What makes violence martial? Adopt A Sniper and normative imaginaries of violence in the contemporary United States

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Abstract

What makes violence martial? Contemporary militarism scholarship, owing to an analytical overdetermination of the role of military institutions, frequently conflates martiality with violence writ large. Drawing upon the illustrative case of Adopt A Sniper, a US military support charity founded by police officers operating during the global war on terror and intended to help supporters 'directly contribute to the killing of the enemy', this article interrogates the intuitive 'line' between martial and other, particularly colonial, forms of violence. To do so, I develop the concept of 'normative imaginaries of violence' – articulations of intersubjective beliefs; political community; spatial geographies; gendered, sexualized, racialized and classed power relations; and logics of legitimation. Through this lens, and informed by the work of Frantz Fanon, the article demonstrates that though coloniality and martiality are deeply intertwined, they are neither reducible to nor epiphenomenal of each other. Through a juxtaposition of the titular sniper with two additional figures invoked by Adopt A Sniper – the militiaman and the vigilante – I outline a novel, genealogical method that enables us to trace the entangled histories of contemporary violences and identify the implicit politics of ordering at work in existing, often fragmented, analyses of political violence.

Keywords

Colonialism, gender, militarism, race, United States, war on terror

Introduction

What makes violence martial? Critical scholarship reflects an intuitive sense that there is some-thing specific and identifiable about martial violence that distinguishes it from other forms of harm, coercion and oppression. We also have a sense that identifying which (or when) violence is martial is exigent: it tells us how to analytically understand it and politically resist it. And yet a great deal of militarism scholarship fails to directly engage with the question of martiality (Eastwood, 2018) and, as a result, the politics of reading violence through one set of intellectual categories over another. As observed by Nicole Grove (2020: 20), 'we may never find the real lines

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between these things, as concepts will only merely ever approximate them in the world, but it is worth trying to identify the thresholds where something is or is not quite militarized'.

The present article directly addresses this lacuna, offering a conceptual apparatus and corresponding genealogical method for empirically capturing and effectively critiquing complex articulations of contemporary political violence(s). Broadly, I argue that militarism scholarship is characterized by an overdetermined emphasis upon the military institution itself, inadvertently resulting in the conflation of martiality with violence writ large. This centring of an expansive notion of martiality risks eliding, through definition, its coproduction with alternative articulations of exclusionary, organized – if not necessarily martial – political violence (e.g. terrorism, crime and, centrally, coloniality). Much of militarism scholarship, then, fails to attend to the conceptual 'weight' of martiality and, in so doing, is unable to track the different ways violence is made meaningful and justified – and thus the political work that moving between them can perform.

The concept of 'normative imaginaries of violence'[1] – articulations of intersubjective beliefs; normative political community; spatial geographies; gendered, sexualized, racialized and classed power relations; mythologized histories; and logics of legitimation – addresses this problem. It offers a means of tracking and parsing normative imaginaries of violence and their co-implication in contemporary violent politics. Drawing upon this lens, and informed by the work of Frantz Fanon, this article demonstrates that though coloniality and martiality are deeply intertwined, they are neither reducible to nor epiphenomenal of each other. Through this process, I challenge the tendency of many critical analyses of violence, particularly militarism, to rely on the idiom of 'diagnosis' – X practice of violence is this, not this – in such a way that the act of labelling violence comes to perform much of the political work of critique (Bousquet et al., 2020: 101–103). Though there is, of course, strategic value in blunt categories, our concepts of violence can come to 'speak' so loudly that critique becomes autotelic and limited to a politics of ontological identification and normative ordering.

Empirically, I examine an illustrative case study, the US nongovernmental organization Adopt A Sniper,[2] to play out this method of analysis. Adopt A Sniper (today known as AmericanSnipers. org) is a registered 501c3 organization (i.e. charity) in the United States founded in 2003 by a group of US civilian police snipers to support colleagues in the National Guard or Reserves deployed during the so-called 'global war on terror'. Adopt A Sniper (AaS) distinguishes itself from other post-9/11 US military charities by declaring: 'To our knowledge, we are THE ONLY non-profit organization actively helping to kill our enemies by proxy' (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. b).[3] The organization was intended to allow civilians to privately support overseas military personnel in their efforts to kill racialized enemies, enacting seemingly private violence in the context of a public, state war. It is not (quite) a typical military charity.

This seeming exceptionality, however, far from rendering Adopt A Sniper unhelpfully *sui generis*, makes it ideal for developing a genealogical analysis of normative imaginaries of violence. AaS references many layered, broader historical and social phenomena: banal practices of militaristic 'support for the troops'; racist domestic populism; US militias and settler colonialism; racialized civilizational accounts of the global war on terror; and, relatedly, ad hoc crowdfunding of unaffiliated individuals 'volunteering' to fight ISIS overseas (Grove, 2019). The different logics at work in the organization's mandate and self-identification – martial and colonial, public and private, domestic and international – highlight the layering and inextricability of multiple imaginaries of violence that can be excavated from this single empirical 'site' and subsequently read together to provide an account of the contemporary politics of US violence(s). AaS makes obvious the forms of imaginative entanglements that more subtly characterize all political violence.

The article proceeds with a critique of the conflation of organized political violence with militarism within existing critical military/militarism scholarship. It identifies the martial as a specific

normative imaginary of violence and, drawing upon Fanon, distinguishes it from colonial violences. I then trace these normative imaginaries of violence through an analysis of Adopt A Sniper. To do so, I offer a genealogical methodology that juxtaposes the martial imaginary evoked by the titular sniper with those of two other thematically related figures: the militiaman and the vigilante. AaS offers a microcosmic example of the distinctiveness, and yet mutual parasitism, of hegemonic (violent) liberal martiality and the organized violent dynamics of colonialism, along with their co-implication in contemporary US vigilantism. I conclude by reflecting upon the excess of meaning that accompanies existing understandings of martiality (and coloniality), and what markings of that threshold set in motion.

Imagining martial violence

This section demonstrates the ways in which contemporary militarism scholarship identifies, and furthers, a particular, martial imaginary of violence that constitutes both martial praxis and the conceptual tools deployed to understand it. Though these conceptual categories are politically and analytically useful, failing to track the politics of the martial normative imaginary itself risks producing overdetermined structural accounts of violence as always-already martial. This, in turn, elides martiality's coproduction with alternative, intertwined though distinct logics and imaginaries of normative violence – including, pressingly, colonialism.

