Fear, feminist geopolitics and the hot and banal

Jenna Christian a, b, *, Lorraine Dowler a, b, Dana Cuomo a, b

a The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Geography, 304 Walker Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA
b The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Women’s Studies, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 3 September 2015

Keywords:
Banal nationalism
Fear
Feminist geopolitics
Sexual assault

ABSTRACT

In this paper we bring together Billig’s notion of banal nationalism and recent feminist geopolitical examinations of fear in order to analyze two cases studies of fear among U.S. college students and U.S. soldiers experiencing sexual violence. Putting banal nationalism and feminist geopolitics into conversation, we argue, reveals both their compatibilities and important pathways for political geography and critical geopolitics to build on Billig’s work. In this regard, the paper makes three key contributions. First, we demonstrate how the insights and imperatives of banal nationalism intertwine in critical ways with the work of feminist geographers, as the banal is often rendered feminine and apolitical and as gender itself is often treated as banal despite its role in the reproduction of the nation. Second, we argue that the multi-scalar analytic of feminist geopolitics offers a valuable intervention into banal nationalism, as relational feminist approaches to binaries like intimate/global provide a useful model to account for hot and banal nationalism as a single, intertwining complex. Finally, through an analysis of fear in relation to sexual violence, the paper illustrates both the inseparability of banal and hot nationalism and how they are deeply gendered, as certain forms of deeply hot violence and fear are depoliticized through their banalization (e.g. sexual assault on college campuses), and as violence that is recognized as hot (e.g. war) is maintained through processes that are deemed banal (e.g. gender).

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Since Michael Billig first introduced the notion of banal nationalism nearly 20 years ago, his ideas have reshaped the study of nationalism both within and outside of geography. His intervention came at a time when scholars tended to locate nationalism in contexts “beyond, or prior to, to the established nation-state,” namely in extreme, violent, social disruptions occurring in non-Western states (Billig, 1995: 43). This “hot” nationalism was characterized as “dangerously emotional and irrational” (Billig, 1995: 38), a problem of violent passion marking the difference between distant “Others” and the presumed rationality of the West. Billig challenged this narrative by exposing how nationalism is also reproduced through the banal routines of everyday life in the West. As he wrote, “far from being an intermittent mood in established nations, [nationalism] is an endemic condition” (Billig, 1995: 6).

Nationhood, he argued, is reinforced or “flagged” through taken-for-granted language, such the use of personal collective pronouns like ‘we’ and ‘us’, and through prosaic practices, like saying the daily pledge of allegiance in school or walking by a “flag hanging unnoticed on [a] public building” (Billig, 1995: 8). These routine discourses and features of the landscape act as subtle, consistent, and emotionally investing reminders of national identity, and they are vital to the ways that nations like the United States reproduce themselves.

Billig’s intervention proved immensely influential in altering the way that nationalism—not to mention politics and geopolitics more broadly—was located and analyzed, as significant attention shifted to everyday, routine, and normalized objects and practices. Over the years, Billig’s thesis also inspired a host of related geographical engagements with the banal, including interventions examining “banal geopolitics” (Sidaway, 2001, 2003, 2008), “banal terror” (Katz, 2007), “banal neoimperialism” (Flusty et al., 2008), “banal Orientalism” (Haldrup, Koefoed, & Simonsen, 2008), and “banal securities” (Ojeda, 2013). There are notable similarities between Billig’s attention to the banal and feminist efforts to expand the realm of the political. Much feminist geographical work endeavors to incorporate that which is too often feminized and
excluded—subjectivity, private space, emotions, the body, the everyday, and the banal—into understandings of our political and geopolitical worlds. For example, feminist geopolitics notably challenges the privileging of large-scale processes and nation-state actors in geopolitical scholarship, and demonstrates instead how the intimate thoroughly imbuies and co-constitutes geopolitics. In other words, while giving substantive attention to the banal is a clear extension of the feminist assertion that “the personal is political”, feminist geopolitics expands upon Billig’s insights to reveal how the feminized banal, emotional and intimate, and the masculinized “hot”, global, and geopolitical can be understood as a “single complex” (Pain, 2015) rather than distinct, hierarchical realms of political activity.

Bearing this in mind, this paper asserts that the linkages between feminist geopolitics and banal nationalism reveal both their compatibilities and important pathways for political geography and critical geopolitics to build upon Billig’s work. Demonstrating how the insights and imperatives of Billig’s banal nationalism intertwine in critical ways with feminist geography, we argue, is particularly important given that political geography’s engagements with banal nationalism have largely neglected the deeply related work of feminist political geography and feminist geopolitics. As Staeheli (2001: 186) describes, within geographic accounts of banal nationalism, “it is striking that gender and feminist work is not discussed.” Additionally, with recent critiques of banal nationalism aptly pointing out the muddy distinction between the hot and the banal (Jones & Merriman, 2009; Skey, 2009), we suggest that feminist geopolitics’ existing approaches to relationality—exemplified by the deconstruction of binaries like public/private and intimate/global—offer a useful model to address hot and banal nationalism as a single intertwining complex. Doing so allows us to maintain the language of the hot and banal, which we believe remains important when undertaking a critique of how the gendering of space and knowledge continues to structure the way we locate and analyze nationalism.

