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Liberal warriors and the violent colonial logics of ‘partnering and advising’

Julia Welland (2015), *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17(2): 289-307

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Abstract: Building on the feminist literature that traces the (re)production of militarised masculinities in and through military interventions, this article details some of the ways British soldiering subjects are being shaped in today’s counterinsurgency context. Required now to be both nation builders and war fighters, contemporary soldiers are a ‘softer’, less masculinised subjectivity, and what Alison Howell has termed ‘liberal warriors’. British troops, with their long history of colonialism and frequent overseas military campaigns, are understood to be particularly suited to this role. Taking then the British military’s involvement in the ‘partnering and advising’ of the Afghan National Army, this article pays attention to the interlocking gendered, raced and sexualised discourses that the British/Afghan encounter is experienced through. Exploring first British troops’ preoccupation with the perceived femininity and homosexuality of their Afghan counterparts, and secondly their hypermasculinity as demonstrated in their violent and chaotic fighting tactics, colonial logics are revealed. While British liberal warriors come to know ‘who they are’ through these logics, (mis)represented Afghan soldiers are rendered increasingly vulnerable to the very ‘real’, very material violences of war.

Key words: militarised masculinities; liberal warrior; counterinsurgency; Afghanistan; ANA; colonial logics

Word count: 7,953

Building on the feminist literature that details the ways in which militarised masculinities have been (re)produced in and through military interventions¹, this article pays attention to some of the ways British soldiering subjects are being shaped in today’s

¹ For example see: Claire Duncanson (2009); Sherene Razack (2004), *Dark Threats & White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping, and the New Imperialism*. London: University of Toronto Press; and Sandra Whitworth (2004), *Men, Militarism & UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

counterinsurgency context. Specifically, it unpacks interlocking discourses integral to this militarised masculinity's constitution, and how they can be traced both to Britain's past as a colonial power and to soldiers' current role in Afghanistan. Starting with a brief discussion of counterinsurgency, the ways in which its contemporary enactment can be understood as unique and how it sets the context for the emergence of a specific militarised masculinity – a 'liberal warrior' – is considered. The article then turns to the gendered, raced and sexualised discourses that circulated during the colonial period and the ways in which they resurface and haunt today. Focusing specifically on the British Army's involvement in the 'partnering and advising' of Afghan security forces and reading primarily from Patrick Hennessey's 2012 memoir, the power and endurance of these colonial discourses is revealed. Firstly through British troops' preoccupation with the perceived homosexuality of the Afghan forces, and secondly through the hypermasculinity of the Afghan National Army (ANA) demonstrated in their violent and 'primitive' fighting tactics. While British liberal warriors come to know 'who they are' through these discourses and through this encounter, for their Afghan counterparts such colonial logics render them increasingly vulnerable to the very 'real' and very material violences of war.

A COUNTERINSURGENCY MILITARISED MASCULINITY

Counterinsurgency is not a 'new' form of warfare. A mainstay of nineteenth century colonialism, counterinsurgency was also used by the British in Malaya in the 1950s and the Americans during the Vietnam War. There is however, something unique about the contemporary context and the British/Afghan encounter that warrants attention. In today's counterinsurgency wars we are witness to weaponry and technological advancements that allow military personnel to be situated thousands of miles away from

the targets they are engaging², while at the same time the human, as opposed to technological, body is re-centred and re-privileged on the battlefield itself. Frontline soldiers are now expected to live amongst and engage with local communities, enter into dialogue, and win their ‘hearts and minds’. Specific to the British case is that in the face of America’s overwhelming military might, its own armed forces shrunk and empire gone, counterinsurgency is where it can make its ‘mark’. With a history of frequent military campaigns, overseas training and imperial experience, the British are portrayed as being particularly suited to counterinsurgency soldiering. Indeed, “[e]tched into much Atlantic discourse is the notion that Britain as enlightened Greece can refine the military might of America’s uncouth and untutored Rome, the old hegemon educating the new about handling the natives” (Porter 2009: 13). From the British Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster’s article in *Military Review* detailing the US military’s counterinsurgency failures in Iraq³ to the American Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl’s (2002) claims that the British military’s organisational culture allowed it to succeed in Malaya while America failed in Vietnam, that the British military is somehow better ‘equipped’ for counterinsurgency operations is a popular refrain.

From its outset the 2001 US-led invasion into Afghanistan has warranted feminist comment on both the implicit and explicit gendering of both the conflict itself and western militaries’ practices within it. As has been frequently detailed, the invasion took

² British pilots of unmanned aerial vehicles – ‘drones’ – are based in Creech Air Force Base, Nevada, or at RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire – some (respectively) 7,000 and 3,000 miles away from the targets they are killing

³ While Aylwin-Foster praises the American Army for its “unparalleled sense of patriotism, duty, passion, commitment, and determination”, he also points to “their cultural insensitivity, almost certainly inadvertent, [which] arguably amounted to institutional racism” (2005: 3). Rather than placating the local population, Aylwin-Foster claims American troops acted like “fuel on a smouldering fire...as much owing to their presence as their actions” (*ibid.*: 4).

place against a backdrop of Afghan women's plight and the west's civilizational duty to protect them. While some heralded Afghanistan as the first feminist conflict, others pointed to the continuing masculinist logics of the war and the silencing of Afghan women's own voices⁴. As the conflict descended into insurgency-based violence, counterinsurgency was initiated as the formal military doctrine for all ISAF troops. Gendered both in its rhetoric – presented as a 'softer' form of warfare – and its practice, for example through the use Female Engagement Teams (see Laastad-Dyvik 2013 and McBride and Wibben 2012), counterinsurgency is often depicted as a 'feminised' form of warfare, particularly in comparison to the hypermasculinised, "more mechanised...[and] higher-fire-power" (Khalili 2010: 1473) wars that preceded it.

