

# Queering Genocide: How Can Sexuality Be Incorporated Into Analyses Of Genocide?

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/01/13/queering-genocide-how-can-sexuality-be-incorporated-into-analyses-of-genocide/>

PATRICK VERNON, JAN 13 2021

Despite rape being designated an act of genocide in international law (International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, 1998, pp.176-177) and sexual violence being highly prevalent across genocidal contexts (Mackinnon, 1994), most literature studying genocide fails to acknowledge the role that heterosexuality plays in genocidal violence. Whilst there is an established school of thought which looks at genocide from a gendered perspective, it generally stops short of exploring how heterosexuality as an episteme informs gender, sexual or racial stereotypes, and genocidal violence on the basis of these stereotypes. In order to correct this, this article maps the literature surrounding the study of sexuality and genocide and identifies gaps in the field. It begins by looking at analyses of genocide which look at sex-specific violence. Beyond this, it outlines constructivist scholarship which sees gender as a system of logic, identifying particularly with the work of von Joeden-Forgey (2010, 2012), who sees the weaponisation of gender stereotypes to be characteristic of genocidal violence. Finally, it outlines queer[1] IR and transnational queer studies as bodies of scholarship which should inform studies of genocide and contrasts these with established studies of sexuality and genocide. The article concludes that from this theoretical basis, the epistemological possibilities of a queer genocide studies which looks beyond discrete identity categories will be made clear.

### Sexuality and Genocide

#### *Gender and Genocide*

Prior to the 1990's gender was seldom considered to be relevant in the study of genocide due to an international security agenda that was defined by Cold War bipolarity, nuclear deterrence and a primary focus on sovereignty over other concerns (Buzan, 1997, p.6), such as human rights. This changed, however, due to the relative success of feminist campaigns drawing attention to gender-based and sexual violence, alongside the resurgence of gendered genocidal violence such as mass-rape in Rwanda and The Balkans. In response to the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, Catherine Mackinnon drew attention to the fact that human rights have traditionally been conceived with regards to the male subject, resulting in an ignorance of human rights violations committed against women (1994, pp.5-6).

Challenging this, Mackinnon highlighted the systematic use of rape as a weapon of war across genocidal contexts (1994, p.9), labelling rape an act of genocide (1994, p.16). The profound impact of this is evidenced by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda's decision to establish legal precedent in treating sexual violence as a crime of genocide (1998, pp.176-177). Furthermore, Mackinnon's paper generated a huge surge in feminist scholarship on women's experiences of genocide (e.g. see: Rittner and Roth, 1993; Smith, 1994; Allen, 1996; Lentin, 1999; Sharlach, 2000). Whilst most feminist analysis of genocide looks at women as victims, an increasing body of scholarship draws attention to the role of women as holders of violent agency (e.g. Sharlach, 1999; Sjoberg and Gentry, 2007, 2015; Brown, 2014).

Reflecting on gendered analyses of genocide in the early 1990s, Jones noted that it failed to take account of the fact that the majority of people killed in genocidal contexts are men, who constitute "the absent subjects" (1994, p.120) within this body of work. Seeking to challenge this, he deployed the term "gendercide" (2002, p.70) to highlight sex-selective violence against males in genocidal contexts, noting that the mass-killing of "battle-age" males "...remains a

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pervasive feature of contemporary conflict" (2000, p.190). Jones thus draws attention to the existence of men as primary targets for execution, and the subsequent relevance of gender in the analysis of men's experiences of genocide[2]. Although the above scholarship does well to look at lived experiences of gender in relation to genocide, it restricts its analysis to the discrete study of women's and men's experiences. As such, it sees gender as an empirical category (Peterson, 2005, p.501) and essentialises male and female experiences, reifying these identity categories as opposed to interrogating the specific gender roles and stereotypes which make different forms of violence intelligible.

Carpenter, who sees gender as a broad system of meaning, challenges Jones (2002) in noting that gender is relevant even when killing is non-sex specific, providing the example of disproportionate numbers of men being killed in genocide, due to them occupying social roles perceived as threatening (i.e. political and military elites) (2002, p.83). Similarly, von Joeden-Forgey sees the perpetration of "life force atrocities" as a hallmark of genocide, labelling these as acts perpetrated in order to "...inflict maximum damage to the spiritual core of those generative and foundational units we call families." (2010, p.2). Elaborating on this, von Joeden-Forgey details that genocidal assaults often target individuals "...based on their (perceived) symbolic status within social and biological group reproduction.", with men targeted as husbands/heads of families/political leaders and women targeted as mothers/wives/daughters, and so on (2012, p.95).

