


FORUM ARTICLE

# Feminist methodology between theory and praxis

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## Abstract

The article revisits the problematic relationship between feminist theory and praxis through the writings of Marysia Zalewski, one of the foremost feminist theorists of IR. Zalewski has dealt with this relationship through her work on methodology. In three sections, the article explores: (a) her engagement with standpoint theory through her interventions in feminist IR debates with ‘the mainstream’; (b) her adoption of feminist postmodernism, embracing a deconstructive posture and in particular the notion of ‘hauntings’ as a methodological device; and (c) the development of a distinctive methodological attitude that seeks to involve, rather than explain or instruct. Crucially, for Zalewski, theory and praxis/politics cannot be separated methodologically: languages of mastery and an attitude of ‘doing something’ are of one cloth. The paper ends with a reflection about how L. H. M. Ling’s method of ‘chatting’ could be enacted in engagements that cross the social fields of academia and policy.

**Keywords:** Feminist Methodology; Standpoint Theory; Feminist Postmodernism; Marysia Zalewski; Feminist Praxis

## Introduction

‘What should be the relationship between feminist scholarship and feminist movements?’ This is a question I posed to Marysia Zalewski on her visit to Florida International University about 15 years ago and to which I received a surprising answer: she suggested that there was no necessary relationship between the two, and certainly not a relationship of accountability. The answer surprised me because my thinking at the time was that feminist scholars were organic intellectuals and the politics of feminism anchored what we should be doing in our research. The relationship between feminist theory and praxis is a *problématique* that I have continued to struggle with since and that I revisit in this article.

I do so by drawing on the writings of Zalewski, whom I consider one of the most interesting theorists of contemporary feminist IR. She has dealt with the relationship of feminist scholarship to ethics, politics, and praxis throughout her work on methodology, which she continues to describe as ‘absolutely one of the most fascinating things’.<sup>1</sup> For feminists committed to emancipation and social transformation the ‘scientific method’ has long been problematic because it has functioned to hide the realities of women and gender. Demands for methodological rigour tend to discipline critical and boundary-pushing work, setting up, in Zalewski’s words, a ‘labyrinth of blocked entrances, concealed exits, closed loops, uninviting dead ends’.<sup>2</sup> As a result, ‘legitimized

<sup>1</sup>Wendy Harcourt, L. H. M. Ling, Marysia Zalewski, and Swiss International Relations Collective, ‘Assessing, engaging, and enacting worlds: Tensions in feminist methodologies’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17:2 (2015), p. 159.

<sup>2</sup>Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: ‘Exquisite Corpse’* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 22.

methodological tools appear to sponsor feminist failure'.<sup>3</sup> The question of the relationship between feminist scholarship and praxis thus emerges as a matter of methodology, or of 'theoretical method' in the words of Ackerly et al.,<sup>4</sup> including reflections about epistemology, ontology, and related choices of methods, but also about ethics and politics.

Zalewski's own methodological styles have shifted in the course of her career, and these shifts are a productive resource for discussing conundrums around the relationship of feminist theory and praxis. She grappled with feminist standpoint theory in the early 1990s, but then became a standard bearer of her distinctive form of postmodernist feminism. Recently, in a seeming extension, she has come to advocate 'low theory', an attitude that invites engagements rather than seeking to either explain or instruct. But low theory has not displaced her previous insights. Throughout her work, Zalewski has held on to sometimes-contradictory commitments, has advocated messiness, and has refused closure on difficult questions of feminist methodology and politics. And while others have characterised her as a postmodernist and her methodology as deconstruction,<sup>5</sup> she is uncomfortable being slotted into a category. In a 2008 roundtable she clarified: 'I hold varying feminist positions which might be differentially labeled: (possibly) liberal, radical, queer, poststructural. I think I am all of those and probably more besides. Perhaps some days I am more one than the other.'<sup>6</sup> In this article, I hope to do justice to these ambivalent commitments.

The article is divided into three sections that trace the development of Zalewski's thinking on methodology. I explore: (a) her engagement with standpoint theory through her interventions in feminist IR debates with 'the mainstream'; (b) her adoption of feminist postmodernism, embracing a deconstructive posture and in particular the notion of 'hauntings' as a methodological device; and (c) the development of a distinctive methodological attitude that seeks to involve. This linear narrative must be taken as a heuristic, rather than a teleology, allowing me to identify different aspects of Zalewski's thinking as they were embedded in debates at the time of her writing. I hope to make visible in particular how her work employs different understandings of theory and theorising, praxis, and practice.

