"To those who choose to follow in our footsteps": making women/LGBT+ soldiers (in)visible through feminist, 'her-story' theatre

Building on Butler's (2015) understanding of visibility "as the object of continuous regulation and contestation", art/aesthetics studies in International Relations and feminist theatre studies, we identify feminist, "her-story" theatre as a unique site at which Western gender/sexually-inclusive soldiering is visibilised, contested, and subverted. Drawing on ethnographic observations of two award-winning dramas, interviews with artists and military hosts as well as findings from a wider research project on contemporary British military culture, we reveal the key role of heteronormative and patriarchal cultural discourses in reproducing the ambivalent positionalities for women/LGBT+ soldiers. We argue that the very visibility of women/LGBT+ soldiers on the stage paradoxically operates to make the complexities of - and struggles against - masculinised heteronormative military cultures *invisible*. Further, despite artists' attempts to dissociate empowerment through soldiering from the problematic context of modern conflicts, 'her-story' theatre ultimately entrenches gendered/racialised hierarchies which normalise Western military interventions. We conclude that only through sustained feminist reflection on the contours of "imagined" futures of female/LGBT+ soldiering can this persistently problematic (in)visibility be productively disrupted.

Keywords: Gender, feminism, LGBT+, military, theatre

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

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

This paper expands upon Butler's (2015) argument that visibility is continually regulated and contested (see also Ahall 2018; Sjoberg 2012), Bleiker's point that through visibilities and invisibilities, art exposes the "brokenness of political reality" (Bleiker 2018, 23; see also Moller 2018; Silvester 2012), and claims that feminist theatre, "as a form of cultural representation made by women, which is informed by the situated perspectives of its makers, its performers, its spectators and its critics" (Goodman 1998, 198), creates "moments of utopian possibility" to imagine "feminist futures" (French, 2017, 2; see also Rosenberg,

2016; Aston and Harris 2006, 3-4). Whilst military inclusion has been approached extensively through analyses of soldiers' own experiences and institutional policies focused on diversity (Basham 2009; 2013; Chapman and Eichler 2013; King 2016, 2017; Brownson 2014; MacKenzie 2015; Wadham et al 2018), we argue that explorations of cultural sites at which such policies and experiences are visibilised are key to understanding how the military and artists collaboratively work to perform, contest and subvert the goals of gender/sexual/race-inclusive soldiering.

Our analysis of the particularly messy performative conditions of (*in*)visibility which perpetuate the positionalities of women/LGBT+ soldiers in feminist "her-story" dramas enriches discussion of long-standing traditions of artist-military collaboration (Burke 2017; Möller 2018; Kirby et al 2019). The heightened inclusion of women/LGBT+ soldiers in Western militaries during the Global War on Terror meant that, from 2001 onwards, women/LGBT+ artists were, often for the first time, granted access to previously closed, male-dominated militarised spaces and experiences (Kay and Reynolds 2016; Green and Brown 2017; Messmer-Moir 2019; Koobak 2019). As our analysis demonstrates, it is reductive to approach artist-military collaboration through the lens of subversion or co-optation. Instead, expanding on Bulmer's (2013) premise, we suggest that it is vital to critically interrogate the ambiguities crystallised through the positionalities of women/LGBT+ soldiers performed on-stage.

Empirically, we compare two award-winning productions from the 2019 Army@TheFringe programme of the International Edinburgh Fringe Festival (*Hallowed Ground – Women Doctors in War* by Australia-based Shift Theatre and *Dead Equal* by the UK-based Palmer and Hall) because they were advertised as advancing feminism and gender equality within

British/Australian militaries and societies.[ii] That they were staged at Edinburgh's Hepburn House Army Reserve Centre allowed us to expand our analysis beyond the "time and place" of the plays (Cree 2019, 168) to reflect on militarised spaces framing them. We draw on auto-ethnographies of the plays, semi-structured interviews with artists and military hosts, Twitter/Facebook feeds and "Live Equal", a photo-portrait exhibition which supplemented *Dead Equal*. In conducting observations and interviews, we adopted the positionality of "feminist spectators as critics" (Dolan 2012) which is key to conducting feminist research in International Relations (IR) (e.g.Ackerly and True 2006) as well as feminist theatre studies (e.g. Aston and Harris 2006). This involves paying attention to how the subjectivities of women/LGBT+ soldiers are embodied, dressed/cross-dressed on-stage, the kinds of affective energies generated by the performances, and how these embodied, affective and temporal positionalities resonate with cultural visions of gender/sexually-inclusive soldiering and wider "feminist dynamics and struggles" (Aston 2020, 13).

Following Cree's (2019, 162) observation that "dramatic subjects of theatre are at once the product of text, context and discourse, and embodied performances of narrative and testimony", we deployed a "close reading" of the dramas, and used Foucauldian discourse analysis and feminist methodology as key means of interrogating instances when women/LGBT+ agentive qualities were performed, visibilised, and/or placed in marginalised positions in relation to the male, heteronormative soldier (Foucault 1989; Ackerly and True 2006, 245; Shepherd 2013, 7-11; Bulmer and Basham 2017).

