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Semiotic Violence against Women: Theorizing Harms against Female Politicians

On January 6, 2021, rioters stormed the US Capitol, displaying numerous symbols and behaviors of white male power. Defending a president well-known for his sexist attacks, the overwhelmingly male crowds wore military gear, brandished weapons, bared their chests, and chanted words and carried signs supportive of white male supremacy. Hunting down certain members of Congress, the mob famously broke into and vandalized the office of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, providing some of the most memorable images of the insurrection—sitting with their feet up on her desk, writing her expletive-ridden notes, holding up a broken sign with her name, and even carrying away her lectern. Beyond breaking windows and smearing feces on the walls, insurrectionists also notably destroyed display cabinets holding historical books on women and politics, together with a memorial to John Lewis, the late congressman who was a leading figure in the US civil rights movement.

These events point to limitations in prevailing understandings of political violence as actions driven by partisan differences (Schwarzmantel 2010), highlighting how identity-based violence may also seek to restrict who participates—or is seen as a legitimate participant—in public life. Concerned about a rising tide of violence targeting politically active women around the world, a global network of politicians, activists, practitioners, and academics has emerged in recent years to give a name to this phenomenon: violence against women in politics (Krook 2019). This work as a whole identifies four subcategories of violence: physical, sexual, and psychological (enumerated in the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women), and economic (named in the 2011 Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence).

Evidence from around the world, however, suggests that physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence do not exhaust the spectrum of acts

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constituting violence against women in the political realm. In this article, I theorize a fifth type of violence against women, semiotic violence, which mobilizes semiotic resources to injure, discipline, and subjugate women. I argue that semiotic violence is not only part of a broader continuum of violent acts but also the most widespread, as well as concealed and trivialized, form of violence against women. In the political sphere, semiotic violence serves as a tool to deny women's full and equal right to participate in politics, undermining both democracy and gender equality.

In the first section of this essay, I consider the implications of adopting different approaches to defining violence and review the four types of violence against women in politics recognized by scholars and practitioners. In an earlier article, Juliana Restrepo Sanín and I theorize that this phenomenon is rooted in structural, cultural, and symbolic violence against women, which both distinguishes it from other, more commonly studied forms of political violence as well as explains why it has to date largely remained normalized and hidden from view (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020). In the second section, I briefly outline key insights from semiotics, which I use to elaborate the concept of semiotic violence. Drawing on literatures from different disciplines, I identify precedents for characterizing language and images that dehumanize, belittle, disparage, exploit, or degrade people on the basis of their ascriptive group memberships as manifestations of violence.

In the third and fourth sections, I theorize two modes of semiotic violence against women in politics: *rendering women invisible*, which attempts to symbolically annihilate women in the public sphere, and *rendering women incompetent*, which emphasizes role incongruity between being a woman and being a leader. Drawing on a global database of news items collected between 2014 and 2019, I focus specifically on female politicians as a subset of politically active women and elaborate a series of examples within each mode.[1] What unifies these behaviors, I argue, is their shared purpose to delegitimize and silence women's voices in the political sphere. The article concludes that recognizing semiotic violence is important for feminist research and activism but also identifies three interrelated challenges to gaining widespread acceptance of this concept. These trends, however, further signal why a new category is not only necessary but vital for combating all forms of violence against women.

[1] Given the small numbers of trans women and nonbinary people in elected positions, this analysis focuses exclusively on cis women. How rates and dimensions of semiotic violence differ across these two samples, however, would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Theorizing violence against women in politics

Global research and activism on violence against women in politics has emerged in a space in which political violence has generally been defined as the use of force to achieve political ends (Della Porta 1995). Violent acts undermine democratic politics when one side attempts to get "its way through fear of injury or death" rather than "through a process in which individuals or groups recognize each other . . . as rational interlocutors" (Schwarzmantel 2010, 222). Political violence thus serves a silencing function, seeking to eliminate or intimidate political opponents so that they are unable to exercise their political rights. Acts targeting particular identity groups magnify these exclusionary effects, challenging personal integrity as well as electoral integrity (Bjarnegård 2018).

The variety of coercive dynamics inherent in political violence has given rise to two concepts of violence in political science: violence as an act of force and violence as an act of violation (Bufacchi 2005). According to Vittorio Bufacchi and Jools Gilson (2016), these definitional variations are not arbitrary but reflect distinct ontologies regarding the nature of violence. The minimalistic approach, treating violence as an act of force, adopts the perspective of the perpetrator and focuses on ascertaining the motives behind a violent act occurring at a single moment in time. In contrast, the comprehensive approach, defining violence as a violation, prioritizes the survivor and centers the experience of violence, observing that violence may leave traces that never fully disappear, with ripples of violence affecting victims, their families, and their communities for years to come.

Despite pressures from electoral violence experts to simply add women into existing political violence frameworks, scholars and practitioners working on violence against women in politics use a gender-based violence frame to expand traditional definitions of political violence (Krook 2020). They thus call attention to physical aggressions as well as instances of sexual, psychological, and economic violence. Illustrating the benefits of this approach, a global study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) found that 25 percent of the female members of parliament (MPs) interviewed had faced physical violence in the course of their political work. Yet more than 80 percent reported being subject to threats, bullying, and "remarks, gestures, and images of a sexist or humiliating sexual nature" (2016, 3). More than 30 percent had been denied funds and other resources as a means to frustrate their political work, and more than 20 percent had confronted various forms of sexual harassment and coercion on the job.

