

Editor's Interview with Marysia Zalewski*

ED: In your recent *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse*, you relentlessly transgress *boundaries* with both form and content. Indeed, the very notion of the boundary – territorial, disciplinary, social – is undone in this text as you traverse academic international relations, art, film, poetry, *the vignette*. Central to your investigation is the pertinence of the everyday, of the events and experiences that are unremarkable to most international relations scholars, even to some feminists. You ask: ‘How do we learn to know?’ Perhaps we could start our discussion with that question refracted to your own career. How did you learn to know, and how did that change for you?

MZ: Perhaps unsurprisingly I haven't followed a typical or traditional path. I had what you might call a 'pre-life' (not meant in a 'spectral' way!) and already had two small children before I embarked on my first degree at the University of East Anglia in the late 1980s. I had been inspired to pursue a degree in Sociology consequent to taking an evening class at the local College. My teacher there was outstandingly inspiring – and though I had previously not thought of myself as 'academic' – his enthusiasm and passion for the subject and his determination to make us understand the 'agency/structure' debate in particular (and why it mattered) had a huge impact on me. I actually did begin to see why that debate mattered (of course it still does ...). And then there was the 'week' on feminism (it was 'feminism and work' I think) – and yes, I did have a 'eureka' moment. My eventual first degree at UEA was somewhat eclectic – a bit of Sociology, a bit of Politics and a bit of International Relations. There wasn't much feminism in any of the courses, though I was very interested in the theory lectures – again the agency/structure debate was dominant.

And I managed to write pretty much most of my essays on feminism in one way or another anyway! Subsequently I embarked on a very circuitous intellectual and academic path: I 'signed up' to do a PhD on 'prenatal screening' (!). It was something of a strange set up at that time, my proposed supervisor was interested in having PhD students work on various aspects of medicine (from a social science perspective), and prenatal screening was one of these. I think I

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imagined I could do something which worked with feminist theory and wider debates on reproductive technologies ...

I think of myself as a scholar of feminism first and foremost. I am particularly interested in philosophically inspired questions which have led me to work a lot with (and around) theory, epistemology and methodology. Because of this, the empirical areas I work on are usually of secondary importance to me (intellectually); my main fascination has always been with the stories weaved in order to 'make sense', as well as the different stories that might emerge, or, really, that don't emerge. So I was interested in the frames in which the stories are encased - though perhaps even more currently interesting is the simultaneous strength and vulnerability of these 'casings'. For a long time while I was working on the topic of prenatal screening for my PhD I struggled with how to think about the story of it. And with hindsight, began to face the first of many, ongoing battles to convince those who needed to be convinced (including myself), of the legitimacy of 'feminism first' - not the topic, not some 'master-theory/discourse' - but *feminism* in all its eclectic and oblique range of questions. My advisor, a political theorist, steered me toward theories of choice, autonomy and the like. Given one of the challenges around prenatal screening tests involved potential pressure on women to abort fetuses identified as 'abnormal', questions of autonomy and choice were (and still are) very important. And I spent weeks in the local hospital medical library reading through the British Medical Journal for cases. I became convinced I had every disease going by the end of it! But I struggled to find my 'feminist way in'. None of my advisors were feminist scholars, in fact I have never been taught (formally) by a feminist teacher. All I could do was keep reading lots more feminist theory.

I was awarded my PhD in 1996; it had the eventual title *Feminism After Postmodernism: Theorizing Through Practice*. After a good few years of intellectual struggle (and still no feminist teachers/advisors) I worked out that the story I wanted to tell about prenatal screening (and reproductive technologies more broadly) was not really about it/them. It was 'about' feminism and in the case of prenatal screening, what kinds of feminist stories were told about it/them, and, crucially, how the differences between those stories mattered (it only really occurred to me toward the end that this was what I was really interested in). A hot (theoretical) topic at that time (still is to some extent I think if differently and more complexly formulated) was the difference between modernist and postmodernist feminisms. There was a lot of anxiety about losing the political basis for an identity politics of feminism if 'woman' was a (postmodern) 'fiction' (something I had agreed with in a very early piece (1991)¹ of writing on the seductions and perils of postmodernism for feminism!). This debate fascinated me and provided a great frame for my PhD. It felt like an accident I had stumbled upon very late into my PhD (and I do tell students that I only really worked out what my PhD was about in the last 6 months - I think (hope) they find it reassuring!).

