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The gendered politics of recognition and recognizability through political apology

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on the performative recognition offered to victims through political apologies for conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). It engages with understandings of political apology as an act of acknowledgment and moral visibility that has the capacity to further include marginalized accounts of violence or injustice within exclusive national histories/memberships. I introduce feminist understandings of visibility as ambivalent alongside a differential politics of "grievability" in order to suggest that political apologies must always recognize and make visible particular accounts of violence and subject positions; however, they simultaneously obscure others. I problematize the gendered and gendering effects of this process in relation to two cases of apology for CRSV: the Japanese imperial "comfort women" and the US Abu Ghraib torture scandal during the Global War on Terror (GWoT).

Introduction
This article problematizes the process by which political apologies can recognize and make visible marginalized experiences of violence. Engaging with theoretical conceptions of apology as an act of moral and political recognition (e.g., Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; Humphrey & Valverde, 2008; Muldoon & Schaap, 2011; Nobles, 2008; Smith, 2008) and as a means of challenging gendered harms specifically (MacLachlan, 2013, 2019; Park, 2000), alongside feminist and poststructuralist literature on the ambivalent and contingent nature of recognition (e.g., Butler, 1997a, 2004; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Markell, 2009), it makes a key contribution by suggesting that political apologies have the capacity to recognize some but simultaneously obscure others. As such, I suggest that we should pay analytical attention to who is made (in)visible within the politics of apology.

The "age of apology" in world politics (Brooks, 1999; Daase et al., 2015; Gibney et al., 2008; Mihai & Thaler, 2014; Nobles, 2008, etc.) has been interpreted in many ways, including—but certainly not limited to—reconciliation (Daase et al., 2015), transitional justice (Teitel, 2006), diplomacy (Gries & Peng, 2002), and conflict reduction (Murphy, 2011). One means of understanding the politics of apology is by reconciling it with a broader politics of recognition, defined as “the struggles over the meaning of and status conferred to particular identities” (Snyder, 2016, p. 175; see also Honneth, 1996; Fraser & Honneth, 2003).

Indeed, political apologies can be read as public expressions that have the capacity to communicate a necessary change within ultimately exclusive narratives of history, belonging, and citizenship (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Muldoon & Schaap, 2011; Nobles, 2008). Feminists have long taken up the language of recognition in response to the “diverse violations of human rights affecting
women throughout the world, and the likelihood that such violations misrecognize their moral worth” (Mookherjee, 2016, p. 45). In particular, because the legal codification of human rights must be preceded by moral and social recognition of an “other,” sexual and gender-based violence underwent a normative transformation from being considered a violation of men’s property rights to a conception that highlights women’s embodied agency and integrity (Wisotzki, 2016, p. 1; Copelon, 2000; see also Fraser, 2000; McNay, 2008). In this way, the development of women’s rights as human rights must be considered as a recognition of women’s moral personhood and legal subjectivity, which has the capacity to be violated (Hesford, 2011).

McNay (2008) complicated this understanding by suggesting that recognition in terms of one’s gender has, in fact, been the source of many forms of historical injustice. Indeed, as the following sections will attest, moral and political recognition of gendered victims of violence is not wholly empowering and must be understood as ambivalent in its gendered effects.

This article consciously sets aside questions regarding which aspects are said to make up an effective, full, appropriate, or “categorical” apology, in part because there is a rich body of literature examining precisely this question as well as the various meanings that can be assigned to numerous examples of interpersonal and political apologies (e.g., see Lazare, 2005; Smith, 2008; Tavuchis, 1991; etc.). Similarly, the article does not specifically problematize whether the case studies examined here can or should be considered as apologies. Rather, I concur with MacLachlan (2014, p. 13), who suggested that “we ought to shift the emphasis in political apology from ‘apology’ to ‘political,’ thinking of apologies first as a form of political practice, that is, a mode of doing politics.”

Reserving judgment on the normative quality of the content of the apologies themselves, I seek here to examine the wider gendered politics of recognition within which they act. In this way, I further agree with MacLachlan (2019, p. 24) that even normatively “good” apologies come with particular risks, especially with reference to gender. Therefore, I would tentatively suggest that all political apologies must participate to some extent in a conditional process of recognition and will likely always obfuscate some subject positions and forms of violence, even those the content of which might be deemed as normatively appropriate and useful in their engagement with victims and/or histories of violence.

The article provides a comparative case study analysis of two instances of governmental apology dealing specifically with conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), the Japanese Imperial “comfort women” and the United States’ torture scandal at Abu Ghraib during the Global War on Terror (GWoT). These case studies were selected because they share the important similarity of being interstate in nature—in this way, neither case engages in the recognition “among citizens” (Muldoon and Schaap, 2011, p. 196) that has been considered important for settler colonial societies. Rather, the apologies can be understood as attempts to demonstrate the moral worth of an other who exists outside of the political community and, in doing so, potentially aid in mending interstate relations and engage in reconciliation (Murphy, 2011). I suggest that this interpretation can be productively aligned with Butler’s (2009, p. 39) notion of “grievability,” through which militarist logics are maintained but can also potentially be disrupted by making the other recognizable, and their life therefore “grievable.” The case studies also diverge in interesting ways.

