

# Delivering life, delivering death: Reaper drones, hysteria and maternity

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## Abstract

Like all warfare, drone warfare is deeply gendered. This article explores how this military technology sediments or disrupts existing conceptualizations of women who kill in war. The article using the concept of motherhood as a narrative organizing trope and introduces a 'fictional' account of motherhood and drone warfare and data from a 'real life' account of a pregnant British Reaper operator. The article considers the way trauma experienced by Reaper drone crews is reported in a highly gendered manner, reflecting the way women's violence is generally constructed as resulting from personal failures, lost love and irrational emotionality. This irrational emotionality is tied to a long history of medicalizing women's bodies and psychologies because of their reproductive capacities and, specifically, their wombs – explored in this article under the historico-medical term of 'hysteria'. The article argues that where barriers to women's participation in warfare have, in the past, hinged upon their (argued) physical weakness, and where technology renders these barriers obsolete, there remains the tenacious myth that women are emotionally incapable of conducting lethal operations – a myth based on (mis)conceptions of the 'naturalness' of motherhood and the feminine capacity to give life.

## Keywords

Cultural representation, drone warfare, gender, motherhood, women soldiers

## Introduction

Warfare is a gendered phenomenon. To state this much builds upon a substantial body of feminist scholarship (*inter alia* Cohn, 2013; Enloe, 1993; Goldstein, 2003; Sjoberg, 2013). As new technologies of war develop, so too do the workings of gender in relation to warfare, and one area which has been subject to recent feminist interest is drone warfare (Clark, 2018; Daggett, 2015; Wilcox, 2015). Some have argued that drone warfare is conducted from such a distance that it could be labelled 'disembodied' (Asaro, 2013; Coeckelbergh, 2013; Royakkers and Van Est, 2010). However, this is a limited perspective, both in terms of the embodiment of targeted populations/

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individuals and the embodiment of the distanced crews (Acheson et al., 2014; Clark, 2019; Daggett, 2015; Wilcox, 2015, 2017). The idea of (dis)embodiment is an integral point of contestation because of the gendered discourses that associate the (denigrated) feminine with the body (and its limitations) in opposition to the association between the (valourized) masculine and the mind (Peterson and Runyan, 2010). Similarly, the feminine is traditionally associated with the emotional/irrational/hysterical in comparison with the masculine connection with the stoic/rational/reasonable (Steans, 2013; Sylvester, 1994). These discourses have implications for how we conduct war, how we construct and understand narratives about war, and how we understand the experiences of those who conduct war.

War often involves periods of acute stress and can be traumatizing. Despite being geographically distant from the physical theatre of war, evidence suggests that drone crews can and do suffer emotional distress as a result of their war experiences (Bentley, 2018; Bryan et al., 2018; Clark, 2018; Hijazi et al., 2019). What this article is primarily concerned with is how this war-related emotional distress plays out in representations of female drone operators. Feminist scholarship has previously shown that violent women are frequently constructed as over-emotional/hysterical and that their emotional 'natures' makes them incapable of being responsible for 'rational' violence – such as the pursuit of military or political aims (Åhäll, 2016; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007; Zalewski, 2015). I argue that now that women cannot necessarily be constructed in popular culture as *physically* incapable of conducting frontline warfare, there remains a tendency to focus instead on women as *psychologically* unable to do the same, and that these representations are grounded in the 'Myth of Motherhood'.<sup>1</sup>

The shape of the article is as follows: Firstly, I sketch the classic arguments used to oppose women's military participation – (1) physical weakness; (2) the disruptive presence of the feminine body; and (3) women's tendency to 'get themselves' pregnant. I then introduce theorizations of motherhood/maternity and warfare, drawing attention to the way in which feminist scholars have shown these two apparently divergent issues to be intimately linked through the 'Myth of Motherhood' (Åhäll, 2012a). I use Åhäll's framework because it is already concerned with the intersection between reality and representation (and their tenuous division) and how the Myth of Motherhood affects representations of women's violence and the political implications. I connect this myth with the historico-medical notion of 'hysteria', a complaint specific to women, purportedly resulting in physical and psychological weakness, which I argue is integral to contemporary representations of women in warfare. I then illustrate some of the ways in which, and reasons why, drone warfare can cause psychological distress to both men and women, but suggest that in popular culture representations, women operators' distress is coded as related to their biology and the 'Myth of Motherhood'. The second half of the article introduces the two 'cases': interview data from a pregnant British Reaper operator, collected and published by Lee (2018), and George Brant's play *Grounded* (2017). Using the Myth of Motherhood and the concept of hysteria as my framework, I illuminate the gendered logics in representations of trauma resulting from drone warfare. I contend that whilst drone crews have experienced trauma, when the pilot or crew member is a woman there is an expectation that her trauma will be centred on or result from her identity as a (failed) mother.<sup>2</sup>

