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The Cruel Optimism of Militarism: A Feminist Curiosity, Affect, and Global Security

Abstract

This article asks: why do communities located at the periphery of the global security market continue to participate, even when they gain the least economically and politically? To answer this, we explore how militarism—an affectively felt logic, that understands military service as desirable and/or inevitable – manifests through both affective relations and colonial structures. We focus on Gurkha communities in Nepal with a colonial military heritage of 200 years with the British. Feminist and postcolonial research on militaries have demonstrated how war and global insecurity is framed through gendered colonial economies and discursive logics, shaping military systems and subjects. Yet what remains under-explored is the affective dimension of how militarism operates within and in relation to militarised communities outside the ‘West’, whose identities and material conditions are structured through colonial histories. To address this gap, we operationalise Lauren Berlant’s (2011) concept cruel optimism to capture why these communities stay attached to militarism when the costs abound. We argue that militarism within the Gurkha context, is both affectively felt and structurally experienced in such a way that renders a military pathway to a good life as natural and desirable, despite evidence of the fragility and impossibility in pursuing this path.

Introduction

I sat on the dewy grass, swatting off mosquitoes, during a sunny early July evening in Dharan, Nepal. At a Gurkha training center—one of the hundreds scattered throughout Nepal, I watched as young Nepali men aged 17 to 19, did circuit training. Their glistening bodies moving around the training facility while the older ex-Gurkha men watched on, yelling out instructions with clipboards and stopwatches in hand. I watched these men’s bodily expressions of power and discipline as they endured long periods of intense strength training conducting pull-ups, push-ups, and sprint drills. These men reminded me of the other young Nepalese men I met and talked to throughout Nepal, who put their bodies through this same intense preparation, and spend considerable amount of time and energy to be trained, in the hope of becoming a British Gurkha. They invest a lot of money, collected through family and community members, and mental energy into these training courses hoping they will be better equipped for the annual British Gurkha selection process. A selection that sees nearly

3000 applicants competing for 250-400 positions. To me, it seemed like a risky life choice to invest so much emotionally, financially and physically in a pursuit of a goal that is unreachable for most and likely to end in disappointment.

This fieldwork note, like the others we explore in this article, raise a puzzle for us: Why do people located at the periphery of the global security market attempt to take up positions as military soldiers/security contractors, even when they gain the least economically and politically? For us this begs the question of how is it that an investment in militarism emerges and is sustained *even when* this relation has put strain on family relations, or prove impossible to achieve; and why do generations of Gurkha families continue to enlist their labour in the service of the global security industry when the migratory pattern is understood to wear out family relations and bodies? To answer this, we turn to Berlant's concept "cruel optimism" to show how militarism as a path to a secure future, to a 'good life' is affectively felt. It is these "moods" and "sensations" of hope, of shame and guilt, that stick to militarism, even when evidence of the fragility and impossibility is abound (Berlant, 2011: 2).

Broadly speaking, we understand militarism as an affectively felt and structurally lived logic that enables Gurkha communities to see military service as a normal, even an honourable pathway to a better life. Militarism manifests itself into everyday life, through a set of material and discursive practices which serve to make war seem normal and even desirable (Enloe 2000; Eastwood 2017:10). Within global security markets, militarism simultaneously rests upon and obscures colonial relations that economically and politically structure communities on the periphery of global security; creating a naturalising and seemingly timeless *martial* communities amenable and willing to sign up for military work, despite the empirical evidence highlighting the economic, social and political costs abound (Barkawi 2017; Ware 2012; Streets 2004; Chisholm 2014).

Our puzzle brings into conversation postcolonial and feminist work on militarism (Enloe 2000; Ahall 2018; Basham 2018; Ware 2012; Barkawi 2017, Howell 2015; 2018). By drawing upon these two bodies of work, we argue that it is not possible to make sense of how Gurkha communities support the global security industry through their labour—military service and the social reproduction of the military households — without accounting for the legacies of their colonial relations with the British. Like Barkawi (2017), we begin by locating what militarism is and does in communities marked by "imperial encounters". In this way, we highlight how affective relations to militarism manifests in the everyday lives of Gurkha communities; communities who because of their colonial histories with the British and broader colonial positions within global economies, are framed through a profound degree of precarity so that even the idea of having an everyday life, for most, becomes aspirational (Davies, 2016).

To unpack how militarism is both affectively and structurally lived, we turn to Lauren Berlant's work on how affects manifest within the context of social crisis and economic precarity (Berlant, 2011). In basic terms, affect is conceptualised as "non-conscious" and "pre-cognitive", as "embodied feelings" that are yet to be registered as conscious emotions (Anderson 2017). These include moods, dispositions, sensations and sensibilities that are not separate from emotions, but rather are intimately connected (Hutchison 2019; Ahmed 2004). However, we are less interested in offering a concrete definition of affect. Instead, we employ a "pragmatic-contextual" (Anderson 2014:12) to militarism to show what militarism does politically in Gurkha communities—that is, how optimistic affects such as hope become attached to militarism, in the form of hope for an economic life-line out of poverty, for communities whose everyday lives are framed through constant struggles in social reproduction.

Optimism for Berlant manifests in attachments to an object of desire as well as in the desire to sustain these attachments (Berlant, 2011: 2). Optimistic attachments are about sustaining life's continuity and about reproducing life (Berlant, 2011). Optimism turns "cruel" when the very pursuit of the "good life" becomes "the obstacle to your flourishing" (2011: 1). What matters for us is Berlant's conceptualisation of optimism as a social relation that organises the present into particular logics that then become affirming and thus pleasurable (Berlant, 2011: 2). When employing cruel optimism in the context of the Gurkha community, militarism is affectively felt logic that makes the pursuit of a "good life" intelligible. What we focus on is the investment in militarism, the desire one derives from being inside this relation, how this relation is experienced, and the feelings that get attached to this relation. We argue that being inside this relation is a crucial part of why those communities who gain the least, and whose very participation often leads to the wearing out or "attrition of life" (Berlant, 2011: 119), continue to participate in global security markets.

