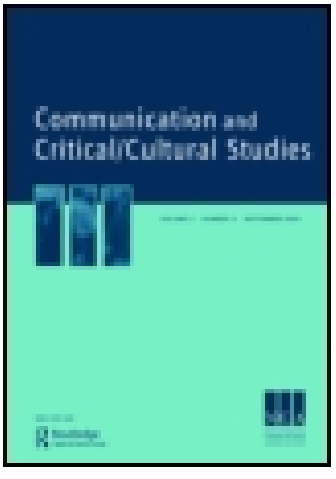

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(De)stabilizing Sexual Violence Discourse: Masculinization of Victimhood, Organizational Blame, and Labile Imperialism

Kate Lockwood Harris & Jenna N. Hanchey

Following calls to center nation, we analyze sexual violence discourse in the US Peace Corps. The texts we consider deploy three typical dichotomies—public/private, self/other, and agent/victim—that, in this case, reveal inconsistencies at the intersections of race and gender. We argue that these inconsistencies are evidence of lability, *counterintuitive discursive shifts necessary to maintain white heteromasculine dominance. Instead of blaming individual victims of rape and assault, the* masculinization of victimhood *shifts culpability to the Peace Corps. This* organizational blame *maintains the moral position of the US and legitimates imperialism. By marking these instabilities, we trace the solidity and vulnerability of sexual violence discourse as it organizes global power.*

Keywords: Discourse; Intersectionality; Organization; Peace Corps; Postcolonialism; Sexual Violence

When sexual violence occurs within US geographic boundaries and involves US citizens, public discourse often reinforces existing relationships among gender, race, and nation. Yet as Cuklanz notes, in scholarship on US representations of sexual violence, "Intersections of international and global discourses … have remained largely unexamined."[1] To address this gap, we consider how sexual violence discourse shifts when foreign perpetrators assault US citizens outside the country. We argue that, like the discussion of sexual violence in the US, international discourses develop around three interdependent dichotomies: public/private, self/other, and agent/victim. In the

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case we consider, the deployment of these familiar dichotomies destabilizes some aspects of US sexual violence discourse and retains other dominant power relationships. Unlike US-only sexual violence discourse, the case we consider includes moments when victims who are assigned masculine qualities, and organizations—rather than individuals—are blamed for violence. Although these shifts seem promising for some feminist goals, they also support US imperialism.

To analyze sexual violence discourse involving international actors, we examine media coverage of US Peace Corps volunteers who experienced assault. In January 2011, ABC News aired a *20/20* special investigative report on this issue,[2] prominently featuring the murder of Kate Puzey, a Peace Corps volunteer who was 24 when her throat was cut in 2009. While Puzey was volunteering in Benin, she learned that another Peace Corps employee, one of the Beninois men who worked at the school where she was teaching, was sexually abusing and raping female students. Puzey alerted Peace Corps officials and requested anonymity. Reports suggest that her anonymity was not protected, and that Puzey's murder occurred shortly after the man was notified that he would be dismissed from further Peace Corps projects. Puzey's death garnered significant media attention and prompted questions about Peace Corps volunteers' experiences and the organization's responses to sexual violence.

The hour-long ABC *20/20* special included not only Puzey's story, but also those of six female volunteers who experienced rape or other sexual assault during their service.[3] In the months after this story broke, every major news outlet covered the issue. The mainstream media attention was so extensive that when the US House of Representative's Committee on Foreign Affairs held a hearing on the Peace Corps' 50th anniversary in May 2011,[4] the committee discussed sexual violence almost exclusively. In November 2011, US President Obama signed the Kate Puzey Peace Corps Volunteer Protection Act,[5] which changed Peace Corps sexual violence training and response. By December, over 20 news articles and videos, numerous blog posts, and new Peace Corps web pages addressed the issue. Utilizing these sources, we address the following question: In what ways do these mainstream media frameworks resonate with or depart from dominant sexual violence discourse? Our answer uses a style of critique informed by feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis.

An Intersectional Approach to Sexual Violence Discourse

We consider sexual violence to be a constellation of action, meaning, institutions, and relations. Sexual violence includes rape, other sexual assault, and intimate partner violence. It also references the structures and discourses that enable those acts. In US history, white men have committed sexually violent acts with impunity because of their proximity to a discourse that hypersexualizes black people and conscribes black men as always violent. This displacement of violent agency onto "other" bodies obscures and legitimates systems of domination, the maintenance of which is a central function of sexual violence. These gender–race dynamics are one example of the discourses we include in the term sexual violence. In understanding violence

thusly, we follow an intellectual tradition that links sexual violence with state violence, colonialism, and racism.[6] Although the term sexual violence does not fully avoid the troubling focus on whiteness and heterosexuality that "gender violence" connotes, "sexual violence" is a more open sign under which to center our intersectional concerns.

