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## Combat as a Moving Target: Masculinities, the Heroic Soldier Myth and Normative Martial Violence

This article problematizes the conceptualisation and use of ‘combat’ within critical scholarship on masculinities, militaries and war. We trace, firstly, how ‘combat’ appears as an empirical category within traditional war studies scholarship, describing an ostensibly self-evident physical practice. We then examine how feminist and gender approaches – in contrast – reveal ‘combat’ as a normative imagination of martial violence. This imagination of violence is key to the constitution of the masculine ideal, and normalisation of military force, through the heroic soldier myth. We argue, however, that despite this critical impulse, much of feminist and gender analysis evidences conceptual “slippage”: combat is still often treated as a ‘common sense’ empirical category – a thing that ‘is’ – in masculinities theorising. This treatment of gendered-imaginary-as-empirics imports a set of normative investments that limit the extent to which the heroic soldier myth, and the political work that it undertakes, can be deconstructed. As a consequence, whilst we know how masculinities are constituted in relation to ‘combat’, we lack the corollary understanding of how masculinities constitute ‘combat’, and how the resulting imagination sustains military authority and the broader social acceptance of war. We argue that unpacking these dynamics and addressing this lacuna is key to the articulation of a meaningfully ‘critical’ gender and military studies going forward.

**Key words: combat, military masculinities, critical**

### Introduction

In this article we explore the conceptual and normative work that ‘combat’ does within literature on gender and war, in particular within that grounded in theorisations of military/ised masculinities. In both academic literature and lay parlance, ‘combat’ variously describes a common sense empirical reality (“as if it were obvious and fixed, just plain combat” - Enloe 2013: 261) or a normative imagination of a very particular form of martial violence. This normative imagination underpins the masculinity-defining mythologised figure of the heroic soldier, in whom resides the “ideals, fantasies, and desires” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 838) associated with privileged iterations of masculinity.<sup>1</sup> This mythologised figure, in turn, is a significant locus for the political project of sustaining martial authority and instating the broader social acceptance of war. Connecting an apparently objective physical practice of violence with larger issues of normative masculinity, normative civil-military relations, and legitimate state violence, the somewhat slippery conceptualisation of ‘combat’ grounds nearly all analyses of gender, war, and the military. What we identify as the concept’s comparative under-theorisation, (de)politicisation, and ‘common-sense’ status is both puzzling and, from the perspective of a critical military/masculinities studies aimed at problematizing collective violence, in need of analytical redress.

We locate the combat-as-empirical-reality usage as most typical of traditions that include strategic studies, traditional war studies and military sociology (hereafter ‘conventional literatures’). We then discuss how the second usage, ‘combat’ as normative imaginary, has been developed in feminist and gender approaches to the study of masculinities, militaries and war. In her piece *Combat and ‘combat’: a feminist reflection*, Enloe (2013) reminds us that ‘combat’, called upon to carry “a burden of gendered meaning”, is “worthy of careful feminist analysis” (p.260). We

argue that the unpacking of ‘combat’ as a normative category has been key to the critical agenda of making visible otherwise obscured power relations through the denaturalisation of that which appears ‘common sense’ and ‘given’. This has been an important tool in deconstructing the myth of the heroic soldier, revealing and critiquing the political work that this figure undertakes.

We argue that there has, however, been conceptual slippage within critical feminist and gender approaches to the study of masculinities, militaries and war. ‘Combat’ is still called upon as a ‘common sense’, or as Enloe calls it, “obvious” (2013:261) shorthand when describing fighting and martial violence. In other words, combat remains an empirical ‘thing’ across both the conventional and critical literatures – and thus becomes entangled, as a foundational “objective” premise, with the very imaginary critical scholars seek to denaturalise and deconstruct. This limits the extent to which the heroic (combat) soldier myth, and the political work that it undertakes, may be effectively critiqued. One of the key consequences, we argue, is that whilst critical scholars have effectively grappled with the ways in which masculinities are constituted in relation to ‘combat’, we have yet to tackle, in a sustained and systematic fashion, the issue of how masculinities constitute ‘combat’ (as a normative imaginary). We have perhaps yet to begin even posing what is, admittedly, a counter-intuitive question. If we are to adequately illuminate the reproduction of military authority and the broader social acceptance of war, however, this critical analysis of the *co*-constitutive arrangement of ‘combat’ and ‘masculinity’ is essential. This missing piece of the puzzle allows us to better understand how martial violence is called into meaningfulness as legitimate and celebrated ‘combat’ along gendered lines.

The article thus proceeds by first outlining the development of ‘combat’ as, initially, a theoretical concept within classical theories of war, followed by its transformation into an empirical descriptive category within modern military sociology and strategic studies. This is followed by a discussion of the animation and political interrogation of the relationship between combat and heroic masculinity in critical gender and feminist analyses. Here, we highlight, as mentioned, an inadvertent slippage between examining ‘combat’ as a normative imaginary and deploying combat as an empirical category upon which to found critique. Each section provides an overview of key theoretical moves and analytic themes within two broad literatures: so-called ‘conventional’ military and strategic studies and ‘critical’ gender and feminist assessments of the military and masculinity. Both literatures, it should be noted, demonstrate Anglo-European centrism. Empirically, they consider primarily, though not exclusively, war, military organisations, and gender within the modern West and, ideologically, to a greater or lesser degree, do so from a liberal perspective. There are therefore also a strong colonial and racial dimensions to the constitution of ‘combat’ that, though largely bracketed here, also require substantial future analysis.

