Curious erasures: the sexual in wartime sexual violence

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ABSTRACT

Wartime sexual violence is especially egregious precisely because it is a sexual form of violence that causes particular harms. Yet, curiously, and in contrast to feminist theory on sexual violence more generally, the sexual has been erased from frames of understanding in dominant accounts of wartime rape. This article places the seeming certainty that “wartime rape is not about sex (it’s about power/violence)” under critical scrutiny and poses questions about the stakes of the erasure of the sexual in explanations of conflict-related sexual violence. It argues that the particular urgency that accompanies this erasure reflects the workings of familiar distinctions between war and peace, as well as efforts to clearly recognize violence and separate it from sex. Erasing the sexual from accounts of wartime rape thus ultimately reinscribes the normal and the exceptional as separate, and reproduces a reductive notion of heterosexual masculine sex (in peacetime) that is ontologically different from the violence of war.

KEYWORDS Sexual violence; wartime; peacetime; rape; feminist theory; sexuality

Introduction

Wartime rape, as it is being framed in both the policy and academic world, is decidedly not about sex, sexual desire, pleasure, or sexuality. Very simply put, “the sexual” (sexuality, desire, eroticism, etc.) has been seemingly theorized away as irrelevant, and even dangerously misleading in efforts to explain and redress conflict-related sexual violence. This erasure of the sexual accompanies the firm move to refute socio-biological explanations for wartime rape that located the “cause” of sexual violence in male heterosexuality, which was seemingly both known and knowable as natural. Such explanations posited that “boys will be boys,” that war rape was a “natural by-product” of warring; that the suspension of societal norms during war inevitably lead to rape; and so on (e.g., Niarchos 1995; Seifert 1996).
The currently pervasive and politically important framing of “rape as a weapon of war,” as well as the dominant understandings of rape in wartime more loosely understood, make sense in contrast to such explanations. Instead of being driven by natural, even animalistic sexual urge or desire in individuals, wartime rape, we have come to understand, is about pursuing military and political goals (e.g., Card 1996; Alison 2007). Those who are subject to such violence are used as tools in a larger ploy to defeat the (collective) enemy, and those who perform rape serve as weapons in the wider arsenal of masculinized military violence. While the notion of rape as a weapon of war has become the subject of critique for being both reductionist and universalizing (Bos 2006; Wood 2009; Eriksson Baaaz and Stern 2013; Kirby 2013; Hoover Green 2016), the question of the sexual still emerges as one of those questions that “we cannot ask” (Glick 2000, 19).

Curiously, this erasure abides in stark contrast to decades of rigorous scholarship on the interrelations between sex, sexuality, violence, and power in feminist theory more generally – work that we, as a collective of engaged feminist IR scholars (broadly defined to include global politics more widely) seem to have largely forgot or bypassed in our attention to wartime sexual violence. There are certainly a growing number of studies that address queer theory, sexuality, violence, war and security (e.g., Peterson 2014; Sjoberg 2015; Crane-Seeber 2016; Weber 2016; Richter-Montpetit 2017) and an increasingly abundant and nuanced scholarship that explores the topographies of particular contexts in which sexual violence occurs (e.g., Boesten 2014; Mookherjee 2015). Nonetheless, the “sexual” part of sexual violence (and attending notions of desire and pleasure) and its relation to violence rarely appear as sites of sustained critical theoretical engagement.1

That we note this resounding silence in the composite stories about wartime rape that feminist IR produces, we suggest, is in itself an indicator that the time (in terms of the theoretical tools at our disposal and the political victories won) is ripe to reinvigorate theorizing the sexual. This article therefore reconsiders the stakes of the sexual as a seeming no-go zone for critical reflection, and ultimately argues for its reengagement in our accounts of wartime rape. In this sense, the article aims to specifically contribute to the debates about wartime sexual violence that have flourished in IR (again, loosely defined) by asking the following questions: Why does it appear to be particularly difficult to critically rethink the sexual in relation to wartime sexual violence, especially given the analytical tools and theoretical insights that feminism offers? What might we silence or inadvertently reproduce through the erasure of the sexual in wartime rape?

We suggest that the erasure of the sexual in wartime rape occurs through the drawing of familiar lines of distinction between war and peace and the military and civilian spheres. Through drawing these lines, sexual violence in the (seemingly) exceptional state of war emerges as particularly urgent; this urgency reflects efforts to clearly recognize violence and separate it
from “sex.” This, in turn, allows us to reinscribe the normal and the exceptional as separate, and to reproduce a particular notion of sex (in peacetime) that is ontologically different from the violence of war. This, despite the decades of feminist and other theorizing that trouble both a peacetime that is clearly separate from wartime, and sex that is clearly separate from violence.

