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Joy and war: Reading pleasure in wartime experiences

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a 'turn' to thinking about war through the experiences of those touched by it. While this scholarship has generated numerous important insights, its focus has tended to remain on wars' violences, those responsible for enacting them, and the effects of such violence. In this article, the experiences of pleasure and joy in war that simultaneously take place are placed centre stage. Drawing on three war novels, the article tracks three recurring themes of pleasurable and joyful experiences related to war: bodily pleasures, the 'togetherness' of war, and moments of joy that escape war's reach. Through this focus, war is shown to work across a range of affective registers and as never totalising or universalising in its experience. The article argues that paying attention to joy and pleasure can work to displace war as a focus of analysis, directing attention instead to the experiences of those who live through war and how they survive, sustain, and resist it.

Keywords

Experience; Joy; Emotions; War; Novels; Feminism

> In wars … there is life amidst death, survival amidst destruction, [and] music, drums and celebration amidst sounds of explosions.[1]

> In the fall of 1995, a few weeks after the war in Bosnia ended, I sat with friends who had suffered horribly … Yet all [they] … did that afternoon was lament the days when they lived in fear and hunger … They did not wish back the suffering, and yet, they admitted, those days may have been the fullest of their lives.[2]

Introduction

In recent years, and predominantly among feminist scholars, there has been a growing body of work within International Relations (IR) that researches, writes, and understands war through the prism of 'experience'.[3] In contradistinction to the grand and abstract theorising about war that can occur

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[1] Swati Parashar, 'What wars and "war bodies" know about International Relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 26:4 (2013), pp. 615–30 (p. 619).

[2] Chris Hedges, *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), p. 6.

[3] See, for example, Christine Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011); Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Victoria Basham, *War, Identity and the Liberal State: Everyday Experiences of the Geopolitical in the Armed Forces* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Swati Parashar, *Women and Militant Wars: The Politics of Injury* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); and Synne L. Dyvik, *Gendering*

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within the discipline of IR, these 'experiential' scholars[4] argue 'understanding people's experiences with/in war is essential for understanding war'.[5] War, in this body of scholarship, is not something that is exceptional or disconnected from the everyday lives of people. Rather, there is a focus on its 'ordinariness' and the ways in which it is interwoven with the day-to-day tapestries of people's lives. Such scholarship has generated numerous important insights into war as a phenomenon, practice and 'politics of injury',[6] with these approaches reminding us 'war cannot be fully apprehended unless it is studied up from the people and not studied down from places that sweep blood, tears and laughter away'.[7] Notwithstanding the richness of this research, the focus of attention has, however, tended to remain on wars' violences, those responsible for enacting them, and the effects of such violence.[8] Indeed, as a discipline borne from the horrors of the First World War and out of a desire to better understand the international system in order to ensure peaceful relations, (critical) research in IR that draws attention to the violent 'realities' of war and challenges its practice is no doubt crucial.

War, however, encompasses a plurality of experiences and works across a range of affective registers. While experiences of war no doubt include those of violence, trauma, and injury, as it has long been noted (and by numerous disciplines) so too is it a site that has historically, artistically, and conceptually been imbued with a range of meanings and emotions,[9] among them: honour, glory, excitement, the existential test, becoming, manhood, hell,[10] and so on. In this article I take joy and pleasure as my starting point, drawing attention to the range of affective registers that war experiences work across. Locating the argument in this recent 'turn' to experience and the literature on emotions and affect in international politics, I draw on insights from Elina Pentinnen and Debbie Lisle to consider how 'there is more to war than suffering',[11] and that it should be engaged with 'through the broadest and the most complex repertoire of emotions available'.[12] After all, for those who practice and live through war, it may not be uniformly horrifying or traumatic, holding instead moments of laughter, joy, compassion, humour, excitement, optimism, friendship, love, and kindness. I argue that placing joy and pleasure at the centre of the study of war can work to decentre war as the focus of our attention, reminding us that war is never the only thing going on, that it is not

Counterinsurgency: Performativity, Embodiment and Experience in the Afghan 'Theatre of War' (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

[4] It is not my intention here to imply there is a coherent and bounded school of scholars who 'do' experiential research. Rather, I am pointing to a range of contemporary (and predominantly feminist) scholars who have placed the everyday, embodied, emotional, and affective experiences of war at the centre of their research.

[5] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*, p. 1.

[6] Ibid., p. 3.

[7] Christine Sylvester, cited in Synne L. Dyvik, '"Valhalla Rising": Gender, embodiment and experience in military memoirs', *Security Dialogue*, 47:2 (2016), pp. 133–50 (p. 135).

[8] For a notable exception, see Elina Pentinnen, *Joy and International Relations: A New Methodology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

[9] A range of emotions, it should be noted, that many of the 'experiential scholars' mentioned previously take account of themselves. Parashar, 'What wars'; Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*; and Dyvik '"Valhalla Rising"' all recognise that as a site of international politics, war is productive of a range of experiences, including those of excitement, celebration, and joy. What I am concerned with in this article is what happens when war is understood as not only productive of these experiences and emotions, but what happens when they are placed at the centre of analysis.

[10] With thanks to Paul Kirby for this particular list of meanings and affects.

[11] Pentinnen, *Joy and International Relations*, p. 4.

[12] Debbie Lisle, 'Waiting for international political sociology: a field guide to living in-between', *International Political Sociology*, 10 (2016), pp. 417–33 (p. 423).

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totalising or universalising in its experience, and can redirect our attention to the experiences of those who have lived through it.

Drawing on three war novels – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2007), Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age* (2012), and Cara Hoffman's *Be Safe I Love You* (2014) – the article tracks three recurring themes of pleasurable and joyful experiences related to war that are found within the texts. The first details bodily pleasures in and of war experienced through individual bodies, exploring sex-for- and sex-as-pleasure in war, and how combat and the capability of a military body can elicit feelings of wellbeing and joy. The second turns attention towards experiences of joy felt between collective bodies in the form of marches, chanting, and political rallies, and how these affective spaces can work to motivate and sustain war. The final theme explored is those experiences of joy and pleasure that escape war's reach: the interpersonal relations and small, everyday moments of happiness. This attention to joy and pleasure reveals the range of affective registers war works across and is integral to understanding how those who live through and practice war survive, sustain and resist it.

