

Affect as Methodology: Feminism and the Politics of Emotion¹

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International relations scholars are increasingly paying attention to “the emotional” as a way to understand global politics. What is often missing from these conversations is feminist knowledge on affect, and also discussions about methodology. By presenting a feminist methodological approach to the affective-discursive to analyze the politics of emotion, this paper aims to fill this gap. It starts by discussing feminist critiques of the “affective turn.” Then, a methodological framework of gender, discourse, and affect as a structure that “goes-without-saying” is presented. Hemmings’ concept of affective dissonance is used as a tool guiding a feminist curiosity, useful to zoom in on the political puzzle of what emotion (in its broadest sense) does. The third section draws on two examples of being emotional about violent “Woman” to illustrate how moments of affective dissonance spark a feminist curiosity about gender, agency, and political violence. In conclusion, the paper argues that feminist knowledge on affect offers a way to re-tune, reset, and reimagine research on the politics of emotion. By prioritizing affect as methodology, feminist knowledge should be valuable for critical endeavors interested in changing the status quo, no matter if the political puzzle is about gender or not.

Prologue: “It Didn’t Really Gel.”

Feminism often begins with intensity: you are aroused by what you come up against. You register something in the sharpness of an impression. Something can be sharp without it being clear what the point is . . . Things don’t seem right. (Ahmed 2017, 22)

“It didn’t really gel”—an observation from an established emotion scholar sympathetic to feminist scholarship after we had both taken part in a workshop on emotion² research in International Relations (IR). I agreed. Four feminist scholars (out of nineteen) had been invited. The invitation meant recognition of feminist work as valuable when it comes to research on emotions, affect, passions, and sensibilities in IR. And yet, my impression during the workshop was that it was as if we were speaking different languages. More generally, what was at stake was different understandings of “the political” and, as a result, how to study the *politics of emotion*

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² When I am using emotion in the singular I refer to “the emotional” more broadly, including scholarly work that might use different terms such as affect, emotions, feelings, sensibilities, passions etc.

in IR. But more specifically, I began to think about how the active disinterest in feminist knowledge in IR more broadly is also often affectively felt.

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed (2017, 22) discusses how sensation matters because “you are left with an impression that is not clear or distinct.” She goes on to argue, “a gut feeling has its own intelligence. A feminist gut might sense something is amiss. You have to get closer to the feeling” (Ahmed 2017, 27). My overall impression that something about the interactions during the workshop did not make sense was both an affective and emotional experience: following Ahmed, I wanted to get “closer to the feeling.”

To me (and, I am sure, other feminists in the room), the impression that our discussions during the workshop “didn’t gel” was no surprise and was perhaps even expected. But, my colleague’s reflection stayed with me because it touched on the much bigger issue of how feminist knowledge on global politics is often ignored more generally in IR. My experience at this workshop fed into previous experiences and my sense of irritation grew. It grew into this paper. Following Sianne Ngai’s (2005) exploration of the critical productivity of negative affective senses (e.g., envy, shame, disgust and paranoia), I want to use my growing sense of irritation to think carefully about how (and why) “It didn’t really gel.”

Feminist scholars have successfully drawn attention to the fact that gender matters in global politics. It is a good thing that it no longer makes sense to exclude feminists from various academic spaces—this is not always the case, but the landscape is definitely changing. It is a good thing that many now realize that feminist research matters. And yet, after decades of “including” feminist theory in IR, feminist knowledge remains marginalized. This is not a new observation (Tickner 1997; Steans 2003), but what concerns me is the continuing presence and force of this marginalization and the way it makes itself felt at the levels of affect and emotion.

Feminist scholars are increasingly invited into academic spaces, while feminist knowledge is, still, too often ignored. Nonfeminist scholars seem convinced that feminist knowledge does not concern them—a feeling reproduced by a common misunderstanding that feminism is only about “identity politics” or “women’s stuff.” This lack of engagement with feminist theory and methodologies continues despite, or perhaps as a result of, the opening up of those spaces for feminist research. Or to put it differently, the opening up of academic spaces for feminist research has not meant actual feminist change of those spaces. By keeping the invitation open, it seems, nonfeminist scholars can get away with their failure to engage with feminist arguments. This failure is perhaps most obvious with the growing interest in research on emotions and affect in IR.

Why? Because “emotion” is a term that has long been associated with the personal, the body, the feminine. As the constitutive other of “reason” (as well as the objective, the mind, the masculine) in Western, binary modes of thinking, “emotion” has been (and still is) a political strategy keeping women and the feminine out of politics and political spheres. As a result, much of feminist scholarship has worked to problematize binaries such as emotion/reason, mind/body, and domestic/international. All this is to say that feminist scholarship has a very long history with “the emotional.”

From a feminist perspective, the aim of this paper is not to convince everyone to pay attention to gender. We know that gender analysis is not necessarily feminist. Instead, my central claim is that any “turning” to affect, emotion, bodies, and embodiment in analyses of global politics in IR without engaging with feminist theory, feminist knowledge, and/or feminist methodologies is political in itself. Going back to my sense of irritation, is it even reasonable to assume that things could “gel” when there is seemingly little understanding of, and engagement with, feminist knowledge on affect, emotions, and the political outside of feminist circles more broadly? I want to use the affective dissonance over an academic workshop to open up wider debates about the research on emotion and affect in IR.

