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Gender, Visuality and Violence: Visual Securitization and the 2001 War in Afghanistan

Abstract

Visual securitization (the discursive processes by which images become assigned security implications) is integral to understanding how war and political violence is made possible. However, its insights have yet to be coupled with feminist international relations scholarship alert to the connections between gender and (in)security. This article synthesizes these two research areas through Lene Hansen's (2011) framework of visual securitization, to investigate the gendered logics which underpinned the 2001 war in Afghanistan. By analysing one hundred and twenty three photojournalistic images alongside American media texts and foreign policy discourse, I argue western images of Afghan women enacted a specific visuality through which they became constructed a legitimate matter of security. The article makes two important contributions through this analysis. Firstly, it extends feminist understanding of the war in Afghanistan by demonstrating how the interplay between the visual and textual, and the gendered and racial logics operating within such interplay, visually produced Afghan women as a referent object of security. Secondly, this argument illustrates how gender can be critical in enabling the acceptance of visual

securitizations, and how such securitizations can be enacted through gendered representations of insecurity and threat.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Visual Securitization, War on Terror, Feminist International Relations, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Feminist international relations scholarship has demonstrated how gendered images shape the practice of international politics, particularly in relation to post 9/11 US foreign policy. For example, there has been considerable feminist attention upon the role of the visual in supporting the 2001 war in Afghanistan, as part of a growing engagement with aesthetics and visibility (see Khalid 2011; Shepherd 2008; Weber 2005). Through such engagement, feminist IR has exposed the gendered and colonial logics operating within visual and textual representations of Afghan women which constructed America's intervention as an act to 'liberate' them from the brutality of the (male) Taliban. The visual was thus appropriated in support of the wider security politics which underpinned the war on terror (Shepherd 2008).

In this article, I extend feminist analysis of the 2001 war in Afghanistan by tracing how visual representations were not merely strategically mobilised by the Bush administration in support of prevailing narratives of (in)security but actively produced such narratives through their interaction with media and foreign policy discourse. I achieve this by offering a critical

feminist analysis of the war through the lens of visual securitization theory (see Hansen 2011), synthesising the insights of these separate but complimentary literatures. Feminist scholarship has established how media images represented Afghan women in accordance with orientalist tropes which visualised the need for western intervention (Fahmy 2004; Hunt 2002; Lee-Koo 2007). However, its analysis has been broadly restricted to interrogating the iconography of these images and the discourses of security they were mobilised to support. Yet, as David Campbell (2007, 361) recognises, it is necessary for critical scholarship to ask what images *actually do and enable* through their circulation. The fact that western images of Afghan women helped render military intervention politically possible is widely recognised within feminist scholarship, but the gendered discursive processes through which this was achieved (and how it might have been resisted) has remained overlooked.

By situating my analysis at the intersection between critical feminist IR and visual securitization theory I investigate how visual representations, through their wider intertextual location, can enact a particular visuality to securitize the subject(s) they are understood to depict. I analyse one hundred and twenty three photojournalistic representations of Afghan women through a feminist lens to make two key contributions which extend the insights of both these literatures. Firstly, I improve feminist understanding of the 2001 war in Afghanistan by revealing how the interplay between the visual and textual, and the gendered and racial logics operating within such interplay, visually constructed Afghan women as a legitimate referent object of security. Images did not merely legitimise military intervention, an argument well established in the existing feminist literature, but through their intertextual constitution constructed a gendered way of seeing

'Afghan women' possessing security implications. This analysis extends beyond recognising the interplay between the visual and textual (see Shepherd 2008), to capture how such interplay can construct a gendered collective subject for which security can be invoked. Secondly, this feminist argument pushes the analysis of visual securitization further by illuminating how gender can enable successful visual securitizations. This argument matters, as presently gender remains peripheral to contemporary debates within visual securitization theory. Yet I demonstrate how visual securitizations can proceed through gendered representations of insecurity and threat, illustrating how gender can delimit what constitutes a matter of security to enable certain political responses and disallow others.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section offers a short account of the feminist literature investigating the visual and the 2001 war in Afghanistan, exploring its insights but also identifying how its analysis can be extended – namely by asking how gendered images can work with textual discourse to *produce* certain subjects as matters of security. The second section demonstrates the utility of visual securitization as a theoretical framework and outlines the article's methodological approach. The third section uses this framework to analyse the intertextuality between visual and textual representations of Afghan women between September 2001 and January 2002. Three distinct analytical components are considered; visual representations themselves (specifically photographic images from two major news agencies), print media discourse and the foreign policy discourse of the Bush administration. By analysing the interactions between these components, I argue the interplay between the visual and textual was not only mobilised by the Bush administration in support of a specific security politics, but constructed that politics by visually producing