We consider Puzey's murder to be one episode in this constellation of sexual violence. We intend to highlight how sexual violence discourse around this murder shifts and stabilizes feminisms and imperialist racisms. Though we distinguish rape and murder in our discussion of sexual violence, the discourse we examine often does not. By focusing on sexual violence, we seek to illuminate the mechanism by which that public conflation makes sense because it serves the politics of dominance.

Our definition of sexual violence draws extensively upon intersectionality, as do our theoretical and analytical postures throughout this piece. Through attention to the mutual constitution of gender, race, nation, and other categories of difference, intersectionality "unpacks relations of domination and subordination, privilege and agency … in the ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies that shape social consciousness."[7] Notably, intersectionality theorizes across levels and thus considers both interpersonal and structural dynamics. The term "sexual violence" commonly labels acts between two people, but intersectionality invites us to "ask the other question"[8] and consider not only humans but also nations in sexual violence discourse. Accordingly, we draw upon strands of postcolonial scholarship to build theory by "dismantling binaries … and showing how the colonizer–colonized are in fact dialectically related and constituted."[9] This postcolonial bent helps us to demonstrate how sexual violence discourse and imperialism dovetail around a white heteromasculine US identity.

Though much critical work on sexual violence assumes a top-down model of power, our intersectional frame leads us to assume that power operates in multiple directions simultaneously. As Spade asserts, "there is no one source of power … Power is not a matter of one dominant individual or institution, but instead manifests in interconnected, contradictory sites where regimes of knowledge and practice circulate and take hold."[10]

As we adopt this approach to power and attend to interconnected contradictions in the discourse surrounding sexual violence, we are interested in the mechanisms by which dominance struggles to maintain itself amidst overlapping power systems. In our reading of the texts surrounding the Peace Corps, we note a softening of brittle, unidirectional power formations. Counter-intuitively, the softening serves the hegemonic white masculinity we seek to trouble.

We write in conversation with others who have noted a similar phenomenon: dominant discourses appear plastic when they incorporate contradictions, yet they ultimately fail to bend.[11] Carroll calls this dynamic *lability*, an ability to adapt difference in order to maintain power. He says:

> the true privilege of white masculinity—and its defining strategy—is … to be mobile and mutable; … To be labile, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, is to be "prone to undergo displacement in position or change in nature, form, chemical

> composition, etc." Lability includes both mobility and mutability. Understanding white masculinity in relationship to lability allows us to keep in mind both its ability to shift locations and its ability to change its nature.[12]

Drawing on Carroll's work, we argue that whiteness, masculinity, and "justified" violence retain their power in the discourse surrounding Puzey's murder. The simultaneous reaffirmation of US moral exceptionalism and destabilization of sexual violence discourse operate through three interrelated processes: *masculinization of victimhood*, *organizational blame*, and *labile imperialism*. As we explicate the discursive paradoxes and instabilities in the texts we analyze, we show how "Western discursive practices, in their representations of the world and of themselves, legitimize the contemporary global power structures."[13] Our intersectional approach lets us show how sexual violence is a nexus point for interconnected discourses of race, nation, gender, and sexuality. These discourses pattern imperial practice, acts of rape, and Puzey's murder.

Dichotomies in Sexual Violence Discourse

Our critical rendering of feminist sexual violence scholarship coalesces around three dichotomies: public/private, self/other, and agent/victim. These binaries overlap such that "femininity" often signals private–other–victim, and any one symbol can stand in for the others. Yet as we begin to outline in this section, these bifurcations are momentary discursive achievements that cannot hold. Our aim is to draw out the interdependence of these categories and the gender–race–nation configurations associated with them. In so doing, we show how these themes both solidify and interrupt sexual violence discourse.

Public/Private

Many scholars demonstrate an association among "public" and masculinity, commerce, unfamiliarity, and danger.[14] In contrast, the private—or the domestic—is understood as a realm of intimacy, safety, sanctuary, and femininity. Feminist scholars of violence argue that this dichotomy overlooks abuse at home and exaggerates the risks of "outside." Burt's discussion of rape myths, especially the notion that sexual violence is often perpetrated by strangers, is one example.[15] The false idea that unfamiliar spaces are unsafe is often used to limit women's mobility and reinforce protectionist logics. The maintenance of this dichotomy requires an erasure of violence in the "private" sphere.

Private spaces become gendered through association with sacredness, inviolability, and vulnerability. The interior of women's bodies,[16] the home,[17] and the nation are all symbolized thusly. Gibson-Graham suggests that "As the geography of women's fear has been made visible, so has the 'reality' of male sexuality and the 'inevitability' of violence against women been accepted."[18] That is, the gendering of public as masculine/male and private as feminine/female works to reinforce ideas about sexual violation and protection.

