

Slow and Fast Violence: A Feminist Critique of Binaries

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Abstract

Rob Nixon's recent theorization of slow violence deliberates on specific forms of violence that unfold gradually and in unspectacular ways. However, discussions about the phenomenon that fall under slow violence are not new to the academy and echo the labor of feminist scholars who have for many years written about how violence is experienced in banal, everyday, intimate, and routinized ways. We argue that these feminist traditions of analyzing violence are vital to touch on, because these contributions are largely overlooked in Nixon's thesis. Further, this robust scholarship demonstrates how the invisibility of slow violence is shaped not only by its everyday nature, but also by larger gendered and raced epistemologies that privilege the public, the rapid, the hot, and the spectacular. We argue that a feminist epistemological approach to denaturalizing binaries can offer a deeper understanding of how the invisible nature of slow violence is shaped by ongoing gendered and raced epistemologies. Specifically, we believe that a feminist geopolitical framework aids in recognizing the co-constitution of fast and slow violence and engages new pathways that challenge impunity.

Keywords

Slow violence; gender; violence; feminist geopolitics



Introduction

In recent years, Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence has become increasingly influential in geographic discussions of violence. Focusing on environmental harms that accumulate slowly, Nixon (2011: 2) describes slow violence as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." He draws a contrast between this "attritional violence" and explosive, spectacular, and sensational eruptions that are immediate and highly visible.

While highlighting the ways that Nixon's work aligns with a long existing tradition of feminist scholarship, we propose that feminist epistemologies provide a proven intervention to denaturalizing binary divisions and adopting a politics of relationality. Specifically, in this epistemological intervention we turn to the insights of feminist theory, and specifically feminist geopolitics, which demonstrate the mutually constitutive relationship between the intimate and global (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2001; Mountz and Hyndman 2006; Pratt and Rosner 2006; Wright 2008; Pain and Staeheli 2014; Pain 2015), the hot and banal (Christian, Dowler and Cuomo 2016), and the personal and political. Rachel Pain's (2015) work on intimate war offers a particularly useful model to draw from in linking fast and slow violence. She argues that intimate violence and war are part of a "single complex," as intimacy operates as "a foundational part of the geopolitical" (ibid: 72). In demonstrating how the binary of fast and slow violence operates as a single complex of violence, we build on arguments we previously made (Christian, Dowler and Cuomo 2016), about the co-constitution of hot and banal nationalism. Feminist efforts to show the mutually constitutive relationship between binaries is a strategic move of visibility, as linking the personal/political, intimate/war, or hot/banal demands that we see the violences that are conventionally ignored in studies of politics, geopolitics, and violence. Thus, this intervention argues that a feminist geopolitical treatment of fast and slow violence as a "single complex" helps us to translate the widespread concern about fast violence into a concern for both fast and slow violence together.

As mentioned earlier, Nixon's notion of slow violence aims to expand the category of violence, and in doing so there are significant parallels between Nixon's theory of slow violence and Johan Galtung's (1969) theory of structural violence, which similarly calls attention to the violence of broader systemic conditions, like racism or unequal morbidity. However, in contrast to structural violence, slow violence has an "explicitly temporal emphasis" (Nixon 2011: 11). Specifically, the theory of slow violence offers a model to understand how the causes and consequences of violence are decoupled from one another through the passage of time, a process that ultimately renders much slow violence invisible.

Indeed, addressing the invisibility of slow violence is central to Nixon's intervention, as the deadly violence of climate change and environmental toxins often creep forward too gradually to draw the attention or outrage they deserve. To Nixon, this presents a representational challenge:

In an age when the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow-moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our world image? (Nixon 2011: 3)

In order to overcome this representational challenge and make slow environmental violences visible, Nixon—who is himself a literary scholar—turns to the imagination of writer-activists, including a Palestinian literary scholar, a Pennsylvania biologist, and a social scientist from India. Writers, he argues, "can help make the unapparent appear, making it accessible and tangible by humanizing drawn-out threats inaccessible to the immediate senses" (p. 15). There is undeniable power in activist writing and other forms of creative expression to bring visibility to slow violences. However, as Lindsey Dillon

(2012: 831) writes, many of the “modern violences that work at varied scales *and* speeds are difficult to represent.” As more scholars—including geographers—take up Nixon’s theory of slow violence, the question of which representational practices and tools are effective in prompting visibility and care remains.