Afghan women as a collective referent object. The fourth section argues this analysis exposes how gender can work across text/image to enable visual securitizations, thus it is by bringing together feminist IR and visual securitization theory that critical analysis can disrupt the (gendered and racialized) meanings ascribed to such images through their interaction with gendered security discourses. By synthesising the arguments of feminist IR and visual securitization scholarship, then, I conclude feminist analysis can better theorise the linkages between gender and (in)security to interrogate how such connections can produce a gendered way of seeing a subject or event possessing security implications.

GENDER AND THE 2001 WAR IN AFGHANISTAN: WHY THE VISUAL MATTERS

Feminist IR has exposed how gendered logics underpinned the 2001 war in Afghanistan.¹ The Bush administration embarked upon a deliberate political campaign emphasising the insecurity of Afghan women,² locating them in the collective role of “feminine victim in need of rescue” which could legitimise military intervention (Lee-Koo 2007, 44). This construction of an “average third world woman” (Mohanty 1991, 55) demanding American protection was thus used to ascribe the conflict a false moral legitimacy. The Bush administration’s representation of Afghan women was predicated upon a profoundly colonial logic, mediated through an obsession with the Afghan chadari or burka and the oppression it signified to the west.² This strategy is most overtly visible within First Lady Laura Bush’s (2001) presidential radio address immediately prior to the commencement of the war, which represented a foundational moment in which the “severe repression and brutality against women in Afghanistan” was discursively linked to the need for America’s military intervention (Ayotte

and Husain 2002; Shepherd 2006; Weber 2005). The visual was critical to enabling the gendered and racial logics which underpinned this address and the security politics it supported. For example, Krista Hunt (2002, 117) argues widely circulated media images of victimised Afghan women were used to visualise America's moral obligation to liberate them. Kevin Ayotte and Mary Hussain (2005, 117) similarly note that the burka acted as both "a visual and linguistic signifier of Afghan women's oppression," illustrated by a proliferation of western images of covered women, while Jasmin Zine (2006, 34) recognises that "images of burka-clad Afghan women permeated the media" to communicate the barbarity of the Taliban. Feminist scholars have thus concluded the legitimising role of Afghan women was "visual, not vocal," (Lee-Koo 2007, 45) exploring how such images visualised the need for western intervention and increased public support for the war.

Yet, there is a need for this analysis to be pushed further. Wider critical IR scholarship has demonstrated that images do not merely reflect prevailing discourses of security but through their location within them actively produce constructions of threat and danger for their audience (Bleiker et al. 2013; Campbell 2007; Campbell and Shapiro 2007). Through their wider intertextual constitution, visual representations are performative of the identities securitizations rely upon and can construct certain subjects or events as security issues and deny such status to others. This matters for feminist IR. As Laura Shepherd (2008, 215) argues, "it is not enough to accept or acknowledge that visual representations join textual representations in service ... of both oppressive and progressive politics." Rather, feminist scholarship must ask *how* images are assigned meaning through their interaction with textual discourse to constitute certain subjects as worthy of security and how their

status as referent objects can be produced through gendered discourses of danger, insecurity and threat. Attentiveness to the interconnections between gender, securitization and the visual and how such connections work through and across textual and non-textual representations can therefore further feminist understanding of the war in Afghanistan. This approach goes beyond acknowledging the political power of images in accruing public support for the war, to ask how such images constructed the (visual) narratives of insecurity through which the war was enabled.

Feminist scholars such as Shepherd (2008) have made significant advances here by demonstrating how the interplay between visual and non-visual representations constructs security discourses. However, I argue such analysis can be extended by engaging with visual securitization theory. By reading images of Afghan women through a feminist lens within the framework afforded by visual securitization, I identify the discursive processes through which these images became read in support of military intervention and what this reveals about the relationship between gender and (in)security. The subsequent section will outline the theoretical framework and methodology which underpins this analysis.