The Japanese government, in issuing its “intergenerational” (Thompson, 2009) apologies for historical violence, attempted to retrospectively recognize the humanity and worth of the comfort women, a task that appears to reflect on the past through contemporary norms of human rights (Barkan & Karn, 2006), and women’s rights, specifically. Recognition might operate in this case as a means of acknowledging that the mis- or nonrecognition that resulted in women of the other, colonized community (and women of specific classes and ethnicities) having fewer political rights than men within the Japanese empire. It also means that their worth was primarily determined by their bodies, defined through perceptions of male sexual needs and the apparent requirements of warfare (see Snyder, 2016).
The US case study, by contrast, consists of apologies delivered by the Bush administration in the context of the ongoing GWoT, the apologies therefore operating to maintain a politics of warfare.

Despite the temporal divergences between the case studies, similar observations can be made about the ambivalent and contingent operation of recognition and the obscuring of some victims of CRSV.

Foucauldian critical discourse analysis (CDA) is the most appropriate method to interrogate the negotiation of gendered recognition that occurs through the dynamics of apology (see, e.g., Shepherd, 2013). I therefore follow Foucault (1972, p. 49) in his articulation that discourse analysis “consists of not—of no longer—treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak.” This version of CDA allows me to interrogate the apologies and surrounding politics not as objective claims to truth, or even as verbal statements imbued with power relations, but as ritualistic practices that performatively (re)create specific gendered and sexual subject positions through recognition, in line with poststructuralist feminist theory (e.g., Butler, 1993, 2009; Shepherd, 2013). The article provides a gender-sensitive analysis through the texts of the apologies, published victims’ testimonies, and surrounding media narratives in order to understand the wider context in which recognition politics occurs in these cases, and from which the apologies cannot be divorced (Yamazaki, 2004).

The article is structured in the following way. First, I position political apology as a means of recognizing the other through the concept of “moral interlocution” (Smith, 2005, 2008, 2014) and the inclusion of CRSV within wider accounts of war and injustice (MacLachlan, 2013). The following section deploys feminist and poststructuralist conceptions of recognition to ask who can be considered recognizable. This section argues that we must conceive of recognition as a differential process that makes some morally visible while excluding others. The following sections present analyses of two important cases of apologies for CRSV—the Japanese imperial comfort women and the Abu Ghraib torture scandal—paying particular attention to who is obscured in each case and what this obfuscation means for the politics of gender. Finally, I conclude on the gendered politics of “selective and differential visibility” (Hesford, 2011, p. 30) that accompanies political apologies for CRSV and make some suggestions about the implications of this understanding of recognition.

Political Apology as Moral Recognition

Victims use human rights as a discourse to constitute themselves as political subjects, to claim a moral relationship to power as victims of abuse and to demand recognition on the basis of their humanity and compassion … to reclaim personhood and gain moral visibility. (Humphrey & Valverde, 2008, p. 84; emphasis added)

Although political apology is often considered as only one part of a larger process by which new legal rights or monetary reparations for minorities or marginalized communities can be provided by the state following violence or injustice (Muldoon & Schaap, 2011; Nobles, 2008), it should be noted that the speech act itself has been interpreted as crucial for conveying official recognition of victimhood or violence and correcting injustices based on misrecognition. For Celermajer (2008, p. 20), for instance, by communicating “concern for and recognition of the experience of the wronged other” an apology “bespeaks in the present another identity” that is transcendent of the identity of the perpetrating state. In Celermajer’s (2008, p. 26) view, then, political apology allows for a “constitutional shift in identity” that is not necessarily facilitated by other forms of redress for past violence or injustice: “Moreover, now equipped with theories that articulate the link between identity, recognition and rights, we are increasingly able to make sense of how we are all implicated in the rules of inclusion and exclusion that underpin institutions of rights and
their violation” (Celermajer, 2008, p. 34). In this way, a publicly delivered apology can be perceived not only as legally important but also as an act of moral recognition that, to some extent, challenges the histories of violence, dehumanization, and exclusion that accompanied or led to injustice. The importance of verbal recognition in particular is demonstrated by the fact that state reparations are sometimes publicly rejected by victim groups when these are not accompanied by an appropriate apology, such offerings being perceived as hollow or insincere (Murphy, 2011). Indeed, Murphy (2011, p. 62) argued that it is this verbal recognition through apology that can “play a powerful role in conflict reduction.” Therefore, political apology is considered a necessary part of wider offerings of redress, because it uniquely serves to communicate the victims’ “human worth and dignity” (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002, p. 1).

The potentially emancipatory power of recognition apologies are conceived to possess tends to be conceptualized in two ways in the academic literature. First, building on the foundations of how interpersonal apologies are understood, some have suggested that political apologies are “exemplary” acts (Mihi, 2013, p. 200) that can, to some extent, remake social relations through the recognition of the moral worth of the victim (Govier & Verwoerd, 2002; MacLachlan, 2015, p. 445). Smith (2008, p. 65, original emphasis) for example, suggested:

The victim, whom the offender may have perceived as but a tool for her use, can become the primary conversant in the offender’s task of reexamining and maintaining her core values. The offender comes to treat the victim as a being with dignity and equal moral worth to whom she must justify her actions.