The bulk of the geographic engagements with slow violence have, like Nixon, centered on environmental injustice: long-term environmental contamination caused by war and military activity (Gregory 2016; L. Dillon 2015), pollution of water (Gorostiza and Sauri 2017), colorblind adaptation to sea level rise (Hardy et al 2017), dangers of a subterranean pipeline (Murry 2015), and climate change (O’Lear 2016). However, the concept of slow violence is being taken up in purely social geographic research as well. For example, focusing on the slow violences perpetrated against bodies during humanitarian crises, Bhungalia (2015) focuses on practices of foreign aid governance in Palestine, and Davies et al (2017) document the abandonment of residents in refugee camps in Europe. De Leeuw (2016) extends the application of slow violence to her work on colonial geographies in British Columbia, demonstrating how slowness “serves to make colonial violence invisible, especially to settler-colonists” (p. 15). Describing the slow violence of gentrification in Toronto, Kern (2016) argues that a temporal lens on gentrification illuminates the ways “new temporalities of the neighbourhood become a barrier to recognition and representation” (p. 441). As these rich geographic engagements with slow violence continue, we suggest that existing feminist theory and feminist geographic tools may offer a vital pathway to address the representational challenge of slow violence’s invisibility. Just as Nixon turns to literature to facilitate the visualization of slow violence, we believe that feminist thought also provides a well of strategies to help us respond to the erasure of violence by time. Specifically, we argue that feminist epistemologies offer a clear pathway for addressing the invisibility of routinized and unspectacular violence.

The gendering of slow violence

Feminists who write about violence will likely recognize close parallels between Rob Nixon's (2011) theory of slow violence and the long history of feminist work on violence. Like feminist scholars—and specifically, feminist geographers—Nixon is concerned by narrow definitions of violence that focus overwhelmingly on spectacular, sensational, and rapid explosions of force. Both Nixon and feminist geographers argue that it is this limited attention to “hot” and fast violence that obscures other forms of violence from sight. For Nixon, his efforts to “[widen] the field of what constitutes violence” focuses on the temporal, as the workings of time allow gradual forms of violence to be decoupled from their origins (p. 11). Feminists, in turn, point to how attention to what constitutes violence (or politics more broadly) is deeply shaped by gendered epistemologies and binary thinking, as the intimate, the banal, the everyday, private space, and emotions are often eclipsed in conventional studies of war and violence. As we will demonstrate, this feminist scholarship also addresses the temporal rhythms that shape the neglect of the banal. For example, Belcher (2018) draws on feminist geography to show how the violence of war becomes a protracted condition even in its aftermath; Faria (2017) uses feminist geopolitics to describe how quotidian moments of violence stretch across space and time in the life courses of refugee women; and Mountz (2018) describes the way that feminist political geographers attend to the often-eclipsed role of the body in geopolitics across space and time. Likewise, feminists of color have long written about the slow toxicity of racism and sexism (Lorde 1997; Mahtani 2014; Smith 2016) that builds up over time in the body, and the ways that the grind of prolonged structural violence can lead to explosions of rapid, physical violence (Davis 1972).

Nixon writes that, “Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, as erupting into instant sensational visibility” (p. 2). Fast violence, in other words, erupts in such a way that it is unavoidably regarded as active, in contrast to the seeming passivity of slow violence. Changes that emerge slowly are almost unavoidably regarded as

banal, as gradual change becomes routine and often goes unnoticed or appears unremarkable. Fast violence shocks and demands attention, while slow violence lulls. Fast violence is regarded as “hot”, active, and an issue of immediate public concern, while slow violence is coded as passive, routine, and banal—to the extent that it becomes exceedingly difficult to assign or demand culpability of the actors responsible for producing slow violence.

The causes of slow violence are detached from their political origins through the passage of time, as time shrouds and obscures perpetrators of violence from vision. Time may even weaken public investment in pursuing accountability, as precipitating acts of violence are minimized and diminished by calls to ‘let the past rest’. Without a spotlight on the causes of violence that unfold gradually, the embodied impacts of violence often come to be understood as personal and private matters, in which victims are left responsible for managing the harm inflicted on their bodies. For example, cancer caused by the gradual accumulation of dispersed toxins is seen as merely a personal problem of one’s own body, and political culpability remains elusive. In other words, slowness works to reinscribe binary divisions of public/private, intimate/global, and active/passive, and the subsequent invisibility of slow violence is shaped as much by these gendered bifurcations as it is by time.