On a global scale, the public/private dichotomy and the invisibility of violence at home support essentialized understandings of non-dominant cultures. Volpp argues that

> [p]art of the reason many believe the cultures of the Third World or immigrant communities are so much more sexist than Western ones is that incidents of sexual violence in the West are frequently thought to reflect the behavior of a few deviants—rather than a [*sic*] integral part of our culture. In contrast, incidents of violence in the Third World or immigrant communities are thought to characterize the cultures of entire nations.[19]

Volpp argues that structural and systemic elements of violence can be overlooked because sexual violence is decontextualized in the US and other Western countries. In contrast, the violence "outside"—in this case, in the so-called Third World—is considered so embedded in the culture that it is expected. This stereotype of the outside glorifies the inside. As a consequence of the elision between femininity and domesticity, femininity becomes a symbol of the United States. Individual women serve "as allegorical figures that signify the virtues of the nation."[20] In contrast, as we discuss in the next section, the public, outside space is conflated with the Other who is assumed to be dangerous, violent, and rarely white.

Self/Other

Under imperialism, an empire becomes "dependent on its others to know itself" and develops an "obsessive need to present and re-present" the Other.[21] As the Other is rendered singular, static, unchanging, undifferentiated, exotic, or silent,[22] non-Western countries serve "as a polemical argument for the West's desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world."[23] In the US, sexual violence discourse distinguishes the Self from the supposedly violent Other: Africa.

Representations of violence support positive images of the Self. Kelly notes that in *Locked Up Abroad* "violence stands in for the general dangers of foreign encounter."[24] The show represents international prisons as hyper-violent and ignores similar issues in US prisons. These portrayals obscure "a global problem that requires structural criticism" and construct "[i]ncarceration and its brutality [as] the defining characteristic of the Third World." In other words, discourses of violence aggrandize the Self and debase the Other. As a result, violence is reduced to an individual problem, not the outcome of global systems of inequality.

These discourses of violence further cast the Self as morally superior. Katz, writing about male perpetration of sexual violence in the US, argues that discourses of violence deflect Self-critique by implicating race: "The sinister influences of 'race' and 'culture' are only invoked when the perps are men of color."[25] In other words, violence associated with whiteness becomes invisible. As Ono explains, even within the United States, the legacy of colonialism shapes these racial discourses.[26] Attention to the Other justifies and reinforces international hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality and casts the (white) Self as nonviolent. The US justifies its often-violent intervention on the world stage by relying on representations of its own exceptionalism[27] and paternalistic

depictions of the Other as backward, un-modern, and savage.[28] Dominance obscures the perpetration of violence and paints the (white, masculine, US) Self as good and right. As we detail in the next section, this othering enhances the Self's agency, which is partly rooted in its imperial capacity to rescue victims.

Agent/Victim

In discussions of sexual violence, victimization is often equated with femininity, agency with masculinity. In much feminist theory, this dichotomy strategically positions sexual violence as an exemplar of male domination. Yet this framework has totalized victimization such that femininity evacuates agency.[29] Further, "appropriate" victimization is often understood through reference to virginity and purity, qualities associated with white femininity. Thus gender, sexuality, and race are woven together in understandings of sexual victimization.[30]

The racialized–gendered contours of violent agency are paradoxical. Masculinity is associated with agency and a capacity to enact violence. When the US enacts violence, it secures its symbolic masculinity, especially when intervening abroad. Yet enacting violence too well can also threaten the nation's whiteness and benevolence. To resolve this symbolic trouble, discourse locates violent agency in the non-white Other. This deferral is imperfect because the outside/Other is supposed to have limited capacity for action (i.e., be feminine). Under the sign of "nation," the usual discursive equation of masculinity–whiteness–agency–self is unstable.

Even in sexual violence cases involving US-only actors, maintaining the overlap between national identity and white hegemonic masculinity—and thus US exceptionalism—requires some work. The discourse must either (a) only grant violent agency to Other perpetrators or, (b) when perpetrators are associated with the (white) Self, blame those who experience sexual violence for their own violation.[31] Victimization is acknowledged when it supports the white–heterosexual matrix that underwrites hegemonic masculinity and denied if it does not exonerate those who are aligned with dominant power formations. The discourse struggles to obscure its own contradictions and assigns blame and responsibility in order to do so. In the analysis of Peace Corps sexual violence discourse that follows, we argue that these currents of agency and victimization, in tandem with the public/private and self/other dichotomies, both retrench and unsettle global systems of racial, gendered, and sexualized hierarchy.

Sexual Violence Discourse and the Peace Corps

In this analysis section, we consider the public/private, self/other, and agent/victim dichotomies in turn. For each, we trace the ways in which binary logic reinforces and, at times, undermines hierarchical power relationships embedded in discussions of sexual violence in the Peace Corps. The dominant terms in these categories do not

always align. Specifically, when victim blaming would be detrimental to US exceptionalism, sexual violence discourse shifts.

Public/Private

Discussions of the recent Peace Corps controversy are often characterized by disbelief, a tone that relies upon omissions regarding the extent to which women experience sexual violence in many, if not most, parts of the world. Some stories suggest that sexual violence is unique to the Peace Corps. A reporter writes, "Critics say sexual violence is a years-old problem in the Peace Corps. Apparently, the problem continues: CBS News has learned that just four days ago a Peace Corps volunteer reported a rape in West Africa."[32] By focusing only on the Peace Corps, the passage allows readers to imagine that sexual violence is not a years-old problem in a plethora of institutions. As in this example, sexual violence in the Peace Corps is most often discussed absent of a broader context of the rates of sexual violence elsewhere.

