Research in Brief

Gender and Genocide:
A Research-as-Creation Project

Azra Rashid
Concordia University

ABSTRACT Nationalism, rooted in the word nation, binds individuals to an imaginary homeland by virtue of shared characteristics, ethnicity, and landscape. Feminist scholarship has demonstrated that nationalism is gendered, crafted to serve masculine privilege. Genocide occurs when nationalism, itself a product of imagination, creates imaginary subjects, who fight over imaginary homelands, and the site of violence becomes women’s bodies.

KEYWORDS Gender; Genocide; Creation-as-research; Research-Creation; Feminist Theory; Nationalism; Rwanda; Bangladesh; Holocaust

Feminist scholarship—universalist, transnationalist, and post-nationalist—remains divided on the relative importance of gender and ethnicity in the context of violence endured by women in genocide. Building on the existing scholarship on feminism and genocide, I argue that it is impossible to define genocide purely in terms of gender or ethnicity, since both ethnicity and gender are markers of asymmetrical social relations. Despite the similarities in the nature of the violence endured by women in ethnic conflicts, women’s experiences and struggles vary across the globe in response to different forms of patriarchy and nationalism.

I further argue that feminist discourse on genocide must avoid treating “women” as a unified category that transcends history, space, and boundaries. The feminist task...
is not only to resist and challenge the patriarchal account of genocide, but also to make visible the differences in women’s experiences and the repressive mechanisms that create those experiences in the first place. Such visibility and representation can help demystify the marginalized Other, specifically women. In mass media, the relationship between image, image-producer, and image-consumer is a close one and goes to the heart of the politics of representation. Every image in a film is a signifier that reflects the biases of the image producer and the image consumer. In this article, I explore the potential of “creation-as-research” in investigating representations of gender and the multiplicity of gendered experiences, using the Holocaust and the genocides in Rwanda and Bangladesh as examples.

Currently, feminist scholarship on genocide is divided on the relative importance of gender and ethnicity in their explorations of the violence endured by women in genocide. Despite some similarities in the gender-based violence committed during war, women’s experiences in genocide are varied and rooted in specific, local histories. In this article, I explore the potential of “creation-as-research” for investigating the lived reality of gender and the multiplicity of gendered experiences of women in genocide. I argue that documenting the specific experiences of women can resist and challenge not only the gender-neutrality of the memorialized images of war, but also the narratives that universalize the gendered crimes of genocide.

**Nation and nationalism: Nationalism is a product of imagination**

For thousands of years, humans have co-existed in communities formed on the basis of common origin and shared ethnicity, language, or interest, in order to ensure survival in often hostile conditions. Within these communities, membership is granted through kinship or through other means of coming together to promote unity and economic and social progress among its members. In this process of defining a nation, the nation-state becomes a set of institutions that control and disseminate the resources necessary for the progress of its people and exclusion of non-members, seen as “Other,” from national identity.

In *Nationalism and Imagination*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) writes, “State formations change but the nation thing moves through historical displacement ... The putting together of nationalism with the abstract structure of the state was an experiment or a happening that has a limited history and a limited future” (p. 14). Spivak places nationalism in the public sphere, and since language teaches individuals how to negotiate the public and private divide, language becomes an instrument of control exerted by the state. Language is also a tool to pass down stories through traditional oral storytelling or more developed forms of expression such as the arts and literature, cementing the idea of a collectivity. Spivak considers nationalism to be a work of imagination, something that belongs with the arts and literature but that has no place within logic or reason. She argues that literature and the arts feed nationalism by creating collective memory of historic events.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag (2003) dismantles the idea of collective memory by insisting that all memory is individual and that what is considered collective memory is in fact collective instruction (pp. 67–68). Through collective instruction and by assigning significance to shared experiences, ideas, and values, the
state can manipulate and instill a nationalistic identity in individuals, which, as Anne McClintock (1995) argues in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, is "frequently violent and always gendered" (p. 353).