It is then, in and through this context that British soldiers are (re)produced and discursively idealised. Militarised masculinities are not stable and fixed subjectivities. Performatively constituted through their 'doings', militarised masculinities are multiple and fluid, relational and situated, occupying positions as diverse as the "technologically sophisticated heroes of Tom Clancy's 'technothriller' novels" seen during the first Gulf War (Niva 1998: 119), the 'softer' and 'gentler' "peacekeeper masculinity" (Duncanson 2009), the modern techno-fetishistic "cyborg soldier" (Masters 2005 and 2008), and the 'everyday' RAF clerk (Higate 2003). In today's shadow of counterinsurgency, Alison Howell (2011) has pointed to the ways in which soldiering subjects are now expected to be both war fighter and nation builder; to be able to engage in kinetic violence, but also

⁴ For a limited number of examples see: L. Abu-Lughod (2002). "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others", *American Anthropologist*, 104(3): 783-790; K. Hunt (2002), "The Strategic Co-optation of Women's Rights: Discourse in the 'War on Terrorism'", *International Feminist journal of Politics*, 4(1): 116-121; L.J. Shepherd (2006), "Veiled References: Constructions of Gender in the Bush Administration Discourse on the Attacks on Afghanistan Post-9/11", *International Feminist journal of Politics*, 8(1), 19-41; I.M. Young (2003), "The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State", *Signs*, 29(1), 1-25.

know when to hold it back. Borrowing the term from Howell, today's soldiers are *liberal warriors*: an embodiment of militarised masculinity that has the fighting ability of a combat soldier, the high(er) technology weaponry of the Gulf War, and the diplomacy and 'soft power' capabilities of a peacekeeper.

Militarised masculinities emerge however, not just because of a particular soldiering context, but, as relational, are also (re)produced through discourses of difference. While the privileging of masculinity and all associated with it, over and above femininity is one such discourse, how this gendered discourse also intersects with discourses of race and sexuality will be integral both to the construction of a liberal warrior and its encounter with the Afghan security forces. It is by paying attention to these discourses that logics that operated during the colonial period can be traced in today's encounters between British liberal warriors and the ANA soldiers they are sent to train and mentor. Before unpacking these colonial logics in a little more detail, I want to briefly expand on my understanding of the term 'interlocking'. I use the term following Sherene Razack who argues that while the term 'intersecting' describes discrete systems whose paths cross, *interlocking* systems *are* each other and give content to one another. To quote Razack: "An interlocking approach requires that we keep several balls in the air at once, striving to overcome the successive process forced upon us by language and focusing on the ways in which bodies express social hierarchies of power" (2008: 62-3). Thus, while one system or discourse may provide an entry point for discussion, it is immediately evident that such an understanding is both informed by, and informs, others. The ways in which gendered, raced and sexualised discourses interlock, and how they help make possible and entrench a system of inequality and violence both during the days of empire and today will be detailed below.

COLONIAL LOGICS

While contemporary constructions of a British militarised masculinity have emerged in response to the current environment of counterinsurgency, it is also a subjectivity that has been produced through an understanding of Britain's colonial past, and British men as colonial soldiers, rulers and explorers. Paying attention to colonial logics that operated during the British Empire is thus essential to understanding the ways in which contemporary British soldiering subjects come to understand who they are and their experiences during overseas deployment.

The largest of the European empires, at its height the British Empire encompassed roughly a quarter of the world's total landmass, with Queen Victoria presiding over some 445 million subjects. For the British however, imperialism was not solely about exploitation: "united by a single imperial ethos, the 'civilizing mission'", official rhetoric of the time distanced itself from exploitation being a motivating factor. Rather, "[w]ith their superior race, Christian values, and economic know-how, the British instead had a duty, a moral obligation, to redeem the 'backward heathens' of the world" (Elkins 2005: 5). For this empire to be considered a civilising project and the men⁵ who enacted it to be embodied by the "image of a lone, dashing Englishman dispensing justice, wisdom and righteous retribution upon his brown subjects" (Rutherford 1997: 13), particular gendered, raced and sexualised discourses were both relied upon and (re)enacted. Discourses that enabled specific understandings of the white, western Self and non-white colonised Other.

⁵ While the architects and enforcers of empire were predominantly men, white European women were not merely the "hapless onlookers of empire" (McClintock 1995: 6). Rather, "the rationed privileges of race all too often put white women in positions of decided – if borrowed – power, not only over colonized women but also over colonized men. As such, white women...were ambiguously complicit both as colonizers and colonized, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting" (*ibid.*: 6).

Before even reaching the far-off lands Britain would later colonise, “[k]nowledge of the unknown world was mapped as a metaphysics of gender violence” with pre-colonised lands “feminized and spatially spread for male exploration” (McClintock 1995: 23). “For centuries, the uncertain continents...were figured in European lore as libidiously eroticized...onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears” (*ibid.*: 22). The Arabic-Orient, as one of Europe’s “deepest and most recurring images of the Other” (Said 1979: 1), was constituted as a site of particular sexual excess, with Europe’s forbidden sexual transgressions projected upon the Oriental man. A man who was contradictorily and inconsistently portrayed as effeminised and/or homosexual⁶, or as a lusty villain “from whom the virile but courteous European could rescue the native (or the European) woman” (Loomba 1998: 152).