On the rare occasions when discussants contrast sexual violence prevalence in the Peace Corps and other organizations, they avoid mentioning high rates of rape at home. In *Peace Corps at 50*, the Committee on Foreign Affairs Chair, Ros-Lehtinen, briefly compares the rates of sexual violence in the Peace Corps and on college campuses in the US. Rather than noting that the likelihood of experiencing sexual violence is comparable in the US, she highlights the risks of being away: "Historically, the media have downplayed the dangers of serving in the Peace Corps, and have underreported and overlooked any criticism of the Peace Corps."[33] Peace Corps is singled out as a dangerous site, but institutions on US soil with similar rates of violence are not. We also note that the experiences of Peace Corps volunteers who are gay, lesbian, and transgender are never mentioned; violence against cisgendered women is figured in relationship to heteronormativity.

The absence of a comparative perspective in stories about sexual violence in the Peace Corps suggests that elsewhere is dangerous, but here is safe. Similar to work we mentioned previously, sexual violence is represented as occurring primarily outside the geographic borders of the US, rather than as a global problem without boundaries on the map. One *New York Times* story suggests that the media coverage in early 2011 was "exposing an ugly sliver of life in the Peace Corps: the dangers that volunteers face in far-flung corners of the world."[34] The potentially violent place is the corner, not the center. This framework reinforces the myth that sexual violence happens outside the home and that the US is a sanctuary.

As a consequence, the dichotomy supports masculine intervention abroad. US Representative Poe says of Peace Corps volunteers, "These women are alone in many cases."[35] The word "alone" obscures the deep and lasting relationships volunteers create with people in the communities in which they volunteer. Poe's comment highlights the absence of other US citizens. He continues, "We want the United States to rush in and treat them as a victim of crime like they would be treated here at

home."[36] In Poe's comments we find the image of a strong, stoic man sweeping down to gather up a helpless, vulnerable woman (i.e., victim): masculinist protection is written onto a nation, and this logic is extended elsewhere. A blogger writes,

> The lesson is it's not realistic for young women to travel alone in dangerous third-world countries. Even as a guy, I would not travel in these places with less than one male travel companion, preferably two. If you were living with two other Americans, you would have the social and physical power to deter rape.[37]

This commentator echoes the idea that the US is a safe space: if one is with other US Americans (conflated with males), one is protected from rape. Most interesting about this statement, however, is not the idea that the US is safe, but the conclusion that women should not go "outside" by themselves. Women's place, then, is in the States. The figured danger of the public—that space outside the US and the home—justifies masculine protectionism.

These discussions of sexual violence in the Peace Corps draw upon familiar US discourses that prioritize hegemonic masculinity (especially white heroism) over femininity, invoke chivalry in order to limit women's public lives, and reinforce the safety of home. This public/private dichotomy works in tandem with ideas about US moral exceptionalism, ideas that are further manifest in the self/other dichotomy.

Self/Other

In this section, we describe three repeated representations of the Other in the sexual violence discourse surrounding the Peace Corps: the Other is cast as object, voiceless, and backwards. These configurations serve as a problematically static foil against which the US constructs itself as agentic, voiced, and developed. Ultimately, the self/other binary affirms US imperialism.

Other Represented as Object

The self/other dichotomy is most noticeable when the Other is represented as one-dimensional and monolithic, easily contrasted with the individualized (US) Self. In the discourse surrounding sexual violence perpetrated against Peace Corps volunteers, non-US countries are homogenized. Rather than granting countries specificity, the discourse casts all host countries as similar or as the same, Other place.

When the ABC reporter describes the circumstances surrounding Puzey's murder in Benin, he says, "her parents … had been worried about her safety in Africa."[38] In this statement, the entire continent is portrayed as a dangerous, life-threatening space. More broadly, an article in the *Washington Post* claims that though "the women's harrowing experiences in developing countries arose in different circumstances at different times … the witnesses' themes were the same."[39] Although the writer acknowledges that places and times differ, US female volunteers' experiences of assault are grouped across geography. Ultimately, the countries are recognized with a singular label: developing. Connoting ubiquitous violence in the countries that

Peace Corps serves, the discourse not only reinforces the objectification of the Other but also reinforces the US exceptionalism that patterns the public/private dichotomy.

The discourse sometimes obfuscates difference to set apart the US as unique. Representative Berman, in the US congressional hearing, describes where most volunteers go to serve in "some of the most remote places on Earth."[40] The word "remote" implies a hub from which these places are abnormally distant and is again interconnected with the public/private divide. The Other country is everywhere far from here, an area defined by exclusion and therefore lacking any real definition of its own. The lack of specific description homogenizes host countries and emphasizes the centrality of the US in global relations. This logic creates a seemingly natural base for imperialist claims.