The aim of this paper, thus, is to showcase what feminist knowledge on affect, as a politics of emotion, offers, in particular when it comes to methodology, an area deemed understudied (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Åhäll and Gregory 2015). Ambitiously, this paper is also an attempt to convince nonfeminist scholars that “feminism is for everybody” (hooks 2000). I present a feminist methodological approach to the affective-discursive as a way to analyze the politics of emotion. It is important to note that the term “politics of emotion” is an attempt at capturing the *political effects of emotional practices*, no matter how such emotional practices are defined. This means that the politics of emotion discussed here involves both representations of feelings—those “sensations that have found a match in words” (Brennan 2004, 19)—and the bodily movements often identified as affect.³ This paper aims to reset, refocus, and reimagine debates on the politics of emotion in IR by following Ahmed’s (2004) encouragement: what should matter for studies of (global) politics is what emotions do politically.

The paper starts by discussing affect theory and feminist critiques of the “affective turn.” It unpacks feminist knowledge and demonstrates how a feminist analysis is, per definition, already both political and affective. There is no feminism without affect. This is because how we feel (consciously or unconsciously) about the world already tells us about how the world works: For feminists, affect, simply, generates feminist questions.⁴

The second section develops a methodological framework by discussing gender, discourse, and affect as a structure that “goes-without-saying.” Here, the focus is on “feelings of structure” (Ahmed 2010), and Clare Hemmings’ concept of affective dissonance is presented as a methodological tool guiding a feminist curiosity, useful to zoom in on the political puzzle of what emotions do.

In the third section, I demonstrate how moments of affective dissonance spark feminist curiosity and how a consideration of affect generates feminist questions about gender, agency, and political violence. I draw on two affective examples of “being emotional about violent women” (see also Åhäll 2012). First, the politics of disgust involved in the representation of US Private Lynndie England, who became the “poster-girl” for the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in 2003. Then, a discussion of how the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) justified keeping a ban on women in combat roles in 2010, even though it did not make (common) sense to do so. The idea here is not to offer an in-depth analysis of either of these events but rather to illustrate a productive feminist methodology that can be used to analyze feelings of structure as a politics of emotion.

In conclusion, I argue that feminist knowledge on affect demonstrates the political power of emotion research. What feminist knowledge on affect offers is twofold: First, a way to identify “the political” in the affective-discursive because affect generates questions about how the world works. Second, by feeling differently, a feminist analysis is opening up a space for thinking, acting, and knowing differently. This is how feminist knowledge on affect offers a way to retune, reset and reimagine research on the politics of emotion. It shows how and why we must also approach affect as methodology. By prioritizing affect as methodology, moreover, feminist knowledge and analyses should be valuable for critical endeavors interested in changing the status quo, no matter if the political puzzle is about gender or not. In short, if scholars are serious about analyzing the politics of emotion, feminist knowledge on affect must not be ignored.

³While I recognize the longstanding debate on the difference between emotion and affect, which I discuss in more detail in the next section, and also appreciate that other scholars have different accounts of the affective, this paper is an attempt at sidestepping that debate to focus on the political.

⁴Thanks to Cristina Masters for this phrasing.

Affect, Feminism, and the Politics of Emotion

The Problem with “the Affective Turn”

A growing strand of research on security practices and international conflict is drawing on the so-called “affective turn” in social sciences more broadly by approaching the emotional through “affect” as something different from “emotions” (see [Ross 2006, 2014](#); [Adey 2008](#); [Solomon 2012](#); [Anderson 2014](#); [Holland and Solomon 2014](#)). Studies of affect generally tend to move beyond a focus on single emotions to explore our ability to affect and be affected in more depth. Where emotions might be used to denote a more amplified, developed, and coherent form of experience, affect is often seen as something that is *before* emotions:

Affect gives you away: the tell-tale heart; my clammy hands; the note of anger in your voice; the sparkle of glee in their eyes . . . Affect is the cuckoo in the nest; the fifth columnist out to undermine you; your personal polygraph machine. ([Highmore 2010](#), 118)

From this perspective, affect resembles a flow of resonances, a form of emotional communication between body and mind that influences us. Affect is, therefore, often described as nonconscious, nonsubjective or prepersonal, and is contrasted with personal, conscious, emotional experiences often identified as “feelings.” Thus, while emotion is here understood as capturing conscious thoughts, subjective experiences and normative judgements belonging to the individual, affect refers to a completely different order activity. For example, Nigel Thrift suggests that affect can be understood as a “set of embodied practices” or as a form of “indirect and non-reflective” thinking that never quite rises to the level of an emotion ([Thrift 2008](#), 175). To Brian Massumi, affect is not something that can be reduced to one thing, mainly because it’s not a thing but an event or a dimension of every event ([Massumi 2015](#), 47; see also [Massumi 2002](#)). Moreover, William Connolly speaks of “thought-imbued energies” expressed as micropolitics, the myriad ordinary and everyday affective relations, material interactions, feelings, habits, and emotions that shape our intersubjective relations and judgments and which typically reside in levels of experience “below” rational or immediately cognitive processing ([Connolly 2002](#), 74).

An interest in affect necessarily involves a focus on bodies (human and nonhuman). This interest in bodies has above all manifested as an interest in the somatic, taking inspiration from discoveries in neuroscience (see [Connolly 2002](#)). That is, neuroscience is presented as an exciting, new, and appropriate (read scientific) way into emotion research in IR, while the much longer history of feminist theorizing about bodies and embodiment, about the personal, emotional, and affective often remains ignored or only superficially engaged with.

From a feminist perspective, the enthusiasm about the fact that neuroscientific discoveries provide “concrete evidence for the idea that decisions and judgments are fundamentally imbued with emotion” ([Hutchison and Bleiker 2014](#), 496) risks missing the point (for nonfeminist critiques see [Jeffery 2014](#); [Reus-Smit 2014](#)). This is because, for feminist scholars who in any case reject the emotional/rational and ideational/material divide, the *politics* of emotion lies elsewhere.

