labour and love: often, acts of labour are also acts of love; and much of love *is* labour (Lynch 2007). This, then, is an article about British military wives' labour and British military wives' love, and about how contemporary British militarism relies upon both of these things interwoven together in multiple ways.

As I explore below, there is a significant body of feminist theorizing on the subject of romantic love. While feminist scholars have taught us much about the politics of love, however, this scholarship has not been fully brought to bear on our understandings of militarism. This is likely largely because, as Welland argues, research on war within IR tends to centre its analysis overwhelmingly on war's violences and traumas (2018, 439). This focus is, of course, entirely understandable: given the magnitude of the horrors that war entails, we may think it a moral imperative that these appear at the centre of any intervention. However, the creation of a fuller, more holistic analysis of how war and militarism function requires that we take seriously the idea that 'there is more to war than suffering' (Pentinnen 2013, 4, cited in Welland 2018, 439). There are other practices and experiences in warzones and military spaces than only those of pain – there love, there is joy, there is laughter, there is desire – and these things must be taken seriously if we are to make sense of how war and militarism are sustained as social institutions. As Welland puts it, 'if joy and pleasure are recognised as part of war's practice and affective landscapes then they – just as grief, violence, or injury – will shed light on this particular (and enduring) puzzle of global politics. As such, there is a need to engage with the full range of experiences and emotions present in war' (Welland 2018, 440; see also Crane-Seeber 2016; Dyvik 2016a; Pentinnen 2013).

I begin the development of my arguments below by reviewing the existing literature on the invisibility of labour performed by civilian women married to men serving in the British military. I then briefly sketch out some of the key tenets of feminist scholarship on love as they relate to my argument. Next, I discuss my methodological approach. I then move to my analysis of the autobiographical accounts themselves. In the section entitled 'The force behind the forces', I discuss their descriptions of military wives' labour. In 'Labour of/or love', I explore how the framing of military wives' domestic labour as love

closes down space for critique of the military. I conclude by summarizing my arguments and, additionally, reflecting on how, when labour and love cannot be disentangled, paying attention to love can help to thicken our understandings of militarism itself.

The invisible labour of military wives

Marxist Feminist political economists have long argued that that the 'private' household and the reproductive labour enacted within it are fundamental in enabling the functioning of economically productive labour in the 'public' sphere (e.g. Bakker 2007; Bedford and Rai 2010; Federici 2012). Reflecting these insights, scholars of militaries and militarism have likewise demonstrated the reliance of military institutions on the unpaid domestic labour of the (primarily) women married to their service personnel.[1] Military wives' labour reproduces the individual soldier in much the same way as women's reproductive labour in capitalist systems reproduces the worker, and thereby enables armed organizations to wage war (Hedström 2020). This labour is not merely incidental but is 'integral to military operations and the reproduction of militarism' (Chisholm and Eichler 2018, 564); in Vron Ware's words, '[w]ithout the unpaid labour and emotional support of thousands of military spouses standing behind their individual soldier, the whole system would grind to a halt' (Ware 2012, 207).

In many ways, the labour expected of women married to British military personnel mirrors the reproductive labour performed by women more generally.[2] British military wives are not a homogenous group, and there are likely to be significant differences in the labour required of wives depending on their husband's branch, rank, and role, on whether he is a regular member of the forces or a reservist (Basham and Catignani 2018), and on whether or not he (or his wife) is a British citizen (Ware 2012, 203–255).[3] However, there are important specificities to many military lives – such as deployments, the emotional difficulties of perpetrating and witnessing violence, and regular house moves – which place additional demands on military wives. Key forms of labour that are expected of a large proportion of military wives, then, include the performance of domestic and childcare labour without the support of the serving spouse while he is away from home on deployment or training; the provision of heightened care work when required by husbands and/or children, in particular during and after combat deployment; and (for the wives of many but not all regular personnel) the labour of enacting the regular house moves required by many military careers, including packing, cleaning, offering emotional support to children who struggle with moving away from friends, and reproducing the military community in a new location (see Baker 2018, 126; Basham and Catignani 2018; Gray 2016, 151–154; Hyde 2015, 44, 68, 87–89; Long 2021a, 2021b; Jervis 2011). In general, this adds up to the expectation that British military wives will have the necessary flexibility required to manage family life around the demands of their husband's job: to 'pick up the slack' and 'make it work' (Basham and Catignani 2018, 166, 158).