There is no bright line between the two broad scholastic churches examined here, and it is not our intention to claim that all works or all scholars falling into these traditions demonstrate the conceptual conflation of combat we problematize here. It is, instead, our aim to highlight the ways in which this conceptual slippage may occur, drawing on key exemplary texts, and the implications of this move for the broader critical project (articulated by what is otherwise frequently excellent work). To that end, the article goes on to outline the logic of the oscillation between combat-as-empirics and ‘combat’-as-imaginary by revisiting two key pieces of critical research into military

masculinities: Barrett's pioneering 1992 study of gendered/ing hierarchies within the US Navy, and Daggett's innovative 2015 analysis of the queering of drone warfare. We conclude with a reflection upon the stakes of our analysis and fruitful avenues of inquiry going forward.

### **Combat as an empirical category**

The 'commonsensical' empirical construction of combat as the basic unit of warfare is, at least in its current form, traceable to Clausewitz, and is a logically recurrent theme in modern strategic and military scholarship. For Clausewitz, fighting is the central and defining activity of the military; it is the means of achieving the ultimate (political) ends of warfare (Howard 2002:37-8; Clausewitz 1976: 95, 142-3). Clausewitz refers to this form of fighting as *das Gefecht*, which Howard suggests ought to be translated as "combat", referring to both a general practice (physical fighting) and a limited, temporally specific engagement (Howard 2002: 37-8). It should be noted, following Howard, that this analytical prioritization of the violent activities of the military distinguished Clausewitz from his contemporaries (Howard 2002: 37; Clausewitz 1976: 95). The fact that to many readers this equation of warfare with combat with the purpose of the military will seem obvious is a reflection of the naturalisation of this formula. In other words, Clausewitz theorised and constructed combat, and its relationship to modern warfare, as a concept, rather than the empirical description of the true, or factual, nature of warfare it is often taken as today. As *On War* became canonized as the seminal work on modern warfare (Howard and Paret 1976: viii-ix) - indeed, the nature of war itself - the subtle theoretical aspect of Clausewitz's work was occluded.

The layered conceptualisation of combat as "obviously" physical fighting, the building-block of warfare, and the primary activity of the military, strongly informed - as empirical premise - the subsequent development of nineteenth and twentieth-century understandings of war and the military (Strachan 2012; see also Nordin and Oberg 2015: 394)<sup>ii</sup>. In the twentieth century post-war era, military sociologist Morris Janowitz argued that although the majority of military personnel, resources, and activities are no longer directly involved in combat, "military authority...must strive to make combat units its organizational prototype" (1959: 480). For Janowitz, these combat units are "functionally distinguished" (480, fn10) from other aspects of the military by their engagement in dangerous, physical "battle" (481) - or combat as a practice of fighting. Janowitz' contemporary, Samuel Huntington, similarly reiterated Clausewitz's understanding of combat as the physical practice of war - armed, between individuals or groups of individuals, and violent (1957: 11). Like Janowitz and Clausewitz, Huntington regards the balance of the military organisation as relevant only in so far as it supports the military's central mandate: combat (11-12).

This naturalisation of Clausewitz's theoretical conceptualisation of combat (and its relationship to the broader military enterprise) into a descriptive, 'found' empirical category, is still more apparent in the term's usage throughout the contemporary strategic studies literature. Posen, for instance, in his analysis of the modern mass army, refers to its "combat power" - the ability of the military to effectively conduct organised violence (1993: 84). Colin Gray reflects a similar understanding of combat in his study of "national style" in military strategy, arguing that US officers in WWII were trained to be logistically ready for combat, while German officers were trained in the practice of combat - fighting between conventional military groups (1981: 25-

6). This synonymy of combat with “simply” war fighting is perhaps best reflected in Stephen Biddle’s work, which, arguing for the continuing relevance of land war and conventional arms, refers to “old-fashioned close combat against surviving, actively resisting opponents” (2003; see also Betts 1994, 2016).

This is not to say that this literature lacks normative discussion. The vast majority of classical theories of war, strategic studies, and, particularly, military sociology, are concerned with the appropriate regulation and political (civilian) control of military violence (see Millar 2016). Huntington, for instance, is clear that it is this mandate for fighting that separates the military from the civilian sphere (1957, 11). Like Clausewitz, Huntington is keen to provide the institutional and political context - the state-sanctioned military - that distinguishes combat, as legitimate violence, from other forms of interpersonal physical confrontation. Janowitz, interestingly, goes further, unproblematically referring to the credibility of combat “heroes” as an objective factor in military authority and organisation, rather than a subjective judgment (1959, 479). The normativity of this discussion, however, is displaced from the conceptualisation of combat itself, which is static, to the relationship between combat and military and civil authority. Combat may enable individuals to distinguish themselves, or be put to positive or negative political ends, but is not a normative category or practice in and of itself - it simply ‘is’.

This correspondingly apoliticised understanding of combat is most evident in the large literature regarding combat motivation. Shils and Janowitz’s early study of the Wehrmacht in WWII laid the groundwork for this decontextualisation by not only reproducing an understanding of combat as “stubborn fighting”, but also by emphasizing the irrelevance of broader political concerns to individual motivation and combat efficacy (1948). Dave Grossman, in his controversial finding of soldiers’ apparent reluctance to kill, propounds a similarly circumscribed understanding of combat as direct killing in a military context, and “combat veterans” as those who were present in the physical space of battle (1996). More recent studies of combat cohesion, though arriving at different “diagnoses” of combat motivation (e.g. group solidarity vs. training and drill) maintain a similar framing of the problem, and thus underlying conceptualisation of combat: Given that combat is violent, dangerous, and contravenes civilians social norms, why fight? (see, for instance, King 2015; Wong et al 2006; Newsome 2003). Throughout, though a distinction is occasionally drawn between close, physically-proximate (infantry) combat and contemporary missions flown by fighter pilots, (see Grossman 1996: 234; Robben 2006), the conventional strategic and military sociology literature produces a common, purportedly-empirical description of combat. It is constructed as a discrete, physical event, and as therefore possessing a definitive “‘before’ and an ‘after’” (Bourke 2000: 11). It is also, as implied Clausewitz’s emphasis upon *fighting*, spatially limited in scope, as war *per se* involves a variety of practices beyond a physical engagement. Though technology and political context may change, combat is also, by implication, a sufficiently uniform practice and experience of physical fighting that, as an empirical category, it may be applied across diverse conflicts.

