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To cite this article: Emma Dolan & Nataliya Danilova (2022): “To those who choose to follow in our footsteps”: making women/LGBT+ soldiers (in)visible through feminist “her-story” theater, International Feminist Journal of Politics, DOI: [10.1080/14616742.2022.2097936](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2022.2097936)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2022.2097936>



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Published online: 02 Aug 2022.



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“To those who choose to follow in our footsteps”: making women/LGBT+ soldiers (in)visible through feminist “her-story” theater

Emma Dolan ^a and Nataliya Danilova ^b

^aDepartment of Politics and Public Administration, University of Limerick, Limerick, Republic of Ireland; ^bDepartment of Politics and International Relations, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, UK

ABSTRACT

Building on Judith Butler’s understanding of visibility as “the object of continuous regulation and contestation,” art/aesthetics studies in international relations, and feminist theater studies, we identify feminist “her-story” theater as a unique site where Western “gender-/sexuality-inclusive” soldiering is visibilized, contested, and subverted. Drawing on ethnographic observations of two award-winning dramas, interviews with artists and military hosts, and findings from a wider research project on contemporary British military culture, we reveal the key role of heteronormative and patriarchal cultural discourses in reproducing the ambivalent positionalities of women/LGBT+ soldiers. We argue that the very visibility of women/LGBT+ soldiers on the stage paradoxically operates to make the complexities of – and struggles against – masculinized heteronormative military cultures invisible. Furthermore, despite artists’ attempts to dissociate empowerment through soldiering from the problematic context of modern conflicts, “her-story” theater ultimately entrenches gendered/racialized hierarchies that normalize Western military interventions. We conclude that only through sustained feminist reflection on the contours of “imagined” futures of female/LGBT+ soldiering can this persistently problematic (in)visibility be productively disrupted.

KEYWORDS Gender; feminism; LGBT+; military; theater

Introduction

Walking up to Hepburn House, a 10-minute walk away from the rest of the bustling, colourful festival, the atmosphere is a stark contrast – quiet, residential, conservative – it’s like this place is at the fringe of the Fringe! (Dolan, field notes, 2019)

CONTACT Emma Dolan  emma.dolan@ul.ie 

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Our foray into the world of “her-story” military theater is inseparable from our sometimes exciting, sometimes uncomfortable experiences of Army at the Fringe, an unusual theater located on the underground floor of the 51st Infantry Brigade and Army Headquarters in Edinburgh’s Hepburn House Army Reserve Centre. Despite being set within the context of the Edinburgh International Festival, known as the Fringe, which has evolved as a platform for cutting-edge “art of every genre” and advertises itself as a welcoming space for “an explosion of creative energy from around the globe” (Edinburgh International Fringe Festival 2021), our experience of Army at the Fringe was often one of awkward transition from the noisy, crowded streets of Edinburgh to the quiet conservatism of a regimented, masculinized space. In this article, we argue that this feeling of awkwardness is symptomatic of the persistently ambivalent, “deeply odd” positionality of women/LGBT+ soldiers within Western, purportedly “gender-/sexuality-inclusive” militaries (West and Antrobus 2021; see also Bulmer 2013; Strand and Kehl 2019). Through an analysis of gendered/sexed/racialized interpellations of soldiering embodied on stage, feminist “her-story” theater offers us a unique way to access often controversial debates around the visibility of female/LGBT+ soldiering bodies.

This article expands upon Butler’s (2015) argument that visibility is continually regulated and contested (see also Åhall 2018; Sjöberg 2012); Bleiker’s point that through visibilities and invisibilities, art exposes the “brokenness of political reality” (Bleiker 2018, 23; see also Möller 2018; Sylvester 2009); and claims that feminist theater – “as a form of cultural representation made by women, which is informed by the situated perspectives of its makers, its performers, its spectators and its critics” (Goodman 1998, 198) – creates “moments of utopian possibility” in which to imagine “feminist futures” (French 2017, 2; see also Aston and Harris 2006, 3–4; Rosenberg 2016). While military inclusion has been studied extensively through analyses of soldiers’ own experiences and institutional policies focused on diversity (Basham 2009, 2013; Brownson 2014; Chapman and Eichler 2014; King 2017; MacKenzie 2015; Wadham et al. 2018), we argue that explorations of cultural sites where such policies and experiences are visibilized are key to understanding how the military and artists collaboratively work to perform, contest, and subvert the goals of gender-/sexuality-/race-inclusive soldiering.

Our analysis of the particularly messy performative conditions of (in)visibility that perpetuate the positionalities of women/LGBT+ soldiers in feminist “her-story” dramas enriches the discussion of long-standing traditions of artist–military collaboration (Bourke 2017; Kerby, Baguley, and McDonald 2019; Möller 2018). The greater inclusion of women/LGBT+ soldiers in Western militaries during the Global War on Terror (GWOt) meant that, from 2001 onward, women/LGBT+ artists were, often for the first time, granted access to previously closed, male-dominated militarized spaces and experiences (Green and Brown 2019; Kay and Reynolds 2016; Koobak

2019; Messham-Muir 2019). As our analysis demonstrates, it is reductive to approach artist–military collaboration through the lens of subversion or co-optation. Instead, expanding on Bulmer’s (2013) premise, we suggest that it is vital to critically interrogate the ambiguities crystallized through the positionalities of women/LGBT+ soldiers performed on stage.

Empirically, we compare two award-winning productions from the 2019 Army at the Fringe program of the Fringe – *Hallowed Ground: Women Doctors in War (HG)* by the Australia-based Shift Theatre, and *Dead Equal (DE)* by Lila Palmer and Rose Miranda Hall, based in the United Kingdom (UK) – because they were advertised as advancing feminism and gender equality within British/Australian militaries and societies.¹ That they were staged at Edinburgh’s Hepburn House Army Reserve Centre allowed us to expand our analysis beyond the “time and place” of the productions (Cree 2019, 168) to reflect on the militarized spaces framing them. We draw on auto-ethnographies of the productions, semi-structured interviews with artists and military hosts, Twitter/Facebook feeds, and *Live Equal*, a photo portrait exhibition that ran alongside *Dead Equal*. In conducting observations and interviews, we adopted the positionality of “feminist spectators as critics” (Dolan 2012), which is key to conducting feminist research in international relations (IR) (see for example Ackerly and True 2006) as well as feminist theater studies (see for example Aston and Harris 2006). This involves paying attention to how the subjectivities of women/LGBT+ soldiers are embodied and dressed/cross-dressed on stage, the kinds of affective energies generated by the performances, and how these embodied, affective, and temporal positionalities resonate with cultural visions of gender-/sexuality-inclusive soldiering and wider “feminist dynamics and struggles” (Aston 2020, 13).