There has been a long history of feminist writings that addressed the ways that intertwining and co-productive structures of gender and race shape the types of violence that are treated as worthy of attention in mainstream geopolitics, international relations, or political science. When Nixon (2011: 2) writes that we need “to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous,” we identify parallels in a wide range of feminist scholarship. This long line of feminist scholarship challenges the disproportionate attention given to immediate, dramatic, and masculine acts of statecraft, the advancement of arms, and explosive demonstrations of force, as well as the ways that racism uniquely shapes inattention to routinized violence experienced by women of color. For example, feminist political geographers demonstrate how everyday life, private space, and women’s lives are intimately a part of spectacular eruptions of violence, even as such arenas are often feminized and ignored. As Pain (2015: 64) writes, “war is inseparable from the politics and experience of everyday life, yet the spatial metaphors used to analyze war tend to situate it as different and distant.” In denaturalizing these binaries, feminists are not only pointing to the gendering of space; they are also calling for us to see the political and geopolitical dimensions of the not so extraordinary—the spaces and rhythms of life that are too often ignored.

Highlighting the gendering of fast and slow violence is important to note, first, as Nixon does not address the contributions of feminists who have been having similar conversations for many years. While the original theorization engages with scholarship on ideas like structural violence, feminist attention to gradual, routinized, and banal forms of violence is largely not touched on. More pointedly, however, looking at these traditions of feminist scholarship alongside the theory of slow violence also helps us to see the uniquely raced and gendered dimensions of slow violence—both in terms of its impacts and in terms of the epistemological concerns that make it invisible.

Black feminists, for example, have written extensively about the ways that racism and sexism compound over time to affect violence and premature death among black women and other people of color (McKittrick 2011; Gilmore 2007; Lorde 1997; Roberts 1997). At the intersection of gendered and racial violence, black feminists draw attention to the ways that history “normalizes practices of colonization” (McKittrick 2011) such that “the very pervasiveness of violence can lead to its invisibility” (Collins 1998: 66). Calling attention to these erasures, black feminist scholarship has tirelessly sought “to make visible what often goes unseen and unsaid, to reckon with the ending that are not over” (Dillon 2012: 116). In doing so, such scholars highlight the raced and gendered epistemologies that enable violence and “challenge the ways that the normal and banal are mobilized to obscure violence, terror, and death” (ibid).

Within this body of work, we can see how racism and sexism are central to the invisibility of both violent causes and consequences, even as the systemic and epistemic nature of harm extends violent impacts across long periods of time. Examples to point to are plentiful. Audre Lorde (1997), for instance, wrote about this in her own life, as she linked her own battle with cancer to the systemic violences of racism and sexism, and Minelle Mahtani (2014) explicitly and deliberately refers to the long-term impacts of racism in academic geographic in terms of toxicity. Likewise, in Dorothy Roberts' (1997) canonical work on race, gender and reproduction, she provides a powerful accounting of the violence enacted through centuries of control over black women's reproduction. In shifting the gaze to the perpetrators of sexual violence, eugenics, sterilization, and criminalization, she in turn challenges harmful assumptions about black women, which treat them as if they are responsible for the violence they experience as reproductive subjects and mothers. As Collins (2004: 64) describes, such "gender-specific forms of sexualized violence" act as tools of racial subordination that reverberate across time. The explicit temporality of these interventions is clear in the work of Dillon (2012: 116), who draws on black feminist traditions and the writings of Assata Shakur to demonstrate how bodily disintegration happens gradually, as "the diffuse violence and quotidian routines of domination that order black life...are invisible in their banality." While impacts of racism and sexism may manifest slowly over a lifetime—or even over generations—its invisibility is tied closely to both raced and gendered epistemologies with render political violence a personal problem.

Christen Smith's (2016 para. 4) work provides an urgent and powerful example of these processes at work. She describes how the violence of racism in relation anti-black police violence often unfolds slowly in the lives of black women. She writes:

...while black men disproportionately die from the immediate physical assaults of police violence (bullets, baton blows, Taser shocks), I believe black women die slowly from the long-term effects of this violence. Like a nuclear bomb, the initial death toll is only a fraction of the eventual body count. Fallout kills those in the vicinity of police violence like cancer over time.