Mainstream approaches to military and strategic studies are also alive to the relevance of gender (or, in many cases, more accurately, sex) to combat. It is understood to be the practice of men, as both an historical regularity (see Best 1998, 31; Goldstein 2001; van Creveld 2000) and a “proving” or “testing” ground for masculinity (see, for

instance, Stouffer et al, 1949; van Creveld 2000). Early studies on the relationship between masculinity and combat articulated the notion that it was a given and findable empirical phenomenon. In their study of military socialisation, Arkin and Dobrovsky (1978: 156; see also Eisenhart 1975) note, for instance, “that it is in combat that the core of masculinity is demonstrated”, through showing “courage, [and] lack of squeamishness” (Stouffer et al., 1949 quoted in Arkin and Dobrovsky (1978: 156). They detail how combat capacity and experience stratifies the military institution both formally and informally, privileging and elevating those assigned to and experiencing combat.

This constitution of combat (and war) as the sole preserve of men is not posited as an active matter of conceptual construction, but rather as empirical description. Combat is a ‘thing’ against which masculinity might be tested and through which it might be demonstrated but it remains very much a fixed empirical reality. Generally, though not uniformly, as a result of both historical production and ontological approach, this literature represents sex/gender, and thus men and masculinity, as correspondent. Consequently the male/masculine (as interchangeable) nature of combat is apoliticised and naturalised into the empirical description of an objective social phenomenon. That said, in these emphases on the “fraternal order” of the military (Janowitz 1957) - and centrality of masculine solidarity to combat motivation - normative characteristics subtly begin to creep into the ostensibly descriptive empirical label. This is perhaps most evident in the polemical literature arguing for women’s exclusion from combat, exemplified by Martin van Creveld (2000). The conventional military/strategic literature, despite its inclinations towards positivist social science, is not immune to conceptual “slippage”. This is something feminist scholarship has given much more attention to, as we consider below.

Durieux provides a cogent summary of the conventional literature’s understanding of combat as, “on the individual level, [a practice] in which a soldier gives death to another and exposes himself to the deadly blows of his adversary” (2012: 143). As illustrated by this brief review, combat, as an empirical category, refers to violent, plausibly reciprocal activity, involving elements of both killing and risk, between men. Though the literature exhibits a normative preference for the regulation of this fighting under the auspices of the military, and by the state, the empirical practice of combat itself is supposedly removed from issues of politics (and, potentially, ethics). This apoliticisation of combat via empiricism - not entirely in keeping with Clausewitz’s explicitly theoretical conceptualisation - and its connection to men/masculinity has been problematized, as we explore next, by a robust feminist, masculinities, and critical military/militarisation research programme. Within this work, however, vestiges of the empirical status/existence of combat have survived. As indicated by critical engagement with the “heroic soldier myth”, empirical combat as masculine activity often forms a jumping off point for gendered analysis, rather than an object of deconstruction in its own right.

### **Combat as Normative Category**

In contrast to the approaches reviewed above, the aim of critical feminist and gender approaches to the study of the military and war is not to problem-solve issues of military power, but rather to problematize this power (Basham, Belkin and Gifkins, 2015:1). Though far from monolithic, this ‘critical’ approach can be characterised by its sceptical curiosity, “questioning underlying assumptions, investigating things that

conventional commentators typically leave unexplored” (Enloe, 2015: 3). It can also be said to “approach[...] military power as a question rather than taking it for granted” (Basham, Belkin and Gifkins, 2015: 1). A key component of this project is making visible the gendered power operating in war, the military, the international system, and ultimately, “how *much* power it takes to maintain the international political system in its present form” (Enloe 1989: 3). These interventions reveal that there is nothing inevitable or natural about the configurations of international politics in and through which we all live; it is not satisfactory to say of any aspect of these political orderings “it’s just the way it is”. This tradition of scholarship is sceptical, therefore, of ‘common sense’.

Correspondingly, feminist and gender approaches articulate a suspicion of the ostensibly descriptive, ‘simply’ empirical account of the military and combat provided above. In particular, critical approaches question the unproblematic bundling of sex/gender into ‘soldier’ that underlies empirical combat, as well as the explicit bracketing of normative concerns regarding the legitimacy of state violence (see Dawson 1994:1). In contrast, feminist and gender approaches have, in effect, conceptualised combat as a normative category that carries a heavy “burden of gendered meaning” (Enloe 2013: 260). Combat, in other words, as a concept, is not correspondently reflective of an actually-existing and obvious practice, but rather encapsulates a range of assumptions as to socially-valued masculinity, civil-military relations, violence, physical geographies, and the state.

Megan Mackenzie, for instance, in her detailed examination of socio-cultural myths regarding the long-standing (though now defunct) US military policy of excluding women from combat, observed that “the definition of combat itself is elusive: both ‘combat’ and ‘combat exclusion’ are constructed” (2015: 19). In sharp contrast to the conventional literature, which accepts the definition of combat as stable and objective, Mackenzie highlights the historical contingency of the concept as changing over time, in accordance with the military’s needs (32-3; see also Enloe 2007: 82). Similarly, Zalewski observes a disconnect between the empirical fact that “relatively few men who have been in the military have ever been in combat” and the hierarchical valorisation and prioritisation of ‘combat’ by the military institution, as seen in the conventional writings above (1995: 353). Zalewski suggests that this construction is furthered by the “ideological potency” of combat, which, though having no fixed definition, is “wielded as a criterion to separate the ‘men from boys’” and, of course, women from men (353). Unpacking combat as a normative category, therefore, involves interrogating the conditions of its social construction and the politics it contains and obscures (Enloe 2013).

