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‘Couture military’ and a queer aesthetic curiosity: music video aesthetics, militarised fashion, and the embodied politics of stardom in Rihanna’s ‘Hard’[1]

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In December 2009, at the end of a year in which Rihanna had been forced into a struggle to control and redefine her public persona after being assaulted by her then partner, the second single from her image-redefining album *Rated R* appeared with a video proclaiming her resilience and invulnerability, placing her in a succession of haute-couture-styled military-themed outfits in the middle of a fantastic version of a desert war. ‘Hard’, released while fans and journalists were still debating the meanings of the BDSM imagery around *Rated R*’s lead single ‘Russian Roulette’, asserted Rihanna’s triumphs in the music industry and the luxury they had earned her result with a defiant message to her online haters and the repeated declaration in the chorus ‘I’m so hard’. Its video translated the innuendo of this symbolic appropriation of masculinity into a military setting, showing Rihanna both in command of displaying her own sensuality and in dominant positions over men – inviting the viewer to co-operate in ‘telling stories’ (Shepherd 2013) about gender, race, geopolitics, violence and survival while subverting, reinscribing, exploiting and/or queering the association between ‘hardness’, masculinity and military power. While the video’s entanglements with the gendered and racialised world politics of the Obama presidency’s ‘avant-garde militarism’ (Cannen 2014) now make it a historic artefact, it exposes an affective continuum between militarisation and stardom that can be explored further for other political moments including our own. The insights into music video aesthetics necessary to perceive this continuum at work highlight a relationship between music and visuality which suggests that articulations between senses are important for understanding not just the embodied politics of militarisation but the wider field of aesthetic politics itself.

Just as much as the better-researched audiovisual genres of film and serial television, music video is also a site through which viewers and listeners encounter narratives about gender, race, geopolitics, violence and security which form part of their everyday experience of international politics and their everyday entanglements of war. Yet music, as Matt Davies

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and M. I. Franklin (2015) argue, is still underappreciated in studies of world politics due to the methodological challenges of perceiving the political work of sound – with rare exceptions such as Susanna Hast's argument that music can itself be a form of knowledge production about war (Hast 2018: 5). Emblematically, even authors as attentive to the intimate and embodied dimensions of politics as Darcy Leigh and Cynthia Weber refer only to 'distillations of shared meanings in words *or images*' (2019: 83, my emphasis) in defining the gendered and sexualised 'figurations' around which ideas and practices of security are organised. The sonic dimension of musical meaning in world politics is essential and even then, this paper argues, insufficient for understanding the aesthetics of contemporary popular music, which make songs not just auditory artefacts but audiovisual ones. Exploring how viewers might have made sense of the 'military chic' (Tynan 2013) of 'Hard' illustrates much about the aesthetics of music video as a genre: particularly its use of embodied performance to produce meaning in synchronisation with sound, language and moving images, and its reliance as an element of meaning on stars' biographies, or what the music video scholar Andrew Goodwin (1992: 98) termed stars' 'metanarratives'. These assemblages of musical and visual representations show that the mediated sensory experiences of encountering world politics in the everyday are *multi*sensory: the meanings of audiovisual artefacts cannot be read simply from sound, language, still image *or* moving video, but exist in the synchronicities and dissonances between them, mediated by what audiences know about the bodies they contain.

The first step towards demonstrating this is however to establish that music itself – let alone music video – still deserves more recognition as an aesthetic and embodied form of creativity and meaning-making that circulates through and mediates people's experiences of international politics. The 'soundscapes' and 'musickings' of International Relations (IR) are, Franklin (2005: 6–10) argues, just as important as the visual practices and metaphors through which the international is much more often perceived, and many uses that individuals and institutions have made of music have indeed been acknowledged as internationally politically significant acts. These include the use of national anthems as instruments of state-building and symbols of a state's sovereignty and distinctiveness in international society (Kelen 2014); music as a component of and occasion for cultural diplomacy (Ramel and Prévost-Thomas (ed.) 2018); punk and hip-hop as transnational forms of oppositional politics and protest (Lock 2005; Dunn 2008); music as a tool of polarisation and separation during ethnopolitical conflict (Baker 2013), or as a resource in post-conflict peacebuilding (Pruitt 2013); the actions states take against musicians they see as security threats (Côté 2011); the international

political economy of gender, militarism and imperialism that entertainers such as Carmen Miranda negotiated in becoming stars (Enloe 2014: 213–18); human rights campaigns mobilising around oppressed musicians such as Pussy Riot (Street 2013; Wiedlack 2016), or being led by musicians as celebrity humanitarians (Repo and Yrjölä 2011); international musical competitions such as Eurovision as platforms for promoting desired versions of national identity (Jones and Subotić 2011) or making international LGBTQ political claims (Baker 2017); and the music of the black diaspora as a site of anti-colonial resistance and knowledge production (Gilroy 1993; Shilliam 2015: 109–30). The sensory and embodied aspects of music are nevertheless still not explored as deeply or as often as their visual equivalents, despite the pronounced turn in international politics research towards theorising aesthetics and emotions.

Revealing what music can add to an aesthetic approach to international politics, Roland Bleiker (2005: 179–80) argues, involves going beyond the places 'where references to the political are easy to find' – that is, beyond lyrics, which as text and language are the most accessible elements of meaning within conventional epistemologies for studying world politics, and also beyond political contentions involving musicians as actors. While scholars are being called upon to think beyond the affective meanings of language in world politics by considering other aesthetic and sensory experiences as well (Sylvester 2013; Solomon 2015: 59), and it is testament to how far studies of visuality in global politics have outstripped other senses that Kyle Grayson and Jocelyn Mawdsley (2019: 436) are also urging IR to overcome an 'ocular-centrism' which privileges sight (Grayson and Mawdsley 2019: 436). Bleiker (2005: 179) himself has transcended language and visuality by studying instrumental classical music rather than music with lyrics, asking 'What can we hear that we cannot see? And what is the political content of this difference?' The methodological challenge of studying popular music, however, is only firstly to recognise the importance of the sonic; it is then to reckon with the way that sound and visuality in popular music have become not just incidentally but also structurally intertwined. Beyond the incidental visuality of music that already exists in audiences' 'witnessing and response' to live performance (Slee 2017: 153), broadcast television's promotion of popular music and music video's emergence as a genre of cultural artefact created an audiovisual aesthetics of popular music which has carried over into, while also being transformed by, the age of digital and social media.

Music video's origin as a genre and product is typically, though simplistically, ascribed to the launch of MTV on North American satellite television in 1981 and in Europe in 1987 (Arnold et al. 2017: 1). Its aesthetics have developed through two main phases, each linked to

technological innovations and their surrounding configurations of capital, power and creativity. The first, televisual and analogue, phase of music video aesthetics arose from MTV creating a new promotional platform which required hit singles to have audiovisual accompaniments to be shown. Foundational works on music video aesthetics from the turn of the 1980s–90s divided into cultural critique explaining music video's editing, content and style through theories of postmodernism (Kaplan 1987), and studies of its distinctive ways of producing meaning, including Andrew Goodwin's ground-breaking work theorising stardom and embodiment as well as sound and image into the structural analysis of music video (Goodwin 1992). Since the 1990s, digital editing techniques and computer-generated imagery have permitted music video creators to visualise settings, movements and montages unrestricted by analogue recording and editing constraints, while broadband internet, online streaming platforms such as YouTube, and mobile internet devices have delinked music video from state-regulated broadcast television, editorially mediated playlisting, and proximity to television sets, creating a new 'digital audiovisual aesthetics' (Vernallis 2013: 74; see Richardson, Gorbman and Vernallis (ed.) 2013). While analogue music video functioned largely to advertise recorded tracks (Goodwin 1992: 28), and was usually harder to access and lower in quality than audio recordings, music videos today 'are now clearly primary products in their own right', capable of reaching greater audiences than the audio of the same song (Railton and Wilson 2012: 7). Rather than displaying what we hear and *cannot* see, music video aesthetics concern what we hear and what we see at once, and their politics are the politics of how these senses converge.

As well as being an audiovisual medium, music video is also fundamentally an embodied one, centred around the meanings of the performer as star. Not all videos feature their stars (some solely contain other dancers or actors), and they need not even depict bodies at all; nevertheless, deciding not to feature a performer in music video is as conscious an aesthetic choice about how their stardom will structure the video as it is to decide how a performer will be embodied in it. Music as a purely sonic phenomenon is, of course, embodied already: it is the result of the body producing sound through the vocal cords, through gestures, and through interaction with other found or manufactured material objects, and audiences hear, see and experience it through the gendered and racialised lenses of their own socially-situated embodied knowledge (McClary 2000): while racialised practices of distinction and categorisation are usually seen as based on visual difference, race can also be heard, producing what Jennifer Lynn Stoever (2016: 4) calls 'the sonic color line'. When music becomes an audiovisual artefact, however, it additionally involves the representation of

performing bodies through techniques and gazes with prior histories in cinema and television – but also through conventions which are unique to or considered typical of music video, to the extent that they can make other audiovisual artefacts 'look like a music video' or 'look like MTV' when employed elsewhere (Vernallis 2004). Before asking what imaginations of gender, violence and militarisation might have been at work in Rihanna's 'Hard', therefore, we should consider what is distinctive about music video aesthetics and how they might enhance methodologies for understanding visual and digital media in international politics.