What stakes might be tethered to this erasure in wartime rape; what might we silence and reproduce? First, questions about the sexual figure in many perpetrators’ and even survivors’ accounts of wartime sexual violence (e.g., Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009; Boesten 2014; Skjelsbæk 2015). Hence, if we ignore the sexual (however we may imbue that with meaning), then we surely lack an understanding of an aspect of sexual violence that resonates with the ways in which perpetrators say they harm, and survivors feel harmed (Bourke 2008; Heberle and Grace 2009). This point cannot be underscored enough. Second, without learning more fully from feminist theorizing on sexual violence that engages the sexual more generally, we risk inadvertently reinforcing a notion of peacetime rape as somehow not political, and wartime rape as somehow not sexual. This diminishes our range of possible frames of understanding and redressing the many forms of sexual harms as distinct from, and in relation to, other harms, motives, logics acts and effects.

The article proceeds as follows. After a brief discussion of methodology, we turn to a sketch of some feminist work on sexual violence that largely addresses “peacetime” settings. This sketch is neither intended as the basis for a novel theory, nor as a framework for analysis of existing theories of wartime rape; instead it highlights that the “sexual” part of the term “sexual violence” is erased in our accounts of wartime rape. It thus invites us to resist the reductionist framing of rape as being about violence/power and not sex that has dominated such accounts. Next, we revisit the prevailing notion of rape as a weapon of war, as well as work critical of its reductive and universalizing storyline in order to glimpse how the erasure of the sexual has occurred. We then discuss how such erasures work through familiar distinctions between war/peace, and military/civilian, which, ultimately, reproduce a seemingly firm distinction between sex and violence, and even war and peace.

A brief note on methodology

To be clear, we do not attempt to provide a universal or definitive understanding of “the sexual” or of violence. We speak of “the sexual” as a composite term that signifies different constellations of meanings around sexuality, sex (as act), desire, pleasure, bodies eroticization, etc. that are commonly associated together. In discussions about rape, the terms sex, sexualized, sexuality, sexual, sexed slide about and are often used interchangeably (Jackson and Scott 1996, 2). Nonetheless, despite their slipperiness (Zalewski and Runyan 2015), these terms and their constellations of meanings often appear so firmly established
and stable in contemporary discussions about sexual violence (particularly in terms of what wartime rape is not about) that we, as scholars of global politics, forget to probe how they are being imparted with meaning and to what effect. Zalewski’s (2010) persistent reminder that we/she does “not even know what gender is or does” could be of help here in inviting us to rethink what we “know” about “the sexual.”

Moreover, we take our point of departure in the well-rehearsed notion that wartime rape is about power and violence, and not about sex (cf. McPhail 2016, 314). In order to query this popular adage, which, we argue, is central to dominant accounts of wartime rape, we engaged in an extensive reading of policy and academic literature on conflict-related sexual violence, both situated within IR and in other fields, as well as feminist literature on sexual violence more generally, searching for references to and evocations of the sexual. The authors cited serve as examples of a larger discursive formation or generalized “feminist fable” (Stern and Zalewski 2009). Notably, as our methodology builds on readings of central texts, we problematically reproduce the familiar silencing of male victims of sexual violence, as well as the prevailing assumption that sexual violence is heterosexual violence.

We noted erasures in terms of the “rubbing out” (Anderson 2012, 8) of meaning (in this case, an understanding of sexual violence as sexual), and in the traces that this rubbing out leave behind and that haunt new meaning (theories of sexual violence) (Gordon 2008). This is clearly a tricky endeavor methodologically, as it relies on not simply looking for what is seemingly there, but also for what is not there, and interrogating those absences (or partial absences). In addition to conceptualizing erasure as “rubbing out,” we also locate erasure in both active agentic moments when interrogation is shut down, such as in the shying away from engagement with the sexual for political and strategic purposes (whether these are conscious decisions or produced through the conditions of possibilities for debate). Erasure (although of a slightly different sort) also includes those moves that gesture towards the sexual without engaging in explicit critical reflection over its meaning, because, for instance, that meaning is seemingly already settled and therefore not subject to inquiry.

Let us now provide an overview of some key insights regarding the sexual, violence and sexual violence in the diverse body of feminist theory in order to propose that we are erasing the sexual in our accounts or wartime rape, and highlight the longstanding problematization of the maxim that rape is violence/power and not sex.

The sexual in “sexual violence”? Revisiting feminist theory (OR in other words: IR has a lot to learn)

In 1991, Bell published a helpful article which highlights how simplistic translations of the adage that “rape is about power/violence and not sex” into
popular and political parlance are both facile and misleading. She argued that the framing whereby “rape is about sex” OR “rape is about (violent) power and assault” sets up an unavailing binary that reduces rich and nuanced feminist thought, and conceals a host of different ways of understanding these terms and their relationships (See also MacKinnon 1989, 171). Indeed, a brief foray into feminist work on sex, sexuality and sexual violence reveals a wealth of robust theorization that renders this binary problematic (e.g., Freedman and Thorne 1984; Butler 1990, 1999; Bell 1991; Helliwell 2000; Cahill 2001; Mardorossian 2002; Bourke 2008; Heberle and Grace 2009). Given the centrality that renditions of this adage play in the accounts of wartime rape that we further discuss below, we loosely follow Bell’s line of reasoning in highlighting some crucial insights that remind us that the way we imbue the sexual with meaning is not fixed (although it may appear so in our accounts). For instance, we can glimpse how the “sex” that is being removed from the act of rape in different accounts is both contested and unstable; “sex” in one theory does not necessarily connote the same thing as “sex” in another.