Key to this project, as implied by the illustrative quotations above, is an examination of the relationship between combat and normative idealisations of socially-valourised masculinity, as articulated within the context of the military. As has been well-established in the literature, for critical scholars, there is no singular (or self-evident) “military masculinity”. Masculinities are not static, monolithic sets of character traits or types (Connell 1995; and see Duncanson 2009: 64), nor do they correspond to essentialist constructions of sex. Instead, just as “militaries...are not unified or homogenous structures” (Sasson-Levy 2003: 320), there are a “multiplicity” of (military) masculinities (Kirby and Henry 2012: 445; Barrett 1996; Baaz and Stern 2009: 499) within and across institutions. Understood as “values, capacities, and

practices” (Hutchings 2008: 402), military masculinities and the idealised ‘selves’ they conjure are models rather than tangible realities (Woodward 2000: 644; see also Duncanson 2009: 65). Together, these masculinities - and femininities (Sjoberg 2007; Stachowitsch 2013: 161) - reflect and reproduce hierarchical orders of gender, race, and class (Messerschmidt 2012: 73).

Combat is identified by critical scholars as central to the articulation of these hierarchies, and their reproduction outside the formal institution. Not entirely unlike the military sociologists above, critical scholars observe that the institutions of war and the military function as “a crucial arena for the construction of masculinity in the larger society” (Hale 2012: 700; Connell 1995). Rather than acting as a “proving ground” for an *actually-(pre)existing* maleness, however, the military (re)produces a “(variable) set of values, capacities, and practices that are identified as exemplary for men” (Hutchings 2008:402; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832), or as Belkin puts it (2012: 3) a “set of beliefs, practices and attributes” that are widely valued and privileged within society.

More specifically, critical scholars argue that it is combat through which these beliefs and practices are articulated. Combat, they observe, is constituted within the military as a particular imagined space of idealised violence in which soldiers can “prove their manhood” (Enloe 2013: 260). Combat masculinity is therefore characterised within the literature as typified by stereotypically masculine, socially-valorised attributes, such as “aggressiveness and endurance of hardships and physical toughness” (Hale 2012: 705; see also Connell 1995), “risk-taking, discipline, technological mastery...absence of emotion, and rational calculation” (Barrett 2001:79). Within the constellation of military masculinities, critical work frequently refers to “the hegemonic masculinity of the combat soldier” (Sasson-Levy 2003: 327), as both additional military and civilian masculinities are (implicitly or explicitly) articulated in reference to this idea. Both conventional and critical literatures are therefore concerned with the relationship between men and the military – particularly the crucible of combat. They differ substantially, however, in ontology. For conventional scholars, “real men” pre-exist combat, and prove their mettle within it. From the critical perspective, the military, through its institutional emphasis on the priority of combat, produces ‘real men’, reifies the notion that there is such a thing as ‘real men’, and promulgates authoritative ideals of masculinity.

Coupled this contingent, though socially ordering understanding of masculinity, combat becomes a normative imaginary of martial violence through which gendered ideals, fantasies and desires can be organised<sup>iii</sup>. The exact form of that imagination might change or be contingent to a particular process of masculinity formation, but it remains an ‘anchor’ for the social (re)production of military masculinities (Hale 2012: 713; Duncanson 2009: 65; Woodward 2000). Various configurations of the notions of risk (Barrett, 1996), proximate killing (Daggett, 2015: 365) and reciprocity of violence (Enloe 2013: 260) define combat as a gendering category. As a special, celebrated and exclusive domain of violence and of gender definition and meaning combat “is contested, protected, and negotiated” (Enloe 2013: 261). It is imagined in various ways to define who is ‘in’ and ‘out’ of particular privileged categories. Being associated with combat, critical scholars observe, accords privileges (Tidy, 2016).



In this sense, combat is understood by the critical literature to constitute a point of positive linking and negative differentiation (Duncanson 2009: 67-8, following Hansen 2006). The apparent monopoly over combat (and therefore hegemonic masculinity) sets the military apart from other parts of society; it is the fundamental point of differentiation through which the military can be imagined as apart and special, occupying the privileged side of the (also imagined) civil-military divide. The difference between this claim and the similar one made by writers such as Clausewitz and Huntington hinges on whether combat is seen as a 'real' thing, empirically differentiated from other forms of interpersonal violence, or a socially produced and embedded category of gender and power. As discussed further below, combat therefore performs an immense amount of analytical work in the critical deconstruction of the military: it is posited as a constructed, empirical "site" wherein military personnel enact and negotiate their gendered/ing social identity and institutional status and, more problematically, as a conceptual anchor for the analysis of the hierarchies these negotiations produce.

### *Combat and the Heroic Soldier Myth*

The critical leverage proffered by this treatment of combat as a gendered normative imaginary is perhaps best illustrated by gender and feminist theorists' empirical identification, and subsequent critical deconstruction of, a cultural figure crucial to the normalisation – and depoliticisation – of combat: heroic (combat) soldiers. In doing so, critical scholars are able to foreground the normative assumptions (and political commitments) smuggled into the ostensibly objective observations of the traditional literature. The conventional writers discussed at the outset, though to varying degrees of explicit acknowledgment, propound and rely upon the idea of the heroic soldier. Dave Grossman's *Introduction* to the revised (2014) issue of his *On Killing* offers, for example, a straightforward statement of his normative position. The book, Grossman writes:

...is being read by countless thousands of warriors who are called upon by our nation to kill in combat. And it is the single greatest honor of my life to have been of service to these magnificent men and women...

Grossman neatly encapsulates the interrelation of combat, nation, and some form of elevation or glory (in his formulation it is 'magnificence') attributed to soldiers. Feminist scholars add gender to this nexus, and deconstruct it as a site of gendered power rather than a 'common sense' 'good'.

