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Geographies of Violence

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Introduction

With some exceptions, domestic violence has often served as an ancillary example for feminist geographers when complicating the public/private binary or affirming the feminist mantra that the ‘personal is political’. More recently however, domestic violence has emerged as a distinct and sustained focus of feminist geographic research, a promising trend in response to directed calls for such work (Basu 2016; Brickell 2015; Brickell and Maddrell 2016a, 2016b; Pain 2014; Tyner 2012, 2016; Warrington 2001). Notably, much of this recent scholarship on domestic violence situates itself within a feminist geopolitical framework that emphasizes the multi-sited and multi-scalars links between intimate and global violence (Pain and Staeheli 2014). While we do not suggest that all work in geographies on violence necessarily takes feminist geopolitics as its epistemological and methodological grounding, in this chapter we centre on feminist geopolitical approaches and their continued influence on the field of gender and feminist geography, including our own work on domestic violence.

Feminist geopolitics ‘embodies an approach that advocates a finer scale of “security” accountable to people, as individual and groups, and analyses the spaces of violence that traverse public/private distinctions’ (Hyndman 2001, 219). Its emphasis on the everyday politics of (in)security and fear (for a review, see Williams and Massaro 2013) have served as an entryway for feminist geographers studying domestic violence, including Pain’s (2014) understanding of domestic violence as ‘everyday terrorism’. By tracing fear as a foundational component of domestic violence and global terrorism, Pain illustrates how both forms of political violence ‘operate across scales rather than being restricted to global or everyday securities’ (ibid., 535). Similarly, Cuomo (2013) traces how masculinist security discourses feature in both the local policing response to domestic violence in the US and global military interventions to ‘protect’ vulnerable women around the world. This work illustrates how security interventions can paradoxically increase the fears of those whom these actions purport to protect. Likewise, Brickell’s work on domestic violence in Cambodia shows the overlap between types of violence utilized in war and the home, and the uneven consequences of post-conflict peace and reconciliation processes for security and safety at both global and intimate scales (2015, 2016, 2017, 2020). Despite the
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warlike dynamics within abusive relationships and the institutional responses to it, Pain (2015) resists reducing domestic violence to simply everyday militarism. Rather, she envisions domestic violence and international warfare as a single complex of violence, given their ‘common gendered, psychological, and emotion-laden foundations of power’, and reasserts their intimate-geopolitical intertwining as ‘intimate war’ (64).

In the first half of the chapter, we explore research focused explicitly on domestic violence from a feminist geopolitical perspective, and include reference to connected work in gender and feminist geography more broadly. The second half of the chapter hones in on research on the intimate violations inherent, but often ignored, in the military and militarization. Despite our organizational separation of these halves, both are attentive to the ways in which masculinized ‘hot’ geopolitics (e.g. war) and feminized ‘banal’, emotional and intimate violences (e.g. sexual assault in the military and on college campuses) are inseparable (Christian et al. 2016).

Indeed, the writing of this chapter and its timing render painfully urgent what is at stake when such connections fail to be recognized or are obscured. In February 2018, one of the world’s worst mass school shootings took place in Parkland, Florida. Seventeen people – 14 high school students and three staff – were killed. It has been argued that media portrayals of these rampages are designed to shock the public and, in doing so, obscure debate and action on how the culture of hegemonic masculinity in the US creates a sense of aggrieved entitlement conducive to violence (Kalish and Kimmel 2010). ‘Toxic masculinity’, which frames masculinity as constituted through violence in patriarchal culture, is one such ‘underlying ailment’ (Datta 2018; Haider 2016) that warrants further research and unpacking in feminist and gender geography. A growing number of news reports in the US and internationally, for example, are bringing into public view the records of male mass shooters who have histories of domestic violence (e.g. Filipovic 2017; ‘In Texas and Beyond’ 2017; ‘In Orlando, as Usual’ 2016). Likewise, the gun control advocacy group ‘Everytown For Gun Safety’ (2018) contends that, ‘Despite impressions from media coverage, mass shootings in which at least four people were killed with a gun are also typically acts of domestic or family violence’, to the extent that 54 per cent of mass shootings between 2009 and 2016 were committed by intimate partners of family violence.