## Feminist standpoints

Drawing insights from sociology and Marxism, feminist standpoint theory is diverse in its origins and has developed into different strands. What these have in common is the suggestion that all knowledge is socially situated, grounded either in gendered experiences, or in gendered activity or labour.<sup>7</sup> Recognising that scientists are embedded in a social context, feminist standpoint theory thus undermines the idea that science can be objective and universal. Moreover, feminist standpoint theorists have drawn conclusions for praxis, suggesting that there is a politics to science as the knowledge of the dominant becomes hegemonic and commonsensical, whereas that of the marginalised is devalued. This affects the ways of life that become possible: Dominant knowledges

<sup>3</sup>Marysia Zalewski, 'Distracted reflections on the production, narration, and refusal of feminist knowledge in International Relations', in Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup>Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True, 'Feminist methodologies for International Relations', in Ackerly, Stern, and True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Ackerly, Stern, and True, 'Feminist methodologies for International Relations', p. 10.

<sup>6</sup>Kimberly Hutchings, Marysia Zalewski, J. Ann Tickner, Christine Sylvester, Margot Light, Vivienne Jabri, and Fred Halliday, 'Roundtable discussion: Reflections on the past, prospects for the future in gender and international relations', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 37:1 (2008), p. 177.

<sup>7</sup>Sandra G. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 141. Other key founding texts include Dorothy E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987); Nancy Hartsock, 'The feminist standpoint: Developing the ground for a specifically feminist historical materialism', in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (eds), *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* (Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004).

that fail to interrogate situations of advantage ‘end up legitimating exploitative “practical politics”’.<sup>8</sup> Conversely, situated standpoint perspectives can show alternatives, but these need to be struggled for because they exist in worlds established by the ruling vision. Achieving a standpoint thus has the potential to inform liberating praxis.<sup>9</sup>

Standpoint theory has been highly influential in feminist IR. Ann Tickner’s methodological guidelines for feminist research in IR resonate closely with the proposals of standpoint theorists. They include asking feminist questions, using women’s experiences to design research that is useful to women, and approaching research as emancipation.<sup>10</sup> As Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True have pointed out, compared to other critical theories, ‘feminist IR scholars privilege the moment of practice in the process of theorizing and judge theories in terms of the practical possibilities they open up’.<sup>11</sup> The project of excavating a women’s or feminist standpoint for purposes of women’s emancipation thus figures large in the methodologies of feminist IR. It informed the question I posed to Zalewski about the relationship between feminist theory and practice/praxis.

In her early work, Zalewski seems drawn to the promises of a standpoint approach, including its apparent refusal to think of theory as independent from praxis. As Zalewski points out, ‘for feminist standpoint theorists, “being” cannot and should not be separated from “knowing”’.<sup>12</sup> Because knowledge is based on experiences and circumstances, being enables knowing; and vice versa, because existing epistemes delimit politics, knowing is being. Although not explicitly formulated as a standpoint approach, Zalewski’s classic article ‘Well, What is the Feminist Perspective on Bosnia?’ can be read as employing a standpoint perspective.<sup>13</sup> It proposes that feminist IR must ask two questions: ‘What work is gender doing?’ and ‘What about women?’ The second question is the one Cynthia Enloe, a major influence on Zalewski, has pursued relentlessly. It is a question that leads to an empirical focus on women’s lives and marginalised groups, and this in turn provides a different kind of knowledge: ‘Asking about women will give us radically different pictures of international politics.’<sup>14</sup>

Standpoint theories have been the object of significant feminist critique, most importantly concerning an implicit essentialism around women’s experiences, their portrayal of women as unitary, and their tendency to universalise one standpoint cross-culturally. There have been rebuttals clarifying the grounds of standpoints and reformulations of standpoints as multiple, partial and situated, and as a result the approach continues to be viable.<sup>15</sup> By questioning situated constructions of gender, however, Zalewski already moves away from a facile understanding of a feminist standpoint. Again, like Enloe, she cautions that making visible the standpoints of women is not enough: ‘we need to analyse the constructions of gender which create these differential realities’.<sup>16</sup>

Though wary of the implied subject in standpoint approaches, in her 1993 article, Zalewski defends them not against the critique of feminists, but against ‘lazy masculinist shortcuts’ that

<sup>8</sup>Sandra G. Harding, ‘Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What is “strong objectivity”?’ in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (eds), *Feminist Epistemologies* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 54.

<sup>9</sup>Nancy Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), pp. 107–08.

<sup>10</sup>J. Ann Tickner, ‘What is your research program? Some feminist answers to International Relations methodological questions’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 49:1 (2005), pp. 1–22.

<sup>11</sup>Brooke A. Ackerly and Jacqui True, ‘Studying the struggles and wishes of the age: Feminist theoretical methodology and feminist theoretical methods’, in Ackerly, Stern, and True (eds), *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, p. 248.