In one of the first academic analyses of this phenomenon, Restrepo Sanín and I propose that dynamics of structural, cultural, and symbolic violence distinguish violence against women in politics from other forms of political

violence (Krook and Restrepo Sanín 2020). We argue that violence against women in politics originates in structural violence, which enacts harm through the group-based stratification of access to basic needs built into the social structure (Galtung 1969). The architecture sustaining women's political exclusion emerged from early political theories associating men with the public sphere and women with the private (Okin 1979). Violence against women in politics is enacted, in turn, through cultural violence, or the cultural toleration of violence when perpetrated against members of particular groups (Galtung 1990). Misogyny polices gender roles through cultural tropes justifying the denigration of powerful women (Manne 2018). These may combine with tropes disparaging members of other socially marginalized groups, magnifying abuse against women based on their race, class, religion, age, sexual orientation, or gender identity, among other possibilities (Kuperberg 2018). The intended outcome is symbolic violence, which seeks to restore hierarchies of domination by putting women who deviate from prescribed norms back "in their place" (Bourdieu 2001).

Because structural, cultural, and symbolic violence naturalize and defend gender hierarchies in reflexive and unconscious ways, this framework helps explain why this phenomenon has until recently remained largely hidden from view. It also calls for a new look at the experiences of politically active women to explore whether prevailing typologies are comprehensive of the full array of strategies employed to harm, delegitimize, and exclude women from political life. Feminist work theorizing a continuum of violence against women highlights why identifying a more complete spectrum of violent acts is vital, as manifestations of violence not only shade into one another but also inform and reinforce one another (Kelly 1988). Excavating and naming these affronts to dignity is also imperative for feminist activism via the creation of new vocabularies to speak about and validate women's experiences.

Toward a concept of semiotic violence

Semiotics is the study of signs. Inspired by contributions from both the philosophy of language and the philosophy of art and aesthetics, semiotic analysis seeks to read words and images as texts, providing insight into the interpretive frameworks that filter and guide human perceptions of the outside world (Chandler 2017). According to Charles Peirce (1994), all experience is mediated by signs such that their role in structuring thought processes is invisible and unconscious. The aim of analysis for Ferdinand Saussure ([1959] 2001) is thus to search for basic signifying units and regularities that can help render these interpretive systems more explicit.

Relevant to feminist research, this work understands signs as being socially constructed rather than as faithful and straightforward reflections of the external world. Due to relations of power, these constructions often center the perspectives and experiences of privileged groups, for example via the phenomenon of exnomination, whereby dominant groups view themselves as the unmarked norm and designate others as the marked category (Barthes 1957). Because words and images contribute to creating and maintaining social hierarchies, deconstructing signs can be a crucial tool for revealing and challenging systems of privilege and oppression (Chandler 2017).

Semiotic analysis, together with theories of structural, cultural, and symbolic violence, suggests that words and images may provide important resources for preserving the status quo. Kate Manne captures this insight by observing that to mitigate the "psychic threat posed by powerful women . . . women may be taken down *imaginatively*, rather than literally, by vilifying, demonizing, belittling, humiliating, mocking, lampooning, shunning, and shaming them" (2018, 76). Such attacks are often trivialized, however, by the public at large, which not only refuses to acknowledge the harms inflicted by words and images but may also accuse women of being overly sensitive.

I propose to call these dynamics "semiotic violence against women." As a general concept, semiotic violence entails drawing on and reinforcing gender inequalities by using words and images—and in some cases, body language—to injure, discipline, and subjugate women. Applied to politics, it specifically refers to the use of semiotic resources to deny women's political rights. A defining feature of these acts is their public signification: while perpetrated against individual women, they seek to send a message that women as a group are unworthy. Acts can gain further resonance by tapping into semiotic resources for denigrating other marginalized groups, creating intersectional manifestations of violence.

Semiotic violence is not a new phenomenon. However, recent technological innovations have dramatically expanded opportunities to create and circulate negative and harmful portrayals, further normalizing these tropes as they reach new, potentially global audiences. Anonymous online communities, in particular, serve as a crucial focal point for generating and sharing digitally manipulated photos and videos while also providing protective cover for perpetrators (Citron 2014). While the internet did not invent sexism, as Emma Jane (2017) notes, it is amplifying it in unprecedented ways.

A wide range of literatures lend support to conceptualizing language and images as forms of violence. Critical race scholars in the legal field theorize hate rhetoric as "assaultive speech," whereby targets face "trauma by racist assailants who employ words and symbols as part of an integrated arsenal of weapons of oppression and subordination" (Matsuda et al. 1993, 7). Through

such means, freedom of expression becomes an instrument of domination, aiming not to discover truth or initiate dialogue but rather to injure and silence the victim through repeated messages of group-based inferiority. Because such speech seeks to dehumanize, degrade, and humiliate, the resulting "psychic injury is no less an injury than being struck in the face, and it often is far more severe" (Matsuda et al. 1993, 74).

Research on group-based slurs argues that slurs perpetuate discrimination because they offer "speakers a linguistic resource with which to dehumanize their targets and identify them in 'subhuman,' rather than full human, terms" (Croom 2013, 189). Pejorative slurs about women affront their personal integrity and autonomy by communicating beliefs about men's and women's essential differences, women's inferiority to men, and women's lack of ownership over their own bodies. Epithets like "whore" and "slut" use sexual shaming to deny women basic human dignity, while "bitch" and "cunt" dehumanize and discredit women to silence their voices and stifle their participation in public discourse (Levey 2018).

