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Digital peacekeeping, cyborg soldiers and militarised masculinities: a posthuman critique

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ABSTRACT

This article contends that digital technologies are profoundly altering peacekeeping practices as well as peacekeeper consciousness and modes of being. It is proposed that combining postcolonial humanist and posthumanist ontological perspectives when undertaking ethnographic research enriches investigations into global race and gender power relations in peacekeeping. Drawing on posthumanism and Bourdieusian practice theory, the article examines how 16 British infantry soldiers articulate reconnaissance and civilian protection experiences and construct their militarised masculinities prior to and after deployment to United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2020–2021. Findings show that deployment to a high-risk, stressful mission and functioning as ‘information processing devices’ in an increasingly centralised UN peacekeeping system disempowers and emasculates the men. The peacekeepers respond by engendering and racialising the British Army’s ‘gender-neutral’ cyborg soldier figuration and draw on virtual gaming syntax and framings to create relational distance between themselves, female colleagues and local populations.

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Introduction

Scholars investigating gender and race power relations in peacekeeping primarily adopt humanist epistemologies and focus on phenomena physically and metaphorically rooted in the organic, in biology and the corporeal body. Critical military studies scholars have shown how the male body and specific forms of hegemonic masculinities are central to reproducing institutional rules, norms and practices.¹ Military-constructed femininities informed by ‘fixed’ gendered biological differences stabilise the hegemonic masculine ideal, encourage homosociability and establish troop cohesion.² Scholars adopting critical race and postcolonial theories have examined how binaries rooted in the organic

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¹Melissa Herbert, *Camouflage isn't only for Combat: Gender, Sexuality and Women in the Military* (London: New York University Press, 1998); and Annica Kronsell, *Gender, Sex and the Postnational Defense: Militarism and Peacekeeping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

²Sabrina Karim and Kyle Beardsley, *Equal Opportunity Peacekeeping* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Robert Egnell and Mayesha Alam, eds., *Women and Gender perspectives in the Military* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019).

reinforce the Western liberal humanist colonial/imperial project by depicting host nation populations as helpless, poor women and hypersexual, violent, ‘toxic’ men.³ These processes of discrimination and marginalisation help elite (white) men maintain their privilege and dominance in global and national defence and security institutions. The UN’s pledge to facilitate people-centred, gender-responsive peacekeeping has inspired scholarly debates on whether women’s integration and peacekeeper interactions with civilians require ‘softer’ militarised masculinities and whether they can replace existing hegemonic militarised masculinities,⁴ though few studies have examined how military masculinities transition and change during and after deploying to peace missions.

Although focus on biology and the body has been productive, less attention has been paid to examining how combat and peacekeeper masculinities are informed by human interconnections with technology, technoscience and digitality. This is partly because military peacekeeping is framed in (global north) policy discourses and western-dominated academic literature as a low-tech, humanitarian-focused activity distinct from high-tech modern warfare. The UN’s Strategy for the Digital Transformation of UN Peacekeeping (2021) calls for utilising digital technologies to enhance performance, generate efficiencies, homogenise intelligence gathering processes and improve gender-responsive civilian protection work. The UN’s assertion that digital technologies can institute equality and diversity, as well as gender responsive protection approaches, and the reality that all military personnel – regardless of their sex, gender, sexuality, religion, class, caste and race – work with and embody digital technologies necessitates examination of how digitality shapes peacekeeper behaviours, gendered identities and race and gender power relations in peacekeeping. This article contends that digital technologies are profoundly altering peacekeeping practices and the composition of peace operations, as well as peacekeeper consciousness and modes of being.

The article proposes that combining postcolonial humanist and posthumanist ontological perspectives when undertaking ethnographic research facilitates richer investigations into gender and race power relations in peacekeeping. In adopting this approach, a thicker analysis of how military men construct and negotiate their militarised masculinity is also achieved. To demonstrate this, the article examines how male British infantry soldiers articulate their experiences and construct their militarised masculinities prior to and after their six-month deployment to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2020–2021. The article first outlines the value and limitations of adopting humanist epistemological approaches before explaining how peacekeeping practices incorporate digital technologies. Here, the peace operation is conceptualised as a multi-dimensional ecology in which human actors encounter organic and digital affordances (or properties that change human behaviour). To borrow from Braidotti, organic affordances include ‘land, water, plants, animals, bacteria’ and other humans. Digital affordances constitute old and new technologies incorporating hardware and software – ‘plastic, wires, cells, codes and

³Anna Agathangelou and L.H.M Ling, ‘Desire Industries: Sex Trafficking, UN Peacekeeping, and the Neo-Liberal World Order’, *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 1 (2003): 133–48; Sandra Whitworth, *Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004); and Paul Highgate, ‘Peacekeepers, Masculinities, and Sexual Exploitation’, *Men and Masculinities*, 10, no. 1 (2007): 99–119.

⁴Claire Duncanson, ‘Forces for Good? Narratives of Military Masculinity in Peacekeeping Operations’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 11, no. 1 (2009): 63–80; Henri Myrntinen, ‘Stabilizing or Challenging Patriarchy? Sketches of Selected “New” Political Masculinities’, *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 3 (2019): 563–81.

algorithms',⁵ AI and dataflows. The article then explores how combining postcolonial humanist and posthumanist epistemological approaches, as well as Bourdieusian practice theory, can help close conceptual and methodological gaps in researching gender and race hierarchies in peace operations, and how male soldiers' self-constructions of militarised masculinities transition and change.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews and a discourse analysis of British Army policies and promotional films, the empirical case study investigates how British infantry soldiers respond to two aspects of their deployment to MINUSMA that risk destabilising the British Army's hegemonic militarised masculinity and white male infantry soldiers' sense of manhood: the integration of women into infantry regiments and deployment to a dangerous and challenging peace operation. Op Newcombe was the first overseas tour to which female infantry soldiers deployed after legally gaining access to combat roles in the United Kingdom in 2018, and the first overseas tour for the young male infantry officers and squaddies interviewed. The findings show that the British Army's androgynous cyborg soldier subject position has emancipatory potential for women and men who do not conform to the British Army's hegemonic masculine ideals. Embodying the cyborg soldier potentially allows women and men from marginalised social groups to be accepted by white men into infantry regiments and deploying combat units. However, deployment to an increasingly centralised, high-risk and stressful peace operation threatens the infantrymen's sense of manhood, to which white British men discursively respond in two ways. First, combining western imperial liberal humanist and posthumanist semiotic schemes, frames and syntax and sequencing their experiences to depict themselves as avatars operating within a computer game, the infantrymen create relational distance between themselves and local Malians. Second, the men create relational distance between themselves and their female colleagues by subtly stretching and engendering the cyborg soldier figuration. In doing so, they attempt to stabilise the British hegemonic militarised masculinity ideal without overtly appearing to undermine the UN and the British Army's public commitment to gender equality, social diversity and anti-racism. The findings further expose the subtle ways in which race and gender power relations play out in peacekeeping.