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF VISUAL SECURITIZATION

Hansen's (2011) framework of visual securitization offers important insights into how feminist analysis understands the photographic images of Afghan women which circulated through western media throughout the war. For Hansen (2011, 60), security discourses

require the constitution of a self to be secured and an other which existentially threatens it, thus images can “become the subject of rival interpretations of what is said about the identities of Selves and Others.” It is here that the interplay between the visual and non-visual is crucial. Hansen (2011) recognises that images are inherently ambiguous; their meaning is not fixed or stable but dependent upon textual discourse for its signification. Thus a visual securitization is never exclusively visual; it is dependent upon textual discourse to maintain what an image depicts qualifies as a matter of security. A feminist analysis of visual securitization must therefore explore the intertextuality of the image(s) it is investigating, to understand how this can produce gendered ways of ‘seeing’ a subject or event and what this renders politically possible.

Hansen (2011) suggests visual securitization can be analysed through several distinct analytical components. Applied here, this comprises of images themselves, their immediate intertextual context and the wider foreign policy discourse which attempts to ascribe them meaning. The task therefore was to collect photojournalistic images depicting Afghan women and explore their interaction with media and foreign policy discourse. Data was collected between 11 September 2001 and 31 January 2002. A narrow timeframe was deliberately chosen, as similar studies (Fahmy 2004, 98; Verschueren 2012, 91) identify that the Bush administration argued for the liberation of Afghan women during the early stages of the war. Further, this timeframe allows a detailed exploration of how a visual securitization unfolded during a period of heightened media and political activity. One hundred and twenty three images depicting Afghan women were sourced from the open access image banks of Getty Images and Agence France-Presse (AFP).³ Photojournalism was

critical to representing Afghan women during this period (see Fahmy 2004), and regularly used by American print media to accompany their reportage. Fifty eight media texts discussing Afghan women were located using the Lexis-Nexis database and sourced from the *Washington Post*, *New York Times* and *USA Today*, all of which carried imagery produced by Getty Images and AFP. It was not possible to align these two data sets, as Lexis-Nexis does not record or store the images which are published alongside media articles. My analysis therefore does not explore how specific images were constructed within particular media texts, but rather interrogate the wider discursive context in which they were situated and through which their collective meaning would be shaped. All images depicting Afghan women as their primary focus were analysed. Media texts were chosen according to their sustained attention to the condition of Afghan women throughout America's intervention, using the 'major mentions' search criteria within Lexis Nexis. Finally, eighteen foreign policy texts addressing the 'plight' of Afghan women were sourced from the American Presidency Project and the online archives of the State and Defense Departments. This comprises speeches delivered by President Bush, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, First Lady Laura Bush and a 2001 State Department report on Afghan women.

Discourse analysis was used to identify recurring visual and linguistic signs which convey meaning to an audience (see Rose 2012). Visual analysis was sensitive to the "strategies of depiction" images employed, in which repeated signs representing particular constructions of identity attempt to fix the meaning of an image for their audience (Hansen 2011, 60). Although an image can delimit its possible interpretations through the employment of

certain strategic depictions signifying threat or danger, it cannot 'speak' security itself or impose a singular interpretation upon its audience. Analysis therefore concentrated upon the intertextual constitution of the images through media and foreign policy texts, through which they were constructed as a particular visibility or way of seeing Afghan women with security implications. Images were read through the wider gendered discourses of security in which they were situated, to investigate what they rendered politically possible through their circulation. By exploring the constructions of gender, visibility and security operating across these different texts, I trace how images produced Afghan women as a legitimate referent object which could be (visually) securitized by the Bush administration.

VISUALISING AFGHAN WOMEN

Two strategies of depiction were identified within the images analysed. Firstly, a strategic depiction of suffering represented Afghan women as victims of Islamic oppression. A central component of this was an intense visual emphasis upon the burka. Eighty two images depicted Afghan women through their wearing of the burka, including all images prior to America's military intervention. Such visualisations possess a substantial history within western discourse, in which the burka signifies the threatening otherness and inferiority of Islam (Auchter 2012; Klaus and Kassel 2005). This recurring image constructs Islam as fundamentally different both spatially and temporally, juxtaposed against the west's apparently innate 'progressive' treatment of women (Klaus and Kassel 2005, 341).

