

## Contending with Paradox: Feminist Investments in Gender Training

**P**owerful institutions increasingly speak the language of feminist concepts. Government bodies, universities, and private companies have set up units and developed policies on equity, diversity, and inclusion, often accompanied by training for gender equality, against sexual harassment, or on implicit bias (Bustelo, Ferguson, and Forest 2016; Ahmed 2017). Institutions of global governance, most notably the United Nations (UN), have committed to “gender mainstreaming” their activities in a project that has given rise to a professionalized cadre of “gender experts” (Jauhola 2010; Kunz, Prügl, and Thompson 2019). These developments have mirrored the institutionalization of first women’s and then gender studies in higher education (Wiegman 2016). Some observers have concluded that these developments amount to a feminist victory, that feminists now “walk the halls of power” (Halley 2006, 20–22; see also Zalewski 2010). Others note with alarm that concepts developed through feminist activism and theorizing—the contested term *gender* key among them—have been depoliticized and co-opted to serve the status quo (Whitworth 2004; de Jong and Kimm 2017). These differences have occasioned debate about the possibilities and dangers that inhere to engagements with powerful institutions, a debate that is largely structured around the binary options of feminist transformation or co-optation. How one approaches this debate has important implications for feminist strategizing: it speaks to urgent questions about under what conditions and indeed whether engaging with institutions that wield the power of the state, of capitalism, and of knowledge production is conducive to feminist political ends. This is not only a question of strategy, a question of what we (those of us who name our commitments as feminist) should do. It is also a question of epistemology, a question of how different epistemic frames structure the conditions of possibility of what political work concepts

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developed through feminist theorizing can be made to do. In this essay, I interrogate these questions by following the concept of gender on its travels into an unlikely setting—training for military and police peacekeepers—and interrogating what gender comes to mean in this space.

Gender training is a practice that draws on and utilizes a conceptual vocabulary developed through feminist scholarship and activism: it is a practice that is clearly indebted to feminist political and intellectual labor (Sexwale 1996; Ferguson 2019b). Over the past two decades, such training has become a requirement for military and police peacekeepers. Introduced as part of the response to gendered harms previously ignored in or actively caused by international peacekeeping missions, training—together with efforts to increase the number of female peacekeepers and the establishment of gender advisory positions—represents an attempt to remedy gendered problems of peacekeeping (Väyrynen 2004; Whitworth 2004). Against the backdrop of the adoption and evolution of the international women, peace, and security agenda, states in different regions of the world increasingly agree that gender training is a necessary part of peacekeepers' preparation for deployment and have developed training curricula and offered courses on gender and related topics (Holvikivi 2021c). Policy makers and some feminist activists celebrate the introduction of gender training for peacekeepers as a victory for progressive politics—an example of feminists walking the proverbial halls of power—though they also lament the uneven institutionalization of such training (Mackay 2003; Lamprey 2012; Razakamaharavo, Ryan, and Sherwood 2018). Discontent around the implementation of policy commitments notwithstanding, these observers expect that the introduction of gender knowledge will make state security apparatuses more attuned to women's security needs and better at promoting women's participation in efforts to make peace: that it will effect feminist transformative politics.

At the same time, reading this development with the help of critical feminist analyses cautions us against assuming that such training is unambiguously a normative good. A rich body of scholarship in the field of feminist (and) critical military studies has exposed the martial institutions that are charged with peacekeeping as social sites animated by hegemonic masculinities hostile to feminism as a political project.<sup>1</sup> A contradiction is apparent

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Cohn (1987), Barrett (1996), Higate and Henry (2009), and Belkin (2012). Following Alison Howell (2018), I privilege the term *martial* over *militarized* to describe the police and military. The concept of martiality allows me to build into the analysis a recognition that police forces are warlike institutions without necessitating a demonstration that the police have incorporated military modes of acting and values that are otherwise foreign to them. The term *martial* also allows me to speak to peacekeeping practices that valorize the

here: training uniformed peacekeepers on gender involves the introduction of feminist knowledge and concepts into institutions of hegemonic masculinity. It is an exercise in which two epistemic fields, which hold largely contradictory values and accepted truths, meet. Gender training for peacekeepers therefore presents a hard case for interrogating what happens to feminist concepts when they are taken up by powerful institutions. It is a case in which, as I demonstrate in this essay, the contradictory effects of institutional take-up of feminist analyses come into sharp relief. These contradictory effects animate my exploration in this essay, raising the questions: What epistemic and political work is “gender” made to do in martial institutions? How does the paradoxical nature of this endeavor speak to feminist political strategizing?

