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**Jester, Natalie ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7995-3028> (2023) Making martial politics palatable: constructing neoliberal feminist subjects in arms manufacturers' social media feeds. International Feminist Journal of Politics, 25 (2). pp. 310-333. doi:10.1080/14616742.2023.2174154**

Official URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2023.2174154>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2023.2174154>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/11866>

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# Making martial politics palatable: constructing neoliberal feminist subjects in arms manufacturers' social media feeds

Natalie Jester, University of Gloucestershire<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine social media output from three of the largest arms manufacturers (by profit): Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and Raytheon, all based in the United States. I ask: how, if at all, are women represented? What do these representations “do”? To do this, I examine all tweets over a three-month period and find that the Twitter content: normalises women within the company context, presents the companies as empowering and inspiring, and as places for individual women to succeed. Central to all three areas is intersectionality, with the companies depicting women of colour frequently, especially Black women. I argue that the social media output of arms manufacturers helps “make possible” the arms trade by presenting these companies as neoliberal, multicultural feminist beacons of social progress, rendering ambivalent criticisms about the suffering inflicted by their products.

**Keywords:** martial politics, arms trade, neoliberal feminism, social media, visual analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Many people gave me comments on various elements of this article, and I am very grateful for their support: Rosie Walters, Louise Pears, Emma Dolan, Samantha Loudon-Cooke, Laura Shepherd, Ben Bowman, Jamie Gaskarth, and three anonymous reviewers, who (kindly!) pushed me to make this article as strong as possible. I would also like to thank the British International Studies Association Early Career Network, which accepted this article for its 2021 Meet the Editors session, where I received detailed and helpful comments from Althea-Maria Rivas and Emily St Denny.

## INTRODUCTION

Feminist political economy demonstrates the relationship between gender and global economic structures/issues (Peterson 2005). Chisholm and Stachowitsch (2017) argue that feminist approaches to security are inherently interlinked with political economy, rather than a lens through which to view the other. Various scholars (e.g. Sjoberg 2015; Stern 2017) argue that there should be a stronger relationship between feminist approaches to security and international political economy, with a “growing divide” between the two (Elias 2015: 406). Up to now, much literature synthesising feminist approaches to political economy and security has either focused on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda or gender-based violence. Comparatively less work in this space explores causes, consequences, and experiences of war (Bergeron, Cohn, and Duncanson 2017). Work around private military and security firms (PMSCs) is an interesting exception. For example, Chisholm and Stachowitsch (2016: 825) argue that PMSCs are a “gendered and racialised project” with “gender knowledge” packaged for sale to those with a stake in security practices (Stachowitsch 2019: 156). In this article, I contribute to this literature by demonstrating how industry approaches to gender are also relevant in the security arena, and vice versa. To make this case, I explore the representation of women in arms manufacturers’ social media discourses, specifically Twitter.

Twitter is particularly interesting because governments, corporations, and international organisations alike have established accounts – 97% of UN member states have one, for example. More broadly, “Twitter use is arguably challenging the relational dynamics between states and their domestic and foreign publics and is implicated in the power and proliferation of nonstate actors in international relations” (Duncombe 2019: 410). Twitter puts distance between us, Duncombe (2019) argues, making it harder to be empathetic. Thus, engagement with issues relating to violence – as is the case concerning weapons – is unlike that of the offline world. Social media formats change how discourses proliferate (Pears 2016; see also: Crilley and Pears 2021), granting companies access to the public in previously unavailable ways. This allows the public to be plugged into particular discourses, cementing their dominance. As a result, those encountering corporate tweets are called into a gendered, neoliberal subject position, rendering these discourses common sense (Weldes 1996).

I investigate all tweets from three of the largest arms manufacturers (Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon) between 1 January and 31 March 2019, numbering approximately 850. I ask how, if at all, are women represented? What do these representations *do*? I begin by setting out my conceptual framework of neoliberal feminism, race and martial politics, before explaining my

rationale and methods. The bulk of this article focuses on the tweets themselves, examining: how women are normalised and named by these companies, constructions of women's empowerment, and individualisation of success. Doty (1993) argues that greater attention needs to be paid to how subjects and objects are constructed in such a way that facilitates particular outcomes. That is, there is not necessarily a direct causal link to be drawn, but rather that representations place particular outcomes onto the table. The neoliberal feminist advancement of women is touted as a sign of social progress by arms manufacturers, obscuring the suffering resulting from their products. I argue, then, that the construction of neoliberal feminist subjects makes possible the wider arms trade.

## **NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM AND RACE**

Works on identity often centre one element, e.g. gender, and these are referred to as "single axis" analyses (Grzanka 2018: xv). As Crenshaw (1991) argues, it is impossible to understand gender without considering other elements of identity. Coining the term intersectionality, she explains that it is not enough to take an additive approach to oppression. Instead, we must seek to understand how different elements of identity combine to create a particular experience of the world. Her work explicitly focuses on Black women, to understand how they are marginalised as women due to their Blackness, and marginalised as Black people due to their womanhood. The study of intersectionality has since broadened to include more identity categories, but it remains important to keep its origins at the forefront of our minds (Grzanka 2018).