Colonial discourses were never then ‘just’ racial discourses. While today skin colour has become the primary signifier of racial identities, the latter is – and has always been – “shaped by perceptions of religious, ethnic, linguistic, national, sexual and class differences. ‘Race’ as a concept receives its meanings contextually, and in relation to other social groupings and hierarchies” (Loomba 1998: 121-2). The British Empire and men’s understanding of who they were within it was thus supported by these interlocking discourses of difference. For example, while it was claimed that Oriental men were more prone to homosexuality, such an assumption was both reinforced by and reinforced understandings of the Oriental man as more effeminate; as colonised lands harbouring deviant sexualities; of the white, European man as the embodiment of masculinity and a

⁶ William Lithgow, travelling through Turkey in the seventeenth century, described the men as “addicted, besides all their sensual and incestuous lusts, to Sodomy, which they account as a dainty to digest all their other libidinous pleasures (Lithgow cited in Loomba 1998: 155).

restrained, but virile, sexuality; and all these understandings underwritten and interlocking with racial identity. It was the interlocking of gendered, raced and sexualised discourses such as these that helped make possible the violence of the colonial encounter. An encounter that for the vast majority of those affected was experienced not, as the rhetoric promised, as “a beneficent force, an exercise in enlightened development ...[but] one of limitation, constraint and oppression” (Levine 2007: 141).

BENEVOLENT LIBERAL WARRIORS AND ‘PARTNERING AND ADVISING’ THE ANA

While today the violence and brutality of the British Empire and imperialism is widely recognised⁷, postcolonial theorists have long pointed to the ways in which colonial logics that circulated and operated during the era of empire can be traced to contemporary interventions by the west in the post-colonies and so-called ‘Orient’ (be they ‘humanitarian’ missions or wars of aggression)⁸. It is these colonial logics, these interlocking discourses of gender, race and sexuality, which are imbued within constructions of a liberal warrior today. There is not however, a simple continuation of those at play during the days of empire and those deployed today. Rather, they emerge in a different language and through a different web of understandings, revolving round what soldiers think they’re doing, who they think they are, and their relations with those ‘Others’ they encounter.

⁷ There are some who continue to apologise and defend the British Empire and imperialism more widely. While Niall Ferguson is perhaps most prominent amongst these figures, the historian Lawrence James describes the British Empire as “a dynamic force for the regeneration of the world. It brought peace, security and stability to people who had lacked them” (James 2012). While Andrew Roberts claims the concentration camps (the first ever created) set up by the British during the Boer war were done so out of concern for “human rights”, despite the 34,000 deaths they led to (Hari 2009).

⁸ A small sample of these would include: Anne Orford (1999), “Muscular Humanitarianism: Reading the Narratives of the New Interventionism”, *European Journal of International Law*, 10(4): p. 679-711; Derek Gregory (2004); Sherene Razack (2004).

As Claire Duncanson has noted, “British soldiers do not shy away from evoking Empire explicitly themselves”, with soldiers often making reference to it in their memoirs (2013: 102)⁹. While some military personnel do so with merely a passing reference to ‘Lawrence of Arabia’ or Rudyard Kipling, others engage in more detail with Britain’s imperial past. Leo Docherty, a former captain in the British Army, for example, envisions himself during his time in Helmand, Afghanistan as a “latter-day Great Gamer” (Docherty 2007: 44), and describes his excitement and enthusiasm for taking part in something as “honourable” as nation building (*ibid.*: 45). Unlike the British who went into Afghanistan centuries before him, Docherty believes the “ideal opportunity to play a new version of the Great Game has presented itself” (*ibid.*: 45). A version that serves “NATO, not the Empire”, and Docherty is confident the British “won’t make such foolish errors this time around” (*ibid.*: 44). Docherty can be said to be deploying what Mary Louise Pratt termed an “anti-conquest” (1992: 7) strategy of representation. Writing about European travel and exploration writers in colonial times, Pratt claims they secured their innocence in the imperial project through establishing themselves in opposition to the imperialists and colonialists of their times. Today, British soldiers similarly secure their innocence against claims of a ‘new imperialism’ and their status as benevolent liberal warriors through an unhinging of the violence of the British Empire. Unlike the brutality of the Empire, contemporary interventions are in “partnership” with the local forces, are “shaped by the will of the Afghan people”, and are not about “imposing a Western model” of how society should be structured (MoD n.d.c). Despite references to ‘The Great Game’,

⁹ For a selection of British soldier memoirs who reference and reflect on the British Empire see: D. Beattie (2009), *An Ordinary Soldier: Afghanistan, A Ferocious Enemy, a Bloody Conflict, One Man’s Impossible Mission*, London: Pocket Books, Simon and Schuster; Docherty (2007); Hennessey (2009 and 2012); S. Tootal (2009), *Danger Close: Commanding 3 Para in Afghanistan*, London: John Murray.

Britain and its military forces remain un-implicated in the bloody history of the region, nor is the long shadow of British imperialism discussed.

Focusing then on the British Army's involvement in the training and mentoring of the Afghan National Army – one such 'partnership' with the Afghans – the specific ways in which colonial logics are rendered visible, a liberal warrior (re)articulated, and Afghan soldiers located in increasingly vulnerable positions will be unpacked. With the end of 2014 set as a deadline for British withdrawal from Afghanistan, today the balance of the UK's military effort is shifting from frontline combat to the 'partnering and advising' of Afghan troops (MoD n.d.b.). British troops involved with Kandak¹⁰ Advisory Training Teams (KATTs) consist "primarily of officers and non-commissioned officers...who are embedded in Afghan units as mentors and trainers to the ANA" (Younossi et al. 2009: 34). KATTs are involved with "mentoring ANA leaders on such issues as leadership...implementation of doctrine, operational procedures, tactics and 'on the job training' during operations in the field", as well as providing crucial combat enablers such as fire support, command and control, and close air support (*ibid.*: 35-6). While official rhetoric makes claims to partnership and cooperation, with British troops living, eating, sleeping, patrolling and fighting "alongside soldiers of the ANA on a daily basis" (MoD n.d.a), this article will claim relations between the two forces are underwritten by haunting spectres of gendered, raced and sexualised colonial logics.

