This article argues that critique as an enterprise – in CSS and beyond – is always and already failed. It contends that failure should be recognized and embraced rather than ignored, covered up, or compensated for. It envisions a CSS where critique is accepted as incomplete, messy, partial, complicated, and failed, both in everyday/mundane and macrotheoretical terms. It proceeds in four sections. The first section sets up my entry into the problems of/with critique. The second section analyzes the types of dissonances inherent in the production of CSS scholarship. The third section theorizes those dissonances as failures – arguing that failure itself is a part of *in* and *of* CSS. The conclusion sketches ways to look forward for a failing/failed CSS.

An article suggesting that CSS is a failure needs a few disclaimers. First, this intervention is not meant to denigrate either the scholarship or the scholars of CSS (or critique more broadly). Second, CSS research is crucially Important to me, personally and professionally (as if the two could be distinct). Third, in failures of CSS, I am in no way suggesting that CSS scholarship is worse than, or even as bad as, or comparable to at all, mainstream Security Studies research. My discussion of critique as failure looks to find a future for, and hope in, critique.

**Practicing Critique**

I have been simultaneously attracted to and repelled by Critical Security Studies (CSS) since I our first introduction in the late 1990s as a college student. ‘We’ met in a debate round. The (very few) readers who were US policy debaters will understand this context immediately. For those who are unfamiliar, I will try to explain.

US Policy debate is both a rigid, century-old tradition and an ever-changing form of discourse art (Mabry and Richards, 2017). The basics are fairly simple: teams of two debaters face-off with research-backed arguments about policy propositions addressing the United States federal government’s handling of some policy issue.[[1]](#footnote-1) Debaters often read hundreds of books and articles on the topic to prepare. That research is partly in political science, and partly interdisciplinary – the balance depends on the team’s approach to the topic.

In the 1980s, most arguments addressed how a particular policy change might alter hyperbolized versions of the future.[[2]](#footnote-2) Most debates focused around “plan” (one team’s policy proposition), “counterplan” (the other team’s policy proposition), “advantage” (the benefit of a policy proposition), and “disadvantage” (the costs of a policy proposition). These debates were often won by the policy proposition a judge believed was less likely to cause a nuclear war.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In defense of me at eighteen: I did not *really believe* that debate policy propositions caused nuclear wars. Instead, I found research scholars who thought that a particular policy shift (or lack thereof) would create a small increase the already small probability nuclear weapons might be used. Like other debaters, I cited those scholars, and dramatized their warnings to bolster my argument.[[4]](#footnote-4) That was part of the game of debate. As I repeated this exercise, it never occurred to me that I was a policy actor. I had always been told – by parents, mentors, and teachers – that my life and the political world were separate.

In the 1990s, though, some debaters started reading critical theory.[[5]](#footnote-5) Debaters used critical work to make arguments that the frameworks and assumptions around debate discourses, particularly doomsday-based policy discourses, were fundamentally unsound.[[6]](#footnote-6) This form of argument in debate is called a “kritik.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Various “kritiks” look to hold debaters accountable for the impacts of their discourses with lost debate rounds.[[8]](#footnote-8) These arguments were still outside debate’s mainstream, but increasingly common.

One year, the topic suggested the United States should increase its “security assistance” to one or more Southeast Asian nations.[[9]](#footnote-9) I do not remember my security assistance “plan,” but I do remember hearing “cards” (quoted argumentation) from David Campbell’s (1992) *Writing Security* critiquing the securitized framework in my proposition. My opponents argued, with Campbell, that assumptions about the definability and desirability of security are problematic: “danger is not an objective condition. It (sic) is not a thing which exists independently of those to whom it may become a threat …. Danger bears no essential, necessary, or unproblematic relation to the action or event from which it is said to derive ….” (Campbell 1992: 1-2).

Our opponents’ critique had two levels. First, they argued that our understanding of our proposed policy change’s potential effects was incorrect because it relied on misinterpreting the meanings of security, danger, and even the state. Second, they suggested that our having made the arguments constituted individual complicity in threat construction. We were *causing insecurity* both in our framing of US national security, and by dramatizing insecurity for competitive advantage. Our opponents argued that we should lose the debate because of the harm of our words. To them, the debaters were the relevant actors.

I normally would have taken notes[[10]](#footnote-10) on my opponent’s speech in order to argue point-by-point later. I did not, though. I just listened. I was hearing an argument I thought was right. My partner and I had not sufficiently examined the underlying assumptions of our argument, and we were intentionally engaging in threat construction.[[11]](#footnote-11) I do not remember what I said next, or the result of the round.

I do remember going from the bus to the bookstore after the tournament and getting *Writing Security.* I devoured it. As I learned about the inseparability of discourse and reality,[[12]](#footnote-12) threat construction’s problems,[[13]](#footnote-13) and the possibility of rewriting security,[[14]](#footnote-14) the realisms of my debate propositions and my professors[[15]](#footnote-15) went from biblical truth to pathetic performance[[16]](#footnote-16) in a matter of hours. I was addicted. I read the message of CSS as optimistic and redemptive – an instruction manual for shifting discourses to make the world a better place (e.g., Booth, 1997; Brown, 1994; George and Campbell, 1990).

What would I argue in debate rounds going forward? I would write kritiks – not just of policy propositions, but of debate as an activity incentivizing threat construction and capitalizing on disaster pornography.[[17]](#footnote-17) I would sound alarms about the dangers of threat construction, and scare this bad behavior out of debate, one ballot (victory) at a time. Debaters who engaged in threat construction like Campbell (and now I) critiqued would stop because I would make a crushing argument about its terrible consequences, and threat construction would become a losing proposition.