Closely associated with intersectionality is feminism and, in this article, I examine a specific formulation: neoliberal feminism. Neoliberalism can be understood as a capital-centric logic of governmentality (Prügl 2015: 615), with some groups of people benefiting more than others. Women are disadvantaged in the labour market because it drives company profit (Elson 1999) and – especially women of colour – remain marginalised by business and the economy (Bedford and Rai 2010). Within this space, a neoliberal variant of feminism is on the ascent. I argue that there are two central components to neoliberal feminism: women's empowerment and individualism.

Neoliberal feminism is driven by a market-centric conception of success, thus, empowerment is integral (Banet-Weiser 2018) and economic participation is frequently proffered as a method (Pearson 2016). Gregoratti (2016: 922) argues that companies "have now become some of the most vocal champions of gender equality and women's empowerment," often driven by corporate social responsibility initiatives (Walters 2021). Women's empowerment centres upon their ability to

provide for themselves and acquire leadership positions traditionally occupied by men, enabling them to cancel out discrimination. There is a perceived link between descriptive and substantive representation, conceptualising women's as an inherent good, driving forward women's interests in addition to interests of companies or states (Celis and Childs 2008). Women's empowerment is therefore seen as a win-win-win, simultaneously generating corporate revenue, enhancing GDP, and advancing women's interests (Roberts 2015). This has led to a co-optation of feminist ideas and ideals by corporate entities, which benefit from this association (Prügl 2015).

Individualism is also central to conceptualisations of neoliberal feminism (Prügl 2015). This is especially evident in "feminist manifestos", including Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, which advocate for the drive to achieve your personal goals and healthy work/life balance. Neoliberal feminism, then, demands that women work their way out of patriarchal problems and power structures that they are not individually capable of changing (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). Instead, the emphasis is upon individual choices, with the logic being that the "right" choice is the one that best suits the needs of the market. Women's labour force participation is seen as both possible and desirable because it enables them to individually escape patriarchal oppression of traditional gender roles, whilst at the same time turning away from structures such as white privilege and supremacy. The focus upon individual success mirrors the mainstreaming of feminism, a process that decouples the concept from more radical ideas centring gender justice (Rottenberg 2018). , which "positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force" (McRobbie 2004: 255). That is, neoliberal understandings of feminism show that individual women can attain success, negating the need for feminism in the first place.

The emphasis on individualism means that neoliberal feminism ignores the racial structures upon which capitalism is founded, privileging white women and their agency (Wilkes 2015). Indeed, the "central beneficiaries" of this type of feminism – and related affirmative action programmes – are middle-class white women (hooks 2000: 111). As a result, as Ahmed (2012: 9-10) notes, "diversity comes to be associated with certain bodies," especially women and/or people of colour. "What does diversity do?" she asks (Ahmed 2012: 1). She argues that intersectionality and diversity have come, to some extent, to stand for each other, obfuscating how power operates. Diversity is seen as the positive action or outcome of intersectionality, obscuring critiques of both by women of colour. By viewing institutions through the prism of "diversity" alone, it is impossible to see every problem because this concept is not nuanced enough to handle the messiness of people's lived experiences

(Ahmed 2012). The corporate celebration of diversity, then, is a form of neoliberal multiculturalism. This is where market logics are deployed in ways that benefit from the labour of people of colour and central to this are violent roles/industries celebrated because they bring jobs to people of colour. This form of neoliberal multiculturalism is global in its scope because it functions as a drive for wider legitimacy of the American political project abroad (Melamed 2006).

## **MARTIAL POLITICS**

The arms trade continues despite vigorous challenge. A key reason for this is militarisation: discourses and practices which create the conditions in which violence is made possible (Rossdale 2019). There have been calls for a reconsideration of militaries and militarisation to engender more nuanced understanding (Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015: 1). Howell (2018) makes a particularly important contribution, arguing that militarisation might be more usefully broadened beyond obvious boundaries. To do this, she proposes a concept of martial politics where “martial” signals a need to be attentive to war-like relations or technologies and knowledges that are “of war” rather than necessarily being clearly and directly related (Howell 2018: 118). This distinction is muddled further by the production of dual-use technologies (Larsson 2020). A good example of martial politics elision of the war/not war boundary are the branches of arms manufacturers *not* dedicated to making/promoting arms sales, but rather environmental monitoring equipment, space satellites, or commercial aeroplanes. Whilst these are not directly “of war” – they are not used to engender violence – products used in conflicts are the companies’ largest income source, and as a result, they too fall under the martial.