My move to the department of Politics and IR in Aberystwyth began to fuel my interest in the discipline of International Relations. The subject matter seemed *so* important! Matters of high international politics, cold and hot wars, bombs and bullets, the mysterious 'security dilemma' - and all the rest. I was, happily, given the opportunity to develop an undergraduate course on 'Gender and IR' - the first in the UK I believe (though Margot Light and Fred Halliday started a course on Women and International Politics at the LSE round that time). I spoke a lot about the

¹ Marysia Zalewski, 'The Debauching of Feminist Theory: The Penetration of the Postmodern,' *Politics*, 11:1, 1991, pp. 30-36.

different feminist approaches (typically liberal, socialist, radical and postmodernist at that time). The gender hierarchy was something I also spoke about a lot – really trying to impress on students how the binary masculine/feminine so *very well* placed women and things associated with ‘the feminine’ down on the ‘bottom rungs’ (an Enloe term) and vice versa. They always liked it (and hopefully ‘got it’ more) when I asked them to imagine one of my senior Professorial male colleagues turning up to give a lecture in a flowery dress I also wrote I think passionately, about the absence of women in IR and international politics; an illusory absence at that² (Enloe’s ‘Bananas, Beaches and Bases’ is still a key text in my view). In the early days those snapshots of some of the main feminist approaches seemed important to discuss in a discipline which was overwhelmingly male and masculine dominated in theory, methodology, empirical interest, personnel and emotional bearing. And centralizing women was what mattered; one of my first articles was a rant against masculinity studies!³ I was pretty convinced at that time that the figure of ‘the male’ would very easily usurp women’s place in the field of gender thinking and practice.

I guess in many ways I seemed to have been very clear about boundaries – boundaries between men and women, between masculinities and femininities, between different types of feminism, perhaps also between the ‘gap’ between ‘not knowing’ and ‘knowing’ about feminism – and the important work that could be achieved if people simply *knew* feminism better. It sounds a little naïve writing it like this, though I’m not sure I’ve moved *that* far from these kinds of thoughts, which kind of surprises me. Though this isn’t quite right and certainly the intentions behind my writing and teaching have shifted, as has their form.

ED: And yet at the same time, your scholarship is so deeply engaged in the refusal of many of these boundaries as sites of identity, perception, and knowledge. I am curious about how these borders and boundaries have shifted for you, intellectually. Could you talk a little bit about that – about the shifts in form and motive in your work? What are the landmarks for you in your own intellectual journey?

MZ: Landmarks in my intellectual journey? -- This moment regularly comes to mind – I was at a very early conference on Gender and International Politics (in the early 1990s) at the LSE. A graduate student (whose name I cannot remember!) was discussing women and abortion. She suggested that there should be no time limit for abortion and women should be the sole ones to choose. Looking directly at the audience she asked, did we imagine that if this was the case women would be happily queuing up in droves for abortions at 38, 39, 40 weeks gestation? The day after the due date? There was a clear ripple of discomfort in the room. I felt discomfort. Of course there might be a range of responses to her suggestion both then and now, but it resonated with me deeply. And as I think about it now and how it speaks to the changes in my work - it strikes me as such an epistemologically stretchy thing to say. For me it opened the possibility of halting the rush toward the ‘usual’ or safe routes to answers, particularly in the context of women and abortion (political, judicial, religious, moral etc.) and perhaps helped me to move less

² Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

³ Marysia Zalewski, ‘Men are Sexy; Women are Small: A Rant about Masculinity Studies,’ *Women’s Studies Network (UK) Association Newsletter*, November, 2001, pp. 16–18.

fearfully toward different thinking paths. Why did we think women would rush to what is perceived to be the ‘worst’ thing? Why do we have so little faith in women? Epistemologically stretchy is not a phrase that I would have used then, but perhaps it does describe something that helped me move in directions that aren’t necessarily obvious or even appropriate. We might even think of it as a research method! (Maybe not ...)