<sup>12</sup>Marysia Zalewski, ‘Feminist standpoint theory meets International Relations theory: A feminist version of David and Goliath?’, *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 17 (1993), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup>Marysia Zalewski, ‘“Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?”’, *International Affairs*, 71:2 (April 1995), p. 339.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 353.

<sup>15</sup>Patricia Hill Collins, ‘Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of black feminist thought’, *Social Problems*, 33:6 (1986), pp. S14–32; Donna Haraway, ‘Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective’, *Feminist Studies*, 14:3 (autumn 1988), pp. 575–99; Sandra G. Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (London: Psychology Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup>Zalewski, ‘“Well, what is the feminist perspective on Bosnia?”’, p. 353.

superficially appropriate these approaches to the field of IR.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, she takes issue with Robert Keohane's rendering of them, which she argues is 'inaccurate and ultimately does feminist standpoint theory a disservice'.<sup>18</sup> There is an effect produced through this appropriation: 'feminist standpoint theory seems either to become marginalized and effectively dismissed, or is used in a way which tends to diminish its subversive intent'.<sup>19</sup> Keohane reduces insights from feminist standpoint to one of many "valid insights" which might help us better understand matters of world politics'.<sup>20</sup> Thus, rather than recognising the epistemic advantage that emerges from a position at the margins, the different realities this opens up, and the more impartial insights it makes possible, he subsumes standpoint approaches into a liberal and pluralist field of science where ideas compete against each other to explain male-defined topics and the better idea presumably wins. Gone is a recognition of the power relations that define centres and margins, privileged and devalorised knowledge. Gone is the reality of existing hegemonies (including mainstream IR) that easily subsume knowledges from the margins and flatten them in order to defang them. And gone is, perhaps most importantly, the ability of the theory to call into question the existing, male-defined IR order of things.

Zalewski's article was one of many in the fraught debate of IR feminists with 'the mainstream' (mostly Keohane). But, because of different epistemological and ontological commitments, the debate also became one among feminists.<sup>21</sup> Feminists embracing a standpoint approach thought that changing scholarly thinking would generate alternative knowledge, anchored in the experiences and struggles of those at the margins, and that this would influence political practices. While recognising the mutual imbrication of theory and praxis, they retained the two as separate categories. But for others, including Zalewski, the field of praxis (or rather 'practice') was the academy itself. For them theorising was a form of practice producing profound and often violent effects. Thus, Zalewski's pushback against Keohane's treatment of standpoint theory was a political intervention into IR. Taking the discipline as her empirical terrain of scholarly practice, she took a stand on standpoint to challenge a hegemonic move of appropriation and disciplining. Standpoint theory told her that 'dominant group experience generally dictates the "common-sense" of the age'.<sup>22</sup> Critical academic practice thus meant not just creating alternative knowledge, but also pushing back against efforts to tame such knowledge.

### Hauntings and the seductions of deconstruction

One of the more surprising discoveries in writing this article was finding an early piece of work in which Zalewski argued that postmodernist thought had a corrupting influence on feminist theory.<sup>23</sup> Her main focus was the inability of postmodernism to foster political change. This led her

<sup>17</sup>Zalewski, 'Feminist standpoint theory meets International Relations theory', p. 13, citing Enloe.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>21</sup>This is not the place to recount this debate. See J. Ann Tickner, 'What is your research program? Some feminist answers to International Relations methodological questions', *International Studies Quarterly*, 49:1 (2005), pp. 1–22; J. Ann Tickner, 'You just don't understand: Troubled engagements between feminists and IR theorists', *International Studies Quarterly*, 41:1 (December 1997), pp. 611–32; Cynthia Weber, 'Good girls, little girls, and bad girls: Male paranoia in Robert Keohane's critique of feminist International Relations', *Millennium*, 23:2 (June 1994), pp. 337–49; Marysia Zalewski, 'Where is woman in International Relations? "To return as a woman and be heard"', *Millennium*, 27:4 (December 1998), pp. 847–67; Marysia Zalewski, 'Do we understand each other yet? Troubling feminist encounters with(in) International Relations', *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, 9:2 (2007), pp. 302–12; Birgit Locher and Elisabeth Prügl, 'Feminism and constructivism: Worlds apart or sharing the middle ground?', *International Studies Quarterly*, 45:1 (2001), pp. 111–29; Georgina Waylen, 'You still don't understand: Why troubled engagements continue between feminists and (critical) IPE', *Review of International Studies*, 32:1 (January 2006), pp. 145–64.

<sup>22</sup>Zalewski, 'Feminist standpoint theory meets International Relations theory', p. 21.