The silence surrounding the specific perpetrators of these crimes further objectifies the Other. The *20/20* special, for instance, does not discuss the man who murdered Puzey beyond the minimum information necessary for a cohesive story.[41] His motivation for the crime goes unexamined. This lack of explanation suggests that the man needed no further impetus for extreme violence than to lose his job; the reaction is to be expected from an African man. As other scholars have noted, the missing rationale flattens the person of color.[42] Audiences are left to assume that his anger was uncontrollable and violence is normal for the Other. The only comment where Kate's alleged killer is discussed in detail attends more to a perceived cultural difference between West Africa and the United States than to his individual motive for murder. Mrs. Puzey (Kate's mother) gave the following testimony in the congressional hearing: "It was rumored that he pressured his female students for sexual favors and had fathered at least two children with them. In our culture this would be unacceptable behavior and a criminal act, but in West Africa the lines are less clear."[43] In this statement, West Africa is separated from the United States, a place supposed to be so civilized that rape of students cannot happen because it is neither normalized nor allowable. This differentiation morally elevates the US in relation to other nations.

Other Represented as Voiceless

In a manner befitting the Other as object, host-country nationals are represented as voiceless unless the agentic US American bestows speech upon them. At no point throughout the *20/20* special is a host-country national shown talking on camera, having his or her words read, or referenced as having voice. Rather, Puzey's cousin Emily says, "The girls actually started having a voice within that club [Kate started],"[44] explicitly claiming that these young Beninois women were unable to speak until Puzey arrived. Additionally, one *20/20* reporter notes, "As part of her mission, Kate even created a girls' club at the school where she taught English, hoping to show the young women how to stand up for their rights."[45] Puzey's influence and tongue are presented as necessary conditions for the students to assert

themselves. Within this discourse, the Other needs a US American volunteer and a new language in order to have a voice.

In some of the discourse, the Other has no language at all. A local police officer is shown in the *20/20* special using a gesture—moving his hand across his throat—to indicate that Puzey's throat was cut.[46] Before the officer can speak about the crime, the visual shifts to Kate's cousin (a white woman), *saying* that Puzey's throat was cut. The "uncivilized" inability to talk is inextricable from the black body. No host-country national is shown speaking, and only one is even shown on camera.

As we have suggested, voicelessness is tied to nation and race simultaneously, even outside Benin. For instance, Peace Corps Director Williams, a US black man, is not interviewed in the *20/20* special.[47] Instead, the speaker for the Peace Corps is the Deputy Director, a white woman. Just like the Beninian police officer, Williams is shown, but never heard in the video. The positional similarity between Director Williams and the police officer reinforces the idea that whiteness is voiced, and color is not. Representations of the unspeaking Other thus rationalize US imperialism, even within the United States. The country is already morally elevated in the discourse, and giving the silent Other a voice seems unquestionably benevolent.

Other Represented as Backwards

Finally, the Other is represented as developmentally backwards, a move that naturalizes the need for imperialism. In multiple sources, Puzey is discussed as "a person that wanted to make the world a better place,"[48] someone who "really wanted to make a difference in the world," "had so much to give," and wanted to "help others in the world."[49] Set in its homogenized entirety against the United States, the world requires assistance, and US Americans can provide it. US Representative Berman's closing comments in the *Peace Corps at 50* hearing further support this perspective:

> [I]t takes a certain kind of person to join the Peace Corps, a certain pioneering spirit, to leave behind all the comforts they have known for their entire lives and enter the unknown to serve others. These individuals live with those who are less fortunate than themselves. They see the poverty that grips billions around the world and join them in their struggle to make a small business work, make their crop yields better, gain access to clean water, combat deadly and debilitating disease.[50]

The image of the pioneer presents the Other-land as wilderness. Berman emphasizes the sacrifice required to regress and live with those "less fortunate," and this emphasis implies that the Other is more backward than the US volunteer. By implication, the US is naturally dominant.

As shown in the public/private analysis, and reinforced earlier in this section, the Other is often assumed to be violent. Described as backwards and dangerous, the racialized Other is shown as needing white women, yet denying them their right and burden to save the world. Stohlberg's description of the violence a volunteer experienced reveals this double bind: "Jess Smochek arrived in Bangladesh in 2004 as a 23-year-old Peace Corps volunteer with dreams of teaching English and 'helping

the world.' She left six weeks later a rape victim after being brutalized in an alley by a knife-wielding gang."[51] The injustice of the act is not solely the violence perpetrated against this woman, but also her lost dream to help the world. In this discourse, the Other requires the US American to bestow both voice and development, but the Other also thwarts that purpose.

Another example of this double bind occurs in Mrs. Puzey's testimony in the congressional hearing. Speaking of her daughter's alleged murderer, she says, "He developed a reputation for becoming violent when he was drinking. Finally, in February of 2009, teachers and students told Kate that he had actually raped two of the female students and begged for her to help with having him removed from his job."[52] The Other appears unable to act, except violently, without the female volunteer. Kate, however, also cannot help. Ultimately, her attempt to assist leads to her death at the Other's hand.