This strategic depiction was enhanced by the frame images employed. Photographic representations of war often capture subjects through signs which quickly communicate their suffering to an audience (Dauphinée 2007). This is not an objective citation of 'reality', rather the inherently selective nature of the frame attempts to visualise a certain relationship between the viewer and the viewed through the employment of such signs. For example, twenty images situated the viewer on an equal level to the subject depicted, often in close-up, portrait style images which emphasised the subjects' (covered) face. Placing the viewer on an equal level to the subject depicted is often read as signifying equality, narrowing the cultural and spatial distance between the viewer and the viewed. However, in the images analysed this sense of equality is disrupted. The close proximity of the viewer frames the subject exclusively through the burka; its prominence inscribes rather than narrows cultural distance. It is therefore difficult to understand these images without drawing upon western discourses of the burka and the identities it signifies, through which the burka functions as visual shorthand for threatening Islamic oppression.

This strategic depiction of suffering is thus predicated upon a profoundly colonial logic, inscribing meaning upon women's (covered) bodies to mark them as visual evidence of civilizational differences. The perpetual visualisation of the burka represents a strategy of homogenisation; subjects were denied the right to visualise differences and subsumed within a universally insecure, helpless female other. The image's genre is important here in securing this representation. Photojournalism is assumed to document reality, offering an authentic visual account of 'what really happened' during an event (Butler 2007, 960). This imbues photojournalistic images with increased epistemic and political authority to

represent and have that representation accepted by their audience. Yet this masks the inherent partiality of such imagery. To photograph a subject in a specific way is an inherently political choice; a photographer rarely captures a scene as it develops spontaneously (Sontag 2003, 45). By visually framing Afghan women through their apparent powerlessness and oppression the images depersonalise the subjects depicted to being a mere signifier of that oppression, demonstrating how visual frames “contain, convey and determine” what is apprehensible to an audience (Butler 2009, 9-10). This illustrates how photojournalistic images depicting a threatened subject can, through their interaction with textual discourse, potentially invoke an illusory sense of responsibility upon their (western) audience to alleviate the suffering represented.

A second strategic depiction emerged after the collapse of the Taliban government, between December 2001 and January 2002. Images alternatively represented Afghan women as a collective subject liberated from Islamic oppression. The burka continued to function as visual shorthand within these images; its removal signified the collective liberation of Afghan women through America’s intervention. This “fetishisation of unveiling” (Ayotte and Husain 2005, 119) reifies the perverse abnormality of the burka itself and the identities it signifies, as Afghan women were literally seen to reject such inferior (Islamic) values and embrace their (western) liberation. This reinforces how the visual framing of subject’s bodies restricted what their audience could interpret. Absent from the frame was the continued wearing of the burka by many Afghan women long after America had supposedly ‘liberated’ them (see Fahmy 2004). There is a visual silence on this, as the

continued visibility of covered female bodies would trouble the political narrative of liberation performed within the images.

These two strategic depictions thus opened up the possibility of political intervention to 'save' Afghan women from the oppression they attempted to visualise, but they could not demand a security response independently. As noted earlier, images are inherently ambiguous and rely upon their wider intertextual location for their meaning. The images enacted certain power relations of race and gender, as recognised by the wider feminist literature (Fahmy 2004; Hunt 2002; Lee-Koo 2007) but could not alone produce Afghan women as a referent object of security nor construct military intervention as the only politically legitimate response to their repression. Rather, for such images to become productive of a gendered way of seeing Afghan women through which they might be securitized, they remained dependent upon their interaction with textual discourse. It is thus necessary to analyse the immediate intertextual context of such images, as the media texts they accompanied possessed the capacity to discipline their ambiguity and shape how they might be interpreted.

