

FORUM ARTICLE

Conceptus interruptus: Forestalling sureties about violence and feminism

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Abstract

Forestalling sureties about what constitutes violence and feminism and the relationships between violence and feminism have been significant themes in the work of feminist International Relations theorist Marysia Zalewski. I follow how Zalewski, through her work and work with others including myself, interrupts well-trodden 'trails' of violence and feminism to open up thinking about both. I consider how her provocative work on violence and particularly feminist violence prefigures and advances cutting-edge critical thought on violence as represented in the 'Histories of Violence' project. What I call her 'palimpsestic' or multilayered and intertextual approach to violence reveals it as not only destructive, but also productive in terms of breaking with deadening conventions. I also consider her conceptualisation of feminist violence as both epistemic and militant over time in relation to some contemporary feminist insurgencies, the kinds of insurgencies that serve as her muses for breaking out of forms of 'secured' feminism and opening space for unbounded feminist thought. Consistent with her insistence that theory (and writing) should provide uncomfortable openings, not comforting foreclosures, I end not with a conclusion about her work, but rather echo her call to resist the kind of 'knowing' that suffocates critical thinking and (re) generative feminist thought.

Keywords: Violence; Feminism; Feminist Violence; Secured Feminism; Insecured Knowledge; Palimpsest

Introduction

Where to start, to alight, when the ground is not firm and the walls are shaking? When it 'seems impossible; impossible to see or hold the shape of nothing'?¹ Such is the sense of productive vertigo that Marysia Zalewski's work engenders, disabling sureties and boundaries in the service of insecurity what we think we know about violence, both international and sexual, and about feminism. For Zalewski, violence is 'slippery', both destructive and productive, and feminism, like all theories, can do violence, both destructively and productively. Thus, she does not allow us to stand on any firm ground about what violence or feminism is or does. Her style of inquiry and writing, too, constitutes continual interventions into foreclosing narratives and easy conclusions. She makes heads (or, more accurately, minds) hurt, but in ways that open them to other possibilities. There is no consummation (heterocoital pun intended) in Zalewski's thought, rather a series of interruptions to normalising conceptualisations, discourses, and practices.

This is best seen in her astonishing *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (2013),² in which she most departs from typical academic form. Drawing on the children's game of

¹Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 2.

²This is part of her large corpus of work, which includes such earlier books as *Feminism After Postmodernism?: Theorizing Through Practice* (London: Routledge, 2000) and many other co-authored and co-edited volumes and articles on postpositivism, visual politics, masculinities, sexual violence, and feminist IR thought and methods, several of which are cited in this

exquisite corpse in which a player provides text or an image on a piece of paper and then folds it over for the next player to do the same and so on to produce ‘something ridiculously strange’,³ she provides a series of vignettes, full of images, poetry, and film references as well as text intermixing theory and personal narrative that at times resembles a stream of consciousness. These constitute a range of takes on feminism, gender, race, and violence inside and outside International Relations (IR). This exercise does not seek any definitive answers as to what these terms mean or how they should be deployed, but rather constitutes, I argue, a palimpsest – ‘a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times, the previous text having been imperfectly erased and remaining therefore still partially visible’.⁴ Jacqui Alexander deploys this figure to signal a ‘rescramble’ of ‘the “here and now” and the “then and there” to a “here and there” and a “then and now” and makes visible what Payal Banerjee calls the ideological traffic between and among formations that are otherwise positioned as dissimilar’ in time and space.⁵ While Alexander finds the palimpsest an apt metaphor for seeing the continuance of the colonial in the neocolonial and neoimperial (the former never erased or supplanted) and the practices of (hetero)sexualisation and racialisation as never separate from colonial and modern state formations, Zalewski’s palimpsestic approach questions not only progress narratives about modernity (as postcolonial, postracial, postfeminist), but also progress narratives about feminism, gender, violence, and IR, and particularly feminist IR.

For every seeming feminist ‘gain’, change, much less transformation, has proven elusive. Reflecting on charges against feminism as ‘unpalatable’ as it has entered the classroom, IR, and beyond to challenge everyday, unceasing, and often hidden violence, particularly in the form of sexual and gender-based violence, Zalewski asks:

Why is feminism so difficult? Unpalatable? ... I mean do people say ‘can you make the holocaust more palatable? And apartheid? ... ‘People’ generally want to hear about atrocity and celebrate change. Why is feminism, which, conceptually, at least, could be considered similar to the range of other atrocity-acknowledging concepts, be so damned unpalatable in comparison?⁶

Still treated as ‘intruder knowledge’, feminism, particularly in IR, must travel the trail of disciplinary acceptability ‘despite the lengths feminist and other critical scholars have gone to depict the political, epistemological, ontological, and methodological violences which are associated with judging feminism within the frame of IR’.⁷ At the same time, international policymakers recently taking up gender as the latest ‘solution’ to global ills assume they know what gender is (usually synonymous with the assumed known category of ‘women’) and that it is easily inserted into and manipulable within policy priorities. Gender becomes a box to be ticked, a thing to be mainstreamed, resulting in an ‘extravagant failure around gender; at least, we have not witnessed the changes in gender that are assumed to be necessary for equality to be convincingly reached, or for gender-based violence to be a rare or unusual occurrence’.⁸

It is these hard and soft violences to the full range of gendered bodies, the demands of feminism, and the complexities of gender that Zalewski wants to continuously disturb lest such

piece and which are reflective of her abiding commitments to feminist poststructural theorising that unmoors feminist thought from corporeal and temporal attachments so as to see it as a mobile and inexhaustible source of and force for critical thought.

³Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations*, p. 1.

⁴M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, and the Sacred* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 190.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations*, p. 34.

⁷Ibid., p. 25.

⁸Ibid., p. 78.

violences produce ever more complacencies and complicities. In this way, she is an advocate of violence, specifically feminist violence, about which Zalewski and I have written through several collaborations we have engaged in over the last decade. What we mean by feminist violence is encapsulated in the following:

As feminist scholars we acknowledge the violent force of feminism as something required in order to challenge hegemonic knowledges and practices. For many this appears as a provocative statement, yet as we have argued, ‘feminism, in all its multiplicity, is part progenitor and product of modernity, but also antithetical to modernity. Shattering myths, blurring and betraying boundaries, obliterating social/sexual contracts – feminism has vigorously deployed and celebrated these kinds of violence.’⁹

As I write this in the midst of a winter storm, I am simultaneously watching the live streaming video of the third annual Women’s March (#WomensWave) in Washington, DC, the epicentre of the ongoing government shutdown precipitated by Trump and his racist obsession with a border wall. Throughout the morning and afternoon of 19 January 2019, majority women of colour and indigenous women (cis and trans) on the march stage raised their voices in unapologetic and just anger and rage as well as in song. They called for doing productive violence to a system based on attacking, murdering, disappearing, incarcerating, poisoning, impoverishing, and displacing black, brown, red, poor, laboring, reproductive, queer, trans, disabled, Islamic, multi-denominational, and non-human bodies within, at, and beyond borders, while also to a feminism that is not inclusive and intersectional¹⁰ in theory and practice. What took centre stage in the media, however, leading up to it was a charge of anti-Semitism raised against one of the organisers for her association with Louis Farrakhan, black nationalist leader of the US Nation of Islam who continues to make anti-Semitic remarks. Black organiser Tamika Mallory unequivocally denounced anti-Semitism before and during the march and decrying anti-Semitism along with a range of other ‘isms’ has always been on the March platform, but a handful of sponsors did withdraw (notably the Democratic National Committee). But as another lead organiser, Palestinian Muslim American Linda Sarsour, argued, an intersectional movement is inevitably ‘messy’, requiring hard and uncomfortable conversations.¹¹ Indeed, the evocation of a messy movement became an anthem at the march. But the messiness that comes with trying to forge an intersectional movement, as Sarsour and many other march speakers vocalised, should not deflect from the real controversies on which the march and the movement are focused – the wholesale violence (represented by Trump but beyond him) of authoritarianism, white nationalism, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia, ableism, classism, and ageism. This deflection away from the seventy-page Women’s March 2019 Agenda,¹² released during the march in the wake of its successful goal last year to take back the US House of Representatives by electing progressive and diverse women and to be used to hold current and prospective elected leaders accountable, is the kind of violence to which Zalewski brings particular attention – putting feminism back in its place/on its heels through trivialising, vilifying,

⁹Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, ‘Feminist violence and the in/securing of women and feminism’, in Caron E. Gentry, Laura J. Shepherd, and Laura Sjoborg (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Gender and Security* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 106.

¹⁰Intersectionality, as first posited by Kimberle Crenshaw (‘Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color’, *Stanford Law Review*, 43:6 (1991), pp. 1241–99) refers to the structural and political interconnections among race, gender, class, national origin, sexuality, and other oppressions and identities.

¹¹Ellie Smith, ‘Women’s March organizers respond to controversy leading up to rally’, *ABC News*, available at: {<https://abc-news.go.com/beta-story-container/US/womens-march-organizers-respond-controversy-leading-rally/story?id=60469238>} accessed 19 January 2019.

¹²Women’s March, ‘Women’s Agenda 2019’, available at {<https://womensmarch.com/agenda>} accessed 19 January 2019.

and admonishing it for ‘unladylike’ (read violent) behaviour, particularly when feminism has a face of colour.¹³

In one of her critiques of the work whiteness does in and around feminism, Zalewski recounts the challenge Sunera Thobani, a Muslim feminist scholar and activist of South Asian descent who once led the Canadian National Action Committee on the Status of Women as its first ‘visible minority’ president, made to white feminist analyses of the post-9/11 War on Terror. Thobani took on such feminists as Judith Butler and Zillah Eisenstein, normally seen as having radical – specifically queer or anti-racist – credentials, for failing to critique or insufficiently critiquing the ways in which US victimhood narratives following 9/11 served to reinscribe ‘white supremacy and white racial innocence’.¹⁴ But it was Thobani’s claim just after 9/11 in her ‘War Frenzy’ speech that the US ‘is soaked in blood’ and all should resist it that made her the subject of approbation by members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police who labelled her comments ‘hate speech’ and members of the public who called for her firing from the University of British Columbia.¹⁵ Ironically, Thobani’s speech now appears in a compendium of great Canadian speeches,¹⁶ but feminists of colour continue to face disciplining violence for their challenges to racist state violence.