Music video aesthetics and international politics

Studies of music video aesthetics, combined with existing approaches to making sense of popular cultural artefacts (more and more of which are audiovisual) in international politics, emphasise aspects of audiovisual meaning typically underappreciated in analyses of linear fictional narratives on screen. The obstacles to perceiving music video as a kind of cultural artefact capable of being 'constitutive' (Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009: 157) of people's affective relations towards world politics likely stem not just from residual perceptions that songs' most 'real' forms are their audio recordings, or the lingering effects of critics' dismissals of music video as postmodern, but also from the fact that music video depends far less than film or television on narrative – the concept around which methods for interpreting popular culture in world politics have chiefly been organised (see Shepherd 2013). Narrative, in the sense of a plot with a protagonist, obstacles and change, is not a structural prerequisite of music video and often is absent altogether; even if the digital video era with relaxed content restrictions, new post-production tools (using the same technology that provides backdrops and special effects for films and video games, so that music videos' action can increasingly unfold in the same digitally-generated settings as these (Jenkins 2006: 104)) and more capacity for pre/post-song film sequences *might* (and do) enable 'novel forms of narrative' in music video (Vernallis 2013: 27), the form itself has not been rebuilt around narrative in such a way.

Viewers do, nevertheless, make meaning out of music video through narrative – both the narrative they try to construct through organising videos' montages of images and sound/image convergences into an interpretive web (Adriaans 2016: 22), and narratives about the public personas of their stars. These 'metanarratives', Goodwin (1992: 103) argued using Richard Dyer's theory of star 'texts' (see Dyer 1998), are composed of audiences' knowledge about stars' past performances, publicity and public representations of their private life.

While music video's convergence of music and image distinguishes it both from narrative audiovisual formats and from still visual images, the importance of star metanarratives in music video aesthetics distinguishes them from other forms of short video with musical soundtracks as well. Explicitly discerning star metanarratives in audiovisual artefacts which harness the politics of stardom or celebrity to any degree should thus be among our methodological tools for observing world politics at work through media and popular culture.

Moreover, music video is also renowned for making the aesthetics of embodiment an essential element of meaning, raising complex questions about what viewers hear and see which can also be posed of other audiovisual forms. Most music videos put bodies in the metaphorical, and sometimes literal, spotlight, as featured performers, supporting dancers, actors, and/or crowds at actual or simulated live performances; the choice to make a music video without bodies is equally possible using audiovisual technology but creates a statement about that video's relation to the form. The pleasures of watching music video depend on spectatorial gazes which are simultaneously gendered and racialised (Railton and Watson 2012), and as Sunil Manghani (2017: 32) observes, 'the editing of the *gendered* body […] has arguably become the most prevalent and recognizable characteristic of the pop video aesthetic'. Alongside (or rather, contributing to and informed by) star meta-narratives themselves, the style and dress of the performer(s) and the '[m]ovement, dance, and embodied action' (Slee 2017: 147) shown on screen are equally constitutive elements of meaning within music video as lyrics, spatial setting, instrumentation or sound. As 'points of identification' (Goodwin 1992: 117) for the viewer, stars provide a particularly powerful affective hinge between the viewer and the (geo)political narratives and imaginations that a video contains.

Studying audiovisual popular music thus helps to highlight the importance of embodiment, performance and spectatorship, as well as sound, to studies of 'visual global politics' (Bleiker (ed.) 2018), digital media (Shepherd and Hamilton (ed.) 2016), and popular culture and world politics (Grayson, Davies and Philpott 2009). These fields' methodological paradigms for making political sense of audiovisual popular culture were largely developed through analysing cinema and serial television, and more recently also video games. Applying Annick Wibben's 'narrative approach' to feminist security studies (see Wibben 2011) to popular television drama, Laura Shepherd (2013: 12) was thus able to demonstrate that the 'ideas and ideals about gender and violence' embedded made these entertainment shows 'profoundly political'. Nevertheless, although her methodology did offer the potential for studying 'the embodied performance of narrative identity' (Shepherd 2013: 9) through factors such as body

language and non-linguistic visual tropes as well as spoken words, in practice most popular culture and world politics studies of television still emphasise plot and dialogue, that is, what can most easily be contained in text. The interactivity of video games, where players must physically manipulate devices in order to advance and co-produce the aesthetic experience on screen (see Jarvis and Robinson, in press), has challenged scholars to reconfigure their methodologies around the aesthetic practices that set this genre apart.

A growing literature on digital media in international politics has meanwhile called attention to various types of short-form video as significant artefacts in the 'mediatized everyday' (Åhäll 2016: 162) of international politics. These include military (Newman 2013) and extremist (Leander 2017) recruitment videos, arms manufacturers' promotional videos (Åhäll 2015), tribute videos to fallen soldiers (Knudsen and Stage 2013), soldiers' own front-line video production (Andén-Papadopoulos 2009) and musical parodies (Shafer 2016), viral clips documenting news events (Saugmann Andersen 2017), and ISIS videos of execution and beheading, around which there is already an established literature (Friis 2015; Patruss 2016; Chouliaraki and Kissas 2018). Mette Crone (2014: 294), for instance, acknowledges ISIS videos as not simply visual texts but also 'aesthetic assemblages', that is, 'technologies that juxtapose linguistics, sound, images and matter' just as is the case for music video. The prevalence of studies on these topics hints at what International Relations most readily recognises as political, that is, armed conflict, violence, terrorism and unrest. Yet online video platforms and social media, technologies which have made 'video […] central to security politics' (Saugmann Andersen 2017: 355) place these in the same digital spaces as entertainment artefacts like music video: within a few minutes, users can be equally likely to see, watch or interact with any of them on an algorithmically generated social media feed.

Understanding that the distinctive meaning-making feature of music video is its mode of producing metanarratives through the performing bodies of stars simultaneously links them into world politics through studies of embodied performance and celebrity. Critical studies of celebrity humanitarianism have deconstructed the visual spectacles stars create through stars' off-stage performances of aid, especially the coloniality inherent to the trope of the benevolent white visitor to Africa (Repo and Yrjölä 2011; Müller 2018). The affective politics of celebrity and stardom amplify spectators' identification with political narratives. M Evren Eken (2019: 223), discussing actors' methods for creating the semblance of emotional and physical authenticity in war films, argues that the emotions they communicate facilitate the audience 'affectively embod[ying] and empathis[ing] with' the hegemonic geopolitical narratives that war films dramatise, in a more 'visceral engagement' than the narrative's bare

bones would produce. Katarina Birkedal (2019: 188), similarly, explores how embodied and fashioned performances can charge 'everyday emotional attachments to martial discourses' in superhero/supervillain cosplay, whose characters have first been personified by stars and who come from storyworlds that revolve around geopolitical narratives of security, violence and war. Fashion itself – an essential component of embodied performance in music video – has also been written into international politics by Cynthia Enloe's feminist questioning of military uniforms and camouflage fashion (Enloe 2000) and more recent studies of phenomena such as the embodied performances of female political leaders and gendered religious struggles over dress (Behnke (ed.) 2017). While music video aesthetics could deepen insights into as many domains of international politics as a selection of videos seems to depict, what stands out at once from 'Hard' is its 'military chic' styling and its setting in a fantastic version of a US desert military base: particularly important for making sense of it, therefore, are perspectives on the embodied aesthetic politics of militarisation.

Music video and the embodied aesthetic politics of militarisation

Militarisation, as defined by Enloe (2000: 3), denotes the processes through which 'an individual or society [...] comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal'. Perceiving it requires turning a critical 'feminist curiosity' (Enloe 2016: 152) towards the taken-for-granted, including the 'fascination with militarized products' that advertising and consumer industries largely treat as unproblematic and natural (Enloe 2000: 2). Unquestioned, such fascination feeds the political economy of desire that fuels what Anna Agathangelou and L. H. M. Ling (2009: 46–7) termed the 'neoliberal imperium' of coloniality and hypermasculinity. It is through the everyday, including people's encounters with popular culture, that much of this normalisation of military power and its racialised gender order as a solution to insecurity occurs, creating the 'everyday geopolitics' (Basham 2016: 884) of militarisation. These everyday politics are also an aesthetic politics, in which visual practices – including fashion – inform 'how people see themselves, others and war' (Shepherd 2018: 213).