We develop this argument in two ways. First, we analyse interviews with Gurkha recruits, Gurkhas, retired from the Indian army, now working in private security and their wives, as well as young men who failed at becoming Gurkhas. Drawing upon three interviews out of the 180 analysed, we show how hope, guilt, shame and desire attach to militarism in such a way that normalises the recruitment and participation of Gurkha workforces and the families who support them, despite the sacrifice and emotional costs this type of military service brings. Secondly, by focusing on an interview with Sameer, a man who was unsuccessful at becoming a Gurkha, we show how failure at becoming a Gurkha has the potential to be disrupted the natural position of militarism as the pathway to a good life in these communities—however small.

The article proceeds in three sections. The first section advances our arguments that attachments to militarism are embedded within colonial socio-economic legacies as much as affective relations. The second section further develops our theoretical framing by engaging with Berlant's notions of cruel

optimism and crisis ordinary. The third section examines how optimistic attachments to militarism emerge and are sustained through engaging with the two interview encounters: “cruel optimisms of militarism” and “militarism and failure”. We conclude by showing how these encounters allow us to critically rethink conceptualisations of militarism in the context of global security.

Methodology

As mentioned, this article focuses upon three sem-structured interviews. These interviews originate from two years of ethnographic research and are situated amongst 180 interviews with Gurkha candidates, Gurkhas, Gurkha families, Gurkha training centre owners, security company managers and security recruiters in Nepal—all who participate in global security operations. These interviews are coupled with detailed textual analysis of the transcripts by both authors. The stories highlight the tensions and different circulations of the good life in relation to militarism. Militarism as affectively felt, for us, moves across temporalities and geographies, and is fundamental to ways of knowing and being. This circulation happens through the fieldwork, in the ways in which AuthorX connected to the communities she embedded herself in. But it also happens through both authors’ textual encounters with the transcripts. The circulation embraces not only those specific moments and geographies but resonates through specific histories (Ahmed, 2014) of militarism, including that of Gurkhas as a community whose origin comes through colonial encounters with the British, AuthorX’s 10 years of researching Gurkhas in private security and AuthorY’s recent engagement with Gurkha histories. The article unfolds through our analysis of our own reflections and engagements with these interviews and interview transcripts fieldnotes, detailed in italics within this article. The reflections and analyses are written both in first person, treated as in conversation with each other. This way of writing is to highlight how our own affective relations to militarism and the transcripts we engaged with materialised in different ways.

Importantly, our work does not assume we can extract a truth of militarism through face-to-face affective encounters during fieldwork (Pedwell, 2012: 176). Rather, we seek to write in the layers of meaning/feeling/interpretation and tensions that not only materialise in the fieldwork conducted “over there” but also in the reflections and emotional/intellectual curiosities applied to the transcripts “here”. The encounters we explore are a reflection of the broader themes that arose from these interviews, particularly with Gurkha communities—yet these are not exhaustive. We chose these encounters to highlight the contested, ambiguous and diverse nature of militarism as an affectively felt logic in military communities that are established through imperial encounters and remain at the periphery of global security.

Political Economies of Militarism

The very idea of the Gurkha arose out of a militarised colonial encounter between Britain and Nepal during the Anglo-Nepalese War (Streets 2004). Gurkhas, a group of men understood through the colonial lens of martial race, continue to fight on behalf of the British and India, and also serve in the Singaporean Police and the Sultan of Brunei's military guardforce. Internationally, the idea of Gurkhas resonates as a military imagining of fierceness, bravery, loyalty and at home in Nepal, affluence and wealth (Chisholm, 2014). Yet, despite a military heritage of over 200 years, militarism as a felt logic, did not immediately register in conversations with the young men preparing to become a Gurkha. In interviews, many of them did not know what military service might mean for them in their everyday. What they knew was that becoming a Gurkha would be a game changer. For most of these young men, it would provide them and their families with a certainty in secure future, a good life, that was currently not thinkable. How then do we make sense of their motivations?

Feminists illustrate the ways in which militarism, as a violent gendered, colonial and raced project and process, fuels war economies. These critiques have focused upon both the structural and ideational economies of contemporary warfare (Enloe 2000; Peterson 2008). The increased use of private security has meant that global security is now more aptly understood as "security assemblages" (Abrahamsen and Williams 2009), blurring state/market distinctions. For Peterson (2008), this new global warfare that is increasingly marked by informal economies, is changing gendered roles in war. War is increasingly decentralised, privatised and global. Yet militarism, manifested through gender and colonial histories, continues to produce macro political identities of the honourable (white and brown) feminine women in need of protecting by the virtuous European male from the barbaric oriental other. These identities perpetuate a western militarism that normalises war (Peterson 2008; Agathangelou and Ling 2009) and broader gendered divisions of military labour (Peterson 2008; Enloe 2000; Howell 2015).

Gender and colonial legacies not only structure the identity and common senses that underpin and normalise political economies of war, they are also fundamental to maintaining a surplus of global military workforce. Where much military scholarship has focused on how militarism is enacted as affect and a logic (Enloe 2000; Basham 2018; Eastwood. 2017), these manifestations of militarism, with a few notable exceptions, continue to be framed within a Western-focused understanding of militarism, military and war. Alternatively, Streets (2004), War (2012) and Barkawi (2017) explicitly begin with the colonial encounter. Each take British colonial enterprise as their starting point to understand why soldiers (and security contractors) fight and what makes "ethnic soldiers". Each illuminate how militarism as a mobilising logic to support global warfare/security operations remains vital to waging war, but operates differently when taken outside the European/Western context.