There is, of course, an obvious tension in associating joy and pleasure with something as violent and horrifying and destructive as war, and it is worth spending some time at the outset of this article addressing this tension, my own 'war experience', and the politics of the piece. I have spent the vast majority of my adult life living in the UK and while for almost all of that time Britain has been 'at war' (in Afghanistan 2001–14, Iraq 2003–11, and more recently carrying out 'air support' missions over Iraq and Syria), I have not personally experienced any of war's horrors. To borrow Christine Sylvester's phrasing, war 'touches'[13] me only gently: while I think, research, and write about war, no one I care deeply about lives in or has been deployed to a warzone these past 16 years and my own life has been altogether undisrupted by its occurrence. To some, I am a 'spectator' of war[14] rather than participant. In writing about joys and pleasures related to war, therefore, it is not my intention to suggest that war is desirable or to fetishise it in anyway, or to occlude its very real violences and the sufferings it engenders. Rather, my reason for researching and writing about war has always come from the recognition of its profoundly injurious character and a desire to challenge its practice. As noted above, however, war is both imbued with and elicits a range of experiences and emotional responses, including those that appear at odds with its violent and frequently horrifying realities. Following Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory's proposition to think about politics as 'political puzzles',[15] I believe it is important to give notice to experiences of joy and pleasure in war. This is because

> [i]f one thinks that that emotions or the emotional can help shed light on the particular puzzle in question, then it is not only legitimate methodologically, but it would be a serious omission to leave out, precisely because a focus on emotions and emotionality would add yet another piece to the puzzle in question.[16]

Thus, if joy and pleasure are recognised as part of war's practice and affective landscape then they – just as grief, violence, or injury – will shed light on this particular (and enduring) puzzle of global politics. As such, there is a need to engage with the full range of experiences and emotions present in war.

[13] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*.
[14] Michael Mann, *States, War and Capitalism: Studies in Political Sociology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).
[15] Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory, 'Concluding reflection', in Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory (eds), *Emotions, Politics and War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 222–33 (p. 230).
[16] Åhäll and Gregory, 'Concluding reflection', p. 230.

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Furthermore, despite its horrors, violences, and even excitements, war is never the only thing going on. For many of those caught up in war – either voluntarily or against their will – life does not come to a grinding halt. By redirecting attention to these people and the full range of their experiences, another piece of the 'war puzzle' may be found.

The fullness of war experience

As Elina Pentinnen notes, 'In the field of international relations it is not customary to focus on how individuals experience flow, beauty and love in the midst of extreme violence.'[17] Rather, attention is often directed towards wars' horrors, pain, and trauma. For Pentinnen, such a focus is understandable as

> War is undesirable, it represents suffering … It is something that disrupts peace and upsets continuity, scars personalities and destroys societies. It represents chaos, and reminds us of the uncertainty and precariousness of life.[18]

This focus, however, relies on, and risks rearticulating, what Debbie Lisle has referred to as a 'restrictive emotional grammar'[19] in and to our interrogations of global politics. While like Pentinnen, Lisle recognises the understandable nature of these emotional pathways, Lisle is also interested in examining 'how misery, horror, and suffering' are translated through a much broader emotional landscape, including 'absurdity … slapstick … and laughter',[20] and that this may hold enormous potential. As Lisle states, 'Lurking within the experience of tragedy are a whole range of unruly, excessive, and in-between emotional states',[21] and examining these may lead to alternative insights or even alternative responses to the horrors IR as a discipline frequently confronts. This call to engage with a broader emotional landscape in our approaches to global politics is echoed by Pentinnen in her innovative text that promotes joy as a new methodology for IR. In the text Pentinnen suggests looking for joy and happiness 'in places traditionally viewed as being defined by suffering and trauma',[22] arguing that joy and empowerment are always there to be found, even in the most extreme of conditions. In her own research Pentinnen finds stories of German soldiers' 'kindness, compassion and mutual friendliness'[23] during their posting to Finland in the Second World War, while in her research on genocide and extreme violence, Pentinnen focuses on 'the human potential for self-healing, resilience and empowerment'[24] rather than trauma and mere survival.

While Pentinnen's 'joyful ontology' encourages the most direct engagement with experiences of joy and wellbeing in war, others within the discipline of IR have also challenged the common-sense approach to war that posits it as exclusively a site of suffering.[25] Likewise, those who are most

[17] Pentinnen, *Joy and International Relations*, p. 62.
[18] Ibid., pp. 62–3.
[19] Lisle, 'Waiting for international political sociology', p. 423.
[20] Ibid., p. 424.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Pentinnen, *Joy and International Relations*, p. 13.
[23] Ibid., p. 8.
[24] Ibid., p. 16.
[25] See, for example, Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton, 'Powers of war: Fighting, knowledge, and critique', *International Political Sociology*, 5:2 (2011), pp. 126–43; Katherine E. Brown and Elina Pentinnen, '"A sucking chest wound is nature's way of telling you to slow down …": Humour and laughter in war time', *Critical Studies on Security*, 1:1 (2013), pp. 124–6; Stephen Chan, 'On the uselessness of new wars theory: Lessons from African conflicts', in Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*, pp. 94–102; and Jesse Crane-Seeber,

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intimately involved and associated with war are often those who most readily admit its excitement and allure.[26] As the recent proliferation of solider memoirs have narrated, the exhilaration, excitement, and ecstasy of combat remains an enticing elixir for the (predominantly) young men who join and fight in militaries.[27] War journalists – those who chase wars across continents – similarly struggle to reconcile the popular refrain that 'war is hell' with their own desires to be among it. Chris Hedges, a foreign correspondent for *The New York Times* for 15 years, describes war as 'a drug', endowed with the qualities of 'excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty';[28] while Sebastian Junger, a journalist and filmmaker who was embedded with US troops in Afghanistan, has said that 'people would have a more honest, realistic relationship to the important topic of war … If they could … acknowledge that part of themselves that responds to it positively'.[29] While none of these authors are the first to recognise the complexity of the emotional landscape of war, nor that war is not a site of universal or total suffering, all gesture towards the plurality of war experiences and affective grammars. In this article, I argue that by not just recognising the emotional complexity of war, but placing experiences of joy and pleasure at the centre of analysis both redirects attention away from wars' violences and focuses attention on people and the ways in which they survive, sustain, and resist war.

War novels and stories from the 'ground'

Concerned not only with depicting war, but also with evoking the feelings, emotions, and sensations associated with it, this article uses war novels in its exploration of wartime pleasures. In doing so I build on the work of numerous IR scholars who have made use of fictional sources in order to rethink political dilemmas.[30] While Roland Bleiker has written about the 'turn'[31] to the aesthetic in International Relations, as Åhäll and Gregory note, 'aesthetic interventions in the study of IR, politics and war go beyond a focus on aesthetic sources'.[32] Rather, 'approaching the study of IR with an *aesthetic sensibility* encourages scholars to pay analytical attention to affect rather than reason, judgement rather than fact, sensation rather than intellectualism'.[33] In this respect, while war novels will not provide clear answers or advice on how to stop or prevent wars and other forms of political violence, they do engage and capture our human and emotional relationship with them.[34]

'Sexy warriors: the politics and pleasures of submission to the state', *Critical Military Studies*, 2:1–2 (2016), pp. 41–55.