My analysis of gender training draws from a larger research project, which is perhaps most accurately described as a multisited ethnography of gender training. Between November 2016 and December 2017, I conducted participant observation in seven different training courses—amounting to eight weeks of highly participatory observation—for peacekeepers in East Africa, the Nordic region, West Africa, the Western Balkans, and Western Europe.<sup>2</sup> I also conducted twenty-three semistructured interviews with gender trainers—including military officers, civilian staff, and nongovernmental organization employees—outside of these course settings. This ethnographic work is supplemented by content analysis of training commitments contained in women, peace, and security policy documents, and close readings of training materials (for details of this research archive, see Holvikivi 2021a). I approached this empirical material with interpretive strategies inspired by discourse analysis techniques, seeking to understand what the internal logics of training interventions are, what epistemic traditions they draw on, what established understandings they cite, and consequently, on what grounds they are accepted as true. This analysis lends itself to my reading of the political potential and limitations of gender training, with the empirical material serving as a catalyst to generate a conceptual vocabulary with which to consider the implications of this practice for feminist strategizing.

I find gender training to be a politically ambivalent practice that simultaneously involves the co-optation of feminist concepts to the service of martiality, heteronormativity, and the maintenance of colonial difference, *and* the subversion of these logics through the introduction of feminist

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use of force without implying that “militarism” is an exogenous problem to otherwise peaceful liberal politics of peacekeeping (Millar 2016; Holvikivi 2021b).

<sup>2</sup> In order to protect the anonymity of the research participants, I do not specify countries or organizations.

knowledges that disrupt and destabilize hegemonic discourses into martial institutions. My examination of peacekeeper gender training thus evokes familiar themes for feminist reflections on engagement with state institutions: of tensions between transformative promise and co-opted politics, of “victory and danger” (Otto 2014).<sup>3</sup> Against the backdrop of this debate, I resist a framing that would require subjecting these dynamics of co-optation and subversion to an accounting exercise that would allow me to pronounce that one outweighs the other. Instead, I seek to interrogate how this ambivalence might be theorized beyond the eminently reasonable but analytically and politically unsatisfactory conclusion of “it is both.”

I suggest that thinking of training as a specifically paradoxical practice within postcolonial and queer feminist traditions of thought means that rather than trying to overcome an inherently irresolvable contradiction, what is required is the development of conceptual thinking that engages with the question of how to sit with a tension, how to work with a paradox in a way that is not politically paralyzing but productive (Scott 1996; Brown 2000). Sitting with the tension compels us, following Dianne Otto (2014; see also Eschle and Maiguashca 2018), to critically interrogate the premises of the commonly evoked concepts of co-optation and transformation and to push our thinking beyond the binary structuring of this opposition. I argue that understanding the politics of such training as specifically paradoxical opens up ways of cultivating resistant forms of engagement that are less amenable to co-optation. Recuperating the political potential of gender training in such a manner is not a question of denying the co-optation of the concept of gender by martial logics, nor does it amount to discounting this dangerous development. Rather, it is a matter of attending to the ambivalence of the historical present, of remaining alive to the subversive potential of hybrid knowledges (Bhabha 1994). I conclude with the suggestion that the political potential of gender training is not rendered obsolete by the ways it has been co-opted or by its inability to produce a transformed future. Its political potential lies in its ability to exploit the margins of hegemonic discourses, introducing strategies of disruption and subversion. Accordingly, I argue for developing forms of critical engagement that track the ambivalences of dominant discourses and identify therein strategies for resisting the capacity of gender to serve the purposes of imperial politics. I advocate for debate and for the investment of intellectual effort into thinking what feminist pedagogies might look like and how they could be practiced in this context: a continued engagement with and against struggles over the political meaning of

<sup>3</sup> See also Grewal and Kaplan (1994), de Jong and Kimm (2017), and Eschle and Maiguashca (2018).

gender through an approach that recognizes that such politics are always messy, imprecise, and corruptible.

To that end, this essay progresses as follows. The first section is dedicated to examining the dynamics of co-optation in gender training practices. I theorize co-optation as a concept alive to the amenability of Western feminism to serve imperial projects, and I trace how gender training works through and with colonial thinking and presents sexual violence as a problem that is amenable to the use of force. The second section then attends to the suggestion that gender training nonetheless holds transformative feminist promise. My enthusiasm for the notion of transformation is severely limited, but I suggest in this section that we may nonetheless locate political worth in the ways in which gender training exposes ambivalences in hegemonic logics and the enactment of subversive strategies by gender trainers. I conclude with a reflection on the ambivalent effects of gender training and use this as an occasion to argue for developing modes of analysis that are able to contend with such paradoxical politics.

### **Co-optation and feminism's amenabilities**

The emergent practice of training uniformed peacekeepers on the topic of gender is situated within a wider cluster of initiatives to make practices of global security more gender responsive, which collectively travel under the banner of the international women, peace, and security agenda. Adopted by the United Nations Security Council in October 2000, the agenda was vested with feminist hopes of constructing alternative understandings of what counts as international peace and security. The transformative promise that feminist advocates saw in the agenda was to challenge state-centric conceptions of security in favor of an understanding informed by women's lived experiences, to recognize women as agential actors rather than simply as victims in need of protection, and to set the path for meaningfully transforming institutions in alignment with such a paradigm shift (Blanchard 2003; Cohn 2008). Establishing such an agenda within the Security Council—a sanctum for masculinist, militarist, state-centered politics—was no mean feat for feminist advocacy. Indeed, advocates celebrated the passage of the inaugural Resolution 1325 as marking the recognition of women's security needs and priorities as the business of serious international security in what Otto (2014) aptly describes as a narrative of feminist victory. Capitalizing on this normative momentum, gender experts who identify as feminists have invested considerable intellectual and political effort in developing gender training as a key technology through which to effect the transformation promised by Resolution 1325 (see, e.g., Mackay 2003; Puechguirbal 2003).