Psychological studies of sexist humor capture why these wounding words are so pernicious yet also difficult to challenge. Framing remarks as a joke is a deliberate strategy to avoid the disapproval normally associated with discriminatory conduct. Yet a sexist joke is not "an isolated event in which a woman is harmlessly teased or ridiculed; it is rather one instance among many in which women are belittled or disparaged" (Bergmann 1986, 76). Recurring themes include sexual objectification of women, devaluation of women's personal and professional abilities, and support for violence against women (Bemiller and Schneider 2010).

Feminist critiques of pornography, in turn, argue that pornographic images seek to dehumanize, degrade, and subordinate women (Itzin 2002). Some go so far as to claim that each creation or use of pornography is "itself a politically gendered oppressive act" (Cowburn and Pringle 2000, 59). Like sexist jokes, these images are often viewed as "innocent leisure" (Cawston 2018, 649) but in fact depict or defend sexualized violence against women—including via sexually graphic, digitally altered images of female politicians—as pleasurable, natural, or deserved (Sheeler and Anderson 2013).

Recent work on online misogyny explores how technological advances generate new opportunities for "image-based sexual abuse" (McGlynn, Rackley, and Houghton 2017). While existing criminal codes seek to protect physical bodies, work on technology-facilitated sexual violence contends that harms experienced by women online—including the distribution of (doctored) sexual and sexual assault images, gender-based hate speech, and virtual rape—should also be recognized as embodied harms. Despite taking place in the virtual domain, these authors argue, such harms have at least as much

impact on a person as traditional injuries against a physical body (Henry and Powell 2015).

Research on some forms of body language, finally, points to ways in which asymmetry in status can be communicated through verbal and nonverbal interactions, including forms of address, norms of touching, and patterns of interruption. These behaviors, Nancy Henley (1977) argues, serve as mechanisms of social control, reinforcing relationships of power between different categories of people. Such microaggressions "send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership" (Sue 2010, 24) yet are often so pervasive that their harmful nature is overlooked or forcefully denied.

Although the normalization of semiotic violence serves to obscure it from public consciousness, its forms are highly systematic and predictable. As Jane observes in the case of online misogyny, there is a "quasi-algebraic quality" to gendered vitriol (2017, 36). Working inductively from news items collected between 2014 and 2019, as well as research in multiple disciplines, I theorize two modes of semiotic violence: rendering women invisible and rendering women incompetent. Using examples from the political realm, I elaborate each via subtypes within each mode to illustrate how language and images are mobilized to resist, exclude, and undermine women. Given its inductive origins, this typology is not necessarily exhaustive but seeks to provide a preliminary architecture for future theorizing and elaboration of the concept of semiotic violence, drawing on diverse cases worldwide.

Semiotic violence as rendering invisible

The first mode of semiotic violence involves rendering women invisible in the political sphere. It aims to symbolically annihilate political women by not acknowledging their presence or contributions to political debates. Reinforcing the male as norm, these acts imply that men are the only legitimate participants—or, if women are included, that men are the only ones whose presence counts. As a result of these dynamics, the idea that women can be political actors, especially leaders, produces strong cognitive dissonance, contributing to women's ongoing secondary status in the political realm.

The concept of symbolic annihilation emerged in media studies with George Gerbner's statement that "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation" (1972, 43–44). The lack of female characters on television is significant, according to Gaye Tuchman (1978), because it suggests to viewers that women do not matter much in society. The treatment of the few women who are included—for example, as sexual objects or denigrated working women—strengthens this message,

cultivating specific ideas about how the world works and where power resides (Gerbner 1972).[2]

Political scientists theorize a similar dynamic stemming from women's relative absence in the political media. Pointing to the lack of women in British election coverage, Clare Walsh observes that "the structured invisibility of women is likely to sustain the damaging myth that politics is primarily a 'man's game'" (2001, 94). Confirming this intuition, research shows a close correlation between the share of women as news subjects and experts and the share of female candidates for parliament (Haraldsson and Wängnerud 2018).

Experiences around the world indicate at least seven tactics for symbolically annihilating women in the political sphere. This ranges from erasure of women as political actors to denial of women's right to speak and be heard in political debates. At the individual level, many of these acts are also instances of psychological violence, seeking to obstruct the participation of specific individuals by affecting their mental states through exclusion and trivialization. By playing out before the eyes of the general public, however, the effects of this semiotic violence expand beyond the affected individual, sending a broader message to society that women are not worthy or equal participants in the political realm.

Removing women from political spaces

Authorities in some countries have responded to women's entry by removing them from political spaces, rendering them literally invisible. In Saudi Arabia, women gained the right to run as candidates in local elections for the first time in 2015. After the elections, two women elected to the local council in Jeddah refused to remain behind a partition wall and insisted on sitting at the same table as their male colleagues. The Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs then ordered the segregation of women and men in local council meetings across the country, requiring that women participate via a video link so that the men could hear the women but not see them—a direct contrast to the national Shura Council, where women and men sit together in the same assembly (Stancati and Al Omran 2016).