Reading predominantly from Patrick Hennessey's memoir, *Kandak: Fighting with Afghans*, but supported by other examples of 'TiC-lit' (troops in combat literature) and the British Army website, I will trace the disjuncture between the rhetoric of partnering and advising, and the interlocking discourses it is enacted through. Discourses that operate to

¹⁰ The Afghan term for battalion/unit.

(re)produce a contemporary liberal warrior, while simultaneously (mis)representing the ANA soldiers as effeminate, cowardly and primitive, and rendering their bodies increasingly vulnerable to the ‘real’ and material violences of war. Hennessey’s book provides much of the empirical texture of this paper principally because it was the only British soldiering memoir I have come across that deals directly and primarily with the mentoring of Afghan troops. *Kandak* departs from the fairly formulaic soldier-memoir that has proliferated in recent years. In particular, Hennessey’s book offers a degree of self- and institutional-reflection with regard to the British Army that is seldom present in the TiC-lit genre, and, at times, offers the possibility of disrupting the colonial logics Hennessey himself is (re)produced in and through. However, while Hennessey concludes that Afghan soldiers – ‘*askar*’ – “are what we were: ordinary soldiers” (Hennessey 2012: 366), much of his book marks a clear distinction (and hierarchy) between the *extraordinary* liberal warriors of the British Army and the *askar* of “what was basically a Soviet-legacy, Third World army” (*ibid.*: 124). A distinction that is made firstly through a preoccupation with the perceived femininity and homosexuality of the Afghan soldiers, and secondly (and paradoxically), their hypermasculinity as demonstrated in their violent and primordial fighting techniques.

THE HOMOSEXUALISATION OF THE ANA

A preoccupation with the bodies of Afghan soldiers – what their bodies look like and assumptions made about what they do with their bodies, particularly with regard to their sexuality – runs throughout Hennessey’s and other soldiers’ memoirs. Frequent and repeated references to Afghan soldiers more effeminate appearance – their hennaed hair, their kohl-rimmed eyes and their love of flowers that adorn their vehicles and weaponry – litter descriptions of British soldiers’ reflections on their time spent in Afghanistan. Hennessey’s first overwhelming impression of the ANA was that of “sheer physical

difference” (2012: 22). While Hennessey and his fellow Grenadier Guards literally embodied the archetypal masculine soldiering figure, the gestures of their body telling a story of order, discipline and control (“all over 6 foot tall...Giant, strapping, pink...with similarly cropped hair” [*ibid.*: 22]), the ANA were “small”, “scruffy as hell”, and likened to children (*ibid.*: 21-4). Feminists have long noted that the elision of women with children is one way in which women and femininity are infantilised. In Hennessey’s memoir we see its inversion: the infantilisation of men to implicitly feminise them¹¹. Working through the same gendered hierarchical binaries – order/disorder; rationality/irrationality; control/chaos – that position women in the latter and lesser half of the dualism, the soldiers of the ANA are understood as “armed primary-school children” (*ibid.*: 346) and implicitly feminised. This feminisation is compounded by the simultaneous deployment of familiar Orientalist tropes of (homo)sexualisation and sexual lasciviousness or deviancy.

As Edward Said (1979) has written about, since the late eighteenth century the Arabic Orient has been designated as a site of particular lasciviousness and eroticism, with harems of veiled and exotic women, lustful and deviant men, and a proclivity for male homosexuality. Today, ideas of sexual excess remain. Stories abound of Arab men taking multiple wives, keeping a catamite, and in his first memoir Hennessey recalls catching one of the Afghan interpreters “shagging a donkey through night-vision goggles” (2009:

¹¹ It is perhaps worth noting at this point that I do not mean to imply that Hennessey, or any of the other soldiers whose memoirs I quote from, are intentionally feminising, (homo)sexualising, racialising the ANA. Rather, the discourses through which ANA soldiers are presented to them, and the discourses through which British soldiers come to ‘know’ or ‘understand’ them (and themselves) are always already imbued with gendered, sexualised and raced colonial logics.

222)¹². Hennessey devotes close to a full chapter to the perception held by a significant number of British troops that – according to one Paratrooper – the ANA “were all bender boys” (Hennessey 2012: 255). While the homosociality, and at times homoeroticism, of the British military is no secret¹³, the tension between it and the homophobia that marks the ‘banter’ between British troops and insults levelled towards ANA soldiers has been largely ignored by soldier memoirs. *Kandak* however, attempts to confront this “strange balance between the macho and the homo-erotic” (*ibid.*: 256). Hennessey writes that it never ceased to amuse him “that one of the things thousands of British troops rotating through Helmand have struggled with the most is the relative intimacy of their Afghan counterparts” (*ibid.*: 255). As he states,

it seemed hypocritical that lads who spent their days pumping iron and sculpting their sideburns found it difficult when the ANA rocked up to patrol in eye-liner. More profoundly disjointed was the overplayed horror with which the common Afghan practice of men holding hands was greeted, especially when contrasted with the ever more bizarrely sexual banter which characterized isolated [British] fighting platoons (*ibid.*: 256).

¹² Paradoxically, the Arab world, and Islamic culture more generally, is frequently portrayed by the British press as vehemently homophobic in comparison to the enlightened and open-minded west.

¹³ Routine male group nakedness is a persistent feature of the British military. As well as incidental practices of nudity (showering together, getting dressed together, stripping off in the heat of the desert), British troops also partake in games featuring nakedness (for example, the infamous ‘Naked Bar’ game [see <http://www.standard.co.uk/news/sent-home-in-shame-the-british-commandos-who-stripped-naked-for-crass-stunt-in-a-foreign-bar-6617718.html>]). As one former Royal Marine told Woodward and Winter, “being naked together with other men is a completely normal part of contemporary British military life” (2007: 68). I discuss nudity and homosociality in the British military in more detail in X.