The establishment of women's security concerns as part of the business of the UN Security Council has, however, simultaneously been re-counted through what Otto describes as a feminist narrative of danger. Broader feminist debates over the merits of engaging with(in) institutions of state power point to the dangers of co-optation, both in terms of the co-optation of feminists into militarized (neoliberal, and/or patriarchal) institutions, as well as in terms of the concomitant appropriation of feminist concepts to serve markedly different purposes than the ones they were intended for (de Jong and Kimm 2017, 186–87; Eschle and Maiguashca 2018, 232). Indeed, observers of the women, peace, and security agenda point to the ways in which efforts to integrate gender in peace and security work equate gender with women and their essentialized roles as victims and/or peacemakers (Puechguirbal 2010; Goetz 2020). This reliance on gender essentialism is marked by a lack of attention to structural causes of inequality, and it produces instrumentalist logics that facilitate the co-optation of women into military systems (Otto 2010; Manchanda 2020). In short, scholars and advocates have exposed how the integration of a gender perspective in international security practices through the women, peace, and security agenda has resulted in the “*co-optation of radical politics* to shore up the legitimacy of the usual suspects” (Basu, Kirby, and Shepherd 2020, 3; emphasis added). This awareness that the women, peace, and security agenda has not lived up to its transformative promise is well established in scholarship, to the extent that it “is recognizable as something of a trope” (Cook 2019, 1293).

Specific analyses of training have further exposed how the concept of gender is diluted and depoliticized in practice: how it is appropriated and its meaning co-opted. Lisa Carson (2016) studies Australian peacekeeper gender training and puts forward a critique of how gender is understood, arguing that the definition provided reduces gender to complementary difference between men and women, obscuring questions of power and patriarchy. She juxtaposes the depoliticized definition of gender used in training with the understanding put forth by feminist activists who lobbied the UN to use the term in the first place, an understanding that was grounded in feminist analyses of patriarchal power. Carson's charge that the way gender is defined in peacekeeping training has lost the originary meaning of the term is an accurate and necessary critique. At the same time, it bears echoes of what Clare Hemmings (2011) characterizes as a narrative of feminist loss, wherein the loss of past feminist commitments marks a betrayal in the present (see also Wiegman 2014). It is worth bearing in mind, as Hemmings insists we should, that a narrative that centers loss constrains our analyses by fixing a feminist past as the standard against which to measure how gender is understood. In the process, such narratives risk reproducing the blind spots and omissions

of those past feminist politics—notably those of race and sexuality. In other words, the narrative of loss, with its nostalgic yearning for a past state of affairs, limits the analytical horizons of where we might look in order to locate exclusions. Here I suggest that a suspicion of loss narratives points to the necessity of building on the established critiques of gender training as depoliticizing the concept of gender by excluding patriarchy from the definition to further examine how “race,” coloniality, and heterosexism figure in this understanding of gender.

Indeed, critiques grounded in postcolonial feminist perspectives have drawn attention to how the logics of coloniality permeate the women, peace, and security agenda, producing racializing effects that justify imperialist military intervention.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, these effects cannot be understood to be wholly exogenous to feminism. Feminism is not a singular referent, and its white/Western variants have long been complicit in colonial projects invested in the construction of womanhood as normatively white (see, e.g., Stoler 2010). The language of co-optation can, then, be misleading: it seems to imply the existence of an innocent feminism prior to its co-optation by oppositional forces (Roy 2017). Scholars like Otto (2014) and Hemmings (2011) thus privilege the term “amenability” to highlight the coextensiveness of white feminism and coloniality. The political import of thinking about feminism’s amenability to serve martial imperial politics is undeniable. However, some scholars fold this recognition into their conceptualization of co-optation, complicating the latter by theorizing feminism itself as a field infused with power and the subject of ongoing contestation in a bid to recognize that certain articulations of feminism dovetail neatly with imperial and/or neoliberal politics (de Jong and Kimm 2017, 188–89). Co-optation thus emerges in their analysis as something more complex than the corruption of a singular, innocent object: it emerges as a critique of “the way that specific terms lose their political usefulness” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 2). In my reading of the concept, it works as a signifier for political developments the author objects to. The charge of co-optation thus involves staking a claim in ongoing contestations over the meaning of feminism and the work one expects it to do rather than denoting simple nostalgia for a prior state of affairs. It signifies a political intervention within a contested field over “what can and cannot be done in the name of feminism” (Raghavan 2018). The concept of co-optation is thus, I argue, capable of holding a recognition of feminist amenability to imperial politics while at the same time offering an affective charge that is active, that calls for ongoing struggle over what gender can and cannot be made to do in spaces of state power.

