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Taking Feminist Violence Seriously in Feminist International Relations

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Abstract
In this article we explore questions about feminism and violence to constructively complicate understandings about this relationship. Feminism is conventionally positioned as oppositional to direct and structural violences, importantly so, as this has been seen key to feminism’s viability as a constructive knowledge project. Yet there are increasingly persistent concerns about epistemic, juridical and other violences circulating around feminism, which render feminism’s role in the production of oppositional knowledge and politics suspect. This is especially the case where western feminist ideas have been problematically taken up in neoliberal global policy making and for militarized human rights interventions. As feminist international relations scholars troubled by such associations, we investigate – via an exploration of three provocative feminist texts – how feminism is perceived to be both violated and violating by its contemporary imbrication in the violences of neoliberalism and global governance. We further suggest that metaphors of feminized corporeality, which infuse representations of feminism in these texts (especially in its western homogenized governance form), inhibit the destabilizing potential of feminism through its harmful associations with the ‘failing’ female body. This bodily shaping of feminism, which we examine by following a ‘trail of blood’, tells us something important about the relationship between feminism and violence, about recurring discursive and theoretical closures around feminism and about the possibilities for reinventions of feminism to unsettle the violent degradations, which feminists insistently reveal and decry.

Keywords
corporeal metaphors, feminism, feminist IR, feminist violence, violence

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INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps a truism to say that feminist work, including feminist international relations (IR), is conventionally positioned as oppositional to direct and structural violences and that this is one of the things that furnishes feminisms’ viability as a constructive knowledge project. Yet of late, questions have increasingly been gathering about the epistemic, juridical and other violences circulating around feminism, rendering feminism’s role in the production of oppositional knowledge and politics suspect. As feminist IR scholars, we are concerned that increasing claims about feminism (and particularly ‘global’ feminism) as being (now) under the sign of governance violence can engender conclusions that feminism has been, or must be, put to rest as a source of resistance to the international violences of militarism and global capital. While hegemonic forms of feminism have consistently been charged with enacting epistemic violence (in part through essentializing and universalizing ‘woman’), the anxieties about feminism we explore here focus on feminist imbrications in the contemporary violences of neoliberalism and global governance, violences which have been the foci of much feminist IR critique. Although there is increasing attention in feminist IR literatures on how western feminist ideas and discourses have gone global and, in the process, have been problematically taken up in neoliberal global policymaking and for militarized human rights interventions (Hesford and Kozol 2005; Squires 2007; Rai and Waylen 2008), we turn in this article to some provocative feminist texts outside of feminist IR (indispensable sources of feminist IR knowledge and institutionalized gender knowledge) to consider and further complicate the question of feminist violence and its implications for feminist IR.

We explore reasons proffered in these texts for why feminism has become a site of violence, if contradictorily: (1) feminism has been violated and perverted by governing neoliberal forces, or (2) feminism’s own will to governance necessarily involves it in perpetrating violence. Feminism, in these renditions, is represented simultaneously as an innocent victim that has become too weak and complicit to resist the seductive power of neoliberal governance and as power-hungry perpetrator that has amassed more juridical power than ever. Either way, feminism, for the most part writ-large in these accounts, is cast as an increasingly problematic and even discredited political project. Thus, the future of feminism, which, on the one hand, is replete with criticisms of the neoliberal world order and yet, on the other hand, is increasingly locked into its capital, its technologies, its values and its violences, is rendered ambivalent and uncertain and probably foreclosed. This conclusion of feminism’s end we do not share.

As exemplified in the texts we engage, those who focus on the violations done to feminism imply there is something fundamentally different about contemporary feminism(s) compared to a previous time when feminism’s mission was perhaps seen as uncontroversially emancipatory and nonviolent
by self-identified feminists and opponents alike. Those, who stress that feminism is, at core, epistemically and/or juridically violating infer that there is an illusory dichotomy between feminism and violence which remains under-noticed and inadequately critically engaged. We take the relationship between feminism and violence seriously, but in ways that constructively complicate understandings of feminist violence. To reiterate, our aim here is to draw attention away from urgings to put feminism to rest. To do this, though, we will offer what might appear to be a discomfiting focus on feminist violence, suggesting that the epistemic violences meted by feminists against the status quo, even as it has at times served it, (re)energizes feminism’s political possibilities, as does simultaneously contesting lingering narratives of feminist innocence. But these possibilities are consistently undermined through representations of feminism as inevitably intertwined with the vicissitudes of the (female) body. This, we claim, thwarts re-inventions of feminism. We see in the anxious judgments reached in these texts, specifically about the life chances of global feminisms under late capitalism/late modernity, an intensely corporeal representation of feminism. We argue, that properly noticing this opens up questions about the effects of representing feminism as (a) ‘body’, and importantly, a feminized body which emerges as inevitably damaged or damaging. We think this bodily shaping of feminism tells us something very important about the relationship between feminism and violence, about recurring discursive and theoretical closures around feminism and about the possibilities for reinventions of feminism to unsettle the violent degradations feminists insistently reveal and decry.