Following Cree’s (2019, 162) observation that “dramatic subjects of theatre are at once the product of text, context and discourse, and embodied performances of narrative and testimony,” we deployed a “close reading” of the dramas. We used Foucauldian discourse analysis and feminist methodology as key means of interrogating instances when feminine/LGBT+ agentic qualities were performed, visibilized, and/or placed in marginalized positions in relation to the heteronormative male soldier (Ackerly and True 2006, 245; Basham and Bulmer 2017; Foucault 1989; Shepherd 2017, 7–11).

Though we utilized some information from interviews with military hosts of Army at the Fringe, this article focuses on insights arising from interviews with women and non-binary artists. As feminist scholars, we shared our interviewees’ strong commitment to agendas of emancipation, inclusion, visibility, and justice for women and gender/sexual minorities. We also shared a feeling of being outsiders to the military, intrigued to have been invited to enter otherwise closed militarized spaces. However, while we as feminist IR scholars perceived the performances as windows into conflict, by contrast, women/

non-binary artists saw their craft primarily as the making visible – and therefore empowering – of women and minority soldiers (interview with *HG* cast, August 17, 2019; interview with *DE* cast, October 4, 2019). As we discuss later, this reluctance on the part of artists to discuss the politics of women's/LGBT+ empowerment through soldiering within/not outside the politics of war making can be attributed to the moral dilemmas associated with the GWOt (see for example Green and Brown 2019; Messham-Muir 2019).

The article proceeds as follows. We begin by discussing the paradoxes of visibilizing gender/sexuality-based military inclusion in the context of the GWOt. We then position Army at the Fringe as a unique space framing the theatrical performance of women's/LGBT+ inclusion. We argue that though *Hallowed Ground* presents the gender-groundbreaking subjectivities of “patriotic sisters,” “professionals/honorary men,” and “saviors,” it also reinstates prevalent norms of masculinized, heteronormative military culture alongside the gendered/racialized hierarchies that normalize Western conflicts past and present. The second case study, *Dead Equal*, interrogates the subjectivities of “adventurous tomboy,” “nurse/(re)gendered? soldier,” and “ambivalent body.” We argue that the positionality of the LGBT+ soldier is situated in ambivalent relation to the woman soldier and that militarized femininity is reproduced as supportive but expendable. The conclusion debates the “not yet visible” and the possible futures opened/closed to women/LGBT+ soldiers, arguing that only through the critical collective efforts of feminist artists, activists, scholars, and soldiers can cultural barriers to inclusion be productively challenged.

Visibility, soldiering, and art/theater

Visibility is a central focus for feminist and queer theorists, starting from the conception that to be publicly visible is a step toward remedying social injustices and discrimination (Aston and Harris 2006; Elshtain 1987; Enloe 2000; Goldstein 2001; Lind 2014; Richter-Montpetit 2018; and many others). Within this large body of literature, we find Butler's (2015, 41) notion that the “field of appearance” is highly ambivalently regulated and “establishes who can be seen, heard, and recognized” as the most productive overarching framework in which to interrogate subversive forms of visibilizing women/LGBT+ soldiers through feminist “her-story” theater.

Specifically, Butler's framework allows for an understanding that the positionalities through which gendered/sexualized/racialized (soldiering) subjects become visible are *inherently* contradictory, as recognized within queer/feminist IR, critical military studies, and contemporary studies of art and feminist theater. Drawing on this diverse scholarship, we use the prefix (*in*)visibility to highlight the often conflicting discourses of gender-/sexuality-inclusive soldiering. This premise allows us to expand on Cree's analysis of how, through

appearance on a theatrical stage, the modern sovereign (male) hero becomes “a recognisable and ambiguous subject” (Cree 2017, 124) by arguing that feminist “her-story” theater does critical work in spotlighting such female/LGBT+ sovereign subjecthood.

For decades, queer theorists have highlighted that visibility has often been articulated through “coming out” and Gay Pride as a means of contesting the “private” status of queerness and pervasive stereotypes concerning homosexuality (Baker 2017; Heckert 2004; Lind 2014; Raymond 2003). However, Bulmer (2013, 140) demonstrates that the “highly visible and public spectacle of LGBT personnel at Pride produced moments of patriarchal confusion in policy-makers” and that this visibility did not directly challenge the heteronormativity of the British military (see also Belkin 2001, 2013; Riseman 2017). Bulmer’s analysis highlights the emerging tension between the increasing visibility of LGBT+ soldiers within Western militaries as a result of some successes in inclusion policies, and the limited effect of this inclusion-driven visibility on dominant masculine military culture. Furthermore, scholars have observed that LGBT+ soldiers’ visibility within Western militaries participating in the GWOt was not only limited but also (mis)used to reify gendered/sexed/racialized justifications for Western war making (Haritaworn, Kunstman, and Posocco 2014; Puar 2005; Weber 2016). The international arena has thereby been ordered “according to how well states ‘treat their homosexuals’ (Puar 2005) and/or women with this transformed normativity being referred to as ‘homonationalism’ (Puar 2005) or ‘femonationalism’ (Farris 2017)” (Strand and Kehl 2019, 299). The homonationalism and femonationalism embodied by Western gendered/sexed/racialized soldiers have become possible through the contrast between a few visible Western soldiering bodies and countless invisible gendered/racialized Others, mostly located within Middle Eastern societies.