Critical military studies' turn towards exploring the *affective* politics of popular militarism (see Rech and Williams 2016) provides further ground for explaining how embodied performance, a constitutive element of so much popular music and music video, can have political significance by intimately linking the individual spectator to imaginations of war, security and the international. Linda Åhäll's work, in particular, paves the way to do so: using

the metaphor of dance, Åhäll argues that feminists' curiosity about 'how bodies matter politically' has offered them 'a *different way into* "the political"', that is, starting with 'stories, experiences and representations of peoples/individuals/bodies rather than states or political elites' (Åhäll 2016: 158). The 'dance' of militarisation, as an often-unconscious ideological practice communicating ideas about security and politics as common sense, is the 'gendered logic' of socially and culturally preparing society for war, a process that occurs 'through the mediatized everyday' (Åhäll 2016: 162). Åhäll (2019a: 149) goes on to extend the metaphor into 'the intersecting political sphere of bodies, affect and movement' in everyday encounters between military and civilian bodies, through which individuals feel and possibly […] resist the politics of normalisation of war'. Among these encounters are the spectatorial gazes – which are themselves embodied experiences (Sobchack 2004) – of viewers watching stars taking on roles in mimetic or fantastic representations of war. The aesthetics of music video and other genres where star meta-narratives are elements of meaning invite viewers to project their identification with performers/characters on to what they are embodying in that audiovisual artefact, while interpreting that artefact and its representations of geopolitics, violence and security through the lens of what they already know about the star.

In certain cases, music video has even operated as a vehicle for 'militainment' (Stahl 2010), a term which – like James Der Derian's reference to the 'military–industrial–media–entertainment network' (Der Derian 2009) – conveys the networks of capital, ideology, technology, representation and power in which the defence and entertainment industries are mutually implicated (Hozic 1999). Popular music's place within these structures is itself underappreciated, at least in IR, though popular music studies and ethnomusicology have done more to problematize popular music's entanglements with militarism in settings such as the USA and elsewhere after 9/11 (Ritter and Daughtry (ed.) 2007; Boulton 2008; Fisher and Flota (ed.) 2011) or Croatia during the Yugoslav wars (Pettan (ed.) 1998). Music video, popular music's distinctive audiovisual medium, is appreciated even less. And yet the performances and fantasies of music video lend themselves to the same feminist and queer questions as other media. A methodological start could be as follows: what narratives of gender, race, sexuality and violence, or gender, race, sexuality and security, are at work in them? Who and what do they imply needs protecting, who should do it and how, what kind of power should be used and what kind of violence might that require? What or whom are being imagined as targets and threats? Which people and bodies ought (not) to be exercising military power, and how should they be trained and disciplined to do it, within which gender

regimes? And how are these ideas about bodies mapped on to geopolitical imaginations of the globe? Even more than in other media, the answers to these questions in music video lie in the embodied performance of the star.

Music video's conventions for establishing action is taking place in a military setting are often intertextually derivative of film, sometimes drawing cinematic tropes such as the shouting drill instructor face-to-face with a recruit (famous from films such as *Full Metal Jacket* (Swofford 2018)) directly into the visual text. They also adopt visual practices of fashion photography (see Tynan 2013: 78–9), abstracting the military base into the same kind of fantasised chronotope as other stock music video locations, such as the club, the spaceship or the beach (Vernallis 2004: 75). Such ideal-type spaces can work to position songs and stars within specific musical genres, with 'different modes of address […] available to different constituencies' along gendered and racialized lines (Vernallis 2004: 73). Music video as a technology of militarisation also differs from film in that music video cinematography and spectacle emphasises the performing *body* more than the featured *character*: the aesthetics of *Top Gun* (1986) are a vehicle for the viewer to follow how Maverick becomes a fighter pilot and gets the girl, and the spectacular rupture that Demi Moore enacted in her public persona by training her body into a hard athletic shape and shaving her head to star in *GI Jane* (1997) was similarly an instrument for narrating the story of Jordan O'Neill's acceptance as a female SEAL (Tasker 2011: 243–7). Music video, even though it *can* take the form of short films telling stories, does not depend on overtly emplotted narrative at all. The movement, discipline, dress and styling of the body in music video, as well as the recreation of physical space, all help to code a setting's theme as 'military' but also ask to be interpreted through viewers' meta-narrative about the star.

Music video is thus embedded in processes of militarisation primarily on an aesthetic level that operates *beneath* narrative: it condenses its representation into assemblages of sound, setting, movement and style in a context which, as part of the popular music industry, is inherently charged with producing affects of desire, identification or both. As a technology of fascination, fantasy and desire, or what Goodwin (1992: 74) called a 'technocracy of sensuousness', music video condenses the militarising potential of narrative audiovisual narrative artefacts on to an aesthetic and stylistic fulcrum. Amid the 'increasingly explicit visualisation' of warfare (Chouliaraki (2013a: 315) in the contemporary world, where digital media have produced a 'qualitatively new' expression of the longer-standing 'feedback loop' between military and civilian technology (Der Derian 2009: xxxvi), music video and its

practices of representing spaces and bodies are a unique component within what Rachel Woodward and Karl Jenkings (2012: 495) term 'popular geopolitical imaginaries of war'.

While more sustained relationships between music video and the military have existed in contexts such as the beginning of the Croatian war of independence (Baker 2010), where US-centric music video has come closest to the 'militainment' paradigm is arguably Katy Perry's March 2012 video for 'Part Of Me', produced in 2011 in collaboration with the US Marine Corps (USMC). This was certainly not the first music video to require military cooperation: in 1989, for instance, the US Navy had facilitated Cher making the video for 'If I Could Turn Back Time' on the *USS Missouri*. Collaborating with Perry to make 'Part Of Me', however, directly served what was then a USMC recruitment priority, persuading more women to enlist in a service that famously cultivated an elite warrior masculinity (see Zeeland 1996) so that the USMC could deploy more Female Engagement Teams on counter-insurgency missions in Iraq and Afghanistan (see Dyvik 2014). During the video's narrative, Perry's character leaves her cheating boyfriend, spots a recruitment ad for the Marines in a neighbourhood store, physically prepares herself to enlist in the store's bathroom (by cutting her hair, bandaging her breasts and putting on a hoodie – actions that a trans or genderqueer gaze might well see as risky rather than empowering in a women's bathroom), and progresses through basic training with a multi-racial group of fellow female Marines. Such a 'generically familiar montage of transformation' (Tasker 2011: 67) through military basic training lasts for only a few minutes as a trope in narrative feature film but can, in music video, become the logic of the video's *entire* text.

Intertextually, 'Part Of Me' remediated the fulfilment narrative of 1980s US militainment cinema such as *Top Gun* or *An Officer and a Gentleman* (a protagonist who is downtrodden in civilian life fulfils their potential through successfully passing through military training) to women viewers who could pleasurably identify with the recruit–protagonist. This pleasure was especially available to white women, given the whiteness structuring Perry's star image, but extended more conditionally to women of colour through the multi-racial (legible as supposedly 'post-racial') composition of the group of Marines. The spectacle of the female protagonist achieving empowerment and repairing her past through military training as self-realisation is further accentuated through the contrast between Perry's embodiment of this character and her established image as a star. While not as radical a bodily transformation as Demi Moore's during *GI Jane* (1997) – Perry's military haircut is still an unremarkable civilian length, and what she is cutting is not even her own hair – it nevertheless echoes the spectacle of a glamorous female star embodying military masculinity and the production of

the character as a 'masculinized subject' whose supposedly naturally feminine reproductive or sexualised qualities must be removed in order to fit into this masculine institution (Åhäll 2019b: 300). The performance gained authenticity through Perry's own star meta-narrative for viewers who knew that she had broken up with her own husband the previous year.

Taking 'Part Of Me' as an example of how to study the visual gender politics of popular culture (though limiting the analysis to lyrics and to action on screen), Linda Åhäll (2019b: 299) breaks down its storytelling into 'what we *hear*, what we *see*, and what we (are supposed to) *feel*' about what different gendered bodies are supposed to embody and what makes certain bodies matter more than others – not to mention what we are supposed to forget, that is, 'that militaries are designed to fight wars, [and] that weapons and military equipment are designed to kill' (Åhäll 2019b: 304). 'Part Of Me' could indeed valuably be read alongside US military recruitment advertising's own constructions of 'militarized femininity' (Brown 2012: 152; see Sjoberg 2007). Tanner Mirrlees (2016: 4–7) places Perry's video alongside contemporaneous US military co-operation with the production of superhero and science fiction films as a convergence of interests between the US security state and US media conglomerates that seeks to 'project positive images of American power to readers, listeners and viewers' around the world – and as an asset for Marine recruiters seeking to recruit more women. Åhäll (2019b: 299) thus makes an important advance for visual global politics in investigating 'meaning-making' and 'sense-making' in music video, especially meanings and senses connected to affective investments in war. And yet, as argued above, song lyrics and narrative action are only two of the elements of audiovisual meaning on which music video aesthetics depend. Even to begin asking what narratives about gender, race, violence and security 'Hard' might tell involves dealing with other elements, including music video editing conventions, the synchronisation of sound and moving image with embodied performance, and the meta-narrative of Rihanna as a star.