Embodiment, equality and militarised masculinities

Feminist and gender scholars have advanced understandings of how hegemonic militarised masculinities glorifying physical strength, aggression, heterosexuality and misogyny can shape peacekeeping practices; women's experiences of deploying and peacekeeper engagements with civilians.⁶ Since the UN's call to implement gender-responsive, people-centred missions and integrate more uniformed female peacekeepers, scholars have examined how militaries are instituting gender equality and social diversity policies.⁷ Adopting humanist feminist ethnographic approaches, which place human

⁵Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press), 46.

⁶Highgate, 'Peacekeepers, Masculinities'.

⁷Robert Egnell, *Gender, Military Effectiveness, and Organizational Change* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Georgina Holmes, 'Feminist Institutionalism', in *United Nations Peace Operations and International Relations Theory*, ed. Kseniya Oksamytna and John Karlsrud (Manchester University Press, 2020).

beings at the centre of the world and academic enquiry,⁸ scholars have researched how military institutional power logics are rooted in the material and corporeal bodies – defined by Highgate as ‘malleable, sentient and fleshy sites of practice’⁹ – to uncover gendered and racialised patterns of inclusion and exclusion within militaries and peacekeeping. Humanist research foregrounding materiality has been productive in several ways. Critical military studies scholars have shown how hegemonic militarised masculinities¹⁰ are constructed by soldiers during everyday military practices and reinforced through the military’s formal and informal gendered and racialised institutional epistemologies.¹¹ Physical spaces such as military barracks and training sites, battlefields and peacekeeping missions determine how militarised masculinities are constituted and expressed.¹² Studying the corporeal body and materiality has also advanced understandings of gendered divisions of military labour and labour hierarchies¹³ including in peacekeeping, enabling scholars to probe further into formal and informal policies, practices and discourses that exclude and/or marginalise women as well as LGBTQ+ people.¹⁴ This has exposed the fragility and instability of hegemonic militarised masculinities, and the substantial emotional, intellectual and physical labour militaries invest to stabilise this ideal.¹⁵

Scholars adopting postcolonial theories to examine the racial dimensions of peacekeeping identify how tropes inscribed on black, brown and white bodies born out of Western liberal humanist colonial projects inform western constructions of peacekeeper masculinities. For Razack, the colourline in peacekeeping is reproduced through fleshy, embodied interactions with local populations, where the ‘heroic’ white peacekeepers’ sense of self depends on the imaginary of ‘Third World Others’, devoid of personhood.¹⁶ Metaphors of the body, biology and embodiment; ideas about masculine virility and the pursuit of sexual relations with local women reproduce male peacekeeper identities.¹⁷ Scholars also adopt humanist epistemological approaches to envision alternative militarised masculinities. Future pathways are driven by organisational change processes designed to institute gender equality and mitigate discrimination based on women’s anatomic difference.¹⁸ Contributions

⁸Päivi Jokinen and Susan Nordstrom, ‘A Queer Cyborg Ethnographer in the Performative Friction of Dissenting Ontologies’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 6 (2020): 639–49, 639.

⁹Paul Highgate, ‘From “Squaddie” to “Bodyguard”: Towards a Remilitarization Agency?’ in *Studying the agency of being governed*, ed. Stina Hansson and Sofie Hellberg (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁰Rachel Woodward, ‘Locating Military Masculinities: Space, Gender, and the Formation of Gender Identity in the British Army’, in *Military Masculinities: Identities and the State*, ed. Paul Highgate (Westpoint, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003).

¹¹Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); and Paul Highgate, *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State* (Praeger, 2003).

¹²Woodward, ‘Locating Military Masculinities’, 43.

¹³Georgina Holmes, ‘Situating Agency, Embodied Practices and Norm Implementation in Peacekeeping Training’, *International Peacekeeping* 26, no. 1 (2019): 55–84.

¹⁴Herbert, *Camouflage isn’t only for combat*; Uzi Ben-Shalom et al. ‘organizational Processes and Gender Integration In Operational Military Units: An Israel Defense Forces Case Study’, *Gender, Work and Organization* 29, no. 9 (2019): 1290.

¹⁵Sara Murh and Beate Sløk-Andersen, ‘Exclusion and Inclusion in the Danish Military: A Historical Analysis of the Construction and Consequences of a Gendered Organizational Narrative’, *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 30, no. 3 (2017): 367–79.

¹⁶Sherene Razack, *Dark Threats and White Knights*, 9.

¹⁷Agathangelou et al., ‘Desire Industry’; Whitworth, *Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping*. Highgate, ‘Peacekeepers, masculinities’; and Annica Kronsell, ‘Sexed Bodies and Military Masculinities: Gender Path Dependence in EU’s Common Security and Defense Policy’, *Men and Masculinities* 19, no. 3 (2016): 311–66, 328.

¹⁸Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (California: University of California Press, 1993); and Duncanson, ‘Forces for good’.

identify peacekeeping as one avenue for facilitating positive transformation of militarised masculinities.¹⁹ Yet, given the proposed ‘softer’ masculinities often entail ‘new race or class or sexuality oppressions’, scholars are sceptical these militarised masculinities are attainable.²⁰ Wilén and Heineken envision an androgenous ‘new soldier identity’ embodying physical and cognitive skills required for contemporary defence and security practices and constituting ‘a balancing of desirable female and masculine traits’ to enhance soldiers’ skill sets ‘irrespective of sex’. Through this de-gendering process, military institutions could ‘move towards a more androgynous military culture’.²¹

However, adopting humanist epistemological approaches can introduce biases into the research process. Emphasising anatomic differences, antagonisms²² and resistance rather than adjustment and acceptance has led scholars to focus on patterns of exclusion than patterns of inclusion. The perception that women are always ‘fundamentally different’ from men unless they perform as men only partially explains how women are accepted by male colleagues, particularly in militaries already implementing gender equality initiatives, or when women are recruited to infantry regiments where high levels of cohesion are necessary. Humanist approaches also influence how researchers analyse and interact with research subjects within a given field under study. For example, Henry et al. mention western-imported military technology and equipment, including ‘Toyota Land Cruisers and tanks, and bulky surveillance and transport equipment’, which they believe evidenced how Liberia seemed a more ‘heavily militarised’ peacekeeping mission than Kosovo.²³ Yet they do not reflect further on how human-tech relationalities may have informed the gendered and raced power hierarchies under investigation. Overall, humanist approaches overlook how a soldier or peacekeeper’s consciousness; ways of seeing the world and their interactions within it are informed by human and institutional relationalities with technology, technoscience and digitality.