Conventionally, militarism is understood as the glorification of war, conducted by military institutions, and the subsequent organization of society through militarist logic (see, for example, Vagts, 1959). As such, militarism references a particular form of violence – namely, combat – that implicitly refers back to the state, as well as statist logics of legitimation and political belonging. The state-sanctioned combatant – the heroic, ideally heteromasculine soldier – is constituted as the apogee of normative masculinity and aspirational citizenship (Sasson-Levy, 2008: 317). As a result, militarism is characterized by a 'leaking' of violence from the military, as its appropriate institutional container, into 'normal' politics. It (often) implicitly posits the ideological claims of liberalism – a distinct civil–military divide, separation between violence and politics, and claims to racial, gender and sexual equality[4] – as the expected benchmark (Howell, 2019: 830).

This account of militarism, I argue, rests upon a particular, normative imaginary of martial violence within liberal states. 'Normative imaginary', here, refers both to the broadly held and widely circulating understanding of violence and to the underlying normative order within which the legitimacy of violence(s) is evaluated (Nielsen, 2006: 85). It captures, in other words, not just the social normalization of statist war as a form of 'common sense', but also the gendered, sexualized, classed and racialized hierarchies, intersubjective beliefs, practices, subjectivities, social relations, spatiality and ideas of political community that are used to make sense of, legitimate and justify violence (Millar and Tidy, 2017). In so doing, it combines aspects of ideology – the discursive and material legitimation of specific forms of violence (see Eastwood, 2018) – with the (re)production of a particular from of imagined community (see Grove, 2019).[5]

Based on the admittedly schematic account of militarism above, the normative imaginary of martial violence is characterized by reciprocal wars fought by states within the Westphalian system against external enemies (Stuurman, 2020: 45). The need for defence posits war as inevitable (even desirable), while citizens, as a condition of political membership, are obligated to serve. The sacrifice and heroism of the idealized (citizen-)soldier serves to legitimate and normalize the martial violence of the state. The politics of ordering violence are thus relatively clear: combat/war is constitutive of martiality, and critique thus rests upon diagnosing the diffusion of military values and symbolism beyond the military institution into broader society.

To leave our account of martiality here, however, would be radically incomplete. At a basic level, 'combat is not a straightforward synonym for violence' (Millar and Tidy, 2017: 157). Both empirically and conceptually, the term evokes the central characteristics of the martial imaginary of normative violence – heroism, soldiering, heteromasculinity, reciprocity – and thus upholds a particular ordering of violence that centres around the identification and critique of statist war. This imaginary, particularly when articulated in a liberal register, as observed by Howell (2018: 120), subsumes 'considerations of race, disability, poverty and Indigeneity under gender' in a manner that elides vital political and analytical differences in socially operant systems of power, marginalization and inclusion/exclusion. The inability of a martial imaginary resting on statist combat to see or address these alternative patterns of violence raises the thorny question of the threshold (Eastwood, 2018; Grove 2020): what makes violence martial?

This brings us to the second conceptualization of martial violence within existing militarism scholarship as, in essence, organized violence conducted by groups. Stavrianakis and Selby's (2013: 3) influential definition of militarism as the 'social and international relations of the preparation for, and conduct of, organized political violence' is an example of this formulation. Rossdale (2019: 3–5), similarly, argues for a 'deliberately vague' account of militarism that captures 'how particular wars, coercive state practices and other forms of violence are embedded, legitimised through, and function to reshape a wide range of social relations'. Howell (2018), in her incisive critique of the ideological naïveté of existing understandings of militarization, argues for the concept of 'martial politics', which draws together myriad violences of liberalism, from chattel slavery to the criminalization of disability.

While the literature does not go so far as to claim that all violence is martial (Mackenzie, 2019: 818), it is not clear what is left out. Attempting to arbitrate whether all violence is militarism is pointless: the exigent issue is the violence(s), not the semantics. The question of what makes violence martial, however, is analytically and politically vital. References to militarism and/or martiality evoke a particular imaginary that extends beyond the term itself (and, potentially, beyond careful contextual qualifications). Accounts of martial violence – whether understood as combat or more expansively – still refer, explicitly and implicitly, to the state, soldiering and war (figuratively or literally). These references may not be an outright conflation of 'organized political violence' with 'statist combat' through the overarching concept of martiality, but it is certainly a haunting. They exist within – and further – a normative imaginary of martial violence that relies for its coherence upon a statist territorial order, a heroic account of masculine heroism/sacrifice and a logic of legitimation bound up in formal political membership.

As a result, there is a paradoxical risk that as militarism scholarship attempts to grapple with ever more complex configurations of violence – and the failing of White feminism to attend to the racialized and colonial dynamics of martiality (Howell, 2019: 830)[6] – the reliance upon the statist martial imaginary will, once again, reduce normatively and politically significant differences to a function of militarism. In other words, by reading (nearly) all violence through the martial, we fail to attend to the ways in which the concept conveys more than it may literally mean in context, almost serving as a form of auto-interpretation. This is not to suggest a return to a more parochial understanding of martiality. Instead, I argue for an analytical attentiveness to the specific ordering work that the frequently liberal, generally statist martial imaginary does within contemporary praxis without inadvertently constituting it as a totalizing narrative that encompasses all of modernity (and thus all violence). This requires actively engaging with the open question of the threshold between forms of violence, as well as the critical and political implications of referencing one imaginary over another – both empirically and conceptually.

Coloniality and the irreducibility of violence

This section draws upon the work of Frantz Fanon to interrogate the contingent – yet analytically and politically meaningful – threshold between martial and colonial violence.[7] In addition to being a key thinker of anti-colonial praxis, Fanon also breaks apart facile diagnoses or assignations of normativity to violence(s). His work gives us the ethico-political tools to challenge false equivalences in contemporary condemnations of violence, which virtually always serve the interests of power. Fanon's analysis of coloniality, through a process of juxtaposition and contrast, delineates the articulation of distinct, though intertwined, normative imaginaries of violence within the same time, place and even practices. In doing so, it lays the groundwork for a genealogical method capable of tracing the coproduction and histories of various imaginaries of violence – and their contemporary political implications – without reducing one to the other. This complication of violence(s) is essential to understanding our current moment.