However, while Hennessey may call attention to the tensions and contradictions in British soldiers' attitudes towards their ANA counterparts, this is something of a marginal discourse in comparison to widespread allusions of the (homo)sexuality of Afghan troops. Docherty for example, writes about that "[d]ue to the complete absence of any female company, intimate male relationships, sometimes homosexual, commonly develop", adding that "[t]he exact role performed by the tea-boy doting on every ANA officer is... a source of endless banter amongst Brits working with the Afghans" (2007: 93). Elsewhere a 2010 report by American social scientists (as part of the Human Terrain System Project) requested by British officers to "help them understand the sexual behaviour of locals and Afghan comrades" (Farmer 2010) concluded that a "culturally-contrived homosexuality... appears to affect a far greater population base than (*sic*) researchers would argue is attributable to natural inclination" (Cardinalli 2010: 1). Such a statement rearticulates Orientalist assumptions that mark homosexuality as something 'Arab' men are *culturally* predisposed towards. Despite the report at several points mentioning that Afghan men practicing affectionate or sexual acts with one another do not personally identify themselves as 'homosexual' – "at least not in the Western sense" (*ibid.*: 4) – it frequently refers to them as such. The report states that for an Afghan man to self-identify or label oneself as homosexual, he would suffer "severe tribal and familial ostracization" (*ibid.*: 5). However, to "practice homosexuality" (which implied in this report can vary from feeling love for another man, to sodomy, to being "freer with companionship, affection, emotional and artistic expression" [*ibid.*: 2]) does not carry such negative social outcomes. As author of the study AnnaMaria Cardinalli states, "it appears to be the label, not the action or the [sexual] preference, that poses the greatest problem" (*ibid.*: 5). How this differs from particular cultures in Britain – including military cultures – is not explored. Hennessey, for example, recalls during his training "rumours abounded of the lads on the Section Commanders' Battle Course who

delighted in shocking their new officers by noshing each other at the bar” (2012: 256). As one cheering onlooker to this act said at the time, it took place “to prove that he’s not gay, sir” (*ibid.*: 256). Like their Afghan counterparts, it appears to be the label, not the action, which determines sexuality. As for the homophobic reaction of Afghan communities towards those who identify as homosexual, ‘severe tribal ostracization’ may be akin to being forced to leave your career because you are an openly gay serving soldier (as was the case until 2011 in the American military, the very organisation Cardinalli is employed by), or being subjected to overtly homophobic insults within your career (common within both American and British militaries).

By understanding this discourse of (homo)sexualisation as not singular and discrete, but as interlocking, means Hennessey’s own reflections give content and form to the very assumptions he seeks to avoid. For while he purposely avoids making sweeping assumptions with regard to the sexuality of his Afghan counterparts, his own production through, and engagement in, discourses that ‘make’ a liberal warrior operate to implicitly rearticulate this (homo)sexualised representation. For example, Hennessey’s overwhelming impression that the ANA were “small” (*ibid.*: 21), his frequent references to the ANA’s “immaculately tended garden[s]” (*ibid.*: 157) on bases (often at the expense of troops performing their soldiering duties), and their behaviour while out on operations (“[t]he night was peppered with angry shouts and nervous, random shots at ghosts and shadows” [*ibid.*: 89]), all work through and emerge from particular gendered – *feminising* – discourses. Thus, while Hennessey may be amused at others’ affront at the affection shown between Afghan men and their presumed homosexuality, his own preoccupation with their ‘effeminate’ appearance, their love of flowers and their Kohl-rimmed eyes, entangles him in these same logics. In comparison, despite his reflection on the homoeroticism of the British military, British soldiers remain resolutely heterosexual,

and by extension, masculine. Homosexuality policed against not only by homophobic assumptions levelled at the ANA¹⁴, but also by the raw physical masculinity of British soldiers' appearance and their 'manly' fighting ability.

It is worth noting here that *Kandak*, like the vast majority of the 'TiC-lit' genre, is marked by an absence of women. It is a book about a man and his relationships with other men. Perhaps the most oft-mentioned woman is Jen, Hennessey's partner, whose mentions serve to remind the reader that while Hennessey is in a warzone, Jen remains at home. Given however, that militarised masculinities are inherently relational and their construction relies upon ideas of the lacking and weak feminine, such femininity is transposed from the bodies of absent women onto the bodies of the present ANA. For not only do liberal warriors emerge against a backdrop of the imperilled Afghan woman, they are also (re)produced through their relations with non-hegemonic men whose bodies have been marked as effeminate and homosexualised. As such, it is through British soldiers' encounter and relations with their Afghan counterparts that they come to know themselves as masculine and heterosexual liberal warriors. It is not however, only that British soldiers come to know 'who they are', the encounter is also fraught with desire. Desire not just of Afghan bodies, as seen in Hennessey and others' obsession with the appearance and sexual behaviours of Afghan soldiers, but also desire of what these bodies *do* (discussed in the section below). With Afghan soldiers' bodies subject to intense scrutiny and often the object of fear, loathing and homophobia, and desire understood as an oscillation between repulsion and attraction with the latter overcome through violence, this simultaneous preoccupation and vehemence suggests desire is at play.

¹⁴ Eve Sedgwick (1985) has pointed to the ways in which homophobia has served as a boundary demarcating the homosocial from the homosexual.