<sup>23</sup>Marysia Zalewski, 'The debauching of feminist theory/the penetration of the postmodern', *Politics* 11:1 (April 1991), pp. 30–6.

to embrace Mary Hawkesworth's opposition to self-identified postmodernist Jane Flax. Zalewski asserted that Hawkesworth's book 'leaves one with the sense that something can be done and would revitalize (or anger) even the most disparaged and jaded feminist to action (in thought or deed)'. In contrast, 'Flax's depressing theme ... does not have a similar positive effect.'<sup>24</sup> Thus, Zalewski concluded that 'to incorporate postmodern philosophy into feminist thought ... mitigates against the feminist aim to change society for the better by working towards eradicating the oppression and exploitation of women'.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, 'we should resist the seductive temptation of postmodernism because the retreat into nihilism and relativism leads only to the situation in which nothing is done because nothing can be done, consequently, power remains exactly where it is'.<sup>26</sup>

Anybody even superficially familiar with Zalewski's work would have a hard time identifying her as the author of this piece, and clearly, her assessment of the matter has changed significantly. The reason I recall it here is because it reflects the profound difficulty feminists (and I include myself) had in their first encounters with poststructuralist theory and postmodern thinking, and Zalewski's arguments reflect the anxieties at the time. Many of these centred on feminist politics, on asking how this kind of thinking can advance the goals of the movement, often identified as 'real life problems that women face such as rape, domestic violence and sexual harrassment [*sic*]'.<sup>27</sup> How can the radical focus on critique and deconstruction produce an affirmative politics of change?

The main point of contention between modernist and postmodernist feminists was the status of the subject, that is, theoretical 'woman' or empirical 'women', as an anchor of feminist truth claims and politics. Postmodernists pulled the rug from under the standpoint approaches as they multiplied and destabilised the feminine subject, portraying it as always situated and intersected by multiple axes of difference, and as always fragile and preliminary in its performativity. If there were no such thing as woman or women, what could ground feminist scholarship and praxis? If there were no coherent women's movement, whose politics should feminist scholars support?<sup>28</sup>

Throughout the 1990s and into the new century, Zalewski grappled with the practical effects of a postmodern perspective. Her 2000 book, *Feminism after Postmodernism*, significantly subtitled *Theorizing Through Practice*,<sup>29</sup> walks us through the various arguments of modernist and postmodernist feminists. Using the case of reproductive technologies, it shows that modernist and postmodernist orientations yield very different ways of approaching such technologies and with them, different conundrums about how to do feminist politics. *Feminism after Postmodernism* refuses to endorse one approach over the other, suggesting that tensions between the two approaches are not decidable: the 'practical differences [between modernist and postmodernist feminism] cannot (and possibly even should not) be bridged'.<sup>30</sup> The analysis itself in this way disrupts conventions of scholarly coherence, making a nod to a postmodernist methodology that accepts the messiness of truths.

Postmodernism for Zalewski is a form of academic practice. Indeed, she suggests that theory should become a verb, it should become *theorising*. We should not think of theories as tools to

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>28</sup>For key texts, see Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); Linda Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>29</sup>Marysia Zalewski, *Feminism After Postmodernism?: Theorising Through Practice* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 30. Even though she progressively embraces postmodernism, she reiterates the importance of understanding standpoints in a recent interview: 'It, of course, matters very much "who we are" and "from where we speak", especially when we profess knowledge in some form or other.' However, she cautions that 'imagining we can control that, or isolate which bit belongs where, is suggestive of a lingering faith in the "God's eye view", which feminists have demonstrated as theoretically and politically bereft'. Harcourt et al., 'Assessing, engaging, and enacting worlds', p. 170.

help us explain a world out there or to inform our politics of emancipation. Rather than creating theory that can be used, we should think of theorising as a way of life, an everyday activity, a practice rather than a prelude to praxis. Opening up the matter in this way, she also questions the privileged position of the academic; if theorising is an everyday activity then perhaps the activist also is a theorist and the academic also is a practitioner.<sup>31</sup> Politics then is no longer relegated to activists and practitioners; it is also something that theorists are engaged in. Theory and praxis are collapsed into the practice of theorising.