First, however, we pause to re-examine Brownmiller’s work, the basic scaffolding of which has been adopted into the literature on wartime rape, and which has been reduced to the politically powerful adage noted above (c.f. 1975, 72). Radical feminists like Brownmiller aimed to debunk the myth that rape was a natural product of lust and placed emphasis on rape as a political crime of aggression (e.g., Millet 1970; Brownmiller 1975). Brownmiller’s insistence that rape was not a tool of sexuality or sex per se but one of social control captured this radical reframing of rape perhaps most famously (Brownmiller 1975, 391). This line of feminist intervention reacted against the notion that rape was a moral crime against the chastity of individual women (and incited by their allure), who were often held accountable for “deserving the assault.” Instead, rape was cast as a collective violent and political act having to do with “male domination and female degradation” (McPhail 2016, 316) and as a tool of power and patriarchy. The dominant understanding of sex (connoting among other things, pleasure and desire on the part of the rapist and complicity on the part of the victim) was seemingly eviscerated as explanatory of rape (Bell 1991, 97). Yet, importantly, Brownmiller’s (and others) work should be read as a product of their time (the women’s movement of the 1970s) which opened up inquiry into sex and sexuality to probe its relations to power, violence and dominance, and crucially, to politics (e.g., Dworkin 1976; Jeffrey’s 1990).

Plaza (1981), for instance, contended that one cannot regard rape as not about sex, in response to Foucault’s appeal to desexualize rape (c.f. Foucault 1990; see also Bell 1991, 85). Indeed, Foucault’s (1990) call for “desexualisation” (c.f. Hengehold 1994; Henderson 2013) can be seen as a plea to “to release ‘bodies and pleasures’ from the legal control of the state” (de Lauretis 1987; Cahill 2001, 144) and a plea which is shared by many contemporary
queer and feminist theorists alike. Bell explains however, that Plaza’s notion of sex is different from Foucault’s. Indeed, Plaza (1981, 27–28) takes issue with Foucault’s notion of sexuality as a technology of power, and of sex as somehow collapsible to being women’s bodies and genitalia, even if they are discursively inscribed. In her insistence that rape is about sex, the meaning of sex shifts from being a discursive production written on the body, which disciplines it as well as its pleasures, to the social, and ultimately to gender. Plaza (1981, 29) explains: “It is ‘social sexing’ which underlies rape.” This reading argues that rape is sexual precisely because it rests on the social differences that oppose women and men (c.f. Henderson 2013; McPhail 2016). These differences are also highly racialized, and sex is constructed out of intersecting relations of domination and power.

For MacKinnon (1987, 1989), the dividing lines between what is “normal” heterosexual sex (understood as mutually consensual and arousing acts) and rape are blurry at best, because what we know to be heterosexual sex is a manifestation of patriarchal domination (see also Dworkin 1976). Mackinnon thus provides some avenues through which we can begin to tackle the meshing of sexual desire with violence. She reintroduces sex back into the notion of rape insofar as she underscores the construction of violent male heterosexuality, where violence and force comingle with ideals of heteromasculinity to produce rape and rapists. Sexual arousal, desire and pleasure, according to MacKinnon (1987), accompany acts of domination such as rape (see also Barry 1981; Dumas 1981; Jeffreys 1990; Heberle and Grace 2009). She explains that if we claim that rape is violence and not sex, “we fail to criticize what has been made of sex, what has been done to us through sex, because we leave the line between rape and intercourse … right where it is” (MacKinnon 1987, 86–78; see also Dworkin 1976). A focus on the (racialized) creation of the sexuality of the rape victim within a heterosexual matrix as passive as always already raped/rapeable was made possible (e.g., Gavey 2005). The difference here between sociobiological readings which posit that sexual desire that leads to rape is inherent in male heterosexuality and such feminist readings lies in attention to male sexual desire and pleasure as produced as entwined with male power over women in patriarchy.