In order to illustrate the utility of feminist geopolitics for engagements with hot and banal nationalism, the paper analyses fear among U.S. soldiers and U.S. college students who experience sexual violence. Our focus on fear as an element of nationalism in these two case studies is informed by Cindi Katz (2007)’s criticism that the banal terror is often contrasted against a presumably dangerous, irrational “them”. While sexual violence in non-Western locations is often treated as the “their” difference and even to justify military intervention (Freni, 2008), rampant sexual violence and fear in the U.S. is often minimized as private, place-specific, isolated incidents. This paper disrupts the assumption that sexual violence is a problem “they” have and “we” do not by exposing the how the nation is shaped in relation to sexual violence and fear within the United States. In doing so, this analysis also demonstrates the intimate, emotional stakes of banal nationalism. Although Billig (1995) critiqued scholarship at that time for locating nationalism in the dangerous and irrational emotions by “Others” in non-Western contexts, subsequent applications of banal nationalism to the West have tended to focus on national symbolism and routine practices without substantive attention to the operation of emotions. The result is an incomplete challenge to the gendered characterization of emotions as irrational and to the depiction of the West as less emotional. Focusing on the everyday operation and management of fear in the face of sexual violence, the case studies therefore demonstrate the intimate, emotional dimensions of nationalism in the United States.

In making the case for feminist geopolitics and fear as useful complements to Billig’s banal nationalism, the paper is divided into four sections. The first section sets up the field of feminist geopolitics, describes its relationship to studies of the banal, and draws from feminist traditions of breaking open binaries in order to suggest that banal and hot nationalism can be understood as a “single complex” (Pain, 2015). The second section draws from Katz’s (2007) “banal terror” and feminist geopolitical studies of fear to discuss the relationship between fear and banal nationalism. The final two sections examine our case studies of fear and sexual violence. In the first case study, we describe how victims of Military Sexual Assault (MSA) justifiably feel fear, and theorize how the United States’ decline as a military geopolitical leader relates to the epidemic of sexual assault in the military. In the second case study, we discuss the erasure of sexual assault victims’ fears on college campuses, as sexual assault reports are initiated without victim permission in order to ensure university compliance with federal legislation. Both cases draw on larger individual research projects and employ a feminist methodology with an eye towards recognizing biases and positionality in research, promoting social change, and attending to difference. To this end, the larger projects from which the two cases derive employ a diversity of methods including ethnography, participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis. Given that the focus of this essay is to identify points of intersection and departure with Billig’s thesis on banal nationalism, both projects are truncated to present the commonality of how the two examples disrupt the hot/banal binary. Analysis that incorporates rhetoric, discourse and policy supports a feminist methodology that is crucial for studying what Wendy Hesford (2010: 52) refers to as the “contradictory effects of globalization and the geopolitics of feminist rhetoric”. In other words, textual analysis does not distance us from the subjects of fear, but allows for a broader vision of how national fears overwhelm those of the individual and how gendered nationalisms are produced as subjects experience fear.

A feminist geopolitics of the banal and hot

Although Billig attends to the gendering of nationalism in his book, namely by examining the deployment of hypermasculinity in national sports and soldiering, both feminist scholarship and the gendering of the epistemological attention to the banal more broadly is unremarked upon. This is important to note, as feminists have long challenged conventional renderings of the everyday and the banal as apolitical and feminine. For example, Cynthia Enloe (2010) groundbreaking work has repeatedly demonstrated how the everyday lives of women in private spaces are indispensable to national war preparedness, despite being largely overlooked in favor of more masculine topics related to leaders of statecraft and the advancement of arms. Even gender itself is treated as banal and irrelevant to the nation, despite being fundamental to the biological, cultural, and symbolic reproduction of the nation, and being intimately tied to issues of citizenship, the military and war (Yovel-Davis, 1997). Feminists often “take nationalism to be an entire into the complex performance and execution of modern patriarchy and oppression” (Staeheli, 2001: 186). This is demonstrated, for example, by many feminists (and mentioned by Billig himself), who
draw attention to how the hyper-masculinization of soldiering labor comes to infiltrate and naturalize seemingly banal societal notions of masculinity at large, valorizing sacrificial stoicism, fearlessness, masculine protectiveness, and a willingness to kill or die for the nation-state (e.g. Cockburn, 2007; Cowen and Gilbert, 2008; Eisenstein, 2008; Enloe, 2010; Mayer, 2008; Mohanty, Pratt, & Riley, 2008; Puar, 2007). Similarly, feminist International Relations theorists examine how gender not only shapes current geopolitics, but also how gender remains entrenched within concepts closely connected to nationalism, such as war, militarization and security (Laliberte, Driscoll-Derickson, & Dowler, 2010; Sjoberg, 2013). By drawing our attention to the banal operation of nationalism, Billig’s thesis is therefore closely aligned to feminist efforts to expand the terrain of what is deemed (geo)political.