To unpack and engage the questions and conundrums which we introduce, this article is composed of three main parts. Part one opens up and briefly follows varying trails of violence in the context of feminism with the narrative aim of installing a sense of the conceptual slipperiness of violence. This is important as contemporary theorizing about violence suggests that we can never be outside it, that our very exposure to and of it implicates us (and particularly the ‘us’ of the Global North) in what we suppose are violence-quelling acts, which, nevertheless, produce their own violences. This discussion entails a reflection on the presumptive relationship between feminism and nonviolence through a questioning of the assumption of (presumably former) feminist innocence. Such an assumption aids the production of feminism as violated. While this is a ‘comforting’ narrative, for it positions feminism as a victim of outside forces, it also potentially renders feminism as static, non-agentic and non-responsible. This simultaneously masks feminism’s capacity for wreaking epistemic violence on hegemonic knowledge systems – a feminist violence that should not be abandoned, we argue. We recognize that the idea of ‘feminist violence’ is disconcerting, but we invoke it to unsettle the conceptual binary of ‘feminine innocence’ and ‘masculine violence’ as well as to re-imagine the productive power of epistemic violence that feminism can still exert in the face of, and in opposition to, all sorts of hegemonic violence, including that within feminism itself. We suggest that explicit attention

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to the violences of feminism complicates understandings of the relationship between feminism and violence and also feminist conceptualizations of violence.

To re-orienteer a route through the messy trail of violence we present in part one, part two introduces three provocative texts by Hester Eisenstein (2009), Angela McRobbie (2009) and Janet Halley (2006). We choose these not because they are definitive in some way, but because, even as they quite differently account for how feminism has been entangled with violence, they each deploy corporeal metaphors to describe feminism and the violence visited upon it and/or which it visits. By this we mean that these texts are littered with metaphors of flesh and blood, with feminism either being depleted of its lifeblood by neoliberal forces, or spilling it as a neoliberal governance actor. In the third part of this article, we investigate this corporeal framing of feminism by moving back through the arguments in the three texts to follow the ‘trails of blood’ to think about how rendering feminism as a bleeding or bloody female body limits re-imagining what feminism might be theoretically and politically. We wonder whether feminist representations of feminism ‘as body’ inevitably invite its decline. Of significance here is that depictions of feminism as a female body in decline, which has lost both potency and relevance, are intricately connected to westernized familial and generational representations of feminism in which (post)feminist ‘daughters’ must disavow their feminist ‘mothers’. We conclude that re-imagining these corporeal representations of feminism offers important interruptions to ideas that feminism is spent as an oppositional force in these neoliberal times, making it unavailable as a significant source of critique and resistance to global politics. We further suggest the need to accelerate critical engagement with the uneasy relationship between feminism and violence in feminist IR, resisting lingering notions of feminist innocence. Embracing feminist epistemic violence against hegemonic ideas within IR and within feminism as an ongoing political project offers potentially vibrant, post-corporeal feminist ‘afterlives’. We also think that to address the violences of the global political arena, in which feminism is embedded, feminist IR may more fruitfully engage in following the violences (both destructive and productive) embedded within its discourses and projects.

TRAILS OF VIOLENCE

On Violence and Feminism

Violence is slippery (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgeois 2004: 1), heavily theorized and constantly empirically tracked, yet it remains omnipresent and ubiquitous with its obliteration tantalizingly and achingly out of reach. The aim is to keep violence at bay, yet violence haunts the everyday. Feminists are routinely appalled by the many forms of ordinary violences they have made visible in the international arena (Shepherd 2008) consequently, in feminist
work, in IR and elsewhere, there is an unrelenting focus on violent acts and actors and on the ways in which violence drenches women’s lives and (mediated) human consciousnesses.

A Turkish teenager found dead in a hole next to her house was probably buried alive, a post-mortem examination has revealed. (BBC News 2010)

This story about a dead Turkish teenage girl, allegedly buried alive for talking to boys, is listed as the ‘most read’ for that week: ‘these stories are repeated every day, and the repetition appears endless, irremedial’ (Butler 2009: 13). Yet, unremittingly seeing and thinking about violence invokes a promise of doing something about it, which carries its own violences, a conundrum that begins to indicate the slipperiness of violence. Despite the clear identification of many violences, even the most ‘obvious’ violence can slip out of grasp quickly, both theoretically and legislatively. Though, perhaps, it is the very grasping at violence and grappling with it that reproduces violence through (inevitable) failures to maintain clear and sharp boundaries around what counts as a violent deed.

However, feminists insist that, much more frequently than imagined, we do not see, recognize or know violence well enough, particularly when women are involved. Feminists continually urge that we need to keep observing, documenting and interrogating violence to know it better. This is especially true in feminist IR, which has urged attention to militarized violence (Enloe 2007), global economic violence (Marchand and Runyan 2011), neocolonial violence (Agathangelou and Ling 2009), discursive violence (Shepherd 2008), masculinist violence (Parpart and Zalewski 2008) and violence among/of women (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007). Yet, does the persistent feminist 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?

There is a strong pull to imagine that ‘we’, particularly as ‘western viewers’, can act empathetically upon consumption of mediated images of violated bodies. Ethically and ‘naturally’, we sympathize, even if never quite fully identifying (Sontag 2003). And further, we (ourselves or our proxies) aim to act on those feelings; there is a western neoliberal imperative to act (Žižek 2009). Though, as Sontag (2003: 102) and Žižek (2009) remind us, the mediated closeness we feel is only one of many mystifications of our ‘real relations to power’, provocatively implying that our very being and thinking seals the painful fate of those we think we want to help. What costs would there be in giving up sympathizing, or giving up on thinking ‘we’ have to act on ‘our’ feelings?