IMMEDIATE INTERTEXTUAL CONTEXT

Media texts performed the two strategic depictions previously identified and thus attempted to constrain the images' ambiguity. For example, all articles documented the "persecution" women experienced as a consequence of "harsh strictures the radically

fundamentalist Taliban had imposed” (Witt 2001). Few media texts attempted to represent Afghan women beyond the strategic depiction of suffering, or question the motivations behind the Bush administration’s sudden interest in their ‘plight’ (for exceptions see Goodwin and Neuwirth 2001; Smiley 2001). Most articles alternatively communicated the abnormality of women’s lives in Afghanistan, marked by Islamic fundamentalism and minimal agency. They were isolated, “cowering in their houses behind darkened windows so they cannot be seen” and thus incapable of political organisation (Hoodbhoy 2001).

Media texts conferred great emphasis upon the burka as a signifier of this oppression. Forty eight texts discussed Afghan women’s oppression through their wearing of the burka, using it to construct a universally threatened collective subject “invisible ... anonymous and mute” (Goodman 2001). However, media texts situated these representations within a wider clash of civilisations discourse, something the images could not achieve alone, through a juxtaposition between the burka and western clothing. For example, Walt (2002) asserted the burka “symbolises for westerners the iron-fisted treatment of Afghan women. Women were forced to abandon makeup and nail polish ... clerics even banned high heels because, they said, they made suggestive noises.” Such constructions demonise the burka itself rather than its imposition by the Taliban, depicting Afghan women as universal victims and erasing the possibility of agency. Prior to the Taliban, Afghanistan was a country of “knee-length skirts, high heels and gender equality,” (McGrory 2001) women were not always “second class citizens” hidden under the burka (Valdmanis 2001). Western femininity, signified through the visibility of the face, was presented as something to which Afghan women aspired and therefore illustrated that they ‘wanted’ to be liberated. Media articles

therefore situated the strategic depiction of suffering within a clash of civilisations discourse, attempting to construct the Taliban as a threatening and irrational Islamic other.

Later texts, produced between November 2001 and January 2002, represented America's intervention as an act of liberation for which Afghan women were grateful. This was symbolised by their "delight at casting off their veils," (*Washington Post* 2001) illustrative of a shift towards the strategic depiction of liberation identified within the images. This was prominently visible within article headlines. Examples included "Women Hope Rights will be Unveiled," (Valdmanis 2001) "The Veil is Lifted" (Struck 2001) and "Afghans Urged to Shed Burka" (Squitieri 2002). The apparent success of the war was thus visualised upon Afghan women's bodies, privileging a western notion of visibility "to the point it dictates personhood itself" (Auchter 2012, 372). This demonstrates how the removal of the burka signified freedom, as it had in the images, depicting Afghan women as a liberated collective subject grateful for America's military intervention.

Media texts thus performed the strategies of depiction identified within the images, constructing the Taliban as a radical Islamic other Afghan women needed and wanted to be saved from. Security discourses always perform identities of self/other (Campbell 1992; Hansen 2006) and this is clearly visible through the location of the images within a clash of civilisations discourse. However, none of the media texts analysed overtly demanded military intervention to 'save' the oppressed female subject they documented. This is not surprising; the ability to constitute a subject or event as a matter of security demands extensive political authority that newspaper reportage generally lacks (Buzan, Waever, and

De Wilde 1998). Consequently, the immediate intertextual context of the images was unable to assign them security implications, reaffirming their ambiguity. The constructions working between and across media texts and the images (re)produced gendered and racial logics which made military intervention a political possibility, but they could not demand the escalation beyond normal politics a securitization requires. Yet, as feminist IR has recognised, the circulation of these images became widely accepted as evidencing the need for military intervention, to the point where images seemed to ‘speak security’ themselves and automatically visualise why America’s intervention was needed. The question therefore remains of how the images came to embody a specific way of seeing Afghan women which enabled a visual securitization, when there existed considerable slippage in what they could be understood to depict. By turning to foreign policy discourse, I demonstrate how this interplay between the images and media texts visually produced Afghan women as a referent object of security to render military intervention politically possible.

FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSE

Foreign policy texts performed the strategic depictions of suffering and liberation, but critically attempted to construct the visualisation of those depictions as a matter of security. This was accomplished through two discursive strategies. Firstly, the framing of the Taliban as a regime ‘at war’ with women was persistent during the early stages of America’s intervention, between September and November 2001. The State Department (2001, unpaginated) issued a report on 17 November 2001 entitled “The Taliban’s War against Women,” which described Afghan women as “*casualties* in the Taliban’s war on women ...

the assault on the status of women began immediately after the Taliban took power” (my emphasis). President Bush (2001b) similarly argued “the people of Afghanistan have suffered under one of the most brutal regimes ... *a regime at war with women*” (my emphasis). Phrases such as war, casualty and assault invoke a language of threat representative of the “grammar of security” (Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde 1998, 33) required to constitute a security issue which media texts possessed insufficient political authority to articulate.