**Gender and nationalism: Nationalism is gendered**

The ideology of nationalism has gendered power and social relations at its heart. Nationalism not only borrows from the ideology of gender but in fact reproduces gender in all social relations by creating subjects who are forced to occupy different spaces, public or private, depending on their assigned gender.

In *Technologies of Gender*, Teresa de Lauretis (1987) writes that gender is a representation, which constructs a relation between one entity and other entities on the basis of belonging to a class, group or category. This particular social relation marks an asymmetrical power relationship within a system, between a man and a woman, which is reflected in all social institutions and collectivities, including the nation. Woman, often referred to as the mother of the nation, is pigeonholed into the traditional role of a caregiver akin to the space she is to occupy within a traditional patriarchal family. In her role as a mother, she is prevented from equal participation in society as a worker and a citizen. Socialized as a subordinate to man within a traditional familial structure, a woman in “nation” finds expression in domestic space. While men meant to protect the boundaries of a nation-state, women are meant to reproduce it and nurture it. The role of “reproducers” is in line with the metaphor of “mother,” which is often mobilized in nationalist discourse. And, because of this particular role ascribed to women within nationalism, we see that, from Korean “comfort women” to the rape camps of the Balkans, historically women have been targeted differently from men in conflict situations.

**Genocide and gender**

Genocide, as defined in Article II of the *Genocide Convention* (Human Rights Watch, 1994, n.p.), is an act committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. The acts include killing or causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; and forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Chinkin, 1994). The ideology of genocide is rooted in nationalism and a sense of cultural superiority, underscored by ideologies of nationality, race, religion, and ethnicity. It is sold to the masses by the dominant culture, which invokes the spectre of the cultural “Other,” identified by differential distributions of power and wealth, in an effort to homogenize minority cultures and construct the nation state. This dominant culture tends to be patriarchal in all its institutions and in its distribution of power, labour, and resources, gendering not only the ideology of nationalism but also the violence that takes place during genocide.

Gendered acts of genocide vary from silent acquiescence to active policies to repress women’s capability to reproduce, whether through murder, forced labour, or starvation. But the most common form of sexual violence against women is rape, used against “enemy” populations as the ultimate means of control, dehumanization, and
shaming. Between 1928 and 1945, 150,000 to 200,000 Korean women were taken into sexual slavery by Japanese soldiers (Dolgopol, 1995, p. 127). Close to 200,000 women were raped in the war of liberation in Bangladesh in 1971 (Saikia, 2007). During the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, United Nations officials estimated that a quarter of a million women were raped (Amnesty International, 2004). In the former Yugoslavia, it is estimated that between 30,000 and 50,000 women were raped by Serb forces between 1991 and 1995 to humiliate the community and terrorize them into leaving their hometowns (Enloe, 2000).

Gender and the Holocaust

Even though feminist scholars have been examining the Holocaust from a gendered perspective since the 1980s, asking what happened to women during the Holocaust is still a question marred by controversy. In her (1997) intervention in the field of Holocaust studies, *The Unethical and the Unsayable: Women and the Holocaust*, Joan Ringelheim argues that women have been ignored in the literature on the Holocaust, which she considers to be “gender-neutral.” Ringelheim writes, “The horror of the Holocaust is of such proportions that any attempt to make distinctions of class, nationality, age, or gender, seems outrageous. Yet discovering the distinctions that exist among various groups and classes is a central feature of all historical research” (Ringelheim, 1997, n.p.). Despite the resistance from some scholars (such as Bruno Bettelheim, author of *The Informed Heart* (1960); Alvin Rosenfeld, author of *A Double Dying* (1980), and Anna Pawelczyńska, author of *Values and Violence in Auschwitz* (1979)), gender-based violence and sexuality emerge as common themes in memoirs of female Holocaust survivors. Myrna Goldenberg (1996) has documented the accounts of rape, sexual violence, and repression of reproductive rights among female survivors, and Joan Ringelheim (1997) has written about forced prostitution and abortion (n.p.). The numerous accounts of gender-based violence during the Holocaust now being made visible by survivors and researchers paint a broader picture of gender distinctions that pre-existed the Holocaust. The dominant post-Holocaust narrative also keeps women’s voices marginalized:

Gender-specific experiences are overlooked in Holocaust literature, especially that written by men. The stories told seem to erase or obscure women. In the instance of erasure, the fact that the main person in the story is a woman seems irrelevant to the teller. Women’s lives are neutralized into a so-called “human perspective,” which, on examination[,] turns out to be a masculine one. Women are obscured (or mystified) when their perceptions, understanding, or actions are ignored in stories that are clearly about them (for example: rape, forced abortion, prostitution). It is as if stories about women were being used to tell about the men involved. Women are there, but they are in the background. Consequently, we are blinded to the fuller context—why something is happening and to whom. Just as those who write about the Holocaust from a “universal perspective of evil” ignore Jews, those who write from a “universal perspective of man” ignore women. (Ringelheim, 1997, n.p.)
Scholars like Ringelheim aim to rid Holocaust studies of its gender-neutrality, by examining how “gender” was created pre-war, how it was mobilized during the war, and how it impacted women’s survival and coping mechanisms post-war.

**Gender and genocide in Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh in 1971, women were once again targeted for gender-based violence and, again, they later saw their experiences turned into silent archives. The British colonization of India had ended in 1947 with partition of the sub-continent into predominantly Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. The newly-born state of Pakistan was divided into East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, and West Pakistan, now the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, with miles of Indian land, and insurmountable cultural and linguistic differences, stretching in between. While West Pakistan was dominated by Punjabis, with a small population of Sindhi, Pathan, and Baluchi nationals and an influx of Urdu-speaking immigrants from India, East Pakistan comprised a predominantly Bengali-speaking population with some immigrants from the northern Indian state of Bihar. The agricultural riches of the country were in East Pakistan, but the government was located in West Pakistan.

Not only did the government extract revenues without investing in the people and economy of East Pakistan, it also actively suppressed the distinctive language and culture of the Bengali population. In response to the inequitable distribution of resources, economic exploitation, restrictions on Bengali speech in the public sphere, and their lack of political representation in national government, people in East Pakistan started to demand independence from Pakistan in the late 1960s. Military dictators tried to suppress the separatist movement for decades, but the floods of 1970, which exacted massive death tolls and destruction in East Pakistan, proved to be the last straw. An absence of relief efforts from the national government brought to the forefront the government’s indifference towards the people of East Pakistan. These events triggered the Bangladesh Liberation War, which lasted nine months. Bangladesh, meaning “Bengal nation,” was created on December 16, 1971.

Hundreds of thousands of people lost their lives in the conflict over Bangladesh. As Yasmin Saikia (2007) writes in “Overcoming the Silent Archive in Bangladesh,” ten million people became refugees, several hundred thousand Biharis became “stateless” (p. 66) in Bangladesh and Pakistan, and close to 200,000 women were raped. The Pakistani army established sex camps where Bengali women were held captive to serve the soldiers and officers (Saikia, 2007). This was done to teach the Bengali nation a lesson about Pakistani superiority, and Bengali women a lesson about male dominance. A large number of the rapes that took place in the 1971 war were committed by the Pakistani army with the intention of shaming the Bengali community, but rape was also committed by civilians, both Bengalis and Biharis. Each side was driven by revenge, national pride, and a sense of superiority over and hatred of the other; and on both sides, the purpose was to confirm masculine dominance. One survivor told Saikia,

[d]on’t ask me who killed whom, who raped whom, what was the religion, ethnic or linguistic background of the people who died in the war. The victims in the war were the women of this country— mothers who lost
children, sisters who lost their brothers, wives who lost their husbands, women who lost everything—their honor and dignity. In the war men victimized women. It was a year of anarchy and the end of humanity. Is this something to talk about? (p. 71)

After the war of independence, Bangladesh was forced to deal with the shame that was supposedly brought upon the nation by rape survivors and children born of rape. To rid the nation of the “bastard Pakistani,” abortion was made available by the government. Those who could not or did not get an abortion were often abandoned by their families and ostracized by the society. Some war babies were also exported to western countries like Canada, with the help of figures like Mother Teresa, where they were given up for adoption. It was partly in the context of reintegrating these women into society that the government designated rape survivors of the war as “Birangana” (Saikia, 2007, p. 73), meaning female hero—but it was also in response to a sense of national shame and humiliation at the hands of the enemy. By re-classifying rape as sacrifice, the government appropriated women’s pain and suffering for its own nationalist propaganda. Rape and violence against women was of secondary importance within the discourse of Bengali nationalism, which focused on the war fought by men on behalf of the nation to obtain nationhood.