Beginning with the “imperial encounter” we acknowledge how militarism has enabled an uplift in economic and social status through (foreign) military service. We also situate martial race as a disciplining and aspiring bonding discourse to foreground the colonial bonds between “ethnic” and “British” soldiers forged through the act of warfighting. It is a bond that remains foundational in how global South security workforces access security markets today.

It is these interlockers that produce the “colonial military labour circuits” (Ware 2012: 269-270) of (cheap) surplus security labour forces that both private security companies and British military draw upon (Chisholm, 2014; Mynster Christensen 2016). Indeed, critical gender scholars within private security scholarship have shown how pathways to employment with security companies are often through the same military colonial ties that bound British officers to their ethnic/martial race soldiers (Chisholm 2014)—with Western retired military officers championing and facilitating employment of retired colonial soldiers and other global South militarised men (Chisholm 2014). Whilst this political and economic analysis is vital to understanding the broader structures and political identities that inform recruitment of global South security labour, it says little about the emotional and affective relations that sustain colonial communities’ attachment to militarism as a pathway to a better life—particularly in contemporary war economies that rest upon increasing informalisation and precarity of workforces globally (Peterson 2008; Mynster-Christensen 2016).

Feminist research on militarism and affect show us that militarism manifests in how bodies culturally and socially matter differently as a result of how they are sexed (Åhäll, 2018). Drawing on this literature, we understand militarism as a logic that becomes sticky (Ahmed, 2014) through our affective encounters—observed, for example, in the ways martial raced soldiers are understood as both brave and infantilised within colonial militaries (Barkawi 2017; Streets 2004). These colonial affects “stick” to these men, becoming a part of everyday sensibilities and frame how and who we understand to be desirable security actors (Chisholm 2014; Ware 2012). Yet, capacities to ‘affect and be affected’ are not reducible to individual bodies but rather are always already conditioned by the histories that precede the subject (Ahmed 2004; 2014). Here, the imperial encounter(s) between the British and Gurkhas remain central to how Gurkha communities understand their own value as martial soldiers/contractors (Chisholm 2014). Ahmed’s notion of ‘circulation’ allows us to move away from situating affect merely in the immediacy of bodily reactions (Ahmed 2014: 212) and instead to think about the ways in which investments in militarism, including the felt and sensed dimensions of these investments, have specific histories (Ahall 2018).

These feminist accounts, whilst important in their own right, do not adequately capture the nuances of militarism as emerging in our fieldwork. These explanations do not address how this logic emerges and is sustained in contexts where it is rendered clear that militarism is an impossible path to

achieving that which one desires, or where the very attachment to militarism has become toxic. What is distinct about the Gurkha communities is their location at the intersection of global capitalism and militarism. Both logics function in tandem as mechanisms that perpetuate the community's *buy in* to economic and security arrangements that imbricate them to the periphery. Importantly, it is not enough to think about this question in terms of how the subject is duped, does not have enough information, is being irrational, or is structurally disadvantaged in ways that renders other choices out of reach (Rashid, 2018). Or to position the subject as so saturated with militarist ideals and values that other options become unthinkable. Understanding militarism through the lens of cruel optimism enables us to ask different questions. We begin to rethink motivations for participating in militarist practices and adopting militarist logics.

The Cruel Optimism of Militarism in Crisis Ordinary

Drawing on Berlant, we understand optimism as an orientation towards a particular pleasure that is bound up with the “activity of worldmaking” (Berlant, 2011: 14), activities geared towards sustaining and reproducing life. Optimism then is not a form of “pathology” but a social relation, specifically, a relation that involves attachments that “organise the present” (Berlant, 2011: 14). This allows us to ask how optimism and militarism intersect as a social relation. In our framework militarism is an affectively felt logic that organises the *colonial* present, gives meaning to Gurkha's colonial histories, and renders the pursuit of military service as a knowable path to a secure future. These optimisms become cruel when the investment in militarism as the necessary pathway to achieving the good life becomes impossible or toxic, and yet the optimistic attachment to militarism is sustained. What we draw from Berlant is the idea that the very pleasure of being inside this relation to militarism can become sustaining regardless of the content of that relation in such a way that a person becomes bound to a situation that is at the same time harmful and affirming (Berlant, 2011: 2).

Berlant's work remains under-explored in the feminist literature that examines militarism through the lens of affect. There are, however, some notable exceptions. Eastwood (2017) employs the concept of cruel optimism in the context of examining the ethics of Israeli militarism. He unpacks how the ethics of militarism ‘instils desires and creates fantasies’, thereby motivating soldiers to participate in an ‘inevitably compromised and violent military occupation’ (Eastwood, 2017: 193). Also writing in the context of Israel-Palestine, Natanel (2016) invokes Berlant to rethink political apathy as a form of ‘active disengagement’ among leftist Jewish Israelis. She draws on the notions of ‘world building’ and ‘world maintenance’ (Berlant, 2011) to show how it is through creating ‘small worlds’ and ‘simple lives’ (Natanel, 2016) that the subjects in her ethnography seek to make life liveable. Both Eastwood and Natanel help us tease out the affective tensions of militarism as it intertwines with

racial and colonial discourses through the everyday. Yet the community we engage with is located at the socio-economic and political margins. As such, our puzzle is not why already privileged communities invest in militarism, but why those located at the margins, who stand to gain the least, continue to do so. Consequently, Rashid's (2018) work on affect as a technology of rule employed by Pakistani Armed Forces, is also informative. Like Rashid, we focus on the engagement and disengagement with militarism by those 'who stand to suffer significant losses (soldiers and families)' (Rashid, 2018: 41-42). However, our research is situated within the global economy of security markets. Our aim is to unpack a specific optimistic relation to militarism in which foreign security service has – over time – become associated with hope for the 'good life'.