Another line of reasoning frames rape as an assault against, and destruction of, (female) subjectivity. Du Toit (2009, 6), for instance, understands rape as “an attack on the very conditions of being a self and a subject in the world.” Grace (2009, 36) explains that […] “sexual violence can be understood as a symptom of a deeper violence in the very constitution of the gendered subject.” In these readings, the sexual – for women/girls at least – connotes subjectivity, being-in-the-world, reminiscent of Irigaray’s (1985) notion that being human means being sexed. The sexual that is animated in the act of sexual violence is a destruction of that site of subjectivity – thus already including a notion of violence and power.
Cahill (2001, 2009), develop an embodied theory of rape, which allows us to remove the sexual from the act of sex. She distinguishes explicitly between sex and sexual and explains a paradox whereby it is possible that the “assailant has had sex with the victim but the victim has not had sex with the assailant” further expounding that the experience of rape “is sexual but is not sex itself” Cahill (2001, 140). For Cahill (2009, 24), “to be sexual one must be seen as a thing-for-sex.” For Cahill (inspired by Irigaray), sexuality is central to ones ontologically distinct being that stands in contrast to Foucault’s explicit attempts to reject sexuality as a privileged site of subjectivity. Rape “is the attempt on the part of one subject (the assailant) to overwhelm the subjectivity of the other (the victim) in a particularly sexualized way” (Cahill 2009, 25). She explains that “rape does not turn women into things: it forcibly reduces their sexual being to that of another, thereby eclipsing their ontological distinctiveness” (Cahill 2009, 28). Hence for her, sex can only be an intersubjective act where two people maintain their ontological distinctiveness (and can, at least theoretically, exercise their sexual agency). While the assailant can experience that “he (sic)” has sex with the victim, this experience is rooted in his subjectivity, and is not actually intersubjective, because his victim has been erased and subsumed within him. It both is (phenomenologically) and is not (as a shared intersubjective experience) sex, depending upon whose experience matters: hence the paradox. Within this paradox, one can speak of the sexual as a way of referring to the eroticization of body parts, the one-sided experience of sex, as well as the specificity of the harm against (female) subjectivity.

But what of female sexual desire and erotics? Feminist forefigures such as Irigaray, who waged a critique of sex as belonging to the masculine, for instance, opened up space for reinvesting sex with different positive and even feminine meaning (Rubin 1984; Irigaray 1985). Different tenets of feminist theorists, for instance, have argued that the act and effects of rape, as well as the way it is framed, reproduce women only as victims of sexual violence (Marcus 1992; Cornell 1995) and not as agents with their own sexual desires and pleasures, and indeed sexuality. Hence, for them, the sexual must be wrenched away from reductive, negative (and violent) forms (associated with heterosexual rape) and reinvigorated in all of its variety. This line of thinking thus invites us to theorize the sexual as produced and productive, shifting and multiple, and therewith refuses the confines of a sex/violence binary. A move for “pro-sex” or “sex – positivity” within feminist theorizing emerged (also as a response to radical feminist thought) (e.g., Vance 1984; Friedman and Valenti 2008). The idea of “sexuality as political resistance” (Glick 2000, 22) can be found also in ideas of performativity within queer theory, most often associated with Butler (e.g., 1990).

Taken together, these varied readings – some that set up (e.g., Brownmiller) and others that problematize (e.g., Mackinnon, Cahill) the notion of rape as
being about violence and power and not sex – enable us to notice and better understand the erasure of the sexual in accounts of wartime rape, to which we now turn.

**Rape as a weapon of war? Erasing the sexual**

The now familiar story of war time rape as strategic (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013) emerges out of the long-standing feminist insistence on the recognition of wartime rape as worthy of attention; as a security problem that should be neither accepted and rendered invisible nor normalized as a part of warring. Its establishment as the dominant framing reflects the flagrant empirical evidence of mass occurrences of wartime rape in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1990 and Rwanda in 1993, which were clearly part of war strategies. Hence, the scale, forms and levels of violence inflicted in these, as well as many other conflict settings – finally! – called for immediate attention; for the recognition of its historical prevalence and an end to sexual violence.

Building on the insights from radical feminists such as Brownmiller discussed above, wartime rape emerged as “desexed” in this storyline through the move to cast it as produced, political, and therefore avoidable (Card 1996; Alison 2007). Importantly, re-formulations of the familiar adage noted above are abundant. Central to these explanations is the firm move from sex to gender (Stern and Zalewski 2009) where gender (understood as socially constructed understandings of masculinity and femininity) has seemingly replaced sex (seen as a given rooted in biology) as a framework for understanding the motivations for, the use of, and the effects of the “weapon” of wartime sexual violence. Notably, both sex and gender in these storylines emerge as already known. Reductive ideas about gender inform the ways in which the dyad sexual violence is somehow collapsed into an amalgam of violence/power, in which the sexual is erased through its belonging to sex, yet lingers in the ways in which the particular form of violence/power (a sexual one) leaves significant traces. The sexual part of the term sexual violence is almost pronounced in a whisper in deference, for instance, to the way it qualifies the types of harms it causes through the workings of gender (see Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013). These are located in “cultural” repercussions and stigmatization because of particular gendered notions of purity and ownership of subjects, bodies, identities, lives.