<sup>4</sup> See Pratt (2013), Parashar (2018), Razavi (2020), and Henry (2021).



In this section, I take up this conceptualization of co-optation (theorized as a concept that is attentive to feminism's amenability to serve colonial projects) to extend Carson's critique of gender training for peacekeepers in dialogue with postcolonial feminist perspectives. I examine a particular aspect of gender training—the prevention of and response to conflict-related sexual violence—to examine how this training serves the political status quo to legitimate military incursions and the circulation of racial tropes to justify martial violence. More specifically, I demonstrate how training simultaneously inscribes and disavows colonial difference and how it communicates gender as a problem that is amenable to the use of martial force.

### ***Gender at the colonial difference***

A notable feature of gender training mandated by institutions of global governance is that it is underwritten by an assumption about the universal applicability and knowability of the concept of gender as a social structure distinct from biological sex. Consider, for example, how the UN organizes peacekeeper training: a core predeployment training package (DPKO and DFS 2017a) is supplied to troop- and police-contributing countries, which are then expected to deliver this training. Because the training materials are the same for all personnel, regardless of geographic location or the conflict zone they are deploying to, gender is inevitably established as a universal term through a knowledge transfer structure in which training materials are disseminated across the world by a central power (see also Kunz, Prügl, and Thompson 2019, 34). Such universalism has been identified as a colonizing move by scholars such as María Lugones (2007), who challenges the notion that gender means always and everywhere the same thing by exploring how this concept is operationalized through what she calls the “colonial/modern gender system.”

Substantively, the UN training materials state that whereas sex is “biologically defined; usually determined at birth; [and] universal,” gender “is socially constructed; differs across cultures and time; [and] results in different roles, responsibilities, opportunities, needs and constraints for women, men, girls, and boys” (DPKO and DFS 2017b, 5). Gender is, in other words, allowed some contextual variation (it “differs across cultures and time”), but the category itself is universal (“women, men, girls, and boys” are the stable subjects of this variation). Reading this excerpt with the help of Lugones's analytic, it becomes apparent that peacekeeper training posits a Eurocentric understanding of gender organized around biological dimorphism, heterosexuality, and patriarchy. It constructs gender along the lines of what Lugones calls the “light side” of the modern/colonial gender system (2007, 187). Of particular interest here is the way Lugones exposes that such an understanding



of gender historically only applied to white colonizers. Its inverse, the “dark side” of colonialism, involved the historical reduction of colonized peoples to inferior beings through the “differential construction of gender along racial lines,” where oppressed peoples were understood as sexed but not gendered, males and females rather than men and women (206). This differential construction of gender produced violences such as “forced sex with white colonizers” (206). These operations of the dark side of the colonality of gender closely resemble what might be referred to as the dark side of peacekeeping—including persistent occurrences of sexual exploitation and violent abuse of peace-kept populations (Razack 2004; Henry 2015; Bauer and Molinari 2017). Peacekeeper gender training systematically omits any mention of race, and a broad nonrecognition of colonial histories or ongoing structures of oppression and dispossession mirrors forms of unknowing that Ann Laura Stoler (2011) describes as “colonial aphasia.” Nonetheless, I suggest that dominant practices of gender training render race simultaneously unarticulated and hypervisible. It is precisely by not naming colonial difference that this practice perpetuates its very fact.

An examination of how training deals with sexual violence demonstrates the operations of the colonial difference in gender training. Reflective of broader trends in women, peace, and security policy making, training efforts around gender are heavily focused on the problem of sexual violence (Hilhorst and Douma 2018; Holvikivi 2021c). First, it is important to note how gender training defines sexual violence. Training materials and gender trainers typically insist on a strict separation between sexual exploitation and abuse (violence committed by peacekeepers against the peace-kept population) and conflict-related sexual violence (violence committed by local warring parties against the civilian population). The former is defined as a conduct and discipline issue and separated from the business of gender training proper. This move allows peacekeeping discourse around gender to present sexual exploitation and abuse as a problem caused by a “few bad apples in an otherwise good barrel,” doing away with the need to examine peacekeeper violence as an enactment of colonial violence (Razack 2004, 89).