Although we utilised some information from interviews with military hosts of Army@TheFringe, this paper focuses on insights arising from interviews with women and

non-binary artists. As feminist scholars, we felt a strong commitment alongside the artists we interviewed to agendas of emancipation, inclusion, visibility, and justice for women and gender/sexual minorities. We also shared a feeling of being outsiders to the military, intrigued to have been invited to enter otherwise closed militarised spaces. However, whilst we as feminist IR scholars perceived the performances as windows into conflict, by contrast, women/non-binary artists saw their craft primarily as the making visible - and therefore empowering - of women and minority soldiers (Interview with HG cast, 17 Aug 2019; Interview with DE 2019)). As we discuss below, this reluctance on the part of artists to discuss the politics of women/LGBT+ empowerment through soldiering within/not outside of the politics of war-making can be attributed to the moral dilemmas associated with the Global War on Terror (GWoT) (e.g. Green and Brown 2017; Messmer-Moir 2019).

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by discussing the paradoxes of visibilising gender/sexuality-based military inclusion in the context of the GWoT. We then position Army@TheFringe as a unique space framing the theatrical performance of women/LGBT+ inclusion. We argue that although *Hallowed Ground: Women-Doctors in War* presents the gender-path-breaking subjectivities of "patriotic sisters", "professionals/honorary men" and "saviours", it also reinstates prevalent norms of masculinised, heteronormative military culture alongside the gendered/racialised hierarchies which normalise Western conflicts past and present. The second case-study, *Dead Equal*, interrogates the subjectivities of "adventurous tomboy", "nurse/(regendered?) soldier" and the "ambivalent body". We argue that the positionality of the LGBT+ soldier is situated in ambivalent relation to the woman-soldier and that militarised femininity is reproduced as supportive but expendable. The conclusion debates the "'not yet' visible" and the possible futures opened/closed to or women/LGBT+ soldiers, arguing that only through critical collective efforts of feminist

artists, activists, scholars, and soldiers can cultural barriers to inclusion be productively challenged.

VISIBILITY, SOLDIERING AND ART/THEATRE

Visibility is a central focus for feminist and queer theorists, starting from the conception that to be publicly visible is a step towards remedying social injustices and discrimination (Enloe 1983, 2000; Elshtain 1987; Tickner 1988; Goldstein 2001; Lind 2014; Richter-Montpetit 2018, Aston and Harris 2006; and many others). Within this large body of literature, we find Butler's (2015, 41) notion that the "field of appearance" is highly, ambivalently regulated and "establishes who can be seen, heard, and recognized" as the most productive, overarching framework to interrogate subversive forms of visibilising women/LGBT+ soldiers through feminist, "her-story" theatre.

Specifically, Butler's framework allows for an understanding that the positionalities through which gendered/sexualised/racialised (soldiering) subjects become visible are *inherently* contradictory, as recognised within Queer/Feminist IR, Critical Military Studies, and contemporary studies of art and feminist theatre. Drawing on this diverse scholarship, we use the prefix of (*in*)visibility to highlight the often-conflicting discourses of gender-inclusive soldiering. This premise allows us to expand on Cree's analysis (2017, 124) of how, through appearance on a theatrical stage, the modern sovereign (male) hero becomes "a recognisable and ambiguous subject" by arguing that feminist "her-story" theatre does critical work in spotlighting such female/LGBT+ sovereign subjecthood.

For decades, queer theorists have highlighted that visibility has often been articulated through "coming out" and Gay Pride as means of contesting the "private" status of queerness

and pervasive stereotypes concerning homosexuality (Heckert 2004; Lind 2014; Raymond 2003; Baker 2017). However, Bulmer (2013, 140) demonstrates that the "highly visible and public spectacle of LGBT personnel at Pride produced moments of patriarchal confusion in policy-makers" and that this visibility did not directly challenge the heteronormativity of the British military (see also Belkin 2001; 2013; Riseman 2017). Bulmer's analysis highlighted the emerging tension between the increasing visibility of LGBT+ soldiers within Western militaries due to some successes in inclusion policies, and the limited effect of this inclusion-driven visibility on dominant "manly" military culture. Further, scholars have observed that LGBT+ soldiers' visibility within Western militaries participating in GWoT was not only limited, but that this visibility was (mis)used to reify gendered/sexualised/racialised justifications for Western war-making (Puar 2007; Weber 2017; Haritaworn et.al. 2014). The international arena has thereby been ordered "according to how well states 'treat their homosexuals' (Puar 2010) and/or women with this transformed normativity being referred to as 'homonationalism' (Puar 2007) or 'femonationalism' (Farris 2017)" (Strand and Kehl 2019, 299). Both homo/femo- nationalisms embodied by Western gendered/sexualised soldiers have become possible through the contrast between a few visible Western soldiering bodies and countless invisible gendered/racialised others, mostly located within Middle-Eastern societies.