The view of the sexual (sex) that is being removed here is the familiar and narrow (masculine heterosexual) one in which the sexual is destined by biology and let loose in the climate of warring. Sexual desire, pleasure, eroticism, etc. and its particular mix, often with an imagined racialized brutality on the part of the perpetrator (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013), although not entirely rubbed out, are replaced by an account of conscious and purposive tactics and strategies of war (not merely specific acts against women)
Niarchos 1995; Card 1996). War emerges as a distinctive category marked by particular, harmful violence. We will return to this point below. This seemingly necessary separation of known sex from gendered violence thus collapses the complex possibilities of the sexual (that, for instance Cahill espouses) into this narrow understanding, which is then erased, leaving little room for notions (let alone theorization) of sexual desire and pleasure as intertwined in the sexual violence perpetrated.

Yet, and as noted above, despite its persistence as the dominant narrative in both policy and academia, many increasingly problematize the Weapon of War narrative. Lines of critique emerge, for instance, from evidence that sexual violence is seldom ordered by the military hierarchy and that the occurrence of conflict-related sexual violence varies. Such research has demonstrated that in order to understand logics and variation, we also need to probe porous civil–military boundaries and civilian micro-conflicts and score settling, as well as military ideologies and military organization (Wood 2009; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013; Cohen 2016; Hoover Green 2016). Yet, despite such developments and the increasing gap between research and policy communities, the sexual is erased even in these accounts in several different ways.

While some lines of argumentation do indeed refer to the sexual, they do not pose sustained questions about the potential complex interrelationships between the sexual and violence in the act of sexual violence. Some poststructuralist inspired work which builds on both Foucault and Butler, for instance, quickly handles the recurring insistence of the import of erotics and sexual desire emerging in perpetrator accounts of rape in sweeping and tepid statements about the social construction of ideas about sexual desire, or about the symbolic power of rape (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009). Engaging them as constructed, however, does not allow us to venture further than a critique of discourse. It does not necessarily afford us entry into the context-specific complex of the sexual as it is lived, practiced and performed (e.g., the acts, the desires, the experiences, etc.) and that is produced through these assumptions and practices.

A similar gesturing towards the sexual can be found through the recurrent notion of “recreational rape” (Enloe 2000). Notions of recreational rape place emphasis on the widespread assumption that soldiers require release for their sexual urges. In other words, recreational rape refers to the widely held belief among many (including perpetrators themselves) of the force of male-heterosexual desire, here theorized as productive of (and produced through) constructions of militarized masculinity. Hence, the notion of recreational rape “solves” the sexual through references to its construction (as it does in Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009 noted above) without seriously engaging the rich body of feminist work noted above that does the risky work of probing the connections between violence, erotics, sexual desire, and pleasure (e.g., MacKinnon 1989; Cahill 2001; see also Glick 2000). Boesten, who asks questions
about the melding of brutality and individual pleasure, the collective “consumption of torture porn” and the seduction of racist domination that was at play in soldiers’ acts of sexual violence in the Peruvian warscape goes perhaps farthest (to our knowledge) in posing such questions (Boesten 2014, 30–35).

“Opportunistic rape” offers another gesture towards the sexual, which recurs both in policy and various academic texts, and is tied to legal categorisations (e.g., Wood 2013). While used in various ways in different strands of literature, it largely derives its meaning through its opposition to strategic forms of rape, and thus debunks the totalizing narrative of Rape as a Weapon of War. Wood (2013, 135), for instance, defines opportunistic rape as “carried out for private reasons,” in contrast to “strategic rape” as “purposefully adapted by commanders in pursuit of group objectives,” and rape as practice. While some scholars, (e.g., Wood 2009) speak of sexual desires explicitly, the majority of literature that employs these terms rarely mentions the sexual. When it does figure, it often manifests as an already known independent variable (male heterosexual desire of young women) (Cohen 2016).

Hence, in a wide-range of different types of critique, the assumptions about the sexual that render recreational and opportunistic sexual violence intelligible remains largely unpacked and un-theorized. What remains are reductive versions of known masculine heterosexuality that do not – or cannot – warrant further reflection without, we (as a collective of feminist IR scholars and stakeholders) fear, leading us down thorny political paths that render us complicit in somehow normalizing wartime rape. Along these thorny paths lurk the political risks of evoking biological essentialism, and the accompanying slippery slopes towards the inevitability and even moral abrogation of rape. Indeed, raising the question of the sexual, we worry, may drive us into an analytical cul-de-sac where the tired and delimiting nature-social construction binary persists in restricting novel ways of thinking about and theorizing sexual violence (Heberle and Grace 2009). The possibility that power/violence and sex are already collapsed, or, worse, were never even separate (as argued in some radical feminist work noted above) urges us to turn back onto the seemingly safe ground where the sexual is seemingly separate from violence; this, despite our insistent focus that the violence that we interrogate is indeed sexual violence, and is particularly heinous because it is sexual. How can we make sense of this seeming contradiction; why is it particularly difficult to critically rethink the sexual in relation to wartime sexual violence?