In contrast, conflict-related sexual violence is presented as an operational problem and a key concern of gender training. This type of violence is characterized as a problem of racialized others. It is typically located in a separate geographic zone—for example, a training curriculum produced in Sarajevo introduces a map charting the incidence of conflict-related sexual violence across the globe, with specific guidance to the instructor to “note . . . the preponderance of African countries” (PSOTC 2014, 116). Similarly, in one of the courses I observed in the Nordic region, training participants watched a documentary about sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the

Congo, noting afterward in their learning logs that what they had learned was that “different cultures behave differently” and that “war, as we take it in western countries, is something different in other places.” By presenting brutal violence—invariably associated with Black and Brown bodies—absent contextualization, the training discourse produces a “decontextualized and dehistoricized narrative” that “imports race into the very meaning of morality” (Razack 2003, 207). Meanwhile, because the training discourse obscures the colonial difference, privileging the light side of coloniality by positing that violence is only gendered and not simultaneously racialized, differences in violence become a matter of scale, not substance. While the peacekeepers’ own violence is framed as a problem of a few deviant individuals, the violence committed by warring parties is characterized as a pervasive problem, linked to different cultures.

This separation of scale but not substance “sets up its own authorial subjects as the implicit referent, i.e., a yardstick by which to encode and represent cultural Others” (Mohanty 1988, 64). This move establishes a difference between the peacekeepers’ home country and the mission area by endorsing a logic along the lines of “We may have some problems at home as well, but they are nothing compared to what women in the DRC are experiencing.” The obfuscation of how misogyny, racism, and deeply unequal power relations structure the peacekeeping endeavor itself facilitates an understanding of peace-kept populations as lacking; they come “to be mythically conceived not as dominated through conquest, nor as inferior in terms of wealth or political power, but as an anterior stage in the history of the species, in this unidirectional path” (Lugones 2007, 192). In other words, when training forwards an understanding of gender that fails to account for its imbrications with race, it erases colonial difference, thereby leaving unchallenged a discursive production of peacekeeping nations as inherently superior.

### ***Sexual violence and martial force***

Facilitated by othered and racialized understandings of sexual violence, peacekeeper gender training draws on martial logics to frame the issue as an operational military problem. In a training course I observed in the Nordic region, a trainer presented a slide that read “conflict-related [sexual and gender-based violence] is used by our adversaries as: command and control; strategic communication; and biological weapon/force generation.” He explained that rape is a reward for soldiers and thus a feature of the “command and control structure” of warring groups. Further, it is used as “strategic communication” to strike fear in civilians and send a message of control to adversaries. Finally, the spread of HIV/AIDS through rape is a “biological weapon,” whereas rape is used as a coercive recruitment strategy, hence

supporting “force generation.” Another instructor of this same course summarized: “Armed terrorist groups are using an operational gender perspective to achieve their political and military goals.”

By couching their explanation of sexual violence in military terminology, these trainers explain that military peacekeepers should care about the phenomenon because it poses a martial problem. The training then proposes a number of military responses. The emphasis is on reporting instances of conflict-related sexual violence through the military chain of command, but a number of more proactive responses, ones that involve physical action, are also suggested. These involve devising early warning mechanisms such as establishing communication channels between the civilian population and the peacekeeping force. They further include preventative measures, such as visible patrolling to deter attacks. Importantly, they position military actors as ready to intervene with force in the event of an attack. In other words, they render the problem of sexual violence as one that is amenable to martial solutions. This framing of sexual violence is bolstered by an insistence—articulated in the language of hegemonic masculinity—that in order to effectively address the problem, peacekeepers must present as “tough guys” with a “robust posture” (see, e.g., Cammaert 2019, 90). In this way, gender training serves martial logics and is implicated in domesticating the question of gender to the epistemic frames of racialized and militarized peacekeeping.

It may be tempting to conclude that the deployment of gender to inscribe racialized difference and to justify the use of martial force involves the co-optation of the concept, decoupling it from more radical feminist projects of decolonization and demilitarization. Such a conclusion is of course not wrong in the sense that many feminist activists and scholars take exception to these developments. At the same time, however, they point to the need to carefully delineate what is meant by co-optation, insofar as these dynamics also point to the coextensiveness of Western feminism with imperial politics: the *amenability* of feminism to serve martial politics.

### **From transformative ambition to small subversions**

My account of gender training so far exposes it as a co-opted practice and affirms its amenability to bolstering martial politics. Where, then, does this leave feminist political strategizing? Should gender training be consigned to a scrap heap of failed feminist causes? Perhaps not. What is palpable in many accounts of feminist co-optation is a sense of transformation as being “inadequate, stalled, or ‘as yet’ incomplete” (Zalewski 2010, 7). There is a sense, in other words, that transformation could be achieved with more time

and effort. This suggestion that gender mainstreaming practices can be recuperated also persists in the sphere of international peace and security. A number of accounts in this field hold that transformative change is yet possible because, while current practices leave much to be desired, they nonetheless “open doors” (Deiana and McDonagh 2018, 46) for further engagement, providing feminist “footholds” in these institutions (Otto 2014, 157). Indeed, some accounts of gender-training initiatives make a hopeful case that institutional transformation is beginning (see, e.g., Brown 2020). The belief in the perfectibility of current efforts is communicated through analyses that posit that progress is not linear and systematic or that weigh the relative costs of co-optation against steps toward transformation (de Jong and Kimm 2017, 191–93; Deiana and McDonagh 2018, 47). These hopeful accounts of incremental change leave unchallenged the binary terms of the debate: *either* gender training co-opts feminist concepts and thus fails its politics *or* initiatives like training evidence incremental transformation.

