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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Coming of age within ‘implosion’

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Abstract

In a recent article, Maria Eriksson Baaz and Swati Parashar¹ trace the continued salience of Eurocentrism in critical International Relations (IR), demonstrating how the ‘master’s outlook’ continues to stifle the study of global politics; they ultimately encourage an unsettling and even implosion of the discipline. Starting from this proposed ‘implosion’ of critical IR, this article reflects on our hopes, as two current PhD candidates and one early career researcher in global politics, for teaching and learning in this future world. We begin by reflecting on our own complicity in reproducing the Western-centrism of the discipline and consider how this discomfort can be used productively. The article then considers the radical potential of the classroom and the necessity of empathetic, collaborative inquiry to the future of the discipline of global politics. We advocate for an IR which is imaginative, relational, messy, and vulnerable – and are hopeful about how this may animate a meaningful and sustainable implosion. Embracing our discomfort and the possibility of failure, we hope to contribute to the ongoing ‘unsettling’ of academia from the standpoint of incipient feminist scholars and hopeful early-career teachers.

Keywords: critical IR; Eurocentrism; feminist IR; pedagogy; reflexivity

Introduction

This article is our attempt, as three postgraduate and early career researchers, to make sense of the International Relations (IR) we have been taught, taught ourselves, grown up in, and researched. Primarily, however, it is an envisioning of the future of IR; trying to navigate possibilities for its evolution ‘post-implosion’. Initially spurred on by witnessing the military withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, and our anxieties exacerbated by the worsening climate crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, we began to interrogate what we were taught to be true about IR – both in content and as a discipline. This article thus draws on and builds upon increasing calls to acknowledge IR’s both gendered and raced assumptions and practices and contributes a junior-scholar perspective on what implosion signifies for the next 50 years of the discipline.

In a forum for *International Politics Review*, Maria Eriksson Baaz and Swati Parashar called upon International Relations scholars to challenge ‘the established canons of critical IR, moving away from IR itself, letting it unsettle and implode.’² Critiquing the Eurocentrism of both conventional and critical IR, they explain how centring the master’s ‘outlook’ limits the discipline’s ability to not only introduce alternative voices, but also to critically reimagine the ‘global’. As three female, white

¹ Maria Eriksson Baaz and Swati Parashar, ‘The master’s “outlook” shall never dismantle the master’s house’, *International Politics Reviews*, 9 (2021), pp. 286–91.

² *Ibid.*, p. 291.

postgraduate students and early career researchers (ECRs) based in Europe and navigating our mid-to-late twenties, the so-called War on Terror has undeniably shaped how we see this ‘global’. In both a traditional and (later) critical capacity, our education of, and exposure to, world politics has been couched in the master’s ‘outlook’ to the extent that certain realities of and thinking about IR are alien to us. Now we ask ourselves: what could this ‘implosion’ look like? How might this challenge, or be challenged by, our discomfort? And what are the implications of this for the study of IR?

This article is not a reckoning with the parts of IR that we have unlearned, neither is it a plea for pity, for the discomfort we feel is both relative and ultimately reflexively useful.³ Instead, this is a reflection on coming of age within implosion, and an imagining of what could be. We aim to locate ourselves within this shifting academic environment and ask a wider audience what a post-implosion IR could look like for students, present and future. Responses and reactions to this question will vary, and we acknowledge that the notion of implosion may invoke fear, anxiety, or apathy among our colleagues at different career stages and in different locations. Discussions about a post-implosion IR necessarily involve difficult conversations that query the distribution of power and privilege across the discipline. This article is thus intended as an attempt to make space for these conversations, to convey anxiety and vulnerability, in the hope that this may make possible a sustained and meaningful implosion.

This article is structured in two parts. We begin by welcoming and responding to Eriksson Baaz and Parashar’s reflection on ‘implosion’, looking specifically at how this implosion challenges us to confront our complicity in IR’s Eurocentrism. This takes us into a discussion on reflexivity and Wanda Pillow’s call to approach reflexive practice from a position of discomfort.⁴ Following this, we consider what post-implosion IR might look like, reflecting particularly on the radical potential of the classroom and the necessity of caring, collaborative inquiry. Ultimately, we argue that to sustain an ‘implored’ IR, one which is feminist, decolonial, and uncomfortably reflexive, we must see the strength in our vulnerability.

Sitting with implosion

‘The master’s “outlook” shall never dismantle the master’s house’

In an effort to turn attention to the field of critical IR, its scholars and canons, Eriksson Baaz and Parashar draw upon Audre Lorde’s influential essay to demonstrate how the supposed ‘critical’ has ended up (re)producing the very same Eurocentrism it set out to criticise and challenge.⁵ By seeking to criticise mainstream IR, critical IR (including its various manifestations of post-colonial, decolonial, feminist, and others) has thereby departed from accepted understandings within mainstream IR – without unpacking its underlying assumptions – and has produced a continued centring of explicit ‘Westernness’. Eriksson Baaz and Parashar argue that this has resulted in, and follows the trajectory of, a twofold development. On one hand, it neglects scholarship and knowledge of the Global South (implying a certain passivity) through ‘bloating the power and influence of “Western actors”’, ultimately reproducing an “Other” without both history and agency,⁶ while on the other hand, it fails at appropriately ‘recognising and querying into changes in the global landscape during the last 20 years’,⁷ overlooking the reorganisation of global power relations, the reversing of trends (for example in migration patterns), and increasing South–South cooperation. In order to counter, and eventually redirect, these developments, the field of critical IR would benefit from more self-reflection and opportunities to ‘move beyond the established canons of critical IR’⁸ – leading to an

³Wanda Pillow, ‘Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research’, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 16:2 (2003), pp. 175–96.

⁴Ibid., p. 187.

⁵Eriksson Baaz and Parashar, ‘The master’s “outlook”’, quotation in heading from p. 286.

⁶Ibid., p. 287.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., pp. 290–1.

unsettling and implosion of IR itself. In this vein, Eriksson Baaz and Parashar conclude by asking: what would that implosion look like?

While we may not have definite answers – and answers themselves would somewhat negate the nature of this implosion – we certainly do have reactions to this proposal. Eriksson Baaz and Parashar suggest several ways in which we may contribute to such an implosion: questioning our locations, decolonising our minds, showing curiosity towards changes in the global landscape, and above all ‘being vigilant about our own positionality, commitment and complicity’.⁹ These are not easy tasks – nor should they be. Our discomfort stems directly from our complicity with this ‘Western’-centrism; our physical and intellectual security are built upon, and feel the daily advantage of, geographic and epistemic privilege. Challenging this complicity will inevitably involve immense, nerve-striking processes of unlearning. Nonetheless, the feeling of engaging with a field at a time when there are calls for an implosion is exhilarating. For example, calls to decolonise¹⁰ or globalise IR stress the need to recognise and remedy histories of epistemic silencing by broadening how we know and do IR.¹¹ While these two critical strands engage in epistemological and methodological disagreement, the desire to diversify the discipline comes from a shared understanding that IR has for too long centred the Western experience.¹²

As such, an implosion feels not only long overdue, but as we try to figure out how we approach and exist within the field of IR, it is welcome. It is precisely the discomfort and potential messiness guaranteed by an implosion that supplies us with hope – and motivation. The possibility of a field characterised not by the hangover of Eurocentrism, but by a ‘genuine spirit of critical enquiry’,¹³ fills us with the promise of critical IR – or whatever it may be called – as a field that seeks to genuinely inquire about and make sense of all the phenomena that surround us. If this means sitting and getting comfortable with our discomfort, that is what we shall do. For the rest of this section, we address the practice of reflexivity in feminist IR as at once a source of suspicion, discomfort, failure, and promise.