The optimistic relation to militarism we unpack has a temporality to it. Gurkhas and their families' stories of militarism are bound together by optimisms for futures not yet known and "unfinished histories" (Berlant, 2011: 124). These histories remain ambivalent in how they are recalled through interviews. For example, Sameer's account of his failure at becoming a Gurkha, is rendered more tragic because of the intergenerations of Gurkha lineage on both sides of his family. Sameer's own failure to become a Gurkha is affectively lived through shame and yet resolve to continue down a similar pathway of foreign work in pursuit of a good life. Sunika explains her guilt around forcing her husband to pursue foreign military work because of her own history of extreme poverty and the hope for a better future for her children. Both the histories and futures are marked by logics of militarism—what futures militarism might allow, but also what failures it enables. The various affects that attach to militarism that are illuminated in our work align with Anderson's (2017) work on neo-liberalism, hope and futurity. Exploring temporality and affect, he locates a continuing hope for a future that is 'not yet' in moments where the 'everyday' is 'declared as an emergency' (Anderson, 2017: 473, 474).

Like Anderson, hope for us features through a "crisis ordinary" (Berlant 2011). Hope affectively sticks to militarism, in communities which are in situated within economic and politically states of crisis, as a familiar pathway to achieve a good life. Crisis is understood not as a singular and extraordinary event, but instead as a process that is "embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming" (Berlant, 2011: 10). The ordinary is an "impasse shaped by crisis", an extended stretch of time within which people seek to develop skills to adjust to newly proliferating pressures, "to scramble for modes of living on" (Berlant, 2011: 8). Importantly, "crisis turns out not to be fast but stretched and slow" (Berlant, 2011: 258). For us, the notion of the stretched-out crisis or "extended crisis" (Berlant 2011: 7) is crucial for understanding how the optimistic relation to militarism emerges and is sustained in Gurkha communities. Specifically because current colonial geographies continue to position Gurkhas's everyday lives in perpetuate state of crisis—that is the (in)ability to access the means to sustain and reproduce life. Hope emerges and sticks to militarism in context of this extended crisis.

We engage with a specific colonial community and location—Gurkhas, located on the periphery of the global security industry—to show how for this population, militarism emerges as a life-line, a “mode of living on” that has a specific colonial structural and affective history and intergenerational dynamic. What is “new” about the crisis ordinariness in the current context is the extent to which militarism as a life line has become intertwined with the demands of the global security market as the pursuit of the secure future is situated within contemporary global security that is increasingly marked by the colonial quest for cheap, flexible and precarious global labour (Peterson 2008; Mynsten-Christensen 2016). Yet, similarly to Stewart’s (2007) work on affect and the ordinary, we are interested in exploring the extended crisis in the small fragments of everyday life rather than seeing these fragments as already part of some totalizing system that can be variously named (Stewart, 2007).

Cruel Optimisms of Militarism: the pursuit of a secure future

In this section we illustrate how the concept of cruel optimism allows us to theorise the complex attachments to militarism that our encounters with Gurkhas and their families offered glimpses to. We focus on the story of Sunika and Rabindra, a wife and a husband. Rabindra served with the Indian army as a Gurkha prior to becoming a security contractor working first in Iraq and then Afghanistan. Throughout we weave in the colonial “histories that come before subjects” (Ahmed, 2014:214) which frame Gurkhas as desirable martial race contractors within PMSCs (Chisholm 2014) to offer a more nuanced understanding of how militarism as an affectively felt logic emerges and is sustained within these colonial histories that materially structure their everyday lives.

While reading the transcripts of my interviews with Gurkhas and their wives I gazed out my window in my CITY X flat. Small rain drops began cascading on the window and a mist was developing, obscuring my vision of the park, and the men and women walking alongside the lake, feeding the ducks who swarm towards them. I was pulled backwards, back to the hot and humid climate of Dharan, Nepal. I sat on the sofa next to Sunika and her husband, and Basanta, my translator, sat across from us. The house was chaotic with people coming in and going, preparing the place for their daughter’s wedding, happening the next morning. There was a buzz of excitement in the air. I was busy pulling out my ipad, pen and paper as Sunika’s sister brought us glasses of coke and some fruit. While others were being served their cold drinks, I began to ask Sunika and Rabindra questions.

AuthorX: So did you guys decide together that you should become a Gurkha or did you just come home and say ‘guess what? I’m going to be a Gurkha’.

[silence]

Sunika: No actually it was me who forced him to join the Gurkha. We already had two children and he wasn't working at that time, and we had actually married when we were really very young so for the future of our children, for their education he joined the Gurkha. He wanted to become a British Gurkha but that didn't happen. And even though he didn't want to join the Indian army, he joined mostly because I forced him to.

As I read the transcripts, I was alarmed that I had forgotten about this interview—something I never thought I would have done at the time. The memories of it came immediately flooding back. I was overwhelmed again with the feelings of surprise but also sadness as I recalled Sunika explaining her actions of forcing her husband to do something he did not want to do. I am suddenly made aware of my throat closing slightly and my eyes watering re-reading Sunika's confession and explanation. The recollection of Sunika explaining to me, as her husband sat across from us, how she forced him to become a Gurkha to offer a better future for their children, and her own experiences of loss and regret at not being afforded a future she desperately desired for her family, was compelling.