For Fanon ([1961] 2001: 48), 'colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasonable faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.' This passage implies an important difference between coloniality and 'greater violence', revealing that violence per se is not reducible to coloniality (like martiality, it has an intuitive limit). Colonial violence, moreover, does not operate in the superficially objective idioms of 'legitimate' Eurocentric conceptions of state violence and sovereign war. To demonstrate this, Fanon ([1961] 2001: 58) juxtaposes the normalized violence of 'militarist Germany', which seeks territory by force (i.e. war), with the anticolonial violence of the 'colonized races' against White settlers. And, crucially, he alludes to a third form of violence as the context for this frame: the oppressive violence, both physical and epistemic, deployed by settlers to control, forcibly assimilate and exterminate colonized peoples (Fanon, [1961] 2001: 31–33). Fanon thus points toward the existence of (at least) two violent imaginaries produced within the same time/place – a colonial understanding of racialized oppression and an anti-colonial understanding of armed liberation.

This is neatly encapsulated in Fanon's ([1961] 2001: 70) description of the French reaction to anti-colonial violence in Algeria: 'For the settlers, the alternative is not between *Algérie algérienne* and *Algérie française* but between an independent Algeria and a colonial Algeria, and anything else is mere talk or attempts at treason.' The political community is not defined by 'national' or 'civic' membership, but by the authority of White settlers over both colonized lands (which, somehow, 'naturally' belong to the colonizers) and 'natives'. The imaginary operates according to a 'Manichean' logic, as individuals are interpellated within a hierarchy of settlers and colonized (Fanon, [1952] 2008: 31). For Fanon, this is a nearly literal – but relational (Fanon, [1952] 2008: 116) – division of the world into Black and White (Fanon, [1952] 2008: 31). He outlines an exclusionary colonial imaginary whose membership is defined on the basis of race and operates through the exclusion, alienation and dehumanization of racialized others against a standard of normative Whiteness (Fanon, [1952] 2008: 73).

Fanon thus identifies a colonial logic that legitimates violence on the basis of preserving and maintaining the White settler community. In contrast to revolutionary violence – and (liberal) martial violence – it is oriented towards the past (Fanon, [1952] 2008: 177). It is exercised not against an external enemy capable of reciprocal violence, as in the martial imaginary, but rather against a native subject who has no right to force. Normativity, expressed by Fanon as 'civic virtue', is synonymous with Whiteness, as it is racial membership, rather than state or institutional affiliation, that legitimates the use of force (Fanon, [1952] 2008: 106). Crucially, from the perspective of empirically parsing normative imaginaries, this force is frequently – though, importantly, not exclusively – meted out by the military and police (Fanon, [1961] 2001: 29). The state exists here, but not in its liberal, Eurocentric guise of ostensibly universal inclusivity/citizenship, or as the

expression of the legitimate political community in whose name (martial) violence is used. Instead, the state is the vehicle, or formal expression, of the violence of White settlers – the actual polity. The presence of the military does not render violence martial. Instead, Fanon suggests violences must be assessed contextually, to reveal which assumptions of membership, obligation and enmity are at play.

This observation underlines the work a 'normative imaginary' of violence performs here. Fanon ([1952] 2008: 64) is disinterested in drawing analytical distinctions between forms of 'inhuman behaviour', to the extent that 'all forms of exploitation resemble one another'. Diagnosing violence as 'really' colonial, or 'really' martial, in any essential or ontological sense, is futile (Bousquet et al., 2020). What do matter – and what the 'normative imaginary of violence' highlights – are the subjectivities, hierarchies, power relations, spatialities and standards of legitimation through which violence is understood and/or made meaningful. The anti-colonial revolutionary, in taking up arms, employs the 'argument' of the settler, who 'understands nothing but force' (Fanon, [1961] 2001: 66), but the normative imaginaries of that force are radically different. Though martial and colonial violences have much in common – and, indeed, have historically both reinforced and ideologically elided each other – they invoke (and reproduce) specific imaginaries that operate contextually and, as demonstrated in the analysis of militarism, conceptually through critique.

Tracing the threshold

Fanon's analysis may be read as offering an emergent methodological approach to 'reading' political violence. He employs juxtaposition – contrasting and 'pairing dominant representations with contemporaneous accounts that do not use the same definitions of what has happened and that articulate subjects and their relationships in different ways' (Milliken, 1999: 243) – to challenge hegemonic and normalizing readings of violence. This process does not attempt to definitively resolve the threshold of coloniality and martiality. Instead, by identifying and tracing their normative imaginaries – and the specific, contextual origins of those imaginaries – it enables us to 'see' their distinctiveness and coproduction. This enables us to account for the ways in which our conceptual categories are informed by same imaginaries at work in praxis, revealing the politics enabled by acting/analysing at the threshold. Fanon thus provides the resources to respond to the need, as articulated by Grove (2020: 19), to historicize and contextualize the 'ambivalent relations' between contemporary forms of violence, their attendant social relations and subjectivities, and the past practices (and mythologized histories) through which they are made meaningful.

In the next section, I extend this methodological premise to develop and conduct a genealogical juxtaposition of the normative imaginaries at work in the contemporary United States, through the illustrative case of Adopt A Sniper. As in a typical genealogy, I trace the historical (re)production of contemporary discourses and practices of violence to reveal their (a) contingency and (b) implication in the production of normalized social reality (Milliken, 1999: 243; Vucetic, 2011: 1302) via normative imaginaries of violence. Instead of following a single problematique back in history, however, the juxtaposition of multiple normative imaginaries of violence enables me to trace multiple problematiques, along with their partial and mythologized histories, operant in the same time, space and, in this case, nongovernmental organization. This maps the layered coproduction (and elision) of the thresholds between colonial and martial violences. It also, importantly, enables us to see logics of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, etc. that cross-cut various normative imaginaries, tracking the politics and violence(s) facilitated by (dis)continuities between them.[8]

Concretely, in my analysis of Adopt A Sniper, I begin with a juxtaposition of the titular sniper with two other, related figures: the militiaman and the vigilante. These figures are drawn from a

close reading of publicly available texts produced by the relevant organization – Adopt A Sniper/ AmericanSnipers.org – sourced from its current website and archived materials accessed via the Wayback Machine. Informed by Fanon's use of the figure of the revolutionary to contextualize anti-colonial violence, I use these figures to initially identify the normative imaginary at work in a particular place/time. Inspired by Grove's (2019) analysis of the ambivalent politics of 'violent' anti-ISIS 'entrepreneurs', I do not aim to 'settle' the meaning of these figures. Instead, I use them to identify the normative assumptions of violence that make those figures possible/meaningful. I then read the mythologized histories and logics of legitimation and valorization within the imaginaries genealogically against the social and political histories they elide and avoid.