The costs are high consequent to the insight that ‘our’ sympathy and attention fuels ‘their’ suffering (Sontag 2003); one is that feminists might be complicit in the pain of others/‘others’ through the very looking at, and empathizing with, their pain. This is deeply disturbing to the traditional
emancipatory project of feminism. But the very idea of emancipation is heavily imbued with good (innocent) intentions (see Lee-Koo 2007). This begs such questions as: have western feminists in particular lingered too long around notions of the ‘good’ or ‘innocent’ feminist to be able to effectively cut through the undergrowth of sympathy or empathy which may have the consequence (and even implicit intention) of sustaining a moral high ground for feminism (Srivastava 2005: 44)? Does the lingering aura of innocence around feminism inhibit a more direct focus on how feminism is implicated in violence? In posing this final critical question we recognize that feminism is never singular and that western(ized) feminism has been most implicated in imperialist violence (see Hunt and Rygiel 2007; Puar 2007; Riley et al. 2008). However, we are also concerned that any feminist investment in/recourse to innocence can lead to a non-critical engagement with the complexities of violence.

On Feminism and Violence

Hybrid and liminal, 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. But a narrative of feminist innocence belies this with the consequence of forgetting and denying the potency of feminist epistemic violence wielded against hegemonic knowledge systems. These feminist violences – epistemic and ‘on the ground’ feminist militancies – have, perhaps, inevitably made feminism an open target for violence. Over time, forces threatened by feminist violations of oppressive conventions and social orders have done everything from muzzling, imprisoning, torturing and killing assumed feminists (often ‘simply’ women) to ignoring, trivializing, expropriating and excoriating feminist ideas, while periodically and hopefully pronouncing feminism dead.

Simultaneously, in efforts to correct ‘gender wrongs’, states and other privileged actors continue to use feminist knowledge with the consequent reproduction of yet more violence. In IR feminists are critical of the neoliberal world order (see Rai and Waylen 2008; Marchand and Runyan 2011) and, yet, they are increasingly engaged with and co-opted by its discourses, its institutions and its mechanisms for governance and control (Squires 2007). This juxtaposition mimics some of the strange ways that violence weaves in and through feminism. Feminism exposes myriad violence(s); of gender, of sex, of identity, the domestic violence of love, the everyday violence of tolerance (Brown 2006), as well as the relentless violence of the ordinary (Butler 2009; Žižek 2009). The brutalties of ordinary family life and the routinization of sexual violence and economic deprivation that feminists reveal, remain shocking (Enloe 2007; Alexander and Hawkesworth 2008). However, in this constant exposure of shocking violence still lies the demand to do something,
and particularly in feminist IR, to garner enough international attention to myriad violences in order to abate them. In the process of doing so, feminist knowledge about cross-national gender violence and its relationship to international conflict and economic maldevelopment has acquired a measure of authority within international policy making circles, despite feminist critiques of the very neoliberal and militarized world order which such circles uphold. ‘Global’ feminism has increasingly come to refer to this form of institutionalized feminism.

As feminist work on gender has become legible and audible (both necessary for the effective implementation of demands in the legislative and political institutions of modernity), it is now theoretically integral to a wide range of national and international legislatures. For example, the UN Security Council stipulates that gender units assist with peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction, gender-sensitive proceedings are required under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court to try cases of gender violence in armed conflict, gender expertise is sought for the dispersal of microcredit championed by international financial institutions, gender equality in political representation is a UN Millennium Development Goal, gender quotas for increasing the numbers of women in public office have been enacted by a range of states as a sign of democracy and a method for reducing government corruption (see Hunt 2007; Rai and Waylen 2008; Peterson and Runyan 2010; Zalewski 2010). There is now a huge demand for experts on gender, and the ideas of feminism have been eagerly snapped up by bodies keen to operationalize gender change for security, development and governance. It seems that the knowledge products of feminism have become exceedingly popular; however, there is a catch.

The changes in gendered race, class, sexuality and national power relations constitutive of the violent world order that transpire fall extravagantly short of most feminist expectations. Indeed, there is a profligate failure to live up to hopes for a world free from social, cultural, political and economic violence, or anywhere near that. Oftentimes political will is limited, as are resources, to implement more than superficial changes. But even worse – feminism, particularly in its ‘global’ form, is now tied to not just policy failures to abate gendered violence on a global scale, but also is implicated in propping up and giving cover to international neoliberal policies, programs and militarized ‘humanitarian’ interventions pursued in the name of gender equality and ‘saving women’, thus, essentially doing violence itself (see Grewal 2005; Riley et al. 2008). How are we to understand this apparent turnabout as feminism moves from and through thought to action, from fractious politics to and through policy prescriptions?