In order to get to the political power of emotion, I am instead drawing on feminist scholars who have critiqued models of affect that attempt to move “beyond emotion” and “beyond humanity” toward the “transhuman.” To start with, these feminist scholars have pointed out that any “turn to affect” that privileges affect over emotion as its object for analysis implies that there is something “new” going on when, in fact, feminist theorists have long been concerned with the relationships between affect, knowledge, and power ([Pedwell and Whitehead 2012](#), 119). The problem is that by prioritizing affect over emotion, a feminized “personal”

epistemology is rejected. The insistence on affect as something different from emotion in this way risks reinforcing a binary, gendered logic between a mobile, impersonal, masculinized affect and a contained, feminized, personal emotion (see Hemmings 2005; Thien 2005; Hsieh 2008; Wetherell 2012; Ahmed 2014a). In other words, the emphasis on affect as something prepersonal and “transhuman” is universalizing but also masculinizing affect.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the problem with focusing on affect as something prepersonal and nonconscious is that the social is excluded (Hemmings 2005). I am following Teresa Brennan (2004), who, similarly to Connolly, understands affect as energies transmitted through bodily encounters. However, her point is to show that the individual emotional experience cannot be separated from the social environment. She discusses the notion of an “affective atmosphere” as that feeling that you get when you walk into a room and sense a particular mood in the air. This, Brennan argues, means that “the emotions or affects of one person, and the enhancing or depressing energies these affects entail, can enter into another” (Brennan 2004, 3). Thus, in this sense, even our most intimate feelings do not really belong to us but are an effect of the body’s encounters with others. The moods of others can have a physical and psychological impact on others without their consent. “[T]he emotions of two are not the same as the emotions of one plus one” (Brennan 2004, 51). In addition, I am drawing on Sara Ahmed in that the affective atmosphere is also dependent on the baggage that we bring with us: “What we will receive as an impression will depend on our affective situation” (Ahmed 2010, 36). In other words, even when we feel we have the same feeling, we do not necessarily have the same relationship to that feeling (Ahmed 2004, 10). Affect is already partial and contextualized. Again, the point is to focus on the social (and political), as Ahmed explains: “I turned to emotions as they help me to explain not only how we are affected in this way or that, by this or that, but also how those judgements then hold or become *agreed as shared perceptions*” (Ahmed 2014a, 208, added emphasis).

Ahmed compares the popular separation between affect and emotions to an egg: “That we can separate them does not mean they are separate” (Ahmed 2014a, 210). She challenges the distinction between affect and emotions by discussing emotions as the idea of “impression,” precisely to avoid making analytical distinctions between bodily sensation, emotion, and thought. Emotions involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected, but, for Ahmed as well as for Hemmings, affect is not something prepersonal that flows between bodies in a generic sense. Rather, some bodies generate different affective responses in a particular context than others. Certain (gendered, raced, sexed) subjects therefore become the objects of others’ affective responses. This is how emotions are a matter of how we come into contact with objects and others (Ahmed 2014a, 208). Thus, crucially, following Ahmed, an approach to affect that takes the social into account means that *that which flows is not affect per se, but objects*. In this paper, the object that flows, in a context of political violence, is “Woman,” but this thinking about objects and others is perhaps best illustrated by Ahmed’s discussion of “the stranger”:

To recognise somebody as a stranger is an affective judgement: a stranger is the one who seems suspicious; the one who lurks. I became interested in how some bodies are “in an instant” judged as suspicious, or as dangerous, as objects to be feared, a judgement that can have lethal consequences. There can be nothing more dangerous to a body than the social agreement that that body is dangerous. (Ahmed 2014a, 211)

The important point that Ahmed makes is that the body of the stranger is already perceived as dangerous before it arrives and that we cannot therefore only focus our attention on the actual affective encounter when one body is affected by another. Instead, we must focus attention on “the histories that come before subjects” in order to understand how “the immediacy of bodily reactions are mediated” (Ahmed 2014a, 212).

That affective processes—*both between and within bodies*—are already social, moreover, means that it has everything to do with gender. This is because gender plays a fundamental role in how our social worlds work. Before talking about how gender matters in more depth, we must first discuss how an interest in affect can be combined with feminism's interest in political change and transformation.

Feminism, Bodies, Emotions

Feminism is often simplistically assumed to be “only” about women's lives and experiences, about “identity politics.” However, as Marysia Zalewski points out, it is more appropriate to think of feminism as primarily concerned with the kinds of questions that are fundamentally about how the world works (Zalewski 2015, 4). And of course, the world also works affectively and emotionally.

What unites various strands of feminist research, in and beyond IR, is a feminist questioning about how bodies matter politically, through ideas about gender—a *social* construction. Most often, the focus is on “women,” that is, those bodies identified as female, precisely because such bodies have been underrepresented and/or represented in particular ways in global politics. But, a focus on bodies also includes attention to male, intersexual, queer, transsexual, and/or raced, classed, aged, able/disabled, or in other ways “othered” bodies. A focus on how gendered bodies matter includes attentiveness to how notions of masculinity and femininity are constructed and continuously reproduced. It concerns how bodies are positioned and valued in relation to other bodies. That is, gender informs social norms about bodies and, crucially, relationships between different bodies. What is more, while it is possible to do gender analysis without feminism, a feminist perspective on gender is always about power. To paraphrase Cynthia Enloe, any feminist perspective puts *politics*—and thereby *power*—at the core of the analysis in a way that a gender analysis does not (Enloe 2010, xi–xii). In other words, the difference between gender analysis and feminist analysis is that the latter is always about changing the status quo. What is feminist is that which concerns political and social change and transformation. Thus, a feminist approach to the politics of emotion through gender is about how we become invested in social norms, *it is about the affective investments in gender as a social norm*.