The location of the images within this discourse allowed them to become constructed as a particular visuality possessing security implications. Rather than depicting Afghan women as victims of human rights abuses which could be responded to in ways outside political violence, this language of threat positions the images as visual evidence of a violent conflict in which America possessed a moral obligation to intervene. The interplay between image and text thus visually produced a gendered referent object which deserved western protection. This argument is highly pertinent for feminist analysis of the visual and the war in Afghanistan. Rather than the circulation of western images of Afghan women merely upholding the Bush administration’s construction of the war as a fight “for the rights and dignity of women,” (Bush 2001) textual and non-textual discourse operated simultaneously to construct Afghan women as a gendered referent object. This allowed the subjects visualised in the images to ‘speak insecurity’ (Hansen 2000, 302) through their (covered) bodies, which signified their status as victims of the Taliban’s ‘war’ and performed the need for an exceptional response. Gendered logics did not merely underpin the Bush

administration's narrative of (in)security but, through the interplay between the visual and textual, produced the very object of security that narrative purported to name.

However, this visual securitization was not unproblematic. After all, American foreign policy discourse had been consistently silent upon the repressive treatment of women under the Taliban and never previously attempted to construct it as a security issue. Hansen (2000, 294) terms this the "security as silence" problem. Afghan women possessed a limited ability to 'speak' security themselves without the support of a securitizing actor such as a state, despite the activism of groups such as the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) to 'speak security' in relation to the repression of Afghan women and demand international support for the improvement of women's rights (Abu-Lughod 2002; Ayotte and Husain 2005; Khalid 2011). The location of the images within a 'war on women' discourse allowed Afghan women to become a matter of security but critically not on their own terms. As Hansen (2000, 299) argues, the silent security problem renders it problematic for 'women' to become referent objects predicated exclusively upon their gender identity. Rather, gendered referent objects are often produced through their linkage with other referent objects such as the nation, through which a (visual) securitization can proceed and justify an escalation beyond normal politics unachievable by gender alone. This speaks to the inherent ambiguity of the images, in that although they might be read as visual evidence of the Taliban's 'war' on women they still could not secure military intervention as the sole political response to the insecurity they were understood to depict.

To resolve this tension, a second discursive strategy emerged through which the images were constructed as visual evidence of a wider existential threat the Taliban posed to the west, rather than simply Afghan women. President Bush (2001b) argued:

(the Taliban) offered us a *clear image* of the world they and the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us ... the central goal of the terrorists is the brutal oppression of women, and *not only the women of Afghanistan*. (my emphasis)

Laura Bush (2001) similarly asserted during her presidential radio address that “in Afghanistan *we see the world* the terrorists would like to *impose upon the rest of us*” (my emphasis). This rhetoric projected the strategic depiction of suffering forwards, constructing it as evidence of a greater security threat. They allowed America to literally “see Al Qaida’s vision for the world” and its desire to impose its radical beliefs “on people everywhere” (Bush 2001a). The interplay between this discursive strategy and the images enabled them to produce Afghan women not only as an insecure referent object demanding western intervention, but allowed that insecurity to signify a wider threat to (western) women. The images could be read not only as visualising victims of the Taliban’s war on women to which America had a moral obligation to respond, but enacted an inherently gendered existential threat which extended beyond Afghanistan to confront the United States. The images thus became inscribed as evidence of a greater (and far more significant) threat which could justify military intervention and render Afghan women worthy of saving; their status as victims of the Taliban’s ‘war on women’ was insufficient to justify military intervention.