Getting reflexively uncomfortable

Reflecting upon the role of reflexivity as a methodological tool, Wanda Pillow warns of the ‘modernist seduction’ of reflexive practice in research which addresses the politics of difference:

Self-reflexivity can in this way perform a modernist seduction – promising release from your tension, voyeurism, and ethnocentrism – release you from your discomfort with the problematics of representation through a transcendent clarity.¹⁴

The uncomfortable academic, she contends, takes to reflexivity as Catholics take to confession: a chance to admit sins, triggering a ‘catharsis of self-awareness’ which can then be channelled into overcoming and eventually arriving at peace with difference.¹⁵ This, however, too often leads us

⁹Ibid, p. 290.

¹⁰Meera Sabaratnam, ‘IR in dialogue ... but can we change the subjects? A typology of decolonising strategies for the study of world politics’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 781–803; Somdeep Sen, ‘Decolonising to reimagine International Relations’ [special issue], *Review of International Studies*, 49:3 (2023), pp. 339–45.

¹¹Amitav Acharya, ‘Global International Relations (IR) and regional worlds: A new agenda for International Studies’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 58:4 (2014), pp. 647–59; Eun Yong-Soo, ‘Global IR through dialogue’, *The Pacific Review*, 32:2 (2019), pp. 131–49; Shabnam Holliday and Edward Westnidge, ‘Towards a post-imperial and Global IR?: Revisiting Khatami’s Dialogue among Civilisations’, *Review of International Studies* (2023), pp. 1–20.

¹²Melody Fonseca, ‘Global IR and Western dominance: Moving forward or Eurocentric entrapment?’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 48:1 (2019), pp. 45–59; Felix Anderl and Antonia Witt, ‘Problematising the global in Global IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 49:1 (2020), pp. 32–57; Isaac Kamola, ‘IR, the critic, and the world: From reifying the discipline to decolonising the university’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 48:3 (2020), pp. 245–70.

¹³Eriksson Baaz and Parashar, ‘The master’s “outlook”’, p. 290.

¹⁴Pillow, ‘Confession, catharsis, or cure?’, p. 186–7.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 181.

towards reproducing the familiar; the binaries upon which we have come to know ourselves and the 'other'. In our journeys of 'self-scrutiny'¹⁶ we (unwittingly) produce the very limitations we set out to challenge. Nonetheless, she does not see this potential slippage into self-indulgence as reason to abandon the practice. She proposes, instead, that we interrupt 'comfortable reflexivity'¹⁷ by continuously interrogating and remaining accountable to the politics of these familiar binaries. As Cynthia Enloe avows in the 'Afterword' of *Researching War: Feminist Methods, Ethics and Politics*:

Exercising genuine reflexivity, nevertheless, should not be easy. It should not be comfortable. Feminists, though, have never promised that placing a feminist consciousness at the core of our work in and on war and its aftermath would ensure comfort.¹⁸

In this vein, before we unpack how 'reflexivities of discomfort'¹⁹ have helped us to learn and teach amidst the implosion of IR, we briefly turn to the concept (and failure) of reflexivity in feminist research.

According to Berger, reflexivity is defined as the:

process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome.²⁰

As a guiding principle²¹ and a 'collective responsibility' of feminist researchers,²² reflexivity urges us to build 'attentiveness to the power of epistemology, of boundaries and relationships into the practice of our research.'²³ It requires a measure of understanding of our own impact on the research context, appreciating power differentials as relative and consequently accounting for how our privileges and experiences shape the research process. Researchers must make a 'commitment to *destabilising our epistemology*,'²⁴ appreciating the relationality of knowledge production by accounting for our own relationships to the research contexts.

As feminist researchers, then, reflexivity means asking questions about how we ask questions, revealing and responding to the imbalances of power that seemingly 'go-without-saying' in the study of international politics.²⁵ It means letting go of the expectation of achieving stable knowledge or unfettered truth to see our work as ongoing, negotiated meaning-making. In this sense, Christine Sylvester introduces the idea of 'empathetic cooperation' as a feminist method of knowing

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁸ Cynthia Enloe, 'Afterword: Being reflexively feminist shouldn't be easy', in Annick Wibben (ed.), *Researching War: Feminist Methods, Ethics and Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 258–59 (p. 259).

¹⁹ Pillow, 'Confession, catharsis, or cure?'

²⁰ Roni Berger, 'Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research', *Qualitative Research*, 15:2 (2015), pp. 219–34 (p. 220).

²¹ Rebecca Campbell, Adrienne E. Adams, Sharon M. Wasco, Courtney E. Ahrens, and Tracy Sefl, 'Training interviewers for research on sexual violence: A qualitative study of rape survivors' recommendations for interview practice', *Violence against Women*, 15:5 (2009), pp. 595–617; Amanda Burgess-Proctor, 'Methodological and ethical issues in feminist research with abused women: Reflections on participants' vulnerability and empowerment', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 48 (2015), pp. 124–34.

²² Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True, 'Reflexivity in practice: Power and ethics in feminist research on International Relations', *International Studies Review*, 10:4 (2008), pp. 693–707 (p. 705).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 705.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 695, emphasis in original.

²⁵ Linda Åhäll, 'Affect as methodology: Feminism and the politics of emotion', *International Political Sociology*, 12:1 (2018), pp. 36–52 (p. 42).

and doing IR, in which the situated and shifting perspectives of disenfranchised communities are taken seriously. Empathetic cooperation, she explains, is a:

process of positional slippage that occurs when one listens seriously to the concerns, fears, and agendas of those one is unaccustomed to heeding when building social theory.²⁶

This ‘positional slippage’ decentres the positionality of both the researcher and the research subject, reimagining this encounter as a negotiation between differently placed knowledges and histories. As such, Sylvester asks us to interact with those deemed ‘other’ in ways which are relationally rather than reactively autonomous, recognising our similarities while appreciating ‘the differences that mark independent identity.’²⁷ In this way, we can avoid ‘cannibalizing’²⁸ those we research by presuming the ability to know their experience absolutely. So too can we overcome the urge to ‘otherise.’²⁹ Instead, we must renegotiate our self-identity to account for our own mobilities and impermanence.

Sylvester thus encourages us to sit with the tensions at the heart of ‘comfortable’ theorising, challenging the idea that there is a fixed or stable starting point for knowledge production.³⁰ Sungju Park-Kang’s ‘utmost listening’³¹ builds on this approach; they identify ‘utmost listening’ as the ‘preparation process’ for achieving empathetic cooperation insofar as it involves listening with attention and openness, resisting the temptation to focus on one’s own rationale for listening, and thus exposing oneself to new ways of seeing the world. And yet, as Naomi Head observes, ‘questions of empathy in lived experience do not fall neatly into the neuroscientific, psychological, or philosophical accounts of empathy but are messy and complex.’³² A normative commitment to seeing similarities in difference – and its associated Enlightenment-era humanism – is not a substitute for comprehensively interrogating the interpersonal and structural power relations embedded in the research encounter. Particularly in post-colonial scholarship, empathy has often been seen as a hollow, moralising accompaniment to neoliberal and neocolonial politics, nullifying concerns for systemic inequalities with excessive emotional identification.³³ Employing empathy uncritically in reflexive research can serve to reify social differences and sustain hierarchies of power. As Enloe explains, however, reflexivity is ‘distinctly feminist’ in its centring of accountability: “‘Be reflexive early’”, she advises, ‘because others are relying on you to take extra care when portraying their lives.’³⁴ It is imperative, then, that we are both mindful of our positionality and engaged in challenging the workings of power upon which this positionality rests. Yet this requirement of accountability can inspire paralysis when the researcher is confronted with the ‘impossibility’

²⁶Christine Sylvester, ‘Empathetic cooperation: A feminist method for IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 23:2 (1994), pp. 315–34 (p. 317).