INCITE! (2006), a national activist organization of US radical feminists of colour, reinforces the connections between intimate and state violence in its anthology Color of Violence, which identifies links between gender-based violence, militarism, reproductive and economic violence, prisons and policing, colonialism and war.

In the weeks following the Parkland School shooting, a group of student survivors powerfully advocated on social media for gun control, with the hashtag #NeverAgain, taking inspiration from the #MeToo campaign and its focus on the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment of women. In March 2018, the student survivors went on to lead the ‘March for Our Lives’ in Washington DC, attended by tens of thousands, with another 800 sibling marches organized around the world (https://marchforourlives.com). Notably, while the student survivors of the mass shooting in Parkland are mostly affluent and White, the march in Washington DC centred and elevated African–American voices, whose sustained activism against gun violence has often gone ignored by the media and larger public. These public platforms for speaking out call attention to the connective tissue of resistance and do so through intersectional frameworks that are foundational to a feminist strategy that contests violence in all its forms.

Across the chapter, we pay close and synergistic attention to the methodologies and methods that feminist geographers employ to study such violence, which tends to prioritize collaboration with research participants in the design, implementation and distribution of research findings (Sharp 2004). In sum, then, our aim is to provide a holistic, albeit non-exhaustive, sense
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of current directions of work on geographies of violence in gender and feminist geography by
drawing on ideas from feminist geopolitics.

Researching domestic violence

In the last five years, feminist geographers have begun using the conceptual frameworks of
intimate war, intimate terrorism and everyday terrorism to analyse variously scaled projects
on domestic violence. Faria (2017) deploys a ‘countertopography of intimate war’ to examine
the domestic violence homicide of a South Sudanese refugee after fleeing to the US, alongside
the multiple forms of state and structural violence that the victim and other refugee women
experienced in the diaspora. In the same year, Little (2017) published her study of the spati-
ality of rural domestic violence as intimate terrorism to examine how constructions of rural
masculinity and femininity shape experiences of, and responses to, such violence. Meanwhile,
Laliberte (2016) shows how post-war Northern Ugandan peacebuilding programmes rely on
Orientalist narratives to target violence in the home as a site for development. Her work is also
an important reminder that domestic violence conveniently emerges from the shadows of inter-
national warfare and global terrorism to take centre stage when racialized and gendered tropes
of violence associated with certain populations serve a strategic purpose. As Faria (2017) notes,
with its recognition of the inseparability of everyday and global violence, the impact of Pain’s
‘intimate war’ extends beyond domestic violence, as feminist geographers apply this framework
to research on state-sanctioned violence against racialized, gendered and classed bodies more
broadly (Massaro 2015).

Feminist geographic research on domestic violence also emphasizes the links between
state, structural and intimate violence, showing how multiple ‘forms of interwoven violence’
(Piedalue 2017) make some bodies disproportionately vulnerable (Sweet 2016; Tyner 2012).
This includes work that argues that the analysis of domestic violence must occur in conver-
sation with other systems of oppression, such as race, class and sexuality (see also special issues
in Dialogues in Human Geography by Brickell and Maddrell 2016a, 2016b; Gender Place and
Culture by Fluri and Piedalue 2017). Smith (2016) analyses the multi-scalar relationship between
state violence and domestic violence among low-income residents of Cairo, Egypt, showing
how the violence of the state shapes and occurs simultaneously with violence in the home.
Cuomo (2017) reinforces, too, the connections between different forms of political violence by
showing how patriarchal ideology and coercive control work in tandem with neoliberal citizen-
ship to normalize political recognition as the primary citizenship right for domestic violence
survivors. Understanding domestic violence as indistinguishable from other institutional and
structural violences, including economic vulnerability, also provides insight into the challenges
that survivors encounter when attempting to flee domestic violence.