Foreign policy discourse also performed the strategic depiction of liberation. Afghan women were represented as a liberated collective subject and linked explicitly to the removal of the burka in later texts, illustrated by President Bush's (2002) assertion that "one of the most joyous things for me is to *see the faces* of the Afghan women as they have been liberated ... we're freeing women and children from incredible oppression" (my emphasis). This expression of joy at literally 'seeing the faces' of Afghan women was persistent in Bush's rhetoric; it was the "pictures of joy," the images themselves, that affirmed the liberation of Afghan women had taken place (Bush 2001b). This again points to the performative significance of the burka in visualising the oppression and later the freedom of Afghan women. The epistemic authority of the images was discursively drawn upon to legitimise America's decision to intervene, verifying the liberation of Afghan women and their acceptance of western cultural norms to the American public.

DISCUSSION

This analysis reveals how photojournalistic images did not merely support the gendered and racial logics which underpinned the Bush administration's construction of Afghan women, but through their intertextual location produced them as a gendered referent object which enabled a visual securitization. By reading these images through a feminist lens within the framework of visual securitization, I have traced the connections between gender, (in)security and the visual to demonstrate the discursive processes through which images

become assigned security implications and what this renders politically possible. The images enacted a particular way of seeing Afghan women through which they became deserving of security, illustrating how security can become constituted as a field of vision which produces the very threats and insecure subjects it purports to name.

This illuminates how the productive power of such images through their wider interaction with gendered discourses of (in)security can enable visual securitizations. Yet I demonstrated the inherent instability of this, even though no image or foreign policy text transgressed beyond the strategic depiction of suffering or liberation and only a small number of media articles presented a more nuanced discussion of Afghan women's rights. The inherent ambiguity of the images and their possibility to construct an alternative visuality opening up political possibilities beyond military intervention was only curtailed through their construction as visualising a security threat to the west. This need to discipline this ambiguity is evidenced by the concerted political campaign pursued by the Bush administration to secure the meaning of the images, managed directly by the President's Office and White House Counsellor Karen Hughes (Allen 2001; Cohn and Enloe 2003, 1201) through which the two discursive strategies identified were enacted. By tracing how images interact with wider security discourses, then, I have pushed feminist analysis further by exploring how this interplay can visually produce gendered collective subjects amenable to securitization and the discursive processes through this is enabled.

This analysis is also significant for the study of visual securitization. It captures how gender can be productive of a visuality possessing security implications, revealing the need for

(visual) securitization scholars to take gender seriously. The gendered logics working through the images allowed Afghan women to be accepted as an insecure referent object demanding a (military) response, without which military intervention would not have been justifiable to the American public. Yet, the wider visual securitization literature (Andersen and Möller 2013; Vuori 2010; Williams 2003) has illustrated marginal interest in gender despite increased feminist attention both to the visual and securitization theory more generally. Synthesising the insights of both feminist and visual securitization scholarship, then, offers a way to theorise how the connections between gender, security and the visual established within feminist IR actually function, to make certain political responses possible and foreclose others.

By offering an understanding of how visual securitizations are achieved, this article troubles the gendered meaning ascribed to the western images of Afghan women by exposing their inherent partiality and contingent nature. As Shepherd (2008, 214) suggests “it is precisely through questioning the reproduction of visual representations and their multiple interpretations that it is possible to formulate a political space from which to speak.” This analysis has attempted to open up such a space by demonstrating how the images enabled a visual securitization through their constitution within dominant discourses of gender and race operating across text/image. Reflecting on the genre of the images is important here. An audience retains a highly privileged position to ‘know’ the suffering visualised within photojournalism and the strategic depiction of suffering identified here is pervasive in visual representations of war, which is dominated by western press agencies. Through this, images of suffering are circulated and consumed by audiences distant from the events such images

depict (Magder 2002, 31-32). Susan Sontag (2003) contends this photographic tradition enacts a particular iconography of suffering, through which individual subjects are framed as representative of a wider political event and consequently denied agency or difference. There is a political economy which underpins this; photojournalistic images must try and quickly communicate why an event matters to audience to ensure their publication in western media outlets, yet they achieve this only through their situation within wider gendered and racialized discourses which can convey such meaning. This leaves little room for nuance or alternative representations, prompting Sontag (1977, 2003) to suggest that our ability to respond ethically to such images is harmed by the perpetual circulation of this iconography.