Similarly, feminist geopolitics, proposed most notably by Dowler and Sharp (2001) and Hyndman (2001), emerged as a critique of the ‘gods eye view’ and disembodied masculinism of geopolitics and critical geopolitics (Dixon & Marston, 2011; Dowler & Sharp, 2001: Hyndman, 2001; Sharp, 2000; Williams, 2011). Feminist geopolitics argues that conventional approaches eclipsed that which was feminized—private space, the local, everyday and routine experience, the body, and emotions—from the realm of the (geo)political. As Dowler and Hyndman (2006: 440) note, feminists “called attention to the silenced, marginalized and excluded. In doing so, they observe that the local is often essentialized” (Roberts, 2004): discourses of globalization hyper-masculinized the body and emotions, and experience are structured. So too must we remain alert to the way that casting certain practices and experiences as banal shapes how it is understood and responded to—or not responded to—as hot. Just as Pain (2015) weaves together intimate violence and war, we believe that engaging with the inseparability of banal and hot nationalism as “a single complex” helps to expose both how certain forms of deeply hot violence are depoliticized through their banalization (e.g. sexual assault on college campuses), and how things that are recognized as hot (e.g. war) are maintained through processes that are deemed banal (e.g. gender).

In this sense, while Jones and Merriman (2005) adopt everyday nationalism as a means to convey the fluid contiguity of hotness and banality, we maintain that the banal and the hot operate alongside one another in order to foreground both how they are thoroughly implicated in one another, as well as to maintain vigilance to the on-going gendered epistemological stakes in what is understood as banal and hot.

Flagging fear

Through the notion of “banal terror”, Cindi Katz (2007) notably offers a bridge between fear and banal nationalism. Katz places Billig’s work in conversation with the militarization of the urban landscape to explore how fear flags banal forms of nationalism. Pointing to examples that include the out-of-place camouflaged national guard conspicuously placed on Manhattan’s street corners after September 11, the sudden increase in flags, and the use of surveillance cameras and checkpoints, Katz demonstrates how the militarized features of the New York City landscape operate as “everyday, routinized, barely noticed reminders of terror or the threat of an always already presence of terrorism in our midst” (Katz, 2007: 350). Ironically, as Katz describes, the very efforts to make citizens feel less fearful and more secure also operate as banal reminders of both the need to fear and the necessity of national strength. It is in the flagging of fear in New York City that Katz sees the maintenance of a “vigorous national identity” (Katz, 2007).

The maintenance of a national identity that is rooted in “heightened concerns about risk and safety” (Lawson, 2007: 335) unevenly impacts policies, practices, and individual experience. Geographers in growing frequency are addressing the blurry boundaries between civilians/soldiers and home/battlefield that support a nationalism rooted in fear. Matthew Farish (2008), for example, describes homeland security as representative of the militarization of everyday life as fear and rituals of sacrifice are flagged and rendered banal. Farish links the performative nature of the War on Terror with the Cold War and argues that, in both cases, a sense of preparedness born out of fear promoted “concerns common to the point of sheer banality” and nuclear families were enlisted as partners to the military’s defense of the nation “before, during, and after a hypothetical assault” (Farish, 2008: 98). Bernazzoli and Flint (2009) also mark the juncture between “political society and civil society” in order to understand how the banal spaces of civil society constitute the stage for political action. They point to places such as “schools, the media, churches, trade unions and political parties” as sites of “securitization” of society
borders of all states, and alarmingly often. When used as a weapon, violence occurs daily. It happens during times of peace, within the genocide. States that fail to protect their (gendered) citizens from such as immigrants. Yet recent critiques from feminist geopolitics attending to experiences of fear across scale point to the ways that fear is too often assumed to be a universal experience, particularly in the context of the War on Terror (Pain, 2009). However, they experienced this metanarrative as “globalized fear,” and calls instead for geographers concerned with fear to attend to its operation across scale in the intimate, emotional interactions “on the ground” in the places and lives that people inhabit.” This is particularly important given the unevenness of experiences with fear, as some subject’s fears are politicized and privileged while others erased. Moreover, this focus on the everyday experiences of fear in relationship to the reproduction of the nation points to an important direction for expanding banal nationalism’s engagements with emotions, as political geographers working with Billig’s theories have often focused on national symbols and practices without substantive engagement with emotions. Therefore, through this grounded and embodied approach to fear, feminist geopolitics facilitates a cross-scalar exploration of fear as an intimately global, banally hot phenomenon.

As we will describe in the two cases to follow, the management of fear in diverse spaces works to solidify gendered nationalisms, to produce more fearful lives for some, and to justify actions under the guise of security and protection. The two cases we examine in this paper both address recent attention directed toward the issue of sexual assault in the United States. Although rape as a weapon of war has garnered attention in gender and nationalism literature, we focus specifically on individuals who experience sexual violence and the ways protecting the nation persists as a priority over protecting the bodies of its citizens. The use of sexual violence as a geopolitical weapon in nationalist movements is well established within feminist scholarship (Yuval-Davis, 1997). As Billig himself states, “in our age, the rape of the motherland is far worse than the rape of actual mother; the death of nation is the ultimate tragedy, beyond death of flesh and blood” (Billig, 1995: 4). Systemic rape as a tool of war, however, is most often associated with “hot” conflicts; nationalist movements that also include ethnic cleansing and genocide. States that fail to protect their (gendered) citizens from rape during nationalist conflicts typically become subject to external scrutiny and intervention (Dowler, 2011). Yet, sexual violence occurs daily. It happens during times of peace, within the borders of all states, and alarmingly often. When used as a weapon of war, rape becomes a visible symbol of “a state of failure” (Erenreich-Bookst, 2008 in Dowler, 2011). However, when experienced outside of a “hot” conflict, for example by an intimate partner, at a fraternity party or in a college dorm room, sexual violence has historically been rendered banal. Although the effects are no less consequential, this banalized sexual violence remains invisible, infrequently discussed and rarely recognized as anything other than an individual concern. Both of the following examples demonstrate that, through fear, the banal often takes on distinctly hot dimensions, and the intimate is deeply wrapped up in the global.