Arguing that women’s experiences of fleeing domestic violence have been under-
recognized in UK policy and practice, Bowstead (2015a, 2017) theorizes survivors’ escape
from abusive relationships as forced migration to illustrate the connections between different
types of gendered migrations and the (dis)empowering elements that accompany such
journeys. Feminist geographers addressing such experiences also emphasize service provision
and the impact of austerity measures on refuge and shelter funding (Bowstead 2015b; Coy
et al. 2011; Graham and Brickell 2019; Pain and Scottish Women’s Aid 2012), further illus-
trating the ‘entangled inequalities’ (Fluri and Piedalue 2017) within experiences of state and
intimate violence.

The research undertaken to explore the experiences of survivors in this work commonly
turns to participatory action research (PAR) approaches that aspire to participants collaborating
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equitably in all stages of the research process to address a problem or issue within a community (Kindon et al. 2010). This is an approach that complements the philosophical tenets of service providers of community-based domestic violence agencies, who emphasize self-determination and recognize that survivors are the experts of their own lives (Schetcher 1982). Pain’s research partnership with Scottish Women’s Aid, a non-profit organization working to prevent domestic violence, for example, illustrates the participatory, reflexive and politically active components of PAR as the project’s findings resulted in a co-authored report (Pain/Scottish Women’s Aid 2012) and a BBC Scotland television programme broadcast in 2014 to raise public awareness of the harm that domestic violence causes. In addition to employing a feminist methodology attentive to power and ethics in the research, for this project Pain trained in counselling skills before interviewing survivors of domestic violence, and then worked with a counsellor throughout the research for both supervision and therapy.

Such methodological strategies are shared widely among feminist geographers and are used to prevent secondary trauma and to support emotional health while conducting research on violence. This includes the specialized approaches adopted by scholars studying violence from outside the academy. Influenced by the training that she received while working as a victim advocate, for example, Cuomo employs the methodological practice of boundary-making when conducting research with domestic violence survivors (Cuomo and Massaro 2016). Boundary-making, when coupled with a self-care practice that relies on space and time to consciously process the grief associated with trauma exposure, has supported Cuomo’s long-term professional, academic and activist work on interpersonal violence (Cuomo 2019). These approaches work to address not only the ethical issues that arise when conducting research with survivors of violence (Meth and Malaza 2003) but also to prioritize protecting the emotional health of the researcher. As we echo calls for further feminist geographic research on interpersonal violence, we encourage a methodological praxis that responds to the emotional implications of studying violence and trauma and prioritizes self-care.

Researching militarized violence

Since the 2010s, interest in gender and feminist geography on militarized violence and its gendered experiences, impacts, meanings and dynamics has intensified. From work examining police-linked death squads and Black women’s organizations in Brazil (Alves 2013), to the police-led murder and disappearance of four dozen student teachers in Mexico (Wright 2018) and to the unregulated violence of state-hired private security companies against female forced eviction activism in Cambodia (Brickell 2014), the militarization of everyday and urban life takes on a range of guises in various sites and spaces of study. Militarization in feminist scholarship, Dowler (2012), writes, ‘acknowledges that subjective forms of violence, such as wars, always reach deeper into societies than conventional reports would portray’ (492). In this section of the chapter, we adopt a conventional focus on war and military violence, enacted both during and after its formal end, to demonstrate the importance of going beyond tidy distinctions between war and peace, domestic and foreign, military and civil society (Loyd 2011).