I wrote the kritik, and used it in one debate round, then another. Soon, though, we debated a team who subjected our advocacy to its own critique. They suggested that we dramatized threat construction by exaggerating, and hyping, the consequences of in-round discourse. In fact, scaring the threat construction out of debate *was* functioning in many of the same insidious ways as the original threat construction did. In my desire to make debate (and the world) a better place, I struggled to see that.

I would spend the next three years trying different ways of pairing acts of reflective critique and efforts to win debate rounds, ultimately unsuccessfully. Since then, debate has changed significantly and there are many who feel like they have made headway against that paradox. But, for me, at the time, I learned a lesson that I thought only applied to debate: perfect or faultless critique was impossible, and critiquing debate from the inside was necessarily a losing cause.

This manifested in a love-hate relationship with critical theorizing. One one hand, I had discovered research that really spoke to me at a more fundamental level than traditional security theorizing. Still, the *practice* of critique felt always and already internally contradictory. I retired from competitive debate and went to graduate school looking to find a better form of critique - one where advocacy was pure (without the attendant demands of competition) and therefore the search for truth could be paramount. I assumed that my problems practicing critique were unique to debate, and that they would stay there. But they did not.

Nearly two decades later, I struggle with the same issues, if in a different form. I would like to think that most of my academic career has focused on fighting the good fight – critically speaking – in Security Studies. While I am no longer the sort of optimist that fits easily with emancipation-oriented Welsh-school CSS,[[18]](#footnote-18) my work has highlighted blindness to gender and sexuality in security research,[[19]](#footnote-19) and argued that the constitutive, explanatory, predictive, and prescriptive nature of that work would change were gender analysis valued as it should be.[[20]](#footnote-20) Yet, both to me[[21]](#footnote-21) and to my readers/critics,[[22]](#footnote-22) much of my work is anything but unimpeachable or comprehensive critique. It certainly lacks puee motive I imagined for academics before I was one. Despite my aspiration to perfect the practice of critique, my work has implicated the critiques that it has contained;[[23]](#footnote-23) been partial and blind in several ways;[[24]](#footnote-24) gone too far or not far enough;[[25]](#footnote-25) been critical but indulgent, or even just indulgent;[[26]](#footnote-26) and sacrificed critique to serve disciplinary norms.[[27]](#footnote-27) Some of those are mistakes, or shortcomings, are my own; others are necessary, and even endemic.

**Failures of/in CSS**

In 2016, many scholars considered their “shadow CV” in response to a Princeton faculty member’s publishing a CV of failures.[[28]](#footnote-28) Shadow CVs included journal rejections, failed fellowship and job applications, and academic program rejections.[[29]](#footnote-29) Like others,[[30]](#footnote-30) my shadow CV would be long – my academic career, unremarkably, has featured more rejections than acceptances, and many incomplete projects, bad ideas, and fruitless applications. But the talk of shadow CVs and research failures brought me to a different set of questions – about what constitutes failure, and what sorts of failures characterize my research and the research of those around me.[[31]](#footnote-31) I see three phases of failure that CSS research might have: production failure, publication failure, and critical failure. I will discuss each briefly in turn.

*Production Failure*

Many discussions around shadow CVs and research failure have focused on work produced, but either never published or rejected en route to eventual publication. I will talk about those failures soon. Here, however, I argue that there is a sort of failure prior to that - where, rather than being produced and rejected, scholarship is never fully produced. Some critiques are never written. Some remain in the form of incoherent notes where the author(s) cannot figure out how to organize them into a linear argument, or fear(s) the repercussions of doing so.[[32]](#footnote-32) Some critiques are silenced by structural disadvantage or exclusion (Malinak, Powers, and Walter, 2013; Redden, 2007). Some critiques are silenced by the tyranny of the expected form of academic writing (Canagarajah, 2002; Lillis, 1997). Some are written and even edited into a presentable form but never presented to others. Critique is often stopped short of production by a wide variety of circumstances – from fear to structural power, from the unavailability of words to the unavailability of resources, from personal circumstance to professional situation. Structural exclusions both of scholars and of forms of scholarship compound on circumstantial discrimination and circumstance itself to narrow the field of scholarship produced.

This article itself had fits and starts. The roadmap and first section came easily, written in a couple of hours one afternoon. But then the production of the text – that was messy. I fell asleep as I tried the first time. The second time, I avoided it by playing MarioKart. The third time, I wrote and then erased almost a full article’s worth of words. The fourth time, I stared hopelessly at the screen. The fifth time, I discussed what I was going to write with a colleague, but wrote nothing. The sixth time, I drafted an email to the editors of this special issue saying I had nothing to say, but did not send it. The seventh time, I believe I had a fruitful conversation with a Chihuahua about the failures of critique. The eighth time, I decided that the exercise of writing a journal article as self-reflection is spoiled and privileged, so I would not do it. The ninth time, I wrote this paragraph. I will leave it to the reader to decide where that falls on the production success-failure spectrum.

Joking aside, critical theorizing has noted the importance of the silences that creep into scholarship (e.g., Charlesworth, 1999). These silences include unheard voices (e.g., Parashar, 2009), devalorized positions (e.g., Peterson, 2003; Vitalis, 2015), unraised objections, and marginalized issues (e.g., Enloe, 1996) to name a few. Those silences also include unproduced scholarship. Some scholarship never produced is not produced by those who never enter into the to-us intelligible world of academia. Other scholarship never produced is not produced by those who “leak” through academia’s “leaky pipelines” (e.g., Blickenstaff, 2006). Still other scholarship never produced is not produced by those who write some things, but not *that* – whatever *that* is. Often, what is not produced is not understood part of critique, but instead understood as somehow incidental or endogenous to the scholarship that is produced.