Though my early work wasn’t particularly ‘stretchy’ I think. I was very committed to the structural and rational force of feminist theory. Very committed to convincing a recalcitrant discipline (IR) of the need for feminist insights and scholarship. As we put it in *Rethinking the Man Question* (2008) in a reflection on *The ‘Man’ Question* (1998), ‘If *The ‘Man’ Question* demonstrated a measure of confidence in a rather conventional relationship between analysis, theory and social change, one that assumed, or at least hoped for, an effectual relationship between academic work and social and political change, [in this book] we adopt a more cautious and methodologically eclectic approach.⁴ My subsequent approach has certainly become much more eclectic, if perhaps less cautious (an ethical choice). Though thinking chronologically or in a linear fashion perhaps doesn’t give a good sense of the ways my thinking has changed or what helped me on my way. Though my ‘straying’ into eclectic areas, e.g. philosophy, poetry, literature, popular culture, the ordinary, and the detritus of the everyday and thinking of them as all equally relevant and important - helped in a kind of chaotic, inexplicable way. Looking toward ‘IR’ and its theories became less and less appealing. Their closures and restrictions too much - too much to bear even. But my intellectual journey - and the writing - has always been (and continues to be) a struggle, though not one which hasn’t been indelibly and joyously marked by meeting and becoming friends with a wonderful array of people who coalesce around FTGS and GIRWG in IR. (I want to write a list of names – but it would be too long!)

I do sense a significant shift in my thinking (and writing) around the publication of ‘Where is Woman in International Relations?: ‘To Return as a Woman and Be Heard’ (1999).⁵ It is certainly very different in tone to my earlier work. In ‘Logical Contradictions in Feminist Health Care’⁶ I think I write ‘like a man’! I know that’s not an unproblematic thing to say, but the differences are noticeable. ‘Gender Ghosts in McGarry and O’Leary and Representations of the Conflict in Northern Ireland’⁷ is another piece that says so much more than the work itself. I’ve recently cleared out my office at the University of Aberdeen (on my way to Cardiff University) and so have spent time rifling through mountains of ‘stuff’! I came across the editorial decision letter consequent to reviews of ‘Gender Ghosts’ – it was clear the editor had decided to ‘take a chance’ on my ‘strange’ piece (or ‘strident’ as one of the reviewers described it!) It was also just around the time that I was just about seeing the ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ after an intense period of physical, emotional and personal turmoil. I think that period probably had a significant impact on my thinking and writing; the personal is indeed political and intellectual. And there are many people to thank on the way (including that editor!)

⁴ Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart, *The “Man” Question in International Relations*, (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998), p. 7.

⁵ Marysia Zalewski, ‘Where is Woman in International Relations?: ‘To Return as a Woman and Be Heard’,’ *Millennium* 27:4, 1999, pp. 847-867.

⁶ Marysia Zalewski, ‘Logical Contradictions in Feminist Health Care: A Rejoinder to Peggy Foster,’ *Journal of Social Policy* 19:2, 1990, pp. 235-244.

⁷ Marysia Zalewski, ‘Gender Ghosts in McGarry and O’Leary and Representations of the Conflict in Northern Ireland,’ *Political Studies*, 53, 2005, pp. 201-221.

ED: It's interesting that you mention personal turmoil here. I was experiencing a great deal of turmoil and upheaval in my personal life around the time that I wrote *Exile*, and I have often thought that this mess was actually the catalyst for that book. I had changed countries, was going through a divorce, was just months into my first tenure-track job at the University of Manchester. On the face of it, things looked great. After all, I had a job. But I had lost a lot in my personal life in exchange, and I felt these losses sort of bleeding into my professional writing. More than anything, perhaps, this experience for me illustrated precisely that feminist point about the porosity – perhaps even the non-existence – of boundaries. Are there moments for you when you can recognize the porousness of those boundaries between your own life and your scholarship? Where the personal leaks out in unexpected ways and floods into your work? (Is this question too personal?)