Smith (2005, 2008, 2014) argued that an adequate apology in the context of collectives “can fundamentally transform the relationship between victims and offenders because they come to understand each other as moral interlocutors as they engage in the normative discourse essential to a categorical apology” (Smith, 2008, p. 227). Although what Smith called “categorical” apologies can be made up of a variety of complex characteristics and issues, of which moral interlocution is only one (e.g., 2008, pp. 267–245), it can certainly be suggested that the verbal recognition of the humanity and dignity of the victim is considered key to apology’s moral, ethical, and political disposition.

Second, some scholars have placed emphasis on the capacity of the speech act of apology to incorporate marginalized subject positions within a dominant conception of the nation/community. For instance, verbal recognition of Indigenous communities within settler states has often been considered a key precedent for material or legal forms of recognition, such as widening legal entitlement to land, additional political rights, or monetary reparations (Gunstone, 2016; Muldoon & Schaap, 2011).

However, many scholars have analyzed apologies delivered by administrations within settler states precisely on the basis that this verbal recognition can attempt to widen the terms of traditionally racially defined national membership, with various impacts (Ahmed, 2004; Coulthard, 2014; Muldoon & Schaap, 2011; Nobles, 2008). Highlighting the complexity of this process, Ahmed (2004, p. 109), for instance, argued that this form of recognition works not to challenge Australian nationalism based on whiteness but to (re)make this nationalism as ultimately good: “Shame means that we mean well, and can work to reproduce the nation as an ideal.”

Paying specific attention to gender-based violence and injustice, MacLachlan (2013) most prominently made the case for conceiving of apology as a tool that can call public attention to the prevalence of such violence and more fully include women’s rights and experiences within traditionally masculinized communities. MacLachlan’s (2013, pp. 138–143) argument concerns the intimately gendered public/private divide, which she problematized by positioning public apology as a means by which CRSV and other issues conventionally considered as private can be powerfully moved into the political sphere and therefore become matters of public concern. Apology might therefore be considered an important means of recognizing gendered harms because:
An official apology has the power to name harms to women as wrongful harms, when they have not previously been publicly recognized as such. At the same time, it also asserts public (i.e. state- or societywide) responsibility for what are often seen as private, apolitical matters, or inevitable consequences of biology and soldier “boys being boys.” (MacLachlan, 2013, p. 139)

In this way, she suggested that apology can be a means of reconceptualizing war from an exclusively masculine domain to one which involves specific experiences of violence and marginalization for women (MacLachlan, 2013, p. 138). This process, MacLachlan (2013, p. 139) suggested, may have the capacity to draw attention to and potentially even disrupt military logics that result in women’s experiences of sexual violence during conflict in particular. Engaging with the argument that political apologies are a means by which governments can make marginalized victims morally visible and transform those gendered issues (specifically sexual violence in this case) traditionally conceived as private into matters of public debate, contestation, and concern through recognition, the following analysis will demonstrate that this process should be understood as ambivalent in part because the recognition of some necessitates the obfuscation of others. Engaging with a poststructuralist understanding of recognition as always conditional, this article challenges us to enquire about not only who is recognized through the speech act of political apology and the impacts of this but, crucially, who is obscured.

**Gendering apology: Who can be ‘recognizable’?**

The history of human rights can be told as a history of selective and differential visibility, which has positioned certain bodies, populations, and nations as objects of recognition and granted others the power and means to look and to confer recognition. (Hesford, 2011, p. 30)

This section engages with Butler’s (2009, p. 1) conceptualization of obituaries during the GWoT as “cultural modes of regulating affective and ethical dispositions through a selective and differential framing of violence” and, inspired by this, provides a reading of political apology as contingent—gendered—recognition. Within this interpretation, apologies, like obituaries, are a means by which sense-making can occur following instances of military violence through performatively bestowing recognition on particular victims, an act that communicates the worth of some subjects, and lives, over others (Butler, 2009, p. 4).

Certainly, apologies make political violence and the victims of this violence morally visible (Humphrey & Valverde, 2008, p. 84), but it remains the case that, for every individual or group made visible through the speech act of apology, there exist those who cannot be recognized, an occurrence that manifests when “institutionalised patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other, or simply invisible—in other words, as less than full partners in social interaction” (Fraser, 2000, p. 113)—or misrecognition.

When the very logic of recognition is considered as contingent, we come to understand that, for one to be recognized, there must be a “constitutive outside” (Butler, 1993, p. 8) to this process. In other words, for some to be made visible, other subject position(s) must be unrecognizable or obscured. Furthermore, recognition should not be considered a wholly empowering force for those it addresses. As I will argue below, when we understand the gendered subject as produced through a language that preexists them, recognition can be conceived as both enabling and constraining. Butler reminded us that our very existence in the social world is made possible through recognition of always already gendered subjecthood: “[T]o be addressed is not merely to be recognized for what one already is, but to have the very term conferred by which the recognition of existence becomes possible. … One only ‘exists’ not only by virtue of being recognized, but, in a prior sense, as being recognizable (Butler, 1997a, p. 5; emphasis in the original).

Precisely because being recognizable means making oneself intelligible through dominant gender norms, the process of recognition is contradictory and “is not in itself an unambiguous good,
However desperate we are for its rewards” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013, p. 82). Certainly, the act of recognition is “constitutive of subjectivity: One becomes an individual subject only in virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by another subject” (Fraser & Honneth, 2003, p. 10).