This is a point that we too have argued, highlighting that the slow operation of systemic racism can often make its violent impacts appear to be personal and private matters, erasing their deeply political dimensions (Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo 2016). Indeed, many critical scholarly traditions draw attention to the continued impact of systemic, extended violences of the past and the violences permeating the present—challenging the notion that time can rupture effects from the historical antecedents. For example, this is a central insight of much postcolonial scholarship which, as McClintock 1995: 10) describes, often sets itself "against the imperial idea of linear time" in order to demonstrate the continuities between the colonial past and present. Understandings of the relationality of past and present imbue postcolonial, decolonial, feminist, and critical race scholarship, which similarly work to challenge the decoupling of violent causes and consequences by time.

Needless to say, there is a wide range of feminist work documenting the slow, routinized, and banal operation of violence. These traditions are important to draw out, not only because their contributions are often omitted in the original slow violence thesis (and in much of the work taking up the theory of slow violence), but also because they demonstrate how the invisibility of slow violence is intimately tied to the very raced and gendered epistemologies that conventionally separated binaries of personal and political, hot and banal, violence and peace, and intimacy and war. In responding to the way that gendered and raced bifurcations shape the visibility of violence, feminist approaches to relationality offer a valuable pathway to respond to the representational challenges of slow violence. As the next section describes, these feminist epistemological investments invite us to engage slow and fast violence as mutually constitutive categories. In treating fast/slow violence as a single complex, rather than a

binary, this feminist move demands that the readily mobilized concern for (and visibility of) fast and spectacular violence is also directed at the inseparable operation of the slow and banal.

Fast/Slow Violence

In 2016, we (Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo) engaged with Michael Billig's influential work on banal nationalism through a discussion of hot and banal nationalisms as a gendered binary. We highlighted how the banal, not unlike the slow, is often ignored alongside other feminized categories, like private space or the intimate. Like we now suggest in relation to Rob Nixon's work on slowness, we argued that the attention Billig's work brought to the banal had long been a focus of feminist scholarship, even as these feminist contributions often go unnoted by those using banal nationalism.

Borrowing from feminist geopolitical scholarship, namely Pain's (2015) writing on intimate war, we argued that hot and banal should be treated as a single complex, much as feminists have denaturalized binaries between public/private or intimate/global. While some have proposed new terms that could encompass hot and banal nationalism into a single category, like "everyday nationalism" (Jones and Merriman 2009), we argued against abandoning the two separate terms. This suggestion is not meant to reassert such divisions. As we describe in this paper, we join other feminists who challenge such bifurcations. Instead, we suggested that, "there remains a need to attend to these categories in practice, as they continue to structure space and knowledge." In other words, if hot and banal (or fast and slow) are often treated as a gendered and racial binary in practice and discourse, we need on-going feminist and critical race analysis to unpack how the hot is afforded a different degree of attention, concern, and response than the banal. By "maintain[ing] vigilance to the ongoing gendered epistemological stakes in what is understood as banal and hot" (Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo 2016: 66), we can identify and challenge the erasure of the banal as it is intimately entangled with the hot.

Here, our intervention into the use of slow violence is very similar to our engagement with banal nationalism. As we described in the previous section, fast and slow violence (like hot and banal nationalism) often operate as a gendered—as well as raced—binary, and the inattention to slow violence is in turn shaped by gendered and raced epistemologies. This invisibility and lack of concern about slow violence presents a representational challenge that bears close similarities to the challenge feminists face in calling attention to the role of the intimate, everyday, or the banal. Overcoming the representational challenge of slow violence requires overcoming the gendered and raced geographies of visibility.

