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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

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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).

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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 imbues 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,

*Submission for: "Nationalism 20 years on", Political Geography, (eds) Natalie Koch, Department of Geography, Syracuse University and Anssi Paasi, Department of Geography, Oulu University.

* Corresponding author. The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Geography, 304 Walker Building, University Park, PA 16802, USA
E-mail address: jmc5974@psu.edu, jennachristian218@gmail.com (J. Christian).

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) description of “banal terror” and by a growing body of literature within feminist geopolitics that both examines fear as it is experienced in everyday lives and illuminates its inseparable role in shaping geopolitics (Pain, 2009, 2015). Within geopolitics certain fears are mobilized and politicized to produce and mobilize support for the nation, while other fears are treated as private and apolitical, and thereby rendered invisible. Within the case studies, this is demonstrated through an analysis of the rhetoric of protection found in texts such as presidential speeches and congressional testimonies, which evoke a sense of nationalism that eclipses individual experience of sexual assault in favor of a mythology of national protection. This gendered myth of protection also works to reproduce a national “us” that is often contrasted against a presumably dangerous, irrational “them”. While sexual violence in non-Western locations is often used to mark “their” difference and even to justify military intervention (Fluri, 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 victim’s 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 (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Feminists often “take nationalism to be an *entrée* 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; Sjöberg, 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.

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