In the British military setting, Basham and Catignani argue that women's domestic labour is mostly 'unpaid, unacknowledged, and often invisible' (Basham and Catignani 2018, 167); in Hyde's words, it is performed by 'the army's own, invisible, reserve-reserve army of labour' who conduct labour that is 'so naturalized and taken for granted that it is practically invisible' (Hyde 2014). The devaluation of women's domestic labour is baked

into the gendered political economies through which everyday militarism is enacted and wars are enabled (Basham and Catignani 2018, 155; Gray 2016). The fact that women's labour is made invisible *matters*, because, in Enloe's terms, this invisibility helps to mask 'how much power it takes to maintain the international political system in its present form' (Enloe 1989, 3). If, as Martin Shaw suggests, the 'new Western Militarism' must, to retain public support, avoid 'above all, any deep social costs for the West's own societies' (Shaw 2013, 29–30), then obscuring the reliance of the institution on women's unpaid labour – and, importantly, the hardships that this engenders in the lives of military wives – may play an important role in closing down space for critique of the military itself. As I explain below, however, this particular example demonstrates that public discussions of this labour are not always sufficient to open up such space.

Feminists theorize love

Feminist critical engagement with the politics of love has a long history, but this field of enquiry was perhaps most animated during the 1970s. Radical and Marxist feminists of the second wave expended significant energy critiquing the heteropatriarchal family, revealing the household as the site of the reproductive labour necessary for productive labour outside the home and 'confronting the various modes of ideological mystification, naturalisation, privatisation and romanticisation that had shielded these institutions from critical judgment' (Weeks 2017, 37–38). While the topic of love has been less of an explicit focus for more recent feminist scholarship (see Jackson 2005, 38) drawing on this body of scholarship is nonetheless, as I suggest above, useful for making sense of contemporary militarism.

Feminist scholarship frames love as a social and cultural construct, with political implications and functions (Jackson 2005, 38): love is 'not merely an interpersonal event' confined in some way to an apparently apolitical private sphere; rather, '[l]ove is a political event' (Povinelli 2006, 175). Beyond this broad generality, feminist framings of love have taken on multiple forms: it has been theorized, among other things, as a form of propaganda used by men to oppress women; as a force that masks the inequalities of patriarchy and the contributions of women's unpaid labour; as something that depoliticizes women's lives by framing their experiences as individual rather than collective; as a fundamental part of feminine subject formation under patriarchy (Weeks 2017, 42–49); as a label which signifies a special legitimacy (Jackson 2005) and/or the assumption that it is necessarily something good (Ahmed 2014); and also, in a somewhat different vein, as an important resource for Black feminist organizing and political community creation (Nash 2011). For the purposes of my analysis in this paper, two of these elements of feminist engagement with the politics of love stand out as particularly relevant: love's role in obscuring women's labour in patriarchal settings, and its function more broadly as a label that confers the assumption of virtue.

First, to love as something that masks women's household labour. As I note above, feminist scholars have shown that women's domestic labour, in the civilian as well as the military sphere, is often made invisible. To say that this labour is 'invisible' does not always mean that the tasks that women perform are not known about (although they may not be); rather, it is more often to say that this labour is not recognized *as labour* – that women's domestic work is seen as 'non-work' (Elias and Louth 2016). The ideology of

love plays a fundamental role in this framing of domestic labour as non-work. This ideology 'holds that when a woman loves a man, a "natural form" for that love is the desire to take care of that man by marriage, preparing his meals, and cleaning up after him' – such 'nest-making' labour is widely assumed to be a ''natural' outgrowth of female love' (but not, of course, of male love) (Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff 2009, 31). Women's reproductive labour, that is, is often framed not as something that requires remuneration or respect in line with other forms of labour, but rather as an expected, unremarkable part of women's natural role as wife, mother, and carer (*ibid*; De Benedictis and Orgad 2017; Federici 2012; Weeks 2017, 44).

This obscuring of women's labour under the code of love is itself, of course, a depoliticizing function, but feminist theorists have demonstrated that it is not the limit of love as a depoliticizing force. In her powerful analysis of white supremacists' attempts to resist the label of 'hate group' by instead claiming to be acting out of 'love' for racialized ideas of nation, Sara Ahmed asks 'What are we doing when we do something *in the name of love*? Why is it assumed to be better to do the same thing if it is done *out of love*?' (Ahmed 2014, 124, emphasis in original). Drawing on Stevi Jackson, I suggest that in this particular case, the ways in which romantic love is assumed to be 'a mystical experience' that is accorded 'a special legitimacy, placing it on some higher plane inaccessible to reason or explanation' (Jackson 2005, 43) plays an important role in placing particular operations of militarism and of military power beyond the realm of legitimate political critique. As Ahmed points out, romantic love in the form of (heteronormative) coupledom/family is often framed in western culture as the ultimate form of happiness, the pinnacle of the pursuit of happiness in which all people have a duty to engage. To fail to embrace that which is supposed to cause happiness is to be the read as the 'origin of bad feeling' – the 'feminist killjoy' thus 'spoils the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness' (Ahmed 2010: 581). When something is placed in the realm of 'love', then, it becomes more difficult to treat that thing as a legitimate object of political critique. Love emerges as a self-evident good, beyond the space of political questioning, and to attempt to engage with it on questioning terms is to unreasonably kill the joy of others.