Perhaps most importantly for a discussion of feminism and affect, feminist theory challenges knowledge as objective, particularly through a focus on the importance of *being as a mode of knowing*. Here, I am following Clare Hemmings who argues that feminist theory has privileged affect as a marker of the relationship between ontology and epistemology (Hemmings 2012, 148). To most feminists, the interest in how gender (and also other identity “markers” such as race, class, age, (dis)ability) functions as a politics of bodies is personal. The political logic of gender is personally felt. We might say, as Ahmed suggests, that feminism is “an inheritance of the sadness of becoming conscious of gender as a restriction of possibility that was not necessary” (Ahmed 2014b). Feminists are affectively moved to identify as feminists in order to change a particular politics. Indeed, it is the “question of affect—misery, rage, passion, pleasure—that gives feminism its life” (Hemmings 2012, 150).

In this way, it is precisely because feminists in IR ask important questions about bodies in relation to war, security, or global politics that feminist scholars often have a different way *into* “the political” than traditional, state-based IR theories. The famous feminist slogan “the personal is political” (and international) means that feminist research agendas are often tuned in to stories, experiences, and representations of peoples/individuals/bodies rather than those of states or political elites. It also means that the personal and subjective is theoretical. Feminist claims to knowledge are not claiming to objectively reveal “the truth,” not least because feminist theorizing often starts from silenced and/or ignored “truths.” Instead, feminist knowledge is about challenging norms, the normative, and the normal, often through lived

experiences. As Judith Butler's theory of performativity has taught us, theory is not just about what we think. It is also about what we do. Theory is also lived. This is why, in a cultural context of patriarchy and sexism, feminist scholars are often interested in challenging the politics of "common sense," that which we tend to take for granted. To this end, feminist scholars in IR have, for example, demonstrated how militarization functions as the normalization of war in the everyday (Enloe 2000; Åhäll 2016a) or how justification for war often relies on particular "veiled references" based on ideas about masculinities and femininities as a politics of common sense (Shepherd 2006).⁵

While feminists comfortably theorize the subjective, the particular, the ignored perspective, what makes research feminist is not limited to analyses of "women" or perhaps even gender. Instead, what makes research feminist is that it asks feminist research questions (see Wibben 2011). And again, feminist research questions are about power and how the world works through power structures. This is why, when it comes to feminist knowledge on affect, I agree with Pedwell and Whitehead's statement that "feminist theory might most productively explore affects less for how they dominate, regulate and constrain individual subjects and more for the possibilities they offer for thinking (and feeling) beyond what is already known and assumed" (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012, 117). The next section discusses gender, discourse, and affect as "feelings of structure" informing such a politics of common sense in greater detail.

A Feminist Framework to the Affective-Discursive

Gender as the "What-Goes-Without-Saying"

In the preface to the essay collection *Mythologies*, first published in 1957, Roland Barthes explains how he "wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which . . . is hidden there" (Barthes 2000a, 11, emphasis in original). Elsewhere, Barthes suggests that if we can understand how a narrative is seen and consumed as common sense, we can expose underlying hierarchical structures. He refers to the "narrative situation" as the protocols and "grammar" according to which the narrative is consumed (Barthes 2000b, 287). To Stuart Hall, language and behavior are the media of the material registration of ideology, the modality of its functioning (Hall 1985, 99). That is why we have to analyze or deconstruct language but also behavior in order to decipher the patterns of ideological thinking inscribed in them (Hall 1985, 100). Hall draws on Althusser's break with classical Marxist notions of ideology, which means that systems of representation are essentially founded on unconscious structures (1985, 106). As Hall explains:

We know the words to the song, "Rule Britannia" but we are "unconscious" of the deep structure—the notions of nation, the great slabs and slices of imperialist history, the assumptions about global domination and supremacy, the necessary Other of other peoples' subordination—which are richly impacted in its simple celebratory resonances. (Hall 1985, 106)

Such unconscious structures, whether we want to call it "unconscious ideology" (Weber 2005) or "myth" (Barthes 2000a) or politics of common sense is about something that is difficult to identify. It is the common-sense foundation of our world-views that is often left unchallenged, beyond debate (Weber 2005, 5). And yet, to consider the investments we have in such unconscious structures is precisely to

⁵Such challenges are not limited to gender-blind policies but also include internal criticisms such as how Black feminism and postcolonial scholars have criticized the subject of feminism. See also Sylvester, Marshall, MacKenzie, Saeidi, Turcotte, Parashar, and Sjöberg (2011) and Sarmã (2016) for how a politics of common sense informs gender-blind scholarly practices.

attend to how they become meaningful, or indeed, as Ahmed (2004, 56) suggests, are *felt as natural*.

Discourse is here used as social meaning-making, or signification, through visual, aural, and/or other sensory representations. It is, as Margaret Wetherell argues, futile to try to pull affect apart from meaning-making, the semiotic and the discursive: “it is the discursive that very frequently makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides the means for affect to travel” (Wetherell 2012, 19–20). Discourse as meaning-making is not only about words simply because the way we interpret the world is not limited to spoken or written words. It is also about how those words are delivered, and, crucially, it is about the gaps and silences involved in how we make sense of the world. Wetherell (2012, 4) uses the concept of “practice” to better capture “how the affective textures and activities of everyday life are shaped.”

“Practice” is also a useful way to think about how ideas about gender are structuring our lives affectively. Gender is, of course, about identity, but from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, gender is analyzed as a discursive power relation, a *logic* that informs and produces global politics (Butler 2011; see also Shepherd 2015). Thinking about gender as a logic informing practice enables a critique of how, in my case, “Woman” (as the subject of the female-identified body more generally, rather than about any particular female-identified body) discursively “get said” (Zalewski 2000, 69). But, it is equally about “Woman” as “what-goes-without-saying,” an affective logic and practice. This is why discourse as meaning-making must be understood beyond words, as the “affective-discursive” (Wetherell 2012).