Adopting a sniper

To unpack the politics of violence at work within Adopt A Sniper, I start with the obvious: the sniper and the imaginary that renders adopting one intelligible and desirable. It is not obvious that offering the US public the opportunity to adopt a sniper would be a logical charitable niche.

In the past, killing enemy combatants at a great distance led to sniping being considered unfair and potentially dishonourable, as the other party was not given a 'fighting chance' (Bourke, 1999: 48). Snipers were frequently regarded as 'creepy' by other soldiers, and disliked for their seemingly detached attitude towards killing (Bourke, 1999: 48). The failure to participate in combat and assume personal risk violated governing expectations as to military masculinity. Despite snipers' status as formal military personnel, they violated the normative expectations of a martial imaginary of violence. The constitution of snipers as a viable locus for charitable and patriotic support is thus reflective of a remarkable shift in attitude toward sniping. During the early phases of the 'war on terror', AaS was regarded as a 'normal' charitable organization: a *New York Times* article referenced AaS as one among many new 'supportive' charities (Strom, 2004). Adopting a sniper was constituted as functionally similar to the more banal care packages sent by a plethora of military charities promoting quotidian, militarized support for the troops deployed abroad.

AaS's materials, which frequently present the snipers as both under threat and working to protect both other military personnel and the United States, shed light on this reframing. The organization's original motto read 'Helping real snipers get the real gear they need to keep us safe' (Adoptasniper.org, 2004a). Similarly, a coin offered for sale in the organization's online store proclaims that snipers offer 'assistance from a distance' (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. d). Through AaS, snipers are posited as 'putting [their] lives on the line to help keep this great country safe and free from terrorism' (Adoptasniper.org, 2004a). Through the framing of sniping as accepting risk for the sake of others, it is reconstituted as a form of normatively legitimated violence – combat. In Iraq in particular, snipers were perceived as not only an essential offensive resource, but also a key part of force protection (Schmitt, 2004). This mirrors a broader cultural heroification of military snipers during the global war on terror, exemplified by public interest in the life of Chris Kyle (Schmidle, 2013), whose memoir was the basis for the film *American Sniper*. Kyle looms large within Adopt A Sniper's public narrative. Following Kyle's 2013 death, the organization raffled a sniper rifle to benefit his family (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. a; Imam, 2015).

The transposition of snipers into the normative imaginary of martial violence, importantly, relies upon a corresponding shift in gender norms. AaS's website is populated by photographs of men in military fatigues holding sniper rifles and aiming at (unseen) targets. The organization refers to the constituency of the charity (serving snipers) and their supporters as belonging to a 'fraternity of snipers' (Adoptasniper.org, 2006). For the first six years of the charity's operation, AaS's mission statement referred to its mandate to help 'our fathers, our sons, and our brothers' (Adoptasniper.org, 2004b), with no mention of female military personnel. This overproduction of

sniping as masculine, when paired with the protective discourses mentioned above, claims continuity and identification with the idealized figure of the citizen-soldier – military men who willingly risk their lives to protect the greater (feminized) home front (Young, 2003). Snipers, according to AaS's mission statement, extend a long line of military men (and wars), wherein 'independence, self-reliance and initiative were personality traits necessary for victory and survival' (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. c). They also, importantly, seemingly vanish issues of race and other particularistic differences among military personnel, as the performance of masculine martial violence is constituted as the sole criteria of evaluation – a continuation of the universalized, liberal myth of the citizen-soldier.

This gendering mirrors the contemporary production of heteromasculinity, premised upon 'risk-taking, discipline, technological mastery . . . absence of emotion, and rational calculation' (Frank Barrett, cited in Hutchings, 2008: 392–393), within the US martial, statist imaginary. This amendment to military masculinity to involve technical skills and a cool affect – in contrast to physical strength and endurance – is itself linked to a broader shift in Western masculinity across the 20th century. Changes in the structure of the globalized economy led to a valorization of white-collar, professional occupations if not over, at least alongside, previous norms of hard work and manual labour (Thobani, 2010). The elevation of the sniper alongside the combat soldier within the martial imaginary thus parallels (and reproduces) broader, classed shifts in societal expectations of productive masculinity.

This is reflected in AaS's emphasis upon – even fetishization of – the technical aspects of sniping equipment. The organization's 2005 'list of wants' is a directory of technical specs for sniping gear ranging from scopes to knives, specified by brand, model and catalogue number (Adoptasniper. org, 2005). Adopt A Sniper's founder consistently reinforces the masculine, specialist nature of this procurement, noting that 'it's easy to write home and say, "I want a can of shaving cream. . . . But trying to explain a Gen 4 Molle gear' – a rifle frame – 'to Mom is a lot harder. . . . [S]he doesn't know where to get it' (Burgess, 2004). AaS constitutes even civilian support for the military as a masculine activity, enabling donors to participate in 'combat' through identification with, and consumption of, hyper-heteromasculine military subjectivities.

Adopt A Sniper thus furthers two key aspects of the statist martial imaginary of violence. First, the sniper is constituted as a legitimate combat subject through their exercise of masculine protection for the military and society. Second, the mutability of masculinity, in the context of shifts away from conventional idealized manual/soldiering labour, both facilitates the rendering of the sniper as masculine and creates a form of gendered pressure for non-military civilians to engage with combat (Thobani, 2010: 56–58). Adopt A Sniper, in this reading, invokes a normative imaginary of martial violence that, by leveraging the gendered expectation of masculine soldiering, pervades civilian values and normalizes (even valorizes) participation in the state-authorized 'war on terror'. So far, so conventionally militaristic.