Military wives' memoirs as public narrative

In this article, I engage with the lives of civilian women married to servicemen in the British military through their representation in published autobiographical narratives. Like the phenomenon of the Military Wives Choirs (see Baker 2018; Cree 2020a, 2020b), these autobiographies are a cultural product that packages up the lives of military wives for public consumption but, unlike the Choirs, they have yet to be the subject of focused discussion in the academic literature.[4]

As Woodward and Jenkings explore in their insightful monograph *Bringing War to Book* (Woodward and Jenkings 2018), which focuses on the memoirs of military personnel, a military memoir (like any other account of memory) is not a full or complete picture of a set of experiences. The writing is selective, shaped by multiple factors including the authors' decisions around how to present themselves, publishers' decisions around what is likely to resonate with readers, and the limits of the genre, as well as by military-specific silences such as institutional censorship and the desire not to be seen to

break the codes of military honour and comradeship (ibid., 130–148). While the memoirs of military wives are not subject to all of these forms of censorship – as they are not serving members of the armed forces, for example, military wives are not subject to official processes designed to ensure memoirs do not reveal information detrimental to operational effectiveness or security (*ibid*., 141–148) – the other factors listed above are likely still pertinent, in particular, perhaps, the desire not to be seen to be betraying or bringing into disrepute the military community.

Notwithstanding these qualifications, military memoirs constitute a useful form of data for researchers as an 'articulation of public narratives of war' (*ibid*., 46). Memoirs do not stand alone; they 'shape and are shaped by broader social imaginaries' which effect how the actors involved and the wider public make sense of the lives and issues at hand (Read 2018, 301). As such, they are a useful site for analysing the 'numerous potent, prevailing, and powerful discursive frames' through which war is understood (Dyvik 2016a, 143; see also2016b; Duncanson 2009, 67–68; Welland 2018). In reading the autobiographical accounts of military wives, I am seeking to analyse the discursive frames through which the authors make sense of their lives on the pages of these books. The political impact of such sense-making practices is not necessarily clear in advance. Reflecting on memoirs by serving personnel, Woodward and Jenkings suggest that it is certainly possible that they act as 'vectors of militarisation', serving to 'facilitate war, not in any crude or causal way, but as artefacts of cultural militarism and militarisation through which the idea of military deployment and intervention becomes normalised and justified' (Woodward and Jenkings 2018, 53). On the other hand, memoirs can also challenge official narratives which sanitize and sustain war (*ibid*., 55; Dyvik 2016a, 134). In my case, as I demonstrate below, while we might have expected the shining of a light on the exploitation of military wives' labour to be something that might open up space for critique of the military, the ways in which the authors choose to frame their lives as military wives for public consumption – and the archetypal construction of 'the military wife' that is thereby produced – play a role in positioning the day to day operation of military power as something that is 'beyond critique' (Cree 2020a, 17).

For this research, I read published, non-fictional accounts written by women about their own experiences of being married to (or, in a few cases, in a committed romantic relationship with) a male serving member of the British armed forces, from the 1980s onwards. My interest is in public narratives of military wifehood in the contemporary era – in how these books produce for public (civilian) consumption an architype of what it is to be a modern military wife. The authors of the texts analysed here explicitly state that they wrote their books out of a desire to tell the 'untold' stories of military wives[5]:

> The world knows what happens to British troops overseas. But the women they leave at home have challenges of their own, which nobody hears about. Until now (The Military Wives 2012, back cover).
>
> We may not deserve medals, but our stories deserve to be told, read or listened to, and maybe, just maybe, we deserve to be bought a beer once in a while too (Eager 2015, 9-10).

These texts, then, explicitly seek to explain the life of a military wife to uninformed civilians. As such, they are a pertinent site at which the archetypal construction of the contemporary military wife coalesces, and is framed for public (civilian) consumption.

I was able to find nine books[6] that met my criteria for this research. Three – Hale and Farmer (2017), Simpson (1996), and Nicholson (1997), – are book-length autobiographies written on the basis of one individual's experiences. One – Compton, Compton and Summerfield Smith (2010), – tells the story of husband and wife Martyn and Michelle Compton, woven together in chapters that are identified as recalling the experiences of one or other spouse; I focus my discussions here on the chapters written by Michelle. The remaining five books are compilations of multiple women's stories. Two – Dimbleby (2011) and Stanford (2011), – chart the personal experiences of their authors (who themselves are military wives) woven together with the reported experiences of other military wives. The final three – The Military Wives (2012), Legg (2015), and Eager (2015), – are made up of multiple short sections, each written by one individual wife, with differing levels of framing provided in the style of a narrator by the title's main author(s). For simplicity, where I reference these narratives I use the name of the main book author rather than the author of the individual section.

The force behind the forces

One of the dominant themes that emerged from my readings of the memoirs was the repeated and emphatic claim that the labour that military wives do *matters* to the military, as reflected in the following statements:

> [T]here is another branch of the armed forces: the military wives who stay behind, adding our quiet strength to our men's courage (The Military Wives 2012, ix-x).

> It is no exaggeration to say that without the support of their families, the Armed Forces wouldn't function as it does (Stanford 2011, 80).