Disciplinary politics, and in particular the progressive policing of feminist thought in IR became the terrain for Zalewski's form of political theorising. And her questioning came to encompass both developments within feminist IR and the backlash from those seeking to guard the field of IR. Why, she asks, has it been so easy and seemingly 'natural' to leave behind the category 'woman' and replace it with gender? Why the 'tendency to represent the category of woman as intellectually inadequate and generally superficial',<sup>32</sup> therefore in need of overcoming? Are feminists trying to inure themselves against the taint of woman? It is this taint that allows mainstream critiques of feminism to accuse it of political pandering to special interests, trivial in its contributions, and best when embedded in real theories, such as, for example, critical theory and postmodernism. This taint marginalises feminist research, keeping it as an optional extra. Zalewski provides a scathing critique of these tendencies in IR, and in so doing questions the dualism between essentialism and constructivism that authorises gender over woman. Rather than abandoning woman, perhaps it is necessary to 'release the category into a future of multiple significations'.<sup>33</sup>

We may now be able to understand why Zalewski rejected the notion that scholars should be accountable to the movement. A 2003 article spells out the matter, recalling that the movement was anchored in the identity of woman/women together with the exclusions (of queer and trans people) and racisms this has entailed: 'It is time for Women's Studies to be exciting *and* subversive again and work with – rather than against – its paradoxes and contradictions. Rejecting the requirement to be accountable to the women's liberation movement might be a place to begin.'<sup>34</sup> Rather than joining others declaring that Women's Studies is dead, however, the article argues in favour of a shift from standpoint approaches to recognising women as 'an incoherent category'.<sup>35</sup>

Drawing on Wendy Brown's appropriation of Jacques Derrida, the article also introduces the idea of 'haunting' as a methodological entry point to explaining 'how we might "learn to live" with "the permanent disruption of the usual oppositions that render our world *coherent*"'.<sup>36</sup> This allows Zalewski to argue that, despite problems with its inflexible adherence to the subject of woman, Women's Studies 'must live'. Representations of Women's Studies as outdated and incompetent may be haunted by a more general association of femininity with irrationality. It is thus premature to discard Women's Studies; instead the field needs to embrace the incoherence of the feminine subject.

Hauntings become a key methodological tool for Zalewski, following also the work of Avery Gordon.<sup>37</sup> Zalewski uses it in her engagements with the Northern Ireland conflict, which for her requires engaging with dominant representations of this conflict. She uncovers in these

<sup>31</sup>Marysia Zalewski, "All these theories yet the bodies keep piling up": Theorists, theories and theorizing', in Steve Smith, Ken Booth, and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *International Relations: Positivism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 340–53.

<sup>32</sup>Zalewski, 'Where is woman in International Relations?', p. 850.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 862, citing Butler.

<sup>34</sup>Marysia Zalewski, 'Is Women's Studies dead?', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4:2 (2003), p. 130; emphases in the original.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 126; citing Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>37</sup>Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

representations ‘gender ghosts’, including, for example, images ‘of feminists who *think* (as opposed to *analyze*), and culturalists who *resort to* (as opposed to using rational explanations)’.<sup>38</sup> For Zalewski, the failure of the Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition is haunted by the inferiority of femininity, which no valuing of difference (in the discourse of the Coalition) could overcome, and this easily relegated its efforts to a ‘helpmate’ role.<sup>39</sup> Hauntology thus is a methodology for telling different stories by reading a text against itself, by looking at what is unsaid and ignored. Hauntology seeks to articulate ‘how the (un)thought, the (un)imagined, the forgotten, the disliked, the abject, the feared and the (un)remembered are drained and expunged by conventional social science methodologies’.<sup>40</sup> It recognises (following Gordon) that all these have made their mark on time, yet are not visible, and (following Derrida) that the centre, the norm, or the hegemon relies for its existence on peripheries.<sup>41</sup> Gender serves to designate these peripheries, that which is hidden, outside, excluded or Other.

The worlds of government and activism fade into the background in this methodology. But for Zalewski the scholarly world is not independent of these worlds: ‘In the postfoundational imaginary, representation is all there is.’ Therefore academic representations inhabit a ‘similar textual/political space as more conventional analyzed social and cultural practices’.<sup>42</sup> And because representation is all there is, and representation is itself political, we must let go of the idea that scholarship becomes political only when it is taken up by policymakers, that is, when it (unpolitically) identifies causes that (politically) inform solutions. The political task of the scholar is instead to apprehend ‘sedimented layers of previous interpretations’ and ‘weave alternative path(s) through these sedimentations’.<sup>43</sup> It entails showing, among other things, how that which appears to be absent (such as gender in the Northern Ireland conflict) actually has political effects. Scholarly interventions thus are political interventions.