Secondly, expanding scholarship on women's accession to combat positions across Western militaries in the 2000s problematised the contradictory conditions of inclusion and (*in*)visibility of women-soldiers. Whereas some scholars have highlighted widening opportunities for women through concepts such as "gender equivalency" (Brownson 2014) and "regendering" (Duncanson and Woodward 2016), others have pointed out that the increasing visibility of uniformed female-identified bodies is yet to lead to productive visions

of militarised femininities, with women often framed as "ambivalent" bodies, "incomplete" soldier-"tomboys", desexualised "honorary men" and/or "sluts and bitches", all of which, to various extents, sustain the dominance of male heteronormative soldiering (Woodward and Winter 2007; Dittmer and Apelt 2008; Fiala 2008; Belkin 2013; Basham 2009, 2013, 2017; McKenzie 2015; Enloe 2014; Ette 2013; Brownfield-Stein 2017; Crowley and Sandoff 2017; King 2016; 2017; Wadham et al 2018). Further, "femo-nationalism", embodied by the figure of the Western "equal-opportunity soldier" (Eicher 2013, 256) worked to reproduce those gendered/raced hierarchies used to legitimise Western interventions, further accentuating the contradictory positionalities of women/LGBT+ soldiers (Hunt 2006; Sjoberg 2010; Khalid 2011; Enloe 2014; Shepherd 2017).

Finally, to capture the complex visibilities of gendered/sexualised subjects, we engage with feminist theatre studies alongside rapidly expanding scholarship of visual global politics (Bleiker 2009, 2018; Danchev 2011; Silvester 2012; Vuori and Andersen 2018; Möller 2018; Kirby et al 2019). Our analysis is built on three points. First, theatre plays a key role in visibilising the largely invisible soldiering bodies within Western societies' participation in the GWoT. Many have noted that limited public visibility was granted to Western dead, injured or returning soldiers from Iraq and Afghanistan (Campbell and Shapiro 2007; Andersen and Möller 2013; Khalid 2018; Purnell 2019, 2021). Further, as Welland has shown, in the instances when "a liberal warrior's body is reproduced" within artistic settings, its representational (hyper)visibility tends to be removed "from the 'real' – the everyday lived realities of those who inhabit this body and subjectivity" (2017, 535). Although playwrights often use "inventive approaches to docudramas and/or 'theatre of the real'", transforming "personal stories into dramatic texts that question the relationship between 'facts and truth'" (Friedman 2010, 594; Burke 2017; Beck 2018), the uniqueness of theatre lies in its capacity

to enliven this illusion of the "real", "authentic" soldiering and in turn to engage the audience through embodied emotional responses (Dolan, 2001).

Second, until recently, artists, playwrights and scholars of contemporary conflicts have focused on the male soldier, with women/LGBT+ soldiers often rendered invisible (Caso, 2020; Cree 2019; Welland 2017; Burke 2017; Corris 2017; Kay and Reynolds 2016; Reason 2017; Beck 2018; Messmer-Moir 2019; Koobak 2019). This outcome is reflected in the significant gender imbalance within the theatre industries in the UK, the US, and Australia, with women playwrights and directors constituting the minority (Aston 2020, 15) and an even smaller proportion of feminist and/or queer artists who focus on the experience of women/LGBT+ soldiers (see Friedman 2010). This triple marginalisation has led to the invisibility of women/LGBT+ soldiers' experiences on-stage. Third, feminist theatre studies can be instrumental in advancing discussions of gender-equal soldiering because of its commitment to imagining possible "feminist futures" which must visibilise intersectional experiences of diverse gendered/sexualised/racialised subjects (Aston and Harris, 2006; Dolan, 2001, Hill and Paris, 2006). The following section analyses the unique conditions of artist-military collaboration at Army@TheFringe.

VISIBILISING INCLUSION AT ARMY@THEFRINGE

Army@TheFringe was devised by the local Army Engagement team in cooperation with art managers of Summerhall Art Centre and introduced within Edinburgh International Fringe Festival[iii] in 2017, running again in 2018 and 2019, with 2020's programme continuing online (https://www.armyatthefringe.org/).[iv] For three years the city's Hepburn House Army Reserve Centre hosted 5-6 theatrical performances per year, each running 10-12 times.[v]

Support for the British Army's hosting of theatrical performances can be explained by three-interconnected trends: 1) perceived invisibility and "misunderstanding" of the British military by the public, deepened by Britain's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan (Edmunds 2012; Basham 2013; Dandeker et al. 2016); 2) the expansion of reserve units and subsequent need to recruit more part-time "civilian" soldiers through the increasing visibility of military service (Edmunds et al 2016; Basham and Catignani 2018;Higate et al 2019); and 3) the drive to present the British Army as an equal-opportunities employer which has finally overcome its legacy of gender/sexuality/racial discrimination (Ware 2012; Basham 2013, 2017; Bulmer 2013, 2017). The subsequent overlap of these trends with nation-wide marking of the centenary of WWI (2014-18) set the scene for expanded artist-military collaboration.

What sets Army@TheFringe apart from traditional state and military-commissioned art projects (Brandon 2007; Corris 2017; Burke 2017; Green and Brown 2019; Messmer-Moir 2019) is the absence of clear contractual obligations, with most productions independently developed and funded.[vi] Therefore, Army@TheFringe emerged as a space co-constituted by the Army's and artists' often conflicting gendered, sexed, and raced interpellations of soldering.