As Sasson-Levy (2003: 327) notes, it is "almost impossible to constitute a military identity (masculine or feminine) that does not relate to the identity of the warrior" or as Duncanson (2009: 64) describes it, the "warrior model". The existence of multiple masculinities (and femininities) in a military context, as noted above, should not distract from the structures of power asymmetry which they entail: "the hegemony of the warrior model is part of the reason that certain men dominate within the military, [and] why there is pressure on men to conform to this form of masculinity (Duncanson 2009: 65). The military is a space within which 'gender' - and other axes of power and subordination - are made, learned, practiced and reproduced (see Baaz and Stern 2009: 499) and 'combat' is a crucial conceptual anchor point for this gendering and all that it entails both in military training and during war. As

Duncanson (2009: 65) describes, “[m]any accounts of military training demonstrate how gender informs this process, as all things ‘feminine’ are disparaged, and ‘manhood’ is equated with toughness under fire” (although cf. Belkin 2012).

Within this literature, the myth of the magnificent warrior is grounded in a heroic narrative of combat, an imagination of martial violence that is privileged, powerful and strongly normative. The heroic soldier myth may change (see Dawson, 1994; Cooper and Hurcombe, 2009: 103), but it remains persistent (Woodward, Winter and Jenkins, 2009: 219), largely due to the grounding provided by combat in the soldier’s relationship with the polity. As combat is imagined to involve elements of risk, sacrifice, and violence on behalf of the group (Mackenzie 2015: 34), the hierarchical elevation of the soldier over the civilian population is assured, despite changes in the ‘actual’ empirical practice of martial violence over time. Within feminist and gender analysis, combat as a normative category therefore remains relationally stable, though substantively changeable. As the heroic (combat) soldier “expands our own ego boundary ecstatically into that of the nation” (Butler 2006: 145), warfare is therefore understood through the figure of the soldier (Woodward, Winter and Jenkins, 2009: 219; Woodward and Jenkins, 2012: 351). The “legitimacy or otherwise” (Woodward, Winter and Jenkins, 2009: 211) of war, and the overall political community, is thus affirmed or contested (see for example Achter, 2010; Tidy, 2016; Millar 2016) through the lens of this figure.

Significantly, the combat imaginary that produces the “heroic soldier” parallels, at an individual level, state-state ‘combat’, such that the heroic soldier is imagined as a microcosm of the heroic state. The heroic soldier, foundationally constituted by combat, is therefore presented as an ideal of, simultaneously, masculinity and citizenship (Sasson-Levy, 2002). As Dahl Christensen identifies, “[t]he soldier becomes a proponent for a whole society’s set of values” (Dahl Christensen, 2015: 355). Deconstructing the myth of the heroic soldier – and its constitutive relationship between combat and masculinity – is therefore key to the critical project of feminist and gender scholarship. If it seems to be common sense that soldiers are heroic, that they do a thing called combat, and that this combat is in some ways an elevated and special form of violence, then it is the job of critical scholars to unpack the assumptions, trace the political investments and the power relations that do powerful work both ‘out there’, in military discourse and popular imaginary, and ‘in here’, in our own scholarship.

### **Combat as an (un)moving Target**

As the above overview has demonstrated, understanding ‘combat’ as a normative imaginary reveals the gendering, highly ‘powered’ ‘work’ that it does. The specific content of ‘combat’ is contingent and flexible and it is called upon and into being in particular forms at particular times to associate, disassociate, include and exclude from particular, privileged categories of military masculinity and their “attendant promises and entitlements” (Baaz and Stern 2009: 499). Unpacking ‘combat’ as a normative imagination, or model, of martial violence has been a means of bringing to the surface the constitution of privileged forms of gender and the power relations that are entailed. It has revealed the constructed and *deconstructable* form of the heroic soldier myth, and ‘his’ role in instating and normalising gendered, martial power and its associated state violence. This has been key to the critical knowledge project of feminist and gender approaches.

As we will now argue, however, this same literature demonstrates a tendency towards ‘slippage’ between the two ways of using ‘combat’. To put it bluntly, ‘combat’ gets used just as “plain combat” (Enloe 2013: 261), including in work that also deconstructs it as a normative imagination, submerging and smuggling its normative heritages and investments into scholarly work that is otherwise concerned with the critical knowledge project. This can hamper analysis of the complexities of the “burden of gendered meaning” that ‘combat’ carries (Enloe 2013: 260), and risks reproducing the gendered and gendering asymmetries entailed in it.

In some instances within the literature on military/ised masculinities the importance of combat to the constitution of masculinities is noted in a broader and almost obligatory sense, but then the analysis ‘moves on’ without tracing precisely what is meant by ‘combat’ in the particular setting being examined, or unpacking what gendering ‘work’ it is doing there (Barrett, 1996; Duncanson 2009). Higate, for instance, in the major 2003 edited volume *Military Masculinities*, questions whether “the presence of some women, particularly at the heart of the male bastion of face-to-face combat, is likely to affect the nature of the combat masculine warrior ethic?” (205). Here, though Higate explicitly identifies combat as masculine and problematizes essentialist views of women as “importing” femininity into the military, he also reiterates the male nature of physical, reciprocal combat – combat as obvious practice – and its apparent centrality to military identity. It is correspondingly unclear whether Higate is referring to combat as masculinist normative imaginary, employing its construction within the military itself, or is himself analytically deploying an empirical understanding.

Similarly, the critical literature, particularly when working to highlight the marginalisation and elision of marginalised persons – and masculine/feminine subjectivities – within both the military institution and broader citizenship myths, frequently relies on an empirical conceptualisation of combat. In her examination of the public representation of deceased US female soldiers, for instance, Millar refers to the awkwardness of the contrast between US official combat exclusion policy and “actual combat practice” (2015: 766; see also Holland 2006: 3; King 2015 122-3) – employing an empirical understanding of combat to, in essence, censure the US military for misrepresenting the experiences of women. A similar slippage is evident in Tidy’s (2016) discussion of the privileging of combat experiences within the public discourse of the military dissent movement and the consequent gendered asymmetry of war knowledge. Whilst Tidy argues that the focus on combat soldiers reproduces a narrow conceptualisation of war, marginalising the experiences or large portions of the military, her discussion of the political power of “experiences of combat” (100) tacitly maintains combat as an empirical ‘thing’ (see also Perez and Sasson-Levy 2015).