MZ: Is the question too personal? Yes - at one level. In the context of the hyper-professionalized corporate sector in which I work (the University) personal questions quickly fall into a gendered zone of weakness - though maybe that tells us these are important questions to ask. But on your point about recognizing the porousness of boundaries between one's life and scholarship – this isn't quite it I think. Perhaps it gives too much credibility to the idea that there *is* such a boundary (however ephemeral) - as if intellectual labour is ever removed or distanced from the emotional or personal or indeed, corporeal. Think of the 'epistemological stretchiness' I mentioned earlier - what choice does one – *can* one – make in such moments of discomfort? Those moments which are marked by a messy choreography of the emotional, intellectual and physical. Moving (nearer) toward spaces of comfort might be obvious – 'natural'. How one manages the relentless cluttering of obstacles (Sara Ahmed's 'walls',⁸ 2012) when working with 'unconventional' thinking is a daily choice. I guess I have a strange willingness to keep being 'unmoored'! This is strange (or a strange choice I make) both personally and professionally as it fosters a good deal of vulnerability (an observation made by Nick Vaughan-Williams about my work, he remarked that I take very seriously the idea that 'the author' is 'dead').

Though perhaps that all makes me too vulnerable, or my work too 'vulnerable'. Masculine-marked certainty and strategies of self-promotion have become hyper-significant in my profession. Visibility and solidity of (acceptable) 'place' are increasingly vital. I think that in the discipline of IR this has made the professionalized intellectual boundaries ever more conservative despite overt welcoming of 'critical voices.' I'm saying this here as I keep thinking about your questions about boundaries especially in relation to *Exquisite Corpse*.⁹ That book was such a struggle to write (and took way too long!) so I was very relieved when it was finally published! I hadn't really thought about any reception it might have. But then a graduate student sent me a paper he wrote on my book which raised some very interesting issues¹⁰ of much relevance to your questions here and how the conversation is unfolding – and to the broader issue of feminism 'in IR'. He starts by describing the book as a path breaking text for feminist international relations and IR more generally (thanks Cory!), though he goes on to say that

⁸ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁹ Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁰ Cory Collins, 'An Autopsy of Marysia Zalewski's *Feminist International Relations: Exquisite Corpse* (unpublished graduate paper, 2015).

Corpse potentially ‘taints the reputability of feminist scholarship’, which is very intriguing. Added to that he states that ‘its marriage of the aesthetics of violence ... and the international character of the mundane, make *Corpse* the archetypal boogeyman [sic] for those who fear the colonizing of IR with illegitimate methods and fringe concerns’. In that mixed context he wonders about the limited reception of the book in the field, ‘we already know that the field is likely to reject its methods out of hand and would not regard an anthology of Surrealist inspired flash fiction, no matter how brilliantly perceived by its target audience, as worthy of comment’. I wonder does this mean I ‘went too far’ – though isn’t that one of the points of ‘critical’ work? Perhaps I have a real aversion to be ‘kept in (my) place’, but the ‘safety’ of the boundary does keep calling.

ED: Perhaps there is an inherent vulnerability in the transgression of established norms. Those who enact those transgressions make themselves vulnerable, to be sure, but this must in part because they reveal the ultimate vulnerability of the very boundaries that they are refusing (and this includes the now well-established ‘critical’ boundaries). You have built your career on a kind of refusal, and that refusal continues to emerge in your scholarship. What would you say in response to Cory Collins’ observation that ‘the field’ cannot find *Corpse* ‘worthy of comment’?

MZ: Yes I think you’re right about the vulnerability provoked by revealing, or even ‘gesturing’ toward the arbitrariness of boundaries. The cruel force of privilege and power are very close then; all manner of ‘re-securing violent acts’ begin appearing then. What would I say in response to Cory Collins’ observation that ‘the field’ cannot find *Corpse* ‘worthy of comment’? Perhaps it isn’t seen to ‘advance the field’s agenda’ or engage in appropriate or legitimate conversations? Then what does it do? I was very touched when another graduate student described it a ‘magic pillow of a book’ (Elizabeth Pearson at Kings College, London). Such a warm thing to say. But her question was about how to think about the work in *Corpse* in relation to her PhD and progressing in the field. This is difficult to answer if it turns out the book evokes more a feeling, and perhaps a confused set of feelings at that, rather than offering a clear direction forward (and thus following the trails disciplines authorize, even for ‘critical thought’). I guess *Corpse* maybe isn’t a book that will help too much there. Maybe that says something about Cory Collins’ observation that ‘the field’ cannot find *Corpse* ‘worthy of comment’? It doesn’t ‘do’ anything for the field – certainly not the self-defined of ‘IR’. But then, what about feminist IR?

