**The Politics of Location and the Location of Politics: Thinking about Feminist Security Studies**

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“The State of Feminist Security Studies” (Sjoberg and Lobasz 2011; Sjoberg 2011) was never meant to be a representative (e.g., Shepherd, this forum, p.1) or hegemonic (Parashar, this forum, p.3) statement defining Feminist Security Studies (FSS). Instead, it reproduced one conversation (of many) among members of a 2010 ISA Working Group “Gender and Security: Theory and Practice” (which included contributors to this forum). While I absolutely agree with Bina D’Costa and Katrina Lee-Koo (this forum, p.3) about the importance of reinforcing “the feminist claim that the politics of location plays a role in shaping knowledge claims,” I think that context matters too.

*Politics & Gender* is the journal of the Women & Politics section of the American Political Science Association. Its “Critical Perspectives” (CP) sections are often (if not always) explorations of the state of research programs: positioning, growth, status, and future directions. For me, the conversation that became the CP section was a positioning exercise in a particular, narrow debate.

Specifically, it was a conversation *about* the politics of critiquing American positivist, liberal feminist work in FSS (e.g., Hudson et al 2009; Thayer and Hudson 2010). I found that work *counterproductive* to whatever common normative agenda (e.g., Basu, this forum, p.2) FSS has, given its gender essentialism and racialization of violence (see Sjoberg, forthcoming). Still, I could not declare that work outside of ‘FSS’ when its proponents saw it as belonging (e.g., Hudson 2011). Carol Cohn’s (2011, 581) description of the difference between “feminist security” studies and feminist “security studies” provided a way forward, but was not, to me, enough. Ann Tickner’s (2011, 579) reminder to “recognize the value of this rich and varied research” was hard to reconcile with Annick Wibben’s (2011, 591) insistence that feminist politics is a necessary part of feminist scholarship. I felt caught between valuing the diversity that positivist, liberal feminist work adds to FSS and valuing a politics that it contradicts.

As I edited the CP section, I came to understand that I could (and should) do both. I concluded the section with that realization, suggesting, with Hayward Alker (1996) that “knowledge, truth, and field definition are *in the contestation*.” This position suggests that there is no ‘right’ and ‘wrong,’ but instead FSS is *in* its diverse approaches, and “the narrative generated from their arguments, disagreements, and compromises”(Sjoberg 2011, 601, 602). Recognizing discussion about what FSS is “also creates, performs, and constitutes” it, I suggest that I do not have all the answers, and characterize FSS as undecidable and dialogical (603).

I was surprised, then, at the suggestion that the CP section “clearly [normatively] situates FSS within American scholarship” (Parashar, this forum, p.2, 1). Swati Parashar (this forum, p.2) characterizes the section as “gatekeeping” and argues that it “reflects an inability to speak to other camps and appreciate the knowledge produced in non-American settings.” She (this forum, p.2, 3) sees the section as a site of “hegemonic power,” “epistemic violence,” and “censorship,” understood to be “parochial,” “intolerant,” and “imperial.” I disagree.

I am not arguing that the CP section is beyond reproach. Its authors live in the US, and it was published in a US-based journal. While it does not claim representation, it also does not discuss its unrepresentativeness. As Laura Shepherd (this forum, p.1) contends, I was responsible for explicitly recognizing its partiality.

Still, Shepherd’s (this forum, p.3) conclusion that the section’s effect is “to construct FSS in the image of White Western femininity” relies on claims to *speak for* that just are not there. The section was *a* conversation about FSS, not *the* conversation, and never claimed otherwise. In it, I and other contributors talk about our *journeys* (sometimes personal, sometimes scholarly) through FSS and our *hopes* for it. We did so looking “to provoke discussion, rather than serve as a systematic treatise” (Sjoberg 2011, 602).