**War and peace, sex and violence: making sense of the erasure of the sexual**

In the above, we have suggested that one explanation of the absence of theorization of the sexual can be found in the urgency tethered to wartime
rape – an urgency which in turn is located in distinctions between war and peace. Yet surely, a critical reader might contest, distinctions between war and peace (and the attendant separations between notions of military and civilian) have been the subject of vast amounts of critical engagement in fields such as IR, war and peace studies, anthropology, political geography, sociology and not the least in feminist scholarship (e.g., Enloe 2000; Kalyvas 2006; Beck 2012). We certainly agree with such objections and our argument is not that the research community attending to wartime rape is oblivious of the blurry lines between war and peace. Indeed, a growing number of, in particular, feminist scholars has sought to (re-examine the “continuum” of violence (Brown and Walklate 2012; Kelly 2012) more generally, and between wartime and peacetime specifically (for an overview see Boesten 2017). Enloe (2000), for instance, has taught us that the rape of a wife in her bedroom in a context of “peace” (defined as a state not at war) by her husband who has returned from a foreign warzone can be understood as a conflict-related or wartime rape. Additionally, feminist theorists and advocates alike have argued that sexual violence in wartime is indeed a weapon in a “war within a war” or a “second front” (Seifert 1996): a “war against women” – thus disrupting easy distinctions between war and peace. Similarly, if we pay attention to the scare quotes around “peacetime” and “wartime” (Halley 2008), we will be reminded of a wealth of feminist work in the study of global political economy, war, security and violence that persistently troubles such lines of distinction (e.g., True 2012; Davies and True 2015). Yet, little attention within such scholarship has critically interrogated the sexual.

Moreover and importantly, such critical scholarship has also demonstrated how boundaries between “peacetime” and “wartime” still play an important symbolic role in the working of persistent political imaginaries, inescapably shaping also the efforts to problematize them. Making a long and familiar story short, the ways in which war is imbued with meaning through its constitutive outside peace occurs through myriad sources and routes, crucially linked to the dominant and familiar framing of modernity itself as progressive, civilized and peaceful, and war as a state of exception (Bauman 1993). Yet, whether war is framed as the politics of exception, in which the normal laws of peace are suspended, as a persistent zone of indistinction (Agamben 2005), as a state of nature, where the social contract and norms of peace-time disappear, or as the unmaking of certainties (Von Clausewitz 1976), it is crucially construed as exceptional to, and outside of peace, which, so the story goes, is lived within the geographic and political boundaries of modern state sovereignty. War (un)makes the normal and normality associated with peace and manifests as an exception fundamentally marked and defined by violence. War’s very exceptionality to the normal working of politics reinforces the norm, and therewith the imaginary, of a zone of peace. Inside peace, this imaginary assures us, there are clear
distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate violence; and, as we shall further explore below, between sex and violence.

How then might the distinctions between war and peace make certain relations between sex and violence impossible, and therewith occasion the erasure of the sexual? Here we are not claiming that rape in warscapes is either fundamentally different or similar to that in peacescapes; instead we are highlighting the conditions of possibility for a claim either way to be intelligible in the first place. These distinctions enable the parsing of different forms of logics, jurisprudence, subjects, legitimacy, authority etc. into distinct spatiotemporal categories.

**Peacetime sexual violence: the exceptional within the normal**

Rape in peacetime settings – so the story goes at least in *official* discourse and legislation in “Western” liberal states – is decidedly not the norm: it is exceptional, criminalized, evidence of deviant behavior. As noted above, decades of feminist theorizing and activism have disrupted such notions of exceptionality, demonstrating not only that rape in peacetime settings is extremely common, but also how the supposedly unacceptable act of rape is already normalized (e.g., through notions that victims themselves are rendered complicit) (Gavey 2005; Bumiller 2009). This, however, does not seriously alter the sense that sexual violence is produced as deviant. Importantly, this sense of deviance arguably creates and reinforces a distinction between a notion of normal sex and sexualized violence/assault.