Although recognition is often considered as emancipatory for disadvantaged groups, it is, in fact, something we “cannot not want” (Spivak, 1999, p. 172) and has ambivalent impacts on those addressed. Feminist and queer theory scholars have long articulated the complexities of recognition for the gendered subject, drawing attention to the ways in which visibility can be emancipatory “and/or” dangerous, especially in the context of a politics of war/violence (Weber, 2016; see also Bulmer, 2013). During the GWoT, for instance, recognition through hypervisibility has often meant subjection to various forms of violence, especially for those who are considered to occupy queer/feminized and simultaneously racialized subject positions (Puar, 2018). If verbal recognition is considered as a means of performatively making possible and/or real particular social existences and versions of humanization (Zivi, 2008, p. 162), when political victims are recognized through apology, they are called into a social existence that preexists them and that others cannot occupy.

Markell (2009, p. 11) reminded us that recognition as a political process operates on and through preexisting subject positions and deals with forms of injustice that do not only “systematically deprive already-constituted subjects of resources, but by shaping subjects themselves in ways that produce and perpetuate systematic inequality.” The capacity of apology as a discursive form of acknowledgment to “recognise us as who we already really are” is one of the many equivocal and ambiguous effects that will be noted throughout the following empirical sections (Markell, 2009, p. 14; emphasis in the original).

This (re)production of politically recognized/recognizable, gendered victims of violence is, I suggest, a key performative function of the speech act of political apology following instances of CRSV. Within this understanding, political apology does not simply represent pregiven subjects; rather, subjects are constituted through a preexisting, gendered discourse that recognizes them as victims and, in doing so, makes them morally visible (Butler, 1997b, p. 85).

This process of linguistic production can be understood as having both regulatory and constructive functions. By acknowledging subjects, political apology serves, on the one hand, to raise the victim’s experience of violence to the level of the state and/or society (MacLachlan, 2013), thereby empowering “history-centred explanations for minority disadvantage” (Nobles, 2008, p. 72), while, on the other, it simultaneously exposes them to the various preexisting norms and expectations of gendered victimhood they must now embody. The recognition offered by political apology, therefore, is not unproblematic for those who are addressed or for challenging a wider politics of inequality.

Moreover, because legal personhood is established on the very potential for violation (Hesford, 2011, p. 46), the implication that comes with the mis- or nonrecognition of some victims is that this violence, when it is performed on particular bodies, simply is not intelligible as violence at all (e.g., Butler, 2009; Hesford, 2011; Taylor, 2018). In the context of sexual- and gender-based violence, this can manifest through the implicating of those whose claims to victimhood involve demonstrations of various forms of personal agency, thereby excluding them from recognition (see Dolan, 2020).

The following sections will demonstrate the (in)visibility of some victims of violence in the context of apology. First, the comfort women are/have become recognizable in ways that exclude some victims and that have strengthened a definition of CRSV as an attack upon a wider ethnic/national community. Second, the Abu Ghraib case study will highlight the obfuscation of female-identified victims, who were not visible in the leaked photographs and whose victimhood would challenge the narrative of apology (and justification for war) offered by the US government of the time. The violence experienced by women, given the context of the GWoT, could not, therefore, be made intelligible as violence at all.
The comfort women apologies

The issue of comfort women, with an involvement of the Japanese military authorities at that time, was a grave affront to the honor and dignity of large numbers of women, and the Government of Japan is painfully aware of responsibilities from this perspective. As Prime Minister of Japan, Prime Minister Abe expresses anew his most sincere apologies and remorse to all the women who underwent immeasurable and painful experiences and suffered incurable physical and psychological wounds as comfort women. (Kishida in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015)

Although there have been multiple Japanese state apologies for the atrocity that has, somewhat euphemistically, come to be known by the terms comfort women or comfort system, this section focuses on the 2015 “joint statement” between Japan and South Korea, because in this diplomatic exchange, the South Korean authorities accepted Japan’s offerings of remorse and declared that the issue had been “resolved finally and irreversibly” (Yun in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015). Centering this latest and seemingly final apology, media narratives, and published testimonials from survivors, this section uses the conditional concept of recognition to inquire about who is made morally visible and who is obscured.

The comfort women movement has often been considered symbolic for a wide range of campaigns for recognition of CRSV as a crime against humanity, and for women’s rights more generally (e.g., Chinkin, 1994; Copelon, 2000; Kim & Choi, 1998; Soh, 2008). Although the wide acknowledgment of South Korean victims of the comfort system within their own country, globally, and perhaps more contentiously within Japan must certainly be considered as a success of women’s rights campaigns and movements against CRSV (Soh, 2001), it is also notable that this recognition of CRSV first as political and second as an unacceptable form of violence has been predicated on the key distinction between rape and voluntary prostitution. Feminist scholars have critiqued this binary in order to demonstrate that the structural dynamics of gender-based and sexual violence cannot be condensed within this simplistic language, which many suggest misrepresents the everyday realities of violence and insecurity that women experience (Doezema, 2002; Enloe, 2000; Soh, 2008; Tsukamoto, 2017).

Similarly, the definitional focus within the comfort women campaign on “sexual slavery” was a direct response to the failure of the Tokyo Tribunals, which, in “referring to the women as prostitutes and not sexual slaves, obfuscated the horrors of the system through a suggestion of immorality and voluntariness” (Copelon, 2000, p. 223). This distinction came alongside the recognition of rape as a weapon of war, a legal definition that explicitly distinguished between seemingly “private” forms of sexual violence and methods of rape that are intended as an attack on an entire ethnic or national community—crucially, not simply a violation of the woman’s own personal or bodily integrity (Buss, 2009, p. 149; Copelon, 2000; Enloe, 2000).