The conclusion is persuasive. The ‘women’s liberation movement’ has lost legitimacy because it was built on a discredited social identity. Because it does not stand outside the politics of representation, it cannot serve as an anchor of feminist scholarship. Such scholarship instead needs to deconstruct existing discourses and practices and uncover hidden gender ghosts. In so doing, the scholar becomes a practitioner and activist as much as the activist also is a theorist; movement politics lose their privileged status and, like scholarship, become an object of deconstruction. Theory and *praxis* are merged into knowledge *practices* that encompass advocating, lobbying, planning, and legislating as well as scholarship, writing, and teaching. As Zalewski reaffirmed at a 2008 roundtable: ‘aren’t our classrooms sites of political action? ... Isn’t the discipline of IR an active site of political exclusion and exception.’ And conversely, ‘do we really want to bestow ownership of theory to academics/intellectuals?’<sup>44</sup>

### Encountering (feminist) violence with low theory

The knowledge practices of that other world of government and activism pushed into the foreground in the new millennium. Like others, Zalewski watched with fascination, and sometimes horror, how gender became a common-sense category in policy circles around the world, how it seemed to smoothly resonate with neoliberal agendas and counterterrorist strategies, and how feminism became complicit in securing international power relations, including ironically

<sup>38</sup>Marysia Zalewski, ‘Gender ghosts in McGarry and O’Leary and representations of the conflict in Northern Ireland’, *Political Studies*, 53:1 (March 2005), p. 213.

<sup>39</sup>Marysia Zalewski, ‘Intervening in Northern Ireland: Critically re-thinking representations of the conflict’, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 9:4 (December 2006), pp. 479–97.

<sup>40</sup>Zalewski, ‘Distracted reflections on the production’, p. 52.

<sup>41</sup>Zalewski, ‘Gender ghosts in McGarry and O’Leary’, p. 207.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>43</sup>Zalewski, ‘Intervening in Northern Ireland’, p. 484, citing Jameson.

<sup>44</sup>Hutchings et al., ‘Roundtable discussion’, p. 179.

gender relations. This was accompanied by the emergence of a 'neo-feminism' in the field of IR that jettisoned feminist methodologies in its quest to understand gender.<sup>45</sup> To some extent, these developments confirmed postmodern suspicions of the dangers of being too attached to the category 'woman', and of the neoliberal will to power translated into wanting to 'do something' to ameliorate inequalities. They also posed in a new way the question of the relationship between feminist scholarship and praxis.

In a 2009 article tellingly entitled 'Feminist Fatigues', Maria Stern and Zalewski suggest that feminists fail because of the 'implicit and explicit expectation that a central task of feminism is to produce effective and productive knowledge in a conventionally recognizably temporal and political manner'.<sup>46</sup> But 'the political' is not just 'about appropriate legislation and the obstacles of translating political and legislative commitments into effective action'<sup>47</sup> as the vast literature on gender mainstreaming seems to suggest. Instead, Stern and Zalewski argue – in a fashion reminiscent of the debates about the feminist standpoint – that the political is about constructions of meaning, in particular constructing categories such as 'women' or 'human', and determining the boundaries that hold these categories in place and how these boundaries are policed.

Feminism, now not through activism but through the strategy of gender mainstreaming, has become complicit in securing gender boundaries. Thus, even though gender today appears to be ubiquitous and apparently easily understood, the embracing of gender in public policy and discourse conceals 'residual and robust epistemological and ontological practices that work to retain attachments to gender' as an always heteronormative binary.<sup>48</sup> These attachments are as problematic in policy texts, such as the UK's Gender Equality Duty Legislation, as they are in feminist IR's critiques of militarist constructions of masculinity. Both discourses are secured through 'sexgender', that is they performatively reproduce the 'sexed identities and attached gendered harms' they set out to eviscerate.<sup>49</sup> The same is true in the field of human rights; in talk about women's human rights, 'the very attachment to the identity of gender, an identity which tautologically transpires as injurious especially, it seems, for women, ... (re)produces itself as injury'.<sup>50</sup> This is so because women are legible as human only to the extent they align with expectations of their gender, that is, 'as long as they don't forget to stay women and don't become ambiguous'.<sup>51</sup> The attachment to gender or sexgender leads to feminist failure as policymakers, activists, or academics revert to binary assumptions and stereotypes to justify their goals.

The disenchantment with the contemporary status of feminism comes to the fore most forcefully in a 2013 paper with Anne Sisson Runyan, which advances the concept of 'feminist violence'. On the one hand, 'feminism has been violated and perverted by governing neoliberal forces', on the other hand 'feminism's own will to governance power necessarily involved it in perpetrating violence'.<sup>52</sup> Attempts to 'do something' are thus reinterpreted as doing violence: 'shifting benefits in favour of women has costs; others will suffer'.<sup>53</sup> Perpetrated 'en route from "theory to practice"',<sup>54</sup> governmental violence builds on an unwarranted separation of theory and praxis, on not seeing that theorising is already practice. It requires a conscious intervention

<sup>45</sup>Zalewski, 'Do we understand each other yet?'

<sup>46</sup>Maria Stern and Marysia Zalewski, 'Feminist fatigue(s): Reflections on feminism and familiar fables of militarisation', *Review of International Studies*, 35:3 (July 2009), p. 613.