As Saikia (2007) notes, the few women who decided to seek justice were shunned by their families and communities. All evidence of mass rape in 1971, including police reports, medical reports, letters, and photographs, was destroyed by the government as part of a national campaign of forgetting. As “Biranganas,” the rape survivors of Bangladesh started to resemble the Korean “comfort women” (p. 75) taken into sexual slavery by Japanese army during the Second World War, who had been reduced to merely sexual and sacrificial objects to gratify the male soldiers. Moreover, the years that followed the war of independence saw a transformation of “Biranganas” into “Baranganas”—meaning prostitutes—in the local memory. As a result, women were silenced and the rapes were written off as collateral damage of the war, instead of being examined and understood as part of a strategic and carefully implemented military policy.

Gender and genocide in Rwanda

According to an Amnesty International (2004) report, over 800,000 people were killed during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda; a quarter of a million women were raped, and 67 percent of the rape victims were infected with HIV and AIDS (Amnesty International, 2004). In Rwandan genocide, the ideology of gender was mobilized in a complex way and turned women’s bodies not only into targets of violence but also weapons of war.

Historically, different ethnic groups occupied different places in Rwandan society and were classified into three ethnic groups: Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. The Twa tended to be short and were hunters and gatherers; the Hutu tended to be squat and of medium height and were considered mainly agriculturalists; and the Tutsi tended to be slender and tall and were pastoralists (Mamdani, 2001).

The colonization of Rwanda, first by the Germans and then by the Belgians, imposed a Rwandan state in which the administrative systems were organized along hierarchically exploitative lines that privileged the pastoralists, creating racialized and
politicized Hutu and Tutsi identities and a marginalized Twa identity. Even after the end of colonial rule, the political and economic divide remained. It was exacerbated by prolonged drought and unemployment in the early 1990s, which led to increased hostility and overall militarization of the population.

Before the genocide, women in Rwanda occupied a traditional role in which they were secondary to men. Traditional social law stopped women from running a business or working in any business without their husband’s permission, and traditional education for girls did not include formal schooling. Women were not involved in governance, locally or nationally. Women were also unable to inherit land or property or to open a bank account without their husband’s consent. Rwandan women were responsible for planting and harvesting food crops, cooking and taking care of the family (Ensign & Bertrand, 2010). A 1990 newspaper article published by Kangura stated, “Every Hutu must know that the Tutsi woman, wherever she may be, is working for the Tutsi ethnic cause,” and “Every Hutu must know that our Hutu daughters are more worthy and more conscientious as women, as wives and as mothers. Aren’t they lovely, excellent secretaries, and more honest!” (quoted in Saï, 2012, n.p.). News and propaganda articles such as these were rampant before the genocide and portrayed Tutsi women as sex weapons to be used by the Tutsi men to destroy the Hutu population.

In “Gender and Genocide in Rwanda,” Lisa Sharlach (1999) writes that any Tutsi woman who survived was likely to have been raped. The survivors reported that attackers made references to their ethnicity before or during the rapes: “You Tutsi women are too proud,” and “You Tutsi women think you are too good for us” (p. 394). After the genocide, there were 10 times more widows than widowers and entire communities were left without men. In Shattered Lives: The Aftermath of Sexual Violence in Rwanda, the Human Rights Watch (1996) estimated that in 1996, 70 percent of the population was female and 50 percent of all households were headed by women. As a result, women had to take on new roles and responsibilities. UK-based news organization The Guardian reported in 2010 that in today’s Rwanda, not only do women have inheritance rights are women and are encouraged to acquire formal education, they also make up 56 percent of the country’s parliamentarians—more than in most developed countries (Boseley, 2010).

