

Rethinking the Body in Global Politics: Why and How?

Written by Kandida Purnell

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KANDIDA PURNELL, MAY 4 2021

What is known as international relations does not come from and take place somewhere else, it happens in, to, and through every body at all times. Indeed, and certainly just as much as 'states', bodies are contested sites of (local-)global politics that are acted upon and act relentlessly in life and beyond – to the point of their continual redoing and eventual undoing. This has been my assumption for over a decade since I began rethinking the body in global politics and the particular role that bodies play in our international system. In fact, as a Masters student and PhD candidate I could not understand why, as Jan Jindy Pettman noticed in 1997, bodies were 'not available for critique' and why IR was 'practiced as disembodied, in the absence of bodies, both of the writers and of their subjects' (*ibid*). Body politics remained a niche and until recently a relatively incoherent area of study within the discipline of International Relations (IR) – there was certainly no text book available. Therefore and in short, the reason I wrote my first book 'Rethinking the Body in Global Politics' was because, to quote Toni Morrison: 'if there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it'.

Over the 10 years it took to write *Rethinking the Body*, my expertise was mis-understood for most of the time, as most of my peers, superiors, and certainly the prospective employers who dismissed me assumed I was a 'gender person' (whatever that is) or just doing some weird theory stuff that was not going to be 'attractive' to students or have any 'impact'. Indeed, for the most part, and for most of the time since the discipline of IR's 1919 inception, those devoted to the thinking, writing, and teaching of international relations have left the narrowly and broadly defined politics out of bodies entirely. Perhaps they did not notice it. After all, when all is seemingly well, bodies are liable to being forgotten and vanishing (see Leder, 1990). Perhaps the embodied subjects writing 'the mainstream' glided through life without a bodily glitch. Whatever the case, as a result of bodies' disciplinary disappearance, intensely and globally contested processes through which bodies come to be or not be (what I have called *(re/dis)embodiment*) have been ignored and/or denied and so occluded because of a common preference for the analysis, scrutiny, and politicisation of the other contested units in our international system – namely, man, the state, and war. In turn, these fetishised levels of analysis have then been almost entirely disembodied as they arrive in our texts, lectures, and policy recommendations, apparently ready-made with (in the case of man) and comprised of (in the case of the state and war) pre- and a-political bodies. This is entirely problematic because bodies are not outside of politics but rather always and already contested sites of global politics. I am therefore writing this short piece for students and scholars interested in the global politics of bodies and my approach to it. As such this short explainer proceeds in two parts – describing the ways bodies are relevant towards the study of global politics and how you too might go about researching (local-)global body politics.

In this time of global pandemic, we cannot help but notice how some bodies cough, splutter, and infect other bodies. We know that sometimes this is intentional but also that sometimes it is not, and we realise that even dead ones can do it. We now realise all too well that what happens to bodies owes to political decisions – even if defining politics relatively narrowly – such as what goes on in parliament and government buildings and at the international level – of vaccine deals and strategy in this case. In this time of global pandemic, some bodies must 'shield' from COVID-19, some bodies are protected from it, some bodies will be nursed back to health if they need to be, while others are made and left more vulnerable, and some bodies are used and used up – they are knowingly exposed to the power of death, succumb, and allowed to die. We see now that in life, and differently in death, some bodies count and are duly counted, while others will be lost count of or discounted. Some bodies are valued highly – deemed invaluable and irreplaceable – while most are disposed of quickly, out of public sight, and without fanfare. However, even when

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these bodies go physically 'missing' from us, as many hundreds of thousands have globally because of having become infected with COVID-19, we remain haunted by their 'seething presence'. Indeed, concerning every body, the COVID-19 pandemic has done a lot of work for me by revealing the management techniques and pervasive social-political manipulations and interventions in the lives/deaths and (re/dis) embodiments of not only seemingly extremely placed and obviously exposed locally internationally contested bodies of soldiers and prisoners of war (the ones that I would focus on in my writing 'before').

Given the purpose of IR – to understand and explain the causes of war, peace, and direct, political violence – IR's empirical focus has led to bodies in pain and bodies blown to bits having become most explicitly entangled in machineries and of violent warfare coming into the frame. This is because IR scholars have rightly shone a light on atrocity and injustice and raised important questions about the use and abuse of particular embodied subjects – highlighting how gender and race play a crucial role in making some bodies more vulnerable than others and increasingly logging the ways and means through which bodies are made and unmade, as well as how bodies are made (in)visible and represented in global politics by what I have describe as dominant (government, military, and mass media, elite) bodies. However, what I have tried to underline through my recent efforts is that *every body* has a story to tell about local-global politics and power. Moreover, as I have found, *no body* is more or less likely to be able to tell you about power operations and the logics informing and producing patterns of not only contemporary local-global (re/ dis)embodiment but the broader behaviours and policies of international actors of the traditional and non-traditional kinds.