In other instances, combat is used as an empirical descriptor, perhaps by referring to a ‘combat soldier’ or a ‘non-combat soldier’ (Sasson-Levy, 2003; 2008; Woodward, 2000, Tidy 2016) or referring to soldiers having seen or been in combat (Stachowitsch, 2013; Daggett, 2015; Duncanson 2009). In doing so, the literature slides between conceptual references to the figurative heroic soldier, a potentially useful conceptual construct, and seemingly habitual references to “actual” soldiers engaged in a real practice. Our cited examples here are not meant to be exhaustive. As indicated by our

citation of many these same writers in our discussion above, the work we critique has been crucial to theorising military/ised masculinities and unpacking combat as a normative category. We argue that the criticality of this collective work could be enhanced however, through a conceptual attention to ‘combat’ that avoids slippage between empirical and normative category.

In sum, the critical literature slides towards the reification of combat as empirically real, in a vein that largely duplicates the constructions of the conventional literature upon which its critique is built, and in doing so also reifies a particular normative relationship between combat and masculinity. Christensen and Jensen, in their 2014 critique of the hegemonic masculinities literature, observe that patriarchal power relations - men’s domination over women - has been definitionally incorporated into the key concept of “hegemonic masculinity” (64). Christensen and Jensen suggest that although patriarchal power relations may characterise the great majority, if not all, of empirically observed hegemonic masculinities, importing this empirical regularity as a necessary conceptual assumption limits the critical power and insights of the resulting scholarship (64). As argued by Beasley, “[...] it is politically deterministic and defeatist to assume that the most dominant...ideals/forms of masculinity are necessarily the same as those that guarantee authority over women” (2008: 88, in Christensen and Jensen 2014). The conceptual assumption of men’s dominance over women undermines, in other words, the potential power and emancipatory potential of critical gender work by premising its central critique upon the existence of the relationship it seeks to problematize and replace.

The implicit reliance upon an empirically-real combat, as key to producing not just masculinity, but *the* central, militarily and socially valorised masculinity (the heroic soldier), encounters a parallel structural problem. If, as outlined above, the central problematic of the critical feminist/masculinities/military research agenda is the deconstruction of the gendered relationships and associations that produce the political possibility/ies for violence and/or war, the conceptual importation of an apparent empirical relationship between masculinity and combat undercuts its analytic and political potential. In other words, it is difficult to critique, deconstruct, and constitute alternatives to the heroic soldier myth premised upon the ‘proving ground’ of combat when this precise relationship is ‘baked into’ the empirical/normative slippage of the concept itself.

The treatment of normative-combat-as-empirical is a specific, arguably foundational, iteration of a general problem Hutchings outlines as characterising the gender and war literature. Hutchings observes that in instances wherein masculinity is constructed as “materially necessary to war because of what war is taken for granted to be...war anchors masculinity, in the sense that the meaning of masculinity reflects the requirements of war” (Hutchings 2008: 393). This dynamic is redoubled, and specified, by the conceptual ambiguity of ‘combat’, wherein what Hutchings refers to as the “causal, or conditional” argument relating war to gender, described above, is rolled into a single concept, as an assumption. This empiricisation removes and obscures the argumentative and directional aspect of this relationship - that combat produces the heroic, hegemonically masculine, soldier. The critical literature thus correspondingly risks (re)producing the essentialised understanding of combat/gender of the conventional literature, wherein combat is inherently masculine, and hegemonic masculinity will, inevitably, refer to, or be positioned against, combat

violence. Similar to men, as observed by Morgan, “seeking the best of reasons to distance themselves from dominant and harmful models of masculinity”, so too may critical scholars “unwittingly perpetuate a one-dimensional and quasi-naturalistic model of ‘man the warrior’” (1994: 179).

Unlike the broader gender and war literature, which holds space for examining the ways in which “masculinity anchors war, in the sense that it provides a framework through which war may be recognised, understood, and judged” (Hutchings 2008: 393), we currently lack a corresponding critical awareness of, and attention to, the role of gender in constituting ‘combat’. As a result, we are unable to interrogate combat as a gendered (and classed, racialized, sexualised) structural category, social identity, and process - as *political*. We have only a partial grasp of a complex process of mutual constitution.

### **Implications of “Slippage”: Revisiting Key Texts with View to Co-Constitution**

By way of closing, we demonstrate in detail the process of conceptual slippage and its implications for critical analysis by revisiting two influential studies of combat, the military, and masculinity that we cite as both significant to the theorisation of military masculinities, including combat as a normative category, and illustrative of the broader problem of slippage we identify. In doing so, we re-read these texts’ empirics from the perspective of the *co-constitution* of gender and combat to provide an initial demonstration of the critical pay-off of our argument. We begin with Frank Barrett’s (1996) study of masculinities in the US Navy. We then discuss Cara Daggett’s (2015) discussion of US military masculinities, drones and the queering of killing in war. We have chosen these pieces because they represent, in Barrett’s case, an influential early theorisation of the topic that has been widely cited, and, in Daggett’s case, a strong piece of contemporary theorising on military masculinities. Both pieces successfully theorise military masculinities as a hierarchically organised plurality rather than monolith, and illuminate the inter-relation of combat, manliness and soldierliness. Whilst Daggett’s analysis undertakes this more explicitly than Barrett, both pieces can be read as concerning the maintenance of the heroic soldier myth and the production of martial violence as ‘combat’. Both pieces however illustrate the conceptual slippage that we described above which limits the extent these inter-relating dynamics can be critically unpacked.