In these comments, an interesting destabilization of the self/other dichotomy occurs. The Self is dominant because of a capacity for full agency and independent action, but that independence paradoxically depends on the Other's existence. Though the US Self (symbolized by the volunteer) is suggested to be the only one who can help, she can provide that help only if the Other is in need. This interdependence destabilizes traditional discourses of dominance, which are usually figured through the Self's isolated action. Yet this interdependence is necessary to maintain US imperial dominance. At the same time, imperialism incorporates white femininity while retaining the Self's dominant racial significations. In these destabilizations, we begin to see the ways in which the self/other dichotomy intersects with the agent/victim dichotomy, a discussion we develop more in the following section.

Agent/Victim

Agency and victimization are articulated in relationship to the individual volunteer and the Peace Corps as an organization. For each of these aspects of the discourse, we attend to the gendered and racialized logics that retrench and destabilize dominant power relations.

Gendering of the Volunteer

At moments, the volunteer is feminized. Across the materials we consider, volunteers are often described as angels. Through recourse to this image, these discourses venerate traditional (white) femininity by celebrating the volunteer's compassion, innocence, morality, and purity. The discourse first gestures toward the vulnerabilities of traditional femininity, a move exemplified in US Representative Poe's statement, "The time has come to stand up and protect America's angels abroad."[53] Poe's evocation of masculinity and chivalry suggests that the feminized volunteer needs to be saved, is likely to be a victim, and is not fully agentic in her own right. But "angels" are also often masculine protectors. We see this paradox again in *Peace*

Corps at 50 when Representative Schmidt says, "You know, 60 percent of the folks … in the Peace Corps are women. You are truly angels and ambassadors."[54] Schmidt uses essentialism to argue that females are angelic. Moreover, his suggestion that volunteers are angels and ambassadors begins to reveal the alternate feminization and masculinization of volunteers. Ambassadors, like angels, may be considered feminine: They engage in diplomatic work, foster and maintain relationships, and use verbal rather than physical means to address conflict. Yet ambassadors work on the international stage, away from the private sphere and the home, in a space associated with masculinity.

The volunteer is also masculinized elsewhere. As referenced in the self/other section of our analysis, US Representative Berman says, "It takes a certain kind of person to join the Peace Corps, a certain pioneering spirit, to leave behind all the comforts they have known for their entire lives and enter the unknown to serve others."[55] Berman's mention of "pioneering" elicits ideas associated with masculinity: exploration, travel, and discovery.[56] In the US, celebratory references to pioneers reinforce cultural amnesia regarding the racial power and violence of the pioneers' movements to the North American West. Puzey is eulogized in these terms in ABC's *20/20* special, thus affiliated with masculinity and whiteness. She is described as a risk-taker, someone who was able to inspire others and "give voice" to those who lived where she volunteered.[57]

We argue that this alternate masculinization and feminization of Peace Corps volunteers, including Puzey, makes victim blaming untenable. Although victim blaming in US domestic discourses often reinforces the dominance of whiteness and masculinity, it cannot function similarly in the discourse on sexual violence in the Peace Corps because the position of the US in the international community is at stake. By gesturing toward the volunteers' simultaneous masculine and feminine qualities, the discourses about sexual violence in the Peace Corps weave agency and victimization together such that US imperialism remains unquestioned. Though the impossibility of victim blaming may seem like progress for feminist activists, its basis in reinforced imperialism necessitates pause. The volunteer's essentialized femininity symbolizes US moral superiority and also necessitates the US's ability to protect and defend its women. Her masculinity symbolizes the US's potent transformation of the world in its own image. The US is understood to be in the right because of its awesome masculine power to exact change and its feminine moral compassion. Because these combined qualities justify US dominance, and because the volunteer embodies the interplay of these qualities, to blame the victim for sexual violence would render her inappropriately feminine (thus calling into question the US's moral exceptionalism) or would render her without agency (thus calling into question the US's power in the world). Victim blaming, as it works in the domestic sphere, becomes untenable in the discourse surrounding the Peace Corps.

We expect that if the victim is not to blame, then the Other—already assumed to be non-white, backwards, hypersexualized, and uncivilized—would be culpable for the violence that Peace Corps volunteers experience. Yet the discourse we examine does *not* blame host-country nationals. Through the interconnections among the

three dichotomies, especially the dependence of the agent/victim dichotomy on the self/other dichotomy, the discourse leaves little space to assign blame to either the victims or the perpetrators of sexual violence. Because the Other is depicted as a voiceless, backwards object, the Other cannot act; he cannot have committed a crime because US dominance depends on his lack of agency. To acknowledge the possibility that host-country nationals can act—even violently—undoes the objectification of the Other, assigning the Other agency that the US is supposed to provide. Instead, through alternate masculinization and feminization of the organization, the Peace Corps becomes the focus of blame.