As material – breathing, fleshy, sometimes aching and eventually ailing – bodies the health, longevity, and vulnerabilities of each of us are socially-politically constructed alike. I, therefore, have meant to suggest and encourage scholars from all factions and corners of the discipline of IR and beyond to try closely appraising more obvious, subtle, and, indeed, barely perceptible bodily contests going on within their empirical settings. Indeed, homing in on *any body* can, if you look closely, tell you about so much beyond that body and immediate setting because every body is not only ontologically and existentially in excess of itself and, therefore, profoundly reliant and dependent on others but also connected via the hierarchical global endoskeleton of the world, which holds a place and accounts for every last body and body part – increasingly counting and accounting at the molecular bottom line of life and death itself. In short, this is because every body comes into and out of being according to logics greater and agents far beyond itself and thus comes to embody those logics as the fleshed-out performative materialisations of power/knowledge and the local-global, social-political contests it emerges from. Indeed, this is what makes bodies such uniquely rich sites of investigation.

For the reasons outlined so far, when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived I started 'using' the COVID-19 pandemic as a means to demonstrate many of the ways in which bodies are unendingly yet un-passively contested as sites of global and more broadly defined politics that occurs in spaces far beyond our parliament buildings and legislative chambers. Indeed, the bodies discussed in my book are at the brunt of and exposed to dynamics, forces, and imperatives so much bigger than comparatively petty party and even national politics and the force of state power but more often than not do not stop to think about this as they go on with their 'private' and more often than not rather mundane lives. As such, I alternatively follow feminist efforts detailed in this introduction and spearheaded by Cynthia Enloe (1990) to conceive of international politics as deeply personal and vice versa. Indeed, from this counter position, it is understandable that Michel Foucault (1977: 308) reversed Carl von Clausewitz's dictum often cited within the war studies canon, because of hearing 'the distant roar of battle' in the centre of civil, apparently civil, society and even during so-called normal times. I have heard it too, even from my own unique but intensely privileged embodied position towards the top of what Dionne Brand has recently and corporeally called 'the global endoskeleton of the world' as a white English working class woman who has risen to work as an Assistant Professor and, therefore, live in ways that make me more secure – in a myriad of ways – than the vast majority of the human population. From this position I have devoted the last decade of my life to thinking in, with, and through bodies and in the end, seeing that 'theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin' (Ahmed, 2017: 10), I returned to that which I could get closest too and even under: my own.

As relations within the international system are always embodied, there is always the option to include within analysis of the body politics any case, event, situation, or moment under the purview of work in IR. This might include

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discussion on how bodies are acted or being acted upon even and especially when they are being used or contested less obviously than in the case of the COVID pandemic – as we all our daily through our work, as we travel (or are contained), as we rest, and while we consume and play. However, starting and ending with bodies (because global politics always does), also means daring to abandon the ‘methodological safety net’ (Zalewski, 2013: 133) provided and clung to by IR’s positivist orthodoxy while resisting ‘the seductions of quantification’ (see Merry, 2016) and the easy acceptability that comes with it. Indeed, my book is presented as a combination of vignettes, auto and digital-ethnography, and reflective/reflexive essays bringing in the results of broader critical discourse analyses and even a survey as I employed the feminist research ethics defined by Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True (2008: 694) as ‘attentiveness to the power of epistemology, boundaries, relationships and the situatedness of the researcher’ and took into account the roles of emotion and positionality within my research process.

As a final piece of advice, and somewhat of a warning, starting and ending with bodies – obsessively following them and finding out where they go and what they become – and doing this while all the while being aware of your own – is hard, it is draining, and it is even possibly extractive and abusive. It is certainly uncomfortable. Indeed, writing *Rethinking the Body in Global Politics* on and during the pandemic lockdown of the spring and summer of 2020 was an absolutely immersive, sometimes cathartic, but more often intense and intensely draining and stressful experience in what was already an incredibly stressful time. I have since considered that I used the writing process and distraction of my manuscript’s approaching deadline as a coping mechanism through which to manage and offset the stress and even trauma of the pandemic itself. However, turning my experience of the lockdown and pandemic into work and tasking myself with writing reflexively about what was an already draining and risky situation also entailed additional stressors which should serve as a warning and reminder of the violent potential of research and academic life and the need for deeper reflection on these always already raced, classed, and gendered issues.

About the author:

Dr Kandida Purnell is an international political sociologist with a decade of in-class and online University teaching experience in the English, Scottish, and US systems. Kandida’s research draws and builds on contemporary critical, gender, and postcolonial theory to center around the global politics of bodies and takes an interdisciplinary approach towards investigating contemporary patterns and logics of violence and (re/dis)embodiment through cases including the Covid-19 pandemic, military and other mass casualty repatriation and commemoration practices, and embodied resistance practices.