> Every happily married man out on the front line is, in part, able to do his job because of the support of a loving wife back home – 'The force behind the forces' (Dimbleby 2011, 106).

Underpinning these claims to importance, the accounts describe the lives of military wives as different to those of their civilian counterparts, not least because of the exaggerated forms of domestic labour expected of a military wife. One major recurrent theme is the labour of relocation. Several of the narratives recollect the labour of the 'march out', when military quarters are inspected for cleanliness when a family leaves. The narratives tell how the women 'scrub [the quarter] from top to bottom and leave it spotless' (The Military Wives 2012, 16); of how wives scramble about using Pollyfilla to cover up their breaking of the regulations around having only one picture-hook per wall (Dimbleby 2011, 45), and would be 'clean[ing] the window frames with a toothbrush' (The Military Wives 2012, 99). In other cases, wives narrate the labour of settling into a new location, a process made more complex when a family has additional needs such as the need for medical support for a disabled child (*ibid*., 86).

Most of the texts centre primarily on the labour required by the serving husband's deployment. Some of this labour is practical. Several of the texts describe having to function as a single parent when the serving spouse is away: 'You're a wife, and a father, and electrician, chef, plumber – you have to do it all and support them while they're out there' (Dimbleby 2011, 144). Some describe having to cope alone with a new baby: 'He was sent away on a course when Calum was five weeks old, and I had nine solid hours

daily of Calum screaming with colic, which was hellish' (The Military Wives 2012, 61). Others tell of the additional roles they take on for their children when their spouse is away ('we have to become mum and dad, nursemaid and bottle-washer. You have to do everything on your own and it is like being a single mum' [Dimbleby 2011, 87]); of having to make decisions alone ('I have to make decisions about important matters, like the kids' education, without him, and then explain it all when he's back. It's down to me to get it right' [The Military Wives 2012, 25]); and of having to comfort children in the absence of their father ('William would still wake up in the night crying that he wanted his daddy. I'd say, "Daddy's not here". "But I want him ... " I felt I was letting him down, because it wasn't me he wanted and I couldn't do anything about it' [*ibid.*, 113; see also 45]). Even when the serving spouse is present, domestic demands on a military wife often require that her own employment or other commitments 'play second fiddle' to those of her husband – 'If one of the children was ill, when they were smaller, he would not dream of taking the day off to look after them. It was always me, and I think you will find that from any service wife' (Legg 2015, 183; see also 187).

The texts also describe the repeated labour of sending items to husbands deployed to combat zones; posting letters and parcels to remind them of home and maintain the bonds of family love. The writing of letters detailing the minutia of everyday life becomes part of the daily routine (Dimbleby 2011, 120; Simpson 1996, 12). Parcels are packed containing little everyday comforts and tokens: some send packets of teabags, magazines, toiletries, cake (Hale and Farmer 2017, 183–184), sweets and cigars (Simpson 1996, 29); some place a shoebox on the kitchen table for children to collect small objects, such as school paintings, to send to their father (The Military Wives 2012, 43). Others 'rack [their] brain' for new ideas of things to send 'to make him smile, if even for a moment' (Dimbleby 2011, 125). Where possible, wives support their deployed husbands through regular contact on the telephone and over the internet (Eager 2015, 42–43; Legg 2015, 167).

The texts also discuss the emotional labour carried out by military wives. The labour of worrying, of waiting, of bearing the strain, is described as being constant throughout the tour – some of the authors report feeling that their lives are 'on pause' while their husband is away: 'When he's away, it's as if your whole life is on pause. You don't even like to go out and have fun: it feels wrong while he's out there, as though you are betraying him in some way' (The Military Wives 2012, 18). Similarly, Dimbleby explains how she was afraid to stop worrying about her husband when he was deployed, as though the act of worrying itself could shield him from harm (Dimbleby 2011, 176).

While this worrying is constant, however, it must be borne without passing it on to the serving spouse. The necessity of bearing this worry alone (or, with the support of other military wives who understand), is one of the most prevalent themes emerging from the texts. It appears mostly clearly in the expectation that military wives refrain from showing their emotions around their husband's deployment, throughout the tour but in particular at the moment of him leaving, so as to avoid distracting him from his job. The trope of waiting to cry until after the goodbyes are finished appears again and again (e.g. Eager 2015, 46; Hale and Farmer 2017, 102–103; The Military Wives 2012, 55, 109–110, 117). One wife, for example, tried not to show her emotions when her husband left 'because I didn't want him to think I was at home alone, all upset. If they're focusing too much on home that could mean they're distracted and in a war zone that could get them

killed' (Dimbleby 2011, 9). Similarly, another remembers her efforts to make the goodbye easier for her deploying husband: 'I looked at James and thought: I love you so much, I just want to hold you forever, I don't want you to go. But I didn't say it, and I was desperately trying to think of things to say that would make it feel better for him' (The Military Wives 2012, 92). This logic extends throughout the tour, when wives refrain from sharing the stresses and problems of home with their husbands so as to avoid worrying them (ibid., 112, 142–143; Simpson 1996, 65–69). For many, the ability to hide one's emotions at the moment of separation, in particular, appears as a point of pride: 'he knew he didn't have to worry about me: I've always been strong and independent' (The Military Wives 2012, 59; see also Simpson 1996, 10). Mirroring this, those who do show their emotions largely narrate this as a 'failure' (see Gray 2017; Long 2021b) of which they are ashamed: 'I'd been waiting for him to go, and I was sure I'd be alright, because I'm so stern and strong, but I just lost it . . . I felt so ashamed that I'd let him go worrying about me' (The Military Wives 2012, 13–14).