**Fighting fear**

On 4 June 2013 the Joint Chiefs of Staff were asked to appear before the Senate Armed Service Committee to debate Senator Kirsten Gillibrand’s proposed bill that the adjudication of all serious military crimes - such as murder and sexual assault — be transferred into the hands of independent military prosecutors. Gillibrand’s bill would radically change a training culture defined by the chain-of-command; the trademark of maintaining military discipline. At first glance, Gillibrand’s bill can be argued as “hot” or threatening as it placed the top brass in the U.S. military on the defensive, as each Chief testified that despite the serious nature of military sexual assault (MSA), chain of command must be maintained. Ultimately, Gillibrand’s proposal garnered 55 of 100 votes—a majority—yet it was still five votes short of the 60 required to overcome a filibuster led by another Democrat, Senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri. In the end, on 6 March, 2014, the Senate voted to implement some oversight of the military’s handling of sexual assault, but maintained the chain-of-command as the final arbitrator. In other words, the final decision upheld the status quo.

Employing a feminist geopolitical analysis to this case makes visible how the intimately global, “as a set of spatial relations, stretching from the proximate to the distant ... a mode of integration” and as a “set of practices connecting the body and that which is distant” (Pain & Statheli, 2014). This framework also draws attention to how fear is evident across scale as both male and female victims fear retaliation or harm to their careers if they formally report incidents of sexual assault, while the top brass fear losing authority over the chain-of-command, thus being emasculated in terms of their military competitiveness globally.

While Gillibrand’s bill was a direct challenge to military power, the discursive framing and response to sexual assault reveals both its intimately global, and its hot and banal dimensions. For example, in a post-vote media interview, Gillibrand highlighted the complexity of these types of investigations, stating, “We need an objective, trained prosecutor making these decisions about whether a case should go forward, not politics, not the discretion of a senior officer or a commander who may like the perpetrator or might like the victim, who may value the perpetrator more than the victim” (MSNBC, 2014). At the heart of Gillibrand’s argument is that the supposed impartial, unbiased and detached model of military discipline, where each level in the chain is responsible for a lower level and accountable to all higher levels, is flawed by the intimate nature of emotion. Sarah Plummer, a U.S. Marine veteran and military sexual assault survivor, speaks to the intimate nature of reporting MSA. She states,

> Having someone within your direct chain of command handling the case, it just doesn't make sense. It's like your brother raping you and having your dad decide the case . . . it truly is that intimate of settings sometimes. These are people we know like brothers and sisters and our commanding officers are like father and mother figures to us!” (O’Neill, 2014).

Although many of America’s allied nations, including the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and Israel, have shifted oversight of MSA to independent prosecutors, the U.S. military leadership rejects this procedural change. At the hearing for the Gillibrand bill,
the Joint Chiefs of Staff each admitted that the system of reporting MSA was flawed and biased. As Chief Odierno acknowledged, “These crimes cut to the heart of the Army’s readiness for war. They destroy the very fabric of our force — soldier and unit morale” (McLaughlin, 2014). Yet, he and his colleagues maintained their defense of the chain-of-command for reporting and adjudicating MSA stating, “the chain of command must be fully engaged and at the center of any solution” (McLaughlin, 2014).

Victims of MSA are rightfully concerned about reporting. A Department of Defense (DOD) report estimates that 500,000 members of the Armed Forces have been victims of rape, sexual assault or unwanted sexual touching during the last 25 years. In 2012 alone, the military treated more than 85,000 veterans for injuries or illness stemming from sexual abuse experienced in the military and most of these cases went unreported (DOD, 2012). These high levels of inter-military sexual assaults have been attributed to several factors, first the lowering of military recruitment standards; second, the implementation of new training modules that desensitize young soldiers toward violence; third, the concern that the military is becoming a refuge for perpetrators fleeing their own backgrounds of sexual assault; and fourth, the sentiment that women’s training is less rigorous as they are ill equipped for combat and therefore they are not real soldiers. U.S. military academies and basic training socialize new soldiers, both officers and enlisted, into a culture of traditional manhood that associates aggression with masculinity (Belcher & Martin, 2013). The purpose of this training is to desensitize soldiers to violence. In other words, killing needs to be rendered banal. In what becomes a critical facet of learning to kill, soldiers are taught to think in binary terms, masculine/protector and feminine/victims. One just has to examine the epithets that drill sergeants use that refer to a soldier not measuring up as “faggot, pussy or simply woman,” linking bad performance to not being a real man (Goldstein, 2001: 265). Military culture is steeped in violent attitudes towards the feminine and this misogynistic culture is an important part of a pedagogical system that renders killing banal. Consequently, military leaders use concepts such as “unit cohesion” to describe the strong emotional bonds between soldiers. In what becomes a critical factor in combat motivation, these terms - brotherhood, bro culture and band of brothers — are notably gendered (Gutmann, 2000).