The Army's concern over perceived "misunderstanding" resulted in encouraging artists, most of whom did not have prior military experience, to "look through the uniforms and try to understand us as individuals" (Interview with Army Engagement 24 Aug 2018) by living alongside the 51st Brigade at Hepburn House during the festival (*Hallowed Ground* and *Dead Equal* production teams did so in 2019), eating and socialising at the Officers" Mess,[vii] and performing at military bases.[viii] Artists' vulnerability in artist-military collaboration was exposed through reminders that "the Army does not just rent out the place" (Interview with

Army Engagement 24 Aug 2018) and "it is better that the Army's story is told by others, but we hope it will be a positive one" (as summarised by a uniformed male soldier during the 2019 *Dead Equal* press-conference dedicated to women-soldiers), it is equally important to recognise the Army's own confusion over how to visibilise gender/sexuality/race inclusive soldiering through art/theatre. As one interviewee resignedly acknowledged, "art creates its own outputs" (Interview with Army Engagement 24 Aug 2018). Resonating with Cree's (2019) sovereign subjecthood performed through "lively" theatre, Army@TheFringe hosted productions which worked to reproduce and expose the ambivalences within the military's gendered/sexualised/racialised outlook.

Echoing "diversity talk" aiming to communicate the Army's commitment to integrating women, LGBT+ and soldiers from ethnic-minority backgrounds (also described as "BAME soldiers"[ix] (Basham 2009, Basham 2013; Ware 2012; Bulmer 2013; King 2017), organisers presented Army@TheFringe as a space for representing inclusion: "The concept to create a venue where we could allow artists to present their interpretations of ideas to do with soldiering… or ideas that we think are important… We care about female empowerment, equality and diversity" (Interview with Army Engagement 24 Aug 2018). However, the 2017-2019 programmes were mostly dominated by male-artist-led productions. Apart from *5Soldiers* which included four men and one woman impersonating soldiers (see Purnell and Danilova 2018), four productions conveyed the story about women-soldiers through all-female/non-binary casts, common trend for feminist theatres (Goodman 1998, 198; Aston 2020). Considering the marginalisation of women/LGBT+ soldiering within Army@TheFringe, the Army has worked to increase the inclusive appeal of soldiering through the visibility of gendered/sexed/raced bodies of *real* soldiers from diverse backgrounds at the ticket office and post-performance press-conferences, alongside the

introduction of a "gender-neutral" toilet during the 2019 programme - black plastic sheets taped over urinals in a male bathroom.

Artists we interviewed saw Army@TheFringe as an opportunity to speak up against gender/sexuality/racially-based inequalities. For the all-women producers/cast of *Hallowed Ground*, Army@TheFringe offered an opportunity to showcase "dynamic work with strong roles for women" and "about remarkable women" (Shift Theatre 2019; Interview with HG's cast, 17 Aug 2019). For *Dead Equal*, developed and performed by women-artists and non-binary artists, Army@TheFringe presented opportunities to change perceptions: "I think women, queer people, people of colour need to see stories which do not cast them as secondary or expendable" (Palmer in O'Donoghue 2019). Despite the Army's preference for contemporary soldiering due to its concerns over invisibility and the "misunderstanding" identified above, both 'her-story' dramas introduced historical and contemporary characters simultaneously, exploring the theme of a "century-long service" from WWI to the modern-day: "It's a tremendous relief for women to know they have powerful forebears" (Palmer in O'Donoghue 2019). The following sections interrogate the use of complex temporalities in creating particular gendered/sexed/raced positionalities through which the story about women-soldiers and LGBT+ soldiers was visibilised and reproduced/disrupted in the dramas.

HALLOWED GROUND: WOMEN-DOCTORS IN WAR

> After viewing two plays with all-male cast, I feel excited about a chance of viewing a play in which "four women converse across a century" (play's poster). The performance begins with a scene of surgery in which actresses, dressed in military uniforms from different eras, operate on a pile of military crates. The crates remind me of all-male plays, but I push this feeling aside… At a certain point in the play,

> women start conversing with each other, and I feel strangely involved…(fieldnotes 2019)

Adopting key feminist theatre principles of emphasising "women's roles as makers and spectators" and "women's roles as characters in plays, and as performers" (Goodman 1998, 198; see also Hutchings 2005), conversation in *Hallowed Ground* takes centre-stage. "If these women could speak to each other – and to an audience – what would they say?", reflect the cast/producers (Brock and Hopkins in O'Donoghue 2019). The performative logic of "having a conversation" does not require many physical actions. Instead, it occurs through creative reworkings of women-doctors' stories[x] and the appearance of female bodies on stage, which function as "both the instrument and a source of a text" (Tait 1998, 225). In *Hallowed Ground*, the imagined conversation between eight Australian women-military doctors who lived during different historical periods is embodied by four actresses, three of whom play two and/or three characters simultaneously. The complex temporality of the play is sometimes confusing, signposted by taking on/off a White doctor's coat over the historical/contemporary military uniforms. The character whose identity remains stable through the play is Tam, a Vietnam-born Australian doctor who served in Iraq and played by an actress of Asian descent. This embodied dynamic is based on the interchangeability of White female bodies, reflecting the dominance of Whiteness as key to Australian stories of gender-equal soldiering, the Australian feminist movement and Australian feminist theatre, all of which struggle to bring forth the experiences of Indigenous and ethnic-minority communities (Tait 1998; Ahmed 2012; Drozdzewski 2016; Caso 2020). This embodied, racialised dynamic exists alongside the equally ambivalent gender messaging which fluctuates between emphasising/eroding women's agentive difference. In the final scene women-doctors recollect their forebearers, "those who stood in the face of adversity, those who choose to follow in our footsteps" (HG 2019) whilst observing "old men marching" in

the Anzac Day remembrance parade. This staging sends a controversial message because it invited spectators to celebrate "a century-long tradition of female soldiering" whilst upholding the "homogeneity, cohesion and sameness" of Australian White-male-dominated military tradition (Wadham et al. 2018, 265).