Gendering of the Organization

Although the alternate masculinization and feminization of the individual volunteer undoes victim blaming, a similar alternation between masculinizing and feminizing works differently when applied to the organization. This process, in context with the two previously discussed dichotomies, necessitates shifting blame onto the Peace Corps. Because the Peace Corps is represented as unable to perform both masculinity and femininity appropriately, the organization can be culpable for the crimes committed against volunteers. The Peace Corps is first presented as a masculinized protector who has failed in his duties: "I trusted the Peace Corps, I believed in the Peace Corps. And then [Peace Corps officials] did everything they could to blame me."[58] Yet the organization is also shown to be imperfectly feminine in its "failure to respond with compassion"[59] to the crimes perpetrated on female volunteers. In both examples, the Peace Corps fails to meet standards of both hegemonic masculinity and femininity.

In a second example both the volunteer and Peace Corps are alternately masculinized and feminized. US Representative Rohrabacher said,

> I think it is a sad commentary that women who went overseas to serve our country and to serve others found out when their most important time of need happened, that we weren't there. Their government was not there to serve them when they needed it the most.[60]

As we discussed earlier, the female volunteers are coded as masculine when their Peace Corps involvement is framed as serving the country, a typical military trope that invokes masculine qualities of honor, duty, and loyalty. However, the volunteers also serve others, a typically feminine framing of care work. These dual qualities are upheld as the exemplar of what US citizens should be, a standard the Peace Corps failed to reach. The organization is discussed as not being there in the volunteers' "most important time of need"; when the perfect victims needed to be rescued, the Peace Corps failed to enact the requisite masculine heroism. The organization also failed to be perfectly feminine, neglecting "to serve [the volunteers] when they needed it the most."

As a consequence, the same process that allowed volunteers to escape blame creates the impetus to blame the organization. In both cases, US agents are expected to embody perfect masculinity and ideal femininity in order to maintain the necessary conditions for US global hegemony. In the discourse, the volunteer achieves this balance. Peace

Corps, however, is represented as unable to perfect the competing demands of masculinity and femininity and therefore becomes culpable. Through double coding, the blame normally assigned to the victim in similar domestic discourses shifts to the organization and maintains US global hegemony.

The media's vehement backlash against the Peace Corps makes more sense given these underlying implications. The surface outrage is about Peace Corps' failure to protect and comfort survivors of sexual violence, anger that stands in for their failure to operate as an international US actor should. Peace Corps is expected to enact perfect masculinity and femininity to allow continued US global dominance. For the volunteer, although the agent/victim dichotomy is destabilized through alternate masculinization and feminization, the volunteer remains agentic enough to support the US's position as public/self but victim enough to be appropriately feminine and thus private/other. For the organization, however, the destabilized dichotomy leads to excess on both sides: The Peace Corps is so feminine (lacking agency) that its masculine competence is called into question. In addition, its inability to respond compassionately to the violence its volunteers experience makes the organization too masculine. Consequently, it cannot successfully navigate the destabilization of the agent/victim dichotomy and perform gender—and gender's accompanying racializations—consistent with US imperialism.

(De)stabilizing Sexual Violence Discourse

As we have suggested, the public/private, self/other, and agent/victim dichotomies are intertwined. The public/private dichotomy figures the outside as dangerous; because the Other lives in that outside, the Other is also cast as dangerous. The self/other and public/private dichotomies work together to deny the Other—and indeed the Self—full agency. Because the Self is agentic only if the Other needs the Self's agency, the US and homogenized Other are interdependent. In this joined victimization and agency, the US cannot be a masculine individualized entity. Its interdependence reveals its vulnerability. The victim is feminine–masculine agent, the Other is simultaneously hyper-violent and incapable of violence, and the US is exceptionally feminine in its compassion and exceptionally masculine in its ability to save the world.

As feminists, we often resist bifurcation, as do many fellow feminist scholars who call for more complicated understandings of victimization. Pearson notes, "US public culture continues to cling to a rhetorically pure sense of victimage."[61] In sexual violence discourse, victim and agent tend to be so dichotomous that Mardorossian critiques "the facile opposition between passivity and agency that has motivated popular academic discussions of violence against women."[62] Further, Mohanty suggests that this binary "freezes [women] into 'objects-who-defend-themselves,' men into 'subjects-who-perpetrate-violence.'"[63] This stark contrast has made it difficult for feminists to theorize female perpetrators of violence; further, it has made both straight and gay men's sexual victimization nearly invisible. Part of our efforts

in this article is to draw a space in which sexual violence victimization cannot be subject to these either/or logics.

In a US-only context, sexual victimization is feminized via a heteronormative frame in which masculine is not feminine, and vice versa. Yet even when Puzey is a victim of murder, she is also an agent of US dominance. Similarly, other volunteers who are subject to sexual assault are alternately ascribed feminine and masculine qualities. We call this the *masculinization of victimhood*. Careful boundaries are constructed around the gendering of the volunteers: they are never total victims, never total agents. This patterning together of masculine–feminine, agent–victim answers feminist calls for messy understandings of the dynamics operating in sexual violence.