[26] See Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta Books, 1999).

[27] See Claire Duncanson, *Forces for Good? Military Masculinities and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and Dyvik, '"Valhalla Rising"'.

[28] Hedges, *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, p. 3.

[29] Sebastian Junger, cited in Crane-Seeber, 'Sexy warriors', p. 41.

[30] See, for example, Philip Darby, *The Fiction of Imperialism: Reading Between International Relations and Postcolonialism* (London: Cassell, 1998); Maja Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*; S. Park-Kang, 'Fictional IR and imagination: Advancing narrative approaches', *Review of International Studies*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 361–81.

[31] See Roland Bleiker: 'The aesthetic turn in international political theory', *Millennium*, 30:3 (2001), pp. 509–33; *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); and 'In search of thinking space: Reflections on the aesthetic turn in international political theory', *Millennium*, 45:2 (2017), pp. 1–7.

[32] Åhäll and Gregory, 'Concluding reflection', p. 230.

[33] Cerwyn Moore and Laura J. Shepherd, cited in Åhäll and Gregory, 'Concluding reflection', p. 230, their emphasis.

[34] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, p. 25; see also Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchinson, 'Fear no more: Emotions and world politics', *Review of International Studies*, 34 (2008), pp. 115–35 (p. 132).

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Novels are also uniquely suited to exploring the 'experiential' aspects of war. Embedded in the personal, they are a key resource for expressing and illuminating human emotions. Readers are encouraged to take up positions subliminally, to identify with at least one of the protagonists and, as such, share something of the read experience.[35] Furthermore, unlike the majority of political analysis within IR, literature's orientation is personal. While the so-called 'mainstream' (and indeed some of the critical approaches with – as Sylvester[36] points out – their focus on metanarratives such as 'globalisation', 'capitalism', and 'militarisation') remains concerned with grand narratives of war and conflict, fiction can provide a window into the lives of 'ordinary' people who live in, through and between these grand narratives. As Bleiker has written:

> [Although] the grand narratives of international relations, from colonialism to revolutionary progress, shape the lives of people … these people – the unnamed and often forgotten objects of international relations – are not entirely defined by the events we often identify as the sole political reality. Everyday struggles seep into, around and through grand narratives. But these transgressions are only rarely explored and theorised in prevailing scholarly approaches.[37,38]

Thus, while 'War' writ large may be the ultimate grand narrative that serves as a centrepiece to so much of IR's scholarship, it is simultaneously made up of innumerable smaller stories and accounts. These smaller narratives, often told from the 'ground' and found in fiction as well auto/biographical accounts, offer a very different perspective to those told from the top down.[39] Fiction, therefore, discourages the tendency 'to generalize war' and can present 'bodies, emotions, and ambivalences difficult for researchers and other war spectators to conjure or register on their own'.[40] In particular reference to what I am interested in uncovering, novels have the time, space, and the forensic focus on the lifeworlds of individuals to explore the lesser-told experiences of war, including those that may be humorous, joyful, or pleasurable. Fictional accounts can 'depict the shallows and depths of violence and injury, the unexpected mundanities and inconveniences, the bits of gallows humor that can hit one in war, *the moments of joy*, and the contexts in which particular wars unfold'.[41]

Three war novels

I draw on three war novels in my tracing of joyful and pleasurable experiences related to war: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*; Tahmima Anam's *A Golden Age*; and Cara

[35] Darby, *The Fiction of Imperialism*, p. 29.
[36] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*.
[37] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, p. 39.
[38] One very notable exception to this is, of course, Cynthia Enloe's significant body of research – for a selection see: *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (London: Pandora, 1989); *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives* (London: University of California Press, 2000); *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire* (London: University of California Press, 2004) on the everyday militarisation of women's lives in which she traverses munitions factories, garment factories, and the private quarters of diplomat's residences in order to uncover the tangle of gendered power relations at the heart of the international political system.
[39] Darby, *The Fiction of Imperialism*, p. 216.
[40] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*, p. 119. It is worth noting at this point that I am not claiming that war novels or fiction are an unmediated way to 'access' war or war experiences. Like any form of representation, fiction is profoundly mediated, with novels in particular often written – and thus marked – by those who have the time, education, and resources to devote to writing and publishing. Rather, my decision to turn to fiction comes from its attention to the personal, the everyday, and the emotional.
[41] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*, p. 119, emphasis added.

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Hoffman's *Be Safe I Love You*. *Half of a Yellow Sun* tells the story of three individuals – Ugwu, a houseboy for a university professor; Olanna, the beautiful and privileged lover of the professor; and Richard, a shy Englishman in love with Olanna's twin sister – whose lives intersect over the course of the Nigeria-Biafra war in the late 1960s. *A Golden Age* is set during the 1971 Bangladesh War of Independence, and centres on the family of a widowed woman, Rehana, and her two patriotic children. *Be Safe I Love You* is set in recent-day United States and the protagonist is Lauren, a young North American woman recently returned from a tour of duty in Iraq. I have chosen these novels, in part, because they document three different conflicts, across three different continents, but also because they are books about war written by women and with women as central characters. Reflecting broader war imaginings and the practitioner and academic worlds of warfare, when war novels are thought of (and 'great' or 'classic' war novels in particular), they tend to be those written by men and concerned largely with the experiences of fighting men (Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Heller's *Catch 22*, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*…). When women have written about war – for example, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* or (albeit not a novel) Anne Frank's diary – such books are often not considered stories or books about war in the same way as those tales imagined and documented by men. As feminists have long noted,[42] this has led to a writing out of women's experiences of war and a failure of policymakers, practitioners, and academics to capture the fullness of wars' experiences and reach. Furthermore, when women's experiences in/of war have emerged, more often than not they have been experiences of horror, suffering or trauma. As Pentinnen writes:

> I had been taught … that in war it is the women who always suffer more. Women are part of the nation that needs to be protected, but which is also violated, raped, tortured and humiliated … Women were depicted in wars like the living dead, forever traumatized and violated, vulnerable and weak, wandering around almost aimlessly in refugee camps, with no hope, no dreams and no capacity for making decisions or recreating their lives after atrocities or in exploitative conditions.[43]

To what extent does this capture the entirety of women's lived experiences in war? While not denying the very real violences and suffering that women (and men) face in war, how might they also experience moments of unexpected joy in the most challenging of environments? And how do these three novels offer insights to these moments?