Second, expanding scholarship on women’s accession to combat positions across Western militaries in the 2000s problematized the contradictory conditions of inclusion and (in)visibility of women soldiers. Whereas some scholars have highlighted widening opportunities for women through concepts such as “gender equivalency” (Brownson 2014) and “regendering” (Duncanson and Woodward 2016), others have pointed out that the increasing visibility of uniformed female-identified bodies has yet to lead to productive visions of militarized femininities, with women often framed as “ambivalent” bodies, “incomplete” soldier “tomboys,” desexualized “honorary men,” and/or “sluts and bitches,” all of which, to various extents, sustain the dominance of male heteronormative soldiering (Basham 2009, 2013, 2016; Belkin 2013; Brownfield-Stein 2017; Crowley and Sandhoff 2017; Dittmer and Apelt 2008; Enloe 2014; Ette 2013; Fiala 2008; King 2017; MacKenzie 2015; Wadham et al. 2018; Woodward and Winter 2007). Furthermore, “femonationalism,” embodied by the figure of the

Western “equal-opportunity soldier” (Eichler 2013, 256), works to reproduce the gendered/racialized hierarchies used to legitimize Western interventions, further accentuating the contradictory positionalities of women/LGBT+ soldiers (Enloe 2014; Hunt 2006; Khalid 2011; Shepherd 2017; Sjoberg 2010).

Finally, to capture the complex visibilities of gendered/sexualized subjects, we engage with feminist theater studies alongside the rapidly expanding scholarship on visual global politics (Bleiker 2009, 2018; Danchev 2009; Kerby, Baguley, and McDonald 2019; Möller 2018; Sylvester 2009; Vuori and Andersen 2018). Our analysis is built on three points. First, theater plays a key role in visibilizing the largely invisible soldiering bodies within Western societies’ participation in the GWoT. Many have noted that limited public visibility was granted to Western dead, injured, or returning soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan (Andersen and Möller 2013; Campbell and Shapiro 2007; Purnell 2021). Furthermore, as Welland (2017, 535) has shown, in the instances when “a liberal warrior’s body is reproduced” within artistic settings, its representational (hyper)visibility tends to be removed “from the ‘real’ – the everyday lived realities of those who inhabit this body and subjectivity.” Though playwrights often use “inventive approaches to docudramas and/or ‘theatre of the real,’” transforming “personal stories into dramatic texts that question the relationship between ‘facts and truth’” (Friedman 2010, 594; see also Beck 2018; Bourke 2017), the uniqueness of theater lies in its capacity to enliven this illusion of “real,” “authentic” soldiering and, in turn, to engage the audience through embodied emotional responses (Dolan 2001). Second, until recently, artists, playwrights, and scholars of contemporary conflicts have focused on the male soldier, with women/LGBT+ soldiers often rendered invisible (Beck 2018; Bourke 2017; Caso 2020; Corris 2017; Cree 2019; Kay and Reynolds 2016; Koobak 2019; Messham-Muir 2019; Reason 2017; Welland 2017). This outcome is both reflected in and reflective of the significant gender imbalance within the theater industries in the UK, the United States (US), and Australia, with women playwrights and directors constituting the minority (Aston 2020, 15) and an even smaller proportion of feminist and/or queer artists who focus on the experience of women/LGBT+ soldiers (see Friedman 2010). This triple marginalization has led to the invisibility of women/LGBT+ soldiers’ experiences on stage. Third, feminist theater studies can be instrumental in advancing discussions of gender-equal soldiering because of its commitment to imagining possible “feminist futures” that must visibilize intersectional experiences of diverse gendered/sexualized/racialized subjects (Aston and Harris 2006; Dolan 2001; Hill and Paris 2006).

The following section analyzes the unique conditions of artist–military collaboration at Army at the Fringe.

Visibilizing inclusion at Army at the Fringe

Army at the Fringe was devised by the local Army Engagement team in cooperation with the art managers of Summerhall Art Centre and introduced as part of the Fringe in 2017, running again in 2018 and 2019.² For three years, the city's Hepburn House Army Reserve Centre hosted five or six theatrical performances per year, each running 10 to 12 times.³ Support for the British Army's hosting of theatrical performances can be explained by three interconnected trends: (1) the perceived invisibility and "misunderstanding" of the British military by the public, deepened by the UK's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan (Basham 2013; Berndtsson, Dandeker, and Ydén 2015; Edmunds 2012); (2) the expansion of reserve units and the subsequent need to recruit more part-time "civilian" soldiers through the increasing visibility of military service (Basham and Catignani 2018; Edmunds et al. 2016; Higate et al. 2019); and (3) the drive to present the British Army as an equal-opportunity employer that has finally overcome its legacy of gender/sexuality/racial discrimination (Basham 2013, 2016; Bulmer 2013, 2017; Ware 2012). The subsequent overlap of these trends with nationwide marking of the centenary of World War I (2014–2018) set the scene for expanded artist–military collaboration.

What set Army at the Fringe apart from traditional state- and military-commissioned art projects (Bourke 2017; Brandon 2009; Corris 2017; Green and Brown 2019; Messham-Muir 2019) was the absence of clear contractual obligations, with most productions independently developed and funded.⁴ Therefore, Army at the Fringe emerged as a space co-constituted by the Army's and artists' often conflicting gendered/sexed/racialized interpellations of soldiering.

The Army's concern about perceived "misunderstanding" resulted in it encouraging artists, most of whom did not have prior military experience, to "look through the uniforms and try to understand us as individuals" (interview with Army Engagement, August 24, 2018) by living alongside the 51st Brigade at Hepburn House during the festival (the *Hallowed Ground* and *Dead Equal* production teams did so in 2019), eating and socializing in the officers' mess and performing at military bases.⁵ The artists' vulnerability in the artist–military collaboration was exposed through reminders that "the Army does not just rent out the place" (interview with Army Engagement, August 24, 2018) and that "it is better that the Army's story is told by others, but we hope it will be a positive one" (as summarized by a uniformed male soldier during the 2019 *Dead Equal* press conference dedicated to women soldiers). However, it is equally important to recognize the Army's own confusion over how to visibilize gender-/sexuality-/race-inclusive soldiering through art/theater; as one interviewee acknowledged with resignation, "art creates its own outputs" (interview with Army Engagement, August

24, 2018). Resonating with Cree's (2019) concept of sovereign subjecthood performed through "lively" theater, Army at the Fringe hosted productions that worked to reproduce and expose the ambivalences within the military's gendered/sexualized/racialized outlook.