Perhaps feminism’s violations of established orders end up violated, appropriated, tamed and perverted, violently serving prevailing orders and their violences. But what of the idea that the failures to achieve eagerly anticipated world order change are intimately linked to violences done by feminism en route from ‘theory to practice’? Not simple co-optations, or misunderstand-
ings, but something about feminism itself? How can feminists countenance the possibility that these failures are linked to the violence that feminism itself does and is party to? Is it just more comforting to think of feminism as violated by violent forces? These troubling questions arise from the contemporary feminist texts to which we now turn to lay out the tensions in them between imagining feminist violence as a product of violation, or intrinsic to feminism. We share their overall concerns about hegemonic violence associated most with ‘global’ and other forms of institutionalized feminism that have become sites of significant feminist contestation from a range of anti-racist, postcolonial and postmodern perspectives (see Mendoza 2002; Eisenstein 2004; Puar 2007; Riley et al. 2008; Fraser 2009). However, we find that their deadly representations of feminism writ-large asphyxiate opportunities to energize lively contestations circulating within and by feminism to violate hegemonies.

THREE FEMINIST EXPOSITIONS ON FEMINISM VIOLATED AND FEMINIST VIOLENCE

Thus far we have briefly introduced some of the complex and messy ways violence and feminism are intertwined. To think further about this we move to consider three feminists texts by Hester Eisenstein (2009), Angela McRobbie (2009) and Janet Halley (2006) that are representative of two different ways of thinking about feminism’s relationship with violence.

The first view is that feminism has ‘gone wrong’, and/or it has ‘been failed’ not just because it has not achieved anticipated visions, but because there is something fundamentally amiss in the simple equation of feminism = gender solution. This engenders a schism between what feminism is conventionally understood to be (a transgressor/violator of oppressive orders) and its incorporation/evisceration by legislation/policy/action (which restores order). The second view places the problem deeper in the very assumptions about what ‘we know feminism to be’ (doing violence to injustice), which makes feminism amenable to the violations of incorporation, but also capable of preparing the foundations for institutional violence done in its name. On both these views, feminism emerges as coterminous with violence, not in any way free of it.

Feminism Seduced

For socialist feminist Hester Eisenstein (2009), feminism has been seduced through a range of governance mechanisms and maneuvers that have de-radicalized it and put it into the service of reactionary forces that do violence with it. At precisely the time neoliberal capital was inscribing itself on much of the world, feminists abandoned totalizing Marxist critiques, thereby facilitating the dismantling of the development state in the Global South and the
welfare state in the Global North through ‘NGOization’ and ‘IGOization’. Eisenstein argues that these processes rely on the co-optation of gender expertise by intergovernmental and through nongovernmental organizations to redesignate the solution to the dissolutions and dislocations of global capital to ‘empowering women’ through neoliberal strategies such as microcredit.

While Eisenstein heaps most scorn on the regulatory regime of neoliberal capital and what it has done to feminism, she claims it was feminism’s encounter with what she shorthands as poststructuralism and postmodernism that made it so vulnerable to being overtaken by neoliberal capital. Resurrecting older debates between structuralists and poststructuralists, she produces economic illustrations to prove structuralists were right, claiming these ‘post’-moves in feminist thought hollowed out feminism’s political grounding in gender difference in favor of the project of gender dissolution. This resulted in abandonment of normative claims about the necessity of protection, through state regulation and economic redistribution, for those subjected to the vicissitudes of not only discrimination, but rapacious global capitalism. For Eisenstein, this opened the door for women to be used and exploited as simply interchangeable and disposable market actors in a post-Keynesian and post-state-led development world. It also led to a perverse celebration by feminists of neoliberal bootstrappings, in which women, along with all other neo-liberalized subjects, were to rise and fall on their own. Eisenstein also implicates these ‘post’-moves in undermining anti-capitalist critique in feminism. In the renunciation of grand narratives, socialism and feminism became casualties, leaving global capitalism relatively un-opposed by alternative visions. Shorn of an anti-capitalist critique, feminism became easy prey. With feminism seduced on the one hand by the seemingly more radical and sophisticated postmodern turn and on the other hand by the supposed freedoms to compete for economic and political power offered by the free market, feminist ideas and energies have been ‘watered down’, siphoned off and put into the service of market solutions to social problems.

How did feminism become seduced and gender de-politicized? Consequent to the feminist foregrounding of gender as power relation upholding unjust orders, an analytic which promised to deliver social justice in and beyond the realm of sexual politics, feminist politics have detonated with the ensuing gender debris picked up and warmly embraced by the very establishments feminists spurn. The boundary-breaking activities and philosophies of feminism have been quietly but devastatingly transformed. The uptake by globalizing institutions of re-ordering gender roles to make them amenable to market imperatives enables such institutions to justify or soften capitalist penetration in the name of incorporating feminist agendas. But for Eisenstein there is a solution.

Eisenstein presents herself as proactively rescuing feminism from the predatory grasp of ‘corporate leaders and elites’ (2009: 220). Despite the current repressed strength of feminism, she remains convinced that a re-organized
feminism has the capacity to deliver social justice on a global scale. The pathological consequences of postmodernism, through which gender has become simply perceived as ‘a performance’ (2009: 68) can be healed. Eisenstein suggests that academic feminists need to turn away from postmodern analyses that focus on ‘individual and private acts of resistance’, and back toward a ‘structural analysis of global capitalism’ (2009: 212). She recognizes the pleasures and rewards of capitalist consumerism and feminist vulnerabilities in this regard and wonders if ‘capitalism has been a better husband for women than socialism?’ (2009: 220). One might question this heteronormatively gendered positioning of (feminist) women. Moreover, Eisenstein never explains why she labels the twin (violent) encounters of feminism with post-structuralism and neoliberal capitalism as a seduction, unmooring/blurring feminist resolve (seduced into saying yes when meaning, if in her right mind, to say no), nor does she explore the sexual violence at work that she evokes by the use of the term seduction. Is it, for Eisenstein, really a rape?