The occurrence of such acts of depravity, von Joeden-Forgey argues, is symptomatic of genocidal violence more broadly and demonstrates that gender goes far beyond sex-selective killing, as argued by Adam Jones (2002, p.70; 2015, p.134), to actively shape the entire character of genocide. Whilst von Joeden-Forgey does well to identify socially constructed gender stereotypes as impacting upon all genocidal action, her analysis does not go far enough. Despite correctly identifying gender stereotypes to be hallmarks of genocidal conduct (2012, p.95), she fails to ask where these stereotypes come from. One explanation for this comes from what Butler terms the "heterosexual matrix" (1990, p.151).

This refers to the system of logic through which sex is produced; the discursive construction of men and women as two discrete and oppositional categories, with each assumed to have their own set of gendered traits (1990, p.151) due to the performance of gender binaries such as rationality/emotionality, public/private. Butler's work is just one example of queer scholarship, which deconstructs how identities are produced by the (often hidden) knowledge frameworks they reside within[3], however there is insufficient space for a full explanation here. Queer approaches to global politics, however, elucidate how ideas about the discursive construction of sexuality can inform the study of global politics.

## *Queering Global Politics*

Providing an indication of the approach that studies of genocide would benefit from, queer IR and transnational queer scholars demonstrate the constitutive power of (hetero)sexuality in global politics. Binding what has traditionally been considered to be the staple of positivist IR (e.g. war, sovereignty and terrorism) to discourses of sexuality, queer theorists demonstrate the importance of anti-foundationalist approaches to IR as a discipline. This is something that scholars of genocide would do well to replicate in order to deepen their understandings of genocidal violence.

Explaining the benefits of this approach, Melanie Richter-Montpetit argues that queer theory's refusal of "a clearly bound referent object" has produced insights into the role of sexuality and gender in "wider relations of power and normalization." (2017, p.224). Writing within this frame, Jasbir Puar is a key scholar in the establishment of transnational queer thought, arguing that the U.S.' war on terror depends upon sexualised narratives (2007, p.2). This argument is centrally based around the concept of "homonationalism", defined as "the use of 'acceptance' and 'tolerance' for gay and lesbian subjects as the barometer by which the legitimacy of, and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated." (2013, p.24). Bound to this, she highlights that the rise in Western LGBTQ rights has been accompanied with the curtailing of rights for Muslims, who have suffered "...the expansion of state power to engage in surveillance, detention and deportation." (2013, p.25). Puar therefore demonstrates how homonormativity, defined by domesticity, consumption and nationalism (Duggan, 2003, pp.50-51) has a constitutive impact upon what are normally seen as 'material' events, in this instance neo-imperialism, in global politics. She also highlights that

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sexuality does not exist in isolation from other aspects of identity construction, drawing attention to the discursive construction of Muslims as 'other' within the homonationalist project.

Another scholar who has made an undoubtable contribution to queer analyses of global politics is Lauren Wilcox, criticising 'the practice turn' in IR[4] for solely looking at 'competent' performances. Drawing upon Butler's theory of performativity (see Butler, 1993, p.2), Wilcox notes that it is precisely the act of failure which allows for change within a discursive regime, and that those bodily styles which fail to meet the standards of competence set by the 'practice turn' are the most interesting (2017, pp.792-793). Wilcox further notes that these understandings of competence are dictated by the heterosexual matrix, with bodies which fail to conform with binary understandings of gender "...falling into the realm of unintelligibility and even inhumanity in their failures." (2017, p.794). Demonstrating this, Wilcox draws attention to the experience of trans bodies at borders, often identified as 'risky' or 'suspicious' due to them failing to practice gender 'competently' (2017, pp.801-802). With such cases ignored by 'the practice turn', she further suggests that the study of performance failures is an ontological contribution of queer/feminist theory to IR which has been marginalised (2017, p.807).

Deploying a queer approach to native studies, Andrea Smith contends that the Western construction of identities such as 'the native' underpins settler colonialism (2010). Due to native people being the object of inquiry for native studies, Smith argues that this decolonising discourse "often reinstates rather than challenges colonial formations and ideologies" (2010, p.45), reproducing the power relations it seeks to challenge. This is because 'the native' is itself a racist discourse which frames the subject as an infantile citizen, standing in contrast to the civilised European (2010, p.51), with such images persisting to the present day with "The 'crying Indian'" enabling "...the birth of a white enlightened environmental consciousness." (2010, p.52). As such, Smith argues that both the logics of settler colonialism and decolonisation must be queered "...to speak to the genocidal present" which "...continues to disappear indigenous peoples..." (2010, p.64). With indigenous land and history still routinely erased by governments around the world, Smith demonstrates that discursively constructed identity categories can facilitate genocidal violence.