Echoing "diversity talk" that aimed to communicate the Army's commitment to integrating women, LGBT+ people, and those from ethnic minority backgrounds (also described as "BAME soldiers"⁶; Basham 2009, 2013; Bulmer 2013; King 2017; Ware 2012), organizers presented Army at the Fringe as a space for representing inclusion: "The concept [was] to create a venue where we could allow artists to present their interpretations of ideas to do with soldiering ... or ideas that we think are important ... We care about female empowerment, equality, and diversity" (interview with Army Engagement, August 24, 2018). However, the 2017–2019 programs were dominated by male-artist-led productions. Apart from *5 Soldiers*, which included four men and one woman impersonating soldiers (see Purnell and Danilova 2018), four productions conveyed the story of women soldiers through all-female/non-binary casts, a common trend for feminist theaters (Aston 2020; Goodman 1998, 198). Considering the marginalization of women's/LGBT+ soldiering within Army at the Fringe, the Army has worked to increase the inclusive appeal of soldiering through the visibility of gendered/sexed/racialized bodies of *real* soldiers from diverse backgrounds at the ticket office and post-performance press conferences, alongside the introduction of a "gender-neutral" toilet during the 2019 program – black plastic sheets taped over urinals in a male bathroom.

Artists whom we interviewed saw Army at the Fringe as a chance to speak up against gender/sexuality/race-based inequalities. For the all-women producers and cast of *Hallowed Ground*, Army at the Fringe offered an opportunity to showcase "dynamic work with strong roles for women" and "about remarkable women" (Shift Theatre 2019; interview with *HG* cast, August 17, 2019). For *Dead Equal*, developed and performed by women/non-binary artists, Army at the Fringe presented opportunities to change perceptions: "I think women, queer people, people of colour need to see stories which do not cast them as secondary or expendable" (Palmer, in O'Donoghue 2019). Despite the Army's preference for contemporary soldiering because of its concerns over invisibility and the "misunderstanding" identified earlier, both "her-story" dramas introduced historical and contemporary characters simultaneously, exploring the theme of a "century-long service" from World War I to the modern day: "It's a tremendous relief for women to know they have powerful forebears" (Palmer, in O'Donoghue 2019).

The following sections interrogate the use of complex temporalities in creating particular gendered/sexed/racialized positionalities through which the story about women/LGBT+ soldiers was visibilized and reproduced/disrupted in the two dramas.

Hallowed Ground: Women Doctors in War

After viewing two plays with all-male casts, I feel excited about a chance of viewing a play in which “four women converse across a century” (play’s poster). The performance begins with a scene of surgery in which actresses, dressed in military uniforms from different eras, operate on a pile of military crates. The crates remind me of all-male plays, but I push this feeling aside ... At a certain point in the play, women start conversing with each other, and I feel strangely involved. (Danilova, field notes, 2019)

Adopting key feminist theater principles of emphasizing “women’s roles as makers and spectators, ... as characters in plays, and as performers” (Goodman 1998, 198), conversation in *Hallowed Ground* takes center stage. “If these women could speak to each other – and to an audience – what would they say?” reflected the cast and producers (Brock and Hopkins, in O’Donoghue 2019). The performative logic of “having a conversation” does not require many physical actions. Instead, it occurs through creative reworkings of women doctors’ stories⁷ and the appearance of female bodies on stage, which function as “both the instrument and a source of a text” (Tait 1998, 225). In *Hallowed Ground*, the imagined conversation between eight Australian women military doctors who lived during different historical periods is embodied by four actresses, three of whom play two or three characters simultaneously. The complex temporality of the play is sometimes confusing, signposted by putting on and taking off a white doctor’s coat over the characters’ historical/contemporary military uniforms. The character whose identity remains stable through the play is Tam, a Vietnam-born Australian doctor who served in Iraq, played by an actress of Asian descent. This embodied dynamic is based on the interchangeability of white female bodies, reflecting the dominance of whiteness as key to Australian stories of gender-equal soldiering, the Australian feminist movement, and Australian feminist theater, all of which struggle to bring forth the experiences of Indigenous and ethnic minority communities (Caso 2020; Drozdewski 2016; Tait 1998). This embodied, racialized dynamic exists alongside the equally ambivalent gender messaging, which vacillates between emphasizing and eroding women’s agentic difference. In the final scene, women doctors recollect their forebears, “those who stood in the face of adversity, those who [chose] to follow in our footsteps” (HG 2019) while observing “old men marching” in the Anzac Day remembrance parade. This staging sends a controversial message because it invites spectators to celebrate “a century-long tradition of female soldiering” while upholding the “homogeneity, cohesion and sameness” of the Australian white-male-dominated military tradition (Wadham et al. 2018, 265).

Patriotic sisters

Why can’t a woman be a patriot? (interview with HG cast, August 17, 2019)

Hallowed Ground depicts patriotism as key to women/LGBT+ soldiers' inclusion, with characters identifying themselves as a "patriotic sisterhood mobilized to support the allied forces" and sharing their "love for the country" and "dreams to serve." This narrative uses "a group (collective) protagonist," a common technique in feminist theater (Friedman 2010, 600). Women doctors' patriotism speaks of their ownership over male-dominated nationalistic soldiering, resonating with rich feminist scholarship (Elshtain 1987; Goldstein 2001; Sjoberg 2007; Yuval-Davis 1997). Though this femo-nationalism is popular across Western liberal democracies participating in the GWoT (Chapman and Eichler 2014; Strand and Berndtsson 2015), its popularity masks a significant discursive shift. It represents soldiering – not the nation – as a place of women/LGBT+ soldiers' *continuous* empowerment. Consequently, in *Hallowed Ground*, the stories of Australian women doctors who served in the Scottish Women's Hospitals (SWH) during World War I without the support of either the Australian or British governments become unproblematically integrated within "A Century of Service," a slogan chosen by the Australian World War I commemoration commission to link World War I and World War II with modern conflicts (Beaumont 2015). This discursive shift places the story of women's empowerment within the narrative of *continuous* conflict, both of which are symptomatic of the "relentless militarisation of Australian history" (Lake and Reynolds 2010, 137) from the beginning of the GWoT in 2001 onward (Donoghue and Tranter 2015; McDonald 2010).

Furthermore, the neoliberal femo-nationalism of the "patriotic sisters" in *Hallowed Ground* claims sameness between "sisters," but works on the silencing of hierarchical differences (Peterson 1999, 51). This silencing of differences between women based on race/ethnicity/class arises from neoliberal ideology, which is founded on the presumption of choice and pursuit of freedom for "medic, marksman; markswoman, marksperson; half-way to equal" (HG 2019),⁸ creating the phenomenon of the "freedom fallacy" as one of the most problematic aspects of modern feminist theater (Aston 2020, 32). For instance, Lilian represents the dominant white, middle-class patriotic femininity typically revived during the recent wave of World War I commemorations in the UK and Australia (Beaumont 2015; Danilova and Dolan 2020). Her purpose-made feminized uniform⁹ (she is the only character wearing a skirt) of the SWH evokes and disrupts nostalgic male-dominated myths of World War I (Grayzel 1999; Noakes 2008). This echoes Emily's subjectivity of virtuous nurse/soldier from *Dead Equal* (discussed in the following section), with both characters embodying historical/contemporary norms of white, middle-class femininity as foundational to the story of Western gender-/sexuality-inclusive soldiering.