Feminist scholarship on genocide

With genocide defined along the lines of ethnic divide and reproduction, it becomes impossible to focus more or less on ethnicity or gender, as both are markers of asymmetrical social relations and power hierarchy. There is a need for feminist scholars of genocide to examine gender-based violence against women at the points of intersection between patriarchy and nationalism, both of which are intrinsically gendered and militarized. In her explorations of genocide in the Balkans in Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits: Feminism in a Globalized Present, Krista Lynes (2013) notes that the complex relationships between gender, nationalism, and genocide divided the feminist community in Zagreb on the issue of whether to put more emphasis on the gendered or the ethnic dimension of genocide. Lynes aptly warns us that, while focusing on gender may bring to light the prevalence of sexual violence against women globally, it also jeopardizes a particular reading of gender and ethnicity, as was the case...
in the former Yugoslavia. A feminist reading of genocide demands a marriage of the two very different approaches, one that would allow for differences in history and experiences while also making room for sameness.

Across different nationalist movements in different parts of the world, we see that the history and experiences of women in genocide are rooted in histories of patriarchy and militarization. The oppression of women manifests itself when a dominant culture seeks to define what it means to be a woman or when it claims to know the “truth” about women of a particular ethnicity, often by tying them to the reproduction and growth of their minority group. However, despite the similarities in the nature of the violence endured by women in ethnic conflicts, women’s experiences and struggles vary across the globe in response to different forms of patriarchy and nationalism. The universal sisterhood approach, by treating “women” as a unified category, removes historic specificity from women’s experiences and asserts the needs and demands of Western feminists over the locally-defined needs of women from the Third World, and as a result, it reproduces hierarchical qualities borrowed from patriarchy.

It is this transcendence of history, space, and boundaries that Chandra Mohanty challenges in her work. In *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Mohanty (2003) argues that this way of coding information to flatten differences denies the plurality of voices among women on the margins and makes everyone outside the West the “Other.” It ensures that outsiders remain on the margin, since the frame of analysis and the discourses available are dominated by the West. The projection of White, Western, middle-class privilege as the experience of every woman in the unified category of “women” silences the voice of the subaltern, or the third world subject.

In mass media, the relationship between image, image-producer, and image-consumer is a close one and goes to the heart of the politics of representation. Teresa de Lauretis (1987) famously wrote, “The construction of gender is both the product and the process of its representation” (p. 5). Across the globe, woman—the marginalized, the Other, often far from the mode of production—finds herself represented either as the oppressed or as “feminist.” Representation of the Other is complex, especially when differences within the category are also taken into account. The dominant culture not only decides what are considered the best ideas and rules of engagement in a society, but it also takes away agency from women by enforcing conformity. The feminist task is not only to resist and challenge the patriarchal account of genocide, but also to make visible the differences in women’s experiences and the repressive mechanisms that create those experiences in the first place. Such visibility and representation can help demystify the marginalized Other, specifically women. The Other is constructed through representations that reaffirm the ideas of the dominant culture; every image in a film is a signifier that reflects the biases of the image producer and the image consumer. An alternative study of genocide would need to decode the existing representations that appear gender-neutral and would need to make women’s experiences central to its discourse. A “creation-as-research” methodology can be a useful tool for making visible the multiplicity of gendered experiences and the silencing of survivors of genocide.
Creation-as-research is a unique way of producing knowledge. It involves developing projects where creation is required in order for research to emerge. Creation-as-research, as Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk (2013) argue in *Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and "Family Resemblances,“* entails “investigating the relationship between technology, gathering and revealing through creation ... while also seeking to extract knowledge from the process” (p. 19). Research remains the end goal in this process, and results are accompanied by a creative production that underlines the research process.