This binary structure of the debate leads, of course, to an impasse, because such steps toward transformation are notoriously difficult to quantify. The account of incremental change is unable to offer a guarantee of a meaningfully different future. In response to this impasse, and in a bid to push feminist thinking and strategizing further, scholars such as Otto (2014) and Catherine Eschle and Bice Maiguashca (2018) call for restructuring the binary terms of thinking around co-optation and transformation. It is this proposal to rethink the dichotomy that my analysis of the politics of gender training responds to. In this task, I take inspiration from critical feminist and postcolonial scholarship. Most critical accounts of peacekeeping remain unconvinced by the proposition that gender mainstreaming will radically or meaningfully transform militaries along a cosmopolitan-minded logic, pointing instead to the dexterity of power and how institutions of governance are able to fold in calls for transformation while maintaining existing relations of oppression (Väyrynen 2004; Whitworth 2004). However, this is not to say that these critiques always or necessarily amount to advocating for disavowal or disengagement from peacekeeping practices. Indeed, Sherene Razack concludes her scathing depiction of Canadian peacekeeping as “the new imperialism” with the concession: “This does not mean that we should stay at home when genocides are in progress. . . . We must go, but *how* we go is critical” (2004, 150, 164). At this juncture, it is useful to consider the function of critique as a productive practice. Homi Bhabha argues: “The language of critique is effective not because it keeps forever separate the terms of the master and the slave [the feminist and the imperialist?] . . . but to the extent to which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor*

*the other*, properly alienates our political expectations, and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics” (1994, 37).

Reading postcolonial feminist critiques of peacekeeping with the help of Bhabha’s thought, it is evident to me that this body of literature does not advocate total disengagement, even while it does not embrace claims of transformation according to the institutional logics of peacekeeping or gender mainstreaming. Rather, this body of work identifies possibilities for engagement precisely through exploiting the ambivalences of hegemonic discourses; by seeking to identify spaces where dissident voices can be heard and adding “an element that celebrates uncertainty and multiplicity” (Väyrynen 2004, 140) as well as identifying opportunities for “subversion from within” (Jauhola 2010, 45). In sum, the critical literature on peacekeeping alerts us to the dangers involved in deploying feminist knowledge in martial peacekeeping contexts at the same time as it gestures toward the political potential of critical engagement.

To develop this mode of critical engagement, I argue for the need to move away from the binary choice that the concept of transformation presents us with. Rather than looking for evidence of cumulative, incremental change—Marysia Zalewski importantly asks whether we can even “(yet) *imagine* [such] seismic changes?” (2010, 7; emphasis added)—I argue that gender training contains the ambivalence characteristic of colonial discourses. I propose two analytical moves, inspired by queer (and) postcolonial feminist critique, to reorient modes of thinking about feminist strategizing. First, I argue for paying analytical attention to the ways in which gender training exposes the ambivalence at the heart of hegemonic discourses. Second, I propose to craft analyses that attend to the political worth of subversive modes of political engagement that do not necessarily promise transformed futures. In this section, I trace how the ambivalences of co-opted gender knowledge produce moments of disruption that menace the logics of coloniality and martiality, gesturing at how “the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses enables a form of subversion” (Bhabha 1994, 160). To that end, I first note the ambivalence that becomes apparent in conflict-related sexual violence training and then consider the ways in which some gender trainers actively exploit these ambivalences in a strategy I characterize as “small subversions.” Notably, these moments of (what I argue are subversive) discontinuity do not amount to a progressive program of teleological transformation but suggest instead a messier political terrain that does not easily lend itself to pronouncing that one or the other political vision has prevailed.

### **Ambivalence**

In my account of co-optation, I outlined how the ways in which sexual violence is taught to peacekeepers rely on logics of racialized othering and frame

the problem as one that is amenable to the use of force. However, the training reality is more complex than the story I have laid out so far, as the intersubjective process of knowledge production invariably produces tension and negotiation. First, the othering of sexual violence and those who commit or experience it is rarely complete. In the same course where some participants reported that they had learned that “different cultures behave differently,” other trainees said instead: “What I have learned was a reminder that the world is not [a] very nice place to live, especially for female persons,” coupled with the admission that discussing sexual violence “made me ashamed to be a man.” These utterances suggest that the trainee in question is somehow complicit, through his manhood, in these acts of violence. Such meaning-making processes are not so much implicated in othering the problem as they are indicative of epistemic efforts to situate the peacekeeper self in the same moral universe as the “peace-kept.” Consequently, participants raised questions about sexual exploitation and abuse, arguing that it fell on a continuum of harms experienced by the local population, and, at the very least, their responsibility as peacekeepers was to ensure that they did not exacerbate harm. When an instructor at the course I observed in East Africa attempted to establish the separation of sexual exploitation and abuse, on the one hand, and conflict-related sexual violence, on the other, one participant objected, arguing: “It cannot be that we encourage troops to violate the local population while we claim to protect them from abuse committed among themselves!” In these ways, training participants exposed the contradictions inherent in the training discourse.