Another important form of labour that emerges from the texts – and in which practical and emotional forms of labour are impossible to untangle – is that of caring for spouses recovering from physical or psychological injuries sustained in conflict. Michelle Compton's narration of her experiences in supporting her partner Martyn through his recovery from severe burns and gunshot wounds sustained in Afghanistan are particularly pertinent here (Compton, Compton and Summerfield Smith 2010; see also Simpson 1996, 84). Michelle describes how important it was to her to take on an active role, however small initially, in Martyn's physical care while he was hospitalized – brushing his teeth, swabbing his mouth to keep it moist, massaging his scars with subaqueous cream to prevent the skin from thickening (Compton, Compton, and Summerfield Smith 2010, 139, 143, 149). Michelle describes how being able to take on this practical role, rather than 'just sitting there, watching things happen to him' was hugely important to her (*ibid*., 160) – the first time she was able to brush his teeth, she says, she felt like she 'was walking on air' (*ibid*., 139). Reflecting the discussions above, Michelle explains how even during this time, she performed the emotional labour of keeping her feelings in check: 'I made a decision there and then: I would be strong for Martyn. I pulled myself together and decided I wouldn't cry again. I've no idea where that strength came from, but I was glad I had it in me. I needed to hold things together, for Martyn's sake' (*ibid*., 119).

Several narratives also told of the heightened labour of supporting their husbands as they processed the psychological tolls of combat (see Gray 2016):

> He had nightmares for a while, and I was scared. I didn't know what to do . . . He never remembered the nightmares the next day, but they woke me up (The Military Wives 2012, 34).

> The tears fell faster now. I reached out and put my arms around him as he buried his head in my chest. I could feel my body being rocked by his stifled sobs as he gasped to gain control (Hale and Farmer 2017, 160).

> It took weeks of gentle coaxing on my part to get him to snap out of it . . . I would take him for long evening walks in the rolling hills around Hereford that he had always loved, and hope that the fresh air would wake him from his reverie. I would make all his favourite meals

> to try to re-whet his appetite, I would one's curl up with him in my arms in bed at night, stroking his hair and talking gently to him, in the hope that it would soothe his nightmares (Simpson 1996, 43).

The texts describe the wives as absorbing this labour, comforting their husbands as best they can (The Military Wives 2012, 32, 60; Stanford 2011, 167–169; Simpson 1996, 161, 171–176). In some cases, husbands who could have accessed professional counselling decided not to, choosing to unburden on their wives instead: 'He could have had counselling, but he chose not to. I was his therapy: he unburdened to me. He described it graphically, and afterwards I would cry down the phone to my mum or one of my friends' (The Military Wives 2012, 44–45; see also Compton, Compton and Summerfield Smith2010, 175).

Although not a common occurrence in the texts, the labour of coping after a combat death is also described in affecting details. In many ways this labour mirrors the labour performed by bereaved spouses in other settings – the organizing of a funeral, the comforting of children, the purchase of clothing for the deceased to wear for burial or cremation (Dimbleby 2011, 195–196, 225; see also Eager 2015, 70–77; Hale and Farmer 2017, 196–197, 216). In other ways, however, this labour is somewhat differently inflected – the public nature of military repatriations through Royal Wootton Basset and dealing with press interest, for example, requires a particular kind of emotional labour (Hale and Farmer 2017, 201, 212–215). In addition, the texts also report tasks which fall to military wives other than the bereaved, in particular those whose husbands are of relatively high rank, which fall to them as representatives of their husbands. For example, wives might be asked to help to clear out the married quarter of a bereaved wife who can't face the idea of doing it herself (Dimbleby 2011, 196–8), or to attend the funerals of men in the battalion when their husbands are still deployed (*ibid*., 228, 231).