The gendered politics of military enlistment is particularly interesting in this regard and brings into view the targeting of civilian lives for military mobilization and violence. Cowen and Siciliano (2011) argue that militaries ‘are not simply warehouses for surplus populations but are themselves increasingly means and sites of accumulation’ sourced through men and boys in inner-city poor and deindustrialized small towns. In her research on military enlistment, Christian (forthcoming) uses art-based methods to explore race and citizenship among youth in Houston, Texas. This includes visual fieldnotes, comic vignettes, activist art and graphic narrative
to theorize visually how youth pathways into the military interlock with local, state and global forms of violence. In her work with anti-violence activist organizations in Houston and as part of her feminist, anti-racist praxis, Christian donates posters for protests and sells her original designs, with all proceeds supporting local social movements. Such visual and art-based methods that focus on engaging in solidarity work with research participants are increasingly popular in geography. Indeed, Hawkins (2015) notes that these creative methods lend to ‘embodied and practiced-based doings’ (248), which we see as especially complementary when studying experiences of violence.

That these creative ‘doings’ are being brought into practice by feminist geographers serves as a segway to discussion in political geography on the creative industry that designs and markets video games that engender hyper-masculinized identities and virtual war spaces of performance and consumption. In the last three years, for example, several publications have arisen from the observed rise of militarism ‘in the living room’ through video-gaming (Robinson 2016). The online communities that form through this game-playing, Bos (2018, 163) argues, are also ‘highly gendered, heteronormative, and promote and reinforce national identities’, and thus asks scholars ‘to think further about the private, public and virtual spaces which constitute and influence particular popular geopolitical encounters and practices’ (see also Woodward 2014 on future directions on this ‘military industrial-media-entertainment’).

The intersections of militarized violence, visual technologies and gender are also becoming more evident in research on drones. Accompanying the proliferation of scholarship and interest in political geography on the international legality of surveillance and killing via drone warfare (Gregory 2011; Shaw 2016), recent work has looked to the targeting of drone strikes, including ‘geographies of legal terror’ against military-aged men (known by US soldiers as MAMs) in Muslim countries such as Pakistan (Wall 2016). Interdisciplinary feminist scholarship has also tended to focus its concerns on the violent trajectories of drone militarism (Feigenbaum 2015) and describes drone warfare as ‘the intermediation of algorithmic, visual, and affective modes of embodiment’, which ‘reproduces gendered and racialized bodies that enable a necropolitics of massacre’ (Wilcox 2017, 11). ‘Drone stalking’ is a particularly cogent example of how such military technologies are further expanding into civilian life the opportunities for violence.

The domestication of military technologies means that the phenomenon of ‘drone peeping toms’ has become a growing yet unexplored threat in academic work. The US government report Integration of Drones Into Domestic Airspace: Selected Legal Issues (Dolan and Thompson 2013) highlights that, as drones become more readily available to private citizens, the technology will be likely used to commit various offences, including drone stalking of women (see Gallagher 2013 and ‘Drone Stalking Several Women’ 2017 for media coverage of these cases). Such examples align with the wider need for vigilance to the threats of digital technologies in the realm of corporeal security, including technology-enabled violence against women (Brickell and Cuomo 2019). Intimate war thus ‘gains its devastating potential precisely because it does not concern strangers, but people in relationships that are often long term’ (Pain 2015, 67).

Domestic violence in the military itself is also an apposite example of an intimate yet often-unseen war that is taking place. Gray (2016) writes, for example, about the prioritization of operational effectiveness in the British military, which can override the self-defined needs of civilian women’s experiences of domestic abuse in marriages to servicemen. This work, Gray argues, contributes to feminist geography scholarship that makes the connections ‘between the intimate spaces of the home and the public spaces of geopolitics’ and emphasizes ‘the role that gendered interactions within military families play in the enactment of militarism writ large’ (921). The inattention to these militarized marriages, Enloe (2016, 321) argues, is problematic – ‘they have
been and continue to be shaped by the interactions of militarized elite strategies, militarized popular cultures, assorted dynamic patriarchies, myriad racisms and ethno-centrism, as well as diverse heterosexisms’.