Fashioning female violence: militarised fashion and music video aesthetics in 'Hard'

'Hard', appearing two and a half years before 'Part Of Me' near the beginning of Obama's presidency, resembled 'Part Of Me' in using music video to tell a story about gender, race, geopolitics, security and US military power, the set of stories it could be viewed as telling *about* those things appears dramatically different once one analyses the interplay between star metanarrative and the aesthetics of militarisation on which the video drew. Directed by Melina Matsoukas (whose credits include five further videos for Rihanna and twelve for

Beyoncé, including 2016's 'Formation' (see Wallace 2017)), the video for 'Hard' placed Rihanna in several contemporary and futuristic militarised settings within a desert landscape, singing and posing in eight haute-couture-styled uniforms and warrior outfits suggesting ranks from enlistee to general. While making the video, Rihanna described its aesthetic to MTV as 'couture military' ('Everything is surrounded around the idea of something military […] We've got lots of cute outfits, lots of bullets') (Montgomery 2009), directly framing it within the visual and embodied practices of 'military chic' (Tynan 2013). The capacity for violence and aggression in Rihanna's character(s) in this spectacle is far greater than what Perry would embody in 'Part Of Me', despite that video's near-obligatory training-montage scene of Perry stabbing a dummy with a bayonet, allowing a viewer who is concerned with gendered narratives of violence and security to draw an immediate contrast between the two star personas. Indeed, the stylised and provocative performances of 'Hard' permit us to examine 'embodied choreographies of war in the everyday' (Åhäll 2019a: 149) much more literally than Åhäll might intend.

[Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xcwd_Nz6Zog]

The numerous costumes, characters and personas introduced during this four-minute video, each dotted around a distinctive corner of its battlefield, are unified thematically through their military associations and extra-textually through the established convention in music video aesthetics of creating multiple dispersed sequences that combine into a song's general theme (see Vernallis 2013: 97). Unlike the design of 'Part Of Me', which claims authenticity through purporting to depict the civilian and military everyday, 'Hard' offers the viewer a hyperbolic composite of militarised signifiers: its spectacle invites viewers to recognise resemblances to science fiction film franchises such as *Star Wars* and *Mad Max*, and to fashion photography (especially the iconic persona of Grace Jones and the performances of sexual dominance, hardness and androgyny she made famous in her 1982 video collection *A One Man Show* (see Kershaw 1997)), as well as contemporaneous warfare in the desert. The song's lyrics boast of Rihanna's triumphs over and disregard for those who are jealous of her success, framing her as tough, ambitious, 'brilliant' and 'resilient', and each chorus declares six times 'I'm so hard', reinforced by deep backing vocals affirming in call and response 'So hard' or 'Too hard'. Rihanna would scarcely need to grab her crotch in the armoury during the first rendition of this chorus to illustrate the phallic symbolism of juxtaposing these embodied and material fantasies of militarised power; and yet this is exactly what she does.

Lyrically, the only line connecting the audio song to any imaginary of state power belongs to the guest rapper Jeezy, whose words recall his youthful career as a drug dealer capable of enforcing his status through violence ('I used to run my own block like Obama did', likening his control of a street corner (see Nielson 2009: 352) to Obama's time as a community organiser in Chicago). A gendered distribution of physical movement emerges from the fact that the most dynamic action in the video occurs during Jeezy's screen time rather than Rihanna's (as Jeezy raps sitting in the roadside wreckage of a military vehicle, another convoy drives past and troops follow the car or leap off the side of the road): Rihanna's sequences, conversely, place the attention on her dancing, moving, singing and performing body, and sometimes her interactions with men. While the song's lyrics imagine much about being a multimillion-selling musician in hip-hop culture and make an autobiographical performance of resilience, at a time when military thinking as well as neoliberal economics were seeing individuals' resilience as an 'indispensable resource' (Howell 2015: 15), the words do not attach it to specifically military power: it is the video that turns 'Hard' into a text about militarised masculinity and the hardness of the military as the symbol of a characteristic Rihanna performs wanting to embody.

The spectacle of the video as both military and provocatively kinky is thus framed from the very first few seconds of 'Hard' through how music, visual setting and embodied performance work together. The song's first sound, a four-to-the-floor side-drum beat that could also double as the rhythm of a military march, is synchronised with a close-up of Rihanna pulling a helmet over her eyes, then a medium-range shot showing Rihanna standing between two rockets (wearing an open green field-jacket, knee-pads, and a low-cut top the same colour as her skin with black tape over its nipple areas), against the backdrop of an armoury. Synchronised with the first words, the video cuts to its second sequence, where Rihanna takes the role of a commanding officer inspecting male troops, in mirrored aviator sunglasses, a green garrison cap, and a white suit jacket with exaggerated shoulder-pads and a cinched waist: the shoulder-pads, the line of the jacket and the sunglasses all echo the 'both seductive and dominant' image of Grace Jones (with its own echoes of masculine military hardness and discipline) in the 'Warm Leatherette' sequence of *A One Man Show* and associated publicity (Kershaw 1997: 21). Off-stage, the shoulder-pads and diamante epaulettes of the Balmain dresses Rihanna wore throughout the turn of 2009–10, and the jaw-length undercut she wore while promoting *Rated R*, both became fashion trends, making militarised fashion part of her persona in a more lasting way.

The remainder of the video, placing Rihanna in various high-fashion outputs in material spaces which all connote desert warfare, likewise depends far less than 'Part Of Me' on staging a diegetic narrative, far more on staging tableaus exhibiting the pastiche, excess, provocativeness and transgression of haute-couture fashion photography; indeed, Rihanna implied as much when calling the video's style 'couture military'. (Its sequences place Rihanna in futuristic warrior costume amid sand-dunes; a pastiche commander's outfit in a squad tent; a metallic bikini on a pile of sandbags; a veiled dress of netting at a checkpoint; a Mickey Mouse-eared helmet straddling a pink tank; and, finally, in a crested helmet waving a black flag with the white letter 'R'). Appearing in 2009, it exemplified the way in which fashion media was then turning its 'tendency […] to exploit the excitement of military conflict' and the possibilities for creating striking images by stylising and eroticising the military body towards fascination with the sites, spaces and embodiments of the Global War on Terror (see Tynan 2013: 78). This fascination is as much at play in 'Hard' as in Tynan's example of Steven Meisel's 2007 *Italian Vogue* editorial 'Make Love Not War', which incorporated First Gulf War desert combat fatigues into its models' couture outfits and appeared to be set on a US military base in Iraq.

Rihanna's claims to 'hardness' in the video are performed not just through the declarative lyrics but simultaneously through outfits aligning her with military attributes and choreographies of strutting, weapons handling and dominance over men. Among these are commanding male subordinates in the parade ground sequence, walking unscathed through explosions in the sand-dunes sequence, outwitting men at poker in the tent sequence, and proximity to and use of weapons throughout, including the rifle she fires off on the parade ground and the gun-barrel she straddles on the tank. Her body is simultaneously sexualised as feminine through costumes emphasising her breasts and thighs, her grinding dance movements, and the camera's concentration on her waist, behind and hips. Two further levels of masculine hardness can be seen as contributing to the video's presentation of what it means to be 'hard'. One is the performance of gangsta masculinity incorporated through the integration of Jeezy's autobiographical narrative into the audio and video versions of the song (the video links Rihanna herself to it via the brief cut to the sand-dunes sequence, where Rihanna turns to the camera through her shoulder-spikes as Jeezy begins to rap 'If I wasn't doing this, you know where I'd be'). A deeper but inescapable layer of masculine hardness behind the video, however, is the aesthetics of US-led desert war.

These aesthetics are mobilised in the video in both directly apparent and subtler ways. The Humvees and a water-truck with US Air Force (USAF) markings used as background props,

or the Arabic graffiti painted on the side of the house (the Qur'anic verse in honour of the dead, 'We belong to God, and to Him we shall return' (Aidi 2011: 37)), are immediately apparent visual referents; the black and green tones of the parade-ground sequence, in contrast, are an echo but not a replication of the night-vision lenses effects which have filmed nocturnal battlefield action in Iraq. A further type of allusion to the aesthetics of warfare in Iraq is achieved through the use of sound to reinforce the significance of a visual shot, making the meaning of that moment inextricably *audio*visual in the way that an appreciation of music video aesthetics enables us to perceive: such is the case for instance when the song's deep, ominous bassline begins at 0.11 and is synchronised with the first armoury shot in which Rihanna's rifle appears. All these elements of meaning would be missed if one only approached music video through lyrics or even how the characters in the video tell a story – and so would another element of music video aesthetics which is essential for understanding 'Hard', the meta-narrative of Rihanna as a star.

Several methods could be used for researching this meta-narrative, including one important set of methods this paper does not attempt: analysing fans' and critics' reactions at the time and/or conducting fresh audience research to reveal what different interpretations viewers might have formed from these ingredients. The circuit of meaning-making within cultural texts is, of course, not complete without considering viewers' own subjectivities and the multiplicity of possible meanings that then result – the very spectatorial experiences that make 'the geopolitical […] emotionally personal' (Eken 2019: 212). Nevertheless, this paper suggests (engaging in its own acts of meaning-making as it does so) that an additional way to understand audiovisual artefacts which rely on star meta-narratives for meaning is to explore the prior incidents, texts and cultural forms that may have informed their production. These relate firstly to Rihanna's own biography and then to the performance of what could be termed 'female military masculinity' that this video entails.

