

Editor's Interview with Christine Sylvester*

ED: Much of your work has cohered around the question of what is not seen by scholars and others at the center of 'knowing'. In your 2003 essay on dramaturgy in *borderlands*¹, you talk about 'the failure to see' – and the question of what is at stake in that failure – both for the one who does not see and the one who is not seen. 'What did we not-see and why might we not have known we were not-seeing...?' For example, you talk about the irony of 'seeing' Afghan women as a result of the American invasion, the blindness to ordinary, common-sense forms of power – the rehearsal of 'veiled chorus[es].' You also comment on the reduction of identity to a single register. In your 2013 book, *War As Experience*, you again note that, 'while 'there is no realm of heresy in democratized IR...there are still many blind spots.'² Can you tell our readers a little about how you came to identify these blind spots? Perhaps, how you came to recognize your own blind spots and what this process has been like for you?

CS: My personal history has a lot to do with striving to see the as yet unseen and talk about it in my writings. When you have a working-class background and then enter academia, you can go the canonical way or pay those canons little heed if the worlds they depict bear scant resemblance to the worlds you glimpse. My initial world came into focus when I read Marx as an undergraduate. I 'saw' my family for the first time as part of a large ensemble of players, the members of which were not doing very well but could have promising destinies if they would only take up their prescribed historical roles. Ah, but this was rugged America. My family of three struggled alone to get out of the 'here' born into to the 'there' associated not with revolution

* Christine Sylvester is professor of political science and of women's studies at the University of Connecticut and is affiliated with the School of Global Studies, The University of Gothenburg, Sweden. A native of Connecticut, she also holds Australian citizenship and has worked extensively outside the USA, including at the Australian National University (Canberra), The Institute of Social Studies (The Hague), and Lancaster University (UK). She was the Swedish Research Council's Kerstin Hesselgren Professor for Sweden in 2010-2011. Other awards include a Leverhulme fellowship at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London; the Susan Northcutt Award of the International Studies Association (ISA); Eminent Scholar of the Feminist Theory and Gender Studies Section of the ISA; the inaugural Ann Tickner Award of the ISA, and ISA Vice-President. She was also named one of Fifty Key Thinkers in International Relations, Martin Griffiths, Steven Roach, M. Scott Solomon, eds. (Routledge, 2008). In 2014 Lund University awarded her an honorary doctorate in the social sciences. Her most recent research and writings are on the state of theory in International Relations, war as experience, and art/museums and international relations. Selected publications include *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2013), *Feminist International Relations: An Unfinished Journey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); *Producing Women and Progress in Zimbabwe* (London and Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000); and *Masquerades of War* (London: Routledge, 2015). She is also editor of the Routledge book series: War, Politics, Experience. She can be reached at christine.sylvester@uconn.edu

¹ Christine Sylvester, 'Global "Development" Dramaturgies/Gender Stagings, *borderlands*, 2:2, 2003.

² Christine Sylvester, *War as Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 9

but with class mobility. My father was tapped for a New York Yankees farm team, as a pitcher no less, and was clearly on his way. Aren't-you-lucky-to-be-here wages, however, didn't work for a man with a new daughter, and two years into it he had to quit. He then became an ordinary working-class bloke again – and again and again. My mother tried to ignore the so-called historic role of the working class; she registered as a Republican, the choice of people she envied. Such disguises rarely work. It might have moved their agendas along if we had some money, but money was hard to see in the household of my youth. I looked for it in my mother's purse now and then but money was missing –and, after awhile, so was my father, who abandoned us when I was 12 and was never to be seen (by us) again.

Once I cottoned on to the social insights that accompany a background like this, academia was a logical place to roost. I was unfettered by familial and social expectations. I was open to all I could see from my studies, especially from the IR I read. Yet I also learned over time to leave preoccupations with big power states and structures on the cutting floor. That world was not the world I saw. I wanted to walk into an international that was more encompassing and full of relations that seemed lost to IR. I went on the lookout for relations international in Zimbabwe and a host of other geospaces, in art museums, in novels, in feminism, among elephants, the undead and the neuroscientific. Those were not the approved places to search for knowledge according to IR traditions. I was developing my own priorities and academic style, though, without worrying (too much) about whether what I saw and wrote about would be acceptable to my canonical field. I have many people to thank for encouraging early on what some called my maverick tendencies, including, if I may, Steve Smith, the late Jean Bethke Elshtain and Terence Ranger, Brad Klein, Rudo Gaidzanwa, Eunice Kapawu, and a host of IR colleagues and friends in Europe.