At first reading there is little to suggest that these novels could tell us anything about the possibility of, or potential for, joys in and of war. Sexual violence, torture, enforced starvation, the loss of loved ones, post-traumatic stress disorder, and violent death all appear on the novels' pages. The stories of horror linger long after the books have been put down, as does the fact that all three novels are very much anchored in the 'real' world and based on 'true' events. However, among the one thousand-odd pages, and in the close detailing of the lives of the characters, moments of physical pleasure, emotional wellbeing, and positive affects are documented. Three recurring themes of joy and pleasure that emerge within the three novels will be traced: bodily pleasures, the 'togetherness' of war, and moments of joy that escape war's reach. Tracking these experiences presents both a conceptual and methodological challenge. What, for example, can be counted

[42] See Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*; Miranda Alison, *Women and Political Violence: Female Combatants in Ethno-National Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2009); Megan MacKenzie, *Female Soldiers in Sierra Leone: Sex, Security, and Post-Conflict Development* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); and Parashar, *Women and Militant Wars*.

[43] Pentinnen, *Joy and International* Relations, p. 7.

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as a 'war experience'? As will be shown below, the experiences detailed include those that war has made possible, those that take place despite of or in excess of war, sometimes the experiences simply take place during war, and at other times war *is* these pleasures. Broadly then, for the purposes of this article the 'war experiences' discussed are those experiences that take place within the novels, all set (at least partially) in what would conventionally be referred to as 'warzones' and during conflict and its immediate aftermath.[44] The novels are also concerned with the lives of those very immediately 'touched' by war: combatants and their friends and families, civilians living through war and/or in refugee camps, and those killed, injured, or tortured as a result of war. As Sylvester notes, however, the 'touch' of war and its experience is much broader than those in wars' 'line of fire':[45]

> people feel the war touch directly, through news reports, aid and relief campaigns, books, films, visual art, discussions in schools and universities, through philosophical inquiry, or by knowing someone who is or has been involved in war.[46]

In this respect, then, everyone – soldiers, state leaders, academics, students, peace activists, spectators, citizens – experiences war in some form or other. Furthermore, all of the experiences detailed below (and arguably anything that might be termed a 'war experience') are not just 'war experiences' – they could also be understood as (among others) sexual, familial, combat, political, everyday, and/or banal experiences. That there isn't a clearly demarcated definition of what 'war experience' (or, indeed, 'war') is does not matter for the argument forwarded here. Rather, these joyful or pleasurable experiences are used analytically to redirect attention away from the horrors of or within war, revealing the range and complexity of wars' affective landscape, as well as the recognition that for those who live in and through it, war is not totalising or universalising in its experiences.

Bodily pleasures

Sex-as- and sex-for-pleasure is featured across all three novels.[47] Both *Be Safe I Love You* and *A Golden Age* feature only one explicit sex scene, appearing close to the beginning and close of the novels, respectively. In the first chapter of *Be Safe I Love You*, the protagonist, Lauren, returns to her hometown from her tour of duty in Iraq and immediately seeks out her former boyfriend, engaging in a sexual encounter with him, presumably both he and sex being the first thing she seeks out upon arrival home. In *A Golden Age*, the only sex scene forms part of a slowly building love story between Rehana and a Bangladeshi Army Major who she has been hiding from the Pakistani authorities.

It is, however, in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* in which sex and characters' sexual relationships occupy a more central role. The novel switches between the early 1960s (the pre-war years) and late 1960s (the Nigeria-Biafra conflict), and throughout 'Adichie offers sensual and detailed

[44] Thanks to Sanna Strand who encouraged me to think through my use of the term 'war experience'.
[45] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*, p. 100.
[46] Ibid.
[47] One of the anonymous reviewers to this piece noted that while there is often a lot of sex in war novels, it is rarely about relaxed pleasure seeking. While I agree with this observation in part, my concern here is not with sex in war novels per se, but rather, the ways in which the characters in the three novels I discuss engage in sexual relations and their apparent bodily enjoyment of them. Further, while I very much agree with the reviewer's comment that sex in war can be about 'distraction, power, [a] release of tension', I would argue that this is not necessarily or always mutually exclusive to its pleasures and enjoyments.

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accounts of sexual desire and intercourse between her principle adult characters'.[48] This is despite the fact that in the late 1960s' sections, civil war, internal displacement, famine, death, and multitude of other hardships are simultaneously present. Despite these horrors, desire, intimacy, and sex-as-pleasure continue. Zoe Norridge has argued that sex in *Half of a Yellow Sun* 'plays an integral role in the characters' response to the onset of war', with the sexual encounters marked not only by reciprocal pleasure and matched desire, but also as something that offers empowerment and support. For example, at times, sex is 'pictured as a haven, a space for joy in the midst of tragedy':[49]

> They would go out to the veranda and he [Richard] would push the table aside and spread out the soft rug and lie on his naked back. When she [Kainene] climbed astride, he would hold her hips and stare up at the night sky and, for those moments, be sure of the meaning of bliss. It was their new ritual since the war started, the only reason he was grateful for the war.[50]

Adichie's characters also engage in sexual encounters during intense moments of grief, where the bodily pleasure of the act is juxtaposed and intermingles with grief, sadness, and the unbearability of war. When Olanna and Odenigbo are told of their friend's death, Olanna feels as if 'something in her head was stretched taut' and she is being 'attacked, relentlessly clobbered, by loss'.[51] When her and Odinigbo make love that evening, Odenigbo is still on top of Olanna,

> so still she thrashed around and pulled at his hips. But he did not move. Then he began to thrust and her pleasure multiplied, sharpened on stone so that each tiny spark became a pleasure all its own. She heard herself crying, her sobbing louder and louder … He was crying too; she felt the tears drop on her body before she saw them on his face.[52]

Even in this moment in which war's traumas have built and multiplied on top of one another to a point where Olanna feels physically and emotionally incapable of coping with them any longer, bodily pleasures remain. However, while Olanna derives pleasure from this sexual embrace, it occurs as *coextensive* to the grief and unbearability of war. My use of the term 'coextensive' here draws on Zoë Wool's use of it to think expansively about war, militaries, and militarisation. For Wool, thinking coextensively means not thinking about love (Wool's example) in the contxt of war, or as war providing a new context for love, but instead thinking about how both love – or joy or pleasure – and war 'are both part of one broader arrangement of life and death'.[53] Thus, in this instance of Olanna's bodily pleasure and grief, both are part of and both are constitutive of Olanna's war experience. As Norridge notes, the depths and complexity of sensations experienced by Olanna – grief, loss, helplessness, and bodily pleasure – are revealed through attention to her physicality.[54]

The second bodily pleasures in/of war I want to draw attention to are the pleasures associated with the soldiering body and its capabilities. In *Be Safe I Love You* significant attention is given to Lauren's 'war body'[55] and what it can do. Lauren's friends and family recognise how her time in the

[48] Zoe Norridge, 'Sex as synecdoche: Intimate languages of violence in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*', *Research in African Literatures*, 43:2 (2012), pp. 18–39 (p. 21).
[49] Norridge, 'Sex as synecdoche', p. 28.
[50] Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), pp. 307–08.
[51] Ibid., pp. 391–2.
[52] Ibid., p. 392.
[53] Zoë Wool, 'Critical military studies, queer theory, and the possibilities of critique: the case of suicide and family caregiving in the US military', *Critical Military Studies*, 1:1 (2015), pp. 23–37 (p. 24).
[54] Norridge, 'Sex as synecdoche', p. 33.
[55] Cara Hoffman, *Be Safe I Love You* (London: Virago, 2014), p. 18.