## **Motherhood/maternity and (drone) war**

Women have been part of militaries and warfare for as long as warfare has occurred, but this has often been in an informal or hidden capacity and in significantly smaller numbers than their male counterparts (Goldstein, 2003). Similarly, women have traditionally been described as having roles supporting warfare rather than actively taking part in the violence themselves (Elshtain, 1995; Enloe, 1983; Hicks Stiehm, 1982; Young, 2003).<sup>3</sup> The trope of the 'Beautiful Soul' who remains at

the home hearth and who requires the protection of the masculine 'Just Warrior' remains a strong one, and one which disciplines women's actions (Carreiras, 2006; Cohn, 2013; Elshtain, 1995; Goldstein, 2003). As such, war narratives have almost exclusively been constructed around the male head of the family going off to war in order to protect the home and hearth, and the stay-at-home wife, who provides the rationale for the warrior's actions, but has no active part in hostilities beyond birthing the next generation of just warriors and beautiful souls (Elshtain, 1995; Lee, 2013). This narrative myth has powerful disciplinary effects on our thinking about warfare, including drone warfare, because it scripts who can and cannot be considered intelligible as a member of a drone crew.

In the UK and USA, restrictions have prevented women from serving, or limited women's participation within the military to a small number of 'appropriate' roles – such as nursing and cooking.<sup>4</sup> It has only been very recently that women have been granted access to combat roles, particularly close combat roles (in the USA 2015, and in the UK 2017). And since then, even though legally permissible, there remains strong resistance to including women in close combat roles such as the infantry and the marines. This resistance is based around, I argue, antiquated ideas about what women are and should be capable of.

Women's physiology is the first line of argument against their inclusion within British and American militaries – their smaller physiques, lack of upper body strength and slower speed is cited as a reasonable rationale for women's exclusion (Davison, 2007: 60; Decew, 1995: 64). Therefore, it is argued, 'because of their almost inevitable physical inferiority to their male comrades, women cannot be regarded as fully equal in a Corps that prioritizes physical strength' (King, 2015: 379). However, there is a frontline role, which includes lethal operations, that does not require the warriors involved to run fast or carry heavy equipment: crewing armed drones. Where women's physical strength is not a barrier to their participation in violence, the argument then quickly turns to the second bar to women's military service – their disruptive presence.

For this, it is argued that women's presence in combat units prevents necessary bonding between soldiers, causes sexual tension and jealousy (this postulation being built on the idea that all soldiers are heterosexual, and that all men and women working together must, necessarily, be attracted to one another; both of which are problematic assumptions) (Simons, 2001; Van Honk, 2017). This argument ignores the results of research that indicates that women's presence in units is *not* disruptive (Basham, 2013; also Berkshire Consultancy Ltd, 2009, 2010; Cawkill et al., 2009; see Åhäll, 2016 for analysis), but (problematically) uses this 'disruptive presence' to explain high levels of sexual harassment and rape of servicewomen.<sup>5</sup> This then leads to the third argument against women's inclusion, which is of particular importance for this article. This is that women can and do 'get' pregnant.

It is stating the obvious that bearing children is a biological possibility that only (some) women (and some trans\* men) have. However, 'motherhood' is also a narrative that is made about how women can and should behave – both in terms of bearing children and in terms of acting in a caring 'motherly' manner.<sup>6</sup> Women's ability to 'get themselves pregnant' (ignoring that procreation requires a man's involvement) is used as a means of alluding to women's unsuitability for a military career because they can become undeployable at the most inconvenient times (Basham, 2013; Drury, 2014; Taber, 2011). Indeed, some argue that women deliberately 'get themselves pregnant' to avoid the violence, pain and distress of the front line in the bloody, gritty world of warfare (Drury, 2014; Van Creveld, 2001).<sup>7</sup>

Pregnant military women are traditionally removed from posts that involve killing because that killing has generally involved a measure of reciprocal risk.<sup>8</sup> The women who are the 'cases' in this article were both previously fighter pilots – one chose to make the move to piloting Reaper drones, the other was placed in that role after having a child. Neither could continue in her role as fighter

pilot whilst pregnant because the G-forces experienced in flying fast jets would be detrimental, even lethal, to the health of her unborn child. Additionally, if they continued to pilot fighter jets in military engagements, they faced risk of injury and death. However, in drone warfare, neither of these issues is pertinent. There is no G-force at play and no physiological reason why a pregnant woman cannot continue in her frontline, lethal role until she goes on maternity leave/gives birth/has her child, because there is little to no risk of physical injury or death.

Feminist scholars have investigated the way in which narratives of motherhood and maternity are employed to make sense of women's (participation in) violence. In *Mothers, Monsters and Whores* (2007), Sjoberg and Gentry trace the ways in which women's violence is explained through narratives relating to either their status as mothers (or failure to become mothers), their position as sociopaths whose abjections render them monsters (and therefore different from 'normal' women), or their sexual desires and/or deviance (associating their actions with ungovernable bodily impulses). Following on from these explorations, Åhäll (2011) argues that behind *all three* of these narratives is a primary organizing concern of motherhood and maternity.<sup>9</sup> She argues, therefore, that all women's violence can and should be understood through *representations* of women's capacity to give life, because women who are violent are constructed as failing in their 'natural destiny' to be 'life-giving', understood more broadly as a failure to be *women* (Skjelsbæk, 2001: 220). This is not the same as arguing that all women's political subjectivity is connected to the lived experience of motherhood/maternity, but rather that 'representations of agency [are] linked to subject positions within discursive practices' (Åhäll, 2011: 104). These 'maternal' representations help us to understand 'workings of power inherent in the way in which female perpetrators of political violence are written as subjects/objects within various discursive practices' (Åhäll, 2011: 104–105). Where women are involved in legitimate violence (as in part of the armed forces), their status remains an indeterminate one – simultaneously hyperfeminine and insufficiently feminine, invisible but hypervisible (Basham, 2013: 86). I focus on Åhäll's framework because she clearly differentiates between representations and actual motherhood, showing that women's participation in violence is presented as resulting from motherhood and/or maternal impulses, even where the individual(s) in question are not biological mothers or their motherhood is not (directly or tangentially) connected with their actions.