Later in the interview Sunika talks more about why she had forced her husband to join:

Sunika: I only knew that in the village, there was a bit of shortage of money in the household and I wanted to really send my children to an English boarding school. So that was the main problem, all the time I was thinking how to manage the money. So according to what I know, and I only know Nepali language, some alphabets that too. And because I never had the opportunity to study I wanted to be able to provide my children with good education. I feel like that is one of the things that I really regret, that I couldn't study. I always think about it, about what I have lost specially when I visit offices and don't understand things. That is why I really wanted to give my children a good education. That was the only concept in my mind that if my children were able to know English, they can do everything. So for that reason only I forced him to join. (Interview 1)

What emerges through Sunika's comments is how the good life was pursued through becoming a Gurkha and service with the Indian army. Militarism, as we read through this exchange, is the desire for a better future that military service could offer. It was also intergenerational, the motivations for military service was to secure a future for Sunika and Rabintra's children. This resonates with our other encounters with Gurkha families—the idea of becoming a Gurkha so one could pick up arms and fight in foreign wars was never mentioned as the foremost motivating factor. For many Gurkhas and wives interviewed, they told stories of wanting their children to have similar childhoods as they

did. The ways in which Sunika and her husband engaged with militarism—through pursuing the good life through military service—needs to be situated within the wider context of the “crisis ordinary” (Berlant, 2011). Sunika’s attachment to militarism was not articulated through a valour in the martial race and the social standing of being a Gurkha. It was articulated through the financial security that becoming one enabled. Desire for military work was rooted in Sunika’s regret at her own lack of education and wanting a different kind of future for her children. Here Anderson’s work on hope and futurity is illuminated in the ways in which Sunika derives desire and purpose in militarism as a pathway to a good life for her children.

Sunika, as a woman, could not become a Gurkha. Her role was the manager of everyday life and the household. Given the broader patriarchal and economic structures which precluded her from finding well-paid work outside the home to realise her ambitions for her children, it made sense to us why she had to turn to her husband. The desire for this good life also meant that Sunika forced Rabindra to maintain this military service—despite him telling her in letters to home, how much he hated it. Sunika recalled to me, 20 years later, receiving these letters. I began welling up as she explained she could not write back because she knew that if she did he would come home. Instead, Sunika stuffed down her anxious emotions and showed outward happiness and gratitude. Officially, she told me, you have to do this. No one would understand, they would think you are crazy, if you expressed any other emotion as a Gurkha wife. Sunika’s reflections bring to the fore the ways in which the social norms of being grateful and happy as part of being a good Gurkha wife are affectively felt and how militarism as a commonsense endures through the constant world building/world maintaining of the Gurkha household (Natanel 2016).

Importantly, what also emerges through Sunika’s and Rabindra’s story is the emotional cost of the pursuit of a secure future through militarism. Rabindra’s reflections on his 16 years in the Indian army offer a glimpse to the ways in which the pursuit of the good life wears out family relations:

Rabindra: At that time, I had to go join the army because of the financial problem we had at home. I didn’t join the army because I wanted to, and after joining I felt like I have left my young children who are very small, and I am also very newly married and have left my wife home. I felt like I really made a mistake and that I shouldn’t have joined the army ... I used to get holiday only once a year, and for a year I had to work there. But when I used to come for holiday, it would be for 2 months and at that time I used to come visit them, and play with the children, take them for outings. That was the system I was used to, and that way I served the army for about 16 years.

As mentioned by Natanel (2016), these negative feelings do not mean militarism—military as the pathway to the good life—is disrupted. Indeed, it is the “repair” reproductive work that continues to reinforce militarism as a status quo. Both Sunika and Rabindra talked at length about the ways in which they had sought to teach their children to know their father—to carry on with the everyday activities of sustaining and making life (Berlant, 2011: 99), despite the difficulties that arise from a physically absent father.

Sunika: the children would forget who their father was, they used to think of him as an uncle. But they used to ask about their father, and I used to tell them. Like if it was raining, the children would tell me “oh my god, I think our father is getting wet in the rain at this moment”, and that time I used to feel very sad.

Rabindra: when we try to hold the children also, they don't come with us because they are scared. That is normal. Everyone faces the same thing. But at that moment when you try to hold your child and the child tries to run away, you feel very awkward and not nice. But after 2-4 days the children understand that this person is my family member as he is staying in my home. After that the children become themselves. So after that, I don't give it too much thought as this is normal in all families where the husband has to go abroad for work.

What the notion of cruel optimism allows us to do is to get to this paradox—of how the very pursuit of the good life can become an “obstacle to your flourishing” (Berlant, 2011: 1). The pursuit of the secure future through militarism was wearing out family relations and required stuffing down emotions of guilt and anxiety that these men and women carry well into their futures. And yet, these stories of pain, frustration and quiet guilt, are told amid the buzzing of excitement in the air as preparations for their daughter's wedding continued. In this case, cruel optimism does not reveal some “hidden truth or harm” (Berlant, 2011: 124). Rather, it highlights a perpetual ambivalence. The variety of attachments to militarism as soldiers, as fathers and as mothers; the lived lives of loss and regret and of joy are often experienced at the same time. These tracings of guilt, sadness, regret and joy in relation to militarism are always “unfinished histories that confirm the hurt and pleasure” (Berlant, 2011: 123-124). They endure through life building work (Natanel 2016) that is carried out in communities where everydayness and crisis/emergency are indistinguishable (Anderson 2017).

The militarized attachment to a secure future we explore has a history of colonial relations, first between the British and Gurkhas and now within global security markets, that continues to underpin the everyday lives of the Gurkha communities and recruitment into the global security industry. As the pursuit of a secure future has moved into the realm of private security, militarism as a life-line for the Gurkha families has become increasingly intertwined with the demands of the global market,

making it even more important to focus the analytical lens at the intersection of militarism and global capitalism. Gurkhas, and other Global South men whose martial races were forged through imperial encounters, carry with them an intergeneration emotional shared history with the same Western men who champion them in security markets (Barkawi 2017; Chisholm 2014). It is these military colonial relations that produce a current surplus in martial military labour (Ware 2012). It is through these histories that the Gurkha families become saturated with militarism as an affectively felt logic that naturalises military service as the pathway to a good life.