²⁷Christine Sylvester, *Feminist International Relations: An Unfinished Journey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 120.

²⁸Ibid, p. 119.

²⁹Sylvester, ‘Empathetic cooperation’, p. 326.

³⁰See also Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Dorothy E. Smith, ‘Comment on Hekman’s “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited”’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 22:2 (1997), pp. 392–8; Sandra Harding, ‘Standpoint theories: Productively controversial’, *Hypatia*, 24:4 (2009), pp. 192–200.

³¹Sungju Park-Kang, ‘Utmost listening: Feminist IR as a foreign language’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 861–77 (p. 875).

³²Naomi Head, ‘A politics of empathy: Encounters with empathy in Israel and Palestine’, *Review of International Studies*, 42:1 (2016), pp. 95–113 (p. 99).

³³Carolyn Pedwell, ‘Affect at the margins: Alternative empathies in a small place’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 8 (2013), pp. 18–26; Carolyn Pedwell, ‘De-colonising empathy: Thinking affect transnationally’, *Samyukta: A Journal of Womens Studies*, 16:1 (2016), pp. 27–49; Grant Marlier and Neta C. Crawford, ‘Incomplete and imperfect institutionalisation of empathy and altruism in the “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine’, *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 5:4 (2013), pp. 397–422; Basma Hajir and Kevin Kester, ‘Toward a decolonial praxis in Critical Peace Education: Postcolonial insights and pedagogic possibilities’, *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 39 (2020), pp. 515–32; María José Méndez, ‘Acuerpar: The decolonial feminist call for embodied solidarity’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 49:1 (2023), pp. 37–61.

³⁴Enloe, ‘Afterword’, p. 258.

of the task at hand, when the fear of ‘failing’ those we research becomes too strong.³⁵ Feminist and post-colonial scholars have long challenged the epistemic violence that occurs when the act of representation, however seemingly good-natured, damages a group’s ability to speak and be heard.³⁶ Perhaps most famously, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?*³⁷ details how a rhetoric of protecting Indian women justified their socio-legal silencing by British colonisers. Spivak’s work has become a jumping-off point for many others attempting to make sense of silencing practices, highlighting the ‘pernicious ignorance’ that leads some to ‘fail’ to engage reciprocally with marginalised groups.³⁸ This ‘cognitive failure’ becomes ‘sanctioned ignorance’ insofar as academic ‘successes’ are frequently born from such silences.³⁹

And yet not being afraid to fail – that is, engaging reciprocally in full knowledge of its impossibility – is central for truly reflexive feminist work. Spivak urges us to work ‘with no guarantees,’⁴⁰ for ‘coming to terms with the Other’s difference is precisely reckoning with the impossibility of knowing it, accepting that it exceeds our understanding or expectations.’⁴¹ This is reflected in Jasmine Syedullah’s ‘congregational care,’ which urges us to lean into our:

lived experience, embrace an improvisational orientation, and understand the essential and deeply generative space created when we admit that we do not know with certainty how to undo the world that creates structural conditions of suffering for most people, most of the time.⁴²

Sylvester’s empathetic cooperation embraces this impossibility by suggesting that feminist researchers become ‘more comfortable with chronic borderland statuses’ and the ‘homelessness’ that comes with destabilising subjectivity.⁴³ We can then remain open to respectful, if politically difficult, negotiations of meaning-making that engage productively with seemingly incommensurable difference.⁴⁴ For Kamala Visweswaran,⁴⁵ too, recognising the possibilities of failure is the first step

³⁵Ewa Maczynska, ‘Reproducing the European gaze through reflexivity: The limits of calling out failures’, in Katarina Kušič and

Jakub Záhora (eds), *Fieldwork as Failure Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2020), pp. 116–27.

³⁶For example, Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair, *Power, Postcolonialism and International Relations: Reading Race, Gender and Class* (London: Routledge, 2004); Anna Agathangelou and Lily H. M. Ling, *Transforming World Politics: From Empire to Multiple Worlds* (London: Routledge, 2009); Marysia Zalewski and Anne Sisson Runyan, ‘Taking feminist violence seriously in feminist International Relations’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15:3 (2013), pp. 293–313; Claudia Brunner, ‘Conceptualizing epistemic violence: An interdisciplinary assemblage for IR’, *International Politics Review*, 9 (2021), pp. 193–212; Siddharth Tripathi, ‘International Relations and the “Global South”: From epistemic hierarchies to dialogic encounters’, *Third World Quarterly*, 42:9 (2021), pp. 2039–54.

³⁷Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the subaltern speak?’, in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313.

³⁸Kristie Dotson, ‘Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing’, *Hypatia*, 26:2 (2011), pp. 236–57 (p. 238); Ilan Kapoor, ‘Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World “Other”’, *Third World Quarterly*, 25:4 (2004), pp. 627–47; Kiran Grewal, ‘Can the subaltern speak within international law? Women’s rights activism, international legal institutions and the power of “strategic misunderstanding”’, in Nikita Dhawan, Elisabeth Fink, Johanna Leinius, and Rirhandu Mageza-Barthel (eds), *Negotiating Normativity* (Cham: Springer, 2016), pp. 27–44.

³⁹Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987 [2006]), pp. 273–4.

⁴⁰Kapoor, ‘Hyper-self-reflexive development?’, p. 644.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Eva Woodly, Rachael H. Brown, Mara Marin, et al., ‘The politics of care’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20 (2021), pp. 890–925.

⁴³Sylvester, ‘Empathetic cooperation’, pp. 328, 326.

⁴⁴For discussions of empathetic cooperation as a framework for feminist politics of war and foreign policy, respectively, see Laura Sjoberg, *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq: A Feminist Reformulation of Just War Theory* (New York: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2006); and Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Annica Kronsell, ‘Theorising feminist foreign policy’, *International Relations*, 33:1 (2019), pp. 23–39.

⁴⁵Kamala Visweswaran, *Fiction of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

towards accountable feminist research. Building on Spivak,⁴⁶ Visweswaran argues that only when the researcher is ‘shaken’, ‘tripped’, or made uncomfortable by the reality that they will ‘fail’, achieving neither epistemic nor representational success, do they have a chance of making decolonising academic moves.⁴⁷ She thus tasks ‘feminist tricksters’ with rupturing perception and practice of failure, retaining the uncomfortable tension between ‘the desire to know and the desire to represent’ by interrogating the line between ‘fieldwork’ and ‘homework’:⁴⁸

What I urge is rather the acknowledgement of failure through an accountable positioning, one that I will argue takes us homeward rather than away. In this reconstituted feminist project, the practice of failure is pivotal.⁴⁹

As Dana Cuomo and Vanessa Massaro note, even feminist work to destabilise boundaries of ‘the field ... ultimately imply that fieldwork is a physically and temporally bounded experience, distinct from the experience of being home.’⁵⁰ On the contrary, by turning our interrogations homeward, by recognising our homelessness, we can examine the oftentimes uncomfortable, power-laden space between our work and our everyday.