The argument for martial over militarisation is useful for three reasons. Firstly, labelling a process/object “militarised” gives a false sense of a civil/military divide and possibilities of substantive de-militarisation (Howell 2018). War is woven into the fabric of many subjects and objects and thus cannot be disentangled. Secondly, this reimagining allows us to better consider militarisation beyond militaries; Howell (2018) examines the police and university as institutions, for example. Thirdly, power is central to martial politics and key to this is examination of the multi-modal process of marginalisation (globally and locally) that take place when martial politics is engendered. This functions as a reminder of what is actually at stake when we consider the manufacture, sale, and use of arms. The emphasis upon power also makes it easier to see how the martial operates in ways that might challenge perceptions. Eisenstein (2013), for example, makes the plea, “Do not now cleanse the wars of/on terror with the face of a white blonde female.” This

highlights how women, often conceptualised as “beautiful souls” (Elshtain 1982), can in fact drive martial violence.

Developing the concept of the martial more broadly, Bousquet, Grove, and Shah (2020: 99) conceptualise a martial empiricism, which “calls for an unbounded investigation into the emergent and generative character of war.” They argue that war – with its messy conceptualisation and operation – cannot be neatly pinned down ontologically or epistemologically. This is because it spreads in new ways and new locations, morphing constantly. Instead of attempting to create a neat definition of what war is – or indeed, what it is not – Bousquet, Grove and Shah (2020: 101) instead encourage us to ask how war “becomes.” The logic is that we expect to find war in some places and, thus, this is where we look. Instead, this call pushes us to look to the margins, the grey areas, and the spaces in between to follow the trail of war wherever it might lead us. As a result, this push to examine an “unbounded” martial politics lends itself particularly well to contemporary and emerging spaces that might have a relationship with war, including social media.

Their three part typology, mobilising, designing and encountering war, suggests that martial politics operates in myriad ways (Bousquet, Grove, and Shah 2020). The first, mobilising war, is the process through which we trace how war is made possible, and they adopt a historical, embodied approach to understanding this subject. This is not the full extent of mobilisation, however, with Bousquet, Grove, and Shah themselves recognising that we should not constrain our thinking on this process. In this article, I broaden this to suggest that we might take a discursive approach in understanding how, where and why the martial might be mobilised. Further, their conceptualisation of mobilising war is congruent with Doty's (1993) suggestion that we examine how particular security practices are facilitated. In this work, Doty herself makes use of a discursive method and I explain this further below.

## **RATIONALE AND METHODS**

In this article, I explore the Twitter accounts of three of the largest arms manufacturers in the world: Lockheed Martin, Northrup Grumman and Raytheon. They were selected because all derive 85%+ of their revenue from arms sales, and are based in the United States. All approximately 850 tweets the companies sent between 1 January and 31 March 2019 were examined. It is important to consider all elements of a discursive artefact because these are dependent upon each other to derive their meaning (Howarth 2000). As a result, we must look beyond text, incorporating images (Hansen

2011) as well as format-specific elements of social media. These include hyperlinks, quote tweets, re-tweets and hashtags (Berents 2016). I ask two questions to better understand this material: firstly, how, if at all are women represented? This analysis seeks to understand how and where the term woman, women, girl or girls might be used in addition to those read as female within images or videos. The second question is what do these representations *do*, given the wider context of arms sales and suffering worldwide?

To answer these questions, I deploy the discourse theoretic approach, which has been used to good effect elsewhere in feminist international relations literatures (e.g., Shepherd 2006) and wider security and intelligence research (e.g. Crilley and Pears 2021). This does not conceptualise tweets as being framed in a particular way and makes no claims about intent. Instead, it explores firstly what is represented/how, and secondly, what political work these representations perform (Shepherd 2006). Representations are not static or stable but must be continuously re/articulated to obtain a semblance of fixity. Within attempts to understand global politics, Doty (1993) explains that it is not enough to simply ask why something happens. She does not emphasise straight lines between cause and effect, instead asking a broader question less concretely related to causality. This focuses on the conditions under which something *could* occur: the outcome is not necessarily guaranteed, rather, it is one of the possible cards from which to choose. Doty explains that how objects and subjects are represented, “[constitutes] particular interpretive dispositions which create certain possibilities and preclude others. What is explained is not why a particular outcome obtained, but rather how the subjects, objects, and interpretive dispositions were socially constructed such that certain practices were made possible” (Doty, 1993: 298). A key benefit of this approach, then, is to denaturalise policy choices or discourses that might have otherwise seemed common sense or inevitable as a result of their re-articulation (Weldes 1996).

To operationalise the discourse theoretic approach, I utilise Doty's (1993) concept of subject positioning. This unpacks the connections between subjects within a discourse, to understand the political work that such representations perform. In this case, I trace the relationship between these arms manufacturers in this space and women especially. There are a variety of ways in which subjects might be located with regards to one another, for example, “opposition, identity, similarity, and complementarity” (Doty 1993: 306). As Jester (2021: 62) explains, this enables us to ask a range of questions: “Which subjects are granted agency? Which are represented as followers rather than leaders? This makes it possible to see whether a hierarchy is present and which subject positions sit where, allowing us to trace the normalisation of power structures.” The relationships between

different subject positions are located within worlds in which these connections *already* make sense. That is, these representations are reliant upon discourses such as gender and neoliberalism; representations of these subject positions then feed-back out to these wider discourses and reproduce them.