## Separating actual motherhood from the Myth of Maternity and hysteria

Describing women's violence as being understood through a Myth of Motherhood is not the same as arguing that all women's violence can and should be understood as linked to maternity and motherhood. Rather the Myth of Motherhood acts as an organizing principle in the *representation* of women's violence, comprised of 'unconscious ideologies' which write motherhood as 'natural. . . when it is . . . not natural, but a social and cultural construction' (Åhäll, 2012a: 109). This myth creates 'ideas about female bodies and the boundary between "natural"/"unnatural femininity"' based on the capacity of the female body to give birth and become a mother (Åhäll, 2012a: 109). Importantly, this *capacity* to give birth, regardless of whether or not the woman is *actually* a mother, is what is used to claim the 'naturalness' of women's caretaking abilities, a connection that is contested by feminist scholars who problematize the linkages of the biological and social (Chodorow, 1999; Ruddick, 1980). However, the Myth of Motherhood also connects the biological and the psychological in important ways that have not been adequately examined.

Although in this article I am focusing on women involved in drone warfare, I am not implying that women's biology *makes* them feminine, or hysterical or caring (or any other trait associated with femininity). Rather, when I use the term 'gender', I aim to explore how 'socially learned

behaviours, repeated performances, and idealized expectations . . . associated with . . . proscribed gender roles' discipline women's behaviour and how their actions are socially interpreted (Peterson and Runyan, 2010: 2). The performative nature of gender in this understanding does not negate the physicality of either gender or sex but rather refers to the meaning ascribed to that physicality, as such '[g]ender [is] both a mode of embodiment and a category of analysis' (Wilcox, 2017: 11; see also Butler, 1999). In using reported interview data and a playscript, I build on Zalewski's observation that '[w]e can glimpse some of [gender's] slipperiness . . . through the theatricality of [these women's] performances; the performativity of gender is not devoid of "actual" performances' (2015: 42), highlighting the porosity of the borders between fact and fiction, and the power of cultural representation. That I rely on the reporting of the 'real' interview data by another author further tangles the lines of fact/fiction: What is the place of interpretation and how is this expressed and contested in lived experiences? Additionally, the 'text' of the play is not a static discourse: *Grounded* will/might be performed differently by different actresses, their bodies moving differently, their intonation, emphasis – the apparent stability of the text rendered as slippery as those categories of fact/fiction, male/female, masculine/feminine.

In this article I draw on Åhäll's (2012a) 'Myth of Motherhood' as a narrative organizing trope and introduce a 'fictional' account of motherhood and drone warfare and data from a 'real-life' account of a pregnant British Reaper operator. I add quotation marks to the words 'fictional' and 'real-life' to highlight that the tenuousness of the distinction between these two categories is essential to interrogating the co-constitution of lived experiences with cultural representations and the way possibility is mapped out by the imaginable (Gordon, 2008). Post-structural and postmodern scholarship has argued that those things labelled 'truth', 'history' and 'scientific fact' are all really socially constructed 'fictions' (*inter alia* Denzin, 1996; Kleinberg, 2017; Park-Kang, 2015). Similarly, what is conceived of as 'fiction' may be of use for social science enquiry; indeed by using fiction it is possible to 'enable other kinds of sociological [and political] information to emerge' (Gordon, 2008: 25) which facilitates 'a consideration of a broader range of possibilities, known in a broader range of ways, than are currently permitted in IR' (Clapton and Shepherd, 2017: 9). I am particularly interested in the boundary between fact and fiction because how those facts and fictions are constructed is always a matter of politics – what is imaginable is informed by 'existing ideas and information' (Park-Kang, 2015: 370), but can 'break up categories around. . . thinking about war' (Zehfuss, 2004: 111). The presentation and the writing of the two pregnant women involved in drone warfare has, I argue, profound implications for breaking up or challenging categories to do with war, gender, motherhood, violence and maternity amongst others. They also have implications for thinking through the gendered connections between violence and emotions, hysteria and warfare, legitimacy and performing motherhood.