<sup>47</sup>Marysia Zalewski, 'Searching for the hard questions about women's human rights', in Cindy Holder and David Reidy (eds), *Human Rights: The Hard Questions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 372.

<sup>48</sup>Marysia Zalewski, "I don't even know what gender is": A discussion of the connections between gender, gender mainstreaming and feminist theory', *Review of International Studies*, 36:1 (January 2010), pp. 12, 22.

<sup>49</sup>Stern and Zalewski, 'Feminist fatigue(s)', pp. 615–16.

<sup>50</sup>Zalewski, 'Searching for the hard questions about women's human rights', p. 372.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 373, citing MacCormack.

<sup>52</sup>Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, 'Taking feminist violence seriously in feminist International Relations', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15:3 (September 2013), p. 2.

<sup>53</sup>Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations*, p. 88.

<sup>54</sup>Zalewski and Runyan, 'Taking feminist violence seriously in feminist International Relations', p. 7.



of ‘unthinking’ to counteract ‘unthinking’ portrayals, such as those that pervade spectacles of sexual violence in conflict.<sup>55</sup>

The introduction of the notion of violence to describe not just what is done to women but what feminists do comes from a deep concern about the directions of the feminist project. For Zalewski it also rings in a new humility as she recognises that deconstruction may not be exempt from perpetrating epistemic violence, as the slicing of ideas into discrete chapters and the consolidation of ‘particular ways of writing, thinking, doing and being’<sup>56</sup> are forms of violence. Her 2013 book *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* draws the conclusion of this insight, offering a pastiche of stories and interventions held together by a concern with feminist IR and deeply suffused with the theme of violence in its multiple manifestations. The book performatively produces a disjointed narrative with ‘tantalizing links left by the trace of the previous mark(er) and the ensuing contingency of connections’.<sup>57</sup> While it refuses methodological and disciplinary standards, it is sprinkled with methodological reflections, including a lengthy discussion of the ‘trail of blood’ left by methodology.<sup>58</sup>

For Zalewski, the intent of feminism is to destabilise and disturb,<sup>59</sup> a task the book fulfils superbly. But it also proposes, though in tantalising brevity, a self-consciously new way of doing feminist IR which, following Judith Halberstam, she calls ‘low theory’,<sup>60</sup> that is, ‘theory that hovers below and aside the radar of disciplined knowledges and that is assembled from eccentric texts’.<sup>61</sup> Halberstam tells us that such theory revels in ‘detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion’, which Zalewski considers ‘a more appropriate “method” for saying anything of interest or importance about the serious international/political issues we are all interested in’.<sup>62</sup> Low theory avoids the hierarchy of knowing that is indicated by the ‘high’ in high theory. According to Halberstam, the implications are multiple: Low theory seeks to privilege subjugated knowledges, that is, those knowledges that have been disqualified as inferior because they are not sufficiently erudite. Low theory also valorises failure: ‘losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world’.<sup>63</sup> Finally, low theory replaces mastery and favours conversation: it ‘seeks not so much to explain or instruct, but to involve’.<sup>64</sup> While thus combining insights from different strands of standpoint and postmodern feminism, low theory steps back decisively from calls to action or praxis: ‘Shadow feminisms take the form not of becoming, being, and doing but of shady, murky modes of undoing, unbecoming, and violating’.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

So what should be the relationship between feminist scholarship and feminist movements today? Tracing Zalewski’s trajectory leads us to understand that it cannot be a relationship between scholars who theorise and activists who engage in practice: activism entails theorising and scholarship itself is a form of political practice. Zalewski thus cautions us against seeking mastery through knowledge – even if this might be mastery from the bottom up, as in some standpoint approaches. Instead, she

<sup>55</sup>Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, ‘“Unthinking” sexual violence in a neoliberal era of spectacular terror’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 8:3 (2015), pp. 439–55.

<sup>56</sup>Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations*, p. 19.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>58</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 19–23.

<sup>59</sup>Marysia Zalewski, ‘Feminist approaches to International Relations theory in the post-Cold War period’, in *The Age of Perplexity: Rethinking the World We Knew* (London: Penguin Random House Group Editorial, 2018), p. 17.

<sup>60</sup>Following Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>61</sup>Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations*, p. 45.

<sup>62</sup>Harcourt et al., ‘Assessing, engaging, and enacting worlds’, p. 168.

<sup>63</sup>Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, kindle loc. 1. 65.

<sup>64</sup>Harcourt et al., ‘Assessing, engaging, and enacting worlds’, p. 168.