UNWILLING FIGHTERS/ *KHARKUS* FIGHTERS

Given the importance of masculine gender and heterosexual competency to soldiering in western militaries¹⁵, it perhaps follows from the above interlocking discourses that British soldiers responsible for the training of Afghan troops, and ‘reading’ them through these discourses, voice concerns over their combat ability. Frequently mentioned in soldiers’ recollections of the ANA, official reports and media stories, are issues with regard to discipline and an unwillingness to engage in, or fear of, fighting. The ANA are portrayed as incredibly adept at disengaging themselves from the possibility that they might have to work or train or fight. Docherty voices his frustration that while he’s desperate “to be properly ‘embedded’ with the Afghans, to truly get to know them and turn the company into a slick, effective unit...they’re not really interested in doing any serious training” (2007: 88). Reaction to Docherty’s disappointment on an online military forum is largely scathing, with one contributor commenting that Docherty encountered just “a couple of small issues...such as, Afghans are lazy as f@#k and don’t want to learn to fight, instead they are more content with picking flowers, drinking tea and enjoying ‘Man-Love Thursday’” (MilitaryForums 2007)¹⁶. Voicing similar, if more measured, sentiments, Hennessey recalls that each time he “decided to do some training with whoever was there...a mysterious bell would ring, and the ANA would all disappear on cue – prayers, lunch, siesta, we never really knew to where” (2012: 45).

¹⁵ Not only has this been pointed to by numerous authors writing on militarised masculinities, the relatively recent lifting of the ban on homosexuals being allowed to openly serve in the UK and US militaries (2000 and 2011 respectively) implicitly makes links between (hetero)sexuality and soldiering.

¹⁶ With thanks to Claire Duncanson whose paper at the *International Studies Association* Conference in 2012, San Diego, drew my attention to this forum.

The assumption that the ANA were lazy and unwilling to fight is not just held by individual soldiers. *Kandak* suggests this is something of an institutional attitude within the British military and that this has enacted a ‘writing out of history’ of the ANA’s combat achievements and successes¹⁷. Hennessey claims that at “every stage” of his pre-deployment mentoring training “the Afghans themselves were dismissed... they were infantilized: were children, boys, novices who needed hand-holding and baby-sitting” (*ibid.*: 33). ANA involvement and successes during field operations failed to be reported in the same ways and to the same extent as their assumed laziness. The twenty page “Royal Anglians’ quasi-official history of their tour” fails to note a single mention of the ANA (*ibid.*: 98), while one recollection of a joint UK-ANA operation describes it as being “about 240 Brits altogether, with the ANA in the rear” (McNab cited in Hennessey 2012: 98). Hennessey recalls this same fight, but describes how Zadiq Ullah was “shot through the eye storming the Taliban positions” and how Sergeant Nadir “broke cover and drove the Dushka wagon right up to the front line with bullets pinging off the bumper” (Hennessey 2012: 98). In Hennessey’s recollection the ANA were frontline soldiers engaging enemy positions, not the lazy, war-shy children they are frequently depicted as.

An unwillingness, or even inability, to fight however, is neither a reaction exclusive to the ANA, and can be re-read as a form of agency or resistance. Firstly, history is littered with stories of men who, having joined the military, find themselves unable to fight.

Hennessey, on one of his returns to Afghanistan as a ‘civvy’, witnesses this while on patrol with British forces. Under fire, Hennessey finds himself in a cold ditch with a hyperventilating young soldier “curled up next to” him. Looking over at the soldier,

¹⁷ This may help explain the ANA’s overwhelming absence in much of the ‘TiC-lit’ currently published.

Hennessey notes he is “breathing at a rate of knots and cradling the Mimimi [light machine gun] like a safety blanket” (*ibid.*: 163-4). Secondly, ANA soldiers’ unwillingness to fight or their seeming lack of discipline may in fact be a form of what James Scott has termed ‘everyday resistance’. Studying struggles “between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rents, and interest from them”, Scott details the “ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups”. Such weapons include foot dragging, desertion and false compliance, and are what the peasantry have historically enacted in order to defend their interests against orders it has faced (1985: xvi). The ANA – who have been perceived to have engaged in a number of these ‘ordinary weapons’ – may utilise such tactics in response to the very real security threats they face. Hennessey alludes to this in his reflections of the ANA’s behaviour when it came to his handing over of training responsibilities to another regiment:

Suddenly, the ANA started showing off and being almost pointedly ill-disciplined...It made me wonder whether the worst we had seen of the *kandak*, now nearly seven months earlier, hadn’t perhaps been similarly exaggerated, part of a pantomime, the only way the powerless *kandak* could register its displeasure (2012: 122).

Paradoxically, representations of the ANA are not just feminised through their unwillingness or fear of fighting, but are simultaneously hypermasculinised through their portrayal as being excessively violent and brutal. Qiam, described by Hennessey as “this story’s hero”, is also described as a hero “only in an older, darker sense of the word: heroic in an ancient, martial sense, laced with pathos and dangerously volatile” (Hennessey 2012: 186). Hennessey’s book is littered with anecdotes reflecting Qiam’s

mad, love of the fight. In one particularly memorable scene after an Afghan policeman blames his refusal to fight on the fact he does not have body armour, Qiam strips out of his armour and clothing, throws his gun at another policeman, before picking up a wrench and charging into the battle (*ibid.*: 87-8). Describing Qiam, Hennessey uses an Afghan word, *kharkeus*, meaning a mix of crazy and brave (*ibid.*: 88). In descriptions of the ANA's fighting such as this there is a mixture of envy and reservation. Envy in the abandonment of restraint; Qiam's behaviour after all, is not that of a counterinsurgency liberal warrior. Unlike the controlled and disciplined fighting of British soldiers, the fighting of the ANA – when they do fight – is more chaotic, violent, *kharkeus*. And it is here, in these reflections, that desire is once again revealed. That while British soldiers are directed by instrumental purposes, carry highly technologized weaponry, and engage in complex battle plans, for Afghan fighters, “conflict had a meaning of its own. Warfare was a calling, affirming a way of life and expressing existential values “ (Porter 2009: 39). Orientalism, “a mixed bag of self-glorification and self-doubt” (*ibid.*: 29), means that the ANA and their actions are both desired and disparaged, both envied and derided.