Feminist critiques of neoliberalism are especially well-suited to social media spaces. Conceptualisations of public and private often render these binary opposites, but social media occupies an ambiguous space, both consumed in private and a “public sphere” where one can engage with anyone else (Habermas 1989). This ambiguity is highlighted by what Srnicek (2017) calls platform capitalism, where digital spaces act as facilitators in bringing together different groups, e.g. companies, the public, buyers, legislators and more to generate capital. This is a neoliberal practice where the public/private distinction is blurred by the ability of companies to access every aspect of our personal lives. As Dadas (2016) explains with regard to social media, feminist and queer approaches offer an obvious way in to this public/private liminal space. This is thanks to rich feminist and queer theorising on relationships between public and private, which positions these not as mutually distinct domains but rather ambiguous, grey, and multi-dimensional (Gavison 2001)<sup>2</sup>.

## ANALYSIS

### Normalising and naming women

The representation of women *without acknowledging* their sex normalises their occupation of defence and science spaces<sup>3</sup>. Images of women are commonplace, and I provide a broad range of examples to highlight the pervasiveness: e.g. a Black woman and a woman of Asian heritage working on a rocket (Raytheon 2019p); a white man and woman in colourful clothes with a robot (Lockheed Martin 2019f); a Black woman engineer standing by a high tech screen (Lockheed Martin 2019h)); two Black women talking at the convention for the National Society of Black Engineers (Lockheed Martin 2019q); four white students – two women – looking at plastic on a beach (Northrop Grumman 2019b); Northrop Grumman employees, a quarter of whom are women (some women of colour), smiling next to the Cygnus resupply spacecraft for ISS in a warehouse (Northrop Grumman 2019d). The volume and variety of women presented within these Twitter feeds therefore

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<sup>2</sup> Academic understanding of social media ethics has not kept pace with use (Williams, Burnap, and Sloan 2017), in part due to aforementioned public/private ambiguities. I suggest that there are subjects from whom it is unnecessary to obtain explicit consent, and arms manufacturers fall into this category. This is due to: 1) the serious harm their products inflict and 2) these companies expect their tweets to be read, as evidenced by their employment of public relations companies (in this case, Sprinklr) to manage output.

<sup>3</sup> According to Lockheed Martin (2015) 25% of their workforce is female.

exemplifies an effortless variety of post/feminism whereby the battle for equality has already been won, including in male-dominated spaces (McRobbie 2004).

In other instances, women are named as women either through use of the word or female pronouns. Common are tweets omitting obviously martial subject matter, for example, Dr. Robin Tanamachi, who works on tornadoes, is referred to as “she” (Raytheon 2019c), whilst Lockheed Martin retweets “[flying saucer emoji] Meet the women of @LockheedMartin who are in charge of ... space projects” (Bloomberg Quicktake 2019). Here, women are invoked within these tweets through the naming of their sex. Some tweets employing the word woman (or female pronouns) refer directly to defence, but this is less common: “We are privileged to work beside the women and men [at the Missile Defense Agency] who have helped to make our nation a safer place ...” (Northrop Grumman 2019a). Arguments for descriptive representation – whereby women’s occupation of a space is an inherent good – take on a new meaning when employed in service of the martial (Celis and Childs 2008). This is because women are commonly perceived as “beautiful souls” (Elshtain 1982) who can do no harm, in sharp contrast with the martial violence of their products. Their explicit naming as women, thus, performs important political work.

The word women (or a female pronoun) is also employed within a social media-specific format: the hashtag. Berents (2016) notes that hashtags are an effective means of mobilising around a particular issue. For example, #WomenInScience, #WomenInSTEM, #GirlDay, #WomensHistoryMonth #InternationalWomensDay, #SheRoars (e.g. Raytheon 2019e; a retweet of Bloomberg Quicktake 2019). The generic gender hashtags especially, e.g. #GirlDay, are a means of bringing martial politics into the mainstream, as the arms manufacturers’ tweets will appear in those searches. The other element of identity referenced directly through hashtags is Blackness, e.g. “#BlackHistoryMonth” (Lockheed Martin 2019i)<sup>4</sup>, which is an exemplar of neoliberal (feminist) multiculturalism (Melamed 2006). Black women are central to the normalisation of women as a whole within this space and this use of hashtags connects these representation to wider equality discourses.