Recognition of CRSV has therefore taken a particular form within the context of international law. Within this context, campaigns for apology can be understood as an extension of the conversion of the comfort system from a seemingly private issue characterized by personal shame to one of public concern, precisely because apology is perceived as a method of emphasizing political actors’ culpability for this violence as well as inducing a wider societal reckoning (MacLachlan, 2013). However, it must be understood as key to the framing of the violence of the comfort system through apology that the harm is expressed as one against the “honor and dignity” of the victims (MoFA, 2015), because this language is highly consistent with definitions of CRSV that rely on the harm being perpetrated not only against the woman but primarily her entire ethnic and/or national community.

In line with this, critical feminist scholarship has increasingly problematized, first, the various ways that the comfort women have been made into symbols of nationalist suffering in South Korea (Dolan, 2020; Jun, 2020; Park, 2000; Varga, 2009) and, second, the definitional binary between prostitution and sexual slavery that has been used to categorize the comfort women, thereby making the case for perceiving the system in the context of wider structural, gendered
patterns of violence and injustice (e.g., Norma, 2016; Tsukamoto, 2017). These studies have demonstrated that the paradigmatic comfort women story that has been used to support South Korean nationalism in particular does not encompass the full range of experiences of violence emerging from this history (Joo, 2015; Park, 2000). If recognition is conceived as a conditional process, however, it becomes apparent that some victims must be obscured for others to become not only recognized but recognizable through political apology.

Two dynamics of the comfort system are powerfully obscured through the recognition offered by the Japanese apologies (and South Korean official acceptance of the 2015 iteration). First, the fact that the apologies consistently refer to the system as one which took place during World War II obscures the civilian origins of the system as well as the daily realities of prostitution more broadly (Norma, 2016; Tsukamoto, 2017). Second, the politics of apology surrounding the comfort women has operated to obscure some victims of the system. In particular, women who were drafted to comfort stations from within Japan have been consistently invisibilized in this politics in several ways. Published testimonial narratives from comfort women have highlighted that Japanese women were treated differently than those of other nationalities and that they were “professional prostitutes” before being recruited into comfort stations (see also Soh, 2008, p. 30):

We Koreans served low-ranking soldiers and non-commissioned officers while the Japanese served solely officers. Many of the Japanese women had been geisha back in Japan, and there was one who looked at least 30 years old. (Mun, 1995, p. 111)

The women in the new station were all Japanese. I was the only Korean. It was much more spacious, since each woman had a room to herself. … Most of the soldiers who came were officers, although a few NCOs visited as well. I was able to serve them when I wanted to. My fee was divided with the proprietor on an equal basis. (Yi, 1995, p. 55)

The argument here is not to dispute or confirm these testimonies, and it must certainly be acknowledged that the comfort system was instituted within a colonial politics that valued the lives and femininities of Japanese women over those from colonized territories (Soh, 2008; Tanaka, 2003). It is, however, important to note that the narratives presented here at times converge with those highly repudiated offerings by historical revisionists within Japan and elsewhere, who have claimed that the comfort women more broadly cannot be considered as victims of CRSV because their experiences were consistent with “[p]rostitutes [who] follow armies everywhere, and they followed the Japanese army in Asia” (Ramseyer, 2021).

This argument essentially suggests that prostitution, by definition, involves difficult working conditions, even more so within the context of World War II; however, this does not constitute systematic rape, because the women who were drafted signed contracts alluding to the fact that they were required to engage in sex work. This argument has been found as highly historically inaccurate and willfully misleading (see, e.g., Gersen, 2021). By contrast, the discursive strategy that aligns South Korean women with dominant notions of femininity through insisting on their youth and virginity prior to their recruitment into the comfort system achieves recognition, in part, through the making of illegitimate Japanese (and other) victims as the “constitutive outside” (Butler, 1993, p. 8) of this narrow definition of victimhood.

The making of Japanese comfort women into professional prostitutes (Tsukamoto, 2017, p. 191) by claiming that they often gained monetarily from the system and that they had not experienced ill treatment (e.g., Yi, 1955, p. 55) summarily excludes them from verbal recognition through apologies that emphasize the coded language of “honor and dignity” and that were directed only to successive South Korean governments and South Korean society. One woman, who uses the pseudonym of Shirota Suzuko, has publicly spoken out about her experience as a Japanese victim of the comfort system. She was working as a prostitute at the time of being drafted to a comfort station in Taiwan and expressed having experienced similar dynamics of gendered violence within the “comfort” system as have South Korean survivors: “at any rate,
I felt I existed to be used by men for profit and for fun, that’s a woman’s lot, I just felt like my body was a throwaway object” (Suzuko in Norma, 2016, pp. 2–3).

This testimonial narrative and Suzuko’s subject position highlight the complexities of consent and coercion in the context of structural gender inequalities as well as the inadequacy of bounding the comfort system within formal definitions of World War II, seeing it not as a part of women’s everyday experiences of violence. Indeed, when the war ended Suzuko was forced to remain in military prostitution, serving US soldiers (Norma, 2016, p. 3), demonstrating the ways in which militarization confounds the confines of formal warfare and continues to define women’s lives during times of supposed peace (e.g., Enloe, 2000). The visibility of CRSV as a practice divorced from the everyday (e.g., Copelon, 2000) can only exist so long as “private” forms of violence form its “constitutive outside” (Butler, 1993, p. 8), an understanding that subverts structural explanations of gender inequalities.