Posthumanism foregrounds technology, human-nonhuman relations and technoscience. Donna Haraway first defined the cyborg as ‘a hybrid machine and organism’²⁴ existing in the material world but also an emancipatory being capable of transcending societal limits on human bodies. Some thirty years later, posthumanist theorists argue digital technologies, social media networks, gaming technologies, GPS networks, nanotechnology and wearable devices (smart phones, watches) are profoundly altering human consciousness and sense of self, blurring boundaries between material and virtual spaces and between human and machine.²⁵ Corporeal bodies and human behaviour are ‘monitored, recorded and coded into data using digital technologies’; inputted into ‘cognitive systems’ and turned into machine-learning algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI).²⁶ For Hayles, cognition is ‘embodied throughout human

¹⁹Claire Duncanson, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity and the Possibility of Change in Gender Relations’, *Men and Masculinities* 18, no. 2 (2015): 231–48, 239.

²⁰Duncanson, ‘Hegemonic Masculinity’.

²¹Wilén and Heineken, 2017, 7.

²²Hendrik Quest, ‘Moving Beyond Antagonisms: Changing Masculinities in Post-Conflict Militaries’, *International Peacekeeping* 29, no. 3 (2022): 463–87.

²³Marsha Henry, Paul Highgate, and Gurchathen Sanghera, ‘Positionality and Power: The Politics of Peacekeeping Research’, *International Peacekeeping* 16, no. 4: 467–82, 471.

²⁴Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 149.

²⁵Deborah Lupton, ‘The Digital Cyborg Assemblage: Haraway’s Cyborg Theory and the New Digital Health Technologies’ in *The Handbook of social theory for sociology of health medicine* ed. Collyer, F. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 170.

²⁶Deborah Lupton, *Digital Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2017), 165–6.

flesh and extended into the social and technological environment'.²⁷ Hayles terms the 'networked and programmable systems' in which 'humans are deeply integrated' and in which 'machine cognizers are also crucial players' the 'global cognisphere'.²⁸ To account for techno-biopolitical co-evolutions, Lupton conceptualises humans as 'digital cyborg assemblages' composed of 'configurations of flesh, others' bodies, discourses, practices, ideas and material objects', and forged out of 'complicated patternings, knottings, web-bings and collaborations of technoscience'.²⁹ For Braidotti, 'technology-mediated and globally interlinked' posthuman subjects residing within 'our enfleshed selves' are constituted by relationalities with other humans; non-human zoe-logical beings (animals, insects, bacteria, parasites, plants); geology *and* technology in a given 'zoe/geo/techno system' or ecology. Braidotti calls this the 'posthuman condition',³⁰ and the posthuman subject (Lupton's digital cyborg assemblage) is always in a process of 'becoming'.³¹ Digital technologies and technical developments³²; older schemes such as Western liberal humanism and the logics of neoliberal capitalism, as well as indigenous schemes influence how posthuman subjects respond to organic and digital affordances and constraints encountered within a given zoe/geo/techno ecology.

Militaries have long used technology to augment biologically-determined human capabilities. Feminists and gender theorists express scepticism towards the transformative potential of military technology, contending that cyborg figurations transfer masculine subjectivity and power from military men onto technology, rendering the male foot-soldier partially obsolete and strengthening the wider integrated warfighting system.³³ However, the suggestion that military technologies are always coded masculine belies the fact that in everyday practice, all military personnel regardless of their sex, gender, sexuality, religion, class, caste and race, work with and embody technology.

Digital peacekeeping and posthuman mission ecologies

Like modern war zones, peace operations are networked and digitalised spaces as well as geographical, material spaces, and constitute posthuman zoe/geo/techno systems or ecologies, within which peacekeepers and other actors navigate and work. The mission area and peacekeepers interconnect with the UN's global systems and programmable networks, as well as the global neoliberal capitalist system's cognisphere in which contemporary defence and security forces are deeply invested. As posthuman subjects, peacekeepers are already connected to the global cognisphere to varying degrees and with varying levels of information literacy prior to deployment. National defence and security institutions also have a virtual presence and an institutional structure constituted by and through new and old technologies. These dynamics shape peacekeeping practices, some

²⁷N. Katherine Hayles, 'Unfinished Work: From Cyborg to Cognisphere', *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 8–9: 159–66, 161.

²⁸Hayles, 'Unfinished work', 161.

²⁹Lupton, 'The Digital Cyborg Assemblage', 6.

³⁰Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 52.

³¹*Ibid.*, 48.

³²Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik, and Christopher A. Hafner, *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age* (London/New York: Routledge), 3.

³³Cristina Masters, 'Bodies of technology', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7, no. 1 (2008): 112–32; and Marysia Zalewski, 'What's the problem with the concept of military masculinities?', *Critical Military Studies* 3, no. 2 (2017): 200–05.

of which are imported into the UN peace operation by troop/police contributing countries and other interveners.

Strategic and tactical-level military peacekeepers embody and interact with technologies throughout their working day. Dorn shows how in addition to conventional military hardware (vehicles, weapons and armour), digital technologies enhance human and existing technological capabilities, performance and bureaucratic efficiencies. Satellites, smart phones and Cloud Computing enhance communications; video recordings and photographs provide evidence for UN investigations; unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) (drones) and radars improve monitoring, surveillance and reconnaissance. Infra-red cameras and night vision equipment allow missions to operate 24/7, enhance base-camp security, and long- and short-range patrols. Data obtained from this equipment is transmitted to UN databases via the UN's Global Service Centre which monitors dataflows. Peacekeepers also depend on Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and Geographic Information Systems (GIS), such as the UN's Unite Aware Signal, providing real-time maps and locations for disparate teams. Systems are supported by the UN's Broadband Global Area Network (BGAN) and wi-fi (via optic cables).³⁴ Digital technologies medically monitor peacekeepers in field hospitals, while biotechnologies including DNA technology used to identify perpetrators of sexual exploitation and abuse or fathers of peacekeeper babies³⁵ increasingly govern and discipline peacekeepers. During periods of rest, peacekeepers use smart phones, computers, and social media platforms to connect with often globally dissipated colleagues or friends and family back home. By importing technology, bringing in commercial partners, constructing the digital dimensions of mission areas and connecting them to the global cognisphere, the UN engages in processes of 'neo-liberal reorganisation'³⁶ to transform urban and rural spaces of post-conflict states into western-controlled militarised, multi-dimensional zoe/geo/techno ecologies. As Agathangelou and Ling observe, peacekeeping ecologies are constituted by neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy and older traditions of colonialism.³⁷ In this sense, peace operations generate entangled organic and digital affordances and constraints to which peacekeepers adapt and respond.