The racialized/classed hierarchy manifests itself through the embodied story of Vietnam-born former refugee Tam. While the patriotism of the

(white) female characters is never questioned, Tam must “strive to excel” to prove her patriotic commitment to military service. This contradiction represents a moment during which characters’ and artists’ subjectivities collide (Cree 2019, 168), leading to a slight change in performance when the actress realized that “Tam didn’t really want to serve in the army, but she wanted to subsidise her medical degree” (interview with *HG* cast, August 17, 2019). Thus, though Tam’s character is introduced to visibilize racial difference and challenge the dehumanization of refugees in Australian culture (Bleiker et al. 2013), the positionality of the “patriotic sisters” works to subvert intersectional gender identities, thereby obscuring particular injustices faced by women soldiers from marginalized backgrounds.

Professionals/honorary men

In *Hallowed Ground*, women’s agentic qualities, such as determination, obstinacy, and professionalism, are placed alongside their aspiration to eventually become “one of the guys.” This becomes the positionality of “professionals/honorary men,” based on celebrations of transformative gender change marked by the accession of women to frontline service alongside stories of women who learned to live with persistent gender discrimination “in a man’s world” (Habiba 2017). This message resonates with the stalled progression of women’s integration within the Australian military, in which “women are invited to embody an identarian logic, one that itself subsumes difference beneath the altar of sameness” (Wadham et al. 2018, 273).

In *Hallowed Ground*, characters do not carry guns, perform soldiering through the physical impersonation of male soldiers, as in Rosie Kay’s *5 Soldiers* (Purnell and Danilova 2018), or reflect on the ambivalence of female bodies, as in *Dead Equal*. Instead, women’s “equal-to-men” professionalism is performed through highlighting their medical skills in war settings alongside carefully obscuring their femininity and sexuality. For Mary (World War II), the “he-man’s uniform with eight generous pockets” symbolizes liberation from her handbag; Jacqui (GWOt/Afghanistan) comments on her acceptance by fellow male soldiers as “one of the guys” for her medical skills in the field after being sneered at for her struggle with her heavy backpack; and Catherine (GWOt/Afghanistan) misses her children during overseas deployments and is adamant about not sharing “intimate moments with a soldier in the next cubicle” (*HG* 2019), a hint at the costly nature of parenting (Basham and Catignani 2018). Through these performative choices, the “professionals/honorary men” positionality simultaneously reiterates women’s worthiness to the military and undermines their legitimacy because it reframes femininity as a problem, weakness, and vulnerability (Basham 2013, 2016; Crowley and Sandhoff 2017, 235; Wadham et al. 2018, 271). This contradiction echoes King’s (2017, 127) observation that women soldiers

“cannot ultimately be accepted as ‘sisters’ and in order even to be sisters, they have to be ‘men.’”

This reduction of femininity subdues sexual difference, and the avoidance of physical touch emerges as the only way to positively visibilize LGBT+ soldiers:

[T]he reason that we picked Lilian and Jo [World War I] was that gay relationship theme, which is not strong ... but I think it’s pretty obvious that that’s what they were ... And also ... the marriage bill’s just been passed recently in Australia [in 2017], and we thought, “How wonderful.” (interview with *HG* cast, August 17, 2019)

This highlights two performative conditions of LGBT+ (in)visibility. First, the focus on inclusion becomes an unproblematic representation of gay relationships, with the historical/contemporary injustices experienced by LGBT+ soldiers obscured (Riseman 2017; see also Belkin 2001; Bulmer 2013; Weber 2016). Second, the focus on the successes of equality-feminism-driven inclusion negates the disruptive effects of LGBT+ soldiers’ visibility, transforming LGBT+ soldiers into loyal sovereign subjects through whom Western militarism is reproduced.

Saviors

In most productions at *Army at the Fringe*, including *Dead Equal*, the Other is an invisible and ever-present signifier of conflict (Butler 2009; Campbell and Shapiro 2007; Möller 2018). Though *Hallowed Ground* does not visibilize the Other through embodied performance, it challenges male-dominated theater:

[Y]ou know how there’s always this thing with women in plays that they’re framed in their relationship with a man usually, or talking about a man ... [W]e wanted to see that broader context of what they’re experiencing and how that changes them, or potentially changes us as an audience. (interview with *HG* cast, August 17, 2019)

When Tam is on stage, I can’t help but focus on the background sounds of babies crying, women and children’s voices intermixing with the sounds of explosions. (Danilova, field notes, 2019)

Artists attempted to dismantle the traditional heteronormative imperative of the love story by representing women/LGBT+ soldiers first as agentive subjects, and second as capable of embracing “the humanity of everybody” (interview with *HG* cast, August 17, 2019). However, we argue that as this aspirational “humanity/equality” code coexisted with the representation of Australian women doctors as “Virgin Marys,” those “with angels on their side” who “have made things [safe]” for local populations (*HG* 2019), it subverted this emancipatory message and reproduced the dominance of Western “saviors”

over inferior and “backward” Others (Dittmer and Apelt 2008, 73; Hunt 2006; Khalid 2011; Shepherd 2017; Sjoberg 2007, 2010; Smith 2019).

In *Hallowed Ground*, scarce comments on relationships between Australian women doctors and civilians or enemies during the World Wars are offset by the expanded narrative of liberal (humanitarian) soldiering. Catherine’s character tells of the Rwandan Army firing at refugees and United Nations peacekeepers attempting to save a little girl: “[I]f we can just get this little one out, then we might be able to make some sense of it ... Our one tiny victory” (HG 2019). This imbues the story with moral rightness, Western trauma, and responsibility – themes that reinforce “violence in violent places” as self-inflicted (Welland 2015; see also Van der Meulen and Soeters 2005). In the performance of the GWoT, Tam’s racial difference within the Australian forces highlights her ability to better “understand” local racialized populations, resonating with feminist scholarship on female inclusion during the GWoT (see for example Hunt 2006; Shepherd 2017), yet this does not move beyond a fatalistic message: “Every war is the same.” Ultimately, Tam’s character allows for the normalization of Western war making in the GWoT through dichotomies of gendered/racialized development versus underdevelopment, lack of hygiene and basic knowledge versus advanced knowledge and technological progress, and Iraqi/Kurdish women’s oppression versus the freedom of Western women.