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military has made her physically and mentally 'strong',[56] that she is 'fit and alert',[57] and that the very movement of her body communicates authority and confidence:

> There was always something about how she moved – like her body had an authority, an ability that made it possible for her not to worry. You didn't worry if you could run twenty miles, if you were coordinated, if knew how to fight – you weren't concerned about things in the same way other people were.[58]

Lauren herself appears to derive satisfaction from what her body can do, how she can control it and physically train it: she notes that '[b]uilding strength is its own addiction',[59] and when jogging enters 'into the rhythm of her body, her breathing, her heart'.[60]

This sense of wellbeing derived from the body and its physical movements has been previously noted in relation to military life. William McNeill recounts his experiences of military drill in 1940s America, noting that, 'What I remember now … [is a] sense of pervasive well-being', and that '[m]oving briskly and keeping in time was enough to make us feel good about ourselves … and vaguely pleased with the world at large'.[61] More recently, Synne Dyvik has explored the presence of emotions such as 'relief, elation and excitement' that are present in combat, as well as the proclamation by one Norwegian soldier deployed in the recent conflict in Afghanistan that 'war is better than sex'.[62] While it goes without saying that these experiences of military drill, combat, and the capability of a soldiering body are different both in relation to one another and to the bodily sensations of sex-as- and sex-for-pleasure detailed above, what I want to think through is how in all of them it is the body that serves as the locus for the physical and emotional experiences of pleasure and satisfaction. Across these experiences, physical sensations of movement, intimacy, and strength are tied to emotional sensations of wellbeing, bliss, and relief. In this respect, across all of the bodily experiences there is a sense of an 'overflowing of … physical and emotional senses'[63] that intermingle and converge through physical bodies.

Drawing on the theory and concept of 'flow'[64] provides one way of thinking about the wellbeing, satisfaction, and even joy a soldier may derive from their body or experience during combat. 'Flow', one of the leading psychological theories of wellbeing, refers to an 'experience which seamlessly unfolds from moment to moment'.[65] Actors in flow are 'fully concentrated on the present moment … action and awareness merge; [and] reflective self-consciousness is lost'.[66] Flow thus provides a way to

[56] Ibid., p. 12.
[57] Ibid., p. 123.
[58] Ibid., p. 232.
[59] Ibid., p. 244.
[60] Ibid., p. 185.
[61] William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 2.
[62] Dyvik, '"Valhalla Rising"', p. 143.
[63] Ibid.
[64] See Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991); Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Jeanne Nakamura and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 'The concept of flow', in C. R. Snyder and S. J. Lopez (eds), *Handbook of Positive Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 89–105; and Yuval N. Harari, 'Combat flow: Military, political, and ethical dimensions of subjective well-being in war', *Review of General Psychology*, 12:3 (2008), pp. 253–64.
[65] Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 'The concept of flow', p. 90.
[66] Harari, 'Combat flow', p. 253.

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think about the embodied experiences of Lauren and William McNeill training their military bodies and building strength, as well as the combat experiences of the Norwegian soldiers that Dyvik documents. It describes an experience in which 'one's entire awareness is absorbed in the present moment',[67] and can elicit sensations of satisfaction and exhilaration. For the military historian Yuval Harari, flow theory may be a 'powerful tool for understanding military experiences',[68] helping to explain the so-called 'joy of combat evinced in almost every warrior culture from Homeric Greece to medieval Europe'.[69] The intention here is not to suggest that the presence of flow and subjective feelings of wellbeing in war are 'good' (and by extension that they and war should be sought out). Indeed, in his own discussion of flow in war, Harari details a number of political and ethical issues that arise when thinking about flow in relation to military and combat experience. Rather, thinking about experiences of flow reveals the multiplicity of war experiences, sensations, and feelings felt through the body. As Dyvik notes, it is only by taking these sensations and emotions into account that 'the discipline [of IR] is … better equipped to understand war's continued seduction and continuation for those who choose to practice it'.[70]

The 'togetherness' of war

While pleasure and satisfaction can be experienced during war in and through the body – whether in the capability of a military body or through sexual encounters whereby the body and its pleasures are central – positive affects in war also travel between and among bodies. In this section I want to specifically focus on the ways in which the potential excitement or promise of war is something that is *collectively felt*.

Both *A Golden Age* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* detail 'the kind of joy in war that can grip people who start a glorious war against oppression'.[71] There is excitement, promise, optimism, and a feeling of justness. In *A Golden Age*, both of Rehana's children are enthralled with the revolutionary possibilities of conflict. Rehana's son Sohail leaves home to join the Bengali national liberation army, and on a visit back to the family home Sohail is brimming with enthusiasm and excitement for his experiences:

> 'Everyone has joined. Everyone.' And his eyes shone. 'All the young men, fighting side by side. No one cares who anyone is. They've all joined, the peasant and the soldier, together, just as we've been dreaming.'[72]

This optimism is shared by Maya, Rehana's daughter, who asks her mother, 'Aren't you even a little excited? A whole nation, coming together.'[73] Similarly, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the potential and possibility that war offers can be traced in the voices of the Biafran radio presenters ('youthful, eager, confident'),[74] and among Olanna, Odenigbo, and their friends who gather to discuss the forging of the Biafran state ('Their voices were urgent and excited, each person barely waiting for the last to finish speaking.')[75] Tellingly, such enthusiasms are most keenly felt close to the start of war's outset,

[67] Ibid., p. 254.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., p. 257.
[70] Dyvik, '"Valhalla Rising"', p. 144.
[71] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*, p. 107.
[72] Tahima Anam, *A Golden Age* (London: Canongate, 2012), p. 102.
[73] Anam, *A Golden Age*, p. 103.
[74] Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 123.
[75] Ibid., p. 124.