Settler violence and the racialized romance of the militiaman

Adopt A Sniper's mission statement, however, situates the organization less within martial myths of 'good' statist wars and the global war on terror than within a romanticized depiction of the US War of Independence:

> The long riflemen of the Revolution, mostly militia, were different than Continental regulars. . . . Their independence, self-reliance and initiative were personality traits necessary for victory and survival. Out of necessity, they brought their own equipment to war. So it was in 1776 and . . . so it is today. (AmericanSnipers. org, n.d. c)

Snipers are the spiritual descendants not of the 'Continental regulars', the formal armed forces raised to fight the British during the US Revolutionary War, but of the 'long riflemen' of the irregular militias. The normativity (and masculinity) of the sniper is established not through association with the institutional military, but through a purposive distancing from it. AaS projects an image of militant, rather than military, masculinity. The organization continues to reference a logic of political violence arranged hierarchically and keyed in to social structures of privilege, but is explicitly distinct from the military institution, the state and the normative trappings of the martial imaginary. Adopt A Sniper invokes a colonial imaginary of normative violence, populated by righteous militiamen, specific to the racialized US frontier (Dalby, 2007).

The individualism and independence that may be read as reproductive of contemporary military masculinity also, simultaneously, evoke an ideology of 'self-reliant, self-made masculinity endemic to American history' (Kerry Carrington and John Scott, cited in Wood et al., 2015: 218). This extreme individualism traces to the – inaccurate – myth, propagated by right-wing political organizations and gun-rights groups, that the US Revolutionary War was won by 'a militia of mobilized citizens' and 'independent gunmen' (James Gibson, 1994, cited in Mulloy, 2004: 63). This, in turn, is closely connected to an ahistoric, romanticized image of the Jacksonian pioneer, or frontiersman, who opened the interior, brought order to the wilderness and 'fathered the next generation of courageous settlers' (Isenberg, 2017: 125). The fact that the revolutionary militiaman, Jacksonian woodsman and Western frontiersman were distinct – and frequently denigrated – subject-positions (Isenberg, 2017: 125) existing generations and geographies apart does not impede the power of this myth. Nor does the fact that while some individual settlers and rifle teams developed expert marksmanship outside the auspices of the army (Emerson, 2004: 3–4), most militias, until at least the Civil War, were underarmed and underskilled (Bellesiles, 1996).

This idealized militiaman – and corresponding vision of America – is White. Past and present iterations of Adopt A Sniper's website contain images of armed snipers posing with rifles in theatre – all White, all men. This erasure of people of colour (and women) reinforces the colonial imaginary, wherein White men are the purveyors of violence and people of colour the objects. Similarly, the 'Mission' section of the website declares that 'our forefathers were not "politically correct" and neither are we. Like them, we make no apologies' (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. c; see also AmericanSnipers.org, 2014a). The refusal of 'political correctness' refers the 'code word phenomenon' within contemporary US racism (Winant, 1998: 763). It constructs the disregard for non-White Others as a key component of 'authentic' Americanness and, here, colonial (and martial) masculinity.

The myth of the freedom-loving, self-reliant masculine militiaman, enacting righteous violence for both the United States and the world, obscures the operation of the Revolutionary War and the frontier as spaces of racialized imperial conquest. 'The people' who founded the Republic and fought the Revolutionary war purposively excluded women and enslaved African Americans, Native Americans and non-elite, landless White men (Bouton, 2007: 4). The implication of militias and 'frontiersmen' in the racist violence of US settler colonialism – from the pursuit of escaped enslaved persons (Schneider and Schneider, 2014: 4), to the genocide and dispossession of Indigenous peoples during the so-called Indian Wars, to the indiscriminate violence of the Mexican War (Hixson, 2013: vii–ix, 101) and the prevalence of lynch-mob and other anti-Black racist violence in the post-Reconstruction era (Brown, 1975: 22–27) – is entirely elided.

Just as AaS furthers a martial imaginary shared by contemporary 'support the troops' organizations, it also participates in a broader discourse that projects a normatively White, romanticized colonial imaginary of violence into the present. Colonial imagery and concomitant claims of (White) US exceptionalism were common at Tea Party rallies (Zeskind, 2012: 504) and inflect the discourse of the Trump-era Republican Party. Masculinist discourses of individualism, self-reliance and idealization of the rural 'frontier' are also present in the contemporary White militia

movement's nativist constructions of a purposively White, armed community (Wood et al., 2015). Adopt A Sniper cultivates community with the far-right and militia movements, participating in gun shows (Wills, 2011), including the annual meeting of the National Rifle Association (Jackson, 2017), and counting *Soldier of Fortune*, a key publication of the new-right militia movement, as a supporter of the organization (AmericanSnipers.org, 2016). These exclusionary, racializing discourses embed AaS within a more diffuse nostalgia for a time when 'middle class white men . . . not only had political and social dominance in society, but when they also had the prospect of serving on the frontier as an alternative to more formal, urban forms of masculinity' (Michael Kaufman and Michael Kimmel, cited in Haltinner, 2016a: 603). Alongside, and layered within, its invocations of martial symbolism and legitimate warfare, Adopt A Sniper conveys a colonial imaginary of normative violence while simultaneously communicating a gendered, classed and racialized anxiety at its perceived passing.

Rendering killable

This intersection of a racialized, colonial imaginary of violence with the martial violence more commonly examined by militarism scholarship is most evident in the paraphernalia available for purchase in the organization's online store. Some items, such as a metal pin with a picture of the Grim Reaper and the motto 'I Decide', reinforce the typical martial imaginary (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. d). A commemorative 'challenge coin', similarly, depicts Uncle Sam in front of a US flag with the caption 'Who's Next?'; the reverse depicts a sniper with rifle, and the inscription 'Remember 9/11' (AmericanSnipers.org, 2012a).