"Patriotic sisters"

"Why can't a woman be a patriot?" (Interview with HG cast, 17 Aug 2019).

Hallowed Ground depicts patriotism as key to women/LGBT+ soldiers' inclusion, with characters identifying themselves as "patriotic sisterhood mobilised to support the allied forces" and sharing their "love for the country" and "dreams to serve". This narrative uses "a group (collective) protagonist", a common technique in feminist theatre (Friedman 2010, 600). Women-doctors' patriotism speaks of their ownership over male-dominated nationalistic soldiering, resonating with rich feminist scholarship (Elshtain 1987;Young 1994; Goldstein 2001; Sjoberg 2007). Although this femo-nationalism is popular across Western liberal democracies participating in GWoT (Chapman and Eichler 2014; Strand and Berndtsson 2015), its popularity masks a significant discursive shift. It represents soldiering – not the nation - as a place of women/LGBT+ soldiers' *continuous* empowerment. Consequently, in *Hallowed Ground,* the stories of Australian women-doctors who served in the Scottish Women's hospitals during WWI without support of either Australian or British governments, became unproblematically integrated within "A Century of Service", a slogan chosen by the Australian WWI commemoration commission to link WWI, WWII with modern conflicts (Beamont 2015). This discursive shift places the story of women's empowerment within the narrative of *continuous* conflict, both of which are symptomatic of the "relentless militarisation of Australian history", from the beginning of GWoT in 2001 onwards (McDonald 2010; Donoghue and Tranter 2015). Further, neoliberal femo-

nationalism of "patriotic sisters" in *Hallowed Ground* claims sameness between "sisters", but it works on the silencing of hierarchical difference (Peterson 1999, 51). This silencing of differences between women based on race/ethnicity/class arises from neoliberal ideology which is based on the presuming incumbent choice and pursuit of freedom for "medic, marksman; markswoman, marksperson; half-way to equal" (HG 2019)[xi], creating the phenomenon of the "freedom fallacy", as one of the most problematic aspects of modern feminist theatre (Aston 2020, 32). For instance, Lilian represents the dominant White, middle-class patriotic femininity typically revived during the recent wave of WWI-commemorations in Britain and Australia (Beamont 2015; Danilova and Dolan, 2020). Her purpose-made feminised uniform[xii] (the only character wearing a skirt) of the Scottish Women's Hospital (SWH) evokes and disrupts nostalgic male-dominated myths of WWI (Grayzel 1999; Noakes 2008). This echoes Emily's subjectivity of virtuous nurse/soldier from *Dead Equal* (following section), both characters embodying historical/contemporary norms of White middle-class femininity as foundational to the story of Western gender-inclusive soldiering

The racialised/classed hierarchy manifests itself through the embodied story of Vietnam-born former refugee Tam. Whilst the patriotism of (White) female characters is never questioned, Tam must "strive to excel" to prove her patriotic commitment to military service. This contradiction represents a moment during which characters' and artists' subjectivities collide (Cree 2019, 168), leading to a slight change in performance when the actress realised that "Tam didn't really want to serve in the army, but she wanted to subsidise her medical degree" (Interview with HG cast, 17 Aug 2019). Thus, although Tam's character was introduced to visibilise racial difference and challenge the dehumanisation of refugees in Australian culture (Bleiker et al 2013), the positionality of "patriotic sisters" worked to subvert intersectional

gender identities, thereby obscuring particular injustices faced by women-soldiers from marginalised backgrounds.

"Professionals/honorary men"

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

In *Hallowed Ground*, characters do not carry guns, perform soldiering through physical impersonation of male soldiers like Rosie Kay's *5Soldiers* (Purnell and Danilova, 2018), or reflect on the ambivalence of female bodies as *Dead Equal.* Instead, women's "equal-to-men" professionalism is performed through highlighting their medical skills in war-settings alongside careful obscuring of femininity and sexuality. For Mary (WWII) "he-man's uniform with eight generous pockets" symbolises liberation from her handbag, Jacqui (GWoT/Afghanistan) comments on her acceptance by fellow male soldiers as "one of the guys" for her medical skills in the field after being sneered at for her struggle with her heavy backpack; Catherine (GWoT/Afghanistan) misses her children during overseas deployments, and is adamant about not sharing "intimate moments with a soldier in the next cubicle" (HG 2019), a hint at the costly nature of parenting (Basham and Catignali 2018). Through these

performative choices, the "professionals/honorary men" positionality simultaneously reiterates women's worthiness to the military and undermines their legitimacy because it reframes femininity as a problem, weakness and vulnerability (Wadham et al 2018, 271; Crowley and Sandoff 2017, 235; Basham 2013, 2017). This contradiction echoes King's observation that women-soldiers "cannot ultimately be accepted as 'sisters' and "in order even to be sisters, they have to be 'men'" (2017, 127).