Labour of/or love

Above, I demonstrate that the autobiographical accounts of British military wives describe in detail the domestic labour performed by these women. Moreover, I have shown that, while women's domestic labour (in militaries and beyond) is often hidden in public discourse – made invisible, unacknowledged (Basham and Catignani 2018, 167; Hyde 2014; Harrison and Laliberté 1994 Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2017, 269) – these published autobiographical accounts are unambiguously public and, moreover, they make explicit claims about the importance of the wives' labour to the public mission of militaries. These public claims, however, do not appear to open up space for critique of the military institution in the way that some critical scholarship may lead us to hope they might. Drawing on the feminist theorizations of love that I introduced earlier in this article, in the section that follows I examine two main ways in which articulations of love mean that space for critique does not open up but, in fact, is further reduced: first, the love framing depoliticizes military domestic labour through naturalizing it as 'non-work' (Elias and Louth 2016); and second, appeals to love position military domestic life, and through this, elements of military labour itself, as something to be afforded a 'special legitimacy' beyond the scope of critical debate (see Jackson 2005, 43).

Military domestic labour as 'non-work'

First, to the framing of military domestic labour as 'non-work'. The texts do not deny that being a military wife is hard: 'it's a tough choice, being a military wife' (The Military Wives 2012, 21). For example, one aspect that is narrated as particularly hard is the way in which soldier-husbands mentally disassociate themselves from their families in the run up to deployment and during rest and recuperation leave (R&R) during operational deployment:

> [During R&R] He was here in body but not in mind . . . I was glad to see him, touch him. But I struggled with trying to cuddle a man who wasn't there (The Military Wives 2012, 11).

> I got very upset one time when he told me he stops thinking about us as soon as he leaves. He said, 'As soon as I walk away, I put you out of my mind, it's nothing to do with you. I couldn't do my job if I was worried about you, and I've got a lot to do.' It hurt (The Military Wives 2012, 23).

However, while this was repeatedly acknowledged as a hardship, it was also positioned as a sacrifice *happily* undertaken because it was important for the soldier's wellbeing and safety:

> I'm pleased he didn't switch off [during R&R], because he had to go back and it was better that he stayed in the zone, but it's not easy living with it (The Military Wives 2012, 39).

> [W]e've heard the saying, 'if his head's at home, he'll struggle out there'. So we accept, and are even glad, that as he prepares to go he seems to shut us out of his mind (The Military Wives 2012, 1–2).

While sacrifices and hardships are acknowledged, then, they are framed as freely chosen, personal choices: sacrifices that women knowingly, *happily* make because of love. This is reflected in the repeated assertions of unconditional support for the husband – and, as if the two are synonymous, for his career – no matter the hardships it brings to her (note, here, that these hardships are to the wife herself, there is no mention of the wider political or moral questions which might be relevant to a military career). The framing of these statements position the women as what Alice Cree (2020a) refers to as 'Penelope' figures – reflecting the character of Penelope as in Homer's epic *The Odyssey* as the 'embodiment of feminine sacrifice' (Cree 2020a, 219) – willingly and happily sacrificing by offering unquestioning support to their soldier, no matter the costs to them personally. The following statements could be joined by many more:

> I knew he would have pulled out if I'd asked him to, but I couldn't make him do that. I was proud of him (Hale and Farmer 2017, 80).

> I've learnt to accept it. I fell in love with the man, and he *is* the job. It's his life. It runs through his blood, and he is the man I love (The Military Wives 2012, 6).

> Our men chose this way of life; they love it and thrive on it. We made a choice too: to be with them (The Military Wives 2012, 2).

There is a certain degree of resignation in these narratives. However, reflecting Hyde's observation that the inconveniences of military life may provide the opportunity for 'a sense of empowerment summed up by the necessity to "crack on" . . . [for] women's

public performance and recognition of self-sufficiency' (Hyde 2015, 80), there is also a significant level of *pride*: pride that the writers are strong enough to cope as a military wife; to accept unconditionally the requirements of the role:

> We are not complaining. Military wives are a stoical band: we get on with it (The Military Wives 2012, 2, see also 30).

> [Y]ou have to be a certain kind of person to be with a 'Bootneck' [Royal Marine] (Eager 2015, 45).

Reflecting this sense of pride, and in contrast to the 'poor sad women' invoked by the television framing of the Military Wives Choirs as analysed by Cree (2020a, 15–16), the authors of the texts analysed here are emphatic in their insistence that they are not objects of *pity*:

> [W]e have never asked for sympathy, just support in our lives which are dedicated, in turn, to supporting the men who keep Britain safe (The Military Wives 2012, x, see also 17, 118).

The hardships, and the labour, entailed in the life of a military wife, then, are framed in the autobiographies as real and significant, but also the result of conscious, individual choices made on the basis of love. These choices, and the ability to see them through, are the source of pride for these authors, as they demonstrate strength, commitment, and resilience. These choices, moreover, are described in the texts as something that is entirely natural, perhaps even inevitable, because they are rooted in love – here we find the idea that any woman, if she were to fall in love with a military man, would find the strength to act similarly.

> This is my answer to the question 'How do you cope with being married to a soldier?' I cope because I have chosen to and because Richard is my soulmate, so I am very very motivated (Stanford 2011, 6-7).

> I was only doing what any girlfriend, fiancée or wife would do. I loved Martyn. I wanted to marry him, to be with him for the rest of our lives. Why wouldn't I do all I could to help him? I thought being there for him, pushing him, encouraging him, was the most natural thing in the world for me to do (Compton, Compton, and Summerfield Smith 2010, 178).