The notion that human-tech relationalities are profoundly altering peace operations, peacekeeping practices and peacekeepers' cognisance and consciousness impacts on how we make sense of the field(s) under study, and how we conduct ethnographic research. Digital technologies influence how researchers and research participants take up multiple positionalities in physical and virtual spaces. Directing the intellectual gaze towards observing the posthuman condition in peacekeeping requires moving beyond humanist epistemological approaches. It is therefore proposed that combining a postcolonial humanist approach with a posthumanist epistemological approach, and being attentive to the productive tensions that arise when adopting the two facilitates more comprehensive interrogations into how gender and race power dynamics within peacekeeping manifest.

³⁴A. Walter Dorn, *Keeping Watch: Monitoring, technology and innovation in UN peace operations* (New York: United Nations University Press, 2011).

³⁵Kristin Bergtora Sandvik and Jasmine-Kim Westendorf, 'Safeguarding Sex: The Technopolitics of Humanitarian Genomic Accountability', *Global Studies Quarterly* 3 (2023): 1–13.

³⁶Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 25

³⁷Agathangelou and Ling, 'Desire Industry', 133.

Humanist/posthumanist ethnographic praxis

The research approach developed is informed by posthumanist theories that account for racialised global power relations and feminist Bourdieusian practice theory, which concerns the study of gendered logics of embodied practices.³⁸ Haraway's 'cyberfeminism' offered an alternative consciousness and postpositivist praxis to interrogate the robotic, cyborg and digital conditions under which human agency is exercised and controlled, while providing a methodology for the oppressed.³⁹ However, Haraway and several posthumanist scholars caution that Euro-American liberal feminists have co-opted cyborg feminist methodological approaches to produce research perpetuating 'master narratives deeply indebted to racism and colonialism',⁴⁰ invisibilising the most marginalised group: black women.⁴¹ Scholars adopting posthumanist approaches do not lose sight of the fleshy, sentient body and acknowledge the tensions that exist when humans interact with technology. Freund contends there are 'seams' in the digital cyborg assemblage and instances when 'human flesh and technology rub up against one another', resulting in discomfort, stress and disempowerment for the corporeal human.⁴² For queer cyborg ethnographers Jokinen and Nordstrom, the 'troubling moments' when the two epistemologies and ontologies jar create 'processes of friction', which reorient the research process in productive ways, resulting in 'ruptures, uncomfortable confusion, and queering of binaries'.⁴³ Instances of friction and discomfort call for the continued use of a postcolonial humanist ontological approach to challenge the western liberal humanist centring of the white male master subject and to critically examine biopolitics, while recognising all people as humans in their own right.⁴⁴ This requires observing how research participants use humanist syntax, schemes and frames to explain experiences, including interactions with other humans in the peacekeeping ecology. The researcher investigates how digital practices are layered onto pre-existing institutional practices and how digital and organic affordances inform military personnel's experiences, perceptions and gender identity constructions. This multi-epistemological approach provides, as Lourde suggests, an alternative kind of 'deep seeing', and is particularly useful when conducting research investigating gender and race power relations in institutions publicly supporting gender and race equality. Indeed, soldiers often speak to an 'institutional script' on women's inclusion during the research encounter,⁴⁵ which serves to conceal what they really think. As the case study demonstrates, the multi-epistemological approach helps to overcome this access challenge by enabling the researcher to observe when and how research participants vacillate between parroting institutional epistemologies and articulating their own opinions, resulting in frictions and contradictions.

³⁸Holmes, 'Situating agency', 5.

³⁹Chela Sandoval, 'New sciences: cyborg feminism and the methodology of the oppressed', in *Cybersexualities: A Reader on Feminist Theory, Cyborgs and Cyberspace*, ed. Jenny Wolmark (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 248.

⁴⁰Sandoval, 'New sciences: cyborg feminism', 251.

⁴¹Henry, 'Problematizing militarised masculinity', 182.

⁴²Lupton, *Digital Sociology*, 183.

⁴³Päivi Jokinen and Susan Nordstrom, 'A queer ethnographer in the performative friction of dissenting ontologies', *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, no. 6 (2020): 639–49, 643.

⁴⁴Malreddy Pavan Kumar, '(An)other Way of Being Human: "indigenous" alternative(s) to postcolonial humanism', *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 9 (2011): 1557–72.

⁴⁵For discussion on related access challenges, see in this Special Issue Asmawati et al., 'Locating Masculinities in Conflict: Researching Conflict-Related Masculinities beyond the Colonial Gaze', *Peacebuilding* 12 (2024).

Haraway's original cyborg figuration has conceptual value if we understand the cyborg as constituting, in Bourdeusian practice theory terms, a part-mechanised subject position that humans, as employees, embody and perform through their routinised workplace practices within a given institution, field or ecology. Cyborg theorists have long recognised the neoliberal capitalist system's requirement for humans to perform as cyborgs to enhance productivity.⁴⁶ Distinguishing between humans as digital cyborg assemblages (the unknown, mercurial posthuman subject, dually existing in the material world and the cognisphere) and institutional cyborgs (the embodied subject position, part organism, part machine, co-constructed by employer and employee and embodied in accordance with institutional workplace rules, norms and practices to deliver specific components of work) yields two levels of analysis for this research project. The first level concerns identifying how military personnel (posthuman subjects existing as digital cyborg assemblages) construct their militarised gendered identities. This includes identifying how the infantrymen's varied lived experiences of being digital cyborg assemblages informs their sense-making and how they discursively construct their militarised masculinity prior to and after their deployment. This requires being attentive to how research participants draw on popular culture, virtual worlds, computer gaming, as well as technology they use in their everyday labouring practices as soldiers/peacekeepers; and how they interpret and respond to organic and digital affordances when deployed to peace operations. The second level of analysis examines how cyborgs soldier/peacekeeper subject positions are discursively constructed in the institutional epistemologies of the military under study, and how these may become embodied, performed, resisted or adapted by soldiers when they deploy.

Being a digital cyborg assemblage researcher

The analytic value of incorporating posthumanist approaches emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic when I conducted my remaining qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews with British Army Infantry personnel online over Zoom. The 16 infantry soldiers were quarantining in the UK for two weeks prior to Operation Newcombe in early December 2020. Suddenly, the research field was on a computer screen rather than comprising the physical spaces of military barracks and training grounds. I was human (cognisant of my white-skinned fleshy body and my reliance on technology) *and* a disembodied virtual avatar on my research participant's screen. This new researcher positionality compelled me to rethink how I could build rapport with research participants. Twelve of the soldiers were white men; two participants were mixed heritage men and two were white women, all between the ages of 18 and 30. Most interviews took place in the privacy of their barrack bedrooms. The seven online interviews conducted between November 2020 and January 2021 with six white male and one white female soldiers who had returned from MINUSMA took place in regiment barracks and civilian homes. By late 2020, most research participants were used to interacting with people virtually.

