

Paying Attention to the Body: Feminist Academic Discourses on Nuclear Weaponry and Warfare

2022/23 Simons Award in Nuclear Disarmament and Global Security

Taylor Tang

Professor M. V. Ramana

May 22, 2023

Feminist epistemologists have long argued that language and discourse reflect the way we see and interact with the world. At the intersection of the sciences and public policy lie questions of how social expressions of power—such as gender—are reflected in geopolitical and military expressions of power—such as nuclear weaponry. At first blush, the politics of nuclear weaponry may seem removed from a feminist interest—what is, after all, seriously at stake in taking a feminist approach to nuclear discourses? In 1987, Carol Cohn published her seminal work, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals”, asking the reader to consider what she termed “technostrategic language”—the invisible linguistic weaponry through which the male defence intellectual mobilises the invented abstraction of nuclear technology.¹ In one of the most prominent feminist interrogations of nuclear politics in the field of international relations to this day, Cohn introduced the idea of analysing nuclear weaponry discourses through a gendered lens.

It has been widely argued by academics ranging from feminists, epistemologists, and linguists that language—in both academic and public discourses—shapes the ways in which we see, understand, and exist in the world (Orwell 1946, Cameron 1985, Butler 1997, Boroditsky 2011).² Furthermore, feminist epistemology (particularly of the sciences, and in Cohn’s case, specifically nuclear weaponry), has developed an analytic tradition which largely rests on the argument that gendered constructs have seeped into the language and knowledge production/dissemination processes of science and technology, resulting in epistemic injustices

¹ Cohn, Carol, 1987, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12 (4): 687.

² Orwell, George. “Politics and the English language.” (1946): 127-140; Cameron, Deborah, 1985, *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, Basingstoke and London: MacMillan; Butler, Judith, 1997, *Excitable Speech*, NY and London: Routledge; Boroditsky, Lera. “How language shapes thought.” *Scientific American* 304, no. 2 (2011): 62-65.

that exclude women (Cohn 1987, Frye 1983, MacKinnon 1993, Fricker 2007).³ Academia, as the bastion through which formalised knowledge production processes occur to this day, is therefore highly subject to analysis of the ways in which gendered dimensions are reproduced, in particular, for our context, in the area of nuclear weaponry.

Moreover, nuclear weapons—their development, regulation, and usage—studied from the perspective of international politics, is undoubtedly an expression of the broader study of geopolitical power. As one of our primary social relations of power, gender therefore becomes an essential lens to apply to the study of nuclear technology. In order to understand from an international relations standpoint what Judith Butler describes as a way in which we “compel the world,” we must necessarily investigate the ways in which gendered dimensions are expressed through discourse on nuclear weaponry, war, and disarmament.⁴ As feminist international relations scholar Cynthia Enloe describes, to ask “where are the women,” is fueled by a desire to understand the “ideas, relationships, and policies [...] gendered workings rely upon.”⁵ Using Foucauldian discourse analysis and a structural violence framing, as will be further elaborated on within the methods section, I hope to investigate and understand any gendered dimensions of academic and activist discourses on nuclear weaponry through a feminist lens. If international relations is about the study of power, and war is a central practice of international relations, to ask after gender—as a primary social relation of power—is an essential lens. As Judith Butler stated in 2004, gender is already central to “how we organise life, how we accord it value, [...]

³ Cohn, Carol, 1987, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12 (4): 687; Frye, Marilyn, 1983, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, Freedom, Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press; MacKinnon, Catherine, 1993, *Only Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; Fricker, Miranda, 2007, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198237907.001.0001

⁴ Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender* (1st ed.). Routledge, p. 205.

⁵ Enloe, Cynthia. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Second edition. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014, 6.

and how we compel the world.”⁶ In other words, not only is a feminist framework essential to understanding international relations as a field, but it is critically important to understanding what life is accorded value in the practice of nuclear war. In conducting this research, I am hoping to unveil the invisible power relations which shape feminist and gendered discourse surrounding nuclearism. Paying attention to women, and centralising them as subjects of study in academia, specifically allows us to both complicate and unveil “who wields power and for what ends.”⁷

To that end, this research project hopes to investigate academic discourses regarding nuclear weaponry, and the gendered dimensions of the language utilised. What are the different ways gender is performed through the politics of nuclear war? Specifically, it will seek to identify and understand the presence of an emergent critical feminist discourse on nuclearism; and through this to understand how, if at all, this discourse is shaping critical feminist perspectives and priorities.

To do so, I will conduct a qualitative critical discourse analysis by studying a selection of prominent academic literature. In order to do so, this project has first consulted feminist international relations literature, in order to identify some trends and relevant insights regarding gendered dimensions of nuclear weaponry. On that basis, this project has then systematically, through Foucauldian discourse analysis, examined political and international relations literature, developed an inductive coding system, and produced a descriptive analytical product summarising its findings. Given the limited scope of this research, it has confined itself to written analyses in lieu of also including audio and visual. It is my hope that conducting this

⁶ Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004, 205.