Women are not presented simply as ordinary within these Twitter feeds, however. Supporting Stachowitsch’s (2019) finding that private security actors increasingly draw upon claims of female expertise, these tweets frequently emphasise women’s credibility. Their womanhood is typically unspecified for example, they are represented as “able to answer questions” which establishes

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<sup>4</sup> Raytheon’s CEO is a Black man named John Harris, who was named or depicted six times within collected tweets.

authority: “Can you use an #exoskeleton in outer space? Can an exoskeleton break the bones of its user? Those answers and more on this episode of Talk Techy to Me ...” (Lockheed Martin 2019n). The accompanying video contains three smiling white women discussing space and exoskeletons, demonstrating expertise. The use of women makes it possible to construct arms manufacturers as progressive, running counter to other research on cultures within martial organisations where they are marginalised (e.g. Cohn 1987). Notably, women are not labelled experts on martial objects such as missiles, but neither are men.

Science, security and white masculinity are often conceptualised as synonymous (D’Arcangelis 2016), but these tweets diverge from this norm to centre women as scientific experts, especially women of colour. For example, one tweet features a smiling Latinx woman, labelled a “cyber expert” (Lockheed Martin 2019d), whilst Lockheed Martin re-tweeted the University of Central Florida (2019), who said, “We’ve got @LockheedMartin cyber experts here at UCF for a live Reddit AMA from 2-3PM ...”. This is accompanied by an image of three staff (two women, one Latinx) sitting informally at a table smiling. There is a tension within this representation: emphasis upon expertise demonstrates that women of colour are valued most when they are equally or more successful than white male counterparts (Nkrumah 2021). At the same time, women of colour’s expertise challenges traditional representations of neoliberal feminism as a white space ignorant of the challenges faced by women of colour (Wilkes 2015).

Contemporary emphasis upon female expertise is also positioned historically. For example, “Raytheon built the computer that guided the Apollo mission to the moon 50 years ago. Behind the scenes, women hired from Massachusetts mills wove the copper wire that made that computer work ...” (Raytheon 2019n). Use of black and white photography (of a Black woman weaving this copper wiring at a machine) locates this within history rather than present day. Appeals to history within feminist rhetoric show how women’s achievements are obscured (Jarratt 1992) and in this case, the tweets in question mark achievements of women in the past. In Northrop Grumman (2019i), a female engineer wonders what it would have been like for women “30, 40, 50 years ago,” suggesting that the status of women has changed. This reassures that the present is a different, better, more equal time, in which women are able to liberate themselves through labour force participation (Roberts 2015). These companies present themselves as integral to women’s – neoliberal – betterment, as Northrop Grumman (2019i) demonstrates: “diversity is important to this company, and it’s been part of their history all along.”

Historic participation in the labour force is also located – at least partially – with the martial realm. Northrop Grumman (2019i), for example, states that “Northrop Grumman actively recruited women to become their Rosie the Riveters and they took an active step to bring those women in to become part of the workforce.” Gregoratti (2016), Walters (2021), and others have argued that corporations can be the loudest cheerleaders for gender equality and in this case Northrop Grumman construct this as part of their history. This goes further than equality, however, with women being vital to masculine spaces: Rosie the Riveter was a World War II icon and therefore more obviously martial than most other representations of women. This mirrors historical discussions about women in martial institutions, as Kronsell (2005: 281) explains, “In western European countries feminist struggle has expanded from the grassroots context to include increasing engagement in a wide range of societal institutions, among which are the military and defense sectors.” Feminist engagement with martial industries divorces women’s oppression from wider power structures such as patriarchy. It positions women as agentic within the labour force and thus can be seen as neoliberal (Cornwall and Rivas 2015).

That women are now able to engage in martial institutions on similar terms with men is presented as progress. Discussions about progress signal awareness that women have been marginalised at some point, and this is both implicit and explicit<sup>5</sup>. This is illustrative: “We are honored to announce our ranking by @Forbes as one of America’s Best Employers for Diversity in 2019. #NorthropGrumman is consistently recognized as one of the best places to work, and it’s all thanks our incredible employees ...”. Featured also is a photograph of a Northrop Grumman team, ¼ female and 1/3 people of colour (Northrop Grumman 2019c). This contrasts somewhat with the aforementioned representations of women as normalised. Here, some of employees are “diversity”: though it does not specify which, Ahmed (2012) notes that this predicate is typically attached to people of colour, especially women.

### **Empowering and inspiring women**

Empowerment has been a significant corporate focus in recent years (Tornhill 2016) and is central to neoliberal feminism. These tweets use the term “empowerment”/“empower” frequently, especially within science and technology, e.g., “We’re proud to empower women in leadership and technology” (Lockheed Martin 2019p); “We support ... efforts to promote #STEM education and workforce training that empowers women around the world to reach their full potential” (Lockheed Martin 2019c). Images reinforce this, for example, a tweet about a scholarship program is

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<sup>5</sup> This is also badged as “LGBT-friendly” (e.g. Lockheed Martin 2016), a form of “pink-washing”.

accompanied by an image of a man showing various women (and men of colour) an open computer (Lockheed Martin 2019g), whilst Raytheon (2019b) features a video including many women. Cohn (1987) argues, in her examination of defence practitioners, that participation in martial discourses/practices can be pleasurable and that is how empowerment is portrayed. As Raytheon electrical engineer Janet tells us, these companies are “a really cool place to work because we get to work on really neat new technologies” (Raytheon 2019o), making empowerment fun.