Another type of production failure is more commonly discussed in academia – mechanical failure to produce scholarship that *looks like* scholarship. This work is either desk rejected or rejected after review for their form. Reviewers often describe this work as hard to read, methodologically flawed, or unclear. They suggest that there’s something ‘to it,’ but the contribution is not yet clear. Maybe a viewed-as-crucial piece of the literature is ignored, or a seen-as-crucial variable or indicator is omitted. In this sort of production failure, something *is* produced, but it fails tests of recognizability as quality scholarship,[[33]](#footnote-33) so the product often does not reach its intended audience.

*Publication Failure*

Sometimes scholarship is seen as not produced when it is really instead a publication failure, where it is produced but does not succeed in the publication process. The publication process itself is full of problems, biases, and procedural rules that police the boundaries of what counts as knowledge for dissemination. Some real, potentially impactful critiques are never published because they are rejected during the inherited process that has the authority to transform ‘submission’ into ‘knowledge.’ I have noticed throughout my career (and particularly as I write and then revise this piece), that the process of transforming writing into ‘knowledge’ is strikingly similar for CSS work and traditional IR work, despite CSS’ radically different epistemological and even ontological claims.

Many elements of this process are not only gendered and raced, but are constructed for use with a particular set of assumptions with which most CSS work disagrees. Often, the raw materials of CSS research are referred to as ‘data,’[[34]](#footnote-34) and the theorizing as ‘analysis.’[[35]](#footnote-35) We think of CSS as a ‘research program,’[[36]](#footnote-36) which mimics the language of traditional political science. CSS work is often judged as ‘successful’ by the same (or similar, or parallel) standards as neopositivist research – including but not limited to perceived publisher quality, citation count, or the reaction of prominent scholars to the work.[[37]](#footnote-37)  Sometimes, this is the result of institutional requirements causing path-dependence,[[38]](#footnote-38) other times, it is simply the entrenchment of inherited discourses and assumptions.

When we label CSS with traditional IR’s terms or judge the publication success of CSS work by traditional metrics – it sometimes seems harmless, like a necessary evil. But this presumes the desirability of a particular measure of success that has been inherited rather than reflexively generated. While it is difficult to measure or size up exactly, the impact of the residual mimicry of neopositivism is imprinted on CSS work. It is reflected in “presumptions about what knowledge is, what knowledge cumulation is for, and who has the authorial voice to engage those questions and/or produce the (assumed producible) knowledge.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

The result of these presumptions is confusion for CSS work. On the one hand, CSS work looks to reject traditional IR’s metrics (e.g., Wilcox, 2016). On the other hand, disciplinary discourses and incentives make those demands often impossible (or undesirable) to ignore. Therefore, some CSS work is a publication failure when it is rejected, while other work becomes a different sort of publication failure by altering its substance to serve disciplinary presets and get published.[[40]](#footnote-40) This simultaneous acceptance and rejection sometimes clouds the practice of critique in CSS work, producing publication failures of critique.

*Critical Failure*

Critical failure is a failure at the enterprise of critique rather than the dissemination of knowledge. My experience as a debater was a sort of critical failure – since my critiques served two sometimes-contradictory purposes (their substance and winning debates), and could be implicated in their own criticisms. The *practice* of the critique – messy, partial, and mixed, never lived up to the *idea* of the critique – aspirational, perhaps even noble, meant to make the world a better place without any of the harms of the discursive violence inherent in their articulation. At the time, I thought that this dissonance between the theory and practice was a situational necessity of debate, rather than endemic to the practice of critique.

I thought that the practice of academic critique would match my ideal – that becoming a critical theorist would avoid the normative and technical problems of *using* critical theory for other purposes. Critical theory, I thought, could succeed on its own terms. But *doing* critical theory, for me, has had as many challenges as, if not more challenges than, using critical theory in debate rounds. Academic critique is dual-purpose in a much more serious way than debate kritik was – one’s employment, paycheck, and livelihood rely on the production and recognizability of academic research. My critiques *are* my job, and my job makes possible my life. I certainly cannot separate *what I write* from the fact that my life and livelihood are wrapped up in the fact that I do write. Even if I could ignore the professional incentive structure behind my practice of critique, there are three sources of dissonance in the practice of critique which make it an inevitable failure: the problem of the possibility of progress, the comprehensiveness of critique, and the sustainability of critique. I will discuss these three sources of critical failure briefly in turn. Note that these critical failures are separable from, and on a different level, than production and publication failure. If production and publication failure can be seen as not measuring up to (or failing to sufficiently reject) pre-existing disciplinary norms and standards, critical failure is the ways that critique fails *on its own terms.*

The problem of progress

The problem of the possibility of progress has been divisive for CSS, and also difficult in my own work. Many CSS scholars have characterezed CSS work,[[41]](#footnote-41) critical IR scholarship more broadly,[[42]](#footnote-42) and even critical and constructivist IR scholarship as united by a similar mission.[[43]](#footnote-43) These plays for commonality ignore one of the largest theoretical divides in CSS work –the question of the possibility and desirability of using critique to improve global politics or academic scholarship.[[44]](#footnote-44) Some CSS scholars believe CSS necessarily has a politics of human emancipation, searching for something better, less oppressive, less repressive, freer, emancipated – in global politics (e.g., Booth, 2007; Aradau, 2004).

Others are more skeptical about a progressivist metanarrative.[[45]](#footnote-45) They suggest progressivist politics for critique is at best idyllic and at worst harmful (e.g., Saurin, 2006). The argument that it is idyllic contends that progress is elusive, and the possibility of some (perhaps even linear) path to making life better is fantasy that progressives tell themselves to make themselves feel better about a fundamentally bad world (McCormack, 2010). The argument that it is harmful suggests that theories which decide and pursue good for others are totalizing in a violent way (e.g., Stern, 2006).