ED: Yes, what about feminist IR? In some ways, feminism has ‘arrived’ in mainstream IR, and in other ways, of course, it remains deeply marginal – perceived as disruptive or interruptive – to the established ‘concerns’ of the profession. *Exquisite Corpse* is one of many interruptions to that discourse.

MZ: I guess my work is both about a ‘refusal’ (of a kind) and an ‘interruption’, though I didn’t have a clear plan as to the direction my work would take (and I still don’t). I’ve just returned from the annual International Studies Association Convention in Atlanta which was the usual bizarre mix of largely white ‘Northern’ privilege, largely speaking of power and violence ‘elsewhere’. Things have changed in many ways at ISA over the last couple of decades - the FTGS section is thriving and has a massive number of panels at this annual event. Though there is still much discussion about ‘progress’ in regard to ‘gender and diversity’ – in subject matter,

teaching priorities, the gendered and ethnic diversity of faculty and their relative positioning, with the discipline still very much found ‘wanting’. Though one thing I loved about this year’s convention was the opportunity to be part of a panel entitled ‘How Inappropriate’ with Saara Särmä, Michelle Brown, Shine Choi, Cristina Masters, Laura McLeod, and Swati Parashar (though Swati wasn’t able to be with us in person). And of course, Jack (my ventriloquist ‘puppet’). The panel’s aim was to explore disciplinary boundaries in a variety of ways picking up on the conference theme of ‘exploring peace’. It is clear to me at least, that feminism is not a ‘peaceful thing’, certainly not epistemologically or methodologically - or pretty much anything else. Michelle opened the panel with a Hawaiian chant which acknowledged the Tsalagi and Muscogee lands we were standing/sitting/meeting on. From Michelle – ‘it seemed really important to me to recognize the lands and waters of those who were forcibly removed and bring aloha to them - especially as ISA goes about ‘exploring peace’. Saara then introduced the background to the panel (building on a series of ‘inappropriate’ panels at the previous few ISA’s as well as her All Male Panel Tumblr¹¹). She showed the audience her copy of the conference programme which she had customized with yellow post notes to show the number of ‘all male panels’. The corporate green-black/masculinized explorer aesthetic of the programme beautifully appropriated by a sea of fluttering yellowness.¹² Cristina and Laura performed a hilarious mansplaining skit and at this point Jack, along with other panel members, joined in enthusiastically to support ‘the mansplainer’ and insult ‘the feminist’. Shine ended by reading her very moving ‘letter to the discipline’ about ‘being a bad academic’ using as an object the book ‘Women Be Terrorists’. Various audience members also participated - popcorn thrown by Sam Cook sitting behind the panel on the floor and Susannah Hast offering a comment in the form of a rap song. The panel was a lovely example of working with an irreverent range of materials and the ‘left overs’ of thinking and methodologies that disciplines work so hard to edge out, perhaps particularly in its critical spheres. Picking them up and using them front and centre illustrates – though perhaps more affectively than anything else - something striking about power, privilege and the production of knowledge, ways that are surely not accessible through the usual (acceptable) routes. We intend to produce a ‘book’ from this work, though it’s challenging to work out how to put something like this together given the egregious demands of publishing the ‘right’ book, in the ‘right’ place’, not least for junior scholars trying to move forward. And yet we will do it – watch this space for more on ‘Jack and the (Yellow) Wallpaper Catalogue’: International Relations Out of Bounds!

¹¹ <http://allmalepanels.tumblr.com/>

¹² See it at <http://allmalepanels.tumblr.com/image/141231528666>