In Mexico, indigenous women in Oaxaca have faced challenges as candidates in municipalities governed by *usos y costumbres* (habits and customs), a provision permitting indigenous communities to follow their own traditions when electing their leaders. Of the more than four hundred municipalities using this system, nearly 20 percent banned women from participating as voters or candidates in 2015 (Hoffay 2017). In 2007, a woman named

[2] While not the focus here, fictional works rarely portray women as political leaders. When they do, these representations break with but also reify existing gendered norms of leadership (Sheeler and Anderson 2013).

Eufrosina Cruz ran for mayor, supported by some men in her community. When the town's leaders saw her name on some of the ballots, they tore them up, saying that she was not a "citizen" and that according to the custom, "only the citizens vote, not the women" (Stevenson 2008).

Not portraying political women

In other contexts, female politicians have been erased from public consciousness. On several occasions, ultra-Orthodox newspapers in Israel have digitally altered photos of the cabinet to remove, replace, or block out women. In 2009, one paper digitally erased the two female ministers, Limor Livnat and Sofa Landver, and put two men in their place; another simply blacked out their faces (Shabi 2009). A wider range of invisibilizing strategies occurred in 2015, when three women—Ayelet Shaked, Miri Regev, and Gila Gamliel—were nominated. Some ultra-Orthodox news outlets declined to publish the photo. Others opted for digital editing strategies: pixelating the women's faces, editing out the three women with no replacements, and removing the three women and adding a man in one of the spots (Goldman 2015).

Using a different medium, in early 2019 a toy company in the United States launched a line of Lego-like minifigures of the "2020 presidential candidates." The series, however, included only the four men who had announced their presidential runs: Beto O'Rourke, Bernie Sanders, Cory Booker, and Pete Buttigieg. When asked by a reporter why the company had not created figures of any of the women who had launched campaigns—like Elizabeth Warren, Kamala Harris, or Kirsten Gillibrand—the company's CEO replied that these would be added later because "at the moment we do not have female hair for the lady candidates" (Render 2019). Given that the company boasts of selling minifigures of many US presidents, including Donald Trump, failing to stock such a key item is a telling oversight—reflecting and reinforcing the notion that only men can be president.

Misrecognizing political women as not being leaders

Although women around the world have gained access to leadership positions, they continue to be viewed as "space invaders," as "bodies out of place" inside political institutions (Puwar 2004). This can give rise to encounters with colleagues and others whereby their political status is not recognized. During these processes, women become figuratively invisible, despite having overcome the literal invisibility associated with explicit exclusion. Being from another politically marginalized group often heightens these effects. In one incident in Denmark, prior to a television panel featuring various political party leaders, the Conservative Party leader, Bendt Bendtsen, asked the twenty-three-year-old leader of the Red-Green Alliance, Johanne Schmidt-Nielsen,

to fetch him some coffee. She replied that, unfortunately, she did not know where the coffee was—and waited for him to get the shock of his life when he subsequently saw the "office girl" on the party leader panel (Nilsson 2007).

Dawn Butler, the third Black woman to be elected to the British Parliament, has spoken up openly about similar experiences. In one case, she was in a "members only" elevator when a fellow MP reportedly commented, "This lift really isn't for cleaners." In a separate instance, a former minister, David Heathcote-Amory, confronted her in the members' section of the terrace, saying, "What are you doing here? This is for members only." When questioned in the press, Heathcote-Amory answered that "he was simply asking" and that "they are quite sensitive about this kind of thing, they think that any kind of reprimand from anyone is racially motivated" (Oppenheim 2016). Rather than seeing any problem with his behavior, he shifted the fault to Butler for taking offense—further marginalizing her as an outsider in the political space.

Applying masculine grammar to political women

A fourth strategy for engineering women's invisibility in politics is to refuse to feminize the language used to refer to politicians. When Laura Boldrini became president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies in 2013, she sent a letter asking her colleagues to use the appropriate gender when talking about other deputies. In a later interview, she explained: "Language is not only a semantic issue, it is a concept, a cultural issue. . . . When you are opposed to saying *la ministra or la presidente* it means that culturally you are not admitting that women can reach top positions" (Feder, Nardelli, and De Luca 2018). This problem arises because many languages treat men as the unmarked or generic category and women as the marked or subsumed category. In addition to rendering women invisible (Pauwels 2003), generic masculine forms create ambiguity for women, as male-designated terms may or may not actually include them (Spender 1980). In a workplace context, gender-exclusive language can thus subtly inform women that they do not belong (Stout and Dasgupta 2011).

Appealing to male-centered rules of grammar reinforces the notion that political positions cannot—and should not—be feminized. In many cases, it also involves ridiculing those who seek to apply more gender-inclusive forms. In an incident in the Greek parliament, after female MPs responded to a roll call vote by answering "present" using the feminine ending, the parliamentary speaker immediately "corrected" their statements to the masculine ending. A female MP then requested that the official recording reflect the fact that she had used the feminine ending. Addressing the speaker, she pointed out that he had changed the sex of all the women. Continuing the roll call, he did not apologize but rebuked her request by telling her to "learn grammar" (Georgalidou 2017, 39).