Beyond women’s empowerment, these companies also empower girls, which is a common corporate strategy (Walters 2021). Girls’ empowerment is represented through presupposition or visually, for example: “We’re helping to inspire the next generation of Aussie scientists and engineers by speaking to students at the @NYSFoz about the great opportunities in cutting edge science and technology, including future careers in space” (Lockheed Martin 2019a). This accompanies an image of a young people’s careers fair, including many girls. Again, the girls are not named as female specifically, mirroring aforementioned representations of women as normalised within this space. As Banet-Weiser (2015: 182) explains, this is “part of a ‘market of empowerment’ that aims to empower girls within a context of commodified girl power and neoliberal entrepreneurialism,” stretching from the domestic to the global (see, for example, Walters 2018, on international development).

Futurity is central to the neoliberal feminist subject (Rottenberg 2018) and girls are instructed to look ahead to their careers, shaping life choices around work. Often, outreach is positioned as targeting girls explicitly and this work portrays STEM as a viable career choice (“In honor of #GirlDay2019, our engineers offer tips on how to encourage girls to pursue STEM careers” (Raytheon 2019i)), with generic STEM badging a more comfortable space than the obviously martial. The companies also provide concrete skills with which to advance in this area, for example: “80 high school girls. 4 coding experiences. 3 lectures. The “WOMEN@STEM Career Day” hosted by #NorthropGrumman and @wisetter, the Korea Center for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology (WISET), was a big success!” (Northrop Grumman 2019e). The companies engage girls at a young age: “Stephanie, an industrial engineer at Raytheon, says: ‘It’s very important that girls get into STEM early on’” (Raytheon 2019j). Many girls portrayed are around ten and they are being encouraged to see themselves as future STEM employees, empowering them to consider a wider range of careers.

There is controversy about allowing the military – especially recruiters – into schools (Blaz 2006), yet the arms manufacturers examined in this article appear to have ready access to children’s spaces. Arms manufacturer access is less easily questioned because most of these roles are less obviously martial, e.g. making rockets that will be used in space, and these activities are positioned as fun ways to learn (Lockheed Martin 2019j). It is harder to challenge activities that are empowering for girls, especially for future careers. This is exemplified by a statement from a young female participant in a Raytheon women in STEM speed-mentoring event. In the video clip, she says that “today I learned that, although competition is everywhere, you shouldn’t let it discourage you, but rather it should empower you because perseverance is what will help you reach your goal” (Raytheon 2019m). The avoidance of the topic of systematic prejudice makes this link with girls’ empowerment a neoliberal one, where individual girls must equip themselves with the necessary skills to succeed in the marketplace.

Beyond direct, tangible solutions for disempowerment, amorphous “inspiration” is proffered as softer engagement. For example, “Inspiring future leaders: ‘Our engineers discussed all things #STEM with 160 aspiring female engineers ...’” (Raytheon 2019k). A variety of other tweets also use the language of inspiration as empowerment (Raytheon 2019m; U.S. Department of Energy 2019, re-tweeted by Lockheed Martin). This tweet, quoting female CEO Marillyn Hewson, is instructive: “Thank you @IvankaTrump for bringing together an impressive group of leaders for an inspiring discussion as part of the #WGDP. Empowering women helps drive innovation, opportunity, and progress. When women prosper, nations prosper. — Marillyn Hewson, Chairman, President and CEO”<sup>6</sup> (Lockheed Martin 2019e). Hewson places the agency at women’s feet: you can “make it” if you want it and are willing to work for it. This mirrors some women’s neoliberal perceptions of their lives, where they can overcome identity-based obstacles such as patriarchy and misogyny themselves by taking responsibility and making sensible choices (Scharff 2011).

If arms manufacturers are empowering and inspiring women, who precisely is taking on this work? It is the female staff who perform this additional labour of encouraging girls into science. Men are featured in this context only rarely, perhaps because women are perceived to be more authentic or better at nurturing girls’ aspirations. For example, Lockheed Martin retweeted Bloomberg Quicktake (2019), who did a feature on their women space scientists. At one point, the women discuss public engagement with girls, with one saying: “I love when we have students come in here and see so many other women on console ... when you can picture yourself doing that, there’s no reason to

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<sup>6</sup> This is a quote-tweet of @Ivankatrump.

limit yourself or not challenge yourself to do whatever you want.” This highlights that female staff members are responsible for these activities, adding to workloads. In situations where equality discourses are evoked, an “added burden” is often placed upon women to correct their own group marginalisation. This practice is replicated in other settings such as peacebuilding, where calls for female peacekeepers demand extra work of women (Wilén 2020). In a peacekeeping context, this can result in backlash against women peacekeepers. Contrastingly, in the context of arms manufacturers, it is the use of women as company representatives that makes backlash harder<sup>7</sup>.