Feeling more disembodied and displaced during digital interactions made me reflect on how digital and organic affordances took effect and entangled with one another in the

⁴⁶Chela Sandoval, 'New sciences: cyborg feminism'.

peacekeeping mission and on how being a digital cyborg assemblage (or posthuman subject), might influence the research participant's ways of packaging and sequencing their deployment experiences.⁴⁷ Adopting the multi-epistemological approach identified above and using discourse analysis, I re-read and manually coded interview transcripts and British Army policy documents to identify new themes and issues emerging from British infantry soldiers' experiences and perceptions. I wondered how technology was influencing the co-production of knowledge during the research encounter. Did research participants use digital and tech syntax, schemes and metaphors to express their emotions and fleshy experiences because we were interacting on a screen, or was I more attuned to how the soldiers' consciousness and sense of self were informed by the posthuman condition? Vacillating between existing, interacting and observing in multiple physical and digital research fields, and between feeling more organism or more machine enabled me to identify 'different knowledge and produce knowledge differently'⁴⁸ about how the British soldiers performed as peacekeepers, leading to a thicker analysis of the qualitative data.

Case study: the British Army, the cyborg soldier and digital peacekeeping

Since 2018 when all combat roles were opened to women, the British Armed Forces has moved towards instituting gender equality and social diversity in its workforce. However, recent reports on institutional racism and sexual violence evidence that cultural change is slow.⁴⁹ Technology has long been central to British constructions of hegemonic militarised masculinity. Yet, in a shift away from racist and gendered institutionalist epistemologies that conceive the white male body as institutional norm, and women, especially black and brown women, and men of colour as disruptive, the British Army have constructed an androgynous cyborg soldier subject position. Jester shows how in post-2018 recruitment adverts, previously coded British/white hegemonic militarised masculine traits are discursively constructed as gender neutral, while all British soldiers are depicted as emotionally and physically strong team-players and protectors of vulnerable people.⁵⁰ From 2021 onwards, a posthuman epistemology is introduced into British Army policy discourse and recruitment films. Akin to the UN's vision for digital peacekeeping, *Future Soldier* (2021) envisions an ambitious plan to modernise the British Army, alongside the 10-year 'digital capability transformation' strategy, Programme THEIA, which aims to 'accelerate change in digital culture and behaviours'.⁵¹ *Future Soldier* foregrounds bio- and digital technologies as enablers of diversity and inclusion: people are the British Army's 'most adaptive, resilient, and inherently competitive capability', 'prepared to win in the digital age'.⁵²

⁴⁷James Paul Gee, 'Discourse analysis of games' in *Discourse and Digital Practices*, ed. Jones et al., 20.

⁴⁸Jokinen and Nordstrom, 'A queer ethnographer', 643.

⁴⁹Anthony King, 'Decolonizing the British Army: a preliminary response UK Parliament', *International Affairs* 97, no. 2 (March 2021): 443–61; 'Report: Protecting Those Who Protect Us: Women in the Armed Forces from Recruitment to Civilian Life – Committees – UK Parliament', (accessed August 1, 2021).

⁵⁰Natalie Jester, 'Army recruitment video advertisements in the US and the UK since 2002: Challenging ideals of hegemonic masculinity', *Media, War & Conflict* 14, no. 1 (2021): 57–74, 63.

⁵¹British Army, 2021, 'Future Soldier', https://www.army.mod.uk/media/15057/adr010310-futuresoldierguide_30nov.pdf, (accessed June 1, 2022).

⁵²British Army, 'Future Soldier', 7.

The British Army's androgenous 'posthuman' cyborg soldier subject position

In the opening scene of an Autumn 2022 recruitment campaign film, an androgynous humanoid robot is seen running through a baron rural landscape and a derelict stone building, before scanning the horizon using green lasers projecting from its mechanical eyes. While the audience's gaze is on the humanoid robot, a coded-female voiceover calmly says 'What does the army of the future look like? It looks . . . like you'. The camera zooms in on the humanoid's mechanical eye and zooms back out to reveal the eye of a woman of colour in British military uniform. Her heartbeat and heavy breathing can be heard. She holds out her hand and releases a micro-drone. The voiceover continues: 'Technology will help us do incredible things, but nothing can do what a soldier can do'. The camera pans out to reveal a mountainous landscape with other British soldiers moving around her. The cyborg soldier subject position is an adaptable, professional team-player operating in the material world, though deeply embedded in the digital dimensions of the military. The film's fusing together of digital and organic dimensions of contemporary warsapes – seen by the subtle transition from what first appears to be a computer game into a real-life military operation targets a young generation of British citizens, who as posthuman subjects and digital cyborg assemblages, already co-exist in material and digital worlds.

In the advert, the conventionally coded white, masculine humanoid-fighting machine of Euro-American popular culture is replaced with a genderless, sexless, a-racial cyborg soldier. This androgynous cyborg soldier subject position reflects Haraway's emancipatory cyborg figuration and Braidotti's vision of the posthuman subject – affirmative, transformative,⁵³ transcending society-imposed limits on human bodies. The British Army's decision to depict the human soldier as a brown woman infers a rejection of the colonial race hierarchy which historically placed black women furthest away from techno-culture and closest to existing as beasts in the natural world, an object to be scientifically (and violently) probed and studied.⁵⁴ Seemingly queering Western liberal humanist binaries, the advert suggests women and people of colour are welcomed into the Army because, like men, they are also human-machine hybrids – trained, coded and hardwired (militarised) to perform combat and reconnaissance tasks. Yet closer analysis reveals that the androgynous cyborg soldier subject position is an imaginary of whiteness, born out of a western liberal humanist 'hegemonic mode of being human'⁵⁵ – an autonomous, biologically closed system, distinct from the nonhuman 'natural' world but part-comprised from their intimate relationalities with digital technologies. In this institutional epistemology, the humanity of black and brown people is recognised without disrupting the modern Enlightenment narrative: Since human capabilities are augmented by technology, any human can be evolved (transformed) into a competent British soldier.

The British Army's androgenous cyborg soldier subject position provides white infantrymen with a language and syntax to articulate institutional acceptance of white women and people of colour without risking disrupting their own sense of self and

⁵³Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*.

⁵⁴Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Colonial Lexicon of Birth Ritual, Medicalization, and Mobility in the Congo* (London: Duke University Press, 1999).