Hardness and the continuum of violence: the meta-narrative of *Rated R*

The stardom of Rihanna, a worldwide celebrity since she released her debut album in 2004 aged sixteen, exemplifies Goodwin's argument that the 'meta-narratives' (Goodwin 1992: 98) musicians build up over time through their performances, styling, albums (which often symbolise new chapters in a star's diachronic celebrity persona) and publicity appearances are themselves elements of meaning in music video aesthetics, even as they advance the meta-narrative themselves. Rihanna's persona had already advanced past her initial image as

an attractive young Bajan girl (see Russell 2012) through the songs, videos and publicity surrounding her 2007 album *Good Girl Gone Bad*, taking over 'the image of the stereotypically hypersexual black female as über-"bad girl"' in a narrative of sexual and artistic maturity (James 2008: 404). *Rated R* (named after the most adult age classification in US cinema, as well as Rihanna's initial) joined violence to sex through an aesthetics of BDSM power-play, revenge fantasy and, in 'Hard', militarisation.

The recording of Rated R, named after US cinema's most adult age classification as well as Rihanna's initial, began in April 2009, two months after Rihanna had been assaulted on the night of the Grammy Awards by her then partner Chris Brown. A photograph of her injuries released by the gossip website TMZ had been widely and controversially republished, forcing the attack to become part of her embodied public narrative against her will. Her videos and artwork for the *Rated R* singles and later songs with Def Jam Records fused performances 'of hardcore masculinity and dominatrix-type femininity' (Hobson 2012: 82). Black feminists including Janell Hobson (2012), Nicole Fleetwood (2012) and Esther Jones (2013) have argued that these strove to regain agency over her public persona, resignify the meanings of her image and body, and indeed produce an explicit dialogue with the facts and visual images of her assault by attaching themes of 'violence in intimate relations and sexual practices' (Fleetwood 2012: 420) to her star image through means that would appear to be under her creative control.

Compared to 'Hard', other songs and videos from *Rated R* and later albums dramatizing 'sexuality, violence and revenge' (Ferreday 2017: 264) have received much more attention in feminist scholarship. 'Russian Roulette', the lead single from *Rated R* released in October 2009, represented a 'deployment of illicit sexuality through BDSM imagery' which arguably sought to overturn the narrative that Rihanna had been a victim or complicit in her abuse (Jones 2013: 75). Her styling throughout the *Rated R* phase made frequent use of peaked caps and fetish wear. The lyrics of one album track with no video, 'G4L (Gangsta 4 Life)', described leading a gang of young women to the house of a man who had beaten one of them, referred to having 'got these girls like a soldier', and ended its chorus with 'we an army, better yet a navy, better yet crazy, guns in the air'. The video for *Rated R*'s last single, 'Rockstar 101', styled Rihanna 'in several androgynous costumes, including a semi-drag impersonation of heavy metal guitarist, Slash [the track's guest artist], as she gyrates sexually with a guitar' (Houlihan and Raynor 2014: 337). 'Love The Way You Lie', her duet on an Eminem album, appeared very shortly afterwards in June 2010, with Rihanna singing as an

abuse survivor and Eminem, himself a reported perpetrator of intimate partner violence (Bierria 2011: 115), as her abuser): this complex song, with a video starring Megan Fox and Dominic Monaghan as a mutually abusive couple, has made feminists debate whether or not its story blamed the victim (Enck and McDaniel 2012; Thaller and Messing 2014), and permitted educators to design activities exposing societal narratives about intimate partner violence (Rodier et al. 2012; Cassar 2019), including its use by Christina Rowley and Laura Shepherd (2012: 157) in teaching gender in IR.

Later songs and videos recorded as Rihanna reconciled with then separated from Brown also pursued these themes, concentrating ever more on violent female revenge. 'Man Down', from her 2011 album *Loud*, cast Rihanna as 'both victim and perpetrator' (Fleetwood 2012: 430) of different forms of violence in telling the story of Rihanna's character shooting her rapist, and the 'escalation' (Ferreday 2017: 268) of violence and excess in the performances constructing her star narrative continued into her 2015 video 'Bitch Better Have My Money' ('BBHMM'), a seven-minute pastiche of pulp cinema where Rihanna and a multi-racial group of women vigilantes torture and kill a fraudulent white accountant and his wife. By 2015, Robin James (2015: 144–5, 155) could describe the 'corporate person' of Rihanna as performing a 'melancholic' subject who retained the very attachments to and identifications with 'non-bourgeois black masculinities' that resilience discourse would have demanded she overcome. Both BDSM aesthetics and appropriated 'symbols of violent masculinity', as Hobson observes in the dancehall setting of 'Man Down', have served in this phase of Rihanna's star narrative as expressions of female survivorship and rage (Hobson 2012: 82–3). In consistently embodying the role of vengeful and kinky perpetrator, Rihanna's star persona has both drawn from and contributed to the 'storied fantasies' (Sjoberg and Gentry 2015: 4) that shape popular understandings of women's violence. And yet, throughout feminist responses to this aspect of Rihanna's stardom, military violence and the international are curiously absent: if her videos, songs and photographs intertextually produce a fetish-like, pulpy space for exploring fantasies of female revenge, what is the effect of placing the military, US desert warfare and the figure of the military woman in a continuum with the rest of these?

'Female military masculinities' and star meta-narratives: making feminist and queer sense of 'Hard'

The militarised aesthetics of ‘Hard’, though strikingly absent from the feminist literature on Rihanna, can be seen through the idea of star meta-narrative as complementing and extending the narrative and strategy of *Rated R*. Its ‘couture military’ fantasy setting which nevertheless indexes Arabic language and the USAF, extends the song’s web of references around what it means to be ‘hard’, via a geopolitical imagination anchored within the contemporary space and time of the US military and the War on Terror. At a time when US military women were participating in killing at all ranges from close quarters to piloting drones, and women’s very capacity to kill was being debated within and around the armed forces as the military began to revisit the combat exclusion, the question of how far representations of military women in music video invite viewers to imagine their stars’ characters as women capable of exercising violence and killing was and is directly political. The invitation is much stronger in Rihanna’s case than Perry’s, and reinforced intertextually when ‘Hard’ is heard and seen alongside other tracks from *Rated R*; retrospectively, it has been reinforced retrospectively through later videos such as ‘Man Down’ and ‘BBHMM’ continuing to associate her persona with survivorship and violent revenge. Since stars’ creation of ‘character identities’ (Slee 2017: 153) in music video provides viewers with points of identification as well as objects of desire (Goodwin 1992: 103), among the identifications that ‘Hard’ invites viewers to make from their own socially situated subject positions is an identification with a (Caribbean) woman taking on to and into her body iconic masculine-coded signifiers of (largely US) military power.

In evoking a woman taking hardness and masculinity into her body to battle back from assault by a man, ‘Hard’ in fact performs a strikingly similar discursive move to the plot of, and Demi Moore’s embodied performance in, *GI Jane*. Moore’s Jordan O’Neill, after being beaten and threatened with rape by her unit’s instructor during a Survival, Evasion, Resist and Escape exercise, fights back at him and defies his warning that her presence would put the men at risk by shouting ‘Suck my dick’ (Youngs, Lisle and Zalewski 1999); Rihanna declares, repeatedly, ‘I’m so hard’. If the audio already makes this move, the video does so even more emphatically, harnessing the military’s aesthetics as an institution that has been made to conventionally symbolise masculinity in order to exemplify what it means to be ‘hard’ – fusing the body made hard through training and resilience (see Jeffords 1994) and the hardness of having a phallus and becoming aroused.

The imagination of hardening the body through militarising it expresses, as Jesse Crane-Seeber (2016: 42) notes, a ‘complicated psycho-sexual dynamics’ that infuse militarisation with emotions of ‘power, desire, pleasure and agency’ within the military as well as

representations of that process outside it. In these two audiovisual texts both Moore and Rihanna, to different extents and distinct but overlapping purposes, are ‘performing’ military masculinities in Judith Butler’s sense of expressing bodily signifiers that typically code bodies as masculine (see Butler 1990). Simultaneously, these are performances of what the queer theorist Jack Halberstam (1998: 1) termed ‘female masculinities’, that is, identifications with and embodiments of aspects of masculinity from gendered subject positions where such identifications would conventionally not be open. The mystique of identification and desire with which the military–civilian ‘dance of militarisation’ (Åhäll 2016) invests *military* masculinities makes the military a particularly powerful and attractive symbol in this regard. The convergence of these ideas makes it possible to theorise ‘female military masculinities’ as a way of thinking about embodied identifications with military masculinities on the part of those who are not men: indeed, it is via Yvonne Tasker’s work on *GI Jane* (Tasker 2011) as an artefact telling a story about ‘military masculinity without the male body’, alongside Mokua Ombati’s work on Kenyan women combatants (Ombati 2015), that Marsha Henry (2017: 188) suggests the study of international politics has engaged with ‘female military masculinities’ at all.