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before '[w]ar becomes a gaping injury to spirit, body, convictions, emotions, and honor',[76] and as Sylvester notes in the case of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, such enthusiasm and delusion 'is maintained mostly by those of privilege and education, who are not actually fighting'.[77]

In both novels the excitement and promise of war is acutely present in scenes that are filled with people, and in which there is a sense of the force of feeling associated with the war and the like-mindedness and 'togetherness' it engenders. Political rallies feature in both novels and capture the embodied sensations of righteousness, empowerment, and camaraderie driving the beginning stages of the conflicts. From *A Golden Age*:

> By the end [of the rally] she [Rehana] found herself chanting *Joy Bangla, Joy Bangla, Joy Bangla* with the crowd, the rhythm of her words chiming with the hard thump of her chest, and she recognized at once, the incendiary thrill of shouting … Rehana suddenly felt young, plunged into a world of limitless possibility.[78]

And from *Half of a Yellow Sun*:

> Olanna was filled with a delicious exuberance … They were Biafrans. She was Biafran … Olanna watched them and relaxed with a sweet surge that they all felt what she felt, what Odenigbo felt, as though it were liquid steel instead of blood that flowed through their veins, as though they could stand barefoot over red-hot embers.[79]
>
> The chanting was constant now … The rhythm was heady. Richard glanced across at Phyllis, thrusting a fist in the air as she shouted, and he looked around for a little while at everyone else, intense and intent in the moment, before he too began to wave and chant.[80]

In all of these excerpts, excitement, elation, and exuberance are experienced through and alongside the physicality of chanting, thumping chests, and thrusting fists. While Rehana, Olanna, and Richard all experience these sensory regimes individually, they are also experienced collectively between the bodies present at the rallies. Indeed, it appears that the 'togetherness' of the rallies – the mass of bodies and a sense of a shared goal or identity – is central to the force of feeling experienced by the individuals. Returning to Dyvik's analysis of Norwegian combat soldiers and the embodied narratives found within their memoirs, Dyvik argues that combat is made intelligible both 'through the senses experienced individually, but also *through* and *between* [soldiering] bodies bounded by gendered and militarized bonds'.[81] Similarly, in these instances, the excitement and exuberance of war are not just experienced by the individual characters, but move, circulate, and multiply among bodies. And while the Norwegian soldiers are bounded by the 'myths' of militarised masculinity,[82] for those in the rallies, it is through the imaginaries of nation communities[83] that they come together and that sensations resonate and multiply.

[76] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*, p. 107.
[77] Ibid., p. 108.
[78] Anam, *A Golden Age*, p. 52.
[79] Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, pp. 162–3.
[80] Ibid., p. 171.
[81] Dyvik, '"Valhalla Rising"', p. 143, emphasis in original.
[82] Julia Welland, 'Militarised violences, basic training and the "myths" of asexuality and discipline', *Review of International Studies*, 39:4 (2013), pp. 881–902; Sandra Whitworth, *Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2004).
[83] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

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The ways in which these experiences of war do not merely reside 'in' a body, but track and circulate among bodies can be understood in relation to Sara Ahmed's work on the 'sociality' of emotions[84] and Kathleen's Stewart's exploration of 'ordinary affects'.[85] Both these authors ask questions about how these bodily sensations move or 'ripple'[86] between bodies[87] and how they 'stick' and/or generate intensities. In this respect, Ahmed and Stewart are less concerned with what emotions and affects *are*, than with what they *do*.[88] For Ahmed this means tracking how emotions accumulate 'affective value' through the effects of their circulation, as well as how they 'stick',[89] while Stewart writes, that it is 'not about one person's feelings becoming another's but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities'.[90] Significant for my analysis here is both authors' concern with a body's encounters with others. That emotions and affects 'work' through their contact with others and their ability to move, and that the more they circulate, 'the more affective they become'.[91] In relation to the excerpts above, it is through the characters' encounters with others – in this case, the mass of a crowd – which their excitement and elation is experienced and accumulates. Here, while the excitement and possibilities of war are still felt in an individual body, it is *bodies'* togetherness that means these sensations resonate and multiply.

Turning directly now to Ahmed and Stewart's concerns with what these emotions *do*, I argue that these affective spaces and the experiences of elation and exuberance by those within them work both to motivate and sustain war's practice. For example, as the sensations of righteousness, justness, and the 'incendiary thrill' of forging a new nation build and accumulate within the rally, the 'stickiness'[92] of these emotions allows this affective atmosphere to move and ripple outwards. Such emotions travel in and between bodies bounded through a shared history of oppression, as well as the seductions of a new nation and all that it promises. The strength of this feeling – its affective value – is essential for both motivating and sustaining individuals to support the war, endure its hardships,

[84] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014 [orig. pub. 2004]).

[85] Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (London: Duke University Press, 2007).

[86] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 44.

[87] It should be noted that both Ahmed and Stewart use the term 'body' to mean not just human bodies, but 'human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise'. See Linda Åhäll and Thomas Gregory, 'Introduction: Mapping emotions, politics and war', in Åhäll and Gregory (eds), *Emotions, Politics and War*, pp. 1–14 (p. 6).

[88] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 4. It is worth noting here that while for some writing within the field of 'affect studies' a clear distinction can be made between 'emotions' and 'affects'. See Patricia Clough (ed.), *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) and Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), with emotions remaining within the realm of language and discourse, and affects as 'non-conscious, non-subjective or pre-personal' (Åhäll and Gregory, 'Introduction', p. 5). I follow Ahmed [*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Afterword] in her scepticism of a clear-cut distinction between emotion and affect. For Ahmed, the claims made by some in the affect literature who argue that the 'turn' to affect has qualitatively shifted understanding erases the insights and contributions of feminist and queer work that has consistently challenged the mind-body dualism some affect theorists claim to have newly transcended. As such, Ahmed is uninterested in distinguishing emotions and affects as different aspects of experience, and while her own theorisation makes use of the term 'emotion' – 'because it is the term used in everyday life to describe what I wanted to give an account of': Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 207 – it 'involve[s] bodily processes of affecting and being affected' (ibid., p. 208).

[89] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 45.

[90] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, p. 128.

[91] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 45.

[92] Ibid., p. 45.

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and offer themselves to its fighting forces. While in *A Golden Age*, the excitement and enthusiasm for Bangladeshi independence drives Rehana's children to fight and support the war effort (which is eventually successful in granting Bangladesh self determination), in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, enthusiasm prevails even in the face of 'blockades, air attacks, starvation tactics, mounting fear, and increasing evidence of defeat engulfing them'.[93] Such blind enthusiasm is seen, for example, in the aftermath of an air raid in which Olanna and her neighbours shelter in a bunker. When they emerge a neighbour declares, 'Our anti-aircraft fire was wonderful!', and another starts to sing 'Biafra win the war', with most of the street joining him.[94] In this terrifying moment, the neighbour's outward and initial response is not one of terror, shock, or fear as may be expected, but of optimism, enthusiasm, and conviction in Biafra's ultimate success. As Sylvester notes, this optimism takes a long time to dissipate in the novel – 'way past the time the blockade reduces incoming food … past the time hospitals run out of drugs, and even after so many people's hair turns red from malnutrition … and falls out by the fistfuls'[95] – and, in the face of so much suffering, is crucial for war's continuance.

