Interventions on military mobilities

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ABSTRACT

Mobility and movement are central to military actions and military life, and yet despite an increasing concern with military geographies and the geographies of mobility, little consideration has been given by scholars to the political geographies of military mobilities and movements, past or present. In these interventions, we examine how these different bodies of work might intersect, focusing on social media, methods for tracing military mobilities, the role of military technologies in facilitating everyday mobilities, and the more-than-human dimensions of military mobilities.

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Military mobilities: an introduction

Peter Merriman and Kimberley Peters

Military mobilities of a particular kind have been widely discussed in political geography and related fields over the past decade, from critical analyses of the use of military drones for remote warfare, observation and killing-at-a-distance, to discussions of extraordinary rendition, histories of aerial bombardment and the spatialities of naval warfare (Adey, Bissell, Hannam, Merriman, & Sheller, 2013; Adey, Whitehead, & Williams 2011; Davies, 2013; Gregory, 2014; Raphael, Black, Blakeley, & Kostas, 2016; Shaw, 2013; Williams, 2011). This intervention builds upon emerging literature concerning military movements to argue for the importance of focusing on the highly distinctive motivations, strategies, practices, experiences, spaces and infrastructures of mobility associated with military actions and military lives. In doing this it seeks to bring together broader work on military geographies with critical scholarship in mobilities studies. In what follows we suggest ways in which these different bodies of work

intersect and can inform our understanding of the distinctive (but also ubiquitous) character, politics, practices and technologies of military mobilities. To do so we examine three interrelated themes: the role of technological innovation and more-than-human terrain in militarised activities; the role of bodies and embodied experience in military life; and the complex, interwoven relationship between civilian and military movements, spaces and worlds.

Technological innovation is frequently positioned as central to the geostrategic capabilities, decisions and actions of advanced military powers, whether in political-theoretic accounts of war, vision, speed and power (De Landa, 1991; Der Derian, 1992; Virilio, 1986, 2002, 2005), or historical accounts of military campaigns (van Creveld, 1989). In short, the development and use of military technologies has shaped and indeed enabled the mobilities and embodied practices of individual personnel and troops. For example, military organisations have developed and deployed a broad range of specialist vehicles which possess unique qualities necessary for military engagement, exemplified by the covert movements of the stealth bomber and nuclear submarine, all-terrain capabilities of the tank and Humvee, or the strike capability and speed-potential of jet aircraft. However, as Forsyth contends in her intervention to follow, military mobilities are not just produced to aid 'fluid, fast and effective' action in the battlefield, or elsewhere. The military also use a range of technologies — both

state-of-the-art (such as target-missiles) and rudimentary (barbed wire) — to block, still, and prevent mobilities of the 'enemy'. Military mobilities, then, are facilitated, enacted, blocked, stilled, tracked, and covered up by a broad range of technologies beyond transport vehicles, including walls, rocket launchers and guns, camouflage, the internet, and telephone networks (Forsyth, 2014, 2015; Krell, 2002; Netz, 2004; Robinson, 2013; Till et al., 2013).

Of course, such technologies do not operate outset of spatial contexts. Technologies are designed, developed, and tested in relation to the geophysical terrains in which they will be used (see Forsyth, 2014, 2015). Military mobilities, then, shape and are shaped by the specific environments in which they occur, and these often extreme and challenging environments — along with the nature of military actions — require technologies that are robust enough to manoeuvre and survive in distinctive theatres of war. As Forsyth shows in her intervention, there is a need to focus on the edges, or forgotten elements of military worlds (in this case the more-than-human dimensions), in order to grasp the entangled geographies of military mobilities.

Bodies are central to the operation and performance of technologies, being enfolded together in the manifestation of military mobilities. With the rise of remote decision-making and the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, so the embodied nature of military engagement has changed. However, this does not represent a shift to disembodied military combat. Rather, military practices entail a highly diverse array of embodied practices and engagements, ranging from the micro-scale movements of bodies undertaking drill practice or interacting with computer keyboards and screens, to the global movements of military personnel (and often their families) to military bases or theatres of war (see Cresswell's intervention to follow). The bodily movements of military personnel are highly choreographed, trained, and entrained, but they may also be radically transformed through the exertions and violent actions of war, with the production of traumatised and mutilated bodies (military and civilian) (Woodward & Jenkings, 2014).