In another martial context, Joachim and Schneiker (2012) argue that the representation of PMSCs as humanitarians obscures their martial nature. Raytheon (2019o) explain that they have a desire to “reach beyond and make an impact” because “our mission is to make the world safer and a better place for everyone”. Representations of International Women’s Day cement arms manufacturers’ portrayal as humanitarian: “All around the world #NorthropGrumman employees are celebrating #InternationalWomensDay by making their own pledges to create a #BalanceForBetter. We pledge to continue the conversation and champion women in STEM, business, leadership, and beyond. What's your pledge? ...”. This is accompanied by images, including a group photograph of women employees in purple, as well as individual or small shots showing smiling women holding signs saying “I will be a champion for women leaders” (Northrop Grumman 2019h). Moving beyond general support for empowerment, these companies represent themselves as offering solutions. For example, they provide internships (a woman named Catherine says “my internship with Raytheon allowed me to exercise my problem-solving skills and helped me find a career that will make a difference” (Raytheon 2019g)), grants (e.g. “to pursue #cybersecurity degrees” (Raytheon 2019f)), and scholarships (Lockheed Martin 2019g). Representations of empowerment as humanitarian also invite a perception of political legitimacy because this quality is a social good. As Stachowitsch (2019: 158-9) notes, this political legitimacy is especially important to subjects – like PMSCs or arms manufacturers – who “fulfil tasks traditionally associated with the state’s monopoly on violence.”

These legitimacy-enhancing tweets are publicly available, making companies more attractive to those who might apply to work there. Constructions of empowerment and humanitarianism therefore function as general recruitment materials, as is the case for other security actors within social media spaces (Crilley and Pears 2021). Enloe (Shigematsu 2009: 420) argues that military institutions “depend” on inequality as a recruitment driver. Socio-economic disadvantages faced by

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<sup>7</sup> The middle portion of this quote is interesting for a different reason: “see so many other women on console, or doing other things here”. The companies selected derive 85%+ of sales from arms and thus, “other things” refers implicitly to martial activities.

those from lower-income backgrounds (often people of colour) can drive this group into the military. Despite risks to life and bodily integrity, the financial stability of working within martial institutions grants a safety net that would otherwise be difficult to obtain; this might be seen by individuals as empowering. There is a parallel for women within other martial industries such as arms manufacturing, though not to quite the same extent given that the physical risks of the job are significantly less. Other work has examined US and UK advertising in the military in the context of declining recruitment (Jester 2021). These tweets mirror the findings that military recruitment advertising rejects the stereotypical form of hegemonic military masculinity, featuring a range of women in different non-traditional roles.

### **Individualising women's success**

Congruent with wider neoliberal feminist discourses, these tweets emphasise individualisation whereby specific women are represented as succeeding or holding power in their career. Abstract representations do not focus upon any woman in particular, but emphasise individual women's corporate success: "#DYK women-owned businesses are growing faster than U.S. businesses overall? We're proud to help fuel that growth by working with more than 1,300 women-owned businesses as trusted suppliers ..." (Lockheed Martin 2019o). Raytheon is similar in its representation of successful women: "Phoenix Products, Inc., a small company owned by women in an underused business zone in Kentucky, will build transport containers for our Naval Strike Missile. Learn how our mentoring program helps develop technical and operating skills ..." (Raytheon 2019h). This is a particularly interesting example of how women's advancement is correlated with martial politics because it explicitly references missiles, and objects clearly "of war" are not commonly articulated to the women in arms companies' social media (Howell 2018).

Other individuals are, however, named and most prominent is Marillyn Hewson, CEO of Lockheed Martin. Tweets about Hewson do not always mention women or gender, for example, "'We know that strong partnerships—like the one between the Netherlands and United States—are critical to the future of our world.' – Our Chairman, President & CEO, Marillyn Hewson ..." (Lockheed Martin 2019k). There are, on occasions, direct references to women's success, for example, "Thank you@IvankaTrump for bringing together an impressive group of leaders for an inspiring discussion as part of the #WGDP. Empowering women helps drive innovation, opportunity, and progress. When women prosper, nations prosper. — Marillyn Hewson, Chairman, President and CEO" (Lockheed Martin 2019e). Uncommonly, Hewson appends her name and role to tweets. Anne Marie Slaughter – author of what Rottenberg (2018) calls a feminist manifesto for neoliberalism – says "I respect and

admire Marilyn Hewson, as I do any woman who makes it to the top job” (Slaughter 2015: 4). There appears to be a wider sense, then, that Hewson is a woman who has “made it” – to the top of a male-dominated industry, no less – thanks to hard work and determination (Banet-Weiser 2018). Neoliberal feminist allies lend support to individual successes: Ivanka Trump is author of her own “neoliberal feminist manifesto” (Hopkins 2018: 99). She and Hewson are also pictured together in another tweet (Lockheed Martin 2019l), the text accompanied by an image of them standing next to each other smiling, both wearing pink.