For us the colonial histories that shape Gurkhas are present in the affective encounters with militarism in another sense – as the histories we bring into the encounters – whether these are face-to-face encounters during fieldwork or affective encounters with the transcripts. The investments in militarism and in the secure future we explore turn out to include our own un-reflected upon attachments. This comes to the fore in the below fieldwork reflection:

Upon reading the transcript of my interview with Sunika and Rabindra, I was at a loss for words. I am still now. My own affective attachments to Gurkhas and what Gurkhas were, framed through 11 years of research, made this encounter strange to me. Militarism and the Gurkha experience tends to be written about in celebratory and mythical ways. I too was reproducing this imagining in only asking questions about how they understood their experiences as soldiers and contractors—by not paying attention to the importance of affect or even the role of the family. I was unsettled in that moment and space where the tension, the regret and my own unpreparedness for it filled the room as Rabinda and Sunika waited patiently for my next question. This, these attachments, is also what militarism means for Gurkhas and their families. When we bring in the family and take affect seriously, militarism for Gurkhas is also a conflicting story of a calling, rooted in intergenerational military service, and a sacrifice. I recall that when Sunika divulged to me that it was a sacrifice they both had to make for their children, I looked over at her husband. He sat quietly. He too had tears in his eyes.

Invoking cruel optimism enables us to trace un-reflected upon attachments (including our own), and ask questions about how these emerge and are sustained. These stories tell a different history and a different life of the infamous Gurkha. Militarism is not something that is always and immediately celebrated by Gurkha communities—even if becoming a Gurkha does mean having better chance at a “good life”. Rather militarism generates simultaneous feelings of desire and/or repulsions, celebrations and/or regrets. Certainly, Sunika felt the pull to express outwardly happiness, even as she grappled with her guilt over encouraging Rabindra, her husband she cared deeply for, to stay in the army when he wrote that he hated being a soldier. All of us remained suspended for a moment in shared sadness and resolve, while outside people celebrated and laughed as they collectively prepared

for Ranbindra's and Sunika's daughter's wedding. Once we understand militarism through cruel optimism we can begin to open these conflicting histories and relations that are always present. Importantly, another storyline that continues to be present, in the background but never told, is that of failure. These are the stories that shape the lives, affectively and otherwise, of the vast majority of young men and their families who attempt to become Gurkhas, but never achieve it. It is this storyline we now turn to.

Militarism and Failure: Creative Alternatives?

Just as conflicting emotions of guilt, regret and celebration frame what it means to be in a Gurkha community, failure also attaches to militarism. In fact, given the near-impossible odds of becoming a Gurkha, articulated in the opening vignette, failure is integral to what it means to affectively relate to militarism. By failure, we do not mean a negation of "success" in becoming a Gurkha. Of course, this is a part of it. But rather, we explore what failure creatively opens up (Halberstam 2011), its capacity to disrupt (Lisle 2017), and how it renders visible the histories and stories that have always worked alongside the familiar imaginings of Gurkhas. Like cruel optimism in the previous section, failure conceptually alerts us to the "toxic positivity of contemporary life" (Halberstam 2011:3)—the often over-celebrated and glorified military lives of Gurkhas, and other martial men, as depicted in popular writings and imaginings of them (Streets 2004). It also provides a space for alerting us to the ambiguities of militarism as a logic (Basham 2018) and how people like Sameer might find other ways of living and being outside military service while attempting to achieve a good life.

I felt pity and intense regret for Sameer as he sat opposite from me, in a small meeting room, at a university in Qatar. Sameer comes from three generations of Gurkhas. Since childhood he was destined to become one himself, and yet he failed. It was when he disclosed to me his two failed attempts that I realised, in my 11 years of studying Gurkhas, I had never actually met someone who failed to become a Gurkha. Like so many of my colleagues who study soldiers and martial men, I focused only on the people who actually became soldiers. I missed, as Halberstam (2011) details, the hidden histories and parallel stories of Gurkhas—more fail than succeed. Failure brings with it a whole host of affect including "disappointment, disillusionment, and despair. But it also provides the opportunity to sue the negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" (Halberstam 2011: 3) for Gurkha communities. It can be a space for creativity—a process by which one can rearticulate a sense of self and belonging. Failure is "a map of political paths not taken, though it does not chart a completely separate land" (Halberstam, 2011: 19). As a concept then, failure opens up ruptures and contestations to what we think we know about militarism and how it is affectively experienced. Importantly, failure highlights the "crisis ordinary" and the global economic precarity that continues to be a fundamental part of militarism amongst Gurkha communities.

Sameer's story is an example of this. It is a story of failure and reimagining a life not as a Gurkha yet also illustrates how militarism endures.

I am reading the transcript with my interview with Sameer and I am brought back to that small room in a university in the Qatar Foundation, the overarching facilities where various international universities are located. Sameer and I sat facing each other. "So what drew you to security work", I asked. Sameer told me that his grandfather and father were Gurkhas and that security had always been in his family. I perked up with excitement and probed further. Did you try to become a Gurkha? Sameer quietly looked down at the floor and said "twice, but I failed the physical and English exam".

I recall being filled with immediate feelings of loss and pain. Having read so much about Gurkhas I knew how becoming one was within the social fabric of these communities. It framed a rite of passage for these young men. It profoundly shaped how they understood themselves in the world. I paused. What do I say? What can I say? Do I make him feel better? How? My eyes fill up with tears. I smile.