Many critics view the goal of a gender-neutral military as equivalent to the emasculation of the armed services. They argue a gender-neutral military will have deeply disruptive and damaging effects on the fighting capabilities of the United States Military. As Gutmann states, “the brass handed over their soldiers to social planners in love with an unworkable (and in many senses undesir- able) vision of a politically correct utopia, one in which men and women toil side by side, equally good at the same tasks, inter- changeable, and, of course, utterly undistracted by sexual interest” (Gutmann, 2000: 12). Critics argue that this approach to gender-neutral education has stripped service academies of their morale, traditions, and standards having a devastating effect on combat readiness (Brown, 2007).

Military academies are crucial spaces where masculinist attitudes and behaviors about sex, protection and power are learned and reinforced—or potentially rehabilitated and transformed. Female and male cadets have experienced sexual harassment and sexual assault within the military academies as facts of life for decades. More recently, however, high-profile cases have made MSA in military academies more visible. Examples include the sex-abuse educator who was discovered running a prostitution ring at Fort Hood, the Army Sergeant who was charged with covertly videotaping female cadets in West Point’s bathroom, and the 33 instructors engaged in the sex scandal at Lackland Air Force. In 2003, Congress directed that an independent inquiry be undertaken specifically within military academies. Although there were 142 formal reports of sexual assault between 1993 and 2003, the inquiry revealed that over 80 percent of women who experienced sexual assault in military academies never filed a report. Although a woman in uniform is a more likely target than a man, officials believe that the majority of sexual assault victims in military academies are men. Statistically, such an argument holds as maleservice members greatly outnumber female service members. Consequently, the sexual assault of U.S. soldiers by fellow soldiers is not a new phenomenon that can be blamed on the more recent rise of women in the military. Rather, it is a trend that has been routinely ignored, or historically dismissed, as the bad behavior of a few. The statistics on sexual assault and lack of reporting mirror those of civilian colleges. However, MSA in academies is of critical importance as so many military and political leaders — the people setting policy — attend them, linking military culture to a larger societal problem (Clark, 2014). This is an important distinction as military leaders often argue that military sexual assault is simply symptomatic of a larger societal problem and not unique to military academies. However, military academies are unique as like other universities they receive federal financial aid, however, they are not subject to the requirements of Title IX, the federal legislation guiding universities response to sexual violence that will be explored in the next case study. Therefore, leadership within military academies do not experience the same level of fear regarding violations of federal mandates, including the reporting of sexual assault.

A recent public Article 32 hearing of a Naval Academy football player, accused of sexually assaulting a female midshipman, re-inforces the exceptional difficulties for victims of MSA who report assault. A female midshipmen accused three football players of raping her at an off campus party, calling into question the boundaries of military culture. An Article 32 hearing was scheduled to determine whether enough evidence existed to court martial one of the players. Unlike a civilian trial, military lawyers maintain a degree of latitude that permits a line of questioning beyond that permitted in the U.S. criminal justice system. For example, military lawyers questioned the 21 year old midshipmen for 30 h to determine if she wore a bra or underpants, how wide she opened her mouth during oral sex (assuming an open mouth confirmed consent), and whether she had apologized to another midshipman with whom she had intercourse “for being a ho” (Steinhauer, 2013). The military record of the defendant can also be presented to support the defendant’s character as exemplified by General Martin Dempsey’s words describing the military justice system as a “little too forgiving because if a perpetrator shows up at a court-martial with a rack of ribbons and has four deployments and a Purple Heart, there is certainly the risk that we might be a little too forgiving of that particular crime” (Dempsey, 2013). Although the accused football players resigned from the naval academy as a result of the case, the line of questioning and its public coverage in the media reinforce why reporting rates of MSA are so low in the military academies.

The high level of MSA is a crisis of nationalism. One of the most persuasive symbols of national strength and protection is that of the soldier, who embodies the strength and power of the nation (see Millar, 2015). MSA is a challenge to this symbolism as the U.S. failed to protect the nation’s future protectors. General Walsh’s (2013) statement before the Senate Arms Service Committee regarding MSA specifically in military academies points to both the intimate and global nature of this crisis:

Americans hold their military to a high standard, and rightly so. Air Force leadership at every level has an obligation to protect and strengthen the force, and to be worthy of the confidence of
our Airmen and the Nation we serve. We have a duty to live by our core values and to meet or exceed the high standards the American people expect of us. As Secretary Donley has stated, “this is family business,” and as an Air Force family, we must do a better job of caring for one another (General Mark A. Walsh III, United States Air Force Chief of Staff).

