

Legacies of War

KIMBERLY THEIDON

Violence,
Ecologies,
and Kin

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VIOLENCE, ECOLOGIES, AND KIN

Kimberly Theidon

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Gratitude

I began writing this book during a sabbatical that coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Somehow amid the turbulence and loss, I found solace in writing. I loved writing this book, revisiting conversations, field notes, friendships, and much more. My spouse, Kathleen Stauffer, has listened to me read every line out loud, and her wit and love of language helped me rediscover the joy of writing.

A Tufts University Collaborates Grant allowed me to think further about many of the issues raised in this book. With my colleague Dyan Mazurana, we convened an author's workshop at the Fletcher School, Tufts University, to discuss "Challenging Conceptions: Children Born of Wartime Rape and Sexual Exploitation." We spent several days with researchers and practitioners from around the globe, each of whom has spent decades working with women who survived wartime rape and with their children who were the result of that violence. Together we aimed to rethink some of the assumptions that echo in the literature, policy, practice, and popular culture about these children and those around them. Those conversations were illuminating, and an edited volume is forthcoming.

I thank Elisabeth Wood and a very insightful anonymous reviewer for comments and suggestions that sharpened my thinking. Libby is a role model and mentor for many of us, and academia is a better place for her brilliant kindness. At Duke University Press, Gisela Fosada and Alejandra Mejía welcomed my manuscript with an attention to detail and great care for the content.

I appreciate Dipali Anumol and Roxani Krystalli very much. They read and provided comments on this book—and provided, as well, living proof that feminist researchers rock.

As I was adding the final touches to this book, I taught my first environmental humanities course at the Fletcher School. My remarkable students made each weekly discussion a cure for Zoom fatigue. For their lively minds, great questions, political commitment, and class finales that spanned the genres of poetry, websites, op-eds, and musical scores, I thank Raunaq Chandrashekar, Ally Friedman, Hyun Kim, Rebecca Mullaley, Kelsey Rowe, Sarah Shahabi, and Rose Wang.

And still more gratitude, desde mi corazón, to the Peruvians and Colombians who have made my research a passion project. I have felt so fortunate over the years, at times gobsmacked, that I was the lucky researcher with whom you shared your time, lives, and stories. How in the world was I so blessed? Mil y más gracias.

INTRODUCTION

In early November 2019, I stood before a packed room in a recently installed gallery space, *Fragmentos*, in Bogotá, Colombia.¹ As part of the 2016 Peace Accords between the Colombian government and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), the guerrillas had turned in some thirty-seven tons of rifles, pistols, and grenade launchers. These weapons were subsequently melted down in the Colombian military's foundry, and some of that metal made its way to the artist Doris Salcedo. With the help of women survivors of conflict-related sexual violence—each woman wielding a heavy hammer to pound the metal into thin sheets—those weapons were recast as tiles that formed the floor beneath the visitors' feet. Bogotá-based Salcedo had been opposed to leaving those tons



Doris Salcedo, *Fragmentos*, 2019

of weapons intact, concerned they might be commemorated triumphantly after having caused so much pain and death in her country: “I thought, I don’t want them to be monumentalized. They don’t deserve to be on a pedestal and respected as a grandiose idea that we should all look up to.”² She chose instead to design *Fragmentos* as an “anti-monument,” staunch in her conviction that “weapons and war are not something that should be celebrated.”

The packed audience that afternoon included a mix of nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives, human rights activists, lawyers working within the transitional justice courts, doctors from the Ministry of Health, journalists—and an undetermined number of rape survivors. I began my talk, “Challenging Conceptions: Children Born of Wartime Rape and Sexual Exploitation.” As I scanned the audience, I noticed a woman in the second row. She was clearly of *campesina* (peasant) origin, and I was struck by her rigidly straight posture and frozen face. Was I offending her? I was not sure.