The autobiographies' descriptions of labour, then, are framed through declarations of love: through the idea that these tasks, while taxing, are freely and happily undertaken as an expression of love. In Fraad, Resnick, and Wolff's terms (2009, 31), then, military domestic labour is merely 'nest-making'; a 'natural form' of a woman's love for her man. The figure of the military wife that emerges from these texts is in large part constituted through these ideas about sacrificial love. In such a framing, the recognition of military domestic labour *as labour* melts into the background.

Love as beyond critique

The appeals to love in the autobiographies, moreover, also serve to frame not just the domestic labour of military wives but by extension also the military labour of their husbands as beyond the realm of legitimate critique. This framing – the idea that love and its enactments are 'inaccessible to higher reason or explanation' (Jackson 2005, 43); that engaging critically with the things that people do for love positions one as a 'killjoy'

(Ahmed 2014) – is layered over in the military context with the idea that outsiders cannot understand life in the military. The idea that the combat experience of service personnel cannot be understood by those who have not experienced it is widely recognized in the literature, often using Harari's concept of 'flesh witnessing' (Harari 2008; see Dyvik 2016b). While military wives' autobiographies do not claim the indescribable 'ultimate experience' (Harari 2008) in quite the same way, there are multiple examples in which the life of a military wife is positioned as something that civilians could not possibly understand; indeed, that the authors themselves did not understand until they lived it:

> Nothing prepares you for military life; there's no way to learn except by doing it (The Military Wives 2012, 20).

> At my job, if I say, 'Lee's away,' they say; 'Oh! I'd love that! Six months away from my husband. It would be brilliant!" I think, 'You don't know what you're saying.' You just have to say, 'Hm, yeah. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't.' Whereas if I say to my military friends, 'Lee's away in a couple of weeks', I just get a hug. They understand (Legg 2015, 151).

Military wives do not claim a monopoly on love in these texts, however the sense does emerge that military love is somehow different – this is love that is tested all the time, love that is not easy and perhaps, therefore, is in some way heightened. This idea of military exceptionalism, the contention that those outside cannot possibly understand the lives of military families, explicitly emerges in some examples as something that disqualifies outsiders from critiquing the military. Two extracts sum this up most clearly, and are worth quoting at length:

> People can also be very rude . . . Comments like 'I don't agree with the soldiers being there' and 'they are over there illegally.' Regardless of whether you are for, or against the war in Afghanistan, have respect for all those out there doing their job and think before you speak because you have no idea what that person in front of you is going through at that moment. Some people just really do not have a clue about military families and what we go through on a daily basis (Eager 2015, 49).

> I am astounded by the ignorance of people in Portsmouth, who don't know anything about the Naval base; who don't know what's in it and they don't know what goes on. I had a lady at work the other day say something about the military and the country saving money. 'I don't know what the forces do you know? We are not really at war now, are we? So if they are not fighting a war, what *are* they doing?' I thought, 'Oh my, how ignorant.' . . . I did send a little prayer up to all of those people who died for keeping people like that safe. I honestly don't know, I am not a political person, I am not going to get involved (Legg 2015, 172).

In these narratives, the acts of loving sacrifice performed within the military family – something that is both simultaneously something that any woman would naturally do if she fell in love with a soldier, and something that no civilian could ever truly understand – emerge as something that should prohibit the civilian from critiquing the military more broadly. To critique the military as a civilian, in this narrative, is not only to critique something that you can never understand, but also to insensitively attack the object and labour of one's love; something that stands outside of the bounds of legitimate criticism. To expose acts done in the name of love to political critique is to place oneself in the role of the killjoy (Ahmed 2010). This mirrors, to some extent, the arguments that Cree makes in relation to the Military Wives' Choir TV programme in which, she suggests, the viewer is 'reminded time and time again of the (feminine) sacrifice that military wives make "for

their husbands" and by extension for their country, encouraged to pity them, support them, and venerate their husbands' (Cree 2020a, 226). In this framing, as Cree explores, the hardships and violences of war that are placed front and centre are not those in which the deploying husbands participate but, rather, in 'the violence against [the wives] of their husbands' absence': that is, 'the violence and horrors of warfare are brought into visibility, but only through the lens of the wives who grieve their husbands' absence,' as 'the real violence of war is felt by those who are left behind' (Cree 2020a, 228, 234). Outsiders' criticism of the military appears, therefore, as something that inappropriately belittles the hardships, and the love, experienced by military wives. That is, when military wives' labour is reprivatized as an act of love, and when outsiders are assumed incapable of understanding their lives, then criticism of these lives and loves becomes, in Basham's words, 'hard-hearted, cynical or snobbish; *even if* an effect of remaining silent is to back "our boys", "wherever they are" and whatever they do' (Basham 2016, 889, emphasis in original). As such, the framing of military wives' lives and labour that appears in these books contributes to the building of 'an imagination that renders the military beyond critique' (Cree 2020a, 17).