Most of the merchandise in the online store, aimed at the organization's constituent members rather than the general public, however, is explicitly racist. The store sells, for instance, a Velcro patch of a bearded man wearing a turban – presumably Muslim – carrying a grenade launcher and an automatic weapon, with the crosshatch of a trigger scope over his face. Another patch depicts a uniformed White man urinating on the corpse of a dead bearded man with a gun – again, presumably Muslim – with the caption 'Piss on ISIS' (AmericanSnipers.org, 2012c; see also AmericanSnipers.org, 2012b). The turban generalizes from the aesthetics of many Afghan men to Islam, thus racializing religious observance and connecting it with Brown people generally (Joshi, 2006). This is a contemporary expression of a longstanding process, 'as the racialisation of Islam emerged from the Old World, was placed on New World Indigenous peoples, and subsequently took on a continued significance in relation to Black America and the world of Muslim immigrants' (Rana, 2007: 151). Similar constructions are also apparent, for instance, in the conflation of 'immigrants' with terrorists and criminals in the southern US border militia movement (Rosas, 2006: 342) or the rural militia movement's promotion of 'categories of politics and race [that] situate whites as culturally superior to the perceived dysfunctions of non-whites' (Wood et al., 2015: 217).

The appearance of 'Brown terrorists' within a colonial imaginary of violence therefore marks an extension of the mythologized settler frontier. As argued by Richter-Montpetit (2014: 139–154), the war on terror was frequently rendered in terms of the 'Wild West', positing counterinsurgency as operationally similar to the 'Indian Wars' of the colonial past and, thus, terrorists as akin to Indigenous peoples. This is a complicated reversal of an earlier colonial process of racialization and vilification, wherein 'Native Americans were made sense of through stereotypes of Muslims' in such a way that both Muslims and Indigenous peoples were framed as 'barbaric, depraved, immoral, and sexually deviant' (Rana, 2007: 154). In the contemporary US colonial imaginary, racialized Others within the community are threatened with violence through a purported connection to Islam, while the 'external' threat of terrorism is rendered intelligible through references to past (conquered) Indigeneity (see Richter-Montpetit, 2014).[9]

White supremacy

This increasingly explicit Islamophobia – and imperial collapse of peoples of colour into a single, killable group – contextualizes a final aspect of the organization's racialized/izing politics. Until about 2011, AaS's merchandise, though overtly masculinist and martial, tended to reference the military mission and/or snipers themselves. The racialized demonization of Others occurred at a time when white nationalism and white supremacy became a more explicit component of far-right (and, now, 'mainstream' right) discourse (Haltinner, 2016b). This is most apparent in AaS's 2014 'challenge coin', which depicts the helmet of a medieval knight – identified as a 'Knight Templar' – over the skull that signifies the sniper within the organization's iconography. The helmeted skull has a cross over the eye in place of the sniper-scope crosshairs used on similar designs in other years. The back of the coin is a cross, with 'AmericanSnipers.org' inscribed on the vertical axis and 'In this sign, you will conquer' in Latin on the horizontal (AmericanSnipers.org, 2014b).

Medieval symbolism is often appropriated by white supremacists and white supremacist hate groups, including the Ku Klux Klan and the Norwegian and New Zealand mass murderers, to propagate a violent notion of historical, cultural and, often, biological, white superiority (Livingstone, 2017). Invocations of the Knights Templar – a 12th-century religious order (in)famous for their involvement in the Crusades – convey a worldview characterized by Islamophobia, white supremacy and far-right evangelical theology, in furtherance of a romanticized depiction of a hyper-heteromasculinist White warrior ideal (Gardell, 2014). The challenge coin illustrates the collision of overt 'forms of whiteness, such as the whiteness of the KKK, the White Aryan Resistance Groups, white militias, and other hate groups' with the 'everyday, unquestioned racialised social relations', such as the White hegemony of the colonial imaginary, 'that have acquired a seeming normativity' (Shome, 2000: 366). The coproduction of the banal martiality of a military support charity with extremist white supremacy demonstrates the ways in which seemingly universal liberal militarism reinforces a White masculine Christian norm (Joshi, 2006: 213) – and the critical imperative to examine martiality in conjunction with colonial (and even, in the case of the Knights Templar, civilizational) violent imaginaries.

Private violence and the recrudescence of the vigilante

Finally, I play out the entangling of the martial and colonial imaginaries through one further figure of US violence: the vigilante. Given that Adopt A Sniper supports military personnel deployed in (domestically) legal military operations, this might seem a counterintuitive claim. After all, AaS is operated by civilian police snipers – official agents of state violence. The organization's valorization of racialized killing on a global frontier, combined with a surprising strain of anti-elitist, anti-statist discourse, however, neatly aligns with an 'ideology of vigilantism' (Brown, 1975: 115).

AaS's founding was justified on the basis that 'the urban mission profiles of US police snipers and US military snipers were found to overlap somewhat and the gear and supplies needed to accomplish the two missions were found to be virtually identical' (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. b). The normalized presence of snipers in US domestic police forces, when considered in the light of the disproportionate victimization of communities of colour by police violence (Ritchie and Mogul, 2007),[10] itself exemplifies the intertwining of martiality and coloniality via racialized hierarchy. The webpage explains that

> Due to the enormity of the commitment in Iraq and Afghanistan and the differences between the various units and staff personnel; many American snipers and designated marksmen were, and still are, having to spend their own funds and enlist their families and friends in procuring gear and getting it to them in the middle of a war zone. (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. b)

In an op-ed, AaS's founder lays out the organization's rationale more bluntly. He argues that owing to the unit types of deployed (police) snipers, 'sniper-related gear is not on their Modified Table of Equipment' (Sain, 2007), meaning it cannot be requisitioned within the US military quartermaster system. The website also notes the 'seemingly endless red tape and agonizing wait times' for all government procurement, as well as the difficulties posed by 'government cut backs and priorities' (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. b). The organization pointedly 'makes no distinction between the actual fully trained and equipped sniper teams and the designated marksmen of the mechanized, tanker and cavalry units' when it comes to providing gear (Sain, 2007). AaS demonstrates a frustration with the regular US military's failure to provide civilian police snipers deployed with the reserves with the gear required to do their jobs due to red tape, tight finances and, interestingly, an implied failure to recognize their sniping skill as equivalent to that of the regular army.