Feminism’s Will to Power

Eisenstein is deeply anxious about the ‘rape’ of feminism; at least this is how we might think about the violence done to feminism given her metaphor of seduction and presentation of violated feminism in need of mascline-tinged rescue. Janet Halley (2006), who aligns herself with queer perspectives, has a more prurient approach to the pleasures and confusions of seduction – she particularly eschews moralizing feminism for strait-jacketing and punishing transgressive sexual identity, expression and relations, including sado-masochism, in theory and law. She is also radically less sure about the innocence and passivity of feminism and feminists. Indeed, we (feminists) are not victims, but perpetrators of violence. Halley lays out a very different intellectual landscape of feminism from Eisenstein’s, arguing that the violent theoretical and conceptual structure of feminism, along with its logically inevitable empirical and legislative manifestations, have given rise to its own practical brutalities. As such it is not that feminism has been violated or usurped and co-opted by regulatory regimes. It is itself a regulatory regime which feminists enjoy the pleasures of.

What violence lies at the heart of feminism? Punching a hole into the increasingly commonplace (academic) acceptance that woman is a multiply constituted fiction, and that masculinity might be as damaging to men as women, Halley insists there is an inescapable violating logic at work within all feminisms based on a traditional, essentialist gender binary. The logic is the Injury Triad of female injury + female innocence (of being injurious) + male immunity (from injury). This structural orthodoxy puts women’s sexual subordination to men at the center of feminist theorizing as the central truth of all women and demands, that all cleave to it. It also acts as the platform
for the successful achievement of governance feminism, which knows what women are and what they need and want. Despite persistent academic and activist claims that there are a range of feminisms, Halley insists these all ultimately contribute to governance feminism, arguably the most recognizable and acceptable internationalized form of feminism that is persistently reduced to and directed at the Injury Triad. Under this reading, gender as an analytic for social justice transmogrifies into an arsenal of powerful, regulatory tools indelibly emblazoned with the mark of feminism; tools which promise power and pleasure to those who wield them.

Who owns these tools? Gender experts, gender entrepreneurs and the like, yet, for Halley, these powerful people, mostly women, fail to acknowledge the power they wield. More dangerously and damagingly, they and the feminists to whom they are indebted for their gender knowledge, consciously disregard the violent distributional consequences of their theories in the form of the legislation and policies that flow from them. Halley rebukes self-identified feminists, particularly for ignoring the costs to groups other than women; there are costs to feminist success, but ‘bringing them back is seen as unfeminist’ (2006: 287). Thus the unswerving commitment to the subordination/Injury Triad model, which for Halley lies at the epistemological heart of all feminisms and which holds women (and, by extension, feminism) harmless and innocent, enables the perpetration of violence through governance feminist practices that are wielded with impunity.

The refusal to let go of the female subordination model lies, in what Halley sees as feminism’s will to epistemic/explanatory power that attaches it to regulatory modes of thinking. The granting of epistemic privilege to feminism through claims to have the corner on the market of women’s realities and perspectives constitutes the first violence. The second violence occurs as theory (made more amenable to prescription) shifts to practice; when ‘feminism rules’, when it has ‘actual power’ in the form of governance feminism (2006: 22, emphasis added). Halley does not bemoan feminism’s ascension to some governance powers as she acknowledges that there are gender wrongs that need to be changed. However, it is feminist insistence on always representing feminism (and women by extension) as the ‘underdog’ and as vulnerable that prevents coming to terms with the social and political costs feminism imposes, and recognizing, in Halley’s words, that feminism has ‘blood on its hands’ (2006: 33).

Feminism’s Aftermath

Through Angela McRobbie’s (2009) cultural studies lens, feminism has metamorphosed in its journey through the institutions of modernity into something she calls ‘faux-feminism’, a depoliticized version of feminism, that applauds the rising cultural motif of youthful females ‘acting out’, becoming verbally and physically violent as marks of liberation. It also celebrates the success
of governance feminism, particularly in the form of gender mainstreaming, that makes feminist movement politics unnecessary, even passé. Contra to Halley’s, McRobbie’s view is that the institutionalized success of feminism has incrementally and devastatingly drained feminism of its radical potential and politics. The feminism that has trickled through to the halls of power is, for McRobbie, not recognizable as feminism.

McRobbie claims elements of feminism have been deeply incorporated into political and institutional life, though her sense of incorporation is not quite the same as Eisenstein’s for McRobbie does not imply a usurpation or watering down of feminist aims, thus, inferring potential recuperation. McRobbie’s conclusion is that feminism has become ‘undone’, it has lost its political efficacy through its popular culture make-over as simply an assertion of sexual allure, rendering it trivial and non-threatening (2009: 110). In the journey(s) from thought/concept/passion to institutionalization, feminism has undergone a governance ‘make-over’. As a consequence feminism has become palatable for contemporary use, perhaps explaining its mainstream acceptance and even its westernized cultural appeal as it is spiffed up and made-over for popular consumption.