Grievances that, were the violent individuals men, would have been understood as political, or military, and perhaps legitimate are instead constructed as representing personal failures, lost love and irrational emotionality when the actors are women. This irrational emotionality is tied to a long history of medicalizing women's bodies and psychologies because of their reproductive capacities and, specifically, their wombs under the umbrella heading of 'hysteria'.<sup>10</sup> 'Hysteria' is the historico-medical term used to describe an ailment or neurosis, with varying symptoms, that was considered (variously) to be the result of a 'wandering womb', of consorting sexually with the devil/repressed sexual desires, or the 'natural' outcome of women's inherent physiological and emotional weakness (Meek, 2009; Micale, 1989; Veith, 1970). Whilst men were occasionally diagnosed as hysterics, the vast majority of sufferers were women and what *caused* women to be more susceptible to hysteria was their identity as women (Evans, 1992; Gherovici, 2010). There are two particularly important connections between the content of this article and the genealogy of hysteria. First is the connection between hysteria and the identity of the female as Other than the male,

as different and inferior to the stable masculine such that ‘hysteria [is] both a medical category and a critique of male-female relations’ (Gherovici, 2010: 60). Secondly, hysteria is connected with what Plato referred to as a woman’s ‘love of procreation’ (cited in Gherovici, 2010: 41), making it particularly useful for investigating the Myth of Motherhood and the representation of two pregnant drone operators. For example, the reflection that ‘[i]t seems that whenever a woman was hyperfeminine or not feminine enough, she was labelled as a hysteric’ (Evans, 1992: 40) is reflected in the conflicting ways that women soldiers are represented and this bears further unpacking as drone warfare develops.

I therefore use the term ‘hysteria’ in this article not to suggest a biological or medical condition which afflicts women’s minds because of the alleged delicacy of their reproductive organs, but rather to signal the continuing social and cultural relevance of the trope of the ‘hysterical woman’ in representations of women, and particularly women engaged in violence. What, therefore, does this mean, then, for the women who conduct drone warfare? And the way that they are portrayed? What is the nature of psychological distress in this particular form of violence? And how is hysteria implicated in the representations of women who experience it? But firstly, I provide a brief explanation of the rationale for including a playscript as ‘data’.

## The women of drone warfare

One of the main aims of this article is to provide an analysis of how women in drone warfare are represented and to consider how and why this matters for thinking about gendering international relations. As noted in the introduction, global politics is ‘produced and/or materialised. . . [through] a range of signifying and lived practices. . . that constitute popular culture’ (Grayson et al., 2009: 156). Popular culture matters for thinking about questions integral to international relations, and some of those questions relate to war. Imagining women as drone crews makes us ask questions about the ethics of those portrayals, and comparisons draw attention to ‘the impossibility of fully knowing war’ (Zehfuss, 2004: 120).

War has long been portrayed in popular culture, with representations in film, theatre, dance, poetry, literature and art, and international relations scholars have begun to consider what these representations can tell us about global politics and warfare (*inter alia* Åhäll, 2011; Bleiker, 2009; Clapton and Shepherd, 2017; Grayson et al., 2009; Moore and Shepherd, 2010; Weldes, 1999; Zalewski, 2015). As such, I am interested in the representation of women who conduct drone warfare and how this new military technology can sediment or disrupt existing conceptualizations of ‘the embodied subject-position of “women” as killer in war’ (Åhäll, 2016: 48). As Victoria Basham notes, ‘men and women often experience military service in very different ways on the basis of salient assumptions about gender and how it shapes wider social and political roles, particularly in relation to the perpetration of (organised) violence’ (2013: 49) to which I add that these different experiences are reflected in and informed by popular culture representations, marking the fluidity between the day-to-day life experiences and the imagined. What I explore in this article is how this unusual (but perhaps to become more normal) intersection between conducting lethal military operations and maternity/motherhood is both experienced in ‘real life’ (through interview data published by Lee [2018]) and represented in popular culture, specifically Brant’s (2017) play *Grounded*.

Blurred lines of ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ matter to thinking about representations of warfare and gender because popular culture is ‘an important site where power, ideology and identity are constituted, produced and/or materialised’ (Grayson et al., 2009: 156). Therefore, to engage with these two different sites of truth/representation I use ‘discourse-theoretical analysis’ (DTA) (Shepherd, 2008). In using DTA, I do not distinguish between the ‘discursive’ and ‘non-discursive’ in discourse,

instead envisioning it as something that enables ‘realities’ to become ‘real’ (Shepherd, 2008: 20), asking how discursive practices operate in popular culture, and how that is entangled with lived experience. Representations create a ‘bandwidth of political possibility’ which informs and structures the way in which we perceive options for being, subjectivity, subject positions and agency (Grayson et al., 2009: 156). Therefore, in this instance, I argue, the political possibility at stake is the intelligibility of women’s involvement in violence, particularly military violence. ‘Intelligibility’ acts as a ‘culturally constituted bordering [practice]. . .’ ordering who can or should be doing specific acts – here, conducting lethal drone strikes – and how these acts are ‘culturally made sense of’ (Åhäll, 2016: 49). To date, there has been no assessment of the way in which women are represented in drone warfare, and this is, therefore, the focus of this article.