While creation-as-research may be new and somewhat controversial in the social sciences, in the world of qualitative research, writing—a creative practice—is generally accepted as a viable way of knowing and a method of inquiry. In literary studies, it has long been understood that different styles of writing convey different messages, or, simply put, that how we write affects what we write about. If writing is a valid method of inquiry and if, as argued by the Camera stylo movement (Astruc, 2012), film-making is akin to writing an essay—both placing subjectivity front and centre—it would not require a radical leap of faith to assert that creative practices, such as film-making, might also be considered a method of inquiry. Within the realm of creative practices, the essay film—situated at the intersection of personal, subjective, and social history—has emerged as the leading non-fiction form for both intellectual and artistic innovation. If the subject of inquiry is the politics of discourse and the silencing, appropriation, and visual representation of women's stories within discourse on genocide, it would be logical to use creative tools to explore that relationship.

Timothy Corrigan (2011) formulates the essay film as a testing of expressive subjectivity through experiential encounters in the public arena, the product of which becomes the figuration of thinking or thought as a cinematic address and a spectatorial response (p. 30). The expressive subjectivity of the filmmaker, which is considered one of the most recognizable signs of an essay film, makes visible the articulation and consciousness of the filmmaker. It not only creates transparency but also accountability, through its specific positioning of a knowing self. Instead of claiming access to a universal truth, the filmmaker makes transparent the various visual possibilities and viewing positions and then focuses on the point of view most accessible to the filmmaker—her own. The essayist-filmmaker offers the spectator a representation of social reality, which the viewer can either accept or reject. But as Laura Rascaroli (2009) argues in *The Personal Camera: Subject Cinema and the Essay Film*, the essay structure implies a certain unity of the human experience, “which allows two subjects to meet and communicate on the basis of such a shared experience. The two subject positions, the ‘I’ and the ‘you’, determine and shape one another” (p. 36). It is this articulation of the essay film that allows multiplicity, and renders it the most appropriate form of research output and the most useful to feminist thought in the context of genocide studies. Similar to a transnational feminist approach, the consciousness of the essay film, expressed through essayistic subjectivity, demands the viewing position of the “I” to build coalition with the “you,” rather than attempting to squash the “you” into the “I.” This dialogue between expressive subjectivity and the public is what allows people to see connections and differences.
Without making a claim to the universality of women’s experiences in genocide, an essay film allows survivors to speak for themselves and does not call upon them to embody an entire nation. The filmmaker’s subjectivity offers audiences a representation of social reality through the experiences of the survivors of genocide. The three subject positions, the “I” (the filmmaker), the “she” (the survivor), and the “you” (the viewer), determine and shape the meaning of the film. The film offers a unique meeting point between the filmmaker’s subjectivity and that of both the survivors and the viewers, and it attempts to create a space to communicate, challenge, and resist the dominant discourse on genocide by building a coalition between the three subject positions.

Conclusion: Activist intervention into practice-based research
Academic research rooted in creative practice closes the gap between theory and creative practice by focusing on creative art as a cultural industry, one that is compatible with theory and offers insights into real problems in the real world, making practice-based research self-reflexive. Creation-as-research, specifically the essay film, has the potential to bring women’s experiences and stories out of the private and into the public domain and to challenge the hegemonic reading of a conflict. It has the power to name the experiences and individuals who were previously silenced in the name of the nation. The essay film does not seek to flatten differences; instead, it sets the ground for the audience to have a conversation based on their lived reality, experiences, and struggles. Viewers get a chance to interpret, translate, and reconcile the tensions presented in the film with their own existing views and subjectivities, and they can either accept or reject what is being presented in the film. In doing so, the viewers also transform themselves into actors and agents of change. Additionally, the essay film can help transmit knowledge produced through research back into society. In “The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities,” Stuart Hall (1990) discusses the political nature of cultural studies, which engages with “some real problem out there in the dirty world” (p. 17), and the importance of translating knowledge back into practice. Hall writes, “[n]either the one nor the other alone would do” (p.18). Practice-based research communicates problems and resolutions. It offers, as Melissa Gregg (2004) argues, a multi-layering of arguments, which “would otherwise appear as a dense and prosaic discussion” (p. 367), and it makes “the complexities of cultural debates more attractive to a broader audience” (p. 367). This is the ultimate potential of creation-as-research.

References