For example, one of the key progressivist CSS texts is Ken Booth’s (2007) *Theory of World Security.* It focuses on a concept of human emancipation that seems to apply the same way to all humans.[[46]](#footnote-46) Yet perpetrators of oppression are positioned differently than oppression’s victims (assuming a false, ideal-typical separation of the two). Above and beyond that, humans have different needs, lived experiences, types of oppression and repression, and un-freedoms (e.g., Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004). Thinking of emancipation as universal and similar for all leads to a number of philosophical paradoxes, including but not limited to the tyranny of the majority, the zero-sum game of free choice, and systemic inequality. It risks ‘freeing’ people against their will. In this context, it can be difficult to distinguish between liberal approaches (which promote liberal individualism and group bargaining to create collective progress) and progressivist critical approaches (which promote radical freedom to obtain individual emancipation). Postmodern and/or queer theorists have suggested that the story of universal emancipation can be a story of entrenching oppression.[[47]](#footnote-47) Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Possoco (2013) analyzed murderous *inclusions* – arguing that including people by putting them into categories where they do not fit and then forcing conformity can be as violent as (if not more violent than) exclusion. Similarly, emancipating people in a particular way without their consent seems violent.

It is for those reasons that, on some level, I have always suspected myself to be not only a skeptic but a nihilist. This may come as a surprise to those of you who have read my work over the years,[[48]](#footnote-48) although possibly it will be less of a surprise to those of you who have read my recent musings on methodology.[[49]](#footnote-49) But the reason it is likely to be a surprise is that I do not fundamentally *write like* a radical skeptic most of the time; in fact, more often than not I write more mainstream- or traditional- friendly work than many of my critical co-adventurers in this field would prefer that I did.[[50]](#footnote-50) Why?

I think that the answer to that question falls within the fundamental paradox of the role of progressivism and even futurism in my understanding of critique. While I feel radical skepticism, I also desire to fix or change things for the better – to make the world a little less painful either for myself and for those who are most disadvantaged by its structural biases. My targets for those progressive desires have vacillated over the years – from the US federal government to the various institutional practices of political science and international relations. Sometimes I have had a progressive influence in those efforts, other times my work has been useless or counterproductive in progressive terms. But those desires have always been formative in my sense of self – successful progress *must* be possible, and good, because why else are we here? I have a need for the world to be as I do not feel that it is possible for it to be.

In this sense, my critique cannot be nihilist because nihilism does not have a goal, a future, a plan of affirmation; my critique cannot be progressivist because I think progressivism’s every instantiation does violence. The latter indulges my fantasy that I can make the world a better place; the former involves emotionally uncomfortably settling for its pain, violence, and fundamental unfairness. Still, even taking a position somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between progressivism and radical skepticism leaves the question of progress as a problem. This is manifest in the challenges of choosing a level of engagement – the foundations that one accepts to find the site of critique.

This is the fundamental problem, I believe, of my first book, *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq* (Sjoberg, 2006)*.* Written from a critical, but progressivist, perspective, the book looks to rewrite just war theorizing from a feminist perspective serving two aims. First, it looks to point out the gendered nature of (just) war. Second, it looks to provide a strong critique of the injustices that I saw in the First Gulf War, the sanctions regime against Iraq, and the Second Gulf War. The book (with the dissertation project that preceded it, and, honestly, my decision to go to graduate school at all) was written with a heavy personal attachment to exposing the cruelty that my state – the United States – was inflicting on those in another state – Iraq. The book argued that a feminist reformulation of just war theorizing could be leveraged to show a better, more humane, path for the United States to take in its dealings with both the Iraqi government and Iraqi people more generally.

I wrote a decade later on *Relations International* that I have come to believe that this book is, well, wrong.[[51]](#footnote-51) The fundamental flaw that I talked about was the choice to latch onto, and look to reform and rewrite, just war theorizing, which, in the intervening years, I had come to believe was beyond repair and a bad basis for making moral evaluations of policy. Any critique that is interested in making something better, or correcting some flaws, or even informing the practice of global politics or public policy, however, has to take some assumptions as base and take some things for granted. In hindsight, I think *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq* could have been more skeptical of both just war theorizing and the United States government as an actor without giving up either its strong voice of critique or its desire to improve a little part of the world a little bit. Still, whether it is just war theorizing, or state governments, or some other construct, a significant amount of critical theorizing has to take (or incidentally takes) some part of how the world *is* for granted, rather than looking to radically change everything at the same time.[[52]](#footnote-52) None of these entry points, or foundational assumptions, are fundamentally unproblematic. Instead, it is a fundamental problem of progressivist critique that it can never be (at least in my view) a full break from the status quo which it is critiquing.[[53]](#footnote-53) In this sense, the problem of progress is one that makes critique necessarily messy, rather than easy or straightforward.

Comprehensiveness of Critique

The second problem is related, but separable: the problem of comprehensiveness of critique. This problem’s most common form is privileging a particular critical perspective over another. It can be seen in a wide variety of contexts in CSS. For example, Christine Sylvester’s (2007) powerful critique of the C.A.S.E. Collective’s (2006) manifesto on critical security noted that feminist approaches appeared only as a footnote in discussions of the many potential futures of CSS. Some have answered this and other critiques of omitting gender by arguing that their general views are meant to encompass or subsume gender emancipation. Feminists, however, have (in my view correctly) argued that the omission of an explicitly gendered perspective leaves an important axis of oppression and devalorization intact.