General Walsh’s words are representative of the intimately global character of nationalism as he simultaneously speaks to the Air Force’s role as protector of the nation as well as defender to soldiers who are the victims of sexual assault. What can be viewed as a challenge to the military’s authority to protect the nation is simultaneously minimized by Walsh with the promise that American core values will endure. When using words such as integrity, ethics and high standards, he evokes a nationalist vocabulary of what it means to be an American, and yet he positions this public institution at the scale of the intimate when he refers to acts of care for victims, as a family matter. The bodies of both women and men who are the victims of sexual assault within the military are eclipsed by “extraordinary, politically charged and emotionally driven” nationalist rhetoric about military capabilities and readiness” (Bilig, 1995, p. 44). This nationalist imagery draws on passionate notions that the United States Military is growing weaker and its citizenry more vulnerable. Yet, the day-to-day vulnerabilities of soldiers to sexual harassment and assault within the military is obscured and relegated as a private issue rather than a nationalist concern.

Learning fear

“Sexual violence is more than just a crime against individuals. It threatens our families, it threatens our communities; ultimately, it threatens the entire country. It tears apart the fabric of our communities. And that’s why we’re here today – because we have the power to do something about it as a government, as a nation. We have the capacity to stop sexual assault, support those who have survived it, and bring perpetrators to justice.”

President Barack Obama, 22 January 2014. (Office of the Vice President, 2014: ii)

The recent attention directed at the epidemic of sexual violence on university campuses offers another case in which to examine sexual violence as intimately global. When sexual violence emerges in public discourse as a national security threat, the focus usually centers on ‘hot’ sites of conflict, for example, ‘failed states’ where rape is used as a weapon of war (Dowler, 2011; Yuval-Davis, 1997). When experienced outside of a ‘hot’ conflict, sexual violence has historically been rendered banal and invisible. Yet the deliberate use of sexual violence to exert physical power and emotional control over populations in times of war mirrors the everyday use of such violence in interpersonal relationships (Pain, 2014). Obama’s statement locates the seemingly banal spaces of university campuses as ‘hot’ sites of national insecurity. By situating banal forms of sexual violence as intimately global, this section examines how the national response to sexual violence within university communities can inadvertently produce more fearful lives for some under the guise of security and protection for the nation.

Institutions of higher education across the U.S. have recently faced unprecedented scrutiny for mishandling cases of sexual violence on university campuses. Made visible by the tireless work of advocates, activists and survivors, the failure of many university administrations to adequately address sexual violence among its student population is now the focus of a new presidential initiative; The White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault (herein Task Force). Evident by President Obama’s remarks in the above quote on the day he signed the Presidential Memorandum creating the Task Force and reinforced through the Task Force’s first report released in April 2014, the federal government has declared that universities have an “obligation to protect students from sexual violence” (Office of the Vice President, 2014: 2).

No longer an invisible problem, campus sexual violence has taken on ‘hot’ dimensions; this intimate form of violence disrupts the artificial boundary between hot/banal and global/intimate as the federal government declares sexual violence both a personal and national security threat.

The timing surrounding the creation of the Task Force is not haphazard. On 1 May 2014, the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) released a list of 55 colleges with open sexual violence investigations (Anderson, 2014). Among other responsibilities, the OCR is charged with ensuring that universities are in compliance with Title IX, the federal law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in federally funded educational programs and activities. Title IX works to guarantee that no student is denied or limited in their ability to participate in or benefit from the university experience (Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Commonly recognized as the legislation that increased opportunities for women in college athletics, Title IX also identifies sexual harassment – including sexual violence – as a form of sex discrimination. As recipients of federal funding, universities fall under federal government mandate and must comply with federal statutes. Title IX legislation reinforces how the intimate is tightly interwoven with the national whereby federal policies dictate the local response to intimate violence (Pain & Stattheli, 2014).

When a university becomes aware of student-on-student sexual harassment, Title IX requires that the school take immediate action to “eliminate the harassment, prevent its occurrence, and address its effects” (Office of Civil Rights, 2011: 4). Universities must initiate an investigation to determine what occurred and then take appropriate measures based on the findings of the investigation. During the university’s investigation, Title IX requires that universities protect the complainant and ensure the student-victim’s safety. A university violates a student’s Title IX rights when upon being notified of an incident of violence, the university fails to take action “to end the sexual violence, eliminate the hostile environment, prevent its recurrence, and, as appropriate, remedy its effects” (Office for Civil Rights, 2011: 1). Students who have already filed Title IX complaints detail examples of university administrators who failed to investigate reports of sexual violence (Bogdanich, 2014), who blamed the alleged victim for the assault (Perez-Pena & Taylor, 2014), who encouraged victims to attend in-person mediation with their perpetrators, (Crane, 2014), and in some cases, punished the victim after identifying her as a ‘mental health liability’ (Dockterman, 2014).