⁵⁵Jackson, *Becoming human*, 2.

militarised masculinity. Prior to deployment to MINUSMA, the infantrymen discursively construct their militarised masculinity and peacekeeper subject positions they perform as being constituted through technology and digitality. One white soldier describes himself as a ‘mechanised’ foot soldier: ‘We’re still an infantry unit, we’ve just been given this vehicle platform’.⁵⁶ Another describes himself as a machine on a reconnaissance mission: ‘We’ll be expected to push for hundreds of miles over a space of two to three weeks and basically start reporting on situations . . . I’m a gunner’.⁵⁷ A black male soldier who when interviewed felt accepted by his white team mates, spoke of bonding with them through the computer game ‘The Call of Duty’.⁵⁸ Male infantry also believed that women in military equipment and armour seemed androgynous. One soldier shared that he did not ‘necessarily immediately see them as a woman’ ‘with all the helmet and stuff on’.⁵⁹ Operational and technological sameness replaces biological difference. Parroting official discourse, one white male observed:

Anyone who joins the army as a soldier . . . It doesn’t matter what sort of background you come from, what colour you are, what race you are, what gender you are, as long as you meet the standards, that’s fine.⁶⁰

White infantrymen demonstrated high levels of trust in their female leaders and peers and in the British Army’s decision to recruit the women. A white male infantry soldier commented on his female troop commander: ‘In her role, she had a whole troop of lads that would 100 percent do anything for her if she asked . . . She was doing the same thing as [the male officers] . . . I don’t think there was any question that she didn’t feel supported.’⁶¹ Another white male soldier did not feel women’s integration threatened his sense of militarised masculinity nor the military’s institutional male-dominated hierarchies, reflecting:

My troop leader, she’s actually the first ever woman to join [our regiment] which pre-2018 was a regiment that was all male-only. Yes, I definitely feel comfortable. It was a bit of a change because we were used to . . . I mean, for two years, I had been in the regiment and it was like I said, all men.⁶²

However, the men’s perceptions shift when deployed to MINUSMA – a physically demanding and psychologically challenging mission which threatens their sense of self and destabilises their militarised masculinities.

Deployment to MINUSMA

British infantry soldiers deployed to MINUSMA in December 2020 were members of a 100-strong UK Task Group. Their base camp in Gao, the peacekeepers undertook several long-range reconnaissance missions over six months, with the longest lasting 28 days. The soldiers believed their stamina and determination evidenced British

⁵⁶Newcombe 1 peacekeeper, 13.

⁵⁷Newcombe 1 returned peacekeeper, 4.

⁵⁸Newcombe 1, peacekeeper 12, interview with the author, 2 December 2020.

⁵⁹Newcombe 1 peacekeeper 11, interview with the author, 2 December 2020.

⁶⁰Newcombe 1, peacekeeper 13, interviewed by the author, 1 December 2020.

⁶¹See note 58 above.

⁶²Newcombe 1 returned peacekeeper 5, interview with the author, 10 December 2021.

exceptionalism since other nations had told them that the unprecedented 28-day patrol was ‘unachievable’.⁶³ Paradoxically, British efforts to extend the UN’s surveillance system into previously unchartered rural locations mirrored settler-coloniser martial practices. As one explained: ‘we were patrolling for longer, we were going further, we were going deeper than other UN nations’.⁶⁴ The task group wore British Army uniform and helmets and deployed with their own reconnaissance vehicles and equipment. The peacekeepers’ main objectives were to closely interact with Malians; gather intelligence on jihadists in the region; enhance UN situational awareness; ascertain the needs of rural communities and deter attacks on civilians.

Several soldiers draw on their experiences of online gaming when framing and sequencing their deployment experiences and constructing their militarised masculinity. These discursive practices are also boundary management techniques that distinguish the white military men from local people, including their translators who they rely on to access and understand indigenous schemas. Within virtual worlds, gamers act through an avatar or ‘second self’, whose identity is co-constructed from available ‘semiotic resources’ (including skin colour and hair, clothing, equipment) and conversations with other characters.⁶⁵ Gamers are goal-oriented: their avatars engage in ‘probe-response-reflect-probe’ cycles, responding to pre-determined affordances within the game world and developing wayfinding strategies and behaviours.⁶⁶ Characters they encounter in the game world are virtual-semiotic entities from which gamers extract information during interactive, turn-based conversations as they probe and explore. Soldiers describe their engagements with Malian people in similar terms, exploring and probing the *zoe/geo/tech* ecology of the peacekeeping mission and interacting with local people to extract raw data. The peacekeepers then digitise information, inputting it into UN databases, to be processed by intelligence teams located in mission headquarters and disseminated across MINUSMA decision-making networks.

White male soldiers describe themselves as smaller cogs in the UN’s centralised peacekeeping system that was invisible and inaccessible to them, and their tactical-level reconnaissance and surveillance practices as increasingly automated. Tasks ranged from ‘patrolling local villages, conducting local leader engagements, talking to village elders’ to ‘sitting a bit further back and just watching and digesting what was going on in local patterns of life’.⁶⁷ Noting their lack of civilian protection work, an officer observed: ‘We were asking the questions and recording the answers, but in terms of actionable effects for civilians, it was pretty limited. It was mostly just conversation and recording’.⁶⁸ The process is tedious and a ‘lot of the settlements weren’t marked on the map, so we came across a lot more than we anticipated’.⁶⁹ For another soldier, the repetitiveness experienced travelling between settlements everyday was ‘like being in a computer game’. He reflected, ‘you’d turn up at a village, and the village would be laid out in the same way,

⁶³Newcombe 1 peacekeeper 7, interview with the author, 20 November 2020.

⁶⁴Newcombe 1 peacekeeper 2, interview with the author, 19 November 2020.

⁶⁵Christopher A. Hafner, ‘Co-constructing identity in virtual worlds for children’, in *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age*, ed. Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik, and Christopher A. Hafner (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 97–111.

⁶⁶Rodney Jones, ‘The entextualisation of the self’, in *Discourse and Digital Practices: Doing Discourse Analysis in the Digital Age*, ed. Rodney H. Jones, Alice Chik, and Christopher A. Hafner (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 33.

⁶⁷Newcombe 1 returned peacekeeper 5.

⁶⁸Newcombe 1 returned peacekeeper 2, interview with the author, 4 December 2020.

⁶⁹Returned peacekeeper 2.

and all the characters you spoke to would be the same'.⁷⁰ When asked whether reconnaissance felt like a computer game, another stated:

Yes. There were obvious differences between some villages, but yes, pretty similar. Everything was kind of set up similar apart from one village which was the weird village. It was the one village where . . . we all thought, 'Something's not quite right here'.⁷¹

In this village, the peacekeepers encountered a naked older woman with mental health issues crawling slowly on the ground and eating goat faeces. They are disturbed by her behaviour and shocked at how inhuman the woman seemed, but equally how inhumanely she was treated, perceiving such neglect would not occur in the UK. It was in this village that the British discovered jihadist activity and an arms cache. The soldiers' suspicions had been partly raised because Malian communities normally looked after their elders. Using gaming syntax and framings, one outlined further clues: There was

more food there [in the village] than they should have had, there were motorbike parts . . . and lots of locked doors – which we were very keen to go in and see what was inside . . . All the indicators and warnings [were there].