Two senior associate stints at St. Antony's Oxford led me to the realization that European approaches were more conducive to my interests than the North American IR rules. I could see that Europe's critical traditions in particular left space for those of us who wanted to lift up the rocks of inherited knowledge to see what was squashed or living lively beneath. I remain grateful to Australia, the Netherlands, the UK, and the Nordic countries for offering me intellectual refuges for nearly twenty years. It is not as though American IR had a brilliant track record of breakthroughs in knowledge, having missed the end of the Cold War, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and later attacks on the twin towers and the Arab Spring. Why hold tightly to ideas and methods that overlooked so much relevant action by ordinary people? More, why not *expect to look* for the international and its relations in the politics of people around the world? What, by god, would ordinary striving folks have to do to get center field IR attention?

At the same time, what happens to whom when we do catch sight of them? Some people can get 'rescued' from their ways by our theories put into practice, whether they desire that or not. I still remember how unhappy my East Berlin friend was when the German Democratic Republic (GDR) collapsed and its citizens were 'rescued' by the power merger with West Germany. (Her words: "My entire history has been erased. I never existed except as a faceless 'victim.'") Today, ordinary people can drone to death while IR rehearses the causes of wars or laments the permanent war footing of the USA. People do make it into some IR texts, but they are muffled within their assigned research aggregations –soldiers, terrorists, refugees. IR does not see, for example, that novels written by individual combat soldiers are bona fide texts of war. The accounts are rich with images, ethical dilemmas, fears, survival tactics, and nuanced causes and strategies that comprise war. Methodologically, vets have surely done more than ample fieldwork. I mean, they have been on the inside of war, often for multiple deployments six

months apart. Societies back home can create a cult of heroism around them, even though veteran accounts of war tend to be far more circumspect, mostly anti-heroic. Wouldn't thinly fictionalized accounts –and here I'm thinking of novels by American veterans of the Iraq war I have been studying, books by Phil Klay, Kevin Powers, and Brian Turner among them -- match if not outflank academic analyses grounded in war theory or statistical analysis? Surely what these authors have seen and can describe is far more vivid than most of us could ever know of war. Such texts go to the heart of war as a set of experiences, eschewing the IR tendency to work at the edges of war.

The larger question is whether seeing war actually matters in much of IR thinking. I think academics should grapple openly with theoretical and methodological traditions that reward scholarship which abstracts war beyond those who do not have the luxury of abstracting it away. I would like to see IR release the world's people from academic black boxes and welcome them to relations international. After all, they are there already.

ED: Can you talk a little bit about your journey from the abstractions so characteristic of IR and other social sciences to the lived experiences of violence and war? How did that happen for you?

CS: Well, for one thing, the stories told by my East German friend had a profound effect on my understanding of the cold war, the one-sided triumphalism of its end game, and the injustices that can lie beneath official IR stories of wars and their aftermaths. The very idea that good people could deeply mourn the GDR as a loss of identity and personal history got thoroughly submerged by the emphasis on bringing a wayward country back to the democratic West. Americans tended to assume that everyone in the GDR was dancing in the streets in 1989, and no doubt many were; but many also lost their jobs to West Germans. Years later, IR academics would analyze the new power relations precipitated by the end of the cold war and focus less on the difficult transitions ordinary people had to negotiate on account of shifting international relations. I wonder to this day how well we actually grasp the silencing and eye-blinding moves of the victorious cold war narrative. Can we say we understand the cold war and its end if the elements outside the accepted narrative are willfully, or by academic convention, ignored?

Messages from East Germany played alongside the many other stories of change I heard on research trips to Zimbabwe (which is where I met my German friend). At the time of independence in 1980, Robert Mugabe was lauded by leftist scholars for marking out progressive Marxist pathways for the country. Yet even on the very first of about 20 trips to Zimbabwe and a year at the university there, I could detect currents of change competing for space and dominance in an inchoate situation, among these Marxist, liberal democratic and autocratic tendencies. The question for me was which one would prevail. It was an issue I kept my eye on up to the years following 2000, when it became clear that an autocrat and his gang had decided against liberal or Marxist approaches. Along the way, I experienced autocracy at close range when Mugabe sent North Korean-trained troops to the southern part of the country to root out and punish the region for backing a competing leader, Joshua Nkomo, in the armed struggle and first election. With a group of journalists (*Spotlight* hero Mike Rezendes among them), I was interviewing Nkomo at his house in a Bulawayo township when the forces arrived at his front door. Suddenly we were in a war zone. Weapons drawn, what would become known as the Fifth Brigade burst in and the *Gukurahundi* (Mugabe's revenge war that killed up to 30,000 people by 1988) began in earnest before my eyes. I recall that it took considerable finesse to get that military to escort our group

from the area and not detain us. On the way out of the township I saw soldiers striking women by the roadside and firing at fleeing men. On later trips to the country, ZANU party members would knock on the door of local friends I was visiting, demanding to know which candidate that household would support in upcoming elections.