As such, these patriarchal marriages are part of a broader panorama of military violence that extends to other types of intimate violence enacted against girls and women in times of war, during peace-keeping missions and while women actively serve in the military. Dowler’s (2011) research on female soldiers who experience sexual violence from their male cohort illustrates the multiple risks that women experience while serving in a military institution embodied by masculinity and virility. Reiz and O’Lear’s (2016) study examines cases of civilian rape by UN military personnel and police in Haiti. Using a ‘critical legal geography of rape’ as their guiding framework, the authors show how ‘governance of these cases and the corresponding jurisdictional logics effectively silence and marginalize the survivors of rape and sexual assault by international security forces’ (456). Both Gray’s research with military wives and this latter work on civilian rape show how survivors’ intimate securities are commonly subordinated below those of a ‘higher’ security order. That Reiz and O’Lear’s research focuses on long-term military deployment and the creation of spaces where violence and impunity burgeon is particularly timely. Such violence, they note, ‘is inexorably linked and entangled in a much larger, complex context of history, colonialism, geopolitics, governance practices, and globalization’ (456).

Described as the ‘the largest coordinated effort of wartime sex trafficking and forced sexual labor in human history, despite the near ubiquity of sex work in the environs of modern militaries’ (Pilzer 2014, 3), the long-ignored problem of ‘comfort women’ is especially resonant here. There are believed to have been around 200,000 women from occupied countries, including Korea, China and the Philippines, who were forced to work by the Japanese military in military brothels during the Asia–Pacific War (1931–1945). The 2017 Column of Strength memorial (Figure 27.1) in San Francisco joins others around the world, including the first, sited outside Japan’s embassy in Seoul, which led to a diplomatic fall-out between Japan and South Korea (Shepherd 2016). This example speaks to issues of the gendered geopolitics of memorialization and the occlusion of women’s everyday experiences of war in comparison to men’s (Tyner and Henkin 2015).

In order to bring the voices and experiences of those speaking historically from the margins into public view, testimonials have proved an important means by which feminist geographers have drawn on individual recollections to speak to collective witnessing (Reyes and Curry Rodriquez 2016). This methodology has been used in Truth Commissions and human rights work, including Rigoberta Menchu’s testimony detailing the state violence and terror that Mayan women experienced from the US-supported Guatemalan army (Hanlon and Shankar 2000). The potential for testimonial to capture the interwoven experience of intimate and state violence is evidenced in Pratt’s work detailing Filipino women’s experience of family separation and state violence (Pratt 2012; Pratt and Johnson 2014) and Valencia’s (2017) research analysing Mexican migrant women’s experiences of risk and insecurity in relation to the militarization of the border and immigration policies. Hanlon and Shankar explain that testimonial ‘does not simply shed light on past abuses, but puts a spotlight on the abusers and the mechanisms of state terror and genocide’ (2000, 267). In other words, testimonials hold potential for individual and collective healing by documenting marginalization as a shared, rather than individualized, experience (Johnston and Pratt 2010). Diaries too, Tyner and Henkin (2015) argue, are an important means to explore (deceased) women’s narratives, ‘given they are imbued with a multitude of emotional responses and relations that provide an alternative, embodied account of war in contrast to detached, emotionless military histories, or heroic and overly virile glorifications of war’ (289).
Figure 27.1  San Francisco’s Column of Strength memorial.  
Photograph: K. Brickell, April 2018.
Conclusion

[G]ender relations are like a linking thread, a kind of fuse, along which violence runs. They run through every field (home, city, nation-state, international relations) and every moment (protest, law enforcement, militarization), adding to the explosive charge of violence in them. If most, if not all, violence has a gender component, violence reduction calls for a feminist gendered strategy.

Cockburn 2004, 44

In this Handbook chapter we have sought to review and inspire work on geographies of violence that takes feminist geopolitics seriously as an explanatory framework. Mapping the spatial linkages between the hurt and the hurter (Philo 2005) means following, connecting and understanding all the intersecting systems of oppression that contribute to the violent fuse of violence that Cockburn refers to in the above quote. Geographical research on violence that takes a feminist geopolitical approach has an important role to play, therefore, in supporting the analytical and political visibility of these intersecting violences and injustices.

Key readings


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