McRobbie initially posits the global feminist strategy of gender mainstreaming as a possible exception to her view that feminism has been ‘undone’, proffering it as evidence of the successful transition of feminist revolutionary and regularly rowdy demands into politically productive effects delivered by polished professionals. However McRobbie ultimately concludes that gender mainstreaming has replaced feminism (2009: 155). But while she sees ‘faux-feminism’ as a technocratic-managerial strategy to optimize gender specific human resources in the service of profit, this is not a simple or easily detectable absorption of feminism. It is rather a new patriarchal ownership of feminism, starkly demonstrating its ultimate profigate failure.

In McRobbie’s narrative, feminist gender analysis, when appropriately tamed, has given the world’s elite more purchase on managerial violence. Eisenstein’s mild-mannered femocrat-economists together with McRobbie’s velvet triangle of activists, NGOs and respectable academics exercise this soft power, which can be all the more insidious because it is in the name of gender equality, a secret, soft violence: ‘Sometimes a polite smile can be more violent than a brutal outburst’ (Žižek 2009: 180). Gender, as such, morphs into a light weapon in the arsenal of neoliberal governance, promising individualist social mobility for good girls, who dutifully get educated and take their places in the global economy as heteronormative workers and consumers, while rooting out bad (non-normative) gender behavior (from sexual violence to sexual deviance) as a solution for the world’s ills in the aftermath of feminism. Gender becomes potent (safely under patriarchal control) through the ‘enforced forgetting’ (2009: 270) of collective and oppositional feminist politics that McRobbie associates with ‘real’ feminism.
Our attention to Eisenstein, Halley and McRobbie is not in the service of coming to a decision about which of these authors we agree or disagree with, but to flesh out how they represent contemporary feminism as entangled with violence. We now focus on flesh and blood or corporeal metaphors that imbue their work by following their implicit and explicit ‘trail of blood’. We tangentially offer a ‘rhizomatic reading’, or one that attempts to ‘spread beyond the covers’ of these differently positioned texts (Edkins and Vaughan-Williams 2009: 3) through inventing imaginative connections in and between them. It is important to do this as the trail of blood which stains Eisenstein’s, Halley’s and McRobbie’s narratives of feminism seems to (as blood might) oxygenate their diagnoses and prognoses of contemporary governance feminism. We sense the trail in their attempts to demonstrate how feminism has been violated and/or perpetrated violence. And, crucially, we trace this trail of blood through metaphors of female corporeality in their narratives that frame and drive their claims about the pathologies and inexorable decline of feminism. In briefly re-visiting their works, we try to follow the trail of blood they invoke and simultaneously leave behind, as they diagnose, operate on and/or leave for dead what they see as the ailing or dying feminist body.

Bloodied Feminism

For Eisenstein feminism is sick; a damaged, diseased and raped body. In evoking a rape/seduction script, in which feminism becomes a violated female body, once innocent but now defiled with only her bloody wounds to speak for her, Eisenstein constitutes feminism as always potentially non-agentic, easily seduced and always ultimately penetrable. In her story, men materialize as sexual terrorists in competition both for women and hegemonic masculinity status; corporate elites vying with socialist men for alpha male status. But it is not only (‘real’) women who end up bloodied and raped in Eisenstein’s narrative; feminism materializes as a feminine body, emerging as an innocent who has been ravished by the (wrong) masculine forces, bleeding out her radical potential from several orifices.

Depictions of raped and bloodied female bodies are commonplace, not least within feminist narratives. Giving legislative and juridical voice to raped women in courtrooms is imagined to deliver women from the shackles of weakness. Similar hopes shape Eisenstein’s attraction to a rape/seduction script, which she deploys to make her case; we sense that she has in mind a traditional understanding of, and hope for, the power/prize of voice. Her abundant knowledge of gender leads her to imply that, in the end, women can take back their (socialist feminist) voices taken from them by ‘post’ and neoliberal moves. But under her rape/seduction script, that positions feminism
in the shape of the violated woman, what sense does it make to retrieve (a) feminine voice? Is it not the case, as Frances Ferguson (1989: 97; cited in Gunne and Thompson 2009: 10) astutely observes, that if a woman were to become powerful in the courtroom scene of rape, ‘she would lose the weakness that is the very condition of the strength of her testimony . . . her not counting makes her words count’?

Bloodthirsty Feminism

Halley’s explicit invocation of blood deepens our sense that it matters that feminism is constituted as (a) feminine body. But when Halley claims feminists have blood on their hands, how does this gendered blood matter? Where can following this trail of blood take us in our perusal of the violations/violence of feminism? Here we follow the trail through a popular culture idiom, in which raped women become rapacious themselves. In vampire tales, the power associated with blood seems to mysteriously metamorphose into a gendered mix of powerlessness or power, again invoking the consequences of sticky associations between feminism and female corporeality.