The masculinization of victimhood disrupts prevalent victim blaming that characterizes US sexual violence discourse. Puzey is not blamed for her own murder, and other women who experienced rape are not blamed for their assaults. Instead, the Peace Corps is faulted. We call this discursive move *organizational blame*. In many ways, this shift is commensurate with feminist aims to understand gender, sexual, and racial violence as the outcome of troubling systemic forces, not individual perpetrators.[64] Indeed, as we noted earlier, scholars argue that a focus on violent individuals deflects structural critique.[65] To find a shift away from blaming individuals (either victim or perpetrator) in any mainstream discourse is unusual and offers opportunities to develop accounts of violence more thoroughly situated in political, rather than purely personal, contexts. This change could be considered a minor victory for feminism, however we are wary of how that shift has been accomplished.

Victim blaming is untenable in this discourse because it cannot retain the series of double-binds around US sexual violence. To blame the Peace Corps volunteers for their own assaults would undermine them as symbols of US goodness. The white volunteer must be vulnerable enough to the dangerous Other that US interventionist logic is reinforced, yet she must also be agent enough to represent the ability of the US to be effective in its global interventions. The standard discourse of victim blaming that patterns US representations of domestic sexual violence cannot accomplish this, but the *masculinization of victimhood* can. Similarly, to blame the perpetrator would grant too much agency to the Other, undoing an incapacity upon which the US agent–self depends. *Organizational blame* of the Peace Corps, however, creates a scapegoat that can reasonably be agentic yet fail in its responsibility to US citizens without casting a negative pallor over the entire country. Both new discourses emerge not because dominant discourses are shifting in response to feminist projects, but because those shifts are necessary to support a US imperialism that encompasses whiteness and "moral" violence.

We argue that the organization can be blamed, in part, because of the gendered–raced coding of the Peace Corps. From its inception, the Peace Corps has been an institution that "symbolized what America wanted to be,"[66] an idealized portrait of national character that attempted to "reconcile [the nation's] republican idealism with its powerful ambition."[67] The Peace Corps arose at a time of US military strength, and part of the impetus for its construction was to present a softer side of US international diplomacy.[68] In comparison with the military's virulent white

masculinity, the Peace Corps is often feminized in public discourse. Although organizational blame is notable because it does not make an individual victim responsible for violence, organizational blame still sutures femininity to culpability for sexual violence. The femininity of the Peace Corps stands in contrast to the masculinized volunteers, a "new brand of American pioneer"[69] that symbolizes the superhero nation.[70] The discursive acrobatics that masculinize individual victims and avoid some kinds of victim blaming should not distract from the power configurations that remain largely the same.

This different sameness is lability, and we call part of what we analyze *labile imperialism*. In this discourse on sexual violence, US moral exceptionalism retains its power—through reliance on hegemonic and heteronormative masculinities, femininities, and whiteness—even as it appears to shift. Productive space opens in a US domestic discourse on sexual violence contemporaneous with the bendable maintenance of US dominance. The US becomes the feminized victim of (unjust) violence at the hands of the Other rather than the masculine perpetrator of (just) violence against the Other. The discourse focuses on victimization of US representatives and uses those instances to reinforce the US's good and necessary work. Through discourses of sexual violence, imperialism is understood to be victimized. Ironically, this supposed victimization supports US imperialism's longevity. Researchers and critics should pursue the translatability of our reading to other cases and contexts. Sexual violence discourse around the US military, US international aid organizations, and US college campuses are other important sites at which to assess how the links we have drawn between agency, blame, and global dominance function elsewhere.[71]

Our critical stance leads us to read some promise in the ways in which domestic discourses of sexual violence are destabilized. Indeed we have mimicked the moves of many a critical scholar who works to make plain how dominant ideology masks its contradictions. Although we note the ways in which this discourse reinforces already existing power relations, we suggest that increasing attention to the contrast between a US-based representation of sexual violence and those same representations involving non-US actors can illustrate the discursive struggle and effort required to maintain the notion of masculine, white, US dominance. That is, through the *masculinization of victimhood*, *organizational blame*, and the accompanying racial–sexual–national significations of *labile imperialism*, the discourse around sexual violence is shown to be politically motivated and unstable, not an inevitable or natural assessment of reality.

Yet our intersectional stance asks us to meet this promise—and indeed our deconstructive impulse—with skepticism. In their discussion of postcolonial intersectionalities, Brah and Phoenix ask, "What are the implications for feminisms of the latest forms of postmodern imperialisms that stalk the globe?"[72] Our analysis offers one answer. Postmodern imperialisms, in their *lability*, offer some resources for US-based feminisms, but also undermine a feminist project that hopes to undo the privileges of West-focused political knowledge. By (de)stabilizing discourses of sexual violence, that political knowledge sustains itself.

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