Most recently, formerly incarcerated radical civil rights icon and black feminist scholar Angela Davis had a human rights award she was to receive in early 2019 from the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute briefly rescinded following a charge of anti-Semitism by a local Jewish organisation for her support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement directed against the Israeli occupation of Palestine.¹⁷ Members of the Birmingham civil rights community (some of whom Davis grew up with in a Birmingham neighbourhood known as Dynamite Hill for being most bombed by the Ku Klux Klan), the Birmingham mayor, and Jewish Voices for Peace, which also circulated a petition among academics, protested this action, arguing it stems from a misinformed view that support for Palestinian human rights is somehow anti-Semitic and that justice must be seen as indivisible as Professor Davis has long argued. Such was the substance, too, of a National Women’s Studies Association statement condemning the decision (later reversed in the midst of protest) to rescind the human rights award as an all-too-familiar form of ‘political silencing’.¹⁸

This kind of feminist violence against violence against intersectional/transnational feminism is the type Zalewski is interested in theoretically, stemming from her worry that white, Western feminisms are not reflexive enough about their implication in ‘the trail of blood’¹⁹ that accompanies white, Western hegemony, but also from her concerns about the hemming in of feminism as it becomes institutionalised in academe and policy circles. What she repeatedly comes back to in myriad ways, particularly in *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* and writings since, is that feminist *thought* need not be seen as so easily constrained, can always exceed the barriers constructed around it, and is at its best when it takes its responsibility seriously for drawing blood in struggles against hegemonic orders.

In what follows, I ruminate more on Zalewski’s contributions to thinking about violence and feminist violence, particularly in her work with me. In the section on violence, I put her work in conversation with the ‘Histories of Violence’ project.²⁰ I do this not only to situate Zalewski’s

¹³Both Mallory and Sarsour resigned from the Women’s March board in September 2019 amid continuing political backlash.

¹⁴Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations*, p. 119.

¹⁵Sunera Thobani, ‘War Frenzy’, Colours of Resistance Archive, available at: {<http://www.coloursofresistance.org/645/war-frenzy/>} accessed 19 January 2019.

¹⁶Dennis Gruending (ed.), *Great Canadian Speeches: Talk of the Nation* (Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2004).

¹⁷Birmingham Civil Rights Institute reaffirms award for Angela Davis’, *Democracy Now*, available at: {https://www.democracynow.org/2019/1/25/breaking_birmingham_civil_rights_institute_reaffirms} accessed 26 January 2019.

¹⁸NWSA Statements, ‘NWSA Statement in Support of Angela Davis’, available at: {<https://www.nwsa.org/statements#Angela%20Davis>} accessed 26 January 2019.

¹⁹Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations*, p. 119.

²⁰‘Histories of Violence’ available at: {<https://www.historiesofviolence.com/>} accessed 26 January 2019.

work in the slipstream of contemporary critical thought on violence, but more importantly to show how her palimpsestic mode of theorising, which excavates layers of feminist and other critical thought and struggle in relation to violence and re-scrambles them in time and space with reference to fiction, art, film, poetry, popular culture, and sites of activism and everyday life to break out of conventional ways of thinking about violence prefigures and has long interwoven the bricolage such a project represents in bringing together theorists, artists, writers, and activists to interrogate and destabilise what we think we know about violence. In the section on feminist violence, I consider (with continued reference to the 'Histories of Violence' and brief reference again to the Women's March Agenda 2019 as a nod to the kinds of on-the-ground destabilisations of what gender-based violence is and how to address it that Zalewski looks for), the implications of her work for insecurity or unmooring feminism from deadening and death-dealing modes of thinking (and acting). I end not with a conclusion but a Zalewskiesque provocation to think sideways, in between, and outside the box to create (uncomfortable) openings, not (comforting) foreclosures.