Thinking through a play and interview data from female drone crews ‘demonstrate that violence and war are made possible through the representation of bodies in particular ways’ and by focusing on the way women’s bodies are represented it is possible to ‘consider the implications for service-woman’s lives. . .’ (Basham, 2013: 88, 49). The two examples I consider here are the play *Grounded* (2017) by George Brant and reported interview data from ‘Tara’ in *Reaper Force* (2018) by Peter Lee and I have chosen these examples because they are the only two pieces I have found that look only and specifically at female drone operators.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, they provide, as far as I am aware, the only two accounts of female drone operators who are pregnant or who have recently become mothers, providing an important and interesting juxtaposition of lived reality against the discursive organizing trope of the myth of motherhood.

In stating ‘reported’ interview data I do not intend to question the truthfulness or accuracy of Lee’s account, but rather to point out that (1) I have not collected the data myself; and (2) there will have been some form of amendment, however minor, to put the raw data into its published form which bears considering. For example, ‘Tara’ is a pseudonym, her identity disguised to protect her ‘personal security’ (Lee, 2018: xxiii), and it is interesting to set this against the way George Brant’s ‘Pilot’ is based on a real-life woman, Major Stephanie Kelson, “‘Vapor” to her peers, and pregnant at 37. . .’ (Trueman, 2017) which further illuminates the methodological importance of acknowledging the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction and the connections between representation and lived reality. In thinking about a theatrical representation of a female drone operator, I move beyond just thinking about how this woman is represented in the written text, but also consider how this character is embodied through the play and how this sits against the interview data. Specifically, in the analysis of these two women I draw a distinction between the representation of maternity and motherhood and lived experience as it relates to the construction of women as psychologically incapable of conducting war as a result of their life-giving wombs.

Beyond focusing on women who crew armed drones, this article is concerned specifically with how stress and trauma experienced by those women is represented. I noted in the introduction that war often involves periods of acute stress and these can include traumatizing experiences. Therefore, before introducing the two cases of the article the following section briefly explores the kinds of trauma drone crews can face.

### *The trauma of drone warfare*

Whilst their distance from the theatre of war makes physical injury unlikely for drone crews, there is increasing evidence that psychological injury is quite possible. Where crews were previously considered to be at risk of being desensitized by ‘killing by remote control’ (Alston and Shamsi, 2010; Asaro, 2013), anecdotal evidence began to emerge that suggested that the reality was quite different. Whilst drone crews are certainly physically remote from the theatre in which the drones are being flown, and in which missiles are being dropped, they experience a strange kind of ‘distant

intimacy' as a result of persistent surveillance operations (Williams, 2015). Having to kill individuals whom the crews feel they have come to know can have profound and sometimes extremely negative effects on the well-being of drone crews. Many have commented on their own struggles during and after operating Reaper drones (*inter alia* Abe, 2012; Chow, 2013; Linebaugh, 2013; Maurer, 2015; Woods, 2015) and qualitative studies on US drone crews have drawn a complex picture (Bryan et al., 2018; Chappelle et al., 2014, 2019; Ouma et al., 2011) that 'create[s] a very consistent narrative outlining the serious trauma [crews] have experienced. . .' (Bentley, 2018: 93–94). Where interview data has been collected, some experiences have been described as 'horrifying' (Linebaugh, 2013) and 'traumatic' (Chow, 2013) and it is easy to understand why scenarios like watching '[IS fighters] just killing everyone' (Lee, 2018: 45) or having a 'front row of watching our own soldiers getting blown up' (Clark, 2019: 118) could cause distress to those watching. It is therefore not surprising when individuals note 'I've seen one or two videos which I wish I hadn't watched . . . I have shed tears from time to time. . .' (Cole, 2017) and 'I had my last sortie . . . and the following day I came out in hives' (Serle and Fielding-Smith, 2015).

### 'Tara'

Tara, a former Tornado Weapons System Officer, is not the only woman to have or to currently fly Reaper in either the UK or US air forces, but she is the first (British) pilot to have done so whilst pregnant. Tara was, at the time, based at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire with XIII Squadron and she continued to conduct operations until the eighth month of her pregnancy (Lee, 2018: 117). We learn from Lee's book that Tara lives with her partner, Marcus, who is in the Royal Navy. Tara's original squadron was closed in 2010 and, as she sought to find a new career path, '[a]n influencing factor in that decision was how best to have some quality married life' which encouraged her to consider a drone squadron (Lee, 2018: 126–127).

Much of the chapter is written as if from Tara's perspective. For example, in the section on her body changing through her pregnancy, Lee writes, '[s]he had been glad of a break. Her desire to empty her bladder had been slightly more urgent than usual' (2018: 116) and '[i]n the coming months the physical changes would happen so gradually that she would hardly notice the tiny adjustments she was making' (Lee, 2018: 116). There are interjections where the author/interviewer is more visible and the conversation between him and Tara is made more obvious, but in general the aim appears to be to provide a 'through-her-eyes' description. Lee notes this distinction in the book's preface, stating that he has tried to be 'honest, fair and accurate' (Lee, 2018: xxiv), and my discussion of this here is not meant to imply any critique of that effort. Rather, in making this author/interviewer/interviewee dynamic explicit, I gesture again to the fluidity of fact/fiction, truth/representation and the way in which the borders between those two categories are, necessarily, blurred.