The logic of gender works—affectively, emotionally, and performatively—through such “unconscious” structures that we might want to call cultural “shared meanings,” “agreed or shared perceptions” (Ahmed 2014a, 208), or perhaps just social norms, that which is normalized, indeed, common sense. Something that just “is” or something we just “do.” Exploring gender as a political puzzle of “what-goes-without-saying” is in other words about paying attention to shared meaning-making, including, but also beyond, words. That is, including an affective logic influencing social norms. Importantly, the “unconscious” is here not understood as the unconscious of a subject but, as Ahmed puts it, “the failure of presence—or the failure to be present—that constitutes the relationality of subject, objects, signs and others” (Ahmed 2004, 46). “Unconscious” is understood as a failure in recognizing the affective investments that perpetuate particular social norms. This is important because “there is nothing more affective . . . than an agreement, precisely because what is in agreement does not tend to be registered by consciousness” (Ahmed 2014a, 219).

The affective workings of gender as a social norm, I would suggest, can be traced both through representations of those emotions surfaced as conscious feelings and through the unconscious apolitical commonsensical and/or bodily thinking we tend to identify as affect. To feminists it is the *politics* of emotion that matter, and if the political outcome is the same (such as reinforced inequality or sexism), then whether we prefer to identify such affective workings as emotions, feelings, or affect is secondary. Similarly, the question is not necessarily whether or not an affective movement is experienced consciously or unconsciously by the subject but how affective processes have political effects. What matters is what the emotional, however defined, *do*. And, for the purpose of this paper, what matters from a methodological perspective is how affect sparks a feminist curiosity about gendered politics and practices.

Affective Dissonance as Feminist Curiosity

In the introduction to *The Curious Feminist* (2004), Enloe explains how being curious takes energy and that certain ideas are appealing precisely because they preserve energy because we don’t have to think twice about them. In this way, something

deemed “natural,” “inevitable,” or “common sense” “saves mental energy.” It is just “normal.” It is just what we do.

After all, what is deemed natural hasn’t been self-consciously created. No decisions have to be made. The result: we can imagine that there is nothing we need to investigate. (Enloe 2004, 1)

Enloe explains that so many power structures—inside households, within institutions, in societies, in international affairs—are dependent on our continuing lack of curiosity. Our lack of curiosity about how the world works serves somebody’s political purpose. And it is because any power arrangement that is imagined to be legitimate, timeless, and inevitable is so rigid and difficult to break through that, Enloe suggests, we need to be genuinely curious about others’ lack of curiosity. Only this way can we meaningfully engage with those who take any power structure as unproblematic (Enloe 2004, 3).

However, from a methodological perspective, Enloe’s discussion of feminist curiosity does not go far enough, it does not explain how such a feminist curiosity happens affectively. Thus, there is scope for development. Here, I am reworking Enloe’s idea of feminist curiosity by combining it with Clare Hemmings’ idea of affective dissonance.

Hemmings (2012) develops the concept of affective solidarity as the foundation for a feminist politics of transformation by combining a rereading of feminist standpoint through affect with Elspeth Probyn’s (1993) idea of feminist reflexivity. To Hemmings, a feminist politics for change necessarily begins from an affective shift initiated by experience of affective dissonance (2012, 157). To illustrate feminist reflexivity as an experienced difference between our own sense of being and the world’s judgements upon us as gendered beings, she tells a story about her own reasoning at the age of seventeen, a story that should resonate with many feminists:

I was a strong, self-reliant, intellectual equal to any boy or man and would not be told that my chances in life were any less than theirs. I simply would not accept there was something that needed changing, and my rage at the very thought found feminism as an object, since the social world could not be its object. My indignation . . . arose precisely because I *did not* see a difference between ontological and epistemological possibilities. Experiences had not taught me this . . . It will come as no surprise that as time went on I discovered rather profound differences between my sense of self and the social expectations I occupied with respect to gender and sexuality, and the reflections on my experiences of these differences also, I believe, helped me gain some feel for other onto-epistemological gaps with respect to e.g. race, ethnicity, disability or class. (Hemmings 2012, 150, emphasis in original)

This is similar to what Ahmed means by “Becoming a feminist involves coming up against the world” (Ahmed 2017, 19). The point that Hemmings emphasizes though, through the concept of affective dissonance, is that politics can be characterized as “that which moves us, rather than that which confirms us in what we already know” (Hemmings 2012, 151).

Hemmings discusses affective dissonance as “the judgment arising from the distinction between experience and the world” (Hemmings 2012, 157). This sense of dissonance might become a sense of injustice and then a desire to rectify that. If so (she makes clear that this might not always be the case), an affective shift that makes it possible to imagine a different politics, a different practice of politics, has taken place. Hemmings argues that, “in order to *know* differently we have to *feel* differently” (2012, 150, emphasis added). An affective shift might in this way inspire critical thinking to imagine an alternative politics.

While Hemmings’ argument centers on how affective dissonance can lead to affective solidarity as a feminist politics of transformation, I propose that the concept of affective dissonance is useful as a methodological tool for analyses of the politics of emotion more broadly. This is because it explains how a feminist

curiosity about how the world works happens. It illustrates how affect generates feminist questions. It shows how an experience of affective dissonance can spark a feminist curiosity. And, by being curious about that which affectively stirred our curiosity in the first place, we might be able to identify political practices as affective meaning-making, as feelings of structure, as “that-which-goes-without-saying.” This is how a feminist methodology to the affective-discursive offers possibilities for thinking and feeling “beyond what is already known and assumed” (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012, 117). And this should be of interest to any scholar interested in changing the status quo of global politics, whether it is a politics of emotion or a politics of common sense.