As an antidote, we find Laura Sjoberg’s contribution on failure particularly refreshing.⁵¹ Following Jack Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure*,⁵² Sjoberg contends that ‘seeing critical security studies as failed and failing helps to uncover potential futures for critical security studies.’⁵³ She argues that critical security studies must recognise and embrace failure in order to avoid reproducing the field’s traditional standards, languages, principles, and biases. In so doing, the practice (and failure) of critique could problematise established metrics of success, ultimately facilitating more hopeful and invigorated research:

A critical security studies that walks away from not only traditional standards of success but also the desirability of success could be a critical security studies more honest about, and more comfortable with, its dissonances and contradictions, and more open to its possibilities.⁵⁴

Sjoberg’s reflection on the shortcomings in her own early works – which, she has come to believe, are marred by an inclination towards progressivism and comprehensiveness, unwittingly reproducing the silences and power imbalances she intended to challenge – reveals the importance of regarding critique as fundamentally fragmented and incomplete. Being comfortable with producing work that is messy, incoherent, contradictory, and forever failing offers an escape from the trap of self-indulgence. Reflexivity, then, is best practised as ‘iterated critical failure.’⁵⁵ Building on this, Lydia Cole suggests that we practice ‘productive affective failure’, seeing our perceived ‘failures’ in composure during the research process as offering ‘a renewed knowledge of oneself in the research context’.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, as illustrated in our discussion of empathy above, it is important to consider that addressing the possibility of failure ‘weakly’ and without meaningfully engaging power inequalities

⁴⁶ Spivak, *In Other Worlds*.

⁴⁷ Visweswaran, *Fiction of Feminist Ethnography*, pp. 99–100.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁵⁰ Dana Cuomo and Vanessa Massaro, ‘Boundary-making in feminist research: New methodologies for “intimate insiders”’, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23:1 (2016), pp. 94–106 (p. 96).

⁵¹ Laura Sjoberg, ‘Failure and critique in critical security studies’, *Security Dialogue*, 50:1 (2019), pp. 77–94.

⁵² Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁵³ Sjoberg, ‘Failure and critique’, p. 87.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵⁶ Lydia C. Cole, ‘Tears and laughter: Affective failure and mis/recognition in feminist IR research’, in Katarina Kušić and Jakub Záhora (eds), *Fieldwork as Failure Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2020), pp. 76–89 (p. 78).

can slip into performativity, protecting one from critique while reproducing dominant structures.⁵⁷ Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Xymena Kurowska thus see failure in fieldwork as part of experimentation in research, a ‘productive rupture’ through which we remain cognisant of contingency and our capacity for surprise.⁵⁸ They go on to note, however, that the *privilege* to fail reflects and reproduces academic hierarchies of experience, tenure, or institution, making reflexive work on research failure too often reserved for (and serving) the academic ‘elite’.

In advocating for reflexivities of discomfort, then, Pillow calls for positioning reflexivity as ‘practices of confounding disruptions – at times even a failure of our language and practices.’⁵⁹ She engages with Visweswaran’s distinction between ‘reflexive’ and ‘deconstructive’ ethnography – the former seen as declarative, questioning and then reinstating its authority, and the latter interrogative, attempting ‘to abandon or forfeit its authority, knowing that it is impossible to do so’⁶⁰ – using this⁶¹ to animate her case that leaning into the uncomfortable enables an ongoing critique of the research process as neither simple nor innocent. More than confessional tales and truth-claims, uncomfortable reflexivity brings to the forefront the ethical questions central to doing research. In so doing, it instigates a conversation with the reader which reaches beyond subjects and subjectivity to interrogate ‘reflexivity’s complicit relationship with ethnocentric power and knowledge in qualitative research.’⁶²

Learning to fail

Embracing failure and discomfort as reflexive practice is itself a horribly uncomfortable prospect for PhD students and ECRs. Conditioned to meet deadlines and fit journal templates, to respect marking criteria and assimilate to module guidelines, to meet job specifications, and to anticipate unemployment, failure, in our worlds, has long been narrowly and rigidly defined. Yet, inundated with academic papers, opinion pieces, and X (formerly Twitter) threads reflecting upon today’s ‘unprecedented times’ – coloured by the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the rise of political populism, the Covid-19 pandemic, the worsening of the climate emergency, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the current situation in Gaza, among many other political crisis points – we were left with an uneasy sense of impending failure. Amid this intellectual noise, we collectively realised that the things we had been taught, shaped by the context of ‘post 9/11’ global politics, had not equipped us to respond, engage, or envision the world we are now facing. For years we have been in training, learning how to critique, question, and analyse, but now this critical approach feels inadequate, especially when paired with our feminist desire to act. The possibility of failure, which in our line of work usually entails misrepresentation or misinterpretation, took on a new meaning as we faced what many saw as the cherry on top of the ongoing and ‘dramatic failure’ that

⁵⁷ Michelle Colpean and Meg Tully, ‘Not just a joke: Tina Fey, Amy Schumer, and the weak reflexivity of white feminist comedy’, *Women’s Studies in Communication*, 42:2 (2019), pp. 161–80.

⁵⁸ Berit Bliesman de Guevara and Xymena Kurowska, ‘Building on ruins or patching up the possible? Reinscribing fieldwork failure in IR as a productive rupture’, in Katarina Kušić and Jakub Záhora (eds), *Fieldwork as Failure Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations* (Bristol: E-International Relations, 2020), pp. 163–74.

⁵⁹ Pillow, ‘Confession, catharsis, or cure?’, p. 192.

⁶⁰ Visweswaran, *Fiction of Feminist Ethnography*, p. 79.

⁶¹ Pillow brings Visweswaran in conversation with Lubna Nazir Chaudhry, ‘Researching “my people,” researching myself: Fragments of a reflexive tale’, in Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre and Wanda Pillow (eds), *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Research and Practice in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 96–113; Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, ‘Methodology in the fold and the irruption of transgressive data’, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10:2 (1997), pp. 175–89; Sofia Villenas, ‘The colonizer/colonized Chicana ethnographer: Identity marginalization, and cooptation in the field’, *Harvard Educational Review*, 66 (1996), p. 71131; and Sofia Villenas, ‘This ethnography called my back: Writings of the exotic gaze, “othering” Latina, and recuperating Xicanisma’, in Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre and Wanda Pillow (eds), *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Research and Practice in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 74–95.

⁶² Pillow, ‘Confession, catharsis, or cure?’, p. 192.

was intervention in Afghanistan, the impetus for our thinking around implosion.⁶³ This sting of disillusionment was intensified by the realisation that, despite talk of ‘lessons learned’, the ‘princes’ and ‘soothsayers’ of world affairs had once again failed to account for their own impossibility.⁶⁴

What’s more, while we do recognise the privilege that makes calling for failure possible, we also argue that the current academic system does not really allow for failure. Though some may have more possibilities, or rather safety nets, to fail, the structure itself is not conducive to failure. The ever-present sentiment of ‘publish or perish’, the demands of global university rankings, the need to demonstrate ‘impact’ in easily quantifiable terms, increasing student numbers with little additional support, high teaching loads, and highly competitive job markets mean that most simply do not have the freedom nor time to fail. Further, the rethinking and reformulating that is inbuilt in the process of failing, as well as ‘getting back up again’, requires space for thought, creativity, and reflection – something that is often at the bottom of to-do lists or just not encouraged. There is no room for non-linear progress within the neoliberal university system/academia.