Tara's position as the 'first' pregnant British Reaper crew member means that she was something of a 'guinea pig' for the RAF (Lee, 2018: 117). Tara and her squadron leaders felt their way through what was feasible and what changes to her regular deployment were required by a body growing a new human. In terms of physiology, the only issue they could discern was tiredness: 'I was definitely more tired . . . I just quietly stopped being programmed for night shifts after I fell asleep on duty. . . It was a long blink really – I wouldn't even say I woke up. . .' (Lee, 2018: 129). This experience of pregnancy in the military is obviously very different from what would normally be the experience of a frontline officer who becomes pregnant, particularly if that woman were flying an aircraft, a scenario in which she would immediately be medically re-graded and 'screened from operational duty [including] weapon firing' (Royal Air Force, 2017: 5).

There is also some discussion of the way in which pregnancy may or may not have affected Tara's emotional state. Lee asks: 'And what was it like flying Reaper and using weapons while



pregnant?’ to which Tara responds: ‘I think some people may have thought I was a bit more hormonal, a bit more – not emotional – maybe a bit more angry. . . Put it this way, the pregnancy didn’t make it harder’ (Lee, 2018: 128). I am interested here in Tara’s phrasing: ‘I think some people may have thought’ – is different from saying ‘I felt more angry’ or ‘I felt more hormonal’. I am also drawn to the way she is quick to state that she was not more emotional – a label used to deride women’s concerns as connected with their irrational, hormonal, wombs. But she does acknowledge that *others* may have labelled her as hormonal – suggesting that the narratives about what it means to be pregnant are alive and well *even when* women are able to continue to do their jobs – including conducting warfare.

As noted earlier in the article, in conventional arguments ‘women are seemingly portrayed as being unable to kill because they are, or could be, mothers’, and where they do kill they are represented as being able to do so because of failed motherhood, abnormal sexuality or some other form of deviance related to (in)fertility (Åhäll, 2012b: 291). What does this then mean for women who are pregnant and engaged in killing? Tara’s account indicates that, when pressed to consider it, ‘the pregnancy didn’t make it harder’ to kill, but she is reluctant to give much more detail to the (male) interviewer (Lee, 2018: 128). We cannot know if her reluctance to elaborate results from personal reticence, a perception of business-as-usual despite pregnancy, a desire to avoid conforming to the ‘hormonal pregnant woman’ stereotype, or something altogether different. Lee notes that Tara ‘identifies herself strongly as the “Just Warrior”, who happened to be pregnant when she was killing enemy fighters. . .’ and identifies particularly with ‘a group of Kurdish women fighters of the YPJ’ (Lee, 2018: 129) – to Tara, it seems, her pregnancy is secondary to her identity as a service-woman. That she identifies strongly with ‘Women’s Protection Units’ (an alternative moniker for the YPJ) suggests that she is comfortable with her role as a *female* warrior, but that this, and the hormonal storm of her pregnancy, does not prevent her in any way from being the professional equal of her male counterparts.

Lee and her partner discuss the potential effect of the enemy’s knowing that they have been killed by a woman, and a pregnant one to boot, as having ‘a huge impact’ (2018: 131). Lee points out that for the members of IS who have been killed this way ‘there is no Paradise, no virgins, no priapic eternity’ and Marcus states that knowing they were killed by a woman ‘would absolutely tear [the enemy] apart’ (2018: 131). Here it is interesting to note that there is an undercurrent suggesting that the enemy would have a strong *emotional* response to being targeted by a woman – a move that feminizes and ‘others’ the IS fighters. It is a shame that although Lee notes that ‘[i]t is a phenomenon that most, if not all women Reaper crew members are aware of’ and that Tara raised the subject, we don’t get to hear any further detail of her thoughts on the issue (Lee, 2018: 131).

Tara’s partner ‘is less reticent about offering his recollections’ of Tara’s state of mind during her pregnancy, noting ‘[t]here were some days where you’d wake up and think. . . I feel sorry for the person sitting next to her for the next six hours because if they look at her the wrong way. . .’ (Lee, 2018: 128). And there, the discussion on the subject ends. Tara’s emotional state, because of her pregnancy, because of the surge of hormones associated with impending motherhood, is left hanging with a question mark (apparently largely made by male observers) that could raise questions about teamwork, collegiality and operational fitness. Women’s motherhood affecting their operational fitness is also a key theme in my second example of George Brant’s play *Grounded*.