More experienced soldiers in the squadron felt these signs were 'a major red flag' and had they been deployed under British orders, as in Afghanistan, the men would have followed their instincts and 'they'd be straight in' to investigate. Yet UN 'bureaucracy and red tape', and 'the UK government's appetite for risk' meant the squadron had to seek permission from UN mission leaders to investigate. Unable to follow instincts, they had to 'make a case based on facts' – a challenging endeavour because 'there was very little . . . cold, hard evidence'.⁷² Performing cyborg soldier/peacekeeper subject positions, reduced to functioning as 'information processing devices' and 'reading machines',⁷³ the male infantry felt frustrated and disempowered. The inability to operate autonomously threatened the white men's militarised masculinity more so than their inability to engage in hot conflict. A soldier explained:

In a conventional role, if we gathered information on, for example, an enemy cell or an enemy location, we would normally pass that further up to potentially brigade-level division level and then something would be done about that from our own assets. We could launch a raid, or the infantry could launch an assault . . . take detainees, take prisoners or anything like that or further. Because we were peacekeepers, that was never the case. We never then did something about it afterward. That was a huge barrier. Essentially, the information went higher.⁷⁴

Feeling disempowered and emasculated, white male soldiers draw attention to their agency in interviews by describing how they devised tactics to increase relational proximity to better extract raw data from Malians. They do so by adapting the British Army's cyborg-soldier subject position, configuring it as existing on an organism-machine spectrum. Though foregrounding human-tech relations and perceiving themselves as more machine, the infantrymen adapt their behaviour to perform more organism when building connections with local people, who are regarded as embedded within

⁷⁰Newcombe 1 returned peacekeeper 9, interview with the author, 7 February 2022.

⁷¹Newcombe 1 returned peacekeeper 3.

⁷²Newcombe 1 returned peacekeeper 2.

⁷³Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf*, 137.

⁷⁴See note 58 above.

the peace missions' zoe/geo dimensions than its tech-dimensions. Conscious their military equipment made them seem robotic and inhuman, the men leave their waggons, remove face masks (mandatory during the pandemic) and approach on foot, emphasising their fleshy bodies. One soldier observed that for Malian people living in isolated villages 'about 50 miles away from the nearest main road . . . It [was] probably a bit of a shock' to see white military peacekeepers in all their equipment.⁷⁵ Asked whether they looked strange with all their technology, another replied:

Yes. Especially with vehicles because they're big and noisy. With our headphones and stuff that we had on. Yes. But we tried to keep it to a minimum as well. We'd probably go, take the headphones off . . . Probably it looks more engaging when you can see someone's ears when you talk to them.⁷⁶

The white female officer also observed:

You can't engage with a local with a facemask on and try and develop a rapport because if you can't speak their language, the best way you can engage is through facial expressions and if they can only see your eyes it defeats the point.⁷⁷

Paradoxically, to overcome cultural and language constraints and strengthen human connections, soldiers made use of available digital affordances. A white male soldier spoke of how on 'one of the fun patrols, we took my Bluetooth speaker with us'.

We ended up doing the Congo line and Macarena [dance] . . . with about 500 kids. Just thinking out [of] the box on how to entertain people [so] the boss could go have a conversation with people instead of having 100 eyes watching. [them]

He continued:

One thing they used to love was we had a drone, an ANAFI Parrot, just a small off-the-shelf drone you could get. Some of them were really fascinated by that. It built up quite a good rapport, I think.⁷⁸

Through these strategies, the infantrymen achieved their reconnaissance and surveillance goals, while boundary-setting by subtly othering Malian people. Following a colonial/imperialist logic strengthening global racial hierarchies and the colour line in peacekeeping, white British infantrymen replace liberal humanist colonial, racist, and sexualising tropes⁷⁹ with sanitised narratives about 'less technologically advanced' African people. Malian people located in villages are perceived as being governed by organic affordances within the zoe/geo/tech peacekeeping ecology. This can be seen in the perception that urban residents of Gao are more digitally connected than villagers because 'they all had phones so they're still in touch with a bit of technology', and that Malians disrupt the UN's imported digital infrastructure when digging up cables 'thinking it was copper wire but it turn[ed] out it was fibre optics so they couldn't sell it'.⁸⁰

⁷⁵Newcome 1 returned peacekeeper 1, interview with the author, 25 January 2022.

⁷⁶See note 58 above.

⁷⁷Newcombe 1 returned peacekeeper 7.

⁷⁸See note 72 above.

⁷⁹Georgina Holmes, *Women and War in Rwanda: Gender, Media and the Representation of Genocide* (I.B. Tauris, 2013).

⁸⁰See note 72 above.

Yet, the white soldiers' discursive practices also expose how tactical-level military peacekeeping constitutes 'the violent regulation of blackness by way of surveillance'.⁸¹ While conducting reconnaissance and surveillance tasks the soldiers use a 'racially saturated field of vision' – or racial gaze – which 'fixes and frames the black subject' within a limited and rigid grid of possibilities.⁸² This is demonstrated in the story of the old Malian woman, the only black woman discussed at length by the men. Under surveillance, she is objectified and depicted as a bio-centric, zoe-logical, non-human being – the product of her community's inhuman(e) behaviour – and a one-dimensional character from a virtual game world. Thus framed, local people's zoe/geo-human inter-relationalities contrast with the British infantrymen's own human-tech relationalities in the peace mission. Consequently, constructions of militarised masculinity are drawn from white, western liberal humanist hegemonic modes of being human and reinforced through their racialised surveillance practices within the UN's neoliberal systems of control.

Concurrently, white infantrymen discursively position women infantry soldiers on the cyborg-soldier spectrum as more 'organism' than 'machine' and therefore better able at building a rapport with Malian people. For one white male soldier, women infantry soldiers were not disadvantaged in the mission initially because 'physically, from a mounted perspective . . . we were on vehicles. There wasn't a huge amount of physically challenging moments, so I don't think there was a huge amount of difference'.⁸³ Yet, as another male soldier explained, 'there were times where [the mission] needed a woman's touch':

I personally think they come across as a friendlier face . . . [People will] open up to them more, they can give that sort of female intuition side of it. The use of female soldiers is a really big asset . . . There's always room for women.⁸⁴

That said, the infantrymen were surprised rural Malian women were nothing like the helpless, victimised African women stereotype. Some felt female colleagues were not needed since Malian women were:

As blasé and relaxed as the men and wanted to chat to you if you said 'hello' and told them that you were there to help . . . I think there are definitely places in the world where that's not the case and women are very important in those environments.⁸⁵

High-risk peacekeeping and militarised masculinities

At times during the MINUSMA deployment, the mission became physically and psychologically challenging. Technology and the human body rub up against one another, causing discomfort and stress for the men. Towards the end of the six-month deployment, the infantry soldiers were operating in temperatures of around 50 degrees Celsius, weighed down by their equipment and unable to escape the heat produced by their vehicles. One white male soldier explained:

⁸¹ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On Surveillance of Blackness* (London: Duke University Press, 2015), 21.

⁸² Simone Browne, *Dark Matters*, 21.