AuthorX: It's a fierce competition

Sameer: Yes, yah. So at that point I look for security work
(Interview 2)

Sameer failed at becoming a Gurkha. Yet the pursuit of a secure future continued through a militarised pathway. Sameer still chose to work in private security in a foreign country. It was the next best thing for him to get the financial security he needed to attain the good life in future. As a career, it also made sense to his family. Sameer's mother told me in conversation that it is still security work, but safer. Sameer is inside and does not carry a gun. But he is still in uniform. It was important that Sameer's mother informed me of this.

I mourn for Sameer's lost future. In that moment, I am invested in failure as devastation, as a loss, and foreclosure on an aspiring future. In that moment I am aware of my own emotional investments in the "success" stories of global capitalism, of neoliberalism and militarism. However failure is doing more here affectively. It shows the stark reality that for the vast majority of men who try to become Gurkhas, failure is a part of their lives. Beyond this reading though, failure can be recast as enabling other possibilities of being and alternative pathways. Failure certainly rendered Sameer's path different, and yet more of the same, from that of his father and grandfather—and, as a result, the path of his own family relations. This emerged when the discussion turned to marriage. Sameer is married to a woman who works as an undocumented worker in Portugal.

AuthorX: and why Portugal?

[silence]

AuthorX: As opposed to Nepal. Is Portugal better to live in than Nepal?

Sameer: Yes... the living standard is obviously higher ... I think so because in Nepal I don't think I can earn enough... I can't earn enough in Nepal because the market is small there... and in Portugal even if I work for some years or so maybe my children will also get education there...

AuthorX: ...three kids, and what would you want for them? What would be your dream for the kids?

Sameer: [deep sigh] good education, good health and a nice home... we are going to need one...

AuthorX: Back in Nepal or in Pokhara – or not Pokhara in Portugal?

Sameer: I haven't thought that [far].

(Interview 2)

Where AuthorX's reflections arise largely through her fieldwork, mine came through spending a considerable amount of time coding and transcribing fieldnotes and interviews. What first struck me when initially reading and coding Sameer's transcript was how Sameer and his wife were continuously working for and investing in an "uncertain" future – a future yet unknown, and how for Sameer that investment came through security work. Sameer and his wife were working in two continents to build a future for children who were yet to be born. The future was at the same time uncertain, with Sameer noting "I haven't thought that long", and detailed – the plan was to have three children. The very arrangement that was supposed to bring about a different life for Sameer and his wife as a family was keeping them apart shortly after getting married. If Sameer had become a Gurkha, he would have had the financial means to have his wife stay in Nepal, at home with his family. Instead he and his wife had a transnational relationship, maintained through social media and texting. Sameer explained how they tried to keep connected by constant text messages:

Just normal daily talk. So if I'm coming to work I will be texting her "I'm going to work now" so that she understands and she will be also sending me "I'm going to work now"..
(Interview 2)

These activities geared towards sustaining life and family relations Sameer describes are not novel to his experience of failure at being a Gurkha. In fact, the social reproduction described is very similar to the labour Gurkha wives and families do while their husband/father/son are away working. Failure at being a Gurkha for Sameer did not mean that his affective relations to militarism were suddenly disrupted. His everyday life was still framed through a "crisis ordinary" and he still needed to find a source of income that would allow him and his wife to build a life and indeed he did seek security work as his first option. Here, Sameer's story resonates with cruel optimism. It illustrates the pull of the promise of the "good life" and the way in which the object of desire – having a good life together with your family – becomes impossible precisely via the very activities that Sameer and his wife engage in to pursue it. They move to different continents, work long hours, spend savings to sustain themselves abroad, live away from their parents and support networks in Nepal. Reading the transcript, I wonder how long this specific "mode of living on", this particular way of adjusting to the proliferating demands of the crisis ordinary (Berlant, 2011: 8) can go on. What would start to "wear out" (Berlant, 2011: 95) – marriage, health, time to have children, Sameer's parents' health back in Nepal?

Yet the militarised attachment to a good life changed for Sameer. When Author X met Sameer for a second time he was on holiday and the meeting was in his parents' home in Nepal. Sameer explained that he had decided not to go back to Qatar and was in a process of getting documentation ready to move to Portugal to live with his wife. To do this, Sameer's parents were investing a high sum of money to secure the visa. The sum was considerably higher than the amount Sameer had paid to work in Qatar, and Sameer estimated it would take him two to three years to pay it back. At the time Sameer was not sure where he would be working or what his salary would be.

AuthorX: So what made you decide to finish up and not work there [in Doha] anymore?

Sameer: Because my wife is single there [Portugal], and she kept complaining about saying that we have to be together. That is why I am returning.

AuthorX: Okay. How do you guys feel about that, in going overseas again and having to put that money for visas? How do you feel about that? Are you excited for Sameer? How do you generally feel?

Sameer: Not so happy actually.

AuthorX: what are your fears then? Like why aren't you so happy about it? [To Sameer's mother:] Is it just because your son's going to be away or what sort of fears or apprehensions do you have about your son going away again?