Sexual violence is cast as wrong and outside of normal behavior – as a different practice than that of *normal* sex (even if the accepted notion of normal includes what others might consider to be violence; see e.g., Millet 1970; Vance 1984; Jeffreys’s 1990/2011). Recalling Rubin’s (1984, 13–14) explanation of the “charmed circle” determining normal, “good” sex (“heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial”) from its opposite, “bad,” “abnormal,” or “unnatural” sex (e.g., homosexual, involving pornography or “fetish objects”) is helpful in fleshing out this point. Although notions of what is considered normal sex shift, the line distinguishing sex from violence endures. Importantly, the state as police and moral authority remains the arbitrator of this line. For instance, persistent and troublesome meshings of violence, power, danger, pleasure, erotics, and brutality are seemingly resolved through the notion of consent (e.g., in BDSM codes of conduct, as well as in much criminal court jurisprudence on sexual violence); the state nonetheless holds the authority to ultimately distinguish the violently deviant from non-violent or peaceful relations. In short, and despite its many apparent contradictions, official discourse and legislation around peacetime sexual violence reflect efforts to create clear distinctions between violence and normal acceptable sex. Yet, as we suggest below,
such efforts are further complicated in relation to wartime rape, making it exceedingly difficult to think about the sexual as a vital site of inquiry in conflict settings.

**Wartime sexual violence: the exception within the exceptional**

Official discourse and international law addressing wartime sexual violence also reflect efforts to create clear distinctions between violence and sex. These efforts are abetted by the recent sense of urgency to stop rape and end impunity (for perpetrators of wartime rape) (Engle, Miller, and Davis 2016). Indeed, wartime rape is construed in the global policy agenda as an exceptionally illegitimate and heinous crime in ways that peacetime rape – despite the also mass scale of its occurrence – and other forms of violence committed in war do not.

In our accounts, this exceptional violence is committed in an already exceptional state – war; a state in which violence pervades in efforts to conquer the enemy. Wartime rape emerges as a particular form of unacceptable violence, which is marked by its *sexual* nature, in a zone in which distinctions between the normal and the exceptional have been collapsed. Such collapse renders the everyday normalcy of life; of laughter, pleasure, sex etc. in warscapes an invisible or at least troublesome side-line to the main story of violent exceptionality (see e.g., Sylvester 2013). Furthermore, crimes of sexual violence in war are legally framed both procedurally and substantively as different from “ordinary” domestic crimes, rendering sexual violence in war exceptional or extraordinary – a crime against humanity, and even a tool of “genocide” or “ethnic cleansing” committed (mainly) by military actors (Bergoffen 2003, 118; Henry 2014). In contrast to peacetime rape and its treatment in peacetime courts, with the often highly problematic focus on questions of desire, complicity, the lack of clear communication of non-consent and other lines of questioning that directly and indirectly evoke “sexual” questions, wartime rape is treated as already occurring in a state of coercion, marked by military force.

As we argue above, the *sexual* part of sexual violence – the very part that renders it an exceptional act within an already exceptional state – must be erased in order to refuse sexual violence as a normal part of warring. Yet, sense must still be made of the exceptional and horrific act that is wartime sexual violence. This, we suggest, occurs, inter alia, through the (re)drawing of lines of distinction between military and civilian spheres. As noted above, in dominant feminist framings of wartime rape, sexual violence is produced by the military (as institution, culture) and through militarization (Enloe 2000). Connected to this logic are also the distinctions made between violence, including sexual violence, in wartime as collective, in contrast to sexual violence in peacetime as individual – at least in terms of jurisprudence (Hansen 2001, 59). While there is an increasing attention to and recognition of
the sexual violence committed by civilians during (but particularly in the aftermaths) of conflict, most research still focuses on armed actors. Moreover, violence committed by civilians is often construed as effects and after-effects of militarization. This violence is understood as produced through the dispersal of militarized masculinities, which render civilians more prone to violence, including sexual violence.

Hence, as countless feminist work has underscored, the problem of wartime rape lies with militarization, seen as the power of military actors to shape civilian identities and practices. Such associations are reproduced through a wealth of excellent, yet also problematic feminist research into the particular nature (read: marked by a celebration of violent achievement – including sexual/violent achievement) of militarized masculinities (cf. Stern and Zalewski 2009). These masculinities contrast with pictures of peacetime civilian masculinities, which transform and become militarized, especially during war. War, we have come to understand, relies on the production of a disciplined and violent/abnormal heterosexual masculinity, which produces rapists.

Because of the close association of wartime sexual violence with the military, which in theory enjoys a monopoly of extreme (lethal) violence in war, queries around sexuality and desire and their potential connection to violence arguably sit even more uncomfortably. The implications of the power of such desire being inevitable or running completely amok (and indirectly revealing heterosexual desire as violent per se), we propose, further nurture our inclinations to make sense of wartime sexual violence as power/dominance/violence, in opposition to an imagined normal/peaceful/nonviolent heterosexual masculinity, which produces rapists.

The erasure of the natural/racialized/bestial inevitable force of male heterosexuality and the attendant recasting of this rape as produced through the military (and therewith stoppable), relies on a rendition of the good, normal and natural sex described, for instance, by Rubin (1984) as its constitutive outside. This sex is ontologically not violence (war), and belongs in the private realm, and within the juridical order that allows for a private sexuality/sex/etc. to remain regulated through both laws and disciplinary practices of governing, thus reinstating the distinction between the normal and the exceptional – a distinction that is obfuscated in the exceptional state of war. This civilized sex stands in contrast to military rape, which is cast as abnormal, violent and – importantly – political sexualized acts ordered or at least sanctioned from higher up in the military hierarchy. Such a distinction between (heterosexual) sex that is not violence and violence that is part of warring, also reinstates the state as arbitrator of violence (in peace) from non-violence.