One of my critiques had this flaw, even though its purpose was to reveal a similar flaw in others’ work. In my context a very narrow field of Security Studies in the US, I was bothered by the particularly strong influence both in academia and in the policy world of a narrow and insidious strand of liberal feminist scholarship.[[54]](#footnote-54) The argument has come to be called ‘the feminist peace’. It identifies ‘empirical’ evidence that states which treat their women better are likely to make less war. I found that problematic because I thought it was net harmful for women and femininity in politics, both essentializing and instrumentalizing women while perpetuating heteronormativity.[[55]](#footnote-55) While this approach did not at the time have a lot of influence outside of the US, it was dominating discussions about gender and security in the US.

Organically, a discussion at the 2010 International Studies Association meeting made in my view a compelling argument for a strong, critical feminist critique of the liberal feminist work that I saw as so harmful in a US context. I wanted to publish that conversation to raise seeds of doubt in the US Security Studies community about the ‘empirical’ validity and normative impact of this influential work. I curated and published that conversation as a ‘Critical Perspectives’ section of *Politics & Gender*, the journal of the Women & Politics Section of the American Political Science Association (APSA). All six contributors to the section were white scholars based in the United States. Though I did not intend it as such, the section could easily be read as an attempt to define FSS writ large, and therefore a suggestion that FSS can and should be defined by white Americans. Its racialized implications were criticized in print (Shepherd, 2013; Parashar, 2013).

I could have been both clearer about the goals of the compilation and more careful about the selection of contributors. At the same time, even more careful critical interventions face similar problems: what perspectives are privileged, and what silences remain?[[56]](#footnote-56) How comprehensive can they be? Can they do violence to no one? If not, what injustice is in the remaining silences? How might that injustice be recognized, minimized, or engaged? If there’s no such thing as a meta-critical perspective that accounts for all injustices, how can critiques manage the balance between comprehensiveness and the violences of silences? If critique is necessarily partial and incomplete, is it not a necessarily injurious activity/form of scholarship? If it is (as I believe it is) necessarily injurious, what are the possibilities for minimizing injury? Or are there any?

Sustainability of Critique

The third failure is the problem of the sustainability of critique. Daniel Levine, an excellent scholar and a good friend, wrote a book called *Recovering International Relations: The Promise of Sustainable Critique* (2012), where he argued that there is a form of critique which is sustainable in IR. Inspired by Adorno and other Frankfurt School theorists, Levine argues that constant reflection on the tendency of reification in the field is called for such that scholars remind themselves of the difference between IR’s theoretical constructs and the realities that neither represent nor describe. Through chastening reflection, Levine argues that sustainable critique occurs when the author/critic, engaged in a moral vocation, continually interrogates and acknowledges the shortcomings of his/her work.

While Levine and I agree on the need to acknowledge reification, deepen reflexivity, and acknowledge limitations, we have two major disagreements which lead me to be skeptical of the ideal-type of sustainable critique. My first major disagreement is that scholars are *not* necessarily engaged in a moral vocation. In fact, I think that many scholars believe themselves to be necessarily *not* involved in a moral/ethical vocation but instead to be involved in a scientific enterprise that excludes the moral from consideration. While the lack of acknowledgment of the need to tie morality to the vocation does not make that need disappear, it *does* matter for the practice of critique in the field. A fundamental disconnect between those who do not think that research is and/or should be critical and those who see critique as the only possible scholarship means that critique will always be interrupted, disengaged, silenced, or discredited by evangelists for objectivist and science. While this does not *a priori* pose a problem for critical work itself, it does raise questions for its disciplinary sustainability.

The larger disagreement I have regards Levine’s argument that guarding against reification, remembering normativity, staying humble, recognizing the weaknesses of one’s work, and maintaining reflexivity make critique sustainable. Those tools make critique *sustained,* but still not necessarily sustainable. In my view, critique’s sustainability problem is manifest in the question of what critique is fundamentally *for* – in two ways.First, the dual substantive and professional purposes that academic critique serves render it unsustainable. Levine suggests[[57]](#footnote-57) that critique is “the attempt to make good on a vocation of systematic thinking, even as it holds fast to the limits of such thinking.” In debate rounds, when critique was *for* bettering the world, it was not just *for* bettering the world, it was also *for* winning debate ballots. In academia, critique is not just *for* bettering the world or bringing to light the faults of that world – it is also *for* self-promotion, the building of an academic career, the building of academic subfields, the recognition of self and/or self’s scholarly mission, and production and publication success. There is a political economy to the practice of critique. These dual missions, I argue, necessarily interrupt the sustainability of critique. Ignoring personal and/or disciplinary incentives limit the reach of critique; paying heed to them limits the effectiveness of critique.

But there is a deeper problem facing the sustainability of critique, also related to what critique is *for.* Presuming, with Levine, that critique can serve the single master of intellectual investigation, the question of the substance of critique must be addressed. Some scholars have defined the purpose of critique by its opposition to what it critiques, and looking to fix the problems it has identified (Hutchings, 2001). Some critical theorists, however, see this as an oversimplification. Foucault (1981, 154) described critique as method, pointing out previous silences in dominant practices. Butler (2002) suggests scholars do not and cannot define critique, instead critique defines its objects which in turn define critique. This creates a contradiction, where critique looks for future truth it cannot find, and names flaws it cannot regulate or control (Foucault, 1981: 25)**.** I agree, and view critique as by definition fragmented and incomplete - a wish that cannot (and ought not) be fully fulfilled.