The sucking of female life/blood has long been associated with vampiric rape, where the vagina morphs into the erogenous zone of the throat. But coursing through vampire narratives is the theme of seduction; female innocents drawn to the preternatural power of the rapacious, blood-seeking male undead. Those innocents bitten and not sucked dry by vampires become monsters themselves, feeding on the blood of others/‘others’, which seems to be the cautionary tale that lies at the end of Eisenstein’s trail of blood. A transfusion is necessary to rid feminism of bad blood injected into it by the (male) vampire’s bite to bring it back to life. But as Halley’s trail of blood infers, feminism is its own cause of its bloodthirstiness. It is a vampire of its own making, sucking its own lifeblood from itself, to which feminists must own up, if they are to wean themselves off the self-made orthodoxy that runs through their/our veins. Not to reclaim feminism, but to leave it behind as and where need be.

For Halley, feminists have become vampires in denial to achieve acceptance and governance power, through which they draw real blood, but refuse to acknowledge this. In denying its vampiric power, feminism’s own life/blood has become so synthetic as to be tasteless, undesirable, undrinkable and ultimately powerless as a mode of social critique. The only alternative left is to swear off drinking from this purportedly sanitized, pleasureless, ossified body, that has drunk itself dry.

Bloodless Feminism

But there is yet another corporeally laced subtext in these vampire tales; female agency does not flow from female (inter-generational) solidarity. The
narratives that Eisenstein, Halley and McRobbie relate about feminism and what makes it sick, all explicitly deploy temporally framed tales of female generations. Ancient or aging mothers must be swept aside to free daughters from their stultifying and violent hold; ungrateful, wrong-headed or made-over daughters need to atone for childish ways and violent/violence-producing disavowals. Feminist bloodlines must be severed to save, abandon or recognize the passing of feminism.

Might there be something of this at work in Eisenstein’s casting out of what she sees as some ‘unnatural’ forms of feminism? Is Halley’s indictment of particularly governance feminism akin to a kind of matricide in order to set daughters free? Is there something like this operating in third wave feminist and post-feminist discourse that imagines second wave feminist ‘mothers’ as devouring their daughters, necessitating a disavowal of ‘old school’ feminism or feminism altogether (McRobbie 2009: 157)?

Such disavowals of feminism(s) past or present may also have something to do with not only the sticky association of feminism with the female body, but also feminism’s central focus on the body. These feminist attachments to the body – the bloody site of woman and the pathologies that beset her – also portend her decrepitude and eventual death (Hawkesworth 2004). McRobbie taps into this bodily decline of feminism, declaring that we are now experiencing the aftermath of feminism, resulting from neoliberal-inspired disavowals and ‘make-overs’ of feminism. Made into the living dead from the vampire’s bite, feminism is bled out, emptied out, rendered not-feminism.

All three authors enact a rigid attachment to a corporeal and generational model of feminism as a female/maternal body that derives from a very western scientific-cultural script and that problematically reproduces both neoliberal and neo-traditional scripts that obscure power relations and carry their own violences. These lifecycle narratives situate a solidified body of feminism in its twilight years, paradoxically claiming that it has never had more institutional power and capacity for prescriptive violence, yet it is spent, drained, sclerotic, desiccated, decrepit, decadent and losing its faculties. The apex/aftermath of feminism is represented as the quintessential neoliberal trope – polished, potent, antiseptic, bloodless and/or bloodthirsty experts, while (past/passing) feminism is rendered seduced, raped, bloodied, leaky and ultimately in inexorable decline and eventual death.

Then, what is left of feminism for Eisenstein and McRobbie consequent to its violation? What is left of feminism for Halley consequent to its violating acts? Each tale/trail of corporealized feminism seems to take us to bloody sites of its (attempted) murder or suicide. At the scene of the crime, these three feminist investigators find forensic evidence of the institutional violence that is now egregiously meted out in feminism’s name and is responsible for its murder/suicide. That feminism is found in the messy scene of violence in such accounts destabilizes appeals to feminist innocence. But at the same time, as we suggest in our concluding speculations, the
corporealization of feminism and accompanying medicalization, which prompts either attempts at recuperation to its former (innocent) self, or triage, arising from a determination that it is not worth saving, hamper an imagining of a contemporary (after)life for feminism that is not hostage to these body-as-destiny narratives. But the positing of such an afterlife does not take feminism out of the scene of violence.

FEMINISM’S VIOLATING AFTERLIFE

Eisenstein’s, Halley’s and McRobbie’s prescriptions vary by how they diagnose what ails the feminist body. Eisenstein’s imagery of feminism seduced/raped impels her to forcefully re-draw boundaries around damaged feminism. Halley, anxious about the powerful frigidity of feminism and its putative theoretical sterility, assertively demarcates boundaries to isolate violating feminisms. McRobbie’s more diffracted perusal of feminism, perhaps, keeps shifting the feminist scene of violence though ultimately attributing violence to faux-feminism. Thus, in the process of indicting sources of feminist violations or violence, these feminist authors engage in a form of epistemic violence themselves. We recognize how uncomfortable this claim is not only for feminist readers, but also for us as authors as we do not exempt ourselves. Yet, feminists are very familiar with theoretical, epistemic and political violence – from the militancy of violating suffragists and second wave feminists to the anti-foundationalist and anti-imperialist blows meted out by contemporary feminists. Working and moving with this (rather than shying away from it) may shift implicit debates about whether to restore feminist innocence (however ephemerally articulated), or its putative non-violence (however ethereally conjured), or to jettison feminism for being violent to thinking more imaginatively about feminist violence as a vital force contesting, if embroiled in, theoretical, empirical and political hegemonies.