On violence

Unwilling to conform to IR conventions that privilege militarised interstate violence, Zalewski relies heavily on poststructural and postcolonial, feminist and non-feminist, theory not found in mainstream (and even some critical) IR to inform and enliven her thinking about violence. A host of leading intellectuals, writers, and artists, past and present, who have grappled with the question of violence, some of whom have influenced Zalewski's work or are highly consonant with it, are assembled in 'The Histories of Violence' project led by political philosopher Brad Evans of the University of Bristol. This project entails an online and ongoing collection of interviews conducted for the *New York Times* between 2014–17 and since for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* as well as multiple video vignettes featuring such luminaries across the humanities and social sciences as Slavoj Žižek, Henry Giroux, Gayatri Spivak, Noam Chomsky, Saskia Sassen, Zygmunt Bauman, Lauren Berlant, Elaine Scarry, Cynthia Enloe, and Michael Shapiro. It also includes introductory lectures, visual texts, and resources on the work of such giants as Hannah Arendt, Franz Fanon, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Susan Sontag. Interview titles range from 'Confronting the Intolerable', 'To Feel the Worlds of Pain and Beauty', and 'The Violence of Art' to 'The Violence of Forgetting', 'The Intimate Life of Violence', 'Without Exception', and 'Non-Violence and the Ghost of Fascism', to name just few. The video vignette collections include 'Disposable Life', 'Ten Years of Terror', and the in-progress 'States of Disappearance'. The project is particularly steeped in the affective and visual turns in critical scholarship that Zalewski's work so well models. In considering the correspondences between some contributions to this project and what Zalewski has brought to our understanding of violence through her writings before and since its inception (including some she has done with me), we see how she is not only a part of such cutting-edge thinking about violence, but also interweaves such theorising in novel and infinitely layered and contrapuntal ways to resist any sureties about what violence is and does.

Most closely intersecting with her understanding of theory as violence is this characterisation by David Theo Goldberg in 'Violence to Thought':

Intellectual intervention, theory too, can be violent in the operative senses of the term. Violence can disrupt, bring up short those at whom it is aimed. This disruptive sense of violence – what we might call the 'violence of critique' – can be productive in some ways. It can get people to place into question the taken for granted, to strike off in a different direction, to unsettle the all too easily given and settled practices.²¹

²¹Brad Evans and David Theo Goldberg, 'Histories of violence: Violence to thought', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (10 July 2017), available at: {<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-of-violence-violence-to-thought#>} accessed 26 January 2019.

In our first foray together, ‘Taking Feminist Violence Seriously in International Relations’,²² we declare our affinity with this kind of epistemic violence, which we argue feminism wields. But we also entertain recent anxieties about how this violence may be becoming muted, perverted, or disarticulated by ‘violating’ forces – in particular neoliberalism. We examine three such narratives (by Heather Eisenstein, Janet Halley, and Angela McRobbie) not to determine whether or not feminism has been (seemingly irretrievably) weakened, distorted, or undone or which account is more persuasive, but rather to consider what violences may be at work in these pictures of the violations of feminism. We acknowledge that feminists – and women and marginalised subjects more generally – have been subjected to all kinds of everyday and often unseen violence, ranging from a dismissive smile to not being heard to brutal and often deadly bodily assaults – a recognition ‘that violence is not reducible to the punctual acts that bring it to full expression in bodily aggression’, as Brian Massumi puts it in ‘Affect, Violence, and Violence – The Personal is Not Political’.²³ And we acknowledge that feminists most insistently ‘urge that we need to keep observing, documenting and interrogating violence to know it better’.²⁴ But we also ask, prompted by Zalewski’s constant interrogation of what we think we know, ‘does this persistent focus on violence and insisting that the gaze of policymakers, NGOs and governments be trained on previously unrecognized violence do something *other* than explicitly desired?’²⁵ Following Sontag and Žižek, we wonder if Western(ised) ‘feminists might be complicit in the pain of others/’others’ through the very looking at, and empathizing with, their pain’²⁶ and doing more harm than good through imperatives to act on that pain, imperatives that carry their own violences, especially when acted out from positions of power and privilege.

To acknowledge feminist (and other critical) complicities with violence requires an abandonment, we argue, of notions of feminist ‘innocence’, consonant with Simona Forti’s observation in her contribution to the ‘Histories of Violence’ project that ‘being a victim in itself does not automatically confer a certificate of innocence’.²⁷ Feminism and other critical thought are ‘never outside the scene of violence’,²⁸ as Zalewski so bitingly writes. Thus, it is important for feminists to not just see and catalogue violence as if we could ‘maintain clear and sharp boundaries around what counts as a violent deed’,²⁹ but to follow the ‘varying trails of violence’³⁰ in all their slipperiness, messiness, and complexities. This is similar to what Lauren Berlant counsels in ‘Without Exception: On the Ordinarity of Violence’. As she puts it, ‘refusing the self-evidence of violence, insisting on tracking its intricate technologies, finding new genres for naming and responding to it (see all the proliferating Twitter handles) are necessary for reconceiving and doing damage to the reproduction of structural – predictable and conventional – violence’.³¹

²²Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, ‘Taking feminist violence seriously in feminist International Relations’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15:3 (2013), pp. 293–313.

²³Brad Evans and Brian Massumi, ‘Histories of violence: Affect, power, violence – the political is not personal’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (13 November 2017), available at: {<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-of-violence-affect-power-violence-the-political-is-not-personal>} accessed 26 January 2019.

²⁴Zalewski and Runyan, ‘Taking feminist violence seriously’, p. 297.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷Brad Evans and Simona Forti, ‘Who is “evil”, and who is the victim?’, *New York Times* (16 September 2016), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/17/opinion/who-is-evil-and-who-is-the-victim.html>} accessed 30 January 2019.