⁷ Enloe. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 9.

research may help contribute to a broader understanding of the shifts in gendered language surrounding nuclear technology, and open up avenues for further research beyond my limited scope in the future.

Methodology

Having discussed why a feminist analytical framework relies on the analysis of power itself, we turn our attention to methodology. It is relevant to note the specific type of discourse analysis that will be conducted. This project applies a Foucauldian discourse analysis, which is particularly well-suited to a feminist lens. Specifically, we can think of the role that academia plays in constructing knowledge—in this context, knowledge about the workings and politics of nuclear weaponry and war. Foucauldian discourse analysis is applied here with the goal of taking into account the “broader social structures and how these impact [...] the way we write.”⁸ The Foucauldian approach is also aligned with the feminist imperative to study the “everyday” as a unit of analysis, for example as expressed by Cynthia Enloe in *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*.⁹ Foucauldian discourse analysis is a useful way to nuance the complex ‘everyday’ of women as not merely the subject of discourses, but to understand how these discourses impact “how we experience and understand ourselves.”¹⁰

Furthermore, Foucault’s work on biopower and surveillance is highly relevant to analysis of war broadly. In *Discipline and punish*, Foucault writes about the 18th century expansion of mechanical regulations on soldier’s bodies in the military: “The human body was entering a

⁸ Wiggins, Sally. “An Introduction to Discourse Analysis.” In Sage Video. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2017. Video, 11:26. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473964709>.

⁹ Enloe. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 359; and Enloe, Cynthia. “The Mundane Matters,” *International Political Sociology* 5:4 (2011), pp. 448.

¹⁰ Wiggins. “An Introduction to Discourse Analysis,” 12:13.

machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born, it defined how one may have hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so they may operate as one wishes.”¹¹ In other words, the military regulation of bodies themselves—of both the masculine and feminine—is an exemplary lens through which we can understand the minute workings of power in the everyday of war. Foucault’s work on this aids in structuring the approach taken to discourse analysis in this context, as again it highlights that this is primarily an investigation of power.

Methods

The articles selected represent a range of international perspectives, taken from one special issue of *International Affairs*. Feminist international relations, and perspectives on nuclear technology, are by definition an international endeavour, and as such there was no limit placed on the publication location or origin of the author of the texts included. Furthermore, the articles selected discuss a wide variety of diverse perspectives, both geographically and in their academic approach—ranging from history to political science. In terms of timeframe, these articles have all been published in the same special issue of *International Affairs*, and as such are each other's contemporaries. Using NVivo, this project used an inductive coding approach and identified one key node of interest, which will be elaborated on further in the results section that follows.

The three articles selected were “Indigenous women's resistances at the start and end of the nuclear fuel chain,” by Anne Sisson Runyan, “Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis:

¹¹ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: A. Lane, 1977, 136.

gender as pre-emptive deterrent,” by Lorraine Bayard de Volo, and “Gendering Sweden's nuclear renunciation: a historical analysis,” by Emma Rosengren. In “Indigenous women’s resistances,” Sisson Runyan draws on Indigenous women’s critiques of the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) to argue that the dumping of nuclear waste on Indigenous lands violates Indigenous women’s right to self-determination over their own bodies and their right to consent specifically. De Volo takes a gendered lens to the complex events of the Cuban missile crisis, demonstrating the gendered dimensions that Kennedy, Castro, and Khrushchev mobilised during that period. Finally, in “Gendering Sweden’s nuclear renunciation,” Rosengren offers a historical view of the development of a new masculinist disarmament constructed in Sweden, complicating existing understandings of disarmament as traditionally part of a “feminine” discourse. In all three articles, although disparate in subject matter, one element of similarity became clear, which was the attention paid to the physicality of nuclear politics and the body.

Results

As stated, one key theme that was evident across the articles selected was the focus on the body, specific physicalities, and the emotional impact of nuclear weapons, war, and power. As Carol Cohn writes in her foundational 1987 article, to pay attention to the human body is associated with a feminine identity. She writes that to discuss human suffering and physicality in concrete terms is to “turn away from the masculinized, rational discourse that limits the conversation to discussion in clinical and abstract terms.”¹² In other words, there is a purported femininity to being concerned with the actual body and physicality of nuclear war, in contrast to the masculinist imperative to abstract and obscure. Furthermore, through feminist curiosity, as

¹² Rosengren, Emma. “Gendering Sweden's nuclear renunciation: a historical analysis,” *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 4, July 2022, Pages 1231–1248, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa113>, 1239.