Finally, arguably the most significant scholar in the establishment of queer IR is Cynthia Weber, who criticises disciplinary IR's non-engagement with queer approaches that de-stabilise its ontological, epistemological or methodological foundations (2015). Writing in her much-celebrated book *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge* (2016), Weber draws upon Ashley's characterisation of "statecraft as mancraft" (2016, p.4) and calls attention to use of sexualised subjectivities such as "the homosexual" in the construction of international anarchy, juxtaposed against the "sovereign man" of the state (2016, p.5).

Weber further highlights the recent deployment of a discourse that distinguishes between the 'perverse' homosexual and the 'normal' homosexual in IR, with the former figuring as "the 'underdeveloped', the 'undevelopable', the 'unwanted immigrant', and the 'terrorist'" (2016, p.48), whilst the latter figures as the entrepreneurial and patriotic "gay-rights holder", specifically in the U.S. under the Obama Administration (2016, p.105). Clear in Weber's analysis of different figurations of 'the homosexual' in IR is use of the subject's (in)ability to follow the norms of productive heterosexual development, also known as chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010, p.3), as a criteria in deciding normality/perversion, security/insecurity and sovereign/non-sovereign. Challenging the norm of seeing global politics in binary terms, Weber suggests the use of Roland Barthes' and/or approach to the perverse/normal homosexual as a basis for conceptualising IR, enabling a new "queer logics of statecraft" (2016, p.6). In arguing this case, Weber makes a crucial contribution to queer IR by demonstrating the centrality of non-normative sexual subjectivities to the construction of selfhood and/or otherness in global politics.[5]

Drawing upon the approach of scholars such as Weber, there are clearly significant benefits of adopting a queer approach to the study of genocide. By binding the occurrence of genocidal violence to logics of heterosexuality, this approach could demonstrate that the essentialising and binary logics of heterosexuality are intimately connected to the occurrence of genocidal violence. As opposed to simply seeing genocide as 'sexualised' when targeting a group based upon their sexual/gender identity, genocide could then be exposed as productive of and constituted by these identity categories. An example of this follows this logic; as opposed to 'men' being a homogenous group of people who are targeted due to gendered perceptions of threat, 'men' is a discursively constructed category constituted by

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gendered perceptions. This is because genocidal violence constitutes a performance of these stereotypes: it is committed largely by 'men' and primarily targets 'men' due to social norms of violence and threat.

As such, it contributes towards the coherence of this identity category, with capacity for violence being seen as a property of 'men' as opposed to 'women'. It also explains the existence of male rape as an act of homosexualisation/feminisation in genocidal contexts (Ferrales et. al, 2016). This perpetuates the gender binary at the heart of heterosexuality and renders genocide a performance of heterosexuality. Unlike the former queer approaches, the existing scholarship which studies sexuality and genocide is ontologically conservative and fails to interrogate the relationship between violence and logics of heterosexuality. As such, there is an imminent need for the adoption of the anti-foundational and deconstructive approach established in queer IR and transnational queer studies to explore the dynamics of genocide.

## *Sexuality and the Study of Genocide*

Most literature which has addressed the relationship between sexuality and genocide has looked at the targeting and extermination of gay men in Nazi Germany (e.g. Crompton, 1978; Rector, 1981). Uniquely adopting an explicitly queer approach to genocide, Matthew Waites notes the failure of the Genocide Convention to consider groups on the basis of culture or gender, resulting in the exclusion of sexuality (2018, p.50), and seeks to redress this. In doing so, Waites focuses on "homosexuality" as a target for genocidal violence, due to this being the term used in laws in Uganda and The Gambia, but recognises that this term is narrow in the demographic it captures (2018, *ibid*). This in turn allows Waites to evaluate whether genocide has been perpetrated against 'homosexuals' in the cases of Nazi Germany, The Gambia and Uganda, using the criteria of the Genocide Convention.