Rihanna’s performance of female military masculinities in ‘Hard’, unlike Moore’s or indeed Perry’s, also however operates through aesthetics of fetish, camp and drag. As Valerie Steele (1996: 180) notes, fetish culture and style has long understood that military uniforms owe their ‘erotic connotations’ to the ‘sexual excitement’ associated with violence and dominance/submission, the capacity for boots and weapons to become ‘phallic signifiers’, and the attention dress uniforms draw to the line and shape of the male body (see Crane-Seeber 2016: 47). Steele (1996: 174) argues that men’s choices of clothing associated with ‘ultra-masculine roles’, including military archetypes, in fetish play serve ‘as a kind of armor against the world that protects the wearer’s inner self, while projecting an image of aggressive masculinity’; indeed, as Halberstam (1998) and C Jacob Hale (1997) show, such choices and projections are not just made by men. The aesthetics of fetish inform ‘Hard’ because, throughout the *Rated R* period, fetish style was a key component of the aesthetic transformations Rihanna and her stylists were employing in order to reassert control over her public persona and convert it from victim to survivor, as were her references to the image of Grace Jones (Russell 2012), a fellow Caribbean diasporic star whose persona played with evocations of dominance, racialised desire and sexual control (Fulani 2012). The luxurious pastiche of Rihanna’s *Rated R*-era outfits, including those in ‘Hard’, continues traditions of ‘black camp’ (see Chatzipapatheodoridis 2017) as embodied by previous generations of stars

including Jones, Michael Jackson, Prince and Jimi Hendrix, and perhaps even the racialised queering of the military through the category of 'military realness' in ballroom drag (see Hilderbrand 2013: 50–1).

'Hard' as mediated through Rihanna's stardom thus uncomfortably combines its narrative about her own persona with reinscribing the US military, its troops and its desert operations as 'hard'. As such, it exemplifies the limitations of queer projects of reading 'separating masculinity from men' (Halberstam 1998: 50) as liberatory. Yet, Amy Stone and Eve Shapiro (2017: 254) argue through research on drag kinging and leather subcultures in the USA, identifications with masculinities may be 'radically transgressive' for individuals on an affective level and still 'simultaneously re-create gendered systems of inequality' in structural terms. This entanglement of 'empowerment and reinscription' (Stone and Shapiro 2017: 254) is exemplified in 'Hard', and the gendered system of inequality it reinscribes is the logic of militarisation itself.

The larger constellation of meaning around 'Hard', mediated through Rihanna's star meta-narrative and the composite persona of all the songs, images and videos that constituted *Rated R*, arguably undercuts that logic somewhat more, since the position she embodies in the 'continuum of violence' (Cockburn 2004) is not that of white masculine power. A less sustained, casual engagement with the video would be more likely to suggest that the sexualised association between hardness, masculinity and the military is 'what it means'. For Rihanna and her persona, 'Hard' might perform a 'disidentification' in José Esteban Muñoz's sense of reading one's self and narrative 'in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with' oneself (Muñoz 1999: 12); but how the viewer affectively perceives it, what aspects of it they might (dis)identify with and how they might do so depends on their own positionality and attachments, such as how they relate to Rihanna as a star or how far they question the gender order and security agenda of US militarism. Appreciating the synchronisations, the embodied performances and the star meta-narratives of music video are all necessary to perceive these politics at work.

Conclusion

Since 2009, 'Hard' has become not just a (complex) story about gendered, racialised and sexualised 'figurations' (Leigh and Weber 2019) of security, geopolitics, violence and militarisation, but also a *historical* text, one that was imagining the projection of US power under Obama rather than under Trump. This was a moment when black musicians in the USA

were reflecting on what it meant for their country to have its first black president – indeed Jeezy had already paralleled Obama's historic access to the White House and his own upward mobility as a hustler and gangsta in a track he released with Nas during Obama's campaign (Nielson 2009) – and when Obama himself was establishing a 'post-hip-hop' presidential masculinity which ostensibly demilitarised the presidency compared to George W Bush yet masked the further institutionalisation of the US-led War on Terror across the globe, a phenomenon Emma Cannen (2014) has called 'avant-garde militarism'. The narratives of gender and security told by and about a US state embodied internationally by Obama as president and Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State were replaced after November 2016 by a narrative of masculinist and white supremacist protectionism and retraditionalisation (see Eroukhmanoff 2017; Graff, Kapur and Walters 2019). While the video no longer belongs to the present of the gender politics of security, it does still exemplify the complex contradictions of the political dimensions that video and its aesthetic practices bring to popular music.

While the creation of fantasies of retributive female violence has remained part of the meta-narrative of Rihanna's celebrity, Rihanna's chief association with the military is likely for many viewers/listeners to be her starring in the 2012 film *Battleship* (an adaptation of the Hasbro board game), playing one of a group of US Navy sailors who find themselves fighting alien battleships near Hawaii. Rihanna's online fan base began calling itself the 'Rihanna Navy' around the same time, likely referencing both *Battleship* and the description of her girl gang as a 'navy' in one line of 'G4L' (Satran 2016). Commenting briefly on this film in her essay on military women in cinema, Yvonne Tasker (2017: 503) observes that Rihanna's role embodied the convention of the tough Black or Latina female soldier as supporting character established by Vasquez in *Aliens* (1986) and personified by Michelle Rodriguez, in whose stardom the chapter is much more interested – indicative of how much more attention film receives compared to popular music in international politics, even though (and more so than ever in the digital era) these genres' aesthetics and affective economies are intertwined.

'Hard' might not have structured space for critical reflection on militarism into its form in the same way as the vein of 'critical military shooters' Lee Jarvis and Nick Robinson (in press: 9) that several games developers released around the same time in 2007–12. Neither, however, does it operate in the same way as the militarisation of women's emotions about themselves and their relationship in order to create positive sentiments about military recruitment that feminist analysis readily reveals in 'Part Of Me' (Åhäll 2019b), even though both depict a wronged woman reclaiming agency by embodying aspects of military

masculinity. Moreover, Perry as a star embodies *white* femininity, and her videos characteristically create ‘fantastic visions of whiteness’, including fantasies of temporarily becoming the exotic Other that she can then divest (Clark 2014: 322); Rihanna enters the field of celebrity *as* an exotic Other, putting her in a similar relationship towards her white contemporaries that Grace Jones occupied in relation to Madonna (Jelača 2017: 454). Though this contrast between two celebrities does not go as far as Marsha Henry argues is necessary in connecting studies of militarised masculinities to ‘a focus on *poor* black women’ (Henry 2017: 183, my emphasis), it nevertheless shows that the fusion of race and gender are necessary for making feminist sense of embodied performance, popular culture and militarisation.

In understanding how this video and other popular-cultural artefacts using militarised aesthetics do political work, it would be reductive to frame the question as simply one of whether something is ‘militarized or not’ (see Kraska 2007: 503) – not least because the very concept, as Alison Howell (2018) shows, rests on an assumption that social institutions have ever existed outside the structures that have enacted state violence on racialised populations and other groups that threaten white socio-economic order. The embodied performances, scenarios and language of ‘Hard’ do employ logics on which militarisation depends: eroticising military bodies, spaces and objects, and implying that appropriating the hardness of militarised masculinity is the solution to the crisis and lack constructed through the song’s lyrics in conjunction with Rihanna’s star narrative. In this sense it is part of the ‘neoliberal imperium’ (Agathangelou and Ling 2009: 46) of desire, and could even have been more seductive because – echoing the Obama presidency’s ‘avant-garde militarism’ (Cannen 2014) – it did not centre white performers. This too becomes more apparent through the song’s audiovisual text.

Using the idea of star meta-narrative to ask what stories about gender, violence and security (see Shepherd 2013) this video tells, meanwhile, brings to the foreground what feminist security studies understands as the ‘continuum of violence’ (Cockburn 2004) in patriarchal structures that enable insecurities from everyday and intimate forms of gendered violence to the militarised violence of the state. In this continuum, Rihanna as an individual has occupied a very different position to the US military as an institution. ‘Hard’ tells a story of how a black woman has used imagination and fantasy to take control of her sexuality and public persona after surviving intimate partner violence, and offers viewers the pleasure of identifying with such a fantasy themselves, but it also tells a story in which the hardest and most masculine thing imaginable is the (US) military and in which Rihanna’s provocative

and dominant sensuality are tied to military weaponry, military uniform and the spaces in which the US military was projecting power in the Middle East. If Rihanna's presence as a popular cultural icon is as 'an unnerving figure who remains something of an enigma' (Jelača 2017: 454), impossible to reduce to just one meaning, this extends to her meaning(s) in the international racialised gender politics of security. We might read this as the kind of refusal 'to signify monolithically' through which, Cynthia Weber (2016: 159) suggests, certain subjects in international politics are able to make the very borders they cannot stay stably on one side of into 'point[s] of contestation', yet what is contested and how depends on each viewer's listening gaze.