In this vein, we asked ourselves: how might we instil a comfortableness with discomfort and failure into our teaching and learning? How can embracing failure as ever present and essential help us to productively navigate implosion? And how could this contribute to the practice of IR as a discipline and, ultimately, a career choice? In the second half of this piece, we consider these questions by paying closer attention first to the classroom as a radical space in which implosion can manifest. We then focus on the cultivation of caring relationships as fundamental to an ‘imploded’ IR.

What might post-implosion (feminist) IR look like?

Centring the classroom

Understood as ‘academics in training’ while simultaneously being entrusted with the education of others, as PhD students and ECRs we sit uncomfortably between the artificial boundaries placed around the roles of teacher and student. When considering the implosion of IR, it is perhaps this liminality that encouraged us to return to a space in which the discipline feels most familiar and tangible to us, the university classroom. We each have our own experiences of ‘international relations’ outside of formal education, yet it is the seminar rooms, textbooks, and lecture theatres of European universities that have provided us with a common experience of how IR is ‘done’. Given that teaching is one of the uniquely shared experiences of most (if not all) IR scholars, we follow many others in centring the classroom in our calls for change.⁶⁵ Evidently, the lines between

⁶³Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain’s War in Afghanistan* (New York: Random House, 2017); Nandini Archer, ‘Don’t use girls as justification for bombing Afghanistan, again’, *Open Democracy* (17 August 2021), available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dont-use-girls-as-justification-for-bombing-afghanistan-again/>; David Kilcullen and Greg Mills, *The Ledger: Accounting for Failure in Afghanistan* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers, 2021); Henry Kissinger, ‘Henry Kissinger on why America failed in Afghanistan’, *The Economist* (24 August 2021), available at: <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2021/08/25/henry-kissinger-on-why-america-failed-in-afghanistan>; Gareth Price, ‘Why Afghan nation-building was always destined to fail’, *Chatham House* (10 September 2021), available at: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/09/why-afghan-nation-building-was-always-destined-fail>; Rory Stewart, ‘The last days of intervention: Afghanistan and the delusions of maximalism’, *Foreign Affairs*, 100:6 (2021), pp. 60–73.

⁶⁴In a well-known article, John Lewis Gaddis writes of how ‘the abrupt end of the Cold War, an unanticipated hot war in the Persian Gulf, and the sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union astonished almost everyone, whether in government, the academy, the media, or the think tanks’, suggesting that ‘deficiencies persist in the means by which contemporary princes and the soothsayers they employ seek to discern the future course of world affairs’. John Lewis Gaddis, ‘International Relations theory and the end of the Cold War’, *International Security*, 17:3 (1992), pp. 5–58 (p. 5).

⁶⁵For example, see Jonas Hagmann and Thomas J. Biersteker, ‘Beyond the published discipline: Toward a critical pedagogy of International Studies’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:2 (2014), pp. 291–315; Jacqueline de Matos-Ala, ‘Making the invisible, visible: Challenging the knowledge structures inherent in International Relations theory in order to create knowledge plural curricula’, *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 60:1 (2017), pp. 1–18; Aaron Ettinger, ‘Scattered and unsystematic: The taught discipline in the intellectual life of International Relations’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 21 (2020), pp. 338–61; Kelebogile Zvobgo and Meredith Loken, ‘Why race matters in International Relations’, *Foreign Policy* (19

research and pedagogy are blurred; neither exists independent of the other, nor should the structure of this article be interpreted as a privileging of one over the other. Both pedagogy and research are integral to considering what the implosion of IR entails. However, in considering the future of IR, we argue that how the discipline is introduced to those who will occupy this field in 50 years' time – that is, the students who sit in our present-day classrooms – is critical to its implosion. The following section explores what implosion might look like for pedagogy in IR. It begins by engaging with what is taught and draws attention to the importance of introductory courses and their role in disguising the ontological fragility of IR,⁶⁶ thus foreclosing radical reimaginings of the discipline for students present and future. This is then followed by a reflection on the role of 'legitimate' knowledge and how a relational approach to pedagogy can work to unsettle and disrupt the neat ordering processes that ordinarily characterises students' linear socialisation into IR. Acknowledging the limitations of what can be achieved within the constraints of the neoliberal university, we take seriously hooks's assertion that the 'classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy'.⁶⁷

When discussing experiences of our undergraduate and master's studies, we frustratedly exchanged anecdotes about how our introduction to the discipline centred around the Eurocentric 'myths' of 1648 and 1919⁶⁸ and the 'grand paradigms' of Realism, Liberalism, Marxism, and Constructivism.⁶⁹ More unsettling, however, was the realisation that our positions as newly appointed graduate tutors on introductory modules would render us complicit in a specific retelling of IR that naturalises Eurocentric ways of thinking for students present and future, thus perpetuating the already-entrenched inequalities within the academy.⁷⁰ In our desire to resist a neat, path-dependent disciplinary narrative in our practice of IR, we echo numerous voices that have sought to expose the enduring dominance of the Eurocentric, white, male gaze that characterises the academic socialisation of undergraduate and postgraduate IR students internationally.⁷¹ The ontological erasures and hierarchies that are reproduced through these linear and Western retellings of IR are well documented,⁷² which is why the classroom must not be neglected in implosion.

June 2020), available at: {<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/19/why-race-matters-international-relations-ir/>}; Beverly Loke and Catherine Owen, 'Mapping practices and spatiality in IR knowledge production: From detachment to emancipation', *European Journal of International Relations*, 28:1 (2022), pp. 30–57; Maika Sondarjee, 'We are a community of practice, not a paradigm! How to meaningfully integrate gender and feminist approaches in IR syllabi', *International Studies Perspectives* 23:3 (2022), pp. 1–20; Claire Timperley and Kate Schick, 'Hiding in plain sight: Pedagogy and power', *International Studies Perspectives*, 23:2 (2022), pp. 113–28.

⁶⁶Eriksson Baaz and Parashar, 'The master's "outlook".'

⁶⁷bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 12.

⁶⁸Halvard Leira and Benjamin de Carvalho, 'The function of myths in International Relations: Discipline and identity', in Andreas Gofas, Inanna Hamati-Ataya, and Nicholas Onuf (eds), *SAGE Handbook of the History, Sociology and Philosophy of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2018), pp. 222–35.

⁶⁹Wiebke Wemheuer-Vogelaar, Ingo Peters, Laura Kemmer, et al., 'The global IR debate in the classroom', in Arlene B. Tickner and Karen Smith (eds), *International Relations from the Global South: Worlds of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 17–37.

⁷⁰Zvobgo and Loken, 'Why race matters'.

⁷¹Hagmann and Biersteker, 'Beyond the published discipline'; Kiran Phull, Gokhan Ciflikli, and Gustav Meibauer, 'Gender and bias in the International Relations curriculum: Insights from reading lists', *European Journal of International Relations*, 25:2 (2019), pp. 383–407; Brieg Powel, 'Blinkered learning, blinkered theory: How histories in textbooks parochialize IR', *International Studies Review*, 22 (2020), pp. 957–82; Sondarjee, 'We are a community of practice'; Wemheuer-Vogelaar, 'The global IR debate'.