This critique matters for feminist and visual securitization analysis. As I have argued, the gendered and racial power relations operating within such images, coupled with their broader intertextual location, can visually produce a subject as a legitimate matter of security. Importantly, the viewer of such images is “marked – made sense of – by the same discourses through which the images are (re)produced” (Shepherd 2008, 222). These discourses of race and gender also produced the western audience which could ‘see’ Afghan women through this visuality, and through which the images ability to signify a wider security threat to such an audience became meaningful. This allowed the images to become read as “self-referencing, rather than other regrading,” (Dauphinée 2007, 148) constructing Afghan women’s insecurity exclusively through its ability to signify threat to the west, foreclosing ethical responses to the images beyond political violence. Synthesising the insights of visual securitization and feminist analysis can therefore ask how visual

securitizations and the political possibilities they enable rely upon audiences 'knowing' what is visually represented through dominant (security) discourses of race and gender. Through this, greater insight can be gained into how gender can enable successful visual securitizations through the interplay between text/image, and how this is aided by Eurocentric ways of visualising war and conflict.

If western photojournalism was key to performing the constructions of race and gender which enabled the visual securitization of Afghan women, this suggests the necessity of alternative ways of visualising conflict which might resist such iconographical representations of suffering. In his study of photojournalism during the war in Afghanistan, Paul Verschoren (2012, 158) argues for a new way of visualising war, one which confers greater emphasis upon "the voices and images of the other" on their own terms. Roland Bleiker and Amy Kay (2007, 141) similarly argue for a "more local, and more diverse" photography which "might overcome the stereotypical image of the passive victim." By problematizing the possibility of a universal representation of suffering, such images are able to disrupt the ways of 'knowing' a subject or event upon which a visual securitization depends and enable ethical responses beyond western (military) intervention. If Afghan women were visualised as political agents outside western photojournalism, if the full complexity and diversity of their lives were visualised, it is possible a visual securitization might have been resisted. As noted earlier, there is ample evidence within feminist IR of Afghan women's political agency within activist groups such as RAWA, which has worked to create a democratic and secular Afghanistan. Such agency was denied within western (visual) representations. However, RAWA has consistently utilised the visual as a site of

political resistance. Throughout America's intervention, RAWA activists produced photographic images of the "corporeal results of war" to disturb its political legitimacy and demonstrate it as ineffectual in improving Afghan women's lives, yet despite their provision to western media outlets such images were never published prior to America's military intervention (Fluri 2009, 260-261). RAWA also continues to produce images of its activities and campaigns, illustrating Afghan women as political agents rather than passive victims and contesting the visual appropriation of their repression in support of political violence (RAWA 2016). This reiterates that alternative ways of visualising war which resist the gendered and racial logics enacted within western photojournalism can facilitate other ways of responding to the suffering they visualise beyond political violence. Although the study of alternative sites of visual representation is beyond the scope of this article, future feminist analysis of visual securitization should explore how alternative ways of visualising war functions as an act of political resistance with the potential to disrupt visual securitizing moves.

CONCLUSION

By bringing feminist IR and visual securitization scholarship into conversation, I have extended feminist understanding of the war in Afghanistan by demonstrating how photojournalistic images visually securitized Afghan women through their interaction with media and foreign policy discourse. This analysis goes beyond noting the political salience of such images to reveal how they enacted a visibility which produced Afghan women as a legitimate referent object of security, exposing how gender can work through the interplay

between text/image to enable a successful visual securitization. I conclude by suggesting the coupling of feminist analysis with visual securitization theory represents a fruitful research agenda, through which the connections between gender, security and the visual can be better understood. Such research can explore how images come to possess security implications through their interaction with gendered security discourses, to visually construct the referent objects and threats required for securitizations. If “world politics is played out in the visual dimension,” (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009, 159) it demands greater feminist attention is given to the interplay between the visual and non-visual in the construction of security issues and the power relations this is produced by and productive of. It is only through such analysis that alternative ways of visualising conflict might be made possible.

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¹ See for example Hunt (2002); Hunt and Rygiel (2006); Masters (2009); Nayak (2006); Shepherd (2006); Steans (2008) and Zine (2006).

² I use the term burka throughout this article, as this is the term used within the textual representations analysed. I recognise that the practice of 'covering' is highly complex and varies across cultural and spatial context.

³ I have elected not to reproduce the images within this article, as it is my contention that the circulation of such images and the strategic depictions they employ is critical to the enablement of political violence, as I demonstrate through my analysis.

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