Dead Equal

[I]t’s difficult to tell that this is a “her-story” opera at first when all I hear is battle noise and all I see are soldiers in uniform ... Women? Men? Non-binary? (Dolan, field notes, 2019)

I love opera! And this is it. I feel exhilarated, but also overwhelmed and almost claustrophobic with music and voices filling up a confined space. (Danilova, field notes, 2019)

Dead Equal’s storyline is made up of operatic conversations between female/LGBT+ soldiers, punctuated by short moments of war-like movement, when the stage becomes dark, gunfire echoes, and the characters’ silhouettes move quickly, holding weapons. For the spectator, these moments of “real war” are disorientating and erode the visibility of difference; it is no longer possible to tell that this is an inclusive “her-story” opera. The conversation-based plot is based loosely on two historical figures from World War I, Flora Sandes (the first British woman to fight on the front line as part of the Serbian forces), alongside her nurse friend Emily Simmonds, and a third character, Jo Epke, a medic based loosely on interviews conducted by artists with contemporary women-soldiers and whose story takes place in Afghanistan.

Dead Equal's feminism expresses itself first as a challenge to “white, posh and heteronormative” opera by centering “women ... driving the narrative, leading from the front, in charge of their lives and their story,” challenging opera as a genre in which women are not agentive but, rather, “are usually killed” (Palmer, in O’Donoghue 2019; see Rosenberg 2016). While the opera is directed not by plot-driven action but by “her-story” conversation between past and present women soldiers sharing their experiences of the front lines, as in *Hallowed Ground*, the vibrato singing within the small Army Reserve Centre obscured this and made *Dead Equal* into a full-body experience for spectators, such that, upon leaving, we were left with a *feeling* rather than an understanding of the characters’ experiences, motivations, and emotions.

Adventurous tomboy

The artistic decision to feature the English historical figure Flora Sandes as central to the opera is explained by the artists’ intention to demonstrate women’s close-combat capability, a choice made for Army at the Fringe after previous iterations focused on war nurses. Accordingly, Flora is presented unproblematically as a predecessor of modern British women soldiers, having successfully transformed from nurse to soldier despite World War I-era restrictions. She is made visible as the lovable and adventurous “tomboy” who can never be a man (Woodward and Winter 2007, 87), “almost equal but not quite” (King 2017, 308). Importantly, the producers’ focus on Flora overlapped with their feminist representational politics expressed through the spotlighting of a non-binary performer. Therefore, the making visible of a groundbreaking historical figure and gender-non-conforming artist became interlinked and inextricably tied (Cree 2019). In our interview, the performer articulated the difficulties of embodying a woman soldier and discussing the military: “[T]hese are such gendered words, I feel weird using them” (interview with *DE* cast, October 4, 2019). Their position appeared as always contested, with proud declarations that Army at the Fringe featured a non-binary artist existing alongside consistent misgendering, indicative of the military’s attempts to see itself as *already* inclusive while struggling with the changes that this requires (see, for example, Basham 2009).

Partly because of these overlapping representational logics, the opera makes sense of Flora’s unusual career ambitions through her gender/sexual identity:

[T]he composer and librettist took liberties, kind of creating this fictional story about Flora and Emily Simmonds and maybe what their relationship might’ve been, or maybe what it was behind closed doors ... I always wonder what if Flora Sandes was alive today ... [W]ould she be a trans man, would she be

[an] out lesbian, would she be a butch lesbian, would she be genderqueer? ...
[I]t's really interesting to imagine what her identity would be because there were so many limitations placed on women back then. (interview with *DE* cast, October 4, 2019)

As in *Hallowed Ground*, the relationship between Flora and Emily is implicit, with queerness used primarily to remedy Flora's gender non-conformity. While historical records cite Flora's prayer "every night that I might wake up in the morning and find myself a boy," her biographer (Miller 2012, 27) interprets this not as an indication of gender identity, but rather that Flora "envied her brothers their freedom from social disapproval." Her transformation from nurse to soldier in the Serbian Army is conveyed in the opera as an advancement, performed by donning a male uniform, consistent with the operatic tradition of "trouser-roles" (Rosenberg 2016), thereby obscuring historical controversies around women in uniform, who were assumed to have sacrificed their femininity/sexuality (Grayzel 1999, 200; Noakes 2008, 10). While Flora's uniform (see Miller 2012) and imagined homosexuality function to justify her "unusual" thirst for adventure and dissatisfaction with nursing, this produces queerness as complementary to heteronormative militarism by obscuring pernicious stereotyping, discrimination, dishonorable discharge, and hierarchies based on gender/sexuality that have been central to the experiences of LGBT+ soldiers (see, for example, Belkin 2001; Bulmer 2013; Weber 2016).

Flora's congruence is not conveyed through equivalency with her male compatriots (Brownson 2014; King 2017); instead, a key signifier of Flora's position is "adventure," which motivates her to fight: "driving a race car, learning how to shoot a gun, being like, 'OK, I'm going to join the Scottish Women's Hospitals and just go on an adventure'" (interview with *DE* cast, October 4, 2019); "The men do what they're raised up for/I wait to shoot, to kill, to live this war" (Dolan, field notes, 2019). This is dissociated from wider patriotic goals, as in *Hallowed Ground*, and allows Flora to be "praised" for her "pluck and determination" (Woodward and Winter 2007, 87) while simultaneously considered incomplete, as evidenced by Emily's line: "You'll never be one of them. You'll still be a woman, warrior or no" (Dolan, field notes, 2019). The purposelessness of this lust for adventure is remedied by Flora's relationship with (invisible) friend General Milos, with whom she communicates through asides. Milos' disembodied role as the invisible, ever-present sovereign authority guiding war absolves the female characters of agency and reframes Flora's legacy as symbolic of gendered nationalism (Peterson 1999). This reframing resolves any controversy regarding Flora's combat role and gender/sexual identity by reinforcing the traditional relationship between the state and the sovereign subject (Cree 2019).