⁷²Robbie Shilliam, 'The aims and methods of liberal education: Notes from a nineteenth century Pan-Africanist', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 29 (2016), pp. 251–67; David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, 'Worlding, ontological politics and the possibility of a decolonial IR', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 293–311; Zeynep Gulsah Capan, 'Decolonising International Relations?', *Third World Quarterly*, 38:1 (2017), pp. 1–15; Isaac A. Kamola, *Making the World Global: U.S. Universities and the Production of the Global Imaginary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); Powel, 'Blinkered learning'.

Following Eriksson Baaz and Parashar,⁷³ at this stage we urge caution; stepping away from traditional syllabi does not mean simply searching for and embedding ‘alternative approaches’ within existing narratives of IR. Although the inclusion of ‘non-Western’ cases, narratives, theories, and epistemologies is essential, and long overdue, Zeynep Gulsah Capan⁷⁴ highlights how these often remain ‘embedded within the binaries and dualities’ that reproduce ‘the colonial matrix of power.’⁷⁵ This becomes particularly pronounced when, as is often the case, these alternative approaches are compartmentalised into a single week of teaching towards the end of term, thus reproducing the binary, ordering logics that underpin Eurocentric approaches to the discipline.⁷⁶ Implosion, we argue, involves working out ways to expose the ontological fragility of the discipline to students, laying bare the discipline’s contradictions, vulnerabilities, and erasures within IR curricula at all levels. This does not mean excluding traditional paradigms from syllabi, but exploring how we might question their dominance without inadvertently reifying it – asking how we put these paradigms into conversation with other ways of making sense of the world(s) that lay before us and our students. United in the understanding that curricula are not passive, neutral spaces,⁷⁷ conversations about how this may be done are already underway, for example, with the publication of new textbooks,⁷⁸ proposals to structure modules around issues and themes,⁷⁹ and considerations of how creating a ‘plurality of knowledges’ within curricula can be achieved.⁸⁰ These discussions are a vital component of imagining a post-implosion IR, and they fill us with hope of the possibility of a discipline that introduces and opens up multiple ways of encountering and interacting with the world to students.

Here, we find William Clapton’s reflection on his attempts to implement an explicitly anti-racist and decolonial second-year course on the Politics and IR programme at UNSW Sydney particularly incisive.⁸¹ In his 2023 article, Clapton talks through the practical steps – from reading lists to course structure – of redesigning his IR course to provide room for and centre Indigenous and subaltern knowledges within the classroom. Importantly, Clapton shows how the inclusion of such voices necessarily recentres discussion away from IR’s founding theories and myths, and instead towards colonialism, imperialism, and empire and their attendant ‘processes, institutions, structures, and events that have so fundamentally and resolutely shaped our world.’⁸² In so doing, Clapton shows us how Western hierarchies of knowledge can effectively be disrupted, and alternative perspectives, experiences, and plurality can be brought into the classroom to ‘undermine and delegitimize the colonial violence of silencing and elision’⁸³ that characterises the carefully guarded boundaries of the discipline. Importantly, however, Clapton acknowledges that this is not easy work – it is replete with both failure and success. Indeed, in one anecdote Clapton captures the messiness of discussing ideas of settler colonialism in relation to Israel with his students, for example.⁸⁴ He speaks of how two students disagreed with Patrick Wolfe’s identification of Israel as a settler-colonial

⁷³Eriksson Baaz and Parashar, ‘The master’s “outlook”’, p. 290.

⁷⁴Capan, ‘Decolonising International Relations?’, p. 7.

⁷⁵See also Loke and Owen, ‘Mapping practices’.

⁷⁶Zvobgo and Loken, ‘Why race matters’; Sondarjee, ‘We are a community of practice’.

⁷⁷De Matos-Ala, ‘Making the invisible, visible’, p. 3.

⁷⁸Arlene B. Tickner and Karen Smith (eds), *International Relations from the Global South: Worlds of Difference* (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁷⁹Zvobgo and Loken, ‘Why race matters’; Sondarjee, ‘We are a community of practice’.

⁸⁰De Matos-Ala, ‘Making the invisible, visible’.

⁸¹William Clapton, ‘Decolonising Politics and International Relations classrooms: Reflections from the “field”’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 69:3 (2023), pp. 442–62.

⁸²*Ibid.*, p. 443.

⁸³*Ibid.*, p. 447.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, p. 451.

state.⁸⁵ For Clapton, key to responding to this discomfort was the encouragement of dialogue, careful negotiation, and constant reflection on one's own practice.⁸⁶ We too have experienced similar uncomfortable encounters in our classrooms and as such recognise that the management of pedagogical and pastoral responsibilities towards differing student standpoints requires the careful and conscientious navigation of both the academic *and* emotional landscapes of our classrooms. And yet we believe that a 'pedagogy of discomfort'⁸⁷ – teaching that productively engages with feelings of crisis – can help students to 'empathetically perceive, understand, experience and respond to the representations of violence that they witness every day'.⁸⁸

Yet reflecting on our location within the academic system – as precariously employed tutors who have little say in curriculum design, but who simultaneously occupy a privileged position as white women in European universities who are much less likely to face prejudice and discrimination than our non-white colleagues – has made us acutely aware of the consequences of calling for challenging the Western centrism of IR teaching. It not only risks framing pedagogical transformation as 'an objective choice, freely available to all regardless of their positionality within the academic system'⁸⁹ but also reproduces a simple dichotomy between Western hegemony and decoloniality that is dependent on an oversimplified conception of knowledge itself. Accordingly, we now turn our attention away from *what* students of IR encounter to a discussion of the different ways of *how* students come 'to know' in the classroom. As highlighted by Yong-Soo Eun,⁹⁰ the dominance of Western approaches in the discipline correlates to a predominantly positivist understanding of what constitutes 'good' and 'legitimate' knowledge in the classroom.⁹¹ Not only does this privilege individualistic, rational, and confident argumentation, but it also conceives the classroom as a location in which 'expert knowers' simply transmit knowledge to seemingly passive student learners.⁹² Building on Robbie Shilliam's⁹³ comparison of colonial science's processes of knowledge *production* and decolonial science's pursuit of knowledge *cultivation*, Claire Timperley and Kate Schick demonstrate how this narrow conception of pedagogy in IR reproduces 'particular ways of knowing and being that are (often unintentionally) hierarchical, exclusive, and resistant to a wide range of alternative perspectives and ways of being'.⁹⁴ Consequently, we contend that implosion looks like the disruption of the figure of the rational expert knower, and that this disruption begins in the classroom.

In calling for this, we join the many voices advocating for a more relational approach to pedagogy in IR that fosters community over hierarchy in its approach.⁹⁵ In a recent special issue of the *Journal of Narrative Politics*, various scholars reflected powerfully on the prompt, 'International Relations As If People Matter'.⁹⁶ Among the various topics covered, Roxani Krystalli⁹⁷ uses teaching in the time of grief as the point of departure for her response. In this essay, she details how answers to questions of academic expertise are ordinarily expected to be ones of distance and credentialism. Yet following her mother's death, Krystalli recounts how her 'students have paved the

⁸⁵ Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8:4 (2006), pp. 387–409.

⁸⁶ Clapton, 'Decolonising Politics and International Relations classrooms', p. 451.

⁸⁷ Hajir and Kester, 'Toward a decolonial praxis'.

⁸⁸ Esther Lezra, 'A pedagogy of empathy for a world of atrocity', *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 36:5 (2014), pp. 343–71 (p. 343).

⁸⁹ Loke and Owen, 'Mapping practices', p. 2.

⁹⁰ Yong-Soo Eun, 'Calling for "IR as becoming-rhizomatic"', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:2 (2021), pp. 1–12.