As a further result of this politics of obfuscation and recognizability, discursive restraints on victim testimony produce formulaic narratives that likely do not constitute the full and complex realities of the comfort system. Not only have those testimonies from comfort women that diverge from accepted notions of femininity been largely eviscerated but, because many victims have been encouraged to change their statements in line with the prevailing framework of sexual slavery, the complex realities of personal involvement have been lost in this process.

Indeed, Kim-Gibson (1999, p. 8) noted that the comfort women she has experience interviewing had become able to manipulate their experiences to become more “politically compelling.” These testimonies have therefore become “highly formulaic, with an intense focus on the repetitive sexual acts and abuses, which may be in danger of serving voyeuristic curiosity” (Choi in Joo, 2015, p. 168). Occurrences of sexual violence are thereby viewed as spectacularly brutal and exceptional events, a view that obscures the everyday realities of such violence and that privileges particular gendered subject positions while not only normalizing other experiences of violence but positioning them not as violence at all (Butler, 2009; Hesford, 2011).

**Abu Ghraib apologies**

I feel terrible about what happened to these Iraqi detainees. They are human beings. They were in U.S. custody. Our country had an obligation to treat them right. We didn’t, and that was wrong.

So to those Iraqis who were mistreated by members of the U.S. armed forces, I offer my deepest apology. It was inconsistent with the values of our nation. It was inconsistent with the teachings of the military, to the men and women of the armed forces. And it was certainly fundamentally un-American.

Further, I deeply regret the damage that has been done. First to the reputation of the honorable men and women of the armed forces, who are courageously and responsibly and professionally defending our freedoms across the globe. (Donald Rumsfeld, in *Washington Post*, 2004)

In 2004, several US officials offered apologies in the wake of the publication of images of torture that shocked the US public. The images depicted the sexual abuse and torture of Iraqi detainees by US military policemen and women in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. A full statement of apology issued by President George W. Bush is no longer publicly available via the Whitehouse website or elsewhere and therefore remains ambiguous in meaning (Sjoberg, 2007, p. 91). Therefore, this section will focus on Donald Rumsfeld’s (in *Washington Post*, 2004) apology, of which a complete text is available, although some sections of Bush’s and Condoleezza Rice’s statements have been reported by media sources. This section engages with Butler’s (2009) conception of the racially, politically, and culturally defined dualism of recognizable and, therefore, grievable lives and unrecognizable nonlives that has fueled the GWoT and suggests that the discourse surrounding the Abu Ghraib scandal fluctuated uncomfortably between the apparent need to recognize the victimhood of the visible detainees and a narrative that characterized them as guilty criminals and therefore deserving of violence.
Although the apologies delivered by members of the Bush administration can certainly be read simply as cynical, manipulative means of justifying US military objectives and personal/professional “face-saving” (Kampf, 2009) measures, the following analysis will demonstrate that this does not disqualify the apologies from additionally having complex gendered implications. Furthermore, such intentions of decision makers, first, should not be assumed (Smith, 2014, p. 50; Celermajer, 2009) and, second, may not directly and successfully come to fruition through apology (MacLachlan, 2014, p. 19, Dolan, 2021). Rather, the following analysis highlights that the gendered discourse offered through the apologies obscured the presence of female-identified victims, elucidating in novel ways a "particular representational politics wherein women in the 'war on/of terror' have been written over and against one another—American women over and against Afghan and Iraqi women, Jessica Lynch over and against Lynndie England" (Masters, 2009, p. 35).

I have argued that, before victims of CRSV can be recognized publicly through apology, they must be, in a prior sense, recognizable (Butler, 1990, 1997a; Markell, 2009). The positionality of those who endured torture at Abu Ghraib was certainly contentious, because their recognition as victims by the US government might call into question the justification for the Iraq war, support for which was galvanized around the central notion that the United States, as a liberal democratic country, was bringing freedom to those under Iraqi authoritarian rule (e.g., Hunt & Rygiel, 2006; Thobani, 2007). Furthermore, Butler (2004, 2009) has argued that the possibility for this war and violence was predicated on hierarchies of grievability.

However, the Abu Ghraib scandal demonstrates the complexities of recognition (and therefore grievability) within the GWoT, because the apologies operate to both uncomfortably acknowledge the victimhood (and therefore the lives) of the Iraqi detainees and simultaneously further dehumanize and dismiss violence against them in order to maintain an ongoing politics of war. This politics of recognition was further complicated by the fact that those who were recognized as victims through apology had previously had their legal subjecthood stripped to facilitate tactics associated with the GWoT (e.g., Hersh, 2004; Wilcox, 2015), necessitating that this verbal acknowledgment could be partial at best and would be unlikely to promise material reparations.

Moreover, although there had been numerous previous allegations of mistreatment and torture at the hands of US military police in Iraq (e.g., Human Rights Watch, 2004), the leaking of the photographs from Abu Ghraib seemed to force US citizens and their government to publicly confront the nature of the military operation in Iraq, a point reinforced by those who suggested that the horror displayed by officials in the wake of the scandal appeared to be in reaction to the existence of the photographs rather than the violence they represented (e.g., Sontag, 2004):

The photographic depictions of the U.S. military personnel that the public has seen have offended and outraged everyone in the Department of Defense. If you could have seen the anguished expressions on the faces of those in our department upon seeing those photos, you would know how we feel today.