Making sense of 'Hard', therefore, shows how a feminist and queer curiosity can be brought to bear on music video aesthetics, including elements of audiovisual and musical meaning which are rarely appreciated as significant in international politics: the synchronisation of sound, moving image and performance (what creates its *audio*visuality), and the meta-narratives of stars as the performing bodies with whom viewers are invited to identify. Even the many music videos not framed as narratives still invite viewers to co-create a narrative through interpreting their montages and through relating them to the meta-narratives of their stars. Indeed, spectators' affective relationships to the performing body can themselves be considered an element of audiovisual meaning, infusing the geopolitical imaginations of audiovisual artefacts with an emotional charge through the intimate politics of identification and desire involved in the spectatorial gaze. Like any other popular-cultural form, music video can be seen as part of the 'bricks and mortar' from which individuals construct their senses of self and world (Railton and Watson 2012: 20) – including their senses of gender and 'race' – just as the literature on popular culture and world politics contends. But music video's harnessing of the emotions of socially defining personal identity through musical preferences and the imaginative work necessary to assemble montaged sequences into a narrative (see Vernallis 2013: 160) gives music video a particularly intimate place in the affective fabric of how individuals experience international politics in the everyday.

Applying the key themes of music video aesthetics to help make feminist and queer sense of media and popular culture in international politics thus enriches the methodological toolkit for making sense of international politics itself, by demonstrating how the 'mediatized everyday' (Åhäll 2016: 162) is not just a sensory phenomenon but a *multi*sensory one – that is, how meaning is able to emerge from the juxtaposition and synchronisation of what is offered to the different senses at once. A widely remediated intertextual vocabulary for

alluding to and referencing the military, established through the transnational imaginative continuum of mimetic and fictional representations of war, has furnished music video with ready resources for attaching symbolic resonances of war and the military as an episode in their stars' meta-narratives, yet the dynamics of militarisation in 'Hard' were not identical to those in 'Part Of Me' even if both were underpinned by the gendered security politics of the Obama presidency. A decade later, the contexts for viewing and understanding them are significantly and troublingly different, for those whose socially and geopolitically situated circumstances allowed them to experience the turn of the 2000s and 2010s as years of progress and peace. The emotions of contrasting the present and recent past indeed lend an extra dimension of temporality to the spectatorial experience, at least for viewers to whom they are apparent or meaningful. Yet the realisation that 'Hard' and other videos of its era are now historic texts hints that historicity itself is an underappreciated element of meaning-making in audiovisual aesthetics – yet a deeply political one that deserves to be further theorised and researched, showing how spectators are positioned not just in space but also in time.

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Appendix 1: Synchronisations of settings, performances and sound in Rihanna's 'Hard'

Time	Setting	Performance	Noteworthy sounds
0.00	Armoury (A)	Rihanna pulls dark green netting-covered helmet over her face with both hands, showing	Snare drums in dancehall rhythm

		her long black nails, 'Shhh' singer tattoo, diamond rings and red lipstick	
0.02		Camera pulls back to show Rihanna standing between two rockets, wearing open green field jacket, knee-pads, and low-cut beige top with black tape over nipples	Snare drum phrase repeats
0.03	Parade ground at night, lit in night-vision tones of black and green (B)	Rihanna wearing mirrored sunglasses, forage cap, and white jacket with giant shoulder-pads, singing in drill-instructor pose to light-skinned male soldier	Rihanna sings 'Yeah, yeah, yeah'
0.04		Multi-racial line of male soldiers in green dress uniform	Men sing 'Yeah, yeah, yeah'
0.05		Male soldier and Rihanna face-to-face	'Yeah, yeah, yeah' call-and-response repeats throughout the sequence
0.06		Camera pulls back to show rocky landscape and Humvee behind the line of soldiers and Rihanna	'Yeah, yeah, yeah' phrases repeat
0.08		Close-up on Rihanna's face	
0.09		Scene fades out	
0.10	Armoury	Rihanna with eyes hidden by helmet, red lips in centre of frame	Rihanna sings 'Ah, yeah, yeah, yeah'
0.11		Rihanna standing between the rockets, M-16 rifle propped up to her right	Deep synthesised bass line begins

0.12	Parade ground	Rihanna reviewing troops contemptuously	Ominous bass line continues; Rihanna singing ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah’
0.14	Armoury	Rihanna between the rockets, hands between her thighs	
0.15		Rihanna with helmet up, brushing hair back from her face with sultry expression, leaving smoky mark on her cheek	
0.16	Parade ground	Rihanna inspecting troops, seen from behind	
0.17		Men present their rifles	
0.18	Armoury	Rihanna provocatively adjusts her top	
0.19	Parade ground	Camera semi-fades-in on men holding rifles across bodies	
0.19	Armoury	Rihanna touches helmet brim, showing two thick metal bracelets	
0.20		Camera judders; Rihanna crosses legs	
0.22	Parade ground	Rihanna struts along the line of troops as men march on the spot	First verse begins
0.25	Armoury	Brief close-up of black dog-tags between Rihanna’s breasts	
0.26	Parade ground	Men saluting Rihanna	
0.26	Armoury	Rihanna climbing on footlocker to dance	
0.27	Parade ground	Rihanna struts along the line	
0.31	Armoury	Out-of-focus close-up on Rihanna’s profile with red lips, helmet over eyes	Rihanna interjects ‘You know this’, male voice gives affirming shout

0.32	Parade ground	Rihanna struts along the line, close-up on gloved hand on hip	
0.35	Armoury	Rihanna sings with eyes visible	
0.36	Parade ground	Rihanna struts along the line	
0.41	Armoury	Rihanna brushes hair back	
0.42	Sand dunes, lit in bright orange tones (C)	Rihanna looks sternly at camera with hair combed over face and a hooked black mask painted around her eyes; the black spikes on her shoulder-pads are as high as her head	Second verse begins
0.43		Long shot of Rihanna standing to the left of an explosion in the sand; Rihanna begins to march	First line continues: 'Imma rock this shit like fashion'
0.44		Medium-length shot of Rihanna marching	
0.45		Rihanna looks at camera over shoulder, revealing backless dress	
0.46		Rihanna looks away, refusing the camera's gaze	
0.47		Rihanna walks through more explosions	Verse continues: 'My runway never looked so clear'
0.51		Rihanna stands with hands on hips	
0.52		Rihanna points to herself, showing long black nails	'The hottest bitch in heels right here'
0.53		Rihanna continues walking forward, addressing camera	Chorus 1 begins at end of sequence (1.04) and carries into next
1.05	Armoury	Rihanna holds jacket open/closed	First line of Chorus 1 ends: 'I'm so hard'

1.05	Parade ground	Rihanna struts, close-up on her behind	Men sing: ‘So hard’
1.06	Armoury	Rihanna dances, dog-tags swinging	Rihanna: ‘I’m so hard’
1.08	Parade ground	Men doing jumping jacks	Men: ‘So hard’
1.09	Armoury	Rihanna dances, holding helmet on head	
1.10		Close-up on Rihanna’s face, as she tugs helmet-strap	
1.11	Parade ground	Men drilling	
1.12	Armoury	Rihanna leans back between rockets	
1.14	Parade ground	Men drilling	Men: ‘Too hard’
1.14	Armoury	Rihanna dances, grabs crotch	Rihanna: ‘I, I, I’m so hard’
1.16	Parade ground	Rihanna marches between two lines of troops	
1.17	Armoury	Close-up on Rihanna’s face	
1.18	Parade ground	Rihanna marches between two lines of troops	
1.20		Rihanna holds her lapels and smiles	
1.20	Armoury	Rihanna dancing out-of-focus between rockets	
1.22	Parade ground	Rihanna walks past troops	
1.23		Close-up on Rihanna’s waist, thighs, gloves, boots and tights	
1.23		Rihanna gives dominant glance over her shoulder and walks back	
1.25	Armoury	Rihanna dancing with hand over crotch	

1.26	Parade ground	Rihanna fires off rifle with her back to the troops	Chorus 2 begins: 'br-r-r-p, that Rihanna rain just won't let up'
1.27	Armoury	Rihanna dancing, camera points down her chest	
1.28	Parade ground	Rihanna marches with rifle in front of the men	
1.30	Armoury	Close-up on Rihanna's face, helmet over eyes	
1.31	Parade ground	Rihanna marches with rifle in front of the men	
1.33	Armoury	Rihanna dancing on footlocker with grinding motions	
1.34	Parade ground	Rihanna struts with rifle, troops lined up behind her	
1.35	Armoury	Rihanna opens and closes her jacket	
1.36	Parade ground	Rihanna fires off the rifle	'br-r-r-p, br-r-r-p'
1.37	Armoury	Rihanna puts finger to her lips	
1.40	Parade ground	Rihanna holds rifle, ready to fire	
1.40	Sand dunes	Rihanna struts through explosions	'So hard, so hard' (continues into next)
1.41	Pile of sandbags in desert, lit in orange tones (D)	Rihanna rolls in wet sand, wearing dark leather mini-skirt, cupped metal bikini, one belted shoulder-plate with two knives strapped to it, a different black mask painted across her eyes, and her hair smoothed back	
1.43	Sand dunes	Rihanna strutting in semi-silhouette	