Recent attention highlighting the problem of sexual violence on university campuses coincides with efforts to improve the response to such violence nation-wide. President Obama passed the 2013 Violence Against Women reauthorization act (Helderman, 2013) and supported efforts to update the definition of rape to include men as victims (Savage, 2012). Sexual assault in the military occupies national attention in the media and is a topic of federal inquiry through congressional hearings. Institutional cover-ups of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and at The Pennsylvania State University have drawn attention to sexual abuse of young boys. While acknowledging that sexual violence plagues broad swaths of society, the 2014 White House Task Force report indicates that campus sexual assault poses a particular problem. Citing statistics from the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, the Task Force reinforces that 20 percent of women and 6
percent of men have been sexually assaulted while in college (Office of the Vice President, 2014). Notably, men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of all sexual assaults (Office of the Vice President, 2014). Forcible stranger rapes are rare in university settings; rather, victims of campus sexual assaults frequently know their perpetrator and research indicates that student perpetrators are often serial offenders (Lisak & Miller, 2002; White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014).

The development of the Task Force and the public naming of universities under investigation for Title IX violations follow a renewed call to action by the Obama administration to “combat rape and sexual assault” (White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014: 1). Like a military operation, the White House plans a multi-front attack on the problem of campus sexual violence by encouraging universities to comply with Title IX, support victims, hold offenders accountable, administer campus climate surveys and institute prevention and education training (White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014). Universities occupy a specific role in the national agenda to fight sexual violence. With federal legislation providing oversight, the federal government has identified universities as the local institutions responsible for protecting the nation’s future citizens. Similar to protection within the nation-state, due to university campuses’ traditional role as a safe haven for students, campuses are often in a unique position to consider all scales of vulnerability from the individual victim of sexual violence to the university community in its entirety. While the rights of individual students – particularly those already victimized – rightfully remain an integral component of the federal response to campus sexual violence, a concern regarding the safety of the broader university community also dominates the discussion. The remainder of this Section focuses on the specific reporting requirements outlined within Title IX legislation to examine how attention to procedure that is “good for the whole” may inadvertently increase the fears and insecurities of individual victims.

Currently all White House documents available to assist universities in Title IX compliance reinforce the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of students who disclose sexual assault. As the Task Force examines best practices for responding to sexual violence on campus, the unique dynamics of sexual violence remain a primary focus; sexual violence is predicated on establishing and maintaining power and control over another person. By assaulting a person in one of the most intimate ways possible, the perpetrator has (temporarily) usurped an individual’s autonomy. Allowing the student-victim the opportunity to regain control over her life after the assault represents a critical component of the healing process (Smith & Kelly, 2001; Steketee & Austin, 1989). Although Title IX emphasizes that a university should permit the victim to direct any action that the university might pursue following a report of sexual violence, criteria within Title IX also provide instructions for when a university must independently act separate from – or in direct contradiction to – the victim’s expressed desires. Specifically, Title IX advises that a student’s request for confidentiality is to be evaluated in the context of the school’s responsibility to provide a safe and nondiscriminatory environment for all students (Office of Civil Rights, 2014: 16–17). Universities must disregard a student-victim’s request for confidentiality when the perpetrator has a known history of prior sexual violence, has threatened to commit additional acts of sexual violence, or used a weapon during the assault. Although advising documents acknowledge that disregarding requests for confidentiality “can have a chilling effect and discourage other students from reporting sexual violence.” (Office of Civil Rights, 2014, p. 19) federal guidelines prioritize the broader community’s safety over the individual student-victim’s fear of losing anonymity. It is here that the response to sexual violence can inadvertently produce fear for individual subjects under the guise of national security and protection.

With attention directed toward universities as banally-hot sites of insecurity, sexual assault victims are not the only fearing subjects as universities revise policies and procedures to comply with federal guidelines. University administrators are under intense pressure to quell the fears of parents, students and alumni. As universities increasingly rely on private donations, fundraising campaigns and student tuition to meet annual operating budgets, university presidents are publicly detailing increased security measures to prevent sexual violence and to reestablish college campuses as safe places for young adults. As Katz (2007) has taught us in time of national crisis, the pendulum of protection swings in the opposite direction following a security breach as the federal government asks individual citizens to assume responsibility for national security. Campaigns to report ‘suspicious activity’ following September 11th provide one such example of such collective responsibility for security. Similarly, federal reporting procedures require university employees, faculty and staff to report disclosures of sexual violence or suspected sexual violence to university compliance officers; mandatory reporting procedures require that employees make such reports regardless of the expressed permission of the victim. While engaging the broader community represents a crucial long-term strategy in the prevention of sexual violence, reporting procedures that prioritize national security further exacerbates the fear of individual victims.

The recent attention directed toward the epidemic of sexual violence within U.S. culture writ large is necessary and long overdue. The student-led lawsuits detail a systemic dismissal of sexual violence on university campuses as many administrators have blamed victims for the assaults and failed to adequately protect students who experienced sexual violence. This section is no way wishes to undermine the efforts of survivors who have made visible the failure of many universities in the response to campus sexual violence or to suggest that universities should not actively work to implement more comprehensive procedures to protect student-victims and hold student-perpetrators accountable. Considering the current climate, the reporting procedures outlined above may seem far-fetched; too much action following a report of sexual violence has not been the problem. However, as the federal government reframes sexual violence as a national security threat, reinforcing the banally-hot elements of intimate violence, the focus on protecting the nation may incite fear and insecurity for individual victims. For many examining Title IX, these reporting procedures appear banal; the federal government is insisting that universities follow the law, protect vulnerable individuals and address an issue that represents a national security threat; all actions that ought to be commonplace and everyday in university settings and across the nation. Yet individual survivors of sexual violence will not experience the banal response of protection in the same way. By recognizing the ways that protection is not experienced universally, this section calls attention to the banally-hot moments of protection; the moments when banal protection results in increased fear for the individual victim, as the institution considers procedure deemed good for the broader community.