Being Emotional about Violent “Woman”: Affective Judgements

In this section, I return to two examples of my past research where a gendered politics of emotion takes place, where the “cultural landscape vibrates with surface tensions spied or sensed” (Stewart 2007, 45). The aim here is not to offer a detailed analysis of these events (this has been done elsewhere) but to demonstrate how attention to the emotional and affective through “feelings of structures” and common sense “judgement” informs my research about gender, agency, and political violence. In both examples, it is a sense of affective dissonance that identifies a representational gap, sparks a feminist curiosity, guides me to identify/locate the “key” to the political puzzle, and helps me to understand what emotion (in its broadest sense) does politically.

Gendered Obsession about “Woman” and Torture

Feminist scholars have pointed out how women’s violence tends to be discussed in terms of violent women’s gender: “Woman” is not supposed to be violent (c.f. Elshtain 1995; Alison 2004; Sjöberg and Gentry 2007, 2008; Gentry 2009). These gender norms are specifically upheld through emotional communication. Stories about women and violence, that is when women are acting against gendered expectations of them being “naturally” peaceful for example, are often specifically communicated through a sense of confusion, surprise, or shock. Elsewhere, I argue that emotions and emotionality function in two different ways in representations of female agency in political violence: as the portrayal of “women being emotional” and as “being emotional about [violent] women” (Åhäll 2012; see also Åhäll 2015). While the first function, the representation of “women as emotional” as a way to circumscribe their agency, is a fairly well-rehearsed feminist argument, I am here focusing on the latter, the politics involved in the emotional reaction, sometimes “shock-factor,” through which “Woman” as an object is often represented in contexts of political violence.

Lynndie England, the female military police officer who found herself at the center of the so-called Abu Ghraib prison scandal where US military personnel were depicted abusing Iraqi prisoners in 2003/4, is one of the most iconic examples of this within a “war on terror” context. England was portrayed as “an enigma” and “a mystery” simply because her behavior, and appearance, did not seem to fit with cultural ideas about women, war, and appropriate femininity. She was described as “evil,” “witch,” and a “whore,” and many, including President Bush, expressed a (bodily) feeling of disgust. While the photographs depicting what was going on at Abu Ghraib were sickening, what caught feminists’ attention was how the individual body of England came to personify and channel much of the public outcry. In May 2004, BBC News reported that the photos of England were “images that will haunt America’s occupation of Iraq” and that “it is Lynndie England’s face most linked to

the horror” (Myrie 2004). In particular, the media coverage focused repeatedly on the fact that England was smiling for the camera in several photos:

It is England’s smile, beaming as she holds a humiliated Iraqi prisoner on a leash or points an imaginary gun at the genitals of naked detainees, that has provided the most shocking images from the album of horrors at Abu Ghraib. (Watson and Farrell 2004)

Because of the smiles, and the fact that the Iraqi detainees depicted were naked males, England was depicted as having an “evident taste for cruelty” (Goldenberg 2004). Her “grin” became “the symbol of sadistic practices at Abu Ghraib prison” (Goldenberg 2004). Lynndie England became the “sex sadist of Baghdad” (Brittain 2006, 86) and a symbol of everything that was wrong with the war in Iraq. Although investigations and testimonies exposed that the mistreatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib was part of a much bigger cultural phenomenon, including poor leadership, the image of England as “evil” and “disgusting” stuck. In 2009, five years after the images became public and several years after England had finished serving her punishment, BBC radio conducted two separate lengthy interviews with her, and an interview in the *Guardian* was introduced as:

In 2004, photographs of abuses at Abu Ghraib shocked the world. Seven people were charged, but the face of the scandal will always be Lynndie England, the 21-year-old private grinning at the camera. (Brookes 2009)

While the representation of England can tell us much about how gender intersects with class and sexuality, as many have already shown,⁶ what is interesting from a methodological point of view is the representational gap between the (emotional) obsession with the particular body of England and her, in reality, rather marginal involvement in the abuse that took place at Abu Ghraib (as well as in other US-run detention facilities).

More specifically, it was how this representational gap was communicated through feelings about “motherhood” and ideas about appropriate femininity more broadly that initially sparked my feminist curiosity. England was pregnant when the scandal broke, which meant that a potential tension between “Woman” as life-giving (motherhood) vs. life-taking (soldier) could not be ignored. Visually, England’s pregnant body not only disrupted the “natural” virtues of womanhood, such as care, compassion, and gentleness but it was also “evidence” of misconduct because in order to become pregnant England must have broken the rules. During her trials, the military prosecutors’ main strategy to argue England’s guilt in the prison abuse at Abu Ghraib was to present England as sexually deviant. Footage of England engaging in sexual acts was used. The footage did not show her torturing prisoners. In the end, England was sentenced to three years in prison for “posing in photos,” the third highest sentence (Åhäll 2015, 114–135).

England and Charles Graner, her then boyfriend who also was involved in the prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, had started their relationship prior to their deployment to Iraq, but it did not seem to matter that some of the photos depicting England in sexual acts, or implied sexual acts, were not even taken at Abu Ghraib. The mere existence of such photos made her easy to frame as a sexual predator and thereby sexually deviant to normative femininity. She was likened to a porn star:

In those pictures that have been printed, her facial expression is very often, as you might expect, a sneer, but the eyes are dark pools that don’t even reflect the camera’s flash. The eyes of Private England, the woman tugging the leash around the neck of a naked Iraqi prisoner, appear empty of emotion. The soldier smiles sadistically but her eyes, dark and devoid of empathy, emit as much emotion as a hardened actress in a porn film. (Crichton 2004)

⁶ See, for example, Masters (2009); Sjöberg (2007).