²⁸Zalewski and Runyan, ‘Taking feminist violence seriously’, p. 308.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 297.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 295.

³¹Brad Evans and Lauren Berlant, ‘Without exception: On the ordinariness of violence’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (30 July 2018), available at: {<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/without-exception-on-the-ordinariness-of-violence>} accessed 30 January 2019.

Zalewski is particularly intent throughout her work in tracking the rivulets of violence, in recognition that ‘traces of violence continue to circulate throughout our societies’³² and as a matter of methodology. I will return to how we follow ‘trails of blood’ in our 2013 article to see how they animate problematic claims about feminism as dead or dying in the next section, but here I want to follow how she enlists various genres to find, expose, and trouble the footprints violence produces and leaves behind. What I learned in working with Zalewski is that she starts inquiry not with words (despite her tremendous facility with them), but with images. Among the images she shared with me early on in our collaborative life were from Francisco Goya’s monumental series on the ‘Disasters of War’, original prints I subsequently saw firsthand in Madrid’s Reina Sofia Museum. Says artist Jack Chapman about ‘Disasters of War’, gory depictions, not in color but in black and grey, of tortured and dead bodies that piled up during Napoleon’s war on Spain:

Goya’s brilliance then is about the materiality of the body overlaid arguably with even greater symbolic resonance and purpose. The body that hangs, the body that drips, the body that is mutilated for the sake of it, it is not redemptive optimism that conveys meaning, but the profound nihilism and self-doubt that characterizes the modern world.³³

Steeping us in these images as we pondered writing about violence was not to write about Goya, the war he protested, or these particular searing images he used to do so to challenge the heroism of war, but rather Zalewski’s way of getting us to feel and think about how war’s ‘grandiosity and authority’ is belied by its ‘violent absurdity’, a theme she takes up in her ‘Thinking Feminism and Race in the War on Terror’.³⁴

Other pictures she shared included more contemporary images of muzzled, suspended, and tortured female bodies from memes, book covers, and art created and circulated in feminist work. This served as a reminder to us that, as painter Bracha Ettinger writes in ‘Art in a Time of Atrocity’:

Painting is about bringing into visibility that which is not ordinarily visible, including the forms that violence takes. Painting produces a suspension in time. It not only makes us confront the atrocities of the past, but provokes how we see and feel about the present moment.³⁵

Rarely, however, does the quotidian violence against women’s bodies rise to the level of atrocities, so we experimented with making associations between an account offered many decades ago by radical feminist Kate Millett on the family-perpetrated torture and murder of a US Midwestern teenage girl and an account of torture of a suspected Arab male terrorist provided in the US Senate Committee Report on Torture released in 2014 in the wake of the George W. Bush administration’s legalisation of torture by the US government. These passages that begun our 2015 “‘Unthinking’ Sexual Violence in a Neoliberal Era of Spectacular Terror”,³⁶ although symmetrical in terms of the kinds of violent deeds visited on these quite different and differently situated bodies and by quite different and differently situated perpetrators, caused us to argue not for, but

³²Brad Evans and Bracha L. Ettinger, ‘To feel the world’s pain and its beauty’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (27 February 2017), available at: {<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/feel-worlds-pain-beauty>} accessed 30 January 2019.

³³Brad Evans and Jack Chapman, ‘Histories of violence: The violence of art’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (5 October 2017), available at: {<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-of-violence-the-violence-of-art>} accessed 30 January 2019.

³⁴Marysia Zalewski, ‘Thinking feminism and race through the war on terror’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 6:2 (2013), pp. 313–15.

³⁵Brad Evans and Bracha L. Ettinger, ‘Art in a time of atrocity’, *New York Times* (16 December 2016), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/16/opinion/art-in-a-time-of-atrocity.html>} accessed 2 February 2019.

³⁶Marysia Zalewski and Runyan, “‘Unthinking’ sexual violence in a neoliberal era of spectacular terror”, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 8:3 (2015), pp. 439–55.

against ‘revitalizing the equation between sexual/intimate violence and terrorism’,³⁷ which some feminists past and present advocate in the hopes of elevating domestic violence to the level that terrorism ‘enjoys’ in terms of public and policy attention. We argue that, in fact, sexual violence, as it has been taken up on the global stage as a scourge perpetrated primarily by ‘brown men’ and suffered most by Global South women to be combatted by civilising missions carried out by well-meaning international actors from the UN to Western celebrities taking up the cause, is already being treated as terrorism. Rather than seeing ‘the securitization (and concomitant surveillance) of international and domestic life that is especially directed at racialized (male) bodies’ now entailed in countering both conventional terrorism and sexual violence as ‘perhaps worth the price of raising sexual violence to the high politics of terrorism, we suggest instead that these are among the effects of post-feminist enclosures of anti-sexual violence politics and foreclosures of critical feminist thought and activism’.³⁸ Post-feminism figures here as neoliberal governance feminism, which imagines a saviour mission on the part of already liberated and enlightened feminist actors and feminist-inspired institutions that have purveyed a veritable flood of accounts and images of widespread and brutal sexual violence, particularly as a weapon of war in the Global South, in the hopes of stemming it. Turning our attention to this global mediascape in which sexual violence now appears so prominently, we consider what work this spectacularisation of sexual violence, eliding with the spectacularisation of terrorism writ large, is doing, both to understandings of sexual violence and responses to it.