In France, debates on this issue have been waged for more than twenty years. In 1997, the new Socialist government decided to address female politicians with feminine titles. The policy was made official in early 1998 despite protests from the Académie Française, the French language council. Female ministers subsequently had feminine titles printed on their official stationery and the signs on the doors of their offices changed (Burr 2003). In 2014, a heated exchange in parliament brought the question to back into the public eye. In a session presided by the vice president of the National Assembly, Sandrine Mazetier, a conservative male deputy, Julien Aubert, addressed her as "Madame le President," using the masculine form. After reminding him that the assembly's rules stipulated that she be addressed as "Madame la Presidente," the feminine form, he refused to yield (Cotteret 2014). While the Académie Française continued to insist that feminizing initiatives were based on an erroneous understanding of grammatical gender, it finally relented to the feminization of all professions—including prime minister—in 2019.

Denying political women's right to speak

Due to historical associations between masculinity and public speaking, the simple act of women talking in public can be seen as transgressive (Cameron 2006). Prohibiting women's opportunities to speak makes women's opinions and perspectives invisible and undermines their status as political equals (Beard 2017). An Afghan MP, Malalai Joya, claims that during her two years in parliament she never had the chance to speak without getting cut off at some point. After a controversy surrounding some remarks she made, the speaker of parliament argued that Joya should be removed from her seat. Not given an opportunity to defend herself, she was subsequently suspended from parliament for the remainder of her five-year term without a formal count of the votes (Joya 2009).

The experiences of US Senator Elizabeth Warren provide a second example. During the 2017 confirmation hearings for Jeff Sessions, who had been nominated for the position of attorney general, Democrats highlighted his ongoing failures to protect the rights of minority communities, pointing out that the Senate had previously rejected him for a federal judgeship on this basis. When it was Warren's turn to speak, she attempted to read a letter that Coretta Scott King had written in 1986 to oppose his earlier nomination, which included relevant details like Sessions's attempts to intimidate elderly Black voters. In the middle of Warren's speech, however, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell invoked an obscure Senate rule—namely, that no senator can impugn the motives and conduct of another senator—to prevent her from continuing. Following her testimony, three of her male colleagues read excerpts from the same letter, uninterrupted (Ebbs 2017).

Exiting when political women speak

When women do gain the opportunity to speak, another way to silence their contributions is to reduce the possibility that they will be heard. As Dale Spender notes, a frequent observation made by women in a wide array of arenas is that they are "not listened to with equal attention (or . . . not listened to at all)" (1980, 87). Recalling her experience giving a speech on gender quotas at a German Social Democratic Party meeting in 1989, for instance, Frigga Haug recounts that "the whole audience was male and stressed this by ostentatiously starting to read newspapers, talk to each other, walk out to get some beer, and so on" (1995, 137). She notes that the situation had not improved five years later, when a debate on equality and equal status for women in parliament was scheduled during the break—leaving only a handful of politicians to discuss the issue while everyone else (including the journalists) went to lunch.

In 2017, Melissa Hortman, house minority leader in the Minnesota State Legislature, realized that a group of male representatives had decided to absent themselves during a speech being given by Ilhan Omar, a woman serving as the first Somali American legislator. In response, Hortman moved for a call of the House, a mechanism requiring that members return to the floor. As a large group of white male representatives came back into the chamber, she remarked: "I hate to break up the 100 percent white male card game in the retiring room, but I think this is an important debate." Called on by some male colleagues to apologize for what they felt was a sexist comment, she refused, saying "I'm really tired of watching women of color, in particular, being ignored. So, I'm not sorry" (in Terkel 2017).

"Manterrupting" political women's speech

Interruptions offer a further mechanism to "engineer female silence" (Spender 1980, 44) by preventing women from achieving their interactional goals. Dan Zimmerman and Candace West argue that because interruptions involve "violations of speakers' turns at talk," they serve as "a device for exercising power and control in conversation" (1975, 105). Meta-analyses find that men are more likely than women to use interruptions, suggesting that they may feel more entitled to take the conversational floor. Men also engage in "intrusive interruptions," which aim to display dominance, at a far greater rate than women (Anderson and Leaper 1998). The concept of "manterrupting" seeks to capture these gendered dynamics, specifically referring to cases where men interrupt women as they are trying to speak (Bennett 2016).

A study of heckling in the Canadian parliament finds that calling out in the chamber without having the speaker's recognition to talk is a common feature of parliamentary life. While most heckling is policy oriented, a nonnegligible amount targets MPs' personal identities. One female MP who was interviewed

perceived it to be an especially gendered phenomenon, noting that heckling "starts when certain women stand up, before they've even begun their question" (Grisdale 2011, 40). Research on parliamentary interruptions between 1926 and 2015 corroborates these insights, showing a sharp increase in disruptive interruptions of female MPs as their numbers grew in the 1990s (Whyte 2017).

A detailed analysis of interruptions in Australian senate estimates hearings between 2006 and 2015 observes that male senators overwhelmingly used interruptions to gain the floor or obstruct other speakers. Conversely, most negative interruptions were aimed at women. Female witnesses were far more likely than their male counterparts to face attempts to destroy their credibility and authority; they were also two-and-a-half times more likely to be called "emotional" or "unreasonable" (Richards 2016, 49). Asked to respond to these findings, female politicians in Australia largely concurred with the analysis, with one noting: "Nothing in this study surprises me. It reflects my experiences having sat through various Senate committee hearings over the last 18 months" (in Workman 2016). Semiotic violence thus appears to be pervasive, with a real and tangible impact on women's ability to participate equally in political life.