In Woodward's intervention to follow, she attends to the ways in which we might research the body and embodied experience in military settings. There are challenges to any kind of research that involves understanding the intricacies and intimacies of lived experience (Colls, 2012; Nash, 2000; Valentine, 2008). In a military setting, however, issues of access, security, and the bodily abilities of the researcher are all called into question in attempts to uncover the fleshy and felt realities of military mobilities. Given the perceived importance of military secrecy and covertness to questions of national security it is not surprising that, as Woodward argues, military mobilities can be difficult to research using conventional social science methods. Go-along interviews, participant observation, and other mobile or ethnographic methods may well be seen as problematic for military authorities, but there are a broad range of humanities and social science methods — from interviews to textual analysis — which can be useful for exploring the experiences, embodied movements, and strategic decisions of military personnel (see Williams, Jenkings, Rech, & Woodward, 2016). Yet in spite of such challenges, researchers must continue to consider the corporeal dimensions of military life in order to shed light on the varied mobile experiences of those living and working in militarised settings. Indeed, there is not a single military 'body' or embodied experience. As Forsyth contends, it is also vital to explore those individuals who are on the edges of war — 'collateral' bodies — who are subject to 'state sanctioned violence' (see Intervention to follow). And as Adey likewise argues, there are intimate geographies of military life to be investigated through understanding how social media use might bring dispersed bodies closer into touch, whilst disrupting channels of intimacy through

quickening processes by which news of military personnel and events is spread.

Attendance to social media technology alerts us to the movement of information in military realms and with the outside civilian world. As Woodward and Cresswell both note in the interventions to follow, military spaces are often understood as distinct and different from civilian spaces. For example, ideal or effective military movements possess qualities which are, at times, quite different from civilian mobilities. Qualities of speed, comfort and efficiency may well be desired by both military and civilian authorities, but qualities of stealth, covertness and the potential to move and strike with 'shock and awe' are also highly significant in military spheres, leading to the development of technologies designed to provide intelligence on movements, and track and trace movements (e.g. radar, RFID, aerial photography). That said, attention to mobilities in a militarised context also works to unhinge the stark differentiation between military and civilian spaces. Moving from contemporary social media technologies, to the telegraph, railway and later the telephone, Martin van Creveld (1989) argues that civilian technologies were frequently re-engineered for military purposes, just as military technologies and military practices can become reworked in civilian settings.

In both Peter Adey and Tim Cresswell's Interventions, we see how the lines between civilian and military mobilities, lives, technologies and spaces can be blurred, redefined, or policed. In Adey's contribution, we see how technologies of communication and social networking may enable the movement and circulation of information, opinions, emotions and affects between military personnel and their friends and families, but also how this can present challenges for military authorities seeking to maintain morale, focus and security during active operations. In Cresswell's intervention, we see how a whole host of seemingly ordinary practices, technologies and spaces are underpinned by technologies and practices which were first developed in the military, including 'boot camp' style exercise regimes and commercial logistics networks. To Cresswell's list we could, of course, add a whole host of media and technologies — from GPS and the internet, to military video games and scientific research — where the spaces, practices and mobilities of military and civilian life frequently intersect (Kaplan, 2006a; Power, 2007). Moreover, if we are to consider the mobilities of bodies and embodied mobile experience, it is possible to trace the deeply interwoven life worlds of military and civilian populations. Nowhere are the blurred lines between military and civilian mobilities more apparent than in life-changing and landscape-changing events of recent war and terror campaigns, as evidenced in conflicts in Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. Here, military movements generate enforced mass movements by thousands and on occasions millions of refugees fleeing war-torn areas (Boyden & de Berry, 2004; Mannik, 2016).

In what follows, the four contributions comprising this Intervention on Military Mobilities expand upon these three lines of enquiry, outlining key avenues of future enquiry on a subject which has received relatively little attention by scholars. Mobilities literature has paid scant attention to the military. Political geographers and critical geopolitics scholars, whilst undertaking important research on the territorial imaginations underpinning military and militarised actions, have largely omitted examinations of military movements. This Intervention seeks to demonstrate the potential of bringing together these lines of enquiry. In short, we contend that a focus on the distinctive qualities, embodied practices, catastrophic effects, and complex and diverse experiences of movement associated with military actions, can shed new light on mobilities of military life and action, rather than simply approaching movement as merely 'a brute fact' of physical displacement (Cresswell, 2006, p. 3).