Concluding remarks: the power of love

In this paper, I have explored how autobiographical accounts of British military wives narrate their domestic labour. I have identified key forms of labour which emerge from the texts, including the practical labour of house moves, parenting alone, and sending post; the emotional labour of worrying but, simultaneously, of controlling the emotions one reveals to one's spouse and children; and the often difficult caring labour done for spouses who come back from war with physical or psychological injuries. Moreover, I have shown that, while women's domestic labour (in militaries and beyond) is often hidden in public discourse – made invisible, unacknowledged – these published autobiographical accounts are unambiguously public and, moreover, they make explicit claims about the importance of the wives' labour to the public mission of militaries.

Drawing attention to the ways in which military institutions rely upon and exploit the unpaid domestic labour performed by civilian women married to their personnel might be expected to open up space for a critical analysis of gendered militarism and/or of the negative impact that the maintenance of British military power has on everyday life within the UK (see Gray 2016). In the case of the autobiographies I analyse here, however, I have demonstrated that this is not the case, because of the ways in which domestic labour is made invisible *as labour* in these texts through its framing as love. This framing, I have suggested, shuts down space for political critique of the military in two main ways. First, framing domestic labour as love enables it to be positioned as 'non-work': something that a woman will naturally do when she loves a man and, thus, something that does not require particular public concern. Second, because romantic love itself is widely seen in Western culture as the unquestioned pinnacle of happiness (Ahmed 2010), even as something mystical (Jackson 2005), love and its objects become a slippery target for political engagement. That is, because we often assume that it is somehow 'better to do the same thing if it is done *out of love*' (Ahmed 2014, 124), actions that we might usually think of as open to political critique – labour that supports the

ability of a nation-state to wage war around the world, for example – become instead something which it is 'hard-hearted, cynical, or snobbish' to question (Basham 2016, 889).

While my analysis focuses on how narratives of love can serve to deflect criticism of military power, there is something more to be said here. Specifically, it is not my intention to argue that the authors of these books are somehow *incorrect* to describe their experiences primarily through a lens of love rather than one of labour. Indeed, feminist scholars have compellingly demonstrated that drawing too firm a line between 'love' and 'labour' is unhelpful, as love and labour are often interwoven and interchangeable in women's lives – that, indeed, much of love *is* labour (Lynch 2007). Doing your best to comfort a crying child in the middle of a night, sending teabags in the post to make a husband smile, holding a loved one through his PTSD nightmares, dealing with your own worries so as not to burden those around you: this is labour, yes, but it is also the stuff of love. In this particular circumstance, moreover, it is *also* the stuff of militarism. What this means is that militarism, here, is operating *through* love, just as in other circumstances it operates through fear, anger, desire, or joy (see Welland 2018). Recognizing how militarism functions in these examples through acts of love helps to further flesh out and complicate our accounts how it becomes possible for nation-states to exercise military power on the global stage.

Notes

1. Not all British military partners are cisgender heterosexual women, nor are all married. It is not my intention to erase military partners who do not fit this mould. However, given the demographics and the heteronormativity of the contemporary British military, as well as institutional structures (such as housing provision) that incentivize marriage, the majority of non-serving partners are married, heterosexual cis women; and the British military's policies that aim to support non-serving spouses are primarily orientated towards women. It is overwhelmingly the domestic labour of wives upon which the institution relies. In addition, all of the published autobiographies I could find were written by cis, heterosexual women, almost all of whom were married to their serving partners for at least some of the time covered by the narratives. Recent years have seen increased public interest in 'military wives' in the British context, not least because of the cultural phenomenon of the Military Wives Choirs, and my discussions of the idealized 'military wife' that emerges from the autobiographies chime with this construction in many ways. My analysis here, therefore, is limited to a discussion of military wives, and I use this term throughout.
2. My focus is on the British Armed Forces. Others have studied military wives in, among other locations, the USA (Enloe 2000, 153–197; Howell and Wool 2016; Wool 2015; Wool and Messinger 2012), Canada (Harrison and Laliberté 1994; Spanner 2020), and the DRC (Eriksson Baaz and Verweijen 2017).
3. Similar labour is expected of the wives of men serving private military security companies (Chisholm and Eichler 2018).
4. I am not aware of prior studies that use military wives' autobiographical accounts as data (with the exception of Baker 2018, who uses The Military Wives 2012 as a supplement to other forms of data). There are, however, several analyses the memoirs of military personnel across multiple disciplines (for a mapping of this scholarship, see Woodward and Jenkings 2018, 44–49).
5. Woodward and Jenkings (2018, 65–88) describe similar motivations behind the writing of many military memoirs.

6. For comparison, Woodward and Jenkings were read more than 250 military memoirs published between 1980 and 2017 by personnel in the British military for *Bringing War to Book* (2018, 23).

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ORCID

Harriet Gray http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7702-1959

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