The stakes of erasure? Concluding reflections

That which renders wartime sexual violence exceptional is precisely that it is a sexual form of violence. Yet, curiously, we have erased the sexual from our
frames of understanding in our accounts of wartime rape when casting it as political and avoidable. A brief revisiting of the wealth of knowledge in feminist theorizing provided in this article suggests both that and how the “sexual” part of the term sexual violence is erased yet lingers as a ghostly whisper in prevailing accounts of wartime rape (as well as those critical of these dominant stories). This ghostly whisper manifests in different versions of a stick-figure of heterosexual masculine sexuality, rooted in biology. The construction of sex as an interfusion of domination and desire, which is produced by patriarchy (e.g., MacKinnon 1987, 1989), for instance, rarely figures in our accounts of wartime rape, nor does the paradox of an act being “sex” for the perpetrator, but not the victim (Cahill 2001).

Ignoring the feminist arguments developed over the last decades of feminist theorizing about sex, gender, violence, and sexual violence, feminism’s early disassociation of the “sexual” from the “violence” of sexual violence continues to sustain the framing of “wartime sexual violence” as an act of power/dominance/violence (not of sex/the sexual) that is committed in an already exceptional state. Querying the sexual has presaged a politically and ethically dangerous line of inquiry in which we evoke biological essentialism, and walk the accompanying thorny path towards an acceptance of the inevitability of rape. While wary of this path, we have nonetheless deemed that not following it risks perhaps more than it safeguards. In this article, we have therefore placed the seeming certainty that “wartime rape is not about sex (it’s about power/violence)” under critical scrutiny, probing the imaginaries prompting the erasure of the sexual, as well as potential stakes (i.e., what we might silence or inadvertently reproduce) that it entails.

The erasure of the sexual in wartime rape, we have suggested, occurs through the drawing of familiar lines of distinction between war/peace and military/civilian that cast wartime rape in opposition to imagined normal/peaceful/nonviolent civilian sexual acts. Any notion of the sexual is thus relegated to peacetime, in which distinctions between violence and sex can be drawn and policed by the state. Thus, engagement with the sexual in our accounts of wartime rape is not only attached to the risk of bringing biology and unavoidability back “in,” but with the risk of sullying a valued notion of the sexual that is not tainted by violence and militarization. The erasure of the sexual from the dominant storyline of wartime rape becomes thus doubly markedly urgent: the presence of the sexual risks rendering rape in warring normal, and simultaneously threatens the very notion of normal sex as ontologically separate from violence.

Yet, while there are crucial stakes attached to interrogating the sexual (however we may imbue it with meaning), there are also stakes attached to not doing so. As questions about the sexual figure in many perpetrators’ and even survivors’ accounts of wartime rape, the erasure of the sexual renders us deaf to an aspect that matters in the lives of those who enact and are subjected to such violence. Moreover, the particular ways in which
the sexual is erased in our imaginaries of wartime rape risk re-establishing familiar and deeply troublesome notions of peacetime rape as somehow not political and wartime rape as somehow not sexual – as if the political and the sexual were always already distinct. The erasure of the sexual thus reinscribes the normal and the exceptional, as well as sex and violence, as ontologically separate, and ultimately vests the state with the authority to distinguish violence from non-violence, as well as war from peace.

Notes

1. There are of course exceptions to this omission in work on wartime rape and sexual slavery (e.g. Bourke 2008; Mackinnon 1994; Norma 2016); and other fields (such as history) do indeed engage such questions (e.g., Herzog 2011) – work that has not received much traction in IR since the “arrival” of sexual violence as a valid subject on the global high security purview.

2. For readability, in the remainder of this article we have refrained from placing scare quotes (Halley 2008) around these terms, although, as we shall see, these categories are highly problematic.

3. Furthermore, we use the terms rape and sexual violence more or less interchangeably in this article, although rape is a form of sexual violence, which includes a wider repertoire of acts.

4. See Parpart and Parashar (2018) for a discussion of silences.

5. We aim to neither argue for one line of theorization over another, nor establish a theoretical framework for rethinking wartime rape, and we are well aware that the following overview glosses over long-standing debates, and simplifies nuanced arguments.

6. Notions of the sexual that similarly reject policing by the state, and that allow, even celebrate, the imbricated relations of pleasure, danger, power, and pain also resonate in the widening BDSM community and attending academic work (e.g., Weiss 2011).

7. Enloe (2000) distinguishes between various types of institutionalized military rape (national security rape, systematic mass rape and recreational rape).

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