Semiotic violence as rendering incompetent

The second mode of semiotic violence entails rendering women incompetent as political actors. It attempts to cast women as a group as unfit for political leadership by tapping both prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes regarding women's inability to serve in public roles. These tropes emphasize incongruity between traits and behaviors ascribed to women (warm, polite, and yielding) and those associated with men and good leaders (assertive, decisive, and confident; Eagly and Karau 2002). In cases where women overcome these normative barriers to accede to leadership positions, cognitive dissonance produces questions about their status as women, preserving women's secondary status and reinforcing ideas about men as natural and legitimate political leaders.

Feminist psychologists developed the concept of role incongruity to account for divergence in evaluations of male versus female leaders. In a meta-analysis, Alice Eagly, Mona Makhijani, and Bruce Klonsky (1992) find that, because gender and leadership stereotypes align for men but conflict for women, female leaders tend to be viewed as less competent than male counterparts with similar credentials. Penalized for perceived "status violations" (Rudman et al. 2012), female leaders are also often viewed as illegitimate, as their authority is not seen to be deserved or justified (Vial, Napier, and Brescoll 2016), as well as cold, losing the warmth stereotypically attributed to women (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick 2004).

Literature on gender, politics, and the media vividly illustrates these dynamics. Arguing that media coverage privileges the practice of politics as a male pursuit (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross 1996), studies observe that while most stories about male politicians focus on their political ideas, a disproportionately large share of women's coverage fixates on their physical appearance (Falk 2008). Similarly, male politicians tend to be presented as living in an integrated world of work and family life; female politicians, in contrast, are often portrayed as inhabiting two conflicting worlds (Van Zoonen 1998; Thomas and Bittner 2017).

Investigating the ways in which the competence, and thus the authority, of women in politics is challenged around the world yields at least six common strategies. These acts seek to belittle women who engage in politics, ranging from insulting portrayals of their temperaments or political knowledge, to aggressive campaigns to sexually objectify and shame them, to judgments insinuating that they are failed women. Seeking to undercut women's access to, as well as effectiveness in, the political arena, these tactics aim to dehumanize political women, punishing them for presuming that they have the right to participate in political life.

Ridiculing political women as emotional

A common metaphorical dualism in philosophy associates men with reason and women with emotion (Lloyd 1984), proposing a fundamental—and highly gendered—incompatibility between outward emotional displays and the ability to make objective, rational decisions (Brescoll 2016). Expressions of anger by female leaders are particularly fraught: while men's emotional reactions are often attributed to external factors, making their outbursts seem justified, women's anger tends to be ascribed to internal characteristics, marking them as angry people and, in turn, lowering perceptions of their competence (Brescoll and Uhlmann 2008). Derogatory terms used against female leaders thus tend to highlight this anger component, trivializing women's voices as "shrill" and "strident" in order to dismiss out of hand what they have to say (Spender 1980).[3]

In 2012, Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard responded to the Leader of the Opposition, Tony Abbott, by delivering what became known as her misogyny speech, in which she called out Abbott's long history of sexist statements. The clip quickly went viral, with more than 2 million views on YouTube within ten days (Sawer 2013, 114). Despite a positive global reception, in

[3] Deborah Jordan Brooks (2013) suggests that both male and female leaders are penalized for emotional outbursts but also provides compelling evidence for the widespread use of this frame when discussing female candidates.

Australia Gillard's speech was cast in largely negative terms by national media outlets and conservative politicians, who framed it as an uncontrolled emotional outburst (Wright and Holland 2014). They also chided Gillard for "playing the gender card" by broaching the issue of sexism in politics, reducing her speech to a crass political tactic (Johnson 2015).

In the months leading up to the 2016 impeachment of Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff, oppositional media coverage portrayed her as a president who was out of control and suffering a nervous breakdown. The magazine *Isto É* was particularly egregious in this respect, with numerous images and stories dedicated to documenting her supposedly declining emotional state. A photo of her yelling on the front cover proclaimed her "nervous explosions," which an analysis inside the magazine compared to the behavior of Queen Mary I of Portugal and Brazil, or *Maria a Louca* (Mary the Crazy; Cardoso and Souza 2016). Memes online dehumanized her by depicting her as a growling dog, using captions like, "I'm crazy, don't you know?" (Biroli 2016).

Denying political women's qualifications

In other instances, women's backgrounds are foregrounded as a means to call into question their qualifications to hold political office. While politicians' skills and experiences should legitimately be scrutinized by voters, the dynamic alluded to here is not necessarily based in reality. Rather, the prospect of a woman in (or aspiring to) a political position mobilizes efforts to find something that might disqualify her—a form of hyperscrutiny out of proportion to that faced by male politicians, including repeated emphasis on the fact that the woman in question may be the first woman to hold this position. These trip-up campaigns pose a particularly acute challenge for women who are also members of other politically marginalized groups, compounding skepticism about their competence to serve in leadership roles.

Born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cécile Kyenge migrated to Italy in 1983. She became the first Black cabinet member when she was appointed the Italian Minister of Integration in 2013. Seeking to dehumanize her, Italian Senator Roberto Carderoli, of the far-right Northern League party, stated: "When I see the pictures of Kyenge, I cannot but think of the features of an orangutan" (Davies 2013). In a supposed apology, party leader Umberto Bossi reinforced her departure from the traditional profile of Italian politicians by noting that she was "differently white" and "also a woman." Other Northern League attacks presumed a more limited role for (Black) women in Italian society. One local councillor explained that "she seems like a great housekeeper" but "not a government minister" (Davies 2013). Member of the European Parliament Mario Borghezio called her a "shitty choice"

who was "totally incompetent" and had "the face of a housewife" (Meret, Della Corte, and Sanguiliano 2013).