Even were critique not *fundamentally* fragmented and incomplete, the practice of CSS critique has been such. Sometimes CSS aims critiques at traditional Security Studies research (e.g., Campbell, 1992). Sometimes CSS focuses on security policy practices, or securitization practices (e.g., Shepherd, 2008). Sometimes CSS critiques other critiques of security theory or practice (e.g., Hudson, 2005). Frequently, the audience is in some sense ‘the converted’ – that is, other critical scholars. Other times, the audience is those whose work is being critiqued. Other times, the audience is policymakers who might be open to ideas about fundamental flaws in their systems. Still other times, the audience is irrelevant to the a critique understood to be generated as activist practice.[[58]](#footnote-58) Work with similar purposes converses, whereas work that diverges in purpose or audience is less likely to engage in dialogue. Those who try to universalize either the purpose of or the audience of critique, or typologize critique, cater to a disciplinary incentive for typologies that can obscure diversity.[[59]](#footnote-59) This means that, even were any given practice of critique sustainable, the enterprise of critique *writ large* would be less sustainable.

Questions of sustainability have arisen in my work on politically violent women.[[60]](#footnote-60) This research area, for me, was inspired by confronting my own initial reaction to evidence of women’s political violence. That reaction was shock – followed quickly by the realization that my other research and activism demanded recognizing that women are as capable as men. Still, I realized that I held the assumption that ‘equal’ capability left out men’s flaws. This assumption is oppressive to women, as it holds them to higher standards than men. My critical intent in this work has been to highlight that recognizing one cannot fully recognize women without recognizing their potential for violence. In some ways, that critique has been sustained – research on women’s political violence has proliferated,[[61]](#footnote-61) and critiques of our original critique (including our own) have deepened understandings of gender and political agency.[[62]](#footnote-62)

At the same time, there are obstacles to the sustainability of this critique, as I argue there are to all critiques. The first obstacle is one that pits the goals of critique against the norms of disciplinary success. Some (like more traditionally valued publication outlets asking for a causal story about women’s political violence), we resisted; others (like a sense of sensationalism around the work) we either failed to adequately resist or proved irresistible. Either way, my career benefitted from the sensationalism of the choice to discuss politically violent women, even when/if that critique was anti-sensationalistic in purpose. The second obstacle to sustainability is a question about what feminist critique is *for:* that is, there are those who (possibly rightly) feel like the choice to focus on the anomaly of the politically violent woman is at odds with the purposes of feminist critiques of masculine violence and male dominance in global politics. The third obstacle to sustainability then becomes a question of what happens *next*: at some point, the point of the critique has been made, and extensions and modifications of it have also run their course. Field work and case studies deepen, and sometimes even alter, the argument, but it was fundamentally, to me, an argument meant to alter the boundaries of an existing critique. How much expansion and deepening is required to do that? To what extent has the critique moved away from its original intent? When does a critique become many? What would it mean to have a listless and divergent critique be ‘sustainable’? Sustainability problems, along with the other dissonances on which they build, can be, and often are, elided. When they are not elided, they can be thought of as critical failure: the substantive failure of the practice of critique to live up to the ideal of critique.

**Theorizing CSS’ Failures**

The previous section discussed production failure, publication failure, and critical failure in CSS. The first two types can be thought of as failures in personal, disciplinary, or even academic sociology; the last type is inherent in critique itself and inescapable in its practice by definition. I want to make this point unambiguously: I see CSS as full of failures. Those failures include failures of production, failures of publication, and failures of critique – as well as failures within those failures, like failures to get attention, failures of coherence, failures of over-promising, failures in silences. For the purpose of seeing failure in CSS, I am not only including my work in CSS but holding it as an exemplar of failure. If my twenty-year-old self had declared my critique and others’ to have many inherent failures, and perhaps necessarily *be* failed, I would have taken that as a negative judgment, and a sign of hopelessness and even worthlessness. Perhaps my inner twenty-year-old still does. In debate and then in academia, I have been frustrated by the internal contradictions, blindnesses, violences, corruptions, incoherence, and unsustainability of my and others’ critiques – all factors that stop critique from living up to my ideals. That frustration has been compounded by a feeling that critique *should* work – it *should* succeed. But as I write now I need neither to cure those failures nor find a pathway to success. I no longer stigmatize failure as disappointment and regret, and do not attach a negative judgment to the determination that critique is failing. In fact, it is my argument that failures should often (and in this case) be recognized, celebrated, and given attention as a part of a broader critical ethos. As I argue below, rather than limiting CSS, seeing CSS as failed and failing helps uncover potential futures for CSS.

I have been told that my disappointment with the results of critique highlights problems with my critiques or my expectations rather than the practice of critique. For a long time, I agreed. I tried to dampen frustration by minimizing the failures of critiques, correcting others’ critiques, and forgiving remaining flaws. Certainly, those efforts matter. At the same time, I argue that adjusting expectations needs to be more radical than simply relaxing tightly wound ideals of critiques’ sustainability and effectiveness. Instead, as Foucault (1981) noted, critique *inevitably* fails to live up to idealized expectations, because it is the art of problematizing which is itself deeply problematic.

This might have been evident in the first CSS scholarship I read. After all, *Writing Security* (Campbell, 1992) opens with a quote from Foucault: “practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult.” The practice of critique is one of the facile gestures that practicing critique makes difficult. This is the endemic failure of any critique. If I idealize the practice of critique as comprehensive, appropriately positioned, non-violent, coherent, and sustainable, that idealization is not only futile (given disciplinary incentives, the limits of writing as expression, authors’ hybrid positionalities, etc.) but also misses the point. Another facile gesture that the practice of critique makes difficult is the dichotomy between success and failure, in critique and more generally.

In other words, calling critique a failure *seems* to attack critique, because most of us have normatively endorsed the idea that success is good and failure is bad. That inherited wisdom, however, is deeply problematic. I argue that regretting, hiding, covering up, or denying failure is itself a concession not only to sometimes-narrow definitions of success, but to the notion critiques must succeed to be critiques. In CSS research, failure is often seen as weakness (you have failed), or as a stepping stone on the way to future success (learning from failures to achieve success). Both of those understandings are problematic. Seeing failure as weakness sets an unattainable standard for strength; seeing failure as something to overcome or learn from relies on a misinterpretation of failure.