Though most senior, Hewson is not the only high-level woman referenced in these tweets, with many others being Black women, highlighting Black Enterprise Awards for Stephanie Hill and Patricia Lewis (Lockheed Martin 2019m) and “Shawn Purvis, #NorthropGrumman Corporate VP & President of Enterprise Services” (Northrop Grumman 2019f). These representations discuss specific women but typically do not discuss sex or race as barriers. There are occasional exceptions, for example: “We are honored to recognize Lockheed Martin HR Director Vernecia Johnson who will receive the 2019 Dave Barclay Affirmative Action Award at #BEYA2019!”, accompanied by a graphic celebrating a Black woman staff member (Lockheed Martin 2019b). We are told that this pertains to “affirmative action”, a system designed to rectify power imbalances by providing opportunities to marginalised groups. Successes of more junior individual Black women are also detailed, for example, “Yolanda, a systems engineer with Raytheon, shares what motivated her to pursue a career in #STEM, her appreciation for challenges and how she successfully oversees operations for a team of 1,800 systems engineers ... #WomenInScience” (Raytheon 2019a). This tweet features an image of a Black woman speaking on a panel. She looks just off camera, her body positioned towards a microphone, mouth slightly ajar as though mid-sentence. This is an image that presents Raytheon as a company in which women – including women of colour – can enjoy a neoliberal form of individual success (Prügl 2015).

Individual stories of women’s success are also presented as female firsts. Striking is the erasure of Black women from their own success, a manifestation of an amorphous neoliberal multiculturalism where Black women can succeed but only unnamed (Melamed 2006). For example, Lockheed Martin tells us that “For decades, our external tanks enabled human spaceflight. And in 1992, Space Shuttle Endeavour took the first African-American woman to space. #BlackHistoryMonth [Black fists emoji]” (Lockheed Martin 2019i). The emphasis is upon a Black female first, though Mae Jemison is unnamed and unpictured, featuring an image of a rocket instead. Northrop Grumman draws upon popular culture linkages to achieve the same effect: “Fifty-seven years after real-life Hidden Figures helped

pave the way for the United States to land on the moon, have we made a difference to women in STEM? ...”. This is accompanied by an image of a young girl of Asian heritage, raising her hand into the air like a superhero, there is a chalkboard behind her and she is outlined with a drawing of an astronaut (Northrop Grumman 2019g; Northrop Grumman 2019j also references *Hidden Figures*). Again, however, key women such as Katherine Johnson are not named or depicted, even though it is their individual successes that underpin the accomplishments in the given tweets.

As Nkrumah (2021: 11) argues, *Hidden Figures* is a film that both represents white maleness as norm within science and technology spaces and poses a challenge to these structures: “Neoliberalism works with whiteness in the film to depict the ideal White worker as someone who is diligent, task-oriented, and dependable. Katherine [a Black female space scientist] is portrayed as someone who must learn to be this way to succeed in her work environment.” These tweets, therefore, draw across intertextual references to other artefacts with narratives of women’s success, reinforcing ideals of feminist neoliberal multiculturalism. Black women’s successes exist in the same space as the (often violent) denigration of this group. This is – perhaps unsurprisingly – unrecognised within these tweets, as is the martial driver behind the positive representations. As argued above, appeals to history obscure marginalisation in the present. The positive portrayals of individual Black women’s success in a white male-dominated industry represent an imaginary in which Black women have “won” and are no longer oppressed or hidden.

## CONCLUSION

I have made the case that the representations contained within arms manufacturers Twitter feeds portray the companies as more widely progressive and a force for good in the world. Their feeds firstly normalise women within their respective companies, making clear that women make important contributions. Representations of women are secondly built around discourses of empowerment, which present these companies as drivers of social progress. Finally, these tweets emphasise individual women’s success, presenting themselves in a supporting role. Central to all of these areas, in addition to gender, is race. The representations are an exemplar of neoliberal feminism, but they are also an embodiment of neoliberal multiculturalism, whereby racial “diversity” is deployed in service of corporate entities.

Arms manufacturers are martial in nature, even if a proportion of their employees are not directly engaged in the manufacture and sale of weapons. We should be concerned with the arms trade

because of the suffering engendered by their products. Roxanne Doty encourages us to ask how particular actions are “made possible” and this is a useful question in understanding the arms trade: how is it possible that arms manufacturers are still able to make and sell their products? These companies are represented in their Twitter feeds as feminist and multicultural (albeit neoliberally). I argue that it is this presentation of these companies as beacons of social progress that makes it harder to challenge their martial activities.

More broadly, this article also seeks to advance our understanding of security spaces on digital platforms, which are not yet as well understood as they might be. Further work might be done on this subject by examining the websites of arms manufacturers. A cursory examination shows that there is an interesting range of materials on these sites, including articles about groups or issues that are not present on Twitter. For example, transgender employees, a group that is not discussed in their Twitter feed beyond generic discussions about LGBT rights, feature on the Lockheed Martin website (Lockheed Martin 2021). There is much left to say about the martial elements of digital space and I look forward to continuing the conversation.

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