⁹¹ See also Fonseca, 'Global IR and Western dominance'.

⁹² Timperley and Schick, 'Hiding in plain sight'.

⁹³ Shilliam, 'Aims and methods', pp. 25–7.

⁹⁴ Timperley and Schick, 'Hiding in plain sight', p. 5.

⁹⁵ *Inter alia* Laura Parisi, Juliann Emmons Allison, Janni Aragon, et al., 'Innovating International Relations pedagogy', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15:3 (2013), pp. 412–25; Powel, 'Blinkered learning'; Roxani Krystalli, 'Of loss and light: Teaching in the time of grief', *Journal of Narrative Politics*, 8:1 (2021), pp. 41–4; Timperley and Schick, 'Hiding in plain sight'.

⁹⁶ Jonneke Koomen, 'International Relations as if people matter', *Journal of Narrative Politics*, 8:1 (2021), pp. 1–6.

⁹⁷ Krystalli, 'Of loss and light'.

way for different kinds of answers. They have expanded my imagination for the possibilities and directions of care.⁹⁸ Through this experience, Krystalli does not suggest that teaching requires the ‘bearing of all wounds’,⁹⁹ nor that the narration of a public self is something equally accessible to all those working in the academy, but rather how such moments of pause encourage her, and her students, to pay ‘careful attention to how authors reveal and hide themselves, and to the ways these acts of self-revelation or occlusion challenge our expectations about what academic voice, authority, and story can sound like.’¹⁰⁰ We too share Krystalli’s insistence on calling into question a strictly bounded idea of expertise by encouraging our students to connect course material with their everyday lives and concerns and to engage in reflections of positionality along with us.¹⁰¹ Translating this into practice, although not straightforward, is full of possibilities. For example, we can ask students to keep reflective journals throughout the module,¹⁰² organise gallery visits to change the learning environment,¹⁰³ and embed assignments in students’ lived experiences.¹⁰⁴ Timperley and Schick provide a helpful example of how they encourage this reflection by asking students to take photographs of places in their life that reflect ‘power’. Their students are specifically asked ‘to identify places meaningful to them, not necessarily places that would broadly be identified as sites of political power (such as the buildings of Parliament).’¹⁰⁵ Activities such as these enable us to explore alongside our students how the diverse set of everyday experiences that we all bring to the classroom is shaped by and shapes ideas of the international and the political. In so doing, we reject a pedagogy primarily based on ‘debunking’, ‘fault finding’, and ‘rational thinking’. Such an approach does not allow for creativity, care, and imagination,¹⁰⁶ nor does it make the classroom a safe space to not know or to be curious.¹⁰⁷ Following hooks,¹⁰⁸ recognising the various subjectivities and limits of identity at play in the classroom and revealing these to students allows us to unsettle the figure of the authoritative, unitary knower, thus making space for uncertainty and, ultimately, ontological disturbance within the discipline.

Challenge individualism: Centring care and collaboration

Shifting away from the traditional linearity and embracing messiness would simultaneously confront the myth of the ‘authoritative knower’. Perpetuating the expectation of the authoritative knower within the field of IR facilitates individualism; in the effort to amass knowledge, it is each for themselves, fostering a sense of competition. Instead, we would like to advocate for the collaborative inquirer. Such an understanding of the people who ‘do IR’, or are curious about the field of IR, would open up to being vulnerable, asking for help and support as well as admitting to what we do not know. Incorporating humility into our sense-making of IR provides the opportunity of learning from and with each other. It is only through making ourselves visible to others that we will get to know ourselves and give ourselves the chance to grow.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ See also Clapton, ‘Decolonising Politics and International Relations classrooms’.

¹⁰² Alison Phipps, ‘Gender Theory Syllabus’ (University of Sussex, 2021), available at: <https://genderate.files.wordpress.com/2021/03/gender-theory-syllabus.pdf>; Jenny Louise-Lawrence, ‘Feminist pedagogy in action: Reflections from the front line of feminist activism – the feminist classroom’, *Enhancing Learning in the Social Sciences*, 6:1 (2014), pp. 29–41.

¹⁰³ Parisi et al., ‘Innovating International Relations pedagogy’.

¹⁰⁴ Timperley and Schick, ‘Hiding in plain sight’; Harmonie Toros, Daniel Dunleavy, Joe Gazeley, et al., ‘“Where is war? We are war”: Teaching and learning the human experience of war in the classroom’, *International Studies Perspectives*, 19:3 (2018), pp. 199–217.

¹⁰⁵ Timperley and Schick, ‘Hiding in plain sight’, p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ See also Sumana Roy, ‘The pedagogy of kindness: The rewards of a sentimental education’, *Open* (24 December 2021), available at: <https://openthemagazine.com/cover-stories/the-pedagogy-of-kindness/>.

¹⁰⁷ Parisi et al., ‘Innovating International Relations pedagogy’; Timperley and Schick, ‘Hiding in plain sight’.

¹⁰⁸ Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, pp. 139–41.

In order to foster a space that facilitates and appreciates vulnerability, we will have to learn and teach through and with care. This encompasses both care towards ourselves as researchers, teachers, or students as well as care towards the spaces that we investigate. Centring care while following our curiosities is deeply intertwined with both collaboration and the appreciation of differences as a source of knowledge. It might even be the very foundations of care; as Dipali Anumol suggests in ‘Care Conversations’,¹⁰⁹ care is often made up of different practices: attention, curiosity, tending, and love. The same text calls into memory Peña’s ‘community as rebellion’, suggesting that care can also be found in the rebellious refusal of universalising narratives and practices. This in turn recalls once more Sylvester’s principle of empathetic cooperation,¹¹⁰ a practice of listening to those traditionally ignored, as well as a research gaze that embraces strange slippages, thereby encouraging a more inclusive and cooperative negotiation of knowledge. Here, difference (in knowledge, insight, positioning, or experience) is seen as not only beneficial but foundational to the building of knowledge and understanding. This echoes one of the aspects of implosion that Eriksson Baaz and Parashar envision:¹¹¹ recognising and attending to the agency of actors in the Global South. Further, operating with empathetic cooperation ultimately illuminates and emphasises the humanity – with all its emotions and messiness – of those working with, existing within and contributing to the field of IR. Highlighting humanity and challenging linearity does not only reimagine our field but also challenges the (impossible) demand for objectivity and related categorising that is prevalent in, and foundational to, mainstream IR. By centring these practices, in both teaching and researching IR, as well as embracing our vulnerabilities, we will ultimately have to confront the unknown and its discomfort. As suggested above, this can be a daunting process, yet it is also full of possibility and hope. This sentiment is reflected in Cynthia Cockburn’s discussion of transversal politics as a practice of peace: ‘[we must] not just allow space for, but actively generate, flights of fantasy, dreams of possibilities ... into the future.’¹¹² Imagining the possibilities and hope then becomes both a result of and an exercise in feminist care.