Remembering that feminism is never outside the scene of violence might allow consideration that animating these narratives (which are emblematic of large swathes of contemporary critiques of institutionalized feminism) at this historical moment is not feminist violence/violation per se, but the fear that feminism has lost its critical (violating/violent) edge. But the metaphorical trail of blood that infuses and sutures the narratives we peruse here makes such feminist impotency a foregone conclusion, seemingly violently foreclosing possibilities for reinvention. So bound up with the always deteriorating feminist body/mind are these narratives that they stifle possibilities for robust (after) lives for feminism not under patriarchal protection or confinement and/or neoliberal orchestration. The conclusion reached in them is that the feminist body/feminism will always betray us, like the ‘ropey skeleton’ that aging women are now charged with having in the age of Big Pharma-sponsored osteoporosis detection (Oakley 2007). It seems to us that if feminism has become less reliable as the wellspring for striking at
the status quo, this does not need to become the source of permanent defeat. Facing and following feminist violence in all its myriad and slippery forms need not carry a death sentence for feminism any more than the aging female body means inevitable disability and decline, at least as conventionally imagined. Following unwelcome, even uninviting trails necessarily engenders strange conclusions. In this article we have opened up some provocative, potentially wounding thoughts. We have done this to encourage rethinking, re-facing and re-imagining. Perhaps unsurprisingly we will not offer a conventional conclusion; indeed we take something of an odd turn. Given our discussion of flesh and blood, female corporeality and the degrading attachments to degeneration of bodies, we have chosen to end with a reflection on a ‘real’ female body, to briefly gesture toward re-readings of feminist possibilities.

Artist Louise Bourgeois died in 2010 at the age of 98, yet her death has brought her to life as it has not meant the end of the capacity of her story and her work to act as muse for our own feminist inspiration. Toward the end of her life, when asked about formative influences on her art, she spoke not of other artists, but of her invalid mother, her faithless father and his English mistress. Her striking spider sculpture, a towering nine meter tall sculpture entitled ‘Maman’ modeled on her mother, was ‘molded by trauma … if your need is to refuse to abandon the past, you have to recreate it’ (Greer 2010). Although her work was shaped by the pain of familial gender betrayals, it is not defined/entrapped by either those painful experiences or indeed her aging body. Against stultifying narratives of feminine corporeality and its inevitable decline, Bourgeois, in engaging in a range of boundary breaking contradictions, through which she continued to recreate her past, herself and her art, offers an intriguing way to think about the re-creative capacities and life chances of feminism.

Taking our theoretical cue from Bourgeois, we posit that feminist possibilities could lie beyond the grave that has been dug for feminism through corporeal representations of it as decrepit, devoid of the energies of life. Perhaps, we forget how difficult it is to effectively disturb the quiet secrets and lies of convention, though, perhaps, feminism has not been sufficiently virulent in tearing the sutures that bind it to disparaging and despairing accounts of the female body that disable consideration of other possible on-going afterlives. Such thoughts offer several ideas for feminist IR as a space where violence is persistently faced. First, to urge a critical engagement with the complicated relationship between feminism and violence in feminist IR, a starting point might be resisting notions of feminist innocence that belie feminist complicities or deny feminist efficacies and responsibilities. There remain discernible traces of Halley’s Injury Triad (where women are always innocent and violated, and men are always immune from violation) in feminist IR (Stern and Zalewski 2009). This reproduces gender norms in global politics and is not borne out empirically (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007, 2011). Nor does it take seriously the variegated
power relations among women, men and the wider range of genders, as well as between globally differentially positioned peoples that postcolonial and queer IR feminists have acutely identified (see Chowdhury and Nair 2002; Lind 2010). But just as importantly, jettisoning feminist innocence means acknowledging that feminism of any hue, like other critical projects, is never outside global political violence.

This important acknowledgment may help to stall the search for feminist ‘purity’, which is inhabited by its own disciplining violence as well as the impulse to act without consideration of the violences this can impose. It may also re-direct feminist IR to focus on what feminism(s) do violence to – not as an indictment of feminism(s) alone (since every order and will to act is violently reproductive), but instead as a more meaningful perusal of the meanings and impacts of feminism(s) in global politics. It also gestures toward ways to re-generate feminist recognition and embrace of violating epistemic challenges to hegemonic ideas within IR. We advance here doing feminist violence to feminist claims to purity and female corporeal representations of an inexorably decaying feminism in these neoliberal and neoimperial times, for such representations foreclose possibilities for vibrant ‘afterlives’ for feminist theorizing in and outside IR. More closely and slowly following the more muted trails of blood in politico/epistemological projects of all hues, including critical and feminist, may aid more imaginative and mobile thinking about their trails of emancipation. And perhaps tracing and trailing feminist violence may make it less persistently available as a vehicle or source for hegemonic violence.

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Notes
1 Hence the variegated use of singular/plural for feminism(s) throughout this article.
2 Marking a difference from Butler’s (2004) sense of the creative possibilities of ‘gender undone’.
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