

***Mothers, Monsters, Whores: Women's Violence in Global Politics.*** By Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry. London and New York: Zed Books. 2007. 276 pp. \$89.95 cloth, \$27.95 paper.

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Laura Sjoberg and Caron E. Gentry go beyond the comfort zone of some feminist international relations inquiry by asking how to make feminist sense of women who commit torture, genocide, and suicide bombings. What are the political effects of reducing such women to mothers, whores, and monsters in the grip of irrational impulses? How do feminists accord such women political agency while also countering charges that this is feminism gone awry? What does it mean for global politics inquiry to take women's political violence seriously?

As the authors point out, there has long been feminist scholarship on women's authorized violence as members of state militaries, collective violence as members of revolutionary armed struggles, and individual violence as, for example, killers of their abusive partners. However, comparatively little work has examined women who engage in "proscribed violence" (defined by the authors as that "which is denounced, condemned, prohibited by the laws of states or the laws between states" p. 11) in the international arena and at the level of torture and genocide. The indelible images of U.S. Army women torturing Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib certainly begged such an analysis and did attract several feminist and antifeminist journalistic (and largely reductionist) commentaries, but this scholarly treatment puts such acts into the more comprehensive frame of women's *political* violence. It connects the Abu Ghraib case to female "terrorists" in Chechnya and suicide bombers in the Middle East, as well as "genocidaires" in Bosnia and Rwanda, and in doing so, reveals the feminist and the global political costs of rendering women's proscribed violence as aberrant and apolitical.

While not condoning or advocating women's political violence any more than men's, the authors argue that using a gender lens illuminates the particularly gendered, sexualized, and racialized constructions of politically violent women, which deny their agency and draw attention away from the political conflicts of which they are a part. Whether it be Abu Ghraib's Lynndie England, the *shakhidka* (or "Black Widows") of Chechnya, Biljana Plavšić of Serbia, or Pauline Nyiramasuhuko of

Rwanda, mainstream accounts of these women depict them as either mothers, whores, or monsters (or all three), to leave intact the idealized images of what Jean Elshtain dubbed “beautiful souls” in wartime, unsullied by the vicissitudes of violent conflict waged in the name of protecting them.

These “discursive frames,” which the authors trace historically and cross-culturally, have been used repeatedly in a range of narratives (mythological, journalistic, and academic) that attempt to explain women’s violence by rooting it in their flawed womanhood, thereby not disrupting, but rather resolidifying, the hegemonic construction of “woman.” Accounts of overprotective mothering or the failure to mother have been cited as primary motivations from Medea to Weather Underground women, while the Medusa scenario of women gone mad and bad has been applied continuously to pathologize women who commit “monstrous” violence. Sexual dysfunction, or the whore narrative, is perhaps the most time-honored explanation in that it has been applied even in contemporary “scientific” literature that links erotomania with women’s willingness to kill to please their male lovers. This latter explanation has even found its way into some feminist literature on female “terrorists,” such as Robin Morgan’s *The Demon Lover* (1989). The flipside of the whore narrative, lesbianism, is resorted to when the explanation rests on “masculinized” women.

These gender tropes are typically classed, as in the case of England, whose Appalachian background became central to the focus on her coarse sexuality. Class politics also assured that no one other than the subordinate prison guards was charged. These tropes are also heavily racialized, as in the case of the Black Widows of Chechnya, so named by the Russian state in its attempt to deflect attention away from its ruthless campaign against Chechen independence by claiming that Chechen women suicide bombers constituted a “Palestinianization” of the conflict, thereby justifying any action by the Russian state in the name of fighting the war on terror. At the same time, because Nyiramasuhuko, the first woman to be charged with genocide and with using rape as a crime against humanity by the International Court of Justice, had served as the minister for the family and the advancement of women in Rwanda, some commentators blamed feminism for her leading role in ethnic cleansing.

Countering these frames, the authors draw upon Nancy Hirschmann’s concept of “relational autonomy” to argue that neither men nor women are entirely freely choosing agents for “every choice is not free in a world

of intersubjective construction and power disparity” (p. 17). However, although “their choices are not independent of the gendered social and political contexts of their local and global worlds, women’s actions also cannot be seen as entirely outside the realm of their choice and agency” (p. 17). To deny that women’s violence involves (circumscribed) rational choice undermines the accordance of any agency to women and reserves (narrowly defined) rational-actor status for men. To debunk the discursive frames of mother/monster/whore that disable women’s *political* agency and *political* responsibility (as opposed to sensationalized and reductive personal responsibility or irresponsibility arising from flawed femininity), the authors provide riveting self-reports by politically violent women, derived from personal interviews that they or others conducted, trial transcripts, and manifestos left by female suicide bombers. What emerges is a far more complex picture, not only of these women and their motivations (which are similar to men’s, such as power, nationalism, physical survival, economic status, following orders, and so on), but also of the conflicts in which they are actors and the global politics that drive these conflicts.

As the authors conclude, gendered (apolitical) representations of violent women *are* international relations as they maintain global power structures that rest upon gender, race, and class distinctions and subordinations and feed dominant narratives about the intransigence of conflict when *even women* are perpetrators of violence, thereby foreclosing space for political solutions. Thus, it is imperative for feminist (and) international relations scholars and students to take “the violent women of international relations and the international relations of violent women” (pp. 223–24) very seriously.

***Multiculturalism Without Culture.*** By Anne Phillips. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 2007. 216 pp. \$29.95, cloth, \$19.95 paper.

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This is an important and insightful book that tackles an incredibly challenging problem, namely, how to balance the commitment of gender equality with the commitment of multiculturalism. Drawing on a wide range of resources, including feminist literature, anthropology, and