There were many questions following my talk, and toward the very end a hand rose in the second row. She asked me for the microphone, which she held in one hand so that she could unwind a wad of tissue with the other. She began sobbing and the room went silent. She had been brutally raped as an adolescent and had told no one, fearful that she would be blamed for what had happened to her. With time, her swelling abdomen gave her secret

away. She explained, “I knew nothing about abortions. I didn’t know what to do. I started jumping off chairs, landing on my stomach. I jumped and jumped, hoping I would kill it. It was disgusting to me.”³ Her efforts to abort failed, and she gave birth to a baby boy. She paused in an effort to stop crying, but tears continued to stream down her face. “I could barely stand to look at him. He repulsed me. I didn’t want anything to do with him.” With time, her mother convinced her to breastfeed the baby, which magnified her disgust. Once again, her body was lent to reproductive labor she hated, this time to feed a baby she wished had never been born. Her son is now an adult, and she was unable to have any more children as a result of the damage done by the rape. She sees him from time to time, but that gives her no comfort. “Everyone has always noticed how short-tempered he is—so aggressive, so angry. I don’t know what it is. He is just like that. Everyone knows he’s not normal. I don’t know, but I think it must be something genetic. Something is wrong with him.”

* * *

This woman’s son is just one of the tens of thousands of children who have been born worldwide as a result of mass rape campaigns or wartime sexual exploitation.⁴ What about these living legacies of rape and sexual violence? What do we know about these children and their life chances? How might we study the intergenerational impact of their violent conceptions? Over a decade ago, in her important edited volume, *Born of War: Protecting Children of Sexual Violence Survivors in Conflict Zones*, R. Charli Carpenter asked, “Why have children born of war by and large remained invisible on the international agenda, and how can this be changed?”⁵ This invisibility was even more striking given the amount of attention that has been paid to conflict-related rape and sexual violence over the past three decades. How might we understand this disconnect?

Sex at the Security Council

In March 1994, the United Nations (UN) established a Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, mandated to examine the causes and consequences of gender-based violence, especially rape and sexual violence targeting women and girls. Additionally, the UN’s ad hoc International Criminal Tribunals for the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda—countries where conflict-related sexual violence in the early 1990s captured international attention on an unprecedented scale—greatly advanced efforts to codify sexual and

reproductive violence. The jurisprudence resulting from these two tribunals classified systematic rape and other sex crimes as war crimes, crimes against humanity, and forms of genocide. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, adopted in 1998, built on and extended those advances, providing a broader basis for prosecuting sexual crimes (including rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity) as violations of international laws on war, genocide, and crimes against humanity. No longer would sexual crimes be considered merely “moral offenses” or “injuries to honor or reputation” as they had been defined in the Geneva Conventions.

On a complementary front, a series of UN Security Council Resolutions focused on the important role women play in conflict prevention, resolution, and peace-building efforts, while simultaneously denouncing the use of rape and sexual violence against women and girls in situations of armed conflict. Collectively known as the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, these resolutions (UNSCR 1325, 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106, 2122, 2242, and 2467) demand the complete cessation of all acts of sexual violence by all parties to armed conflicts, with each successive resolution lamenting the slow progress made to date on this issue. In addition to insisting on the need to protect children from rape and sexual violence in armed conflict and postconflict situations, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2122 specifically notes “the need for access to the full range of sexual and reproductive health services, including regarding pregnancies resulting from rape, without discrimination” (2013). There is nothing said about the outcome of those pregnancies, nor about their meaning for the mothers and their children. There is a striking irony here: concurrent with the hypervisibilization of conflict-related sexual violence was the relative silence around two potential outcomes of rape—pregnancies and babies. Some feminists have argued that sexual violence is about power and domination, not sex; one can endorse this important political insight yet still insist that we must recognize the “sex” in sexual violence. Where there is heterosexual intercourse, there are erections, penetrations, ejaculations, and potential impregnations. This is sex, albeit violent, repugnant, and degrading.

In 2019, to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda’s foundational Resolution 1325, the UN Security Council proposed Resolution 2467. This resolution recognizes that “women and girls who become pregnant as a result of sexual violence in armed conflict, including those who choose to become mothers, may have different and specific needs,”