Conservative circles in the United States have responded in similar ways to the rise of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. In 2019 Ocasio-Cortez, a former bartender with Puerto Rican heritage, became the youngest woman ever to serve as a member of the US House of Representatives. Fixating on her personal history and magnifying her misstatements, right-wing media outlets have sought to discredit her credentials, tapping into Trump-era Republican discourses that "undeserving minorities" succeed at the expense of white Americans (Serwer 2019). Ocasio-Cortez called out these double standards in a tweet comparing how she and Paul Ryan, who was also elected to Congress at age twenty-eight, were treated: he was considered a "genius," while she was treated as a "fraud" (Gardner 2018). She later tweeted: "I find it revealing when people mock where I came from, & say they're going to 'send me back to waitressing,' as if that is bad or shameful. . . . But our job is to serve, not to rule."[4]

Mansplaining to political women

A third way to communicate women's presumed incompetence is through "mansplaining," which refers to instances when a man speaks to someone (usually a woman) in a patronizing manner, on the assumption that he knows more about the topic that the person he is addressing (Kinney 2017). This pattern implies that the best person to explain the topic at hand is a man, training women in "self-doubt and self-limitation" while reinforcing "men's unsupported overconfidence" (Solnit 2014, 4). Growing usage of this term by political women around the world signals that, even once elected, women continue to have their place in politics questioned by their male colleagues.

In an interview at the World Economic Forum in 2018, Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg, who was first elected to parliament at age twenty-eight, shared an experience early in her career: "I have met a lot of people who have maybe underestimated you, because you were a young girl in politics at the time." In one instance, she was serving on the finance committee when a bank CEO tried to tell her "like a child, in a very childlike way, how the interest rate market functions." The committee chair then leaned over to clarify that she had the highest level of education on the committee (Parker 2018).

Such exchanges have also taken place on the floor of some national and provincial parliaments. One of the highest-profile incidents occurred in the United Kingdom, where on March 7, 2018, the Leader of the Opposition,

[4] See https://twitter.com/AOC/status/1104069510238269440.

Jeremy Corbyn, informed Prime Minister Theresa May that the next day was International Women's Day. She responded: "Can I thank the right honorable gentlemen for telling me it's International Women's Day tomorrow? I think that's what's called mansplaining." She then followed up with a tweet addressed to Corbyn on Twitter containing the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of the term (Specia 2018).

Sexually objectifying political women

Sexually objectifying women reduces them to their body parts and depicts their worth solely in terms of their ability to be sexually attractive. Exposure to such portrayals leads to diminished opinions regarding a woman's competence, morality, and humanity among both women and men (Ward 2016). According to Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson, politics has become increasingly "pornified" (2013, 14), with images, metaphors, and narratives from pornography entering online spaces as well as mainstream media coverage of politicians. This process affects male and female politicians unequally: while men are typically cast in positions of power, female candidates tend to be humiliated, violated, and abused.

In the United States, these trends began in earnest in 2008, after the nomination of Sarah Palin as the vice presidential candidate for the Republican Party. Her physical appearance was a substantial focus of early media coverage. *Time* magazine referred to her as a "sex symbol" (Tancer 2008), and a clip of her wearing a swimsuit during a beauty contest received well over 1 million views on YouTube (Heflick and Goldenberg 2011). Palin's head was photoshopped onto the body of a woman in a bikini holding a rifle, and over the course of the campaign she was increasingly sexualized through sales of blow-up dolls and pornographic films (Carlin and Winfrey 2009). Priming people to focus on her appearance reduced not only perceptions of her competence but also intentions to vote for the Republican ticket (Heflick and Goldenberg 2009).

Similar tactics have been used against Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, the first woman and youngest person ever to serve as President of Croatia. Soon after her election in 2015, a Serbian tabloid published images purporting to show her "in action" in a porn video (Kumar 2018). In 2016, there was virtually no media coverage of her trip to Washington, DC, but during this same period, the *Washington Post* and other international outlets published stories about viral photos purporting to show her in a bikini. Although the images were later determined to be photos of Coco Austin, an American reality star, similar photos continued to surface online, featuring a range of different models and porn stars. In an interview in 2016, she responded: "It makes you feel like an object, rather than as an actor" (Full Frontal with Samantha Bee 2016).

Slut shaming political women

Slut shaming is a related but distinct phenomenon, involving the "shaming of someone due to their sexual behavior—real, imagined, or made up" (Hanson-Young 2018, 55). This type of shaming is directed almost exclusively at women to silence them, often for reasons that have nothing to do with actual sexual activity. During recent elections in Iraq, for example, alleged sex tapes of at least five female candidates were circulated on social media. Despite claiming that the video was a fake, at least one of these women dropped out of her race (Arraf 2018).