Christine Sylvester writes, we must understand war as not just a series of violent acts but instead as a social institution and as a politics of bodily injury.¹³ This is of course drawn from Elaine Scarry's 1985 work, which opens with the powerful statement that "[the] main purpose and outcome of war is injuring."¹⁴ Sylvester extends this argument to demonstrate that to pay particular attention to war as a bodily and emotional experience is an expression of the feminist desire to understand the lives and experiences of women in war.

Furthermore, while it is true that not all of these articles deal directly with 'war' itself, as traditional international relations literature would define an inter-state nuclear conflict, from a critical perspective all nuclear technology is a manifestation to some extent of the warlike phenomenon, as discussed by Alison Howell and earlier by Cynthia Enloe. In particular, we can think of the content of Sisson Runyan's article as being a useful case here to exemplify the presence of martial politics even outside 'classical' war: the dumping of formerly militarised nuclear waste on indigenous lands aids in illuminating "the constitutive nature of war-like relations of force perpetrated against populations deemed a threat to civil order or the health of the population."¹⁵

Across all three articles, specific references to the body and its presence in planning, executing, and disposing of nuclear technology can be found. In "Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis," de Volo devotes significant attention to the archival fragments of verbal and written descriptions of the three key figures of the Cuban missile crisis. Specific attention is paid

¹³ Sylvester, Christine. *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY;: Routledge, 2013; 2012;.

¹⁴ Scarry, Elaine. "Injury and the Structure of War." *Representations*, no. 10 (1985): 1. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3043799>.

¹⁵ Howell, Alison. "Forget "militarization": Race, Disability and the "martial Politics" of the Police and of the University." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 2 (2018): 118.

to the physicality of each leader. This does not merely add colour to historical descriptions, but also specifically is used to further the analysis of power. For de Volo, the physicality of the figure, and its association with masculinity or femininity explicitly links to the international political power that each leader displayed during the crisis. Much ado is made about descriptions of sex organs for all three leaders, with complex comments about sexuality and power helping legitimise or legitimise them respectively: Castro describes Krushchev as having “no cojones [testicles],” whereas Krushchev says in regards to Kennedy that it has been “a long time since [he] could spank [the Soviet Union] like a little boy—now [they] can swat [his] ass.”¹⁶ Castro’s masculine beard is a symbol of his power, whereas Krushchev’s description of war as sowing death and destruction (i.e., paying attention to the bodily and emotional content of war as a politics of injury) is denigrated as written while drunk by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.¹⁷ The attention to the individual physicalities of these leaders and the resulting gendered discourses demonstrates an example of the imperative to examine the bodily and physical elements of nuclear politics.

In “Indigenous women’s resistances,” Anne Sisson Runyan also pays specific attention to the body. Although this comes up several ways in her article, for example in discussing the physical effects on women in particular that results from nuclear waste dumping on indigenous lands, one interesting element of her discussion focuses on consent. She argues that Indigenous women’s consent is violated through these practices, as it has undue implications for women’s bodies. Furthermore, she pays attention to the body in describing the ways in which Indigenous women have resisted these practices, through “water walks.” Anishnaabe women have taken up

¹⁶de Volo, Lorraine Bayard. “Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis: gender as pre-emptive deterrent,” *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 4, July 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa121>, 1120, 1215.

¹⁷ de Volo, Lorraine Bayard. “Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” 1217.

water walks—including the recent 12-day walk around the perimeter of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation (SON) territory to “assert [themselves] as stewards of their territory,” and their “responsibility to the water and the land,’ as well as to walk in the footprints of their ancestors.”¹⁸ She also highlights a ceremony performed wherein a SON elder, Shirley John, blesses the water for all living things.¹⁹ In Sisson Runyan’s analysis, equally important attention is paid to the physicality of the effects of nuclear power and war, from the side of resistance rather than active perpetrator. While de Volo’s work focuses on the ways in which the body appears and is seen to be gendered in relation to nuclear discourses, Sisson Runyan focuses on the consequences of nuclear technology and directs our attention to the physicality of water and resistance.

Finally, Rosengren’s work also devotes attention to the physicality and bodily content of nuclear war. In particular, she repeatedly notes the consequences of war on bodies, especially women’s bodies. One interesting mention comes when she discusses the results of a weapon that affects future generations. She writes that the former chair of the Federation of Social Democratic Women, Inga Thorsson said in 1959 that “‘women naturally, quickly and based on instinct turn away from a weapon that allows the wrongdoing of fathers to affect children in a third, fourth, and even later generation.’ Through such statements, women—as mothers—were given a responsibility for opposing nuclear weapons in the interest of the welfare and survival of those as yet unborn.”²⁰ In other words, women were required, politically, to pay more attention to the bodily content of nuclear war as they were made responsible for the future unborn children. Rosengren uses chilling statistics such as the reminder that the US bombings of Hiroshima and

¹⁸ Sisson Runyan, Anne. “Indigenous women's resistances at the start and end of the nuclear fuel chain,” *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 4, July 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa123>, 1164.