Crucially, AaS is far from alone in doing so. It represents a continuity with the contemporary practice of private 'entrepreneurial' individuals from the global North travelling overseas to fight ISIS without formal state sanction or military affiliation (Grove, 2019). However, in contrast to these more radically privatized violent actors – who themselves often seek crowdfunding in support (Grove, 2019) – AaS is, superficially, doubly associated with the state, through the layering of police associations with military participation. Its consistent critique of the formal military, however, suggests that it is not a statist imaginary or juridical process of normatively legitimating violence through which AaS understands itself. AaS acts through the state, not of the state, instead positioning itself in direct opposition to it. Though this might seem extreme, the failure to adequately equip the US military reserves is a common complaint offered against the US armed forces by politicians, family members of deployed servicepeople, and military and veterans' charities. More moderate organizations, such as the Law Enforcement Equipment Program and, somewhat surprisingly, the anti-war group Military Families Speak Out, engage in activities functionally similar to those of AaS, providing specialist military equipment, such as batons, helmets, body armour and even sniper scopes to deployed military units (LEEP, 2008; Oregon MFSO, 2009). Far from being an outlier, AaS reflects a broadly normalized imaginary of anti-statist, racialized martial 'self-help'.

The imaginary invoked here echoes the anti-elitism and anti-government commitments of vigilantism (and contemporary racialized populism). Within the United States, vigilantism is associated with the extra-legal persecution, killing and terrorization of racialized, marginalized and minoritized groups by elites in order to preserve a social order that reflects their interests. The South Carolina Regulators, aimed at establishing the frontier/settler community absent a centralized legal authority, are frequently referenced as the first US vigilante group, but vigilantism carried through the Fugitive Slave Laws, the white supremacist lynchings of the post-Reconstruction South and the violence of contemporary border militias (Brown, 1975; Rosas, 2006). AaS's move to generate 'private' support for killing the enemy on the global frontier (Richter-Montpetit, 2014) reflects a similar commitment to popular sovereignty and self-preservation (Brown, 1975: 115). It invokes the 'common right-wing ideology that social problems are manufactured by elitist puppet masters to undermine the sovereignty of the nation' (Sara Diamond, in Haltinner, 2016b: 401).

This ideology is also seen in AaS's emphasis on self-reliance and community ties. AaS's origin story holds that as demand for equipment grew owing to word-of-mouth, the founding police officers 'decided to radically broaden the scope of their efforts and committed to aid as many snipers in the military as possible, no matter the theater of operations, for as long as the officers could sustain the program' (AmericanSnipers.org, n.d. b). These frames rely on references to private, affective ties when the government cannot be counted upon to deliver. This resonates with a broader imaginary of vigilante violence that, as observed by Lenz (1988: 120), is 'consistent with a political system designed to encourage private actions by self-interested citizens'. War is repositioned

within a vigilante imaginary of violence, wherein 'citizens [take] the law into their own hands' (William Burrows, quoted in Lenz, 1988: 118), not only explicitly bypassing state authority and due process, but normatively valorizing that aversion as a foundational component of a particular, White patriarchal settler community.

To be a sheepdog

This, finally, reveals the multidimensional nature of AaS's offer to enable supporters to indirectly kill enemies in the 'war on terror'. Historically, vigilantism has been legitimated as a normatively acceptable form of violence owing to the understanding that it 'supplements inadequate law enforcement' (or, here, military readiness) 'with direct action' in line with the spirit of the law (Lenz, 1988: 127). Within AaS, a vague commitment to the 'spirit of the law' is found in efforts to gatekeep participation in the martial imaginary evoked by the organization's motto and mandate.

The description of a set of commemorative dog tags previously offered by the AaS online store, for instance, which bear the inscription 'One Shot, One Kill, No Remorse, I Decide', notes that this phrase has been 'historically used by military snipers . . . to boost morale and confidence within the sniper ranks. These tags are a tribute to those men, and it [*sic*] is not intended to be displayed in any other context' (AmericanSnipers.org, 2006). 'Actual' military snipers and marksmen are posited as the legitimate purveyors of AaS's brand of racialized violence, as they draw authority from both their association with the statist martial imaginary and their purposive denial of its legitimacy. Their violence, in other words, is justified by working at the blurry threshold of several, layered normative imaginaries of violence. Though these dog tags are ostensibly available for sale to all supporters, the product description contains a subtle rebuke to those who might, in purchasing/wearing them, claim an identity and authorization for violence they have not earned. The disclaimer engages in an important double-move of impunity: denying support for 'unauthorized' racist killings while explicitly valorizing the same practice. Supporters who might commit not only legally but *socially* unauthorized violence are posited as deviant, acting outside any normative imaginary of violence.

This gatekeeping can also be seen in the organization's use of the phrase 'Hunt the Wolf, Protect the Flock' (AmericanSnipers.org, 2014c). The imagery, popularized in *American Sniper*, stems from an (infamous) essay by a former military officer, which states:

> If you have no capacity for violence then you are a healthy productive citizen: a sheep. If you have a capacity for violence and no empathy for your fellow citizens, then you have defined an aggressive sociopath – a wolf. But what if you have a capacity for violence, and a deep love for your fellow citizens? Then you are a sheepdog, a warrior. (Dave Grossman, quoted in Cummings and Cummings, 2015)

In the context of the war on terror, the 'wolf' refers to an inherently evil, racialized terrorist. Domestically, in a context of police violence – and settler violence, and White police settler violence that similarly troubles a meaningful threshold between policing, militias and vigilantism – Black US-ians, particularly Black men, are the 'victims of this analogy' (Cummings and Cummings, 2015). Chris Kyle claimed to have killed up to 30 looters during Hurricane Katrina, as well as two men who attempted to steal his car (Schmidle, 2013). While these claims have been largely disproven, the fact that they were offered – and frequently received – as not a confession of criminality but evidence of heroism further speaks to the affinity between wartime sniping and 'peacetime' vigilantism. Trump's pardons of military war criminals against the wishes of the US military establishment similarly reflects the collision of martial and colonial imaginaries into a vigilantist politics of racist, populist impunity (Haberman, 2019).

The framing of the balance of the population as 'sheep' is particularly important. Though the construction of sheep as 'healthy' implies a positive social valence, the term also invokes a sense of dependence and mindless conformity at odds with the venerated martial/frontier masculinity constructed throughout AaS's discourse. This suggests that although AaS's members may not be able to themselves engage in violence, they may still be read into the exclusionary, particularistic normative imaginary that supports and legitimates vigilantism. In doing so, they are able to opt out of the inferior, feminized and insufficiently or inappropriately White 'sheep' that constitute the majority of the population.