Jack Halberstam (2011) argues that “queers are experienced at failure” – the failure to meet expectations of heteronormative social orders. Rather than stigmatizing failure, Halberstam (2011) sees it as “a category levied by the winners against the losers” with “a set of standards that ensure all future radical ventures will be measured as cost-ineffective.” Accepting the inherited wisdom that failures, contradictions, and imperfections in CSS merit rejection “serves to reinscribe and renormalize standards of ‘research success’ which remain unchanged …and regressive” (Halberstam, 2011). Halberstam (2011) argues that it is important to politicize and problematize the metrics by which we aspire to success, by recognizing, embracing, incorporating, and legitimizing failure. Lee Edelman (2004) argues that the success/failure dichotomy is actually all *one* side, reifying the status quo and the value systems underlying it. He suggests that rejecting success and embracing failure provides a way out of that trap. As Halberstam (2011) explains, “the queer art of failure involves the acceptance of the finite, the embrace of the absurd” – where humanness necessarily involves messing up, disappointing, and failing. Embracing, rather than rejecting, those failures, can change how they are read and to interrogate the value systems that serve as their context.

Extending this analysis, inevitable failures of critique do not warrant *either* changing standards of success or rejecting practices of critique. Instead, failures endemic to critique present opportunities for reevaluation of the success/failure dichotomy assumed or explicit in CSS. In debate and in research, my mistake was not failing at practicing ideal critique, it was accepting the traditional social science standards as measuring critical ‘success,’ looking to redefine success, and failing to interrogate the desirability of success. Seeing critique as something built on to uncover deeper and deeper problems frames it as a process with a linear, pure, and potentially successful end. Seeing reflexivity as having the strength to sustain such a progression frames reflexivity as a measure of a scholar’s success.[[63]](#footnote-63) By aiming for critiques that ‘work’ – with non-violent language, without silences or struggles or contradictions, with a comprehensive scope and pure motives – I implicitly strive for perfection, mimick inherited notions of success, and success as normatively valuable.

I am not arguing for an alternative of carelessness for the form or normative implications of critique. But I am concerned that the perceived middle ground of aiming for perfection and accepting minimal flaws simultaneously denies of inherent failure of critique and celebrates approximating success. Instead, I argue that failure should be understood as a key part of practices of critique. Seeing failure as inherent in CSS, rather than as a dooming flaw for CSS, reframes the practice of critique.

**Looking Forward for a Failing CSS**

It seems (and likely is) ironic and hypocritical for a scholar who has (intentionally, not incidentally) met many (though certainly not all) of the demands, metrics, publication forms, etc. that count as markers of academic, professional, and publication success to argue for the embrace of failure in CSS. It is through those exercises in practicing success, however, that I have realized the intellectual and critical importance of recognizing, embracing, seeking, and understanding failure. The pretenses of substantive success block complexity, and the pretenses of professional success morph intellectual exploration. CSS is no less failed/failing for ignoring its failures, and no amount of professional success changes that substantive failure. That is why I suggest that looking for a successful future for CSS is normatively problematic and practically impossible.

At first, rejecting the normative value or practical possibility of correcting CSS’ failures seems hopeless. But I want to suggest that embracing failure is actually a path to hope. A CSS that is deeply flawed, fundamentally incoherent, and at cross purposes *but accepts those failures* is one that can rise above coherence exercises, disciplinary performances of success, and any need for internal competition. Reflexivity can exist without the desire for success; critique can revel in its failures rather than striving not to fail; CSS can be CSS without a coherent narrative of its purposes, shared values, and goals. CSS can not only defy traditional disciplinary meanings of success, but also the notion that it must be internally successful to be useful or practiced.

Recognizing that any practice of critique will include silences, shortcomings, failures, violences, incompleteness, incoherence, and/or uncertain/mixed purpose does not mean that any and all practices of critique have less value than scholarship which provides performances of objectivity, coherence, or comprehensiveness. Instead, those ‘successful’ performances carry their own violences and failures. Critique that meets disciplinary norms for scholarship shows disciplining. Critique that appears coherent and comprehensive excludes in some way or another. Critique that ‘works’ is leaving something out, not going far enough, or going too far. But a CSS that recognizes and embraces failure would look different. It would turn CSS work away from exercises in definition, method, categorization, and mimicry of, and towards acceptance of inherent messiness, difficulty, strife, and even violence. Recognition of these failures is the first step to coping with them. Coping mechanisms would forefront practices of critique that recognize, incorporate, and even celebrate critique-with-failure as not just *a* but *the* practice of critique, and put stock-taking exercises on the back burner. Internal contradiction and unresolvable questions are a part of engaging in critique, rather than a signal that the critique is somehow unprepared to see print or be read. The acknowledgment of the partiality (both in the sense of incompleteness and in the sense of bias) of critique is unavoidable rather than a demonstration of weakness.

This is the future for failing CSS that I see. It is a future where CSS recognizes engages the disciplinary sociologies that produce production and publication failure while (and perhaps even by) embracing critical failure. It impossible to fight against inequality and bias in the field while at the same time mimicking the field’s traditional values, standards, and terminologies. A CSS that walks away from not only traditional standards of success but also the desirability of success could be a CSS more honest about, and more comfortable with, its dissonances and contradictions, and more open to its possibilities. In such a CSS, the struggles I have experienced both in debate and in research would be a crucial part of the practice of critique rather than a shameful secret and an embarrassing shortcoming. A CSS that recognizes that critique is wrought and difficult, always failing but always invigorating, rather than facile would feel, for me, like more of a fit than the CSS that inspired me to look for, and fail at, the ideal critique.