How that (admitted) incompleteness matters, then, becomes key. Teresia Teaiwa and Claire Slatter (this forum, p.1) worry that the CP section characterized the Pacific Islands as “geo-politically marginal to the field” and see that sort of exclusivity as counterproductive to FSS. I could not agree more with their conclusion, and regret if it was possible to read the CP section as marginalizing any location. I can only speak for myself, but I should have been more careful than I was to make it clear that no homogenizing, exclusive, or marginalizing intent accompanied my construction of what I saw as an explicitly inclusive framework. As I described then, “the conflicts and contestations among feminists in Feminist Security Studies and between feminists ….constitute Feminist Security Studies” (Sjoberg 2011, 602). I meant that to suggest that differences of theoretical orientation, location, nationality, substantive focus, race, gender, gender identity, sexuality, perspectival orientation, and epistemology are parts of an argument that make FSS. This is similar to the methodological argument that Jacqui True and Brooke Ackerly (2010) make about how to do feminist research.

While the (possible) effects of my scholarly and editorial choices as relates to the CP section are important to discuss (and critique), some of the critiques are reifying. Particularly, I am concerned by Parashar’s argument (this forum, p.1) that FSS has a “camp structure,” and see camp construction in this forum. While the CP section neither claimed nor discussed representative politics, contributions to this forum do. For example, Sylvester’s (this forum, p.1, 2) dichotomy between “people in the United States” and ”people who do not … experience the world as American security studies feminists,” assumes that ‘American security studies feminists’ have necessary commonalities, apparently including their ability to “dwell comfortably in an abstracted world.” This claim is not only essentialist but camp-constructing, categorizing American-based FSS work as by-definition fantasy. The result is two camps: the non-American one, where “scholars ‘over there’ are doing fantastic feminist security research” (Sylvester, this forum, p.2), and the American one, from which we should “walk away” (Sylvester, panel comments, ISA 2013). There is as much field divisiveness in that boundary-drawing as there is in the omission, intentional or unintentional, of “feminist ‘security’ scholarship and empirical analysis from non-US locations” (Parashar, this forum, p.1) in the CP section. That does *not* excuse a parochial view of FSS. As many contributors to this forum suggest (e.g., Parashar, Sylvester, D’Costa and Lee-Koo), much of the best work in FSS right now (and for the foreseeable future) is being done outside of the US. But that does *not* excuse FSS rejecting American work on its face either.

That said, I think there is something deeper to this discussion Parashar’s recognition of camps and Sylvester’s drawing their lines. It is that encampment, as described in this forum (see also Sylvester 2010) is antithetical to how I see the politics of feminist research. Even early feminist IR work (e.g., Tickner 1992; Pettman 1996) suggested that feminists are uniquely positioned to break down inherited boundaries and dichotomies in the field of IR and in global politics. Feminist work on IR methodology (e.g., D’Costa 2006; Cohn 2006) urges paying attention to location in a multi-sited way. Postcolonial feminist IR work argues that the multiple layers of power in the “house of IR” should be looked at with complexity (Agathangelou and Ling 2004). The combined lesson I take from this work is that the totalizing characterization of any work (including the CP section) as a one-dimensional part of a bounded camp *is exactly what feminist IR means to fight* in the discipline and in the world (see, e.g., Basu, this forum).

In critiquing the critiques, I do not mean to devalue the interventions in this forum, intellectually or politically. Instead, I find them crucially important. Perhaps ironically, though, it is my investment in that importance that inspires me to revisit my conclusion in the CP section: “these challenges and tensions are, I believe, real, and fundamental” where “we might see these questions as areas of conversation, and conversations around them as the core of FSS;” a core that “creates, performs, and constitutes FSS” as we are doing now (Sjoberg 2011, 603). If I had the chance to rewrite those words, I would certainly explicitly mention inclusiveness. Still, my call to that effect was always meant to be both substantively and representationally inclusive, looking to expand FSS[[1]](#footnote-1) rather than constrict it. To the extent that this conversation furthers that goal, I am happy to have had it and to continue it – especially as it produces discussions about how to promote diversity and avoid any (and any perception of) gatekeeping.

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1. Not only along the axes of nationality and perspective, as discussed in this forum, but across sexualities and gender identities, which were unfortunately left out of this forum, and only briefly mentioned in the CP section (Wilcox 2011)

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)