A liberal warrior is a very specific conception of masculinity, and one that discipline and control are integral to. Expected not only to be able to deploy lethal force but to know when to hold it back, a liberal warrior's recourse to violence is underwritten with the assumption that it is legitimate, proportionate and controlled. The ANA's lack of discipline from their failure to wear correct uniform to their uncontrolled and chaotic actions in combat, suggests an excess of masculinity; an excess that makes it an impossibility that they could ever embody a liberal warrior subjectivity such as Hennessey's. As Hennessey writes reflecting on the shift towards 'hearts and minds' in counterinsurgency warfare,

The unquestioned fighting spirit of the ANA which had won it so many admirers in the past was of less value in the softly-softly-catchy-monkey world of counterinsurgency, where it was all about winning the population, not the fire-fight. General McChrystal's¹⁸ mantra of 'courageous restraint' was difficult enough for some of the more experienced ISAF troops to get their heads around...but it was complete anathema to the ANA" (Hennessey 2012: 274).

This quote coming close to the end of Hennessey's memoir is both interesting and revealing. Firstly, it seems a little disingenuous to state that the fighting spirit of the ANA was 'unquestioned' by their British counterparts given that large sections of book were given over to exactly this questioning. Secondly, it is interesting that once the military focus shifted towards a 'hearts and minds' campaign as opposed to 'winning the fire-fight', this was now where British liberal warriors excel. At the beginning of his memoir Hennessey recalls how the ANA handed "out sweets to kids" and chatted "away to the few farmers" (*ibid.*: 91), all the while depending on the British "for coordination, combat support, all the stuff that would win battles" (*ibid.*: 74). In these earlier reflections, counterinsurgency has been implicitly divided into masculine war fighting (carried out by the British) and feminine 'hearts and minds' (carried out by the ANA).

That the ANA can be simultaneously (and paradoxically) feminised and hypermasculinised in this way, while at the same time maintaining a British liberal warrior's privileged position demonstrates the power of the interlocking discourses and the difficulty of stepping outside them. It is that that the gendered, raced and sexualised discourses that work to (re)produce a British liberal warrior and their relation with the ANA give content and form to one another that they prove so enduring. For example,

¹⁸ US ISAF Commander between June 2009 and June 2010.

understandings that an ANA soldier is more effeminate than his British counterpart plays into and interlocks with understandings of an ANA soldier being more culturally predisposed to homosexuality, to a fear or unwillingness to fight, and his child-like demeanour. However, that an ANA soldier has a greater proclivity towards homosexuality also informs, and is informed by, a more general sexual lasciviousness or deviance, a lack of discipline and more 'primitive' behaviour such as chaotic or hypermasculinised forms of fighting. These two seemingly contradictory understandings therefore do in fact emerge from, and play into one another.

Despite the impossibility of separating out individual discourses and the endurance this engenders, that understandings of ANA soldiers emerge through multiple points and multiple ways of this interlocking web, also offers the possibility of rendering unstable borders mapped between western liberal warriors and Afghan *askar*. It offers the possibility of British soldiers engaging in other, less exclusionary discourses, and engendering a less hierarchical militarised masculinity. Claire Duncanson in her reading of British soldier memoirs argues that western military interventions do not always, inevitably rely on radical Othering (2013: 114). Duncanson details instances where there is evidence of a different militarised masculinity emerging through British soldiers' encounters with the Iraqi and Afghan populations: a "peacebuilding masculinity", constructed "through relations of equality, empathy and respect" (*ibid.*: 148). Hennessey, in his refusal to homosexualise the ANA and his recognition of their fighting ability begins to disrupt and render unstable the hierarchical and Othering relation between the two soldiering subjects. However, as Duncanson also acknowledges, such disruptions are not the dominant discourse, and, as has been shown, while disruptions take place and are significant, the interlocking nature of discourses means it can be all too easy to revert back to a colonialist and hierarchical relationship. It is then to a deeper reflection of these

interlocking discourses that my conclusion will turn, and how despite Hennessey's reflections offering some disruption, they remain haunted by the gendered, raced and sexualised colonial logics he tries so hard to extricate himself from.

CONCLUSION

Produced not just through the recent turn towards the gendered rhetoric and practice of counterinsurgency, but also through Britain's history as a colonial power, a 'liberal warrior' is today's militarised masculine embodiment. And while the violence and exploitation of the British Empire is now largely recognised, gendered, raced and sexualised discourses that circulated and interlocked during the colonial period continue to haunt and (re)articulate a contemporary liberal warrior according to particular logics. For although military rhetoric on Afghanistan today centres on words such as 'partnership', and British soldiers understand their role as being in the service of international security as opposed to empire, the encounter between British troops and their Afghan counterparts serves to largely hold in place a hierarchical relationship between a superior white liberal warrior and inferior non-white 'Other'. Taking the British military's role in 'partnering and advising' the Afghan security forces this article has traced the ways in which these interlocking discourses both emerge and sustain this hierarchy.

Unlike much of the 'TiC-lit' that has proliferated in recent years, Hennessey's memoir offers a degree of self- and institutional-reflection that is quite rare. Writing about the ANA he frequently juxtaposes their supposedly effeminate or homosexualised or lazy behaviour with that of British troops, pointing to the ways in which both subjects actually engage in similar performances. Indeed, Hennessey's contextualisations do, at times, disrupt the radical Othering and dominant colonialist discourses that are at work.