Frank Barrett’s article represents an approach to combat and masculinities that owes much to the more traditional, empirical usage we discussed above. However, the gender-normative character of the notion is more fully realised here than in those literatures. Within the broad canon of military masculinities research, the article was particularly valuable in how it deconstructed what had elsewhere been characterised as a more monolithic military masculinity, revealing varying “constructions of masculinity ... across [Navy] job specialities” (Barrett, 1996: 129). Barrett set out to complicate “the link between masculinity, violence, and the military” captured in the common sense “image of ‘man the warrior’” (Barrett, 1996: 130).

Throughout the analysis, combat appears as an anchor of military masculinity, and central to the pursuance of the heroic ideal. Gender is defined in relation to combat, which remains an empirical ‘thing’ around which gendered identities orientate. In Barrett’s analysis, the relational ranking of masculinities in the US Navy places the

‘combat speciality’ of aviation at the top, the ‘combat speciality’ of surface warfare second, with ‘non-combat’ “support communities” (131) occupying “the lowest status in the Navy” (138). Those working in support communities “have [in contrast to their combat-specialist colleagues] fewer opportunities to demonstrate courage, autonomy, and perseverance, the hallmark of the hegemonic ideal” (138). Barrett therefore highlights how combat is an organising feature of the gender structure of the US Navy. In this analysis however, combat remains a common sense ‘thing’ that some encounter and some don’t, rather than a particular hegemonic imaginary of martial violence. The piece reveals the ways in which the heroic soldier myth is maintained, by privileging those that have the most direct contact with violence and disparaging those who are further from it – a gendered proximity-distance configuration which Daggett (2015) develops upon in her work.

Conceptualised as an empirical thing – albeit strongly normative – combat can define gender but does not seem to be in turn defined by it. This means the work that gender does to privilege and legitimise violence cannot be fully traced. Close reading of the piece hints, however, at the ways in which combat is, rather than a static and straightforward opportunity to demonstrate particular ideals, a normative imagination not only constituting but also constituted by gender. Barrett notes that Naval aviators, those with the highest status, are understood within the institution as “embodying the ideal” of masculinity (134). This is associated with involvement in ‘combat’ but also “boldness, irreverence” and “aggressive heterosexual activity” (134). Barrett records that “for those [pilots] who engaged in combat, the experiences were unforgettable”; “the most intense experiences of their lives” (134), expressed as “feelings of transcendence and vitality” that are “usually reserved for the sacred.” (135). These accounts can be re-read as examples of how very particular imaginaries of violence call moments of warfare into meaning in particular, *valued and privileged* ways. In the case of one of Barrett’s interviewees, a pilot, particular tropes of the combat imaginary (proximity, death, reciprocal danger) are mapped onto the account of flying “the entire length and breadth of Kuwait in one day” so that it can become intelligible as “flying combat in the Gulf”. There is death, for example, – “the burned out tanks, the bodies” and there is some form of reciprocal peril: “if you hit a telephone wire you were dead”. Proximity is emphasised; the aviator describes flying “10 feet above the ground”. (Barrett, 1996: 135). The coding of flying as combat is a function of gender working at the broadest level of framing. The attachment of the figure of the masculinity-embodying aviator to flying enables flying to be understood as ‘combat’ and in order to be intelligible in these terms risk, reciprocity and proximity are emphasised. The construction of this warfare as combat within the terms of the heroic myth works, therefore, to simultaneously maintain the heroic myth *and* ‘code’ this particular violence as glorious, right and legitimate – or even bordering on sacred.

In Frank Barrett’s study, combat is treated as an empirical given, albeit one with a strongly normative, gender-defining and gendered-power organising association. In Cara Daggett’s (2015) exploration of drone warfare, to which we next turn, we see combat appear as both normative and empirical category, with the distinction or relation between the two not always clearly apparent. Combat is here understood as a synonym for “killing in war” and as a normative form of martial violence that must be (re)imagined, protected and sustained.

Daggett unpacks how drones make the categories of martial violence ‘strange’, troubling the ‘common sense’ of its privileged and fetishized forms. The co-constitution of combat and masculinity are submerged but present dynamics in the analysis. Daggett notes that martial violence is “located along the hierarchy of militarized masculinities that helps to render killing in war morally intelligible” (2015: 362) and at the same time the “orienting “straight” path of killing in war” constitutes “a compass for militarized masculinities” (363). She describes how this ““straight” path of combat, [provides]...familiar landmarks (enemy, courage, combat, coward)” that offer “moral and practical bearings for killing in war” (362). In this way, combat is clearly at work as a normative imaginary, locating the soldier hero and the good wars ‘he’ fights and co-constitutively locating violence as morally intelligible or not through a mapping of that violence onto the “hierarchy of militarized masculinities” (362). These ““lines” that orient state violence” and are “a compass for militarized masculinities” are “queered” by drones (363); drones pose a problem for the straightforward operation of the soldier myth. “The pinnacle of hegemonic warrior masculinity” is located “at the site of intimate killing in the midst of combat, with other experiences judged by their proximity to this point.” As with Barrett’s Gulf War pilot, emphasising reciprocity, danger and proximity, “hegemonic warrior masculinity is secured not just through the difficult act of killing up close, but in doing this while making one’s body vulnerable to being killed” (365) Yet, “because drone operators are protected from death, they are disqualified from performing as “real” warriors because their bodies are not sited in combat.” (363).