It’s important for the American people and the world to know that while these terrible acts were perpetrated by a small number of U.S. military, they were also brought to light by the honorable and responsible actions of other military personnel. (Rumsfeld in Washington Post, 2004)

Indeed, the discourse offered by the apologies operated profoundly through a perception of the photographs as spectacular, inverted, and exceptional, a narrative that was constructed in part through the shocking visual of female soldiers perpetrating sexualized abuse on male prisoners. This came in contrast to sexual violence against vulnerable women in conflict zones, a circumstance that had perhaps become so commonplace that it did not fit within this narrative of exceptional sexual depravity. The overt spectacle of abuse visible in the photographs preceded any attempts to critique what happened in Abu Ghraib as rooted primarily in masculine violence, and as anything other than a remarkable exception to “American military values.” This is especially the case because women’s rights had been so often mobilized in support of the GWoT (see Sjoberg, 2007; Hunt & Rygiel, 2006; Thobani, 2007). Laura Bush’s 2001 speech in support of the
war had famously claimed, “The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” and that “[t]he brutal oppression of women is a central goal of the terrorists” (Bush, 2001). Thus, the offenders could be more easily dismissed simply as “deviants” (Sjoberg, 2006, p. 144) and women’s rights could continue to provide legitimation for the GWoT.

Despite the discourse surrounding Iraqi male prisoners, which fluctuated uncomfortably between guilty criminals and innocent victims, official apologies were issued, and the scandal has been perceived as one of the most embarrassing foreign policy scandals in recent US history. Shepard (2009) used the concept of “simulated atonement” to suggest that the US public, although initially shocked and outraged by the leaked images of abuse at Abu Ghraib, was able to quickly move past this emotional response precisely because the victims were not perceived as morally worthy—in other words, grievable. The political context of fear surrounding terrorism and public belief that the overall mission of the US military was worthy might therefore have quelled outrage at the conduct of “some” military personnel.

Centrally, however, the victims themselves were not innocent enough (Shepard, 2009) and had not been humanized enough throughout the GWoT (Butler, 2009) for US Americans to feel large amounts of sympathy following the scandal. This lack of sympathy was facilitated by the facelessness and anonymity displayed in the photographs themselves, the reproduction of which operated to further dehumanize as a means of protecting victims’ identities (Butler, 2009, p. 94). It might therefore be argued that the apologies and measures undertaken by US officials after the scandal broke were widely accepted by the US public, and Bush entered another term of office precisely because those being tortured in the photographs were perceived as ambivalent in their victimhood at best and as anonymous criminals or terrorists at worst.

The form of recognition offered by the apologies, therefore, seemed to uncomfortably acknowledge and draw attention to the violence committed against Iraqi bodies. This suggests that perhaps the victims in the photographs represent a more ambivalent subject position than Butler (2009) suggested. They are recognized as lives, but their anonymity and lack of political subjectivity within the context of the war makes their lives partial and not fully grievable, an ambiguous positionality in some ways shared by the perpetrators, who were condemned as “bad apples” (Bush in Murphy, 2004) and “fundamentally un-American” (Rumsfeld in Washington Post, 2004). Indeed, Zehfuss (2009) argued that these US soldiers occupied an especially ambivalent subject position, as they were publicly repudiated in order to protect “honorable” members of the military, whose own lives are somewhat expendable in the name of national security.

However, there were other victims whose experiences were left entirely unrecognized, a process facilitated by the dominant focus on female perpetrators and male, emasculated victims in the torture photographs. Narratives surrounding the abuse were so profoundly focused on women as perpetrators and not women as victims (Feitz & Nagel, 2008, p. 211) that female-identified victims were disregarded despite their presence in official reports and photographs. For instance, the Taguba (2012) and Fay and Jones (2004) reports both described pictures of female prisoners lifting their shirts to expose their breasts, images that were never published; nor were there demands for them to be published (see also Richter-Montpetit, 2007, p. 50). The Fay and Jones report additionally claimed that the acts in these photographs were not necessarily coerced (2004, p. 91; Richter-Montpetit, 2007, p. 50), a form of speculation that was not present in discussions regarding the nude photographs of male detainees.

Similarly, there are references to an incident in which a male guard “had sex with” a female prisoner (Nusair, 2006, p. 189; Masters, 2009, p. 41; Taguba, 2012, p. 17), a form of sexual violence that was entirely absent from political and media discourse regarding the scandal and that was not described as rape in the reports, despite the fact that it occurred within the context of rampant abuse and gross power differentials (Brittain, 2006, p. 92). Moreover, a letter from an anonymous female-identified inmate claimed that women were forced to strip naked, that one inmate was raped 17 times, and that some of the women in the prison had become pregnant
(Nusair, 2008, p. 189; Masters, 2009, p. 42). The complete absence of public discourse (including apologies and media reports) regarding sexualized abuses having occurred against female detainees is therefore striking.