Conclusion

By putting banal nationalism into conversation with a feminist geopolitics of fear, this paper makes three key contributions. First, the paper demonstrates how the insights and imperatives of Billig’s banal nationalism align and intertwine in critical ways with the work of feminist geographers, as the banal is often rendered feminine and apolitical and as gender itself is often treated as banal despite its central role in the reproduction of the nation. We argue that attention to the connections between Billig and feminist
geography are particularly important given that political geography’s engagements with banal nationalism have largely neglected feminist geography’s influential and related work expanding the realm of the (geo)political (Staeheli, 2001). By drawing out the linkages to feminist epistemology and theory, we hope to encourage political geographers working with banal nationalism to put their scholarship into greater conversation with feminist political geography and geopolitics.

Second, we suggest that building these theoretical linkages also reveals the potential of feminist geopolitics to address critiques leveled against banal nationalism for entrapping a hot/banal binary. Although the similarities between these two lines of theory and scholarship make Billig’s work an important contribution to feminist geography, we argue that feminist approaches to the deconstruction of gendered binaries also offer a valuable intervention for theories of banal nationalism. Drawing on feminist geopolitics which demonstrates not just the importance of attending to the small scale and the everyday, but also how these processes co-constitute the geopolitics, we argue that rather than abandon the terminology of banal and hot nationalism in favor of alternatives like “everyday nationalism” (Jones & Merriman, 2005), the two may be maintained alongside one another and treated as “a single complex” (Pain, 2015) of nationalism. Just as feminists assert that the intimate is global and the personal is political, the banal can also be “hot”. This is true for minority subjects who are disproportionately bordered as external to the nation or for whom the routine markers of national belonging may feel deeply violent and steeped in fear. It is also true for victims of sexual violence —whether in the military or on college campuses—who may be made more fearful or less secure by the routine practices designed to protect the larger whole of the nation. Maintaining the language of the hot and banal, we argue, emphasizes the way they co-constitute one another and foregrounds the on-going need to critique the ways the gendering of space and knowledge continues to structure the way we locate and analyze nationalism.

Third, and finally, by focusing on the operation of fear in the lives of multiple diverse actors, the paper addresses the emotional stakes of banal nationalism. Michael Billig challenged the tendency by scholars to locate nationalism in the extreme eruptions of “hot”, violent, emotions in distant places. Yet, while his call to focus on the banal has been widely engaged, the emotional imperatives of his work have been less thoroughly addressed in politically geography. By turning to this example of fear, we demonstrate how a feminist geopolitical analysis can engage with the complex emotional relationships between the intimate and global, and the hot and banal. There is a need for more engagements emotions alongside banal nationalism in order to further challenge both the gendered devaluing of emotions as irrational and the depictions of emotions as a dangerous phenomenon of non-Western “Others”. We hope that this paper will encourage others, especially scholars of critical geopolitics, to incorporate feminist geopolitics in their own efforts to interrogate the interaction between hot and banal, and as they develop agendas for expanding the realm of the political to include emotions.

Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest resulting from the publication of this research.

Endnotes

1 Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Gen. Raymond Odierno, Chief of Staff of the Army; Adm. Jonathan Greenert, Chief of Naval Operations; Gen. James Amos, Commandant of the Marine Corps; Gen. Mark Welsh, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, and Adm. Robert Papp Jr., Commandant of the Coast Guard, each acknowledged that sexual assault is a serious problem but one that commanders are equipped to handle.

2 2014 DOD survey of MSA not yet published.

3 The Fifth-Amendment constitutional right to grand jury indictment is inapplicable to the Armed Forces. Instead, Article 32 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (Section 8 of Title 10 United States Code), requires a thorough and impartial investigation of charges and specifications before they be referred to a general court-martial.

4 General Martin Dempsey is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff testimony at Personnel Sub-Committee Hearing of the National Defense Authorization Act for 2014 May 17th, 2013.

5 Statement General Walsh III, USAF Chief of Staff, for A Review of Sexual Misconduct by basic training instructors at Lackland Air force Base, Committee on Armed Service House of Representatives, (January 23, 2014).

6 At the time of this manuscript’s publication, the number of universities with active federal investigations stood at 94 (KingKade, 2015).

7 The 2001 Revised Sexual Harassment Guidance document clarified that Title IX also prohibits gender-based harassment.

8 Sexual violence refers to physical sexual acts perpetrated against a person’s will or where a person is incapable of giving consent due to the victim’s use of drugs or alcohol. An individual may be unable to give consent due to an intellectual or other disability. Acts of sexual violence include rape, sexual assault, sexual battery and sexual coercion. These acts of sexual violence are forms of sexual harassment covered under Title IX (Office of Civil Rights, 2011).

References


tid=4w5t2&_r=2.