The disproportionate focus on England in comparison to others involved, but also *how* her alleged agency in torture was framed through a gendered and sexualized politics of disgust, did not seem to make sense. Sianne Ngai (2005, 335) refers to disgust as “the ugliest of ugly feelings.” She explores disgust as the opposite of desire and attraction, as an ugly feeling that “block[s] sympathetic identification” (Ngai 2005, 340). Because of this quality, disgust functions to police societal borders more broadly and Ngai therefore refers to disgust as the most political of the “minor negative affects” (see also Tyler 2013 on “revolting subjects”).

Thus, the methodological approach I am illustrating here is not about the actual affective encounter, it is not about how receivers of the news about England felt. It is also not only about how the individual subject (England) was disciplined, demonized, and objectified. Instead, by paying attention to feelings of structure in which the object affectively flows, in this case “Woman” in a context of torture, we can focus on “the histories that come before the subject,” as Ahmed put it. We can focus on what the emotional obsession about “Woman” and torture does politically, beyond this individual case. The methodological approach is about how, through a moment of affective dissonance, a representational gap is identified, and a feminist curiosity about gender, agency and political violence is sparked. And, it is about how a feminist gut feeling might put into question the emotional representation that was immediately mediated as commonsensical about England’s involvement at Abu Ghraib. By feeling differently about England, a feminist methodology can offer a way to think differently about gender, agency, and political violence.

Gendered Fear about “Woman” and Killing

In 2016, the UK Ministry of Defence (MOD) announced that they were removing their ban on women in combat roles. My feminist curiosity about the British ban on women in combat roles was sparked when, in 2010, the MOD announced that they were keeping the exclusion policy: “The consequences of opening up these small tactical teams in close combat roles to women are *unknown*” (MOD 2010a, 3, emphasis added). Andrew Robathan, minister for defence personnel, welfare and veterans, explained:

We looked closely at the findings of this review but the *conclusions were inconclusive*. There was no evidence to show that a change in current policy would be beneficial or risk-free, and so a decision was made to take a *precautionary* approach and maintain the current position. (MOD 2010b, emphasis added)

Intrigued, I decided to do my own analysis of the four reports included in the 2009/2010 review and also of the MOD statements justifying this decision (see also Åhäll 2016b). Again, I found an affective logic informing a representational gap.

After opening up more and more positions to women during the 1990s, the MOD published the first exclusion policy on women in combat roles in 2002. Legally, the exclusion policy was exempted from European Union (EU) sex discrimination legislation by referring to combat effectiveness: women could be excluded from those posts where the military judgement is that the employment of women would undermine and degrade combat effectiveness (MOD 2010a, 1). Crucially, the reason women were excluded from close-combat roles was not because of their perceived physiological and/or psychological differences to men, such as physical strength or aggression, but because the presence of women’s bodies was seen to constitute a potential risk to team cohesion. A lack of cohesion, in turn, was seen to impact negatively upon combat effectiveness. A female body in a small-combat unit was thought to compromise the combat effectiveness of “the band of brothers” (see also MacKenzie 2015).

While others have critiqued the MOD's failure to distinguish between social and task cohesion (see [Basham 2009](#); also [Woodward and Winter 2007](#)), what initially attracted my feminist curiosity was that the exclusion policy was made in the name of "killing": women were excluded from so-called ground close combat roles defined as "roles that are primarily intended and designed with the purpose of requiring individuals on the ground *to close with and kill the enemy*" ([MOD 2010a](#), 5, emphasis added). Brig. Richard Nugee, who was leading the 2009/2010 review, had ensured that any decision to remove the ban would be taken for military reasons. Yet, the decision to keep the exclusion policy in 2010 turned out to be based not so much on the findings from the review reports, that is on the real-life experiences of women and men serving in combat roles/situations or knowledge-sharing from other countries, but on the undisclosed opinions of the "Service Chiefs." It was the "Service Chiefs" who "evaluated the evidence that the individual pieces of research provided but also considered the relative weight that needed to be accorded to each of the conclusions" ([MOD 2010a](#), 2).

In contrast to the MOD's conclusion that it would make *most sense* to keep the ban, I found that the conclusions of the review were clear: All four reports failed to establish a link between gender-cohesion-combat effectiveness. To me, it seemed that the review was set up to find a (scientific) link between gender-cohesion-combat effectiveness simply because this was the only way the ban could legally be justified. When the reports failed to do so, the MOD interpreted this as "the conclusions of the review were inconclusive." I sensed feelings of structure and my aim became to show how "common sense" simply did not make sense, how common sense was gendered and based in an affective logic informing such unconscious and uncurious structures.

The affective logic involved in this particular exclusion policy could perhaps be identified as "unease," or perhaps even "fear," about legitimizing women into roles with the task "to close with and kill." Crucially, it is women's bodies, including what women's bodies "stand for," that is at the heart of the argument. It is not about what women are actually doing in war. Such sentiments briefly resurfaced immediately after the January 2013 announcement that the United States would work toward removing their exclusion policy on women in combat roles. In a debate on whether or not the UK should follow suit, British columnist Charles Moore said the following on the BBC Radio 4 show *Any Questions?*:

I think the emancipation of women has produced an understanding that women and men are not the same. I actually would be very sad if the way that *women stand for peace* and gentleness in our society were taken away and I think that *if women were killing people*, which is what we're talking about, that would be *an uncivilized and retrograde act*. It's not a matter of courage; it's a matter of difference. ([BBC Radio 4 2013](#))

Similar to the representation of England as particularly disgusting, there is an affective logic communicating a gap between what "Woman" should or should not be doing in war and what women are already doing in war. And, for the purpose of my argument, what matters is how the keeping of the ban is justified through a common sense, precautionary, logic, even though the review showed that the exclusion policy itself might be unjustified. Importantly, it is precisely this affective logic about Woman and common sense that helps me to zoom in on the political, in this case the gendered politics involved in keeping the ban.