I started going to Zimbabwe precisely because I felt my main field of IR was operating too far above people and their experiences of international relations. Zimbabwe was a new country in an area of the world marginal to the neorealist and neoliberal institutionalism then in the forefront of American IR. I learned in Zimbabwe that there were scores of people eager to talk about a long national liberation struggle and the new country emerging from UN sanctions and Rhodesian-British rule --trade unionists, cooperative producers, small-scale farmers, factory workers, commercial farm worker women, and market women. I talked to as many 'ordinary' people as I could and realized later that many of their personal experiences foreshadowed the shifts in orientation ahead for the country, shifts that a significant number of Africanist academics were reluctant to recognize or name at the time, so invested were they in a liberation leader with progressive credentials. Mugabe turned a country that was widely praised in the early 1980s as the Pride of Africa into a thug-run kleptocracy, and the many, many people I talked to in Zimbabwe saw it coming in tangible ways years in advance. They were the experts on leaders, political parties, and policies that betrayed them.

My focus on Southern Africa would extend over a twenty-five year period, during which time I wrote two books about Zimbabwe's zigzagging political economy and its effect on the ambitions of Zimbabwean working women. The lessons from Zimbabwe, combined with my own awareness of class issues, and the education I received from the East German friend I met there, have been the cornerstones of a persistent effort to recognize people in international relations as movers, shakers, victims and excellent seers. Researching the hopes of locals also led me, circuitously, back to IR with an agenda in hand: it was to 'people' the academic study of international relations. That goal partnered well with the women's movement in academia, which I continue to embrace, and led to two books on feminist IR, the first feminist-inspired volumes in the Cambridge University series on International Relations. Both highlight IR theory, feminist theory, and people in developing countries and elsewhere shaping and being shaped by local and international relations. A parallel orientation carries forward in my recent work on contemporary (post-World War II) war --not war as explored in foreign policy and strategic studies, not wars reduced to causes, types, and weapons systems, but war as everyday, ordinary people's experiences with collective armed conflict. It is an interest that is apparently shared by many new generation researchers: the War, Politics, Experience book series I began in 2010 has over ten volumes in print now.

ED: Given your observations about the blind spots of IR, how do you weigh the significance of your experience of travel? For example, how do you weigh the significance of your movement into (and out of) Zimbabwe in both empirical and conceptual terms? What is it, in other words, that you couldn't find in Connecticut?

CS: My own world traveling began when I stood with my parents on our back lawn and watched for sputnik to pass overhead, as it was predicted to do. Skies in coastal Connecticut were bright with stars, not with city lights or pollution, so searching for signs of something tiny moving in the dense 'up there' took some dedication. The elders quickly tired of the whole thing but I kept a

diligent eye out. And there it was! I tracked the moving object halfway across the New England sky before I was certain, and then screamed: ‘there, there!’ I was a little kid. From that point on, though, I did not deviate from a plan vaguely devised that night to travel the world like sputnik, like the wonderful mobile thing that seemed to awe and scare folks. That moment launched my career in International Relations. I made it to Europe for a university year abroad, and later to Russia, where I furiously took in the toll that the cold war -- a fragment of history that now seemed idiotic to me, sputnik notwithstanding -- had taken on St Petersburg.

I assumed that the field of International Relations was a good entry point to the world. I imagined it as a worldly place that would, of course, require those who studied it to have lived outside their country of origin or be intent on going somewhere else for their PhD research. Then I found out the dire truth of the day –no pressing need to go anywhere except to one’s office or computer lab and think about the state system, model it, or run numbers pertaining to it. In fact, if you actually got stuck into the world, it was likely you would be seen as an area specialist mired in worthless details and unseeing of the big picture. Best to keep considerable distance from the world in order to study the few elements of it that IR imprimated, travel to overseas conferences or a visiting professorship excepting.

Many would-be grad students in IR still believe that IR opens doors to places in the beyond. And some do walk the talk: I am immensely proud that all the PhD students I have supervised to completion were either already worldly or have become so, and that each enjoys an academic career in Europe, Australia or Asia. Most of my students have done fieldwork-based research, something I encourage. And that brings me to a serious lament I have about the unworldly barriers that university ethics committees can impose on researchers who endeavor today to bring in the people missing from prevailing knowledge. In the USA, a bureaucratized snarl of naïve requirements has graduate students bypassing fieldwork for secondary sources that avoid all the government surveillance. I would like to see more faculty pushback and less hang-dog docility. Even a good debate on the difference between genuine ethical concern and university efforts to protect itself from litigation would be useful.