However, what makes these colonialist discourses so difficult to challenge, what makes them so enduring, is the ways in which they interlock and give content and form to one another, and the ease at which subjects both unthinkingly (re)articulate them and are (re)produced by them. For example, while Hennessey acknowledges the disjuncture between British soldiers' unease with Afghan soldiers' tactility and the intense homoeroticism of the British military, he too inadvertently (re)iterates these same assumptions. For while Hennessey may not regard the ANA as 'bender boys' as one of his colleagues does, he does feminise them with frequent references to their love of flowers, kohl-rimmed eyes and diminutive stature. Gendered and raced discourses such as these give content and form to the very (homo)sexualised discourses Hennessey attempts to disentangle himself from. Similarly, while Hennessey makes an explicit attempt to 'write in' the ANA's fighting ability and their contribution to kinetic operations, thus disrupting claims that they are cowardly and lazy, he simultaneously falls back into familiar colonial logics. For example, Hennessey's frequent references to the ANA's reliance on the better equipped, more highly trained and technologically advanced British military, or his descriptions of their fighting, portrayed as chaotic, mad, and at times hyper-violent. Unlike British liberal warriors who draw on controlled and precise fighting tactics when going into combat, Afghan soldiers are chaotic, out of control. Anecdotes such as these re-entangle Hennessey and the ANA he often affectionately describes in interlocking webs of colonial logics. Logics that despite Hennessey's appeals that the *askar* of the ANA were "no different from the British soldiers they have fought alongside" (2012: 10-11), give content and form to Orientalist discourses that portray them as feminised, infantilised, homosexualised, primitive; as irrefutably different from the disciplined and controlled masculine liberal warriors.

Hennessey's contextualisations and attempts to move beyond the dominant discourses are further restricted by the ubiquity of the colonial terms the Afghan mission is portrayed and understood through. As Derek Gregory has written,

The colonial present is not produced through geopolitics and geoeconomics alone...It is also set in motion through mundane cultural forms and cultural practices that mark other people as irredeemably 'Other' and that license the unleashing of exemplary violence against them (2004: 16).

It is this "*banality* of the colonial present" (*ibid.*: 16, emphasis in original) and the fact that Afghanistan is everywhere (unthinkingly) understood in colonial terms that help make these interlocking discourses so effective and so difficult to escape.

Hennessey wrote his second memoir in an attempt to give ordinary Afghan soldiers a voice and aware of the difficulties, imbalances and even dangers of attempting to tell O/others' stories. He writes in a self-conscious and, at times, self-reflective manner, recognising the flippancy the ANA are frequently afforded and the inconsistencies that mark British soldiers' attitudes towards them. However, despite his attempts at disrupting the dominant colonialist discourses, he too does not fully escape the gendered, raced and sexualised colonial logics of much of what he critiques. It is not after all possible to simply step 'outside' discourse. Hennessey, as all political subjects are, is produced in and through discourse, and, as a former British soldier his subjectivity displays the 'marks' of colonial discourse perhaps more vividly than others. To destabilise these logics, to attempt to discard them, is to trouble who he understands

himself to be. Hennessey's self-reflection¹⁹ may indeed be a way to bolster his own position as innocent in Britain's ongoing involvement in Afghanistan, while simultaneously keeping in place the discourses and logics that allow him to understand himself as militarised and masculinised and offer a degree of comfort. What effects however, does this have on the subjugated Others that are simultaneously produced? For the ANA who are assigned "the most under-strength or least trained or most-unknown unit" (Hennessey 2012: 328), who "are forever cast in the role of the supported" (*ibid.*: 328), and who are written out battles and written out of history. For the ANA who have died in numbers far exceeding their British 'partners'²⁰, these interlocking discourses have far more violent effects than mere misrepresentation. They locate the ANA in violent relations of power where they are under-resourced and underfunded, where their bodies are left on battlefields²¹, and they are expected to patrol in conditions the British would not²². It is on the ground 'realities' such as these – the mundane, banal and 'everyday' actions of underfunding and different rules – which mean contextualisations such as

¹⁹ It should be noted that Hennessey is not the only former soldier to self-reflect. Docherty struggles with what he refers to as his "disappointing double-sided existence", referring to his simultaneous and contradictory desire "to be properly 'embedded' with the Afghans", while annoyed with himself for his "enjoyment of the Afghan-free DFAC [dining facility]" (Docherty 2007: 88).

²⁰ According to Congressional Research Report between 2007 (the point when Afghan deaths began to be 'counted', although the researcher, Susan Chesser, advises such figures are used as "guideposts rather than statements of fact" [2012]) and the first half of 2012, 2,334 Afghan Army and Security Forces (not including the police) have been killed in comparison to the UK's 438 service personnel deaths (Chesser 2012).

²¹ Hennessey recalls one incident when the British refused to deploy helicopter support from Bastion to recover the bodies of two dead ANA soldiers. While Hennessey argues there are "all manner of good reasons not to bring in the vital medical helicopter for guys who were already dead" (2012: 275), given the importance amongst British soldiers of never leaving a soldier – dead or alive – behind, cases such as this give the impression a distinction is being made between 'their' dead and 'our' dead.

²² Hennessey recalls that "[w]hen the hospital at Bastion got full and there was a temporary lock-down on patrolling it was suggested...that perhaps I could ask the ANA to continue patrolling" (2012: 116).

Hennessey's do little to disturb the dominant colonialist discourses. For the soldiers of ANA however, these interlocking discourses lead not to a 'knowingness' of who they are, but render them increasingly vulnerable in a war initiated by outside forces and who are soon to disengage.

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