Despite her implied homosexuality, Flora is desexualized, and the potential for queer visibility to challenge heteronormative soldiering is disrupted

on several levels. As in *Hallowed Ground*, while Flora and Emily share one brief kiss, their relationship is devoid of physicality. However, in a reframing of protector/protected mythology (Elshtain 1987), Flora leads and protects Emily, the nurse in need of support and reassurance, thereby re-establishing hierarchical dualisms of masculinity/femininity and soldier/nurse (Danilova and Dolan 2020; Enloe 2007; Grayzel 1999) and ideas that women in military uniform are either heterosexual and sexually promiscuous or desexualized butch lesbians (Basham 2013; King 2017; Noakes 2008).

Nurse/(re)gendered? soldier

Emily transgresses the historical/contemporary division and embodies a different role in each timeline: a nurse during World War I and a soldier/medic in Afghanistan. This was enacted by simply removing her long nursing apron to reveal combat fatigues beneath. Emily vacillates between essentialized feminine character traits and the ideals of humanitarian soldiering important to liberal wars, a positionality that makes her the closest embodiment of Duncanson and Woodward's (2016) envisioning of the "regendered" soldier, an image representative of claims that the inclusion of women/LGBT+ soldiers can create space to challenge hegemonic heteronormative masculinities. However, this "regendered" liberal humanitarian soldier remains supportive of traditional soldiering masculinity and is expendable. This hierarchy is reinforced through Emily's desexualized relationship with Flora and was reflected in the general lack of discussion of her position in artistic reviews and social media comments, which focused on Flora as a groundbreaking pioneer for women/LGBT+ soldiers (see, for example, Kennedy 2019).

During World War I, Emily embodies the vulnerable, caring, "angel"-like nurse. However, while the opera, echoing *Hallowed Ground*, positions war as the most important avenue for women to develop medical skills, crucially, Emily's nursing ability is not communicated through professionalism. Indeed, when she is required to perform surgery, she seeks reassurance from Flora before facing the challenge, a decision that casts her as timid and delicate. Consequently, the opera represents war nurses as ideals of white, middle-class femininity, praising them as "healing angels" while considering them less accomplished, proficient, and important than soldiers (Danilova and Dolan 2020; Enloe 2007; Noakes 2008, 17).

Furthermore, Emily's demise at the hands of the invisible enemy Other reflects World War I framings of uniformed women as only in death "confirming their right to khaki" (Noakes 2008, 19), a narrative that is unproblematically extended into the context of the GWoT (Ette 2013) and furthers classical operatic traditions that cast the "feminized other" as ultimately expendable (Rosenberg 2016). Only through Emily's explicit challenge to

the morality of war do we glimpse the liberal/antimilitarist feminist debate: “[Y]ou can’t fight because you shouldn’t, not because you can’t” (Dolan, field notes, 2019). However, similar to *Hallowed Ground’s* premise, this crucial debate is undermined through the stronger theme of *continuous service/conflict* and the fact that all female-identified subject positions are framed as empowered through militarization.

Ambivalent body

Working class, queer and women of colour have different experiences in the same circumstances than affluent white women because of responses to their combined identities ... I wanted to explore how women negotiate those differences of experience in the extremity of a theatre of war and form relationships across them. (Palmer, in Stephen 2019)

Jo Epke, a contemporary BAME soldier, makes visible racial/class difference alongside the ambivalence of women’s bodies within the military. However, despite casting a Black actress, race is ultimately invisibilized in *Dead Equal*, with reviews and social media comments reflecting this absence of discussion about race in the British military. Jo’s working-class positionality is visible; like Tam’s position in *Hallowed Ground*, it is implied that Jo enlisted not through free choice but because of her financial circumstances. However, the opera obscures the structural inequalities of modern soldiering, with racial/class difference ultimately reframed through the gendered code of “ambivalent body.”

While Flora’s transition to soldier and donning of a World War I uniform is unproblematic, Jo finds that even the simple wearing of women’s combat fatigues is challenging with her “excessively female body” (Woodward and Winter 2007, 85). This reflects women’s disruption within the military, their bodies “sexually promiscuous and alluring, reproductive entities, and weak and leaky” (Basham 2013, 86). Jo’s difficulty wearing a uniform not designed for women’s breasts – “‘appendages’ to a soldier’s body” (Woodward and Winter 2007, 85; see also Ette 2013) – reflects wider concerns about inclusion: that women’s “sexy” presence can distract male soldiers and put them at risk because of their “natural” vulnerability to rape and sexual assault by enemy “others” (Kennedy-Pipe 2000). Importantly, Jo is the only sexualized character, communicated through her references to female pleasure and male sexual organs. However, she is not positioned as a “slut” (King 2017); rather, her sexuality is reframed through motherhood, problematically linked to soldiering through potential pregnancy (Basham 2013, 74).

Jo struggles with her contradictory roles of soldier and mother; however, the opera deals with this through the conceptual paradox of being “a lover and a fighter,” thereby obscuring structural gendered issues: “[C]an I be any good at this and good at loving you?” (Dolan, field notes, 2019). Though militaries have been understood as “greedy institutions” because of their demands upon serving soldiers’ families (Basham and Catignani

2018; Segal 1986), the complexities of childcare and the lack of support for military women are not elucidated in the opera, with parenthood and its challenges largely obscured by allusions to the female/pregnant body.

Various artists' visions of the "problems' ... associated with the reproductive capacities of servicewomen's bodies" (Basham 2013, 75) converged in Wolf James' accompanying photography exhibition, *Live Equal*. The portraits of military women in uniform engaged in activities that are considered subversive of viewers' expectations – for example, laughing or playing the saxophone – were accompanied by descriptions of their own identities, many of which began with "mother"/"mum" (mostly of children, sometimes of pets). Importantly, the promotional materials for *Dead Equal* featured one such photograph, centering the head and shoulders of a BAME woman in uniform, obscuring her heavily pregnant body (*Fringe Review* 2019). This framing highlights that, for artists, even in making women soldiers visible, their *bodies* remain disruptive: "But the one who really blew me away was Camiel, who was pregnant. It was just one of those things I'd never thought about, that Army women need pregnancy uniforms" (James, in *Fringe Review* 2019).