In excess of war

While the previous section explored experiences of joy made possible through war – the excitement of rallies and the promise of victory – in this final section I focus on moments of joy that remain in spite or in excess of war. Such moments can range from small bursts of laughter and unbidden smiles, to the momentary pleasure of hearing a piece of music or eating food that hasn't been tasted in a long time, to the rebuilding or deepening of relationships between friends, family, and loved ones. Two 'excesses' will be explored in particular: the interpersonal relations between those who live through war and smaller everyday pleasures that make room for snapshots of joy. Attention to experiences such as these remind us that while war may 'touch' all, it is also never the only thing going on, and that for those who live through it, war itself may not be the most important or defining feature of their experience.

Starting with the interpersonal relationships featured within the novels, in the close detailing of characters' lives and embedded in the personal, the intimate relationships of and between characters are central to all three novels. In *Be Safe I Love You*, two principle relationships are featured. The first is between the protagonist, Lauren, and her brother, Danny. Danny is the reason Lauren joins the military, the reason she needs to survive her deployment, and her focal point upon her return home. The second are the relationships Lauren has with her fellow soldiers while stationed in Iraq, and with one soldier – Daryl – in particular. In this respect, the novel works through two familiar frameworks for understanding military service in a contemporary North American and European context: that military service offers a degree of economic stability and career opportunities for those from precarious or vulnerable socioeconomic contexts,[96] and that military service inculcates bonds and relationships stronger than any previously experienced.[97] While such comradeship between soldiers is always gendered, sexualised, and racialised, and can be productive of gratuitous violences

[93] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*, p. 107.
[94] Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 245.
[95] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*, p. 107.
[96] See Steven Morris, 'British army is targeting working-class young people, report shows', *The Guardian* (9 July 2017), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/09/british-army-is-targeting-working-class-young-people-report-shows} accessed 3 November 2017.
[97] Whitworth, *Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping*, p. 158; see also D. Harrison and L. Laliberté, *No Life Like It: Military Wives in Canada* (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1994).

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against 'others',[98] these friendships also reveal the complexity of war's affective landscape. In the everyday experiences of a tour of duty in which soldiers watch films together, work out together, exchange books, tell stupid (and often bleak) jokes, and make one another laugh, war is rendered visible as not only a site in which death, injury, and violence occur, but one in which friendship, humour, and support are also present.[99]

In *A Golden Age* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the respective violent conflicts provide the backdrop for blossoming love and the rebuilding of familial relationships. In *A Golden Age*, Rehana falls in love with an army Major, while the war also allows for a softening in her relationship with her daughter. Likewise, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, a tender romance is told between Ugwu and a young woman named Ebrechi, who he meets after he, Olanna, and Odenigbo are forced to flee their home; and Olanna and her twin, Kainene, become close again after falling out in the early 1960s' parts of the novel. What unites all of these relationships is the significance of them to the characters involved: that in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty of war, it is often these relationships that assume the greatest import in individual lives. When, for example, Olanna and Kainene begin speaking and spending time together after years with no communication, this thawing of relations has a profound effect on Olanna: 'Inside Olanna, something calcified leaped to life.'[100] Similarly, when living in sparse conditions, where bombing raids were frequent and Ugwu was in constant threat of being kidnapped and forced to fight for the Biafran cause, Ugwu's thoughts were frequently preoccupied not with hardship but with Ebrechi, and the time he spent with her was joyful: 'She rubbed her eyes and laughed, a happy sound that made Ugwu happier.'[101] In these interpersonal moments, war recedes and it is the relationship that is centred and that occupies the primary position in the character's lifeworld. While war has often been noted as a radically relational act, the relations in/of war that are most frequently paid attention are those that make possible its violences; be that the 'warrior brotherhood'[102] of militaries or the 'Radical Othering'[103] of those across enemy lines. The interpersonal relationships detailed here reveal individuals not only to be entangled in war's violent relations, but also in love, friendship, desire, lust, and their concomitant comforts, joys, and excitement.

The second 'excess' explored are the small, often one-off, moments of pleasure that emerge during war. Such fleeting moments of joy include the thrill of finding or receiving rare or rationed goods; the immersion or escapism that music, film, or schooling can offer; and new or adapted daily routines that bring comfort in the face of war's uncertainties. While in many ways unremarkable, these snapshots of pleasure show that war is not totalising in its experience. That while it is inarguable that war causes death and destruction, for those who live through it, life does not come to a grinding halt. Living, laughing, loving, caring, eating, drinking, washing, dancing, singing, working, all continue, and that in and of themselves may be key practices in surviving and even resisting war. None of the

[98] See, for example, Sherene Razack, *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping and the New Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Melanie Richter-Montpetit, 'Empire, desire and violence: a queer transnational feminist reading of the prisoner "abuse" in Abu Ghraib and the question of "gender equality"', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 9:1 (2007), pp. 38–59; Welland, 'Militarised violences'.

[99] Brown and Pentinnen, '"A sucking chest wound …"'.

[100] Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, p. 347.

[101] Ibid., p. 295.

[102] Whitworth, *Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping*.

[103] Claire Duncanson, *Forces for Good? Military Masculinities and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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novels I review are concerned with relating 'The Story' of the war they are located within, rather, they document how violent conflict 'reconfigures the daily lives of their characters'.[104] In this way they provide a window into routines, rhythms, and experiences of war often ignored or paid scant attention. All three novels, for example, detail the smiling and laughter of their characters at various points: From the Major smiling 'so widely his scar stretched across till it touched the tuft of hair beside his ear'[105] when Rehana presents him with a gramophone; to Olanna and Odenigbo 'laughing, raucously, almost falling off the bench'[106] at the simultaneous awfulness and absurdity of war; and to Lauren and Daryl sharing a joke about Girl Scouts being 'bloodthirsty supporting-the-troops motherfuckers'.[107] Both *A Golden Age* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* tell of the small pleasures and excitements acquiring provisions otherwise hard to come by – the Major looking as if he had received 'a trunk full of gold'[108] when a dish of chicken is presented to him and Olanna 'gasp [ing]'[109] when she finds toilet tissue in a care package sent by a friend. Such fleeting moments of joy do not, of course, compensate for the loss of loved ones, starvation, or any of the other everyday privations and horrors of war. They may, however, provide insights into how the seemingly unliveable is rendered bearable, as well as how war becomes familiar, how new daily routines emerge, and a new tempo of life and living are established. *Be Safe I Love You* depicts the 'routine, reflexive, comforting'[110] patterns of life on the frontline, while *Half of a Yellow Sun* recounts the determination of Olanna to continue teaching in the face of ever more challenging circumstances. In all of the novels, then, war and living within it becomes normal:

> [From *A Golden Age*:] It was May. They had been at war since March. What was strange had become unstrange. They were used to seeing the green uniforms wherever they went; they were used to returning obediently to their homes at the peal of the curfew siren; and they were used to dusty, empty streets, the closed shops, the hospital with locked gates, the half-full baskets of the fruit vendors. The landscape of war was becoming familiar, and they had all found their ways to live with it.[111]

What all these small moments of pleasure or simply 'getting on' reveal is that in-between and among the catastrophe of war, a form of everyday life continues: life does not come to a grinding halt for all and war is not all-encompassing in its experience. While there may be happiness in unhappy moments (and vice versa) wherever they occur in international politics, including war, and that this should not negate the overall suffering that war, the 'ongoingness'[112] of everyday life amid the chaos should not be completely discounted either. For Lauren Berlant, simply 'getting by, and living on'[113] amid the dramas and crises that mark the dominant narratives of modern life is an act of agency and resistance. Drawing on Berlant, Lisle has also noted how the 'rhetorics of crisis, catastrophe, and apocalypse' that characterise the contemporary condition 'occludes the repetitive, much slower, and more familiar rhythms of everyday life'.[114] In this respect, not only do these moments signal

[104] Norridge, 'Sex as synecdoche', p. 19.
[105] Anam, *A Golden Age*, p. 147.
[106] Adichie, *Half of a Yellow* Sun, p. 273.
[107] Hoffman, *Be Safe I Love You*, p. 163.
[108] Anam, *A Golden Age*, p. 142.
[109] Adichie, *Half of a Yellow* Sun, p. 333.
[110] Hoffman, *Be Safe I Love You*, p. 157.
[111] Anam, *A Golden Age*, pp. 99–100.
[112] Lauren Berlant, 'Slow death (sovereignty, obesity, lateral agency)', *Critical Inquiry*, 33:4 (2007), pp. 754–80 (p. 759).
[113] Ibid., p. 759.
[114] Lisle, 'Waiting for international political sociology', p. 426.

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towards the expansiveness of wars' emotional and experiential landscape, but they also draw attention back to the lives of those who live in and through war, and how they survive, enact agency, and resist its hardships.

Concluding remarks

This article has used three war novels in its exploration of joyful and pleasurable experiences of and in war. Novels, through their location in the personal, are particularly suited to exploring the experiential aspects of war, and Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Anam's *A Golden Age*, and Hoffman's *Be Safe I Love You* all detail the ways in which people's lives are reconfigured by conflict. While none of these novels tell a 'joyful' story of war, all of them depict the fullness of wartime experiences, with its complex assemblages of pleasure and pain, laughter and trauma, and aliveness and despair. Three recurring themes of pleasurable and joyful experiences were tracked through the novels. First, bodily pleasures in and of war were explored through sex-for- and sex-as-pleasure in war, and how combat and the capability of a military body can elicit feelings of wellbeing and joy. Through the coextensiveness of pleasure and unbearability in war, and drawing on the concept of 'flow' to think through the 'joy' of combat, a multiplicity of sensations and feelings are felt in and through individual bodies in times of war. The second theme explored positive affects that flow between and among bodies, detailing how the promise of war is something that is *collectively felt* during political rallies. In these instances, the excitement of war travels, sticks, and is generated between bodies, with these affective spaces working both to motivate and sustain war's practice. Finally, the small moments of pleasure and the ongoingness of everyday life that escape wars' reach were explored. From the interpersonal relations that endure and make war bearable, to moments of joy and everyday comforts, for those who live in and through war, life and living continues in spite of and in excess of it. Such moments reveal not only wars' broad emotional and experiential landscape, but can also help to explain wars' continued seduction for some and are strategies of survival, agency, and resistance for others.

The joys and pleasures detailed in this article relate to war in varying ways: sometimes they are experiences that war has made possible (its 'togetherness'); sometimes the experiences take place in spite of, or in excess of, war (the ongoingness of everyday life); others simply take place during war (the rebuilding of familial relations/falling in love); and there are some experiences in which war *is* the pleasure (the coextensiveness of joy, pleasure, grief, and pain). Through these different relations to war, joyful and pleasurable experiences serve different ends. Joy and pleasure can work to motivate war through their bringing of people together in a shared sense of purpose; they can sustain war through the seductions and excitements that can be found in its practice; and joy and pleasure can be acts of survival and resistance through their making of life liveable in the most extreme of conditions. Starting with experiences of joy and pleasure thus not only reminds us that war is never universalising in its experience, it also works to displace war as a focus of analysis, redirecting attention to the experiences of those who live in and through it.

Associating experiences of joy or pleasure with war is likely to make many (as it makes me) uncomfortable, however, if we wish to confront the political 'puzzle'[115] of war and people's experiences in it, then we need to not only 'employ the full register of human insight and intelligence',[116] but also engage with the spaces, sites, and experiences that make us feel uncomfortable or

[115] Åhäll and Gregory, 'Concluding reflection'.
[116] Roland Bleiker, 'Learning from art: a reply to Holden's "World Literature and World Politics"', *Global Society*, 17:4 (2003), pp. 415–28 (p. 417).

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appear antithetical to the politics we wish to engender. Doing so may better equip us as scholars of international politics for understanding the complexities of war and – and this is what I have been more concerned with in this article – for directing attention towards those who live in and through wars' violences. As Pentinnen writes, while war may create 'unliveable spaces', IR scholarship's focus on its spectacular violence means how people actually survive in these unliveable spaces is forgotten or paid scant attention.[117] After all, while war unquestionably destroys and disrupts the normalcy of people's peacetime lives, splitting up families, causing the loss of loved ones, and affecting a whole range of physical, structural, emotional, and economic violences, nor is war the sole political 'reality'.[118] Taking seriously Christine Sylvester's entreaty to 'people' the discipline of IR'[119] means being attuned to the lived experiences of people's lives in all their multiplicities. Confronting wars' violences, its grief, and its physical and emotional injuries is one way of populating the discipline with the bodies and experiences of those it researches. Extending this analysis to joy and pleasure broadens these sites of understanding, provides insights into what animates wars' potential and practice, and may produce strategies of resistance, agency, and survival in the face of these 'unliveable spaces'.

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[117] Pentinnen, *Joy and International Relations*, p. 108; see also Chan, 'On the uselessness of new wars theory'.
[118] Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, p. 39.
[119] Sylvester (ed.), *Experiencing War*.

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