Further, many participants communicated a desire to help and to support victims of sexual violence in ways that exceeded their military mandate and the forms of martial action it prescribes. Military medics questioned why they were not provided postexposure prophylaxis to administer to rape victims, only to be told that their mandate was restricted to providing medical care to peacekeepers, not the local population. Some trainers recounted stories of encountering situations where “the right choice tactically” was not “the right choice morally” and subsequently volunteering their own time and personal funds to charitable projects and care of victims “because I felt guilty . . . the lesson . . . is to not get emotionally attached, but that’s impossible.” The peacekeepers’ questions and stories exposed, in other words, the limits of martial action and communicated their desire to transcend these limitations. In one such conversation during a training session, a participant wondered if what they could do was so limited, why was the UN investing so much money in sending tens of thousands of troops to conflict zones, and whether that money would not in fact be better spent on providing economic, medical, and psychosocial support to conflict-affected populations. In asking this

question, the participant unwittingly echoed Sandra Whitworth's (2004, 186) provocative call to send "not platoons of warriors but contingents of doctors, feminists, linguists, and engineers; regiments of construction workers and carpenters; armies of midwives, cultural critics, anthropologists, and social workers; battalions of artists, musicians, poets, writers, and social critics." The ambivalence of the training discourse on sexual violence therefore produced moments of instability for that same discourse, productive of new questions that expose the uncertain foundations on which it is premised.

### ***Subversion***

The subversive potential of gender knowledge in martial institutions did not arise solely out of spontaneous questioning by training participants but at times was purposefully cultivated by trainers themselves. While some of the gender trainers I observed and spoke with actively distanced themselves from feminism, others embraced the term (Holvikivi 2019). Trainers who saw their work as motivated by feminist commitments often sought precisely to resist some of the othering dynamics of gender training I described in the previous section. As one gender trainer explained to me: "People like talking about gender when it's 'over there,' they like to talk about gender inequality in a faraway conflict-affected country. But when you talk about how actually their own . . . understandings of gender—their identities, gender relations—influence their work; how there's power imbalances in the relations they're in with partners or local contacts; I mean that's when it gets really uncomfortable." Rather than shying away from this type of "uncomfortable" knowledge, this trainer and others sought instead to "always try and get [trainees] to connect with a personal experience." Their training practices, in other words, were characterized by an insistence on engaging with uncomfortable knowledges, including exploring questions of power and privilege, reminiscent of similar practices advocated in the field of feminist pedagogy (Boler 1999; Cornwall 2016; Ferguson 2019a).

In practice, these pedagogies took various shapes. Many trainers facilitated exercises where they asked training participants to reflect on how they understood the relationship between being a man or a woman, the military, and the exercise of violence. Some took creative approaches, such as asking trainees to judge a fictional story as a way of exposing how ideas about appropriate gendered behavior inform our interpretive processes.<sup>5</sup> In a few instances, trainers explicitly spoke back to colonial discourses. At a training held in West Africa, I observed a session on gender and security sector reform. Training on this topic in institutions of global governance tends to focus on political

<sup>5</sup> See "the King and Queen" exercise (Pepper 2012, 44–45).



challenges and technocratic solutions in an ahistorical narrative where the need for security sector reform is premised on the assumed mismanagement and/or incompetence in countries in need of reform (Kunz 2014; Hudson 2016). In this particular training, a West African trainer discussed the establishment of security sector institutions in the region in the context of colonial rule and argued for the need to reform institutions that were built to serve the interests of the “colonial masters” into institutions that would serve the people.

In mobilizing these kinds of feminist pedagogical strategies to counter the othering of gendered violence and to expose the coloniality underpinning structures of power, these gender trainers were engaging in pedagogical practices that I characterize as small subversions. I privilege the term *subversive* over *transformative* in an effort to signal that these strategies do not necessarily articulate a coherent demand for a transformed future, nor are they fully resistant in the sense that they engage with rather than against the project of gender training. When, in interviews, I asked trainers how they would define success in their pedagogical projects, few volunteered a vision of a transformed future, preferring to focus instead on the present. As one trainer explained: “Success for me is not a complete, total, world-changed thing; I’m happy to see little steps along the way.” Another trainer noted that his goal was to cultivate an awareness of gender dynamics in the everyday lives of participants: “Once you see it in your daily life, you can’t stop seeing it everywhere.” This pedagogical desire maps onto Sara Ahmed’s account of the development of feminist consciousness: “once you become a person who notices sexism and racism, it is hard to unbecome that person” (2017, 32). This is not a pedagogical project that lends itself easily to measurable learning outcomes articulated as new skills acquired or attitudes demonstrated—as Judith Butler reminds us, “subversiveness is the kind of effect that *resists calculation*” (1993, 29). Rather, it is a complex and often messy project that prompts those involved in training to see their being-in-the-world differently, that opens space to consider uncomfortable knowledges. I characterize these subversions as *small* because they are less a program for radical, foundation-shifting change and more a series of moments of instability for hegemonic discourses.