Zalewski’s keen attunement to the theoretical resurfacing of Guy Debord’s 1960s work on the spectacle particularly informs this analysis. Although Debord was concerned with the spectacle as a mechanism that tightened the hold of capitalism and consumerism by dulling the senses and the mind, it also has a long association with torture. As Elaine Scarry notes in ‘The Intimate Life of Violence’:

In Vietnam in the 1970s, the torture room was called ‘the cinema room’; in the Philippines, it was called ‘the production room’; in Chile, it was called ‘the blue-lit stage’. The cruelty at Abu Ghraib was elaborately photographed; it was meant to be viewed by the prison guards and torturers (perhaps even for their pleasure, or their sense of triumph – hence the famous ‘thumbs up’ picture).³⁹

In such cases, torture is rendered as a visual, cinematic spectacle to heighten torturers’ sense of control, deaden their responses to the pain of others, and even revel in that pain. When sexual violence is deployed as a spectacle by human rights advocates, under the firm belief that somehow this will move those horrified by such images to action (which can carry its own violences especially when done in the name of civilising missions), visual consumption becomes the way in which we (particularly Western/Northern viewers) are to ‘know’ sexual violence (particularly in the South) and affectively and effectively respond to it, cutting off or ‘cauterizing’ critical thought about what we are seeing, feeling, and doing. What Zalewski dubs the ‘visibility paradox’ is how ‘optic abundance invites and nurtures suffocation of intellectual energy’.⁴⁰

To demonstrate how visibility paradox operates to actually conceal, as Brian Massumi argues, that violence ‘looms over us as an unspoken threat that is applied unequally, depending on the color of a body’s skin, its gender, and other conventional markers that the exercise of power-over uses selectively to trigger itself into operation’⁴¹ and to actually shore up ‘the insidious work of

³⁷Ibid., p. 439.

³⁸Ibid., p. 445.

³⁹Brad Evans and Elaine Scarry, ‘The intimate life of violence’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (4 December 2017), available at: <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-of-violence-the-intimate-life-of-violence> accessed 3 February 2019.

⁴⁰Zalewski and Runyan, ‘“Unthinking” sexual violence’, pp. 446–7.

⁴¹Evans and Massumi, ‘Histories of violence’.

race and gender in (re)producing⁴² violence, Zalewski brings to the piece a piercing critique of a video short produced by the NGO, Save the Congo, entitled 'UNWATCHABLE'. Rather than depicting footage of reports on sexual violence or interviews of survivors of rape in the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the video invites viewers to watch what it dubs as unwatchable – a reenactment of the brutal rapes and murders of a family by heavily-armed forces that helicopter in and break into their home to gratuitously destroy their bodies and lives. But what is supposed to make it most unwatchable is that this violence is being visited upon a white, middle-class family in an idyllic home in the English countryside by white soldiers, albeit all dressed in black (racialised proxies?). Zalewski deftly details how whiteness, including the skin color, blonde hair, and blue eyes of the victims and the sterility of the scene in terms of the absence of blood and other fluids resulting from the rifles used to rape and kill and the pristineness of the home and clothing, constitutes what is right and good and above all what should not be violated. As a result, a video intended to evoke sympathy for the plight of Congolese victims by asking its viewers to contemplate what if it happened here, ends up reinscribing 'the very hierarchies that' it 'hopes to challenge'.⁴³ This raises whether and how the global mediascape can provide 'an ethical quality to the act of witnessing'.⁴⁴ But it does put into serious question the tethering of 'sexual violence to terrorism and feminism to counter-terrorism'.⁴⁵ Instead, we must ask, as Henry Giroux does, 'how might we counter these tragic and terrifying conditions without retreating into security or military mindsets?'⁴⁶

Indeed, Zalewski's work is heavily devoted to untethering or unbinding feminism from a host of problematic and limiting attachments, not the least of which are its associations with security and peace, through acts of feminist epistemological violence. It is to these acts of feminist violence that imbue her work, and some of it with me, to which I now turn.

On feminist violence

As Zalewski and I note in our 'Feminist Violence and the In/Securing of Women and Feminism', given feminism's 'intention of overturning conventional knowledge', it is odd that 'feminism is so clearly much more associated with peace ... and non-violent activism', with the effect of reducing it to 'a moral force ... as opposed to a political one'.⁴⁷ Yet for all the instances of feminist non-violent activism for peace that have been surfaced and continuously documented, feminism has an 'inescapable relationship to violence'⁴⁸ in its insistence that unjust orders must be changed. An understanding that violence is immanent in non-violent struggles for peace and justice is provocatively encapsulated in Todd May's 'Non-Violence and the Ghost of Fascism':

Nonviolence often involves direct confrontation. ... I believe that most successful nonviolent movements are in fact coercive. They rarely work through the moral conversion of the adversary but instead through a dynamic that puts the adversary in a situation where continuation of its activities is morally, economically, and/or politically impossible.⁴⁹

⁴²Zalewski and Runyan, 'Unthinking' sexual violence', p. 447.