### ‘Pilot’

*Grounded* is a one-woman play written by George Brant which debuted in 2012 and swiftly became very popular. It won the National New Play Network’s Smith Prize, was staged in the USA and UK, and starred Anne Hathaway in one production (Miller, 2017; Morrison, 2014). The play’s only part is a female fighter pilot who remains nameless but is described in some detail:

a woman in her mid-to-late 30s. . . distant vision of at least 20/200 but corrected to 20/20, and near vision of 20/40 but corrected to 20/20. She should have a sitting height of between 2 foot 9 inches and 3 foot 4 inches, and a vertical standing height of between 5 foot 4 inches and 6 foot 5 inches tall. . . with no more than 32% body fat. She should be able to complete a 1.5 mile-run in 13 minutes and 56 seconds or less, as well as complete 50 sit-ups and 27 push-ups. . .

reflecting the military requirements for her fighter pilot role (Brant, 2017: 11). At the beginning, 'Pilot' is confident and brash, proud of her status as a pilot and unapologetic of that pride: 'I had earned this. . . It's the respect/It's the danger. . .' (2017: 13), and describing herself as a 'Rockstar' (2017: 15). She loves her flight suit, being up in the blue of the sky in her jet (nicknamed 'Tiger') and being 'one of the boys': 'I drink with my boys and we tell stories about flying' (2017: 14). Pilot becomes pregnant and, on return from maternity leave, is moved from her beloved fighter jet to Reaper drones. The pilot is initially devastated by her redeployment to the 'chairforce', and asks her Commander if she is being punished for falling pregnant and taking maternity leave: 'I say bullshit. . . I say is this punishment?' (2017: 24). Being 'grounded' and relegated to the 'chairforce' takes some getting used to but she becomes reconciled by the twin, if apparently opposing, appeals of being able to kill 'bad guys' and being able to spend quality time with her family:

The drones are a gift

I have been given a gift

I get to fly again

Sort of

But I will not be eight thousand miles away

while I do it

I will see my daughter grow up

I will kiss my husband goodnight every night. (2017: 27)

However, she continues to loathe the comparison between the grey world shown on the drone computer screens and the bright, freeing blue of the sky she used to fly in 'I dream of it though/ I dream of blue all the same' (2017: 43).

The distinction between the grey world and the world of colour is an important motif in the play, which focuses on the psychological implications of drone warfare, in particular the impact on the operators of close observation alongside lethal strikes and the perpetual cycling between home and war. The blurring of the grey worklife bleeds into her homelife in the most intimate moments: 'I'm on top of him and I close my eyes and I see grey for a second' (2017: 36).

As she settles into her role, Pilot notices, apparently abstractly, some of the distressing sights of drone warfare:

Are those?

I didn't notice that last time

Body parts

Those must be body parts

Huh. . . (2017: 40)

Similarly, considering the guiltiness of the military-aged males who are the primary targets, she touches on some of the ethical issues around drone warfare and the debate about ‘fairness’:

It’s not fair

Not really

We should make an announcement:

Attention People of the Grey Desert

Everything is Witnessed

The Moment You Step Outside You are Under Suspicion

That would be fair. (2017: 42)

These pronouncements of guilt and the sight of flying body parts begins to take its toll on Pilot, as does the repeated transition between her life as drone operator and that of mother/partner. She notices a CCTV camera at the mall:

Someone is watching us

That’s fine

Fair enough

But Attention People of the Boulevard Mall:

My Daughter is Not the Guilty and her Stroller is Not a Jeep. . . (2017: 44)

The play culminates in the pilot’s disobeying orders and refusing to kill a terrorist because she hallucinates that her daughter is on the ground with this man:

[the sensor operator] locks the laser crosshairs dead on

He locks on and I wait for the call to push my button

. . .

But then

The girl

Her face. . .

I see it clearly I can see her

It's Sam

It's not his daughter it's mine. . . (2017: 66–67)

Despite her efforts to avoid the Hellfire missile being released, another crew member takes the shot and kills 'the Prophet', as her commander notes:

We had our eye on you Major

For weeks

The warning signs

Everything is Witnessed. (2017: 68)

As a result of her refusal to follow orders and make the strike, Pilot is court martialled, fully grounded, with her final words to the audience suggesting that she still believes her daughter was killed:

Everything is Witnessed

You who have slaughtered my child

Sealed me in this tomb. . .

Though You Mark Each and Every Door with Blood None of the Guilty Will Be Spared. (2017: 70)

I am interested in this play because not only is the pilot's pregnancy and motherhood the background to the story, and the reason she is flying drones, but it is also a core component in her failure to be able to cope with the psychological rigours of this kind of warfare. Additionally, her inclusion of her child in her various hallucinations and mental breakdown cements the connection between her motherhood and her 'hysteria'.

What is striking is that 'one of the defining parameters of the play – the fact that the pilot is a woman – only came to [the playwright Brant] after he had started to think about the role of pilots and the psychological and emotional pressures on them as individuals' (De Angelis, 2014: 114). Here are two core elements: that the gender of the pilot is a 'defining parameter', and that making her a female character hinges on a reflection of emotion – suggesting that thinking about the emotional and psychological elements of drone warfare required a female character. I would also add, that by making this female pilot firstly pregnant and then a mother, and then also having her experience a mental breakdown which centres on her child is strongly illustrative of the Myth of Motherhood.