Conclusion

This article has exposed the inherently ambivalent dynamics embedded within feminist "her-story" military theater in its attempts to make visible gender/sexuality inclusion within the armed forces. We have argued that, to fully comprehend the possible "feminist futures" (Aston and Harris 2006, 3) of gender-/sexuality-inclusive soldiering, the complex interactions between artists and the military alongside the wider conditions of visibility that they produce through making, staging, and performing theatrical productions must be interrogated. This task is crucial, we suggest, because performance art is a key site where military inclusion can be seen, embodied, felt, and, perhaps, made possible.

In our study, the interactions between artists and military organizers presented complex conditions of visibility, with artists' commitment to empowerment through making gender/sexual/racial difference visible on stage resonating with the British Army's move to celebrate its embracing of inclusivity and diversity within changing gender relations. However, the resulting positionalities ascribed to women/LGBT+ soldiers left both sides and us as "feminist spectators" (Dolan 2012) feeling somewhat unconvinced. These positionalities appeared as both groundbreaking and limiting, which speaks to the limited progress in developing visual, narrative, and performative vocabularies for articulating the complex embodied experiences of women/LGBT+ soldiers. Further than this, however, we were left wondering whether the "liberal dream" of unproblematic gender-equal soldiering was being presented as already or as "not yet" achieved (Aston and Harris 2006, 3).

Indeed, military hosts and artists appeared to converge in creating a narrative of gender-equal soldiering as already achieved through the ostensibly unproblematic weaving together of undoubtedly impressive historical narratives and contemporary stories of women/LGBT+ soldiers. Furthermore, while the agenda of creating artistic/performance roles for women and sexual minorities is certainly important, when this agenda converges with depictions of individualized heroines who succeed against all odds, it can simultaneously operate as a means of obscuring the more difficult but necessary “her-story” conversations about structural disadvantage and violence. This process can be reconciled with “a neoliberal appropriation of a liberal-feminist lexis that transformed equality and rights into ... the illusion of women’s self-empowerment and choice that flies in the face of persistent inequalities and social injustices” within theater as well as Western militaries/societies (Aston 2020, 32). In enacting this performative future through an intertwined past/present, Army at the Fringe became a space where one could *feel* empowered, facilitated by the crucial masking of controversies associated with Western military conflicts (aided by the invisibilizing of the bodies of enemy “others”) alongside the conflicts that emerge when representing complex intersections of power/identity.

Reflecting on such controversial matters of visibility, we concur with Aston and Harris (2006, 12) that “differences ... cannot be ‘dealt with’ instantly in a single performative gesture ... nor by listing them, embracing them, celebrating them nor marking their proliferation.” Rather, we suggest that the “her-story” military conversation that must emerge across difference is tasked with the risky endeavor of engaging with uncomfortable, “messy” realities of structural gender/racial/class discrimination/inequality set against the controversial backdrop of state-sanctioned violence. While spaces such as Army at the Fringe are uniquely positioned for productive *and* disruptive discussions to take place, it is only by engaging in difficult conversations between the military and feminists (artists, activists, and academics) that truly challenging depictions of women/LGBT+ soldiers can emerge.

Notes

1. Both productions received glowing reviews; *Hallowed Ground* was awarded the Summerhall Lustrum Award for Best Drama, and *Dead Equal* received the Summerhall Lustrum Award for Best Festival Moments of the 2019 Fringe. This article does not discuss the productions’ success or failure as works of art.
2. This article focuses on the 2017, 2018, and 2019 programs. 2020’s program continued online (<https://www.armyatthefringe.org/>).
3. We excluded from our sample one short production: *This Is My Life*, by Hopscotch Theatre Company, supported by RCET and Scotland’s Armed Forces Children’s Charity. It was performed three times during the 2017 Army at the Fringe.

4. UK government Covenant funding was awarded to four productions: *5 Soldiers*, by the Rosie Kay Dance Company; *Shell Shock*, by Smokescreen Productions; *The Troth*, by Akademi South Asian Dance UK, and *Bomb Happy*, by Everwitch Theatre Company (Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust 2016, 2017, 2019; Gov.uk 2018).
5. The Army offered a festival stage free of charge, an extremely attractive offer for many artists. *Dead Equal's* cast and producers met 25–30 serving women at Aldershot Garrison. *5 Soldiers* by the Rosie Kay Dance Company was also performed at Aldershot Garrison, among other military settings.
6. The term “BAME” (Black and minority ethnic) is commonly used in UK-based diversity policies, including those of the military (see, for example, MoD 2018). The term has been criticized for its homogenizing effects; however, we use it in this article to highlight the context of military inclusion within which the productions operate.
7. The script of *Hallowed Ground* was inspired by the memoir of the colonel of the Australian Medical Corps, Susan Neuhaus (Neuhaus and Mascall-Dare 2014), as well as artists’ interviews with women soldiers.
8. This metaphor of “half-way to equal” echoes the title of the 1992 “*Half-Way to Equal* report” (*Report of the Inquiry into Equal Opportunity and Equal Status for Women in Australia*) (Wadham et al. 2018, 267).
9. Women who joined the SWH came from middle- and upper-class backgrounds, which allowed them to pay for their uniforms and other expenses associated with wartime service (Danilova and Dolan 2020).

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Sarah Liu and the members of Scotland Feminist PIR Network, as well as attendees of BISA’s Critical Military Studies panel in October 2020, for constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This work was supported by Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland: [Grant Number RG13890/70560].

Notes on contributors

Emma Dolan is Lecturer below the bar in Peace and Development Studies at the University of Limerick, Republic of Ireland. She recently completed her PhD in International Relations at the University of Aberdeen, UK, and her research interests include feminist international relations and gender studies, specifically political apologies as redress for conflict-related sexual violence. Her work has been published in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* and the *Journal of Human Rights*, and her first

book *Gender and Political Apology: When the Patriarchal State Says "Sorry"* is now available within Routledge's Gender and Global Politics series.

Nataliya Danilova is Lecturer in Politics and International Relations at the University of Aberdeen, UK. She has published in the fields of critical military studies, feminist international relations/gender studies, art/aesthetics, and the politics of war memory. Her latest book, *The Politics of War Commemoration in the UK and Russia* (Palgrave, 2015), explores the instrumentalization of war through commemorative media coverage, memorials, and rituals.

ORCID

Emma Dolan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0178-0312>

Nataliya Danilova  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2576-726X>

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