The normative work that the combat imaginary undertakes is therefore a key part of the analysis. A sense of gender and combat as mutually constituting comes through. Yet combat is at the same time regularly deployed as a synonym for “killing in war”. It is noted that an “increasing share of combat [is] performed by drone assemblages” (369) although “Drones have not completely replaced more traditional combat” (375). “Drone warfare make[s] combat on homesites while at the same time these agents of violence avoid entering idealized sites of combat” (366). Empirical combat-as-killing is therefore subdivided into that which is “idealized” (and therefore normative) and that which is not; it might have varying normative rank but in the final analysis it remains an empirical thing that just ‘is’. As with Barrett’s analysis, there remains something ‘common sense’ about this conceptualisation of combat that shifts it out of the ambit of analysis and critique because it appears as given rather than constitutable. It remains ‘offstage’; a thing against which masculinities and other forms of martial violence can be measured. The *constitution of the measure* remains obscured.

Because a common sense of combat-as-killing-in-war is retained, the politics of producing this martial violence *as combat* (or the failure to do so) cannot be fully brought into focus. Daggett notes that Drone violence “cannot be located along traditional gendered maps that orient killing in war” (364), to which we think it is important to add *as combat* (or not). Drone operators make visible the instability of the heroic soldier myth, which must be preserved and protected. But they also make visible the instability of legitimate martial violence. There is little to qualitatively separate the violence of a missile fired from a drone from that fired from a Naval aviator’s F18. These acts of martial violence can be coded very differently however within imaginaries of gender and violence so that one is straightforwardly understood as combat (as in Barrett’s study) and one is not (as Daggett describes). As is apparent from Daggett’s empirical source material, the public discrediting, mocking and

broader feminising of drone pilots who have claimed that they are engaged in combat, (369) is achieved by highlighting how they might rupture of the myth of the heroic soldier. Doing so is at the 'cost' of placing drone killings in an ambiguous ethical space: they are not fully counted as valued and privileged, good and righteous 'combat'. Drone operators are termed the "chair force" and they are commonly represented sitting in "ergonomic chairs, drinking coffee and eating junk food" (367), the only danger posed by an accidental burn from a Hot Pocket (368).

If we understand masculinity as constituting 'combat',<sup>iv</sup> we should pay attention to the ways that imaginaries of violence, embedded in the heroic soldier myth, call moments of martial violence into value and legitimacy. If we do so, drone killings arguably pose more of a problem to the straight lines orienting gender and war than is accounted for in Daggett's analysis because they pose a problem for the category of combat itself. To return to Barrett's Gulf War pilots, the line between one-sided martial violence being 'combat' or not might come down to how easily the respective dangers of phone lines and hot pockets can be accommodated within a maintenance regime for the heroic soldier myth. In this way, the maintenance of the heroic soldier myth and the myth of legitimate martial violence are co-constitutive projects. Drones, at least for now, destabilise 'combat' itself, the common sense basic unit of warfare.

## Conclusion

Scholarship does not exist externally to public narratives of soldiers, soldiering, violence and war. Deconstructing the figure of the soldier is key to the intervention that critical feminist and gender work undertakes in this context and the concept of military/ised masculinities has been a useful tool for achieving this. In this paper we have aimed to take seriously the point that there is nothing "obvious" (Enloe, 2013:261) about 'combat'. Writing within the critical feminist tradition we have felt uneasy, including with our own work, at the ways that a well-rehearsed link between masculinities and combat can slip into a tacit common sense that combat is a 'thing'. Does this common sense hamper us in our efforts to deconstruct militarist myths such as that of the heroic soldier, and further, might it represent a continuing investment in that myth?

A 'common sense' empirical conceptualisation of combat characterises the conventional literatures on war that feminist and gender approaches have written against. But we have argued that it survives in these critical literatures. We suggest that this tenacious common sense does two related things. Firstly, it obscures the co-constitution of gender and combat as a privileged and war-legitimising imagination of martial violence. If combat is just a 'thing', then it is easy enough to see how martial manliness can be produced through association and exposure to it, but less easy to see the extent to which ideas of martial manliness (with its entailed legitimacy) in turn produce war violence as 'combat'. Put another way, imaginations of combat are a way for soldiers to "prove their manhood" (Enloe 2013: 260). But how and in what ways is violence 'proved' against imaginations of manliness? How does violence become 'combat' – and therefore a legitimate mode of martial violence - through association with particular imaginations of manhood? Gender is the engine of combat as a moving target. A blurred definitional treatment of combat constrains our analytic ability to reveal the co-constitution of gendered power and privileged imaginations of violence.



Secondly, the common sense of combat is a perpetuation of the investment in the idea of the heroic soldier and the legitimate wars he fights. Combat is not a straightforward synonym for violence. The word invites associations that cannot easily be dispelled; the word ‘combat’ is therefore never just a word, rather it is a key term in a lexicon that perpetuates the epistemic normalisation and – indeed – *celebration* of state violence. To use combat as an empirical descriptor is to invest in the legitimacy of the broad and imaginative array of violences meted out by the state. This does not, of course, mean we should avoid talking about combat. Quite the opposite: we should take claims to and about combat seriously and understand the gendered and gendering and more broadly political work that such claims undertake. We should also take seriously denials of combat; when soldiers who have been involved in martial violence deny that violence was ‘combat’, for example see Strong (2015), it is important to understand why. Ultimately, what we must not do is allow combat to be a common sense, a thing that is beyond the reach of our feminist curiosity (Enloe, 2004).

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<sup>i</sup> When we refer to soldiers we mean here a martial figure encompassing the different branches of the modern western military (i.e. army, navy and air force).

<sup>ii</sup> Indeed, this understanding of "war as fighting", albeit in a more open and contingent sense than articulated by Clausewitz, has been proposed as a key aspect of the nascent field of "critical war studies", which otherwise departs from the assumptions of classical theories of war. See Barkawi and Brighton 2011.

<sup>iii</sup> As we will discuss later it should also be understood as operating in the other direction: the ideals of martial masculinity organise this imagination of violence in particular ways that undertake specific political tasks.

<sup>iv</sup> And, indeed, femininity as well – though this conceptual assemblage will likely take substantial empirical work to unravel.