This dehydration of femininity subdues sexual difference and the removal of physical touch emerges as the only way to positively visibilise LGBT+ soldiers.

> the reason that we picked Lilian and Jo [WWI] was that gay relationship theme, which is not strong... but I think it's pretty obvious that that's what they were … And also there's the marriage bill's just been passed in recently in Australia [in 2017], and we thought, 'How wonderful' (Interview with HG cast, 17 August 2019).

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

"Saviours"

In most productions at Army@TheFringe, including *Dead Equal*, the Other is invisible and ever-present signifier of conflict (Campbell and Shapiro 2007; Butler 2009; Moller 2018).

Although *Hallowed Ground* did not visibilise the Other through embodied performance, it challenged male-dominated theatre:

> …you know how there's always this thing with women in plays that they're framed in their relationship with a man usually, or talking about a man, … we wanted to see that broader context of what they're experiencing and how that changes them, or potentially changes us as an audience…(Interview with HG cast 17 Aug 2019).
>
> When Tam is on-stage, I can't help but focus on the background sounds of baby crying, women and children's voices intermixing with the sounds of explosions (fieldnotes 2019)

Artists attempted to dismantle the traditional heteronormative imperative of love-story through first representing women/LGBT+ soldiers as agentive subjects, and second as those who are capable of embracing "the humanity of everybody" (Interview with HG cast 17 Aug 2019). However, we argue that as this aspirational "humanity/equality" code coexisted with the representation of Australian women-doctors as "Virgin Marys", those "with angels on their side", those who "have made things save" for local populations (HG 2019), it subverted this emancipatory message and reproduced the dominance of Western "saviours" over inferior and "backward" Others (Hunt 2006; Dittmer and Apelt 2008, 73; Sjoberg 2007, 2010; Khalid 2009; Masters 2009; Shephard 2017; Smith 2019).

In *Hallowed Ground*, scarce comments on relationships between Australian women-doctors with civilians or enemies during the World Wars are offset by the expanded narrative of liberal (humanitarian) soldiering. Catherine's character tells of the Rwandan Army firing at refugees and UN peacekeepers attempting to save a little girl ("if we can just get this little one out, then we might be able to make some sense of it… Our one tiny victory" (HG 2019)). This imbues the story with moral rightness, Western trauma and responsibility, themes that

reinforce “violence in violent places” as self-inflicted (Welland 2015; see also Van der Meulen and Soeters 2005; Van de Bidt 2015). In the performance of the GWoT, Tam’s own racial difference within the Australian forces works to highlight her ability to better “understand” local racialised populations resonating with feminist scholarship on female inclusion during the GWoT (e.g. Hunt 2006; Shephard 2017), yet this did not move beyond a fatalistic message, “every war is the same”. In the end, through Tam’s character, gendered/raced dichotomies of development vs. underdevelopment, lack of hygiene and basic knowledge vs. advanced knowledge and technological progress, Iraqi/Kurdish women’s oppression vs. freedom of Western women are reproduced, normalising Western war-making in the GWoT.

DEAD EQUAL: “WE FIGHT, WE DREAM, BECAUSE WE ARE”

> …it’s difficult to tell that this is a ‘her-story’ opera at first when all I hear is battle noise and all I see are soldiers in uniform… Women? Men? Non-binary? (fieldnotes 2019).
>
> I love opera! And this is it. I feel exhilarated, but also overwhelmed and almost claustrophobic with music and voices filling up a confined space (fieldnotes 2019).

Dead Equal’s storyline is made up of operatic conversations between female/LGBT+ soldiers, punctuated by short moments of war-like movement, when the stage became dark, gunfire echoed and the characters’ silhouettes moved quickly, holding weapons. For the spectator, these moments of “real war” were disorientating and eroded the visibility of difference - it was no longer possible to tell that this was an inclusive, “her-story” opera. The conversation-based plot itself is based loosely on two historical figures from WWI, Flora Sandes (the first British woman to fight on the front line as part of the Serbian forces) alongside her nurse friend Emily Simmonds, and third character Jo Epke, a medic based

loosely on interviews conducted by artists with contemporary female soldiers and whose story takes place in Afghanistan. *Dead Equal's* feminism expressed itself firstly as a challenge to "white, posh and heteronormative" opera by centring "women…driving the narrative, leading from the front, in charge of their lives and their story", challenging opera as a genre in which women are not agentive and, rather, "are usually killed" (Palmer in O'Donoghue 2019; see Rosenberg, 2016). Whilst the opera was directed not by plot-driven action, but by "her-story" conversation between past and present women-soldiers sharing their experiences of the front line, like *Hallowed Ground*, the vibrato-singing within the small Army Reserve obscured this and made *Dead Equal* into a full-body experience for spectators such that, on leaving, we were left with a *feeling* rather than an understanding of the characters' experiences, motivations, and emotions.