Feelings of Structure

The idea of women and violence is often communicated through feelings of (a gendered) structure—of confusion, shock, pity, or unease about legitimizing/normalizing women's agency in killing. This emotional representation demonstrates that there has been a disruptive moment with regards to gendered social

norms. It is “a testament to that we have reached some form of societal border-crossing as [gendered] *common sense is no longer making sense*” (Åhäll 2015, 142, emphasis in original).

In *When Women Kill* (2003), Belinda Morrissey shows how murders committed by women are narrated repeatedly as traumatic events. The trauma, Morrissey argues, resides in the *structure of the experience* of the event, rather than in the event itself. This experience, moreover, causes an inability to assimilate or understand the event, yet the traumatized society condemns it by repeating it over and over via narrative representation (Morrissey 2003, 10). The repetition of the traumatic event means something. It fulfils a particular function for society. Morrissey argues that the use of what she calls “conventional stock stories” across a range of empirical cases of women murderers points to the influence of an imaginary realm, an unconscious aspect structuring the development of narratives and discourses. These stories, Morrissey argues, present stereotypical or mythic characters who embody traits evaluated as either ideal or condemnable, positive or negative. In essence, they represent the cultural capital on which discourses rely for community acceptance and comprehension. These stock stories may be specific to a particular discourse, but most frequently “they exist transdiscursively, extant within the cultural unconscious” (Morrissey 2003, 9).

It is because, as explained above, gender functions as a logic that goes-without-saying that such feelings of structure are also practiced unconsciously, uncuriously. In the essay, “The Third Meaning,” written in 1970 (published in the collection *Image-Music Text*), Barthes addresses what he calls “the obtuse meaning.” The obtuse meaning is different from the “obvious” meaning. The obtuse meaning is about disguise and, more importantly for the purpose of my argument, the obtuse meaning is about emotion. Caught up in the disguise, Barthes argues, such emotion is never sticky, it is an emotion that simply designates “what one loves, what one wants to defend.” The obtuse meaning is about “an *emotion value*, an evaluation” (Barthes 2000b, 324). Although he does not use the term affect himself, in my reading Barthes is here describing affective movement (never sticky) and affective judgment (emotion value).

In order to understand the politics of emotion involved in the two illustrative cases discussed, it is not enough to analyze the obvious meaning. Instead, an affectively informed feminist curiosity zooms in on the obtuse meaning involved. It zooms in on the less obvious, hidden, emotion value about gender norms. Thus, the MOD’s statement about a precautionary approach because the implications are “unknown” and Moore’s viewpoint that women’s killing in the name of state-sanctioned political violence represents “the end of civilization” are clues that the ban might be in place because of an emotional value about how gender plays a fundamental role in how the world works. The problem with a policy such as the exclusion ban on women in combat roles, justified by the idea of “Woman” rather than individual women’s and men’s experiences, is, of course, that individuals are being judged and valued on the basis of the (assumed) shape of their bodies rather than their actual capabilities and actions. It means that *the idea* of legitimizing women’s killing impacts upon, destabilizes, and ultimately threatens broader ideas about what women and men should or should not be doing, irrespective of what women and men are actually already doing in war. The obtuse meaning is affectively communicating a logic of gender as “that-which-goes-without-saying.”

While the “obvious” meaning in the emotional representation of Lynndie England might be about “disgust,” how the individual subject was disciplined and demonized through emotional representation, the obtuse meaning is about understanding what such feelings of structure do. That is to say, while the structures of gender are felt by those who are limited by them, the way in which I use “feelings of structure” here is not only about what we are called upon, interpellated, to feel about her (disgusted). Instead, it is about how the (gendered) boundaries of those

structures are policed and reinforced through an affective logic, either manifested as “feelings” or immediately mediated as apolitical “common sense,” consciously or unconsciously. Inspired by Ahmed’s thinking, the object that affectively flows in both representations of female agency in political violence is “Woman.” In the examples used here it is the idea of “Woman” as torturer (including sexualized torture) and as killer in war that affectively moves. It is culturally shared ideas about what female bodies should or should not do that are the objects that affectively move.

Affect as Methodology

Feminist scholarship tends to center on two main things: an analytical focus on gender, however defined, and political change. However, feminist knowledge and feminist theory is useful for much broader critical endeavors. Feminist knowledge is about imagining how things could be different, and, importantly for the argument here, this imagination is developed affectively. This paper has demonstrated how the policing of gender norms is a subtle process, at times performed through unconscious structures immediately mediated as common sense. It is communicated through a politics of emotion, often in everyday contexts, as affective judgments. Analyzing representations of “Woman” [female body] and violence, I am not interested so much in the “real” affective impression body to body, but the affective-discursive in-between as shared meanings. This is because a feminist approach to the politics of emotion is about the affective investments of gender as a social norm.

In order to understand such affective investments as a politics of emotion, I argue, we must also approach affect as methodology. To this end, what feminist knowledge offers is twofold: First, a way to identify “the political” in the affective-discursive because affect generates questions about how the world works. Second, by *feeling* differently, a feminist analysis opens up a space for thinking, acting, and knowing differently. There are feelings of structure everywhere. Depending on our own cultural baggage, we will encounter and feel those structures differently. By using affective dissonance as a methodological tool that sparks a feminist curiosity about challenging power structures, whether these are conscious or unconsciously, uncuriously commonsensical, it is possible to unpack those feelings of structure as political. This is how feminist knowledge on affect offers a way to retune, reset, and reimagine research on the politics of emotion. By prioritizing affect as methodology, feminist knowledge and analyses should be valuable for critical endeavors interested in changing the status quo, no matter if the political puzzle is about gender or not. If scholars are serious about analyzing the politics of emotion, feminist knowledge must not be ignored.

Only then could our discussions potentially “gel.”

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