This conceptualisation of care as a practice of radical politics reflects a rich body of Black feminist and Indigenous scholarship. These authors see the radical promise of care as the opening of new modes of sociality and political organisation, as well as ‘an epistemic commitment addressing historic and ongoing forms of misrecognition.’¹¹³ To care, in this sense, goes beyond an emotional affinity with a shared suffering. Rather, caring practices become strategies for survival in the face of practical and epistemic marginalisation. In this framework, self-care is seen as less a self-indulgence and more an exercise in self-preservation, an act of ‘political warfare’,¹¹⁴ and a way of understanding ‘a self which is grounded in particular histories and present situations of violence and vulnerability.’¹¹⁵ Self-care becomes an essential starting point for collaborative work in IR insofar as it encourages an openness to relational self-construction. This is brilliantly captured in María José Méndez’s reflections on *acuerpar*, or ‘the quotidian actions that bodies take to hold space for each other in the face of rampant gendered and racialized violence.’¹¹⁶ Drawing on decolonial feminist knowledge and activism, Méndez recounts how the messy doing of care involves being moved and challenged by distinct ways of being in the world. This, she believes, makes *acuerpar* a fruitful framework for thinking about feminist solidarity and collective action, for:

¹⁰⁹ Q Manivannan, Dipali Anumol, Sinduja Raja, et al., ‘Care conversations’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 25:2 (2023), pp. 336–52.

¹¹⁰ Sylvester, ‘Empathetic cooperation’.

¹¹¹ Eriksson Baaz and Parashar, ‘The master’s “outlook”’, pp. 287–8.

¹¹² Cynthia Cockburn, ‘Transversal politics: A practice of peace’, *Pacifist Feminism*, 22 (2015), pp. 1–6 (p. 5).

¹¹³ Woodyly et al., ‘The politics of care’, p. 893.

¹¹⁴ Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays* (New York: Ixia Press, 1988), p. 130; Sara Ahmed, ‘Selfcare as warfare’, *Feminist Killjoy* (25 August 2014), available at: {<http://feministkilljoys.com/2014/08/25/selfcare-as-warfare/comment-page-1/#comment-9620>}.

¹¹⁵ Inna Michaeli, ‘Self-care: An act of political warfare or a neoliberal trap?’, *Development*, 60:1–2 (2017), pp. 50–56 (p. 53).

¹¹⁶ Méndez, ‘*Acuerpar*’, p. 38.

Acuerpar is not just about an ‘I who travels to achieve mutual understanding but about a ‘we’ who enact loving perceptions by traveling together through practices of mutual aid. In other words, the self that is invoked by *acuerpar* not only becomes different by traveling to another world but is transformed by traveling alongside others in a world of their collective making. *Acuerpar* involves an ethical relation that attempts to transcend one’s experience and position by congregating with diverse bodies and bringing new spaces of care into being. It requires not only entering another world but active participation in the making of a different world itself.¹¹⁷

Collaboration thus becomes one of the possibilities resulting from embracing practices of care and reciprocity in both research and teaching. Allowing, and embracing, vulnerabilities will foster relationships and networks, which in turn improves possibilities for collaboration. Taking the US withdrawal from Afghanistan as an impetus to make sense of our thoughts and impressions concerning the field that we have studied and researched and in which we work in this article is one such example of collaboration. Throughout this process, we have shared feelings of vulnerability, acknowledged what we do not know, and, above all, learned from and with each other. In the spirit of Linabary, Corple, and Cooky’s¹¹⁸ collaborative feminist reflexivity, we have extensively discussed both our individual and joined positionalities, navigated our differences in how comfortable we feel with certain jargon and theories, and continuously reflected on the process as well as sharing our musings via a joint online document. Although the thinking about and writing of this article was born out of discomfort, the process itself was regularly sprinkled with laughter and joy – delight at a new thought that made things fall into place, some hilarity with one of our dogs joining our Zoom meeting, and above all the joy of trying to make sense of the world together. Similar sentiments are also reflected in a blog post written by Eriksson Baaz and Stern¹¹⁹ on the occasion of receiving the 2021 ISA Eminent Scholar Award: fun, communication, acknowledgement of contributors and compromise. While the award applauded their collaborative work specifically, to us it demonstrated a general recognition of collaboration. Seeing two established scholars not only champion collaboration but being celebrated for it fills us with hope and excitement. It implies potential for a future filled with collaborative inquirers – seeking to learn from and with each other, recognising our vulnerabilities and remaining curious.

Conclusion

This article is our reflection of the transformative potential of an implosion of IR, as well as subsequent hopeful imaginings of what the future of the discipline may look like. Embracing the challenge of conceiving what the next 50 years of IR studies, research, and teaching may come to be, we propose a welcoming of discomfort, while also being aware that the realities of a more vulnerable, reflective practice are not equally accessible, due to persistent dynamics of power and privilege across the discipline. And yet we advocate for trying, embracing the messiness of a process that is inherently destabilising, and the ever-present potential for failure, while also remembering the possibilities of cooperation. Ultimately, it is the collaborative dreaming of scholars who see the strength in their vulnerability that will challenge IR’s Eurocentrism and actively shape a post-implosion IR. Echoing voices from Global, decolonial, and anti-racist IR, we argue that a discipline built around ideas of rational and objective knowledge and ‘hot takes’, which privilege state action over that of peoples’ experiences of the international, excludes and limits *what* the discipline can claim to know and *who* can claim to know. This approach, we have shown, fails students of IR past and present while simultaneously refusing to acknowledge such failure. We are excited to learn

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 42.

¹¹⁸Jasmine R. Linabary, Danielle J. Corple, and Cheryl Cooky, ‘Of wine and whiteboards: Enacting feminist reflexivity in collaborative research’, *Qualitative Research*, 21:5 (2021), pp. 719–35.

¹¹⁹Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, ‘The joys of collaboration’, *School of Blogal Studies* (7 April 2021) available at: <https://www.blogalstudies.com/post/the-joys-of-collaboration>).

about and study the new ‘turns’, topics, and theories, many of which are spoken about in this special issue, that will come with the next 50 years of IR, but we also hope that this research takes seriously and reckons with ‘implosion’. Not doing so, we argue, impoverishes the discipline’s future.

Answering Eriksson Baaz and Parashar’s¹²⁰ question what an implosion might look like, we call for a more exposed approach – sitting in discomfort, being reflexive about our own positions and vulnerabilities,¹²¹ and harnessing the transformative power of the classroom. The latter also includes the shift from the ‘authoritative knower’ to the ‘collaborative inquirer’, whereby teaching with/through care provides the space to incorporate humility and vulnerability into the collaborative process of making sense of IR. It is precisely this collaborative inquiry that we hope defines and shapes the next 50 years of IR. Here, we are not just calling for a larger embrace of collaborative work – for the process of learning and ultimately failing is more enriching in company – but we also welcome a more ‘intergenerational’ conversation. With this, we suggest that dialogue and the exchange of ideas and experiences between different generations of people doing and thinking about IR will help to recognise how understandings of and about ‘the international’ and ‘the political’ differ according to their experiences. This does not just end in the classroom but extends to broader conversations throughout the field. As such, we are particularly grateful to have the opportunity to respond to, and support, Eriksson Baaz and Parashar’s call for implosion from a junior scholar perspective and to contribute to wider reflections on what the next 50 years of IR might look like. Beyond these hopes for the future of IR, centring care and compassion in both our teaching and our processes of knowledge cultivation is also a challenge to the constant neoliberalisation of the university, its commodification of knowing and over-reliance on precariously employed PhD students/ECRs who straddle academic boundaries in an everlasting battle between making sense of the world and having to conform in order to remain in academia. The post-implosion future and present involves an embracing of messiness and ‘uncomfortable realities.’¹²²

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¹²⁰Eiksson Baaz and Parashar, ‘The master’s “outlook”’.

¹²¹Pillow, ‘Confession, catharsis, or cure’.

¹²²Ibid., p. 193.