"Adventurous Tomboy"

The artistic decision to feature English historical figure Flora Sandes as central to the opera is explained by artists' intention to demonstrate women's close-combat capability, a choice made for Army@TheFringe after previous iterations focused on war-nurses. Accordingly, Flora is presented unproblematically as predecessor of modern British women-soldiers, having successfully transformed from nurse to soldier despite WWI-era restrictions. She is made visible as the lovable and adventurous "tomboy" who can never be a man (Woodward and Winter 2007, 87), "almost equal but not quite" (King 2017, 308). Importantly, the producers' focus on Flora overlapped with their feminist representational politics expressed through the spotlighting of a non-binary performer. Therefore, the making visible of a ground-breaking historical figure and gender-non-conforming artist became interlinked and inextricably tied (Cree, 2019). In our interview, the performer articulated the difficulties of embodying a woman-soldier and discussing the military: "...these are such gendered words, I

feel weird using them" (Interview with DE cast 4Oct 2019). Their position appeared as always contested, with proud declarations that Army@TheFringe featured a non-binary artist existing alongside consistent misgendering, indicative of the military's attempts to see itself as *already* inclusive whilst struggling with the changes this indicates (e.g.Basham 2009).

Partly due to these overlapping representational logics, the opera made sense of Flora's unusual career ambitions through her gender/sexual identity:

> …the composer and librettist took liberties, kind of creating this fictional story about Flora and Emily Simmonds and maybe what their relationship might've been, or maybe what it was behind closed doors …I always wonder what if Flora Sandes was alive today… would she be a trans man, would she be out lesbian, would she be a butch lesbian, would she be genderqueer… it's really interesting to imagine what her identity would be because there were so many limitations placed on women back then…(Interview with DE cast 4 Oct 2019).

Like in *Hallowed Ground*, the relationship between Flora and Emily was implicit, queerness used primarily as a remedy for Flora's gender-nonconformity. Whilst historical records cite Flora's prayer "every night that I might wake up in the morning and find myself a boy", biographer Miller interprets this not as an indication of gender identity, but rather that Flora "envied her brothers their freedom from social disapproval" (2012, 27).Her transformation from nurse to soldier in the Serbian Army was conveyed in the opera as an advancement, performed through the donning of male uniform consistent with the operatic tradition of "trouser-roles" (Rosenberg 2016), thereby obscuring historical controversies around women in uniform, who were assumed to have sacrificed their femininity/sexuality (Grayzel 1999, 200; Noaks 2008, 10). Whilst Flora's uniform (see also Miller 2012) and imagined homosexuality functioned to justify her "unusual" thirst for adventure and dissatisfaction

with nursing, this produced queerness as complementary to heteronormative militarism by obscuring pernicious stereotyping, discrimination, dishonourable discharge and hierarchies based on gender/sexuality central to experiences of LGBT+ soldiers (e.g.Belkin 2001; Bulmer 2013; Weber 2017).

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

Despite her implied sexuality, Flora was de-sexualised and the potential for queer visibility to challenge heteronormative soldiering was disrupted on several levels. Like *Hallowed Ground*, whilst Flora and Emily share one brief kiss, their relationship is devoid of

physicality. However, in a re-framing of protector-protected mythology (Elshtain 1987), Flora leads and protects Emily, the nurse in need of support and reassurance, thereby re-establishing hierarchical dualisms of masculinity/femininity, soldier/nurse (Grayzel 2011; Enloe 2007; Danilova and Dolan, 2020) and ideas that women in military uniform are either heterosexual and sexually promiscuous or desexualised, butch lesbians (Noakes 2008; King 2017; Basham 2013).

"Nurse/(regendered?) soldier"

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

During WWI, Emily embodies the vulnerable, caring, "angel"-like nurse. However, whilst the opera, echoing *Hallowed Ground*, positions war as the most important avenue for women to develop medical skills, crucially Emily's nursing ability is not communicated through

professionalism. Indeed, when she is required to perform surgery, she seeks reassurance from Flora before facing the challenge, a decision which casts her as timid and delicate. Consequently, the opera represents war-nurses as ideals of White, middle-class femininity, praising them as "healing angels" whilst considering them less accomplished, proficient, and important than soldiers (Noakes 2008: 17; Danilova and Dolan, 2020; Enloe 2007).

Further, Emily's demise at the hands of the invisible enemy Other reflects WWI framings of uniformed women as only in death "confirming their right to khaki" (Noakes 2008, 19) a narrative unproblematically extended into the context of the GWoT (Ette 2013) and which furthers classical operatic traditions casting the "feminised other" as ultimately expendable (Rosenberg 2016). Only through Emily's explicit challenge to the morality of war do we glimpse the liberal/antimilitarist feminist debate: "you can't fight because you shouldn't, not because you can't" (fieldnotes 2019). However, similarly to *Hallowed Ground*'s premise, this crucial debate is undermined through the stronger theme of *continuous* service/conflict and the fact that all female-identified subject positions are framed as empowered through militarisation.