One reason for this absence is that publicly problematizing the rape of Iraqi women by US military personnel might have had the capacity to shatter the civilizing discourse the US government had so painstakingly crafted to support the war (Nusair, 2008, p. 190). “[S]aving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1988, p. 92) had become integral to the legitimation of the GWoT project. In line with this, Richter-Montpetit drew attention to the “historical ‘un-rapability’ of black female-identified bodies” and “Western representations of ‘oriental’ women as mysterious (e.g. veiled) and lascivious (e.g. in the harem)” to explain the discursive insignificance of female-identified victims throughout the scandal (2007, p. 50).

In line with this civilizing narrative, the apologies operated to powerfully legitimize the supposed victimhood of the United States. This is highly congruent with the prominent discourse that had existed since 9/11 and had largely legitimized the GWoT. Victimhood rhetoric used within the apology statements therefore represents an extension of previous justifications for the war and serves to (re)securitize “terrorists” and the Iraqi state as a “terrorist supporter.” In this context, apology operates as a narcissistic and self-indulgent (Ahmed, 2004; MacLachlan, 2013) means of correcting a rupture within the US psyche that resulted from the public visibility of military personnel engaging in CRSV and torture (Masters, 2009, p. 37).

**Conclusion**

This article has made the case for a conception of political apology as a means of recognizing, and therefore making visible, the experiences of some victims of CRSV. I have suggested that understandings of political apologies as possessing the capacity to enact a moral acknowledgment of the humanity and worth of a wronged other—or, indeed, as normatively recognizing the violence perpetrated against some as violence—have not paid significant attention to those who are obscured in this inherently contingent process. Thus, although apologies might signify state recognition of the previously underrepresented experiences, including CRSV (MacLachlan, 2013), the analysis offered in this article has highlighted that the recognition of the comfort women and the victims of the Abu Ghraib torture scandal was a complex process because, in order for recognition to be achieved, subjects first must be recognizable (Butler, 1990, p. 145; Markell, 2009, p. 31). Most importantly, I argued that this process is contingent and operates to further obscure some victims of violence from view.

I further suggested that the discomfort displayed in the Bush administration’s apologies in particular challenges Butler’s (2009) categorization of grievable lives and other nonlives during the GWoT, as both subject positions were more ambiguous than this suggests. Notwithstanding normative critiques of the apologies themselves, the visible victims were cast as guilty criminals and victims simultaneously, women-as-victims were obscured from view, and the involved military personnel were repudiated as unrecognizable members of the US armed forces. Furthermore, the cases both demonstrate the delivery of political apology as a mechanism of distinction between violable bodies and others (Hesford, 2011, p. 46) following the occurrence of rape, torture, and sexual violence, which themselves act as markers of differing bodies and subject positions (e.g., Enloe, 2000; Wilcox, 2015; Yuval-Davis, 1997). This calls attention to the fact that some forms of violence, when enacted upon certain bodies, are normalized to the extent that they cannot be considered violence at all (Butler, 2009; Taylor, 2018).

Although political apologies will always, to some extent, obscure those who form the “constitutive outside” of the process of recognition (Butler, 1993, p. 8), the case studies of CRSV offered here share the perhaps unexpected commonality of reproducing essentialized, embodied femininities. This might be considered most striking in the comfort women case because the
dynamics by which South Korean women were recognized operated to obscure those women who have commonly been understood as professional prostitutes (Tsukamoto, 2017). This discursive equation of “good” female victimhood with sexual purity prior to their being drafted as comfort women had the additional impact of requiring some victims to edit their testimonies in attempts to reflect this dominant standard more closely.

The Abu Ghraib case study, although contextually different in many ways, echoed the comfort women case in its (re)making of femininities and masculinities through the medium of apology. In particular, through the visibility afforded to “deviant” women perpetrators in the wake of the Abu Ghraib scandal, the construct of “good” femininity as inherently innocent, vulnerable, and in need of protection could be preserved (Sjoberg & Gentry, 2007). Most importantly, however, the visibility and recognition afforded to the women in the Abu Ghraib photographs allowed the following apologies to use this narrative of spectacle and exceptionalism in order to further obscure the female-identified victims of abuse and violence at the prison. That both case studies make sense of CRSV in this way speaks powerfully to Butler’s (1997a, p. 49) contention that gender must be “ritualistically repeated, whereby the repetition occasions both the risk of failure and the congealed effect of sedimentation.”

The analysis offered in this article to some extent illustrates MacLachlan’s (2013) argument that apologies can serve to bring public attention to gendered violence and other issues that predominantly affect women; however, both sets of apologies appear to operate through a gendered discourse that protects (conventional) femininities and obscures those whose experiences challenge the traditional gender roles that make subjects recognizable in the first place. As Butler (2009, p. 6) suggested, “The problem is not merely how to include more people within existing norms, but to consider how existing norms allocate recognition differentially.” Therefore, given the structural limitations of modes of recognition such as political apology, the case must not simply be made for widening terms of recognition to include others; instead, we must continually interrogate these norms and, ultimately, make the case for enquiring about not only who is made visible, but who is obscured in the process.

Notes

1. This is not to say that there is any kind of blueprint for apologies and/or wider redress that will be considered as acceptable or appropriate by victim groups (Bentley, 2021, p. 3; MacLachlan, 2019).
2. This has not been the case. Tensions between Japanese and South Korean authorities are ongoing, with a recent court battle leading to Japanese politicians claiming they do not owe the comfort women reparations, citing diplomatic immunity.

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