⁴³Ibid., p. 451.

⁴⁴Evans and Ettinger, 'To feel the world's pain and its beauty'.

⁴⁵Zalewski and Runyan, 'Unthinking' sexual violence', p. 453.

⁴⁶Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux, 'The violence of forgetting', *New York Times* (20 January 2016), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/20/opinion/the-violence-of-forgetting.html>} accessed 8 February 2019.

⁴⁷Zalewski and Runyan, 'Feminist violence', p. 107.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Brad Evans and Todd May, 'Histories of violence: Nonviolence and the ghost of fascism', *Los Angeles Review of Books* (21 May 2018), available at: {<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-of-violence-nonviolence-and-the-ghost-of-fascism>} accessed 8 February 2019.

Thus, it is problematic to seek to keep feminism ‘pure’, unsullied by any association with violence, which requires a denial of militancy in thought and deed in feminist present and past. The costs of this lie in a ‘secured’ feminism, one that is entrapped in the soft embrace of femocratic global governance in which feminist voices of ‘loud refusal’ are unwelcome and kept sequestered.⁵⁰

In order to keep insurgent feminist knowledges front and centre, Zalewski relies often on a host of past and present muses – from radical Valerie Solanis and her SCUM Manifesto to the queering work of Jack Halberstam. She also often counterposes such uncompromising voices with the array of celebrity feminists (from Angelina Jolie to Malala) that constitute the most public faces of global governance feminism – and represent how feminism is made ‘safe’ for it. But it is precisely the reliance on the comforting narrative that feminism (or more accurately, gender) is making it on the global stage – as Zalewski would put it, with gender programmes and policies coming out of our ears – that the arrival of Trump-time has been met with such incredulity (at least among white Western progressives), the subject of our ‘Security Unbound: Spectres of Feminism in Trump-time’.⁵¹ In that we enlist the idea of the spectral, derived in part from Zalewski’s close readings of Derrida, but employed increasingly within critical and feminist IR. Zalewski has worked with ghosts before in her 2005 ‘Gender Ghosts in McGarry and O’Leary and Representations of the Conflict in North Ireland’⁵² as forgotten shadows that (re)emerge to disrupt coherent narratives of modernity. We contend that what Trump represents constitutes perhaps the biggest ghost of them all, bursting forth from the shadows of what many thought was a thoroughly condemned and long-buried past.

As much as we need to remain alert to such virulent visitations to shake us out of complacencies that feminism has arrived (typically measured by its footholds in the halls of power) and that this cannot be reversed, we also need to remain alert to feminist ghosts, rowdy spirits all around us in thought and action which belie seemingly endless prognostications about the dismemberment and death of feminism prior to and during Trump-time. Similar to the revivification work that Zalewski does with her muses, we need to ‘break the shackles of amnesia’ that have ‘bound’ unpalatable feminisms ‘to an eternity as condemned ghosts. It can release them from a forgotten and dehumanized fate, locked forever in different unmarked tombs across a watery planet.’⁵³

Although much of Zalewski’s work is dedicated to resisting foreclosing notions of what feminism is and what it is supposed to do (particularly in the discipline of IR and in governance policy circles), she begins to investigate with Maria Stern in the 2009 ‘Feminist Fatigue(s): Reflections on Feminism and Familiar Fables of Militarization’⁵⁴ why feminism always seems to be consigned to failure – failure to make gender wrongs right at least as imagined it should through the right policies and interventions. Within this, there are starting points about the tethering of feminism to linear, temporal progress and to the corporeality of the female body that produce tales of the failure and dessication of feminism, which Zalewski and I take up more centrally in our ‘Taking Feminist Violence Seriously in International Relations’. As noted earlier, there we follow the trails of blood produced by feminist narratives that charge feminism as being too weakened to stop neoliberal violences as it is either too bloodied or rendered bloodless by them or too violent and bloodthirsty as an instrument of neoliberal governance. In the latter case, feminists become what Arendt referred to as ‘functionaries’ with blood on their

⁵⁰Zalewski and Runyan, ‘Feminist violence’, p. 108.

⁵¹Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, ‘Security unbound: Spectres of feminism in Trump-time’, *Critical Studies on Security* (2019), available at: {doi: 10.1080/21624887.2019.1685293}.

⁵²Marysia Zalewski, ‘Gender ghosts in McGarry and O’Leary and representations of the conflict in Northern Ireland’, *Political Studies*, 53 (2005), pp. 201–21.

⁵³Brad Evans and John Akomfrah, ‘Histories of violence: Landscapes of violence’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (5 June 2017), available at: {https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-of-violence-landscapes-of-violence} accessed 8 February 2019.