Sameer's mother: No no, I am happy if he goes to stay with his wife. Officially you must be happy. (Interview 3)

What struck me about this “shift” in plans was the financial risk the family was taking in pursuit of a future and the “ordinariness” of this risk – paying for a visa to work abroad was something they had done several times before, and so had others around them. Echoing Anderson's (2017) work, hope for a better future makes the financial emergency/crisis that arises from securing the funds necessary to facilitate this type of economic migration a part of the everyday. Indeed, in Nepal (and beyond) the practice of paying for a visa is entrenched within the recruitment industry and not limited to the recruitment for security work. The inseparability between everyday and emergency is also rendered clear in Sameer's mother's comment about how “officially you must be happy.” Her acceptance and active participation in securing finances for Sameer illuminates the ways in which these risks, these experiences of loss and longing are something you endure, and rather than something “exceptional” are part of the ordinary, part of how life is sustained. Sameer's father had worked abroad as a Gurkha in the Indian Army and then as a private security contractor throughout their marriage. This time, she was enduring not being away from her husband but from her son, to keep life moving for her son. Sameer's mother's statement resonates through what Berlant claims as a logic of adjustment (2011: 10)—a way of being conditioned through years of performing emotional labour of a Gurkha wife. Sameer's mother makes an adjustment (to live away from her son) not as a response to an exceptional event, but through a long history of living a life that requires key family members to seek foreign security employment. Sameer's failure with militarism might have opened up another possibility of achieving a good life, but one that is riddled with high level of insecurity and risk. At the same time, militarism as a pathway to a good life was not disrupted within Sameer's family or the broader community. Rather, Sameer's own failure and his new pathway as an undocumented worker was understood more as making the best out of the situation.

Whilst Sameer will eventually live a different life to his parents and grandparents, working alongside his wife as restaurant staff in Portugal, entanglements with “crisis ordinary” were not vastly altered. Sameer's everyday life will continue to be marked by long work hours for little pay and the expectation to send much of their savings to support their families back in Nepal. What the failure did enable was a re-orientation in the optimistic attachment to militarism, one that opened the possibility

of Sameer spending his life, as an undocumented worker, together with his wife. Yet this pathway is not celebrated in conversation with Sameer and his mother in the same way as becoming a Gurkha is. Sameer and his mother continued to mourn the future Sameer might have held as a Gurkha. At the same time, Sameer's mother is helping him in his new pathway as an undocumented worker.

Sameer's mother: "He can't just sit at home. What would I tell the neighbors?"

This was a pathway to building a "good life" that would not have been conceivable without the failure. Importantly, being together with family was precisely what the future "good life" was about and it was also what Sameer explained had shifted his plans. Ultimately, the plan was to all live in Portugal:

Sameer's mother: Now we'll always try to sit together. We will not separate we will sit together. (Interview 3)

This move that Sameer makes—towards building a "good life"—is a departure from the inter-generational migration pattern of the Gurkha family. Unlike his parents, Sameer and his wife are building a life that even if precarious, allows them to be together. In our reading of Sameer's story, it is the "failure" to become a Gurkha that makes this improvisation possible, even though he does not escape the economic precarity that structures everyday life. It is here that Sameer's story resonates with Halberstam's (2011) rendering of "failure" as a possible space for creativity, at least partially. Rather than enduring the repetitive work of a security guard and the living away from his family, Sameer has started to craft into being alternative possibilities of living, even if precarious. It is these kinds of "unexpected" moves that arise through failures that produce new ways of knowing that were not possible before. This creative opening is not overtly radical to be sure. But these alternative ways of being we explore in the everyday activities of "life-making" and "life-building" (Berlant, 2011: 99) allow us to, as academics, resist the temptation of positioning militarism as the overarching logic/high theory that forms the entirety of the lives of migrant security workers.

Conclusion

This paper has shown the pervasive impact that the optimistic relation to militarism has in shaping communities who participate in the global security industry. By theorising affective attachments to militarism, we begin to make sense of what motivates those communities who are peripheral to these global economies yet fundamental to their operations, to participate. We begin to account for why, when militarism as a pathway to the good life has been rendered impossible or toxic do people

continue to affectively invest? We have drawn upon Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism to demonstrate how Gurkhas and Gurkha families affectively invest/divest in logics of militarism, framed through colonial histories and uncertain presents, in pursuit of a secure future.

Current understandings of militarism as an overarching commonsense do not map easily onto the stories and encounters we have discussed. Our analysis should not be read as an overwritten story of militarised seductions that end in the exploitation of Nepalese security workforces. Indeed, we would be doing a disservice to the richness of the ambiguities that arise from these encounters if that's the concluding story we tell. Instead, we have highlighted how militarism operates as a cruel optimism that enables an affective attachment to the promise of a future. Militarism, for Rabindra embodied the hateful past, the regret and longing for a different history where he could be a physically present father. For Sunika, it was the unfortunate but only option to pass on a better future for their children. For Sameer, his failure at becoming a Gurkha, enabled a different path, one with high degree of uncertainty, but where he could physically be with his wife. For Sameer's family, the affective investments, which would enable a life as a Gurkha or life as an undocumented worker, remained similar. In both cases, as detailed by Sameer's mother, to achieve a good life you have to officially be happy and support (financially and emotionally) a foreign work pathway, and the associated life sustaining and life attrition processes.

The everyday lives that we have sought to weave in through the stories of Sunika, Rabindra and Sameer and his family are distinctively marked by different unfinished histories and uncertain futures. By foregrounding these temporal modalities we have illustrated first, how and why people invest in militarism even when practicing it wears them down. And second, opened an exploration of how the affective attachment to a secure future remains militarised, through social reproductive activities of the household, even as the pursuit of a good life takes new forms. Our analysis begs the question: to what degree does cruel optimism of militarism enable broader global circulations of labour outside global military workforces? It is the ambiguities that emerge from these stories that show us a perpetual tension in how affective investments in militarism shape motivations and desires within the global security industry, but perhaps also reach to broader global economies. What our argument demonstrates is the crucial, productive intersections between the existing security studies engagements with militarism and a broader global political economy critiques of global capitalism.

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Interview 2: Interview with Sameer, April 2017, Doha, Qatar.

Interview 3: Interview with Sameer and family, August 2017, Pokhara, Nepal.

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