Finding that genocide has been perpetrated against 'homosexuals' as a group in these three instances (2018, p.63), Waites sets about evaluating the discursive benefits of using 'genocide' as a label for queer politics, arguing for the subsequent sharing, debating and contestation of 'genocide' as a concept within queer political movements (2018, *ibid*). Waites' work is undoubtedly beneficial in that it uniquely considers the relationship between sexuality and genocide from an explicitly queer perspective. However, by using the Genocide Convention as a set of criteria to ascertain whether genocide has occurred, Waites places a primary emphasis on legal frameworks as opposed to lived experience. This is evidenced by Waites being forced to restrict his analysis to [male] 'homosexuals' as queer victims of genocide in order to fit his re-worked 'group' requirements under the Genocide Convention, despite the acknowledgement that this focus is overly narrow in practice (2018, p.50). Furthermore, Waites' restriction of his analysis to the targeting of queer individuals is problematic, as this implies that queer arguments are solely relevant where queer individuals are targeted.

As demonstrated by the previously discussed queer scholarship, queer ideas are relevant in all global political events, due to these events being legitimised, organised, interpreted and (re)presented by binary norms of heterosexuality. By employing the example set by queer IR and transnational queer scholarship, studies of genocide must incorporate an approach which demonstrates the relevance of discourses of heterosexuality to all instances of genocidal violence. This will both deconstruct the stereotypes which inform genocides and will contribute towards the queer project of exposing heteronormativity in previously uninterrogated spaces.

## **Conclusion: Queering Genocide**

We need to understand more about the sexuality of genocidal violence and this will only come from an analysis of heterosexuality as a system of logic, as opposed to the individual identities that sit within this system. As queer theorists looking at the organisation of global politics note, discourses of heterosexuality enable, inform and frame norms of violence in IR. It is high time for this deconstructive approach to be applied to the study of genocide, if we seek to move beyond a box-checking of sexual/gender identity categories and towards a deeper understanding of the role violence plays in constituting and (re)affirming these identities (Shepherd, 2013, p.6). To do so in a queer manner requires an analysis of a) the discursive conditions which enable the emergence of genocidal violence and b) the specific discourses which inform the violence that occur within a genocide. With regards to the former, specific attention must be paid to dehumanising language in the lead up to genocidal violence, especially with regards to

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ideas of civility/depravity/development which are central to established (heterosexual) understandings of chronological/productive temporality, also known as chrononormativity (Freeman, 2010). Once the form of these logics have been identified, it is then possible to look at the specific types of violence which occur in a genocidal context, exploring these in relation to ethical, gendered, racialised and sexualised meanings associated with heterosexuality. For example, the use of public rape in genocidal contexts speaks to meanings about the sanctity of family bonds and community reproduction, with genocidal rape frequently used to pollute another ethnic group's blood line (Banwell, 2015), to weaponise local gender stereotypes to inflict maximum trauma (von Joeden-Forgey, 2012), and as a symbolic act of feminisation and disempowerment (Ferrales et. al, 2016). All genocidal violence is meaningful and it is only by analysing this violence in relation to the binary stereotypes of the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990, p.151) that we can understand how heterosexuality (re)produces genocidal violence and vice versa.

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## Notes

[1] Sedgwick describes queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be made*) to signify monolithically” (1993, p.8). It is this definition which guides my understanding of queerness, referring to an ontological and epistemological rejection of all processes of categorisation.

[2] For further scholarship on male experiences of genocide see: Sivakumaran, 2007; Johnson et. al, 2010; Lewis, 2010.

[3] E.g. see: Foucault, 1976; Anzaldua, 1987; Butler, 1990, 1993; Wittig, 1992; Sedgwick, 1993

[4] The ‘practice turn’ in IR refers to an attempt to move away from linguistic approaches and towards a focus on how political action is actually effected (Neumann, 2002, p.627).

[5] For further excellent queer scholarship, which draws attention to discourses of sexuality in the organisation of global politics, see also; Rao, 2010; Foster, 2011; Amar, 2013; Peterson, 2014; Frowd, 2014; Hagen, 2016; Wilcox, 2017; Smith, 2020.

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## About the author:

**Dr Patrick J. Vernon** is a Lecturer in Gender and War Studies in the Department of War Studies at King’s College London. Their research studies the role of gendered, sexual, and racialised representations in discourses and practices of security. They are particularly interested in the study of political violence from the micro to the global level, having researched topics including online abuse, hostile media representations of minoritised groups, bordering practices, genocide, and humanitarian intervention. Patrick has published work in journals including *Millennium*, *International Studies Review*, *International Political Sociology*, and *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.