⁵⁴Maria Stern and Marysia Zalewski, ‘Feminist fatigue(s): Reflections on feminism and familiar fables of militarization’, *Review of International Studies*, 35:3 (2009), pp. 611–30.

hands, which Enloe warns we are all capable of becoming in her contribution to the ‘Disposable Life’ video lecture series.⁵⁵ This paradox (among many Zalewski puts forth in her work) between bloodied and bloodless feminisms derives significantly, we think, from ‘sticky associations between feminism and female corporeality’⁵⁶ that produce bodily images of feminism as either violated or violating. Wittingly or unwittingly, such narratives can conjoin with patriarchal architects of feminism’s demise, denying feminism what Zalewski calls its ‘after lives’. To realise the continued potentialities of feminism involves ‘tearing the sutures that bind it to disparaging and despairing accounts of the female body’ but it also means embracing the ongoing capacity of feminist thought, as highly mobile despite efforts to dismiss, chain, or kill it, to violate/do violence to ‘hegemonic ideas’ within and beyond IR.⁵⁷

Key to feminism’s mobility is unmooring it from not only the cis female body (even as that continues to be a locus of its inquiry), but also from illusory notions of the ‘secured’ (cis) woman around which global governance feminism is built. Also key is moving beyond now captured concepts, such as sexual violence, that disallow recognition of a range of perpetrators and victims, not just the typical cis male on cis female penetrative violence. We propose in “‘Unthinking’ Sexual Violence in a Neoliberal Age of Spectacular Terror’ the substitution of sexual violence with the concept of ‘sexed violence’ to shake up the torpor in thinking and practice produced by a hegemonic imagining of who sexually violates whom and how and why. Her recent co-edited book, *Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics*,⁵⁸ following two co-edited books with Jane Parpart on the men and masculinity in international politics,⁵⁹ is an example of problematising, and indeed, queering or making strange, discourses and practices that reproduce women as inevitably rapeable and men as inevitably rapists. Resisting such reproductions of gender binaries and the securitising (including carceral) projects that shore them up can make feminist thought less available for such projects.

There is some movement towards this in the 2019 Women’s March and its agenda. Celebrities and politicians were more absent at that, with indigenous trans and cis women and men taking more centre stage along with black, Latina, Asian, Muslim, and disabled grassroots activists across the gender and sexuality spectrum speaking against all forms of violence. The agenda plank devoted to sexual violence reads ‘Sexual Violence Against Women and Femmes’ and insists on prioritising federal funding for ‘community-based organizations outside law enforcement and to be focused on survivors to prevent further state violence/state-sanctioned violence on communities of color, immigrant communities, indigenous people, and LGBTQUIA+ communities’ and puts ending sexual harassment in the context of ‘worker-driven social responsibility’ actions.⁶⁰ This is not the usual approach to sexual- and gender-based violence that we see proliferating at the international level.

Concluding thoughts

I end not with a tidy summation of what Marysia Zalewski’s work means or does, but rather with a gesture towards what her work does not allow ‘us’ to do. I earlier referred to Zalewski’s work as

⁵⁵Cynthia Enloe, ‘Disposable Life Lecture’, *Histories of Violence*, available at: {<https://www.historiesofviolence.com/full-lectures-cq5w>} accessed 8 February 2019.

⁵⁶Zalewski and Runyan, ‘Taking feminist violence seriously’, p. 307.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 309, 310.

⁵⁸Marysia Zalewski, Paula Drummond, Elisabeth Prügl, and Maria Stern (eds), *Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁵⁹Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart (eds), *The ‘Man’ Question in International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998) and Jane Parpart and Marysia Zalewski (eds), *Rethinking the Man Question: Sex, Gender and Violence in International Relations* (London: Zed Press, 2008).

⁶⁰‘Women’s March Agenda 2019’, pp. 33–7, available at: {https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c3feb79fc7fdce5a3c790b/t/5df275481257e772df8b6cd8/1576170878086/WM_WomensAgendaFinal_Lo_Res.pdf} accessed 15 February 2019.

palimpsestic, unwilling to erase, as she would put it, ‘all the bodies piling up’ over time and space or the range of feminist intellectual and artistic work that contests this over time and space. This is a vast reservoir that must be continually revisited, rethought, and re-imagined not to ‘know’ and thus pin down under a logic of control so endemic to world politics-as-usual, but to see anew through ever complicating refractions. As a fragment from a poem that appears in *Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics*, consistent with Zalewski’s practice to include poetry in much of her work, puts it: ‘people that don’t know, I want to know’.⁶¹ Zalewski invites ‘us’ to be non-knowers in the sense of resisting the kind of ‘knowing’ that strangles thought through thinking sideways, in between, and outside the box about violence in all its multiplicity and destructive power, but also its productive work, in the form of epistemic violence to hegemonic knowledge. Such non-knowing forestalls sureties by creating uncomfortable openings, not comforting foreclosures, for endless recastings of feminist oppositional knowledge that keep it alive and (re)generative.

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⁶¹Kevin Kantor, ‘People you may know’, in Zalewski, Drummond, Prügl, and Stern (eds), *Sexual Violence Against Men*, p. 254.