"Ambivalent Body"

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

Jo Epke, a contemporary BAME-soldier, makes visible racial/class difference alongside the ambivalence of women's bodies within the military. However, despite casting a Black

actress, race is ultimately invisiblised within the opera, with reviews and social media comments reflecting this absence of discussion about race in the British military. Jo's working-class positionality is visible - like Tam's position in *Hallowed Ground*, it is implied that Jo did not freely choose to enlist due to her financial circumstances - however, the opera obscures structural inequalities of modern soldiering, with racial/class difference ultimately reframed through the gendered code of "ambivalent body".

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

Jo struggles with her contradictory roles of soldier and mother; however, the opera deals with this through the conceptual paradox of being "a lover and a fighter", thereby obscuring structural gendered issues: "can I be any good at this and good at loving you?" (fieldnotes, 2019). Although militaries have been understood as "greedy institutions" because of their

demands upon serving soldiers" families (Segal 1986; Basham and Catignani 2018), the complexities around childcare and lack of support for military women are not elucidated in the opera, with parenthood and its challenges largely obscured by allusions to the female/pregnant body.

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

CONCLUSION

This paper has exposed the inherently ambivalent dynamics embedded within feminist, "her-story" military theatre in its attempts to make visible gender/sexual inclusion within the armed forces. We have argued that to fully comprehend the possible "feminist futures" (Aston and Harris 2006, 3) of gender/sexually-inclusive soldiering, the complex interactions between artists and the military alongside the wider conditions of visibility they produce through making, staging, and performing theatrical productions must be interrogated. This

task is crucial, we suggest, because performance art is a key site at which military inclusion can be seen, embodied, felt, and perhaps, therefore, made *possible*.

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

Indeed, military hosts and artists appeared to converge in creating a narrative of gender-equal soldiering as already achieved through the ostensibly unproblematic weaving together of undoubtedly impressive historical narratives and contemporary stories of women/LGBT+ soldiers. Further, whilst the agenda of creating artistic/performance roles for women and sexual minorities is certainly important, when this agenda converges with depictions of individualised heroines who succeed against all odds, it can simultaneously operate as means of obscuring the more difficult but necessary "her-story" conversations about structural disadvantage and violence. This process can be reconciled with "a neoliberal appropriation of a liberal-feminist lexis that transformed equality and rights into …the illusion of women's self-empowerment and choice that flies in the face of persistent inequalities and social

injustices" within theatre as well as Western militaries/societies (Aston 2020, 32). In enacting this performative future through an intertwined past/present, Army@TheFringe could become a space at which one could *feel* empowered, facilitated by the crucial masking of controversies associated with Western military conflicts (aided by the invisiblising of the bodies of enemy 'others') alongside those conflicts which emerge when representing complex intersections of power/identity.

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

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[i] The Edinburgh International Festival, known as The Fringe has evolved as a platform for cutting-edge ‘art of every genre’ (https://www.edfringe.com/).

[ii] Both received glowing reviews - *Hallowed Ground* was awarded the Summerhall Lustrum Award for Best Drama and *Dead Equal* received the Summerhall Lustrum Award for Best Festival Moments of 2019 Edinburgh Fringe. This paper does not discuss plays' success/failures as works of art.
[iii] The Edinburgh International Festival, known as The Fringe has evolved as a platform for cutting-edge 'art of every genre' (https://www.edfringe.com/).
[iv] This paper focuses on 2017, 2018, 2019 programmes.
[v] We excluded from our sample one short production: *This is My Life* by Hopscotch Theatre Company supported by RCET and Scotland's Armed Forces Children's Charity performed three times during the 2017 Army@TheFringe.
[vi] UK-government Covenant-funding was awarded to four productions: 5*Soldiers* by Rosie Kay Dance company, *Shell Shock* by Smokescreen Productions, *The Troth* by Akademi South Asian Dance UK and *Bomb Happy* by Everwitch Theatre Company (https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/covenant-fund;https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/covenant-fund-awards-2015-2016/; https://www.armedforcescovenant.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Small-Grant-Case-Studies.pdf; https://www.covenantfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Local-Grant-awards-2018-19.pdf(18/08/2020))
[vii] The Army offered a Festival stage free-of-charge, an extremely attractive offer for many artists.
[viii] *Dead Equal's* cast/producers met 25-30 serving women at Aldershot Garrison. *5Soldiers* by Rosie Kay Dance Company was also performed at Aldershot Garrison, among other military settings.
[ix] The term BAME (Black and Minority Ethnic) is used commonly in UK-based diversity policies, including the military (see, e.g., MoD 2018). The term has been criticized for its homogenizing effects; however, we use it in this paper to highlight the context of military inclusion within which the plays operate.
[x] The script of *Hallowed Ground* was inspired by memoirs of the Colonel of the Australian Medical Corps, Susan Neuhaus (Neuhaus and Mascall-Dare 2014) as well as artists' interviews with women-soldiers.
[xi] This metaphor of "half-way to equal" echoes the title of 1992 "Half-way to Equal Report" (Report of the Inquiry into Equal Opportunity and Equal Status for Women in Australia) (Wadham et al 2018, 267).
[xii] Women who joined the SWH came from the middle- and upper class-backgrounds, which allowed them to pay for their uniform and other expenses associated with war-time service **(**Danilova and Dolan, 2020).