One way that feminists address the gendered politics of visibility and care is by denaturalizing binary divisions and adopting a politics of relationality. Feminists have fought the reification of objectivity in science and exposed the subjective and emotional dimensions of knowledge creation (e.g. Harding 1986); they have demanded equal citizenship and protection by declaring "the personal is political"; they have challenged the devaluing of women's labor by making visible the profoundly productive nature of reproductive work (e.g. Mitchell et al 2003); and they have illuminated how presumably "natural" characteristics of sex and gender are in fact deeply social (e.g. Butler 1990). Feminist geographers have furthered these discussions by highlighting and questioning the application of gendered binaries onto space and scale, in particular, the feminization and devaluation of private space and the intimate scale. For example, as Rachel Pain (2009: 467) writes, "Feminist interventions question the disembodied masculinism of the [global] and interrogate the limits of local/global binaries, called attention to the silenced, marginalized and excluded." In "challenging and even imploding" these binaries (Mitchell et al 2003), feminists, as well as queer scholars (see Browne 2006, Oswin 2008), have sought to examine processes and spaces relationally and without binaries, for example, by developing a feminist geopolitics interested in the co-constitution of "the intimately global" (Dowler and Sharp 2001; Hyndman 2001; Pratt and Rosner 2006) or by exposing the interlinking processes of war and peace (e.g. Ross 2011). The shadowy role of slow violence is most evident in the geography scholarship of domestic

violence (Cuomo 2013; Pain 2014; Brickell 2015) and non-violence (Oswin and Olund 2010; Koopman 2011; Laliberte 2014; Loyd 2014) in feminist geography. These feminist interventions into the gendered divisions of space, knowledge, and identity remain key conceptual and practical tools in feminist geographer's work on violence, and we propose that we approach slow and fast violence with a similar attention to their inescapable relationality.

Just as we borrowed Pain's (2015) notion of intimate war as a single complex to propose also treating hot and banal nationalism as a single complex, we similarly argue for approaching fast and slow violence as a single complex. Indeed, as the examples in the previous section demonstrate, fast and slow violences already thoroughly imbue one another. Slow and routinized harms of racism and sexism accumulate in deadly ways, even as the long-term consequences are detached from their public causes. Everyday discourses of hate and xenophobia can fuel racist hate crimes. Routinized and naturalized forms of rape culture produce the conditions for actual rape. The slow march of economic and political exploitation can incite explosive and violent responses, like an act of terrorism, and an act of terrorism can then be used to justify a generation of oppressive changes to immigration or policing policy with violent impacts that stretch across time.

Slow forms of violence imbricate with the fast, and the fast inescapably shapes the slow. A feminist imagination, like the imagination of writers Nixon engaged with, reveals the co-constitution of these temporal binaries. Moreover, as the gradual nature of slow violence reinscribes divisions of public/private and intimate/global by separating the political causes of violence from their embodied consequences, treating fast/slow violence as a single complex provides us tools to challenge the gendered and raced epistemologies that depoliticize or erase slow violence. Such a relational approach helps us to link the causes and consequences of violence, providing a pathway to challenge impunity. In other words, if fast violence already draws our attention, linking it with slow violence rhetorically and in our analyses lends urgency and visibility to the slow.

Conclusion

In this brief intervention, we have sought to make three interlinking points. First, we wish to give attention and credit to the long line of feminist scholars, as well as critical race, queer, and postcolonial and decolonial scholars, who have challenged binary epistemologies and written about the slow operation of violence. These existing contributions are important to acknowledge, as they are often unnoted in work on slow violence. Second, we argue that the invisibility of slow violence is deeply linked to the invisibility of feminized experience and space more broadly. Specifically, we argue that geographers using slow violence need to remain vigilant to the ways that the invisibility of slow violence is shaped not only by slowness, but also by larger gendered epistemologies that focus on the rapid, hot, and spectacular. Violence is not decoupled from its origins by time only; the origins of violence are also decoupled from their gendered, raced, and colonial roots. Thus, a feminist analysis assists us in addressing the ways that the gendering of visibility impacts engagements with slow violence.

Finally, we suggest that feminist approaches to relationality—and specifically feminist geopolitics—offer a critical pathway to overcoming the representational challenge presented by slow violence. Feminists have long grappled with the devaluation and invisibility of the banal, the slow, and the intimate in conventional studies of violence and (geo)politics. By demonstrating the inextricable relationship between hot/banal, intimate/global, and public/private, feminists enact a strategic move that links the invisible to the highly visible in order to draw attention and care. Adopting such an approach to fast and slow violence similarly signals, as Pain (2015: 66) writes, “the supposed divide and the actual leakage between them.” Thus, by arguing on behalf of fast/slow violence as a single mutually constituted complex, we attend to the ongoing gendered epistemologies of violence, while at the same time denaturalizing the spatial and temporal bounds of concern. This, we believe, will offer a valuable lens,

through which geographers might respond to the representational challenges of slow violence within their own work.

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