1.44	Pile of sandbags	Rihanna with head thrown back; soldier behind her points rifle to right of camera	
1.45	Sand dunes	Rihanna looks to camera through her shoulder-spikes	
1.46	Pile of sandbags	Rihanna stands on 'podium' of sandbags between squad of four armed male soldiers wearing vests, fatigue trousers with knee-pads, helmets with goggles on top; chiffon train trails from the back of her bikini as she dances and shakes her behind	Second verse begins
1.48		Rihanna sits up from rolling in sand	
1.50		Rihanna sings to camera	
1.51		Rihanna sings in dominant pose, flanked by two of the squad	
1.52		Rihanna crawls over the sandbags	
1.53		Rihanna sings from the 'podium'	
1.55		Rihanna writhes in sand and arches back	
1.57	House in desert (E)	Soldier wearing green vest and red head-wrap, carrying beige rifle, walks past side of house with Arabic graffiti from the Quran ('To Allah we belong and to Him we shall return')	Second verse continues: 'Who think they test me now'
1.57		Camera pulls back to show footlockers outside house,	

		soldier walks in past another guard	
1.59	Armoury	Rihanna dancing between rockets	‘Run through your town, I shut it down’
2.00		Close-up of Rihanna’s face	
2.01		Rihanna points down	Vocoder slows the word ‘down’
2.02	Interior of tent (F)	Off-duty male soldier slams cards on to a table where Rihanna and other male soldiers are gambling	Bass drops
2.02		Close-up of a luxury liquor bottle, Rihanna’s hands dealing cards, what seems like bandolier of bullets on her chest	‘Brilliant, resilient…’
2.03		Rihanna looks over cards, wearing high black/white/red peaked cap and large hoop earrings	
2.04		Squad playing cards	
2.05		Close-up on dog-tags and Poker Stars chips on table	‘Fan mail from 27 million…’
2.06		Soldier and Rihanna looking over cards; ruched straps of her dress, eagle-like insignia on cap	
2.07	Armoury	Rihanna opens jacket	
2.09	Tent interior	Close-up on dog-tags and poker chips	
2.10	Armoury	Rihanna dancing, holding helmet down	
2.11		Rihanna makes ‘small’ sign with two fingers, smiles sardonically, gives dismissive wave	‘It’s gonna take more than that, hope that ain’t all you got’

2.13	Tent interior	Black soldier lifts on webbing	
2.14		Rihanna gathers chips towards her	‘I need it all’
2.15		Close-up on dog-tags and poker chips	
2.16		Black soldier puts on camo-print Skull Candy headphones	
2.16		Close-up on dog-tags, poker chips and $100 bills	‘The money, the cars, the clothes…’
2.17		Rihanna starts dancing on her chair	
2.18		Unseen hand throws down Poker Stars playing cards	
2.19	Armoury	Close-up on Rihanna’s face	‘I can’t just let you run up on me like that’
2.20		Rihanna dancing in front of upturned rifle, shot at 90° angle	
2.21		Rihanna dancing between rockets	
2.24	Tent interior	Close-up of soldier’s headphones	
2.25		Rihanna overturns table, tossing banknotes into air	
2.25		Male soldiers on another table arm-wrestling	
2.27		Rihanna walks away from the men, waving her winnings	
2.28	Pink tank in desert (G)	Rihanna’s head and shoulders with pink tank in background, wearing black helmet with Mickey Mouse ears, pink lipstick and four bandoliers of bullets	Chorus 1 starts

2.29		Rihanna standing on tank, with its gun-barrel pointing forward; she dances slowly, swaying hips	
2.31		Rihanna tugs straps of helmet	
2.31		Rihanna stands on gun-barrel of tank, both hands between her legs	
2.32		Rihanna looks over her shoulder to camera, revealing nothing but a very fine mesh top under the bandoliers	
2.33	Roadside scene (H)	Rihanna wearing olive-green cape, netting and high black boots, holding rifle, standing by US Air Force water-tank	
2.34	Pink tank	Rihanna dances on tank	
2.35	Roadside	Camera pans up Rihanna's chest and head, Rihanna looks to camera wearing netting like veil	
2.38	Pink tank	Rihanna glances up from under helmet	
2.38	Roadside	Rihanna walks past line of trucks	
2.40	Pink tank	Rihanna tugs helmet-straps, sways hips, pink gun-barrel in foreground	
2.40		Rihanna straddles gun-barrel	'So hard'
2.42	Roadside	Rihanna walks away from water-tank, rifle pointing down, and changes places with soldier she is relieving (Jeezy)	

2.48		Rihanna walks to checkpoint, holding rifle which reflects the light	
2.48	Mountain road (I)	Long shot of burning vehicle	
2.49		Close-up of Jeezy, wearing black leather jacket, black do-rag with goggles on top; flames behind him	Jeezy begins rapping
2.51		Jeezy seen sitting among wrecked tyres as other military vehicle drives by	
2.55		Two soldiers run down hill to join the vehicle	
2.56		Jeezy continues rapping	'I used to run my own block like Obama did'
2.57		Two soldiers advance, pointing rifles	
2.58		Close-up on Jeezy	'You ain't gotta believe me'
3.00	Sand dunes	Rihanna struts through explosions	'Go ask my mama then'
3.00	Mountain road	Jeezy sitting on the tyres	'You couldn't even come in my room, it smelled like a kilo'
3.01		Soldier runs through wreckage, pointing rifle	
3.02		Soldier tries to revive another in seat of wrecked vehicle	
3.03		Close-up on face of male soldier wearing camo-print headphones, three streaks of black paint on cheek	
3.04		Close-up on Jeezy rapping	

3.04	Sand dunes	Rihanna turns to camera	
3.05	Mountain road	Two dark green tanks drive up road	
3.06		Jeezy standing with one foot on gun-barrel of tank	
3.08		Jeezy tugs his lapels and raps	
3.09		Convoy drives	
3.10		Jeezy sitting on tyres	
3.10	Sand dunes	Camera pans up from Rihanna's feet as she struts	
3.12	Mountain road	Jeezy smokes a cigar in bright lens-flare	
3.13		Jeezy sitting on tyres, soldiers exploring wreckage	
3.16		Fireball explodes	
3.17		Jeezy stands and walks away with fireball in background	
3.19		Jeezy sitting on tyres	
3.20	Sand dunes	Rihanna strutting past explosions	
3.21	Mountain road	Jeezy sitting, gesturing with cigar	
3.22		Soldier wearing camo headphones lifts rifle	
3.23		Jeezy sitting on tyres as soldiers leap past him	'Yeah, they say they hard, they ain't as hard as this'
3.25		Soldiers circle wrecked vehicle	
3.28		Jeezy stands, smoking cigar	'Hard, the one word that describes me' (continues into next)
3.28	Sand dunes	Rihanna turns and looks through shoulder-spikes	'If I wasn't doing this…'

3.30	Mountain road	Jeezy sitting on tank, holding jacket collar	'…you know where I'd be' (Jeezy's last line)
3.31		Close-up of Jeezy on tank, holding two fingers to camera	End of Jeezy's section
3.32	Parade ground	Rihanna struts in front of the troops	Rihanna begins singing again: 'Where dem girls talking trash, where dem girls talking trash?'
3.35		Rihanna mimes scanning horizon	'Where they at, where they at, where they at?'
3.36	Armoury	Rihanna dancing	'Where dem bloggers at…?'
3.39	Parade ground	Close-up of Rihanna scanning horizon, bright searchlight behind her	'Where they at, where they at, where they at?'
3.42	Pink tank	Rihanna dancing on tank, swaying hips	
3.47	Parched plain (J)	Rihanna wearing black bodice with pointed shoulders, centurion's helmet, knives strapped to hips, carrying large black flag with white letter R	Chorus 1 begins for last time
3.52	Armoury	Close-up on Rihanna's face	
3.53		Rihanna crouches between rockets	
3.55	Parade ground	Rihanna turns to camera, men out of focus, camera highlights hair braided into tram-lines on one side of her cap	'I'm so hard'
3.57		Rihanna leads men in marching dance	

3.57	Plain	Rihanna swirls flag, looks to camera, camera picks out leopard-print fur on helmet	
3.59		Close-up of knives on Rihanna's hips	
4.00		Rihanna swirls flag	
4.01	Parade ground	Rihanna turns to camera	I'm so hard'
4.02		Rihanna stands between ranks of men	
4.03	Armoury	Close-up of Rihanna's face, hands behind her head, swinging her hips	
4.04	Mountain road	Convoy driving past smoking wreckage	
4.04		Jeezy sitting on tank	Jeezy: 'So hard' (accompanying chorus for first time)
4.05	Sand dunes	Rihanna strutting past explosions	
4.06	Armoury	Rihanna dancing between rockets, from thighs up	
4.07	Mountain road	Jeezy standing by wreckage	
4.08	Armoury	Close-up on Rihanna's face, helmet over eyes, with red lips open	Rihanna: 'I, I, I' (last words)
4.09		Scene quickly fades to black	