The vigilantist masculinity of the war on terror reflects a mainstreaming of 'angry white masculinity [to] the centre of state and political institutions' (Thobani, 2010: 64) – reaching an apotheosis in the Trump administration. AaS reflects and reproduces a sense that heteromasculine White US citizens are simultaneously the apogee of humanity, as evidenced by their use of normative violence, and somehow implicitly victimized and/or burdened by this privileged expectation. The construction of the sniper – and AaS supporters – as perpetrating (and glorifying) racialized violence yet reluctant and responsible masculine heroes acting on behalf of a beleaguered community is consistent with the enduring US imaginary of vigilantism. The sniper is 'bad to be good', but his co-imagination with the militiaman and vigilante suggests it is also 'good to be bad'.

Conclusion

There are many ways to imagine adopting a sniper. It's a martial practice of war, a racist colonial fantasy and an opportunity to 'take the law' into one's own hands, under the guise of 'self-preservation – the right to self-defense' (Lenz, 1988: 127). It's a process of asserting a series of distinct yet interrelated hegemonically heteromasculine, White, economically productive identities and expressing fear at their perceived waning. The violences of adopting a sniper are imagined as martial, legitimated through public logics of war; as colonial, justified through reference to a White settler community; and as vigilantist, self-authorized through the actions of ahistorically decontextualized private individuals. The coproduction of these distinct yet entangled imaginaries reveals the normative complexity of contemporary US political violence – as well as the corresponding futility of attempts to reach a single critical 'diagnosis', or point of resistance, to the politics animated by Adopt A Sniper.

Coloniality and martiality, as elucidated by Fanon, are not reducible to, nor epiphenomenal of, each other. Instead, just as Whiteness is parasitic upon Blackness (West, 1990) and liberalism relies upon racialized dispossession, appropriation and genocide for its ordering capacities (Lowe, 2015), colonial and martial imaginaries of violence rely upon and reinforce each other. In a double-move similar to those of Whiteness and liberalism, wherein the empowered term denigrates and denies its dependence upon the latter, so too do coloniality and martiality each elide and erase the other. In doing so, they serve to further obscure the deep entanglements of liberal – and increasingly, ostensibly illiberal, vigilantist – political orders with constantly shifting, yet seemingly coherent, normative accounts of legitimate violence.

Adopt A Sniper, as an illustration of a larger politics, thus reveals the limitations of existing critiques of violence – particularly, but not exclusively, militaristic violence – that work through attempts to order and categorize. Reading AaS as martial, or colonial, or vigilantist – or even all three at once – without an account of how these violences are normatively legitimated, empirically bounded and blurred, and played off each other, is insufficient. Levying critique in the register of ontology and ordering – of deciding what AaS *is* – provides few insights into how its perpetuation of hierarchical, colonial and white supremacist violences might be resisted and addressed. Indeed, as demonstrated by the discussion of militarism scholarship, there is a risk that the excess of

meaning at work in our concepts gives the impression that ordering is itself a form of critique – that if we 'know' an organization is militaristic, or colonial, we also 'know' what to do about it.

The genealogical method proposed here offers a means of pushing past the limitations of categorical ordering to expose the politics of the thresholds of violences. In the case of Adopt A Sniper, it revealed that the blurring of normative logics of violence – or, perhaps more accurately, the constant and iterative reimagining of violence to suit the demands of anxious contextual power – is key to understanding the 'connective morphology' (Grove, 2019: 94) of racist, sexist and imperial oppressions, exclusions and harms. Thinking of violence as a series of socially and historically embedded normative imaginaries also suggests effective critique, and meaningful resistance, must be found in addressing the *multiple* imaginaries – and shifting legitimations between/across them – within which contemporary US violence(s) becomes possible and desirable. It is not simply that we must think of both martiality and coloniality (and vigilantism, and civilizationalism, etc.), but that we cannot – as militarism scholarship has so often done – only think of one.

Acknowledgements

Funding

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Notes

1. This concept is an iteration and expansion of the understanding of combat as a normative imaginary of violence developed with Joanna Tidy in our 2017 *Critical Military Studies* article (Millar and Tidy, 2017).
2. Many thanks to Catherine Baker for suggesting this line of analysis.
3. This line appears to have been added in approximately 2011–2012, almost ten years after the organization's founding, prior to which time visitors were allowed to connect the purchase of sniper gear with subsequent violence themselves.
4. It reflects a '(neo)liberal' racial project, which understands citizenship as an (ostensibly) open category into which all minorities groups can be integrated through the elimination of discrimination (Winant, 2004: 8–10).
5. For the distinction between ideology and the social imaginary, see Thompson (1984: 27).
6. In accordance with the emerging critical politics regarding capitalization and race, I have capitalized 'White' throughout the article as a means of challenging its universalization to a 'default' position for humanity and to point up its implication in hierarchical, racialized power relations. The exception to this practice is in relation to 'white supremacy', where lower case is used to avoid reproducing the preferred style – and racist claims to superiority – of hate groups and supremacist politics.
7. My sincere thanks to Nivi Manchanda for this suggestion and for her generosity and support in working through this line of reasoning.
8. For instance, colonial and martial violence are often both imagined in a White heteropatriarchal manner, but the contextual meanings and histories of Whiteness, heterosexuality and masculinity articulate differently, enabling a more complex politics of legitimation and elision by switching between the imaginaries.
9. This, paradoxically, relies on the process of 'settler indigenization' (Veracini, 2010), wherein settlers attempt to supplant Indigenous peoples' connection to the land and claims to normative 'American'

racial and gender identity. AaS's 2018 challenge coin depicts a skeleton wearing a large, feathered Native American headdress, emblazoned with the sniper's 'motto': 'One Shot, One Kill, No Remorse, I Decide'. The reverse reads 'Khute Thoka Itogna', which the description claims means 'Shoots the Enemy's Face' in Lakota (AmericanSnipers.org, 2018). The sniper fairly literally takes the place of Indigenous subjects.

10. As articulated by Black Lives Matter, police violence and more seemingly private 'vigilantism' – such as the murders of Trayvon Martin and Ahmaud Arbery – are often experienced by Black communities as functionally and politically indistinguishable violences of white supremacist racial control and oppression (Cazenave, 2018).

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