<sup>65</sup>Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, kindle loc. 1. 87.

privileges a knowledge politics of disturbing and disrupting, of unpacking gender talk and keeping open thinking spaces. Conversely, Zalewski also harbours a deep suspicion of the will to do something that is intrinsic to activism and policy work, often calling it violent. In a sense she has arrived precisely in the postmodern place that her earlier self feared, that is, the implicit suggestion that 'nothing can be done'. But, she no longer draws the conclusion that this also means 'power remains exactly where it is' because she recognises that knowing and doing are intimately imbricated.

Yet, if theory and praxis thus cannot be separated methodologically, they also cannot be collapsed sociologically. As Zalewski recognises, 'the policy world is different from academia' and 'academic (critical anyway) work and policy work are subject to different needs, roles and expectations'.<sup>66</sup> While she is critical of policy-oriented gender talk for various reasons,<sup>67</sup> she appreciates that it 'has opened up many spaces for policymakers to push agendas that were not possible before'.<sup>68</sup> But the policy world is not able to embrace complex ways of theorising gender and linger over assumptions, that is, to 'stop a while to see what thinking and theorizing paths they want to take'.<sup>69</sup> This remains the privilege of academics. So perhaps my starting question needs to be reformulated: perhaps it should not be about the relationship between theory and praxis, but between two social worlds – that of academics specialising in theorising and that of activists/practitioners wanting to get things done. For Zalewski there is an unavoidable tension in the relationship between these two worlds.

With its emphasis on the importance of conversation and on inviting involvement (rather than instruction and explanation), low theory offers the seeds of a methodology for negotiating this tension. Zalewski fleshes it out one way in her engagement with the work of the late Lily Ling. In a discussion of feminist methodologies, Zalewski, Ling, and Wendy Harcourt agree that storytelling is at the heart of all methodologies, but the question emerges of how to create spaces to listen, in particular across cultures and to 'other' feminist messages.<sup>70</sup> Ling then introduces a tool that might also be useful in encounters between feminists in academia and the policy world, which is the notion of 'chatting':

Telling stories effects what I call 'chatting'. The story itself can provide insight but the telling of it creates an atmosphere, a relationship, and a kind of meta-communication. Everyone loves a story. It reminds one of childhood treats. But stories also give listeners a venue for entering into a subject that may be too complex or frightening to consider otherwise.<sup>71</sup>

Elsewhere, Ling develops chatting from Chinese and Indian bodies of knowledge as a corollary to rationalist dialogue and deliberation, describing it as a purposeless and seemingly frivolous activity that, however, cements solidarity and 'interbeing'.<sup>72</sup> A chat does not drive towards a necessary conclusion, towards eliciting the most persuasive argument or winning a debate. Instead, there is pleasure in chatting ('everybody loves a story'), even if topics may be complex and frightening. Zalewski and Ling performed such a chat over 'tea and biscuits' at a recent conference, an act in a play written by Ling and, according to Zalewski, 'a beautiful example of how the field works when faced with the "other of thought"'.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>66</sup>Cristina Masters and Marysia Zalewski, 'Reflections on the Special Section, "Well, what is the feminist perspective on international affairs?": Theory/practice', *International Affairs*, 95:6 (November 2019), p. 1310.

<sup>67</sup>For a discussion, see Zalewski, "I don't even know what gender is".

<sup>68</sup>Masters and Zalewski, 'Reflections on the Special Section', p. 1310.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 1310.

<sup>70</sup>Harcourt et al., 'Assessing, engaging, and enacting worlds', pp. 163–4.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>72</sup>L. H. M. Ling, *The DAO of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations* (New York: Routledge Chapman & Hall, 2013), p. 123.

<sup>73</sup>Marysia Zalewski, 'Forget(ting) feminism? Investigating relationality in International Relations', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:5 (September 2019), p. 629.

As a methodology for feminist knowing across differences, chatting suggests a politics and mode of creating knowledge quite different from establishing a standpoint or deconstructing a discourse. It refuses an image of knowing as a programme for doing on the one hand, or of forgetting, violating, and undoing on the other. Instead, it focuses on storytelling, on the listening this requires, and on the way in which chatting ‘among ourselves’<sup>74</sup> affirms solidarities. It invites difficult conversations that might make possible less hurtful encounters between feminist academics and practitioners.<sup>75</sup> The question about the relationship between feminist scholarship and feminist praxis thus may need to be reformulated yet again: perhaps it is also a question about the meanings of ‘relationship’ and feminist ways of relating.

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<sup>74</sup>Ling, *The DAO of World Politics*, p. 123.

<sup>75</sup>See Aiko Holvikivi, ‘Gender experts and critical friends: Research in relations of proximity’, *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, 2:1 (22 February 2019), p. 139.