### **Conclusion: Practicing paradoxical politics**

Can there be life without transcendence? Politics without the dream of perfectibility?

—Homi Bhabha (1994, 88)

In the preceding sections, I have sought to demonstrate that gender training for peacekeepers is a practice that exposes the amenability of feminist concepts to serve colonial thinking and martial logics and that it simultaneously creates subversive moments of instability for these same logics. I have argued that such subversiveness should be understood as something distinct from transformation—it is not a political practice that promises to transcend the problems of co-optation or perfect the peacekeeping enterprise. This produces an ambivalent account of what gender training means for feminist politics. Joan Scott notes that the technical definition of a paradox is “a proposition that is both true and false at the same time” (1996, 4). From the point of view of feminist politics, gender training poses a paradox: it is both good and bad feminist politics at the same time. What, then, does this mean for political strategizing when it comes to gender training? Under the conditions of liberal thought, a paradox is a “political condition of achievement perpetually undercut . . . a state in which political strategizing itself is paralyzed” (Brown 2000, 239). However, feminist thinkers from a wide range of theoretical traditions and who examine different problematics in the world have sought to challenge this mode of liberal thought, and I would like to conclude by thinking with them about what types of (dis)engagements with paradoxical pedagogical projects we can envision.

In her examination of feminist engagements with peacekeeping and Security Council politics more broadly, Otto (2014) sees a need to move beyond stories of victory and danger, to disinvest from progress narratives in favor of a politics of the present. Her proposition is helpful for thinking about the politics of gender training and can be productively explored with the support of queer feminist thinking about futurity. This is a mode of thought that requires a certain disinvestment from the demand that feminism serve “as a future-producing epistemology and politics” (Wiegman 2004, 164; see also Stern and Zalewski 2009). In so doing, it allows us to attend to the subversive potential of feminist politics in the historical present. If we disinvest from transformation as being *the* positivist criterion for being politically worthwhile, we can attend to the political worth of resistant or subversive politics in the present. I argue that subversion *is* worthwhile from an epistemic stance that values the potential of exploiting the ambivalences of hegemonic discourses to produce moments of instability. After all, every moment of enunciation of a hegemonic discourse is, as Bhabha reminds us, also a moment of instability for that discourse. Further, he continues: “Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the content of another culture. . . . It is the effect of the ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses” (1994, 158). Subversion in this context is therefore not a question of

producing an alternative future in the form of a regendered military or a reliably benevolent peacekeeping enterprise, nor is it about a refusal to engage with these structures tout court. Rather, it is a form of action within the rules of dominant discourses that involves the continued labor of producing forms of engagement “that are less amenable to institutional capture” (Otto 2014, 165).

Pointedly, in arguing for feminist analyses to attend to the political potential of small subversions, I am not suggesting that we ignore the very real and worrisome political purchase that gender acquires when subjected to the epistemic frames of powerful institutions. Rather, I am suggesting that there is a need to cultivate a form of attachment that is “optimistically cruel,” following Robyn Wiegman (2016, 91). Lauren Berlant famously described “cruel optimism” as a relation in which “something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (2011, 1). Wiegman (2016, 91) reworks this concept, suggesting that when we are optimistically cruel, “our ongoing attachment to an object . . . is only possible because we know it will not deliver what we most want from it. In this context the cruelty of our optimism—to be attached to an object that ‘impedes the aim’ that brought us to it—is a potent form of inoculation against the threat of institutional complicity.” In other words, it is precisely the recognition that the concept of gender can and does serve the purposes of imperial politics that should be the point of departure, because it is this recognition that cultivates vigilance against complicity.

Read in this light, the amenability of the concept of gender to serve objectionable politics does not mean that gender training—or the concept itself—need be consigned to a scrap heap of lost feminist causes. Rather, I suggest that there *is* political worth in tracking where and how gender travels; in continuing to contest what political work the concept can and cannot be made to do. I therefore identify political potential in continuing to cultivate subversive pedagogies and seeking to identify how they can be practiced. Such politics must not come at the price of ignoring the very real dangers of co-optation but must instead be grounded in an ongoing recognition that such projects are always messy, imprecise, and corruptible. My hope is that this proposition finds traction in broader feminist debates over engagement with powerful institutions. The proposition aligns itself with calls from queer and postcolonial feminist scholars to take up the task of contending with paradox. The stakes are clear: to ignore the capacity of feminist concepts to do epistemic violence would be obviously irresponsible, but to write off all politically objectionable developments as doomed and to be disavowed risks ceding spaces and concepts that may offer political potential in the present.

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