¹⁹ Sisson Runyan, Anne. “Indigenous women's resistances,” 1164.

²⁰ Rosengren, Emma. “Gendering Sweden's,” 1236.

Nagasaki killed more than 100,000 immediately—and that the consequences of radiation-related injuries would linger for generations.²¹ She describes emotions as “stuck” to women’s bodies, in that women found themselves associated with the emotional and the feminine; with regards to the discussion of fear of nuclear war. Humanitarian concerns were emotional, irrational thinking, whereas the abstracted desire to acquire nuclear weapons was rational thinking— “a military necessity,” as though bodies, and female bodies, are not subjected to the consequences of these types of militarised thought.²² Rosengren’s attention here to the bodily and physical consequences of war is also an important thread of feminist curiosity expressed through this critical lens.

Conclusion

As Robert Cox states, to undertake critical theory is to be constantly aware that actions—in this case, discourses—are never themselves free, but take place within another framework. While these frameworks, ranging from historical structures to material conditions, do not mechanically impose the individual actions, they should be understood from a critical perspective as constituting, if not the impetus at least some of the structural causes of action. The importance of recentering the body and devoting specific attention to the physicality of nuclear war cannot be understated. As Sara Ahmed describes, there is a clear hierarchy between subjects, wherein “thought and reason are identified with the masculine and Western subject,” and on the other hand, “emotions and bodies are associated with femininity and racial others.”²³ There is a distinct risk in centering these subjects in academic discourse: to be emotional, to pay attention

²¹ Rosengren, Emma. “Gendering Sweden’s,” 1236.

²² Rosengren, Emma. “Gendering Sweden’s,” 1238.

²³ Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. NED-New edition, 2. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g09x4q>, 170.

to the body, specifically in these spaces wherein the rational abstract terminology of Cohn's defence intellectual still reigns, is to potentially be discarded as un-academic and not real scholarship. But as Ahmed states, the "truths" of the world are in fact dependent on emotions and bodies—and how they stick to people, not just women. She asks us to consider that this attachment to emotion and the body is not a weakness to be eliminated from feminist critical literature and discourse, but instead a strength that allows it to develop a transformative discourse.²⁴ In these three articles, Rosengran, Sisson Runyan, and de Volo do exactly that: demonstrating the power of paying attention to the body in discourses on nuclear war, they challenge the question of rigour and rationality by clearly elucidating the power dynamics of the physicality and bodies present in the politics of nuclear technology.

²⁴ Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics*, 172.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g09x4q>.
- Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- choi, shine, Catherine Eschle. "Rethinking global nuclear politics, rethinking feminism,"
International Affairs, Volume 98, Issue 4, July 2022, Pages 1129–1147,
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiacl118>
- Cohn, Carol. "Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals", *Signs* 12: 4, 1987, pp. 687–718.
- Cox, Robert. Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. *Millennium*, 10: 2, (1981). 126–155.
- Eichler, Maya. "Militarized Masculinities in International Relations." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 81-93.
- Enloe, Cynthia. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Second edition. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014.
- Enloe, Cynthia. "The Mundane Matters," *International Political Sociology* 5:4 (2011), pp. 447-450.
- Eschle, Catherine. "Nuclear (in)security in the everyday: peace campers as everyday security practitioners", *Security Dialogue* 49: 4, 2018, pp. 289–305.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: A. Lane, 1977.
- Howell, Alison. "Forget "militarization": Race, Disability and the "martial Politics" of the Police and of the University." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 2 (2018): 117-136.
- Scarry, Elaine. "Injury and the Structure of War." *Representations*, no. 10 (1985): 1–51.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/3043799>.
- Sisson Runyan, Anne. "Indigenous women's resistances at the start and end of the nuclear fuel chain," *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 4, July 2022, Pages 1149–1167,
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiacl23>
- Sisson Runyan, Anne. "Going Greenham/going Gaga on peace and security", *Critical Studies on Security* 3: 2, 2015, pp. 216–19.

Sylvester, Christine. *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis*. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2013; 2012.

Rosengren, Emma. "Gendering Sweden's nuclear renunciation: a historical analysis," *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 4, July 2022, Pages 1231–1248, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa113>

de Volo, Lorraine Bayard. "Masculinity and the Cuban Missile Crisis: gender as pre-emptive deterrent," *International Affairs*, Volume 98, Issue 4, July 2022, Pages 1211–1229, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaa121>

Wiggins, Sally. "An Introduction to Discourse Analysis." In Sage Video. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2017. Video. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473964709>.