One of the most high-profile instances is the case of Leila de Lima, a senator in the Philippines who is also a harsh critic of President Rodrigo Duterte. In 2016, representatives in the lower house loyal to the president proposed to screen a sex tape supposedly featuring de Lima with her married chauffeur. The initiative followed Duterte's remarks that de Lima had a "propensity for sex" and was "not only screwing her driver" but "also screwing the nation" (Sherwell 2016). Setting aside their political differences, five female senators came together to file a resolution to condemn the plan. They wrote that, while the action was directed at a particular senator, it was "a blow to our collective struggle to uplift the dignity of women, respect her agency and her autonomy over her own body, and is a form of slut-shaming that will not set a good example for the country" (Elemia 2016).

In another well-covered case, Sarah Hanson-Young, a Green senator in Australia, has repeatedly faced innuendos about her sexual behavior. When she first won her seat in 2008, she was the youngest woman ever to be elected to the federal parliament—as well as an unmarried single mother. In 2018, she decided to speak out after Senator David Leyonhjelm yelled out during a debate on violence against women, "You should stop shagging men, Sarah!" Both the Green Party leader and Senate president asked him to apologize, but he refused and instead went on a Sky News program in which he said that "Sarah is known for liking men" and "The rumors about her in parliament are well known" (quotes then repeated at the bottom of the television screen). He spread the message further on additional television and radio programs, prompting Hanson-Young to sue him for libel (Hanson-Young 2018, 69).

Denying that political women are real women

A final tactic for undermining the notion that women can be competent political actors is to intimate that women who demonstrate some level of political competence are not real women. In an experimental study, Monica Schneider and Angela Bos (2014) find that female politicians are not seen as sharing qualities stereotypically attributed to women. Perhaps for this reason, a common mode of criticizing political women is to accuse them of being lesbians.

This trope figures prominently in media coverage and social media representations of high-level politicians like Julia Gillard, Helen Clark (former prime minister of New Zealand), and Tarja Halonen (former president of Finland).

Empirically, female politicians around the world are more likely to be single and childless than they are to be mothers, while male politicians are predominantly family men (Thomas and Bittner 2017). This pattern stems from cultural beliefs that women with children should not run for political office, as well as parliamentary working conditions that make it difficult to balance work and family life, including lack of parental leave, late working hours, and frequent travel. In 2016, First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon opened up about a miscarriage she had experienced in 2011 at the age of forty. She stated that there are “many reasons why women don’t have children.” Yet the story featured a graphic titled “Childless politicians” that included pictures of six women but no men (Rhodes 2016).

Treating political women as an aberration from gendered expectations, however, is perhaps most obvious and acute in the case of Hillary Clinton. During the 2007–8 US presidential primary campaign, Clinton was frequently depicted as a monster or a cyborg. Jessica Ritchie argues that this was not accidental: rather, female political figures “are especially prone to monsterization and the political arena is a fertile site for the creation of monstrous women” because they “destabilize identity categories” (2013, 103). Demonizing her, anti-Hillary groups digitally simulated devil horns and the number 666 across her forehead. They also commonly spliced her head onto a male body or morphed her face together with her husband’s. These representations, Ritchie argues, portray Hillary Clinton—and her bid for the White House—as “improper and unnatural” (102). Applying blanket judgments to women as a group, these forms of semiotic violence deliberately avoid individual and fair assessments of political women’s qualifications.

Conclusions and implications

This article seeks to make a case for recognizing semiotic violence as a form of violence against women, in general, and as a form of violence against women in politics, in particular. In so doing, I seek to expand the notion of violence to theorize how sexist language and images also operate to harm and exclude women. One implication of the tendency to naturalize this type of violence, however, is precisely that it remains invisible as well as trivialized—and thus widespread. To combat these trends, I identify two broad modes of semiotic violence that I elaborate theoretically through a discussion of different empirical manifestations, drawing on cases of female politicians from around the world.

This theory-building exercise is crucial, I argue, because it points to as-yet undertheorized dynamics that not only form part of a broader continuum of violence against women in politics but also interact with and bolster the injuries committed through the other four more widely recognized forms. Politically, theorizing and mapping semiotic violence also serves a vital consciousness-raising purpose. The lack of adequate language to describe women's experiences has long been noted by feminist activists. Giving a name to these dynamics thus constitutes a crucial first step toward challenging the structural inequalities that normalize these harms (West 2000).

Three aspects of the current global context, however, present ongoing challenges to recognizing the concept of semiotic violence. First, claims about the "death of feminism" or passage into a "postfeminist age" (Hawkesworth 2004, 969) have given rise to dynamics obscuring, denying, and even actively rejecting the notion that gender inequality still exists. Sexism has not disappeared, however, but has simply taken on less noticeable but equally or more pernicious forms.

Second, "popular misogyny" has emerged globally as a powerful new force (Banet-Weiser 2018). Casting gender equality as a destructive "gender ideology," these antifeminist movements have gained strength around the world and, in some countries, have succeeded in overturning equality policies (Corredor 2019). These countergains have not only contributed to abuse against feminists, they have also strengthened the resolve of those who feel justified in defending gender inequalities.

Third, advances in online technologies have expanded opportunities for people to connect around the world, creating new echo chambers and fueling an expansion in online abuse. According to Whitney Phillips (2015, 8), one result has been an expansion of the boundaries around what is seen as "acceptable" discourse, including sexism, leading to increased normalization of abuse. These trends, however, make acknowledging, developing, and applying the concept of semiotic violence an urgent task—ensuring that both women and men enjoy their full spectrum of human and democratic rights.

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