In the descriptions of what makes drone warfare possibly traumatic, few if any of the accounts made public reference to parenthood in any way. Why then in representations of drone warfare, when the operator is a woman, is it expected that her status as a parent will be heavily implicated in her experience of trauma/PSTD? I contend that because a woman's subjectivity and agency remains so heavily tied to her capacity or experience of giving birth/being a mother, we expect this

to be the primary marker of her identity, and where this ‘life-giving’ identity conflicts with a ‘life-taking’ one, we expect the results to be a violent breakdown of psychological wholeness. Pilot’s eventual emotional breakdown is evidenced, in part, by an operational failure. Although she is no longer pregnant, it is her motherhood and her hallucination of her daughter as a figure on the ground that makes her refuse to kill and indicates her failed status as a drone pilot. Consider Åhäll’s comments on another fictional woman who kills:

the last scene of the film can be seen . . . to effectively punish Maya for being an atypical woman and masculinized subject, for ‘being a killer’. . . the film’s ending with Maya crying concludes the story by writing the heroine of war as an emotional weak feminine subject ultimately at a loss with regards to who she is . . . (Åhäll, 2016: 56)

These sentences, with the name ‘Maya’ replaced with ‘Pilot’, and ‘film’ with ‘play’, could be used to describe the finale of *Grounded*, with a woman failing in her role as warrior because of her status as a mother. In reviews of *Grounded*, the Pilot’s identity as a mother is highlighted: ‘[the actress’s] voice tore through the air with the anguish of a mother whose child is in mortal danger’ (Morrison, 2014: 167); ‘her daughter made her give up her life as a fighter jet pilot, but one of the few happy moments the pilot experiences in her capacity as a mother makes her lose her life as a drone operator’ (Van Honk, 2017: 40). Therefore, whilst De Angelis (2014: 114) argues that ‘[t]he play . . . is perhaps more about parenthood than motherhood’, I contend that this misses integral elements of the play, that it is her motherhood, with all the associated gendered logics, that wins out. As Miller argues, ‘Brant seems to imply that the maternal instinct is inescapable and the façade of masculinity the female warrior must adopt is an illusion, only to be dominated by biology in the end’ (2017: 13).

## Conclusion

It is perhaps not novel to state that warfare is gendered, drone warfare is gendered and the representations of drone warfare are gendered. Neither is it novel to note that conducting warfare, particularly killing and seeing people killed, is stressful – including if those killings are done via drone. But what I have explored in this article is the way in which the gendering of drone warfare, as an example of women’s violence, is tied to and co-constituted by two concepts, motherhood and hysteria, that are used to frame the trauma caused by that violence as somehow less legitimate and less rational than the male equivalent. Situating interview data against a play, I have looked at how women are produced through these discourses as subjects, and as such, aim to write an ‘ideational reading of female agency in political violence’, in both ‘fictional’ representations and from ‘factual’ interview data (Åhäll, 2012b: 290). I have used the blurred lines between fact and fiction to show the political importance of these concepts for reproducing narratives of women’s unsuitability for conducting war because of their potential to become mothers. Both motherhood and hysteria draw parallels between women’s physiology and psychology in ways that are used to discipline women’s behaviour, and by highlighting this it is possible to shed new light on our understanding of how drone warfare (and warfare more generally) is deeply gendered.

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## Notes

1. I offer the following caveat: This article is not claiming that women's participation in violence is a good thing, or that women's participation in the military means that this institution is becoming better or more equal. As feminist peace scholars have noted, '[t]he feminist peace project is partly constituted by its antimilitarism and commitment to developing nonviolent relations', including protesting against war (Chatterjee, 2015: 204). But of interest to this article is that many of these methods have hinged on an identity of 'the mother' or 'mothering' (Confortini, 2017; Di Leonardo et al., 1985; Gentry, 2009). Therefore, I present this article on the basis that the women in the military, and in drone warfare, exist and warrant research, rather than a normative boon for the feminist cause.
2. I bracket 'failed' here because in the play *Grounded* which is assessed in this article, the protagonist's capacity to be a good drone pilot is explored alongside her capacity to be a good mother, and thus once she begins to struggle with motherhood her abilities as a drone pilot come under threat, and vice versa.
3. In particular, as part of the military family, reflecting particular, traditional ideas about the ideal heteronormative household (Aducci et al., 2011; Enloe, 2000, 1983).
4. I focus in this article on the UK and USA because they are currently the only two countries using armed Reaper drones.
5. These critics cite the high levels of sexual harassment and rape of servicewomen as evidence of this issue, ignoring that assault and rape are committed for a range of reasons, not many related to sexual attraction (Baaz and Stern, 2009; Pankhurst, 2009).
6. Within reports about women soldiers, those individuals are described in terms that relate to women's 'innate' caring tendencies (Åhäll, 2012a; Tidy, 2017; Welland, 2010).
7. Indeed, Basham notes that these opinions are also 'documented as a salient belief among servicemen. . .' (2013: 73)
8. See, for example, British Army, 2019; Royal Air Force, 2017.
9. Gentry and Sjöberg address Åhäll's claims in their subsequent book '*Beyond Mothers, Monsters and Whores*' (2015).
10. The Myth of Motherhood and the discourses of hysteria ignore that reproduction requires both male and female gametes and that some women do not have wombs, some wombs cannot reproduce, and some women choose not to reproduce.
11. The other possible source was that referencing the drone sensor operator USAF staff sergeant known as 'Sparkle' (Maurer, 2015), but this account is short and written in a very sensationalist style and I wanted to compare *Grounded* with an account substantiated by high-quality research.

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