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1. For a technical discussion, see: <http://atlantadebate.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/AUDL-2k8-Policy-Debate-Manual-ver-1.1.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For a substantive discussion of these dynamics in debate, see: <https://puttingthekindebate.wordpress.com/tag/impact-debate/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For critique of this practice, see: <http://commfaculty.fullerton.edu/jbruschke/theory_and_practice_in_academic_.htm>, chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See <https://dallasurbandebate.wikispaces.com/file/view/DUDA.Politics.Novice.doc> for a fairly simple version. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. About evolution of kritik in debate, see Louden (2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. About how the change of forms of debate changed debate, see Zompetti and Lain (2005) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. German for ‘critique’ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For how kritiks are deployed, see: <http://webpages.charter.net/johnprager/IPD/Chapter14.htm>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See the topic paper here: <https://debate.uvm.edu/SEAsia.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This is “flowing”: <https://debateclash.com/how-to-flow-in-debate/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See, e.g., discussion in: <http://utdebatecamp.com/2011/perfomative-contradictions-in-policy-debate-the-limitlessness-of-negative-conditionality/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See e.g., Bleiker (2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See e.g., McDonald (2008) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See e.g. Hoffman (1991) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. e.g. Mearsheimer (2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Back then, my reading of this was most informed by George (1994) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I learned this term in debate rather than academia, and use it as such, to describe the exploitation of tragedy in the world for some other purpose (e.g., in service of stereotypes, or to win debate rounds). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. e.g., Booth (2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. e.g., Sjoberg (2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. e.g., Sjoberg (2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. see: <http://relationsinternational.com/tifu-gender-justice-wars-iraq/> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. e.g., Parashar (2013); Wibben (2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. e.g., conflating women and gender despite critiquing that conflation in others’ work [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. e.g., Parashar (2013) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Sjoberg (2011) perhaps does not go far enough; Sjoberg (2017a) perhaps goes too far. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. e.g., a presentation at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association using the movie *Pretty Woman* as a metaphor for disciplinary IR [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. e.g., Sjoberg (2017b) [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. <https://www.princeton.edu/~joha/Johannes_Haushofer_CV_of_Failures.pdf> started the public discussion, though the author acknowledges predecessors [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Political scientists have followed suit, e.g., <http://www.saramitchell.org/shadowCV.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Early thoughts are here: <http://relationsinternational.com/ever-feel-afraid-questions-failure/> [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Anxiety, depression, mental illness, belittling, impostor syndrome, and a wide variety of other causes have been discussed by many scholars in many outlets. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See discussions of bias in peer review by Whyte (2017); Lerback and Hanson (2017); Hojat, Gonnella, and Caelleigh (2003) [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. e.g., Peoples and Vaughan-Williams (2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. e.g., Krause and Williams (1997) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. e.g., Krause (1998); Mutimer (2009) [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See discussion in Sjoberg (2016b) [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. see, e.g., van Dijk, Manor, and Carey (2014); Tachibana (2017); Burrows (2012). The UK Research Excellence Framework (REF) at least attempts substantive evaluation (<http://www.ref.ac.uk/)>, though many have pointed out remaining flaws – e.g., <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/policy/research-excellence-framework>. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Quoted text is from material under review. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. The pressures of academic knowledge economy are important to acknowledge here: while books once took a decade to produce, such that each word was carefully placed, now, various professional pressures prioritize quick production over meticulous production. Those who argue against this trend (e.g., Stengers [2018]) suggest that slow, deliberative work will have higher quality intellectual and practical payoffs. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. e.g., Floyd (2007); Jackson (2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Rengger and Thirkell-White (2007); Fluck (2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Duvall and Varadarajan (2003); Price and Reus-Smit (1998) [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. On the ‘progress’ side, see, e.g., Linklater (1990); on the side of less linearity, see, e.g., Doty (1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Hoffman (1991); Walker (1993) [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. e.g., “insecurity is a life-determining condition” (p.101). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. see, e.g., discussion in Jahn (1998); Jahn (2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. e.g., Sjoberg (2006) which looks to reconstruct just war theorizing [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Sjoberg (2016b); Sjoberg (2017a) [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. e.g., Sjoberg (2013); Sjoberg (2012); Sjoberg (2012); see, e.g., discussion in Prugl (2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. <http://relationsinternational.com/tifu-gender-justice-wars-iraq/> [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. There’s a debate about whether these foundations need to be ‘weak’ (White, 2000; 2015) or ‘strong’ (Forst 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See discussion of this problem in Brown (1994) [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. e.g., Hudson, Ballif-Spanvill, Caprioli, and Emmett (2012); Hudson and Den Boer (2004); Caprioli and Boyer (2001) [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See, e.g., Kinsella and Sjoberg, forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. various discussions in Dingli (2015); Weber (1994); Charlesworth (1999); Kronsell (2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. In personal conversation/commentary on a draft of this piece [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. See discussion in Zalewski (1996) [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. See Sjoberg and Barkin (forthcoming) [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Sjoberg (2007); Sjoberg and Gentry (2007; 2011; 2015); Sjoberg (2016a) [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. e.g., Alison (2009); Parashar (2009; 2014); Baaz and Stern (2013); Brown (2014); Henshaw (2016); MacKenzie (2009); McEvoy (2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ahall (2012); Auchter (2012); Gentry and Sjoberg (2015) [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See, e.g., Levine (2012); Neufield (1993); Ackerly and True (2008). I am not arguing that reflexivity is bad; quite the opposite, this whole piece is an exercise in reflexivity. Instead, I am arguing that reflexivity is a crucial and important part of iterated critical failure, rather than a feature of critical success. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)