⁸³ See note 73 above.

⁸⁴ Newcombe 1 peacekeeper 5, interview with the author, 20 November 2020.

⁸⁵ See note 72 above.

It was a constant fight to try and get into the shade because you're wearing 25 kilograms of body armour and you're moving around and consuming, I think, 10 to 12 litres of water a day to combat that.⁸⁶

As technological affordances become constraints, the soldiers' intimate relationalities with *zoe*, notably bacteria and viruses, grow prominent – challenging the western liberal humanist conception of the self as an autonomous, biologically closed system. The men are susceptible to bacterial genital infections ('crotch rot'), but hygiene practices are restricted to using wet wipes.⁸⁷ They become increasingly aware of their fragile, fleshy bodies and spend significant energy and time combatting dehydration, exhaustion, sleep deprivation and disease. A white male officer ruminated: 'You do come back a lot weaker. I think we all did'. He continued: 'Mental stresses were exaggerated by the physical stress, by the heat . . . Vehicles were breaking down quite a lot, we were getting bogged in the sand.'⁸⁸ Another white male soldier was horrified at how emaciated his teammates had become during the 28-day patrol:

You looked at some of the lads and . . . one lad looked like he's from the film *Machinist*, with Christian Bale. He was happy. He was like, 'Well, this is hard, this is rubbish', like everyone else did. But you just looked at him. 'You look like Christian Bale'. When he goes and puts his hands like that. [*he reaches out his hand while talking online*] That's just like . . . jeeze . . . it's like dead skinny . . . No matter how much you ate and drank . . . your body couldn't keep the water because you were sweating that much. Not enough calories to burn to keep yourself cool.⁸⁹

The reference to the American psychological thriller film *The Machinist* (2004) is significant. In the film, a working-class machinist cannot cope with the reality that he had run over and killed a small child. Consumed with guilt, paranoia and suffering insomnia, he begins to hallucinate. The lead actor Christian Bale lost around 28 kg of weight for the role. For the white, working-class infantryman, the *machinist* – a mentally ill, anorexic civilian killer speaks of a fear of transgressing, of becoming physically and mentally unstable and ultimately losing his militarised masculinity, which he conceptualises as constituting peak physical and mental health.

While in an isolated location, the Brits hear 'on various radio chatters [they] were being observed by Islamic State fighters',⁹⁰ unnerving some of them. One white male soldier frames this experience as if he were playing a virtual game world: Peacekeeping becomes 'surreal', everything 'slows down' and 'feels more sinister', and their surveillance technology – the infrared cameras and night vision equipment – seemingly had let them down:

When people think of computer games, [they] think of *The Call of Duty*, a bit fast-paced and all that. [The peacekeeping mission is] not that kind of computer game . . . Not kicking doors through and all that stuff. Not that kind of computer game . . . It's kind of chasing someone and you're like . . . almost part of a horror game in a way. Like someone's watching you, but you don't know where they are, but you know they're watching . . . Over the radio, the team would [hear them say], 'Oh, yeah, we've got eyes on them, we'll wait till it gets dark' and

⁸⁶See note 78 above.

⁸⁷Trainer 1, informal discussion with the author, 20 October 2020.

⁸⁸See note 73 above.

⁸⁹See note 72 above.

⁹⁰See note 73 above.

you'd be like 'Someone's watching us and they know where we are and they're going to wait until it gets dark' . . . and you're looking out there and can't see anything.⁹¹

In this moment of countersurveillance, the watchers become the watched, leaving some infantryman feeling vulnerable. The soldiers were already on alert prior to the mission because a French camp had been hit by indirect fire days before they left the UK. Referring to the chatter on the radio he said, 'You get a bit paranoid sometimes. I think everyone did'. The soldier's framing of the story using gaming terminology is an attempt to stabilise his military masculinity by positioning himself as emotionally and physically detached from his embodied deployment experiences. Yet the soldier reveals deeper fears – the fear of no longer owning the dominant gaze, the fear of being under scrutiny in another actor's system of surveillance and, perhaps most frightening for a soldier, the fear of failing to control his fear.

The white female officer observed that a peace operation could be considered a 'masculine environment' depending on individual soldiers' perceptions. Some men who wanted 'to hunt down terrorists and kill them' had a 'more of a masculine outlook', while her 'primary focus [was] protection of people', which other men shared.⁹² Under challenging deployment conditions, some of the men's perceptions change in response to threats to their militarised masculinity, and they imagine the mission ecology as a 'masculine environment',⁹³ unsuitable for women, positioning them as inferior, displaced and unable to cope. Discussing mission stresses, one white male stated that when a female colleague had cried (which he acknowledged was a form of stress release), he had told her 'to get over [herself]', inferring a lack of manly control. Finding comfort in the older, liberal humanist logics of the British Army foregrounding anatomical and biological differences, the infantryman recentres the white male body as institutional norm.

Post-deployment, framing and sequencing their experiences during the virtual research encounter, as well as the act of digitally sharing memories, videos and photos with teammates via social media⁹⁴ constitute important acts for re-stabilising the white male soldiers' sense of self and militarised masculinity. The men attempt to compensate for exposing their fears and vulnerabilities in the research encounter by claiming they have overcome difficulties, returned to their previous physical fitness, and are now mentally stronger, more experienced cyborg soldiers.

Conclusion

This article advances understandings of how technology and digitality inform gender and race power relations in peacekeeping. The article contends that human-tech relationalities are profoundly altering the composition of peace operations and peacekeeping practices – as well as the cultures, cognisance and consciousness of the people that work within them. The article therefore demonstrates how combining postcolonial humanist and posthuman ontological perspectives when conducting ethnographic research, and being attentive to the

⁹¹See note 72 above.

⁹²See note 78 above.

⁹³Returned peacekeeper 5.

⁹⁴Returned peacekeeper 9.

productive tensions that arise when adopting two divergent ontologies, facilitates more comprehensive interrogations into how (global) gender and race power hierarchies are reproduced, challenged, transmitted and emplaced by interveners in peace operations. The article also provides a thicker analysis of the discursive techniques military men use to construct and transition their militarised masculinities. The impact that British infantry soldiers' relationalities with technology and digitality have on their sense-making within the mission can be seen in the ways in which they draw on the syntax and discursive framing devices used in online virtual game worlds to create relational distance between themselves and the one-dimensional 'peacekept', and to stabilise their militarised masculinities when organic and digital affordances in the zoe/geo/tech ecology challenge western liberal humanist perceptions of the self. While this research focuses on militarised masculinities and peacekeeper perceptions of their reconnaissance and civilian engagement experiences, scholars should continue to investigate the posthuman condition in peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention spaces to study how human-tech-zoe relationalities influence intervention practices, while being mindful that researcher and research participant relationalities with digital technologies also influence the ways in which they investigate and interpret their chosen field(s) of study.

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