At the same time, I recognize that there are other bona fide ways of traveling and learning. I spent hours, weeks really, with Jackson Pollock’s painting “Blue Poles” in the National Gallery of Australia during the years I worked at the Australian National University. I love that enormous encapsulation of American energies and aspirations gone haywire during the cold war, so haywire that all the bountiful colors run gorgeously amuck and have to be held together with painted sticks. After a tall dive into that painting, I would listen as docents tried to talk visitors into appreciating it. That was often a hard sell. The painting from America had been elevated to center stage at the time as the Gallery’s signature international piece. Never mind that the museum already had a fine small collection of national and international artworks, including scores of brilliant costumes from Les Ballets Russes. And never mind that the “Blue Poles” acquisition in 1973 helped topple a prime minister by setting off public protests over the price (A\$1.3 million) and over the timing of the purchase while the unpopular war Australia had joined with the Americans was pounding Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. It was all so audacious, the painting and the hang in Australia’s capital city. Surely the woolly colors of “Blue Poles” had been pulled over the Gallery’s eyes. It was an American joke, right mate?

The painting and the international relations around it continue to resonate with my own quirky world travel experiences, so much so that a book I wrote on art, museums, and international relations ends with the image of a woman escaping from a painting that frightens

her by stepping into a nearby Pollock and wrapping herself ‘in the dense, thick colors [to] feel more secure.’³ Of late, carrying on down the next road, I write about the looting and destruction of ancient artifacts in today’s Middle East wars, the value of studying international relations as a moving collage of disparate juxtapositions, and the value of arts-based methodologies for a field that has historically shunned arts and humanities knowledges -- to its detriment.

I am back in Connecticut now, less by any plan than by the surprise of being a targeted hire at the public research university in my home state. UConn is noteworthy for its encouragement of interdisciplinary research in all fields. My IR colleagues are therefore more open to a variety of points of view than is often the case in the USA. More, the executive offices of the International Studies Association (ISA) are here; as IR’s major professional organization, the ISA facilitates the sharing of all manner of IR-relevant knowledge across the globe.

The take-away in all this? A hometown can contribute important pieces to a collaged life in and around international relations. Formal studies add immeasurable value; so does abundant and imaginative travel, not tourist travels laden with checklists of what to see, but stay-awhile work-awhile travels. This personal travelogue has not been about getting away from someplace so much as getting out there and engaging. It is about feeling secure enough in a vast world that inherited frames of reference can multiply and render simple characterizations impossible. It’s all a collage in progress.

ED: It’s very unusual in our profession to end up returning to work in the place where we were raised. But perhaps in a sense it is always the case that the roads that take us away from our homes also lead us back there. In your early work, you talk about ‘homesteading’, and the ways in which this term invites overlapping connections of identity, place, and meaning. Could you offer our readers some final reflections on how your journeys away from and now back to ‘home’ have collaged your own identity/identities?

CS: The identities question seems to haunt existence these days. At one extreme are those who choose to display identity elements – I almost said ‘on their sleeves,’ when today it’s likely to be body tattoos made into pictorial maps of self. It is a wrinkle on the phrase ‘written on the body,’ as is body-hiding clothing that identifies one as a woman and as a follower of a particular religion or culture. All around the world, huge numbers of people present, invent, reinforce, and parade landscapes of identity as a series of moments that must –just must –be documented and exported worldwide via social media. Identity flaunting is clearly the latest reincarnation of the medieval *horror vacui*. Of course, for the thousands of refugees streaming out of identity/power war zones in Syria, Libya, and Iraq, the uppermost concern is not to show off or hide identity or bits of themselves. Rather, horror boats are packed so tightly you can’t make out individual bodies. No space between them. From one violent center of identity to problematic identity havens in Europe.

My identities proliferate and move rather more quietly than all this. I do not ‘do’ tattoos, clothing markings, or social media. Impertinent these days, I know; I am un-practiced in the art of vivid self-exposure. Still, self from modest circumstances is present everyday, repeatedly steering toward the international relations of ordinary people. She carries the skills and lacks of an only

³ Christine Sylvester, *Art/Museums: International Relations Where We Least Expect It*, (Abingdon and New York: Paradigm, 2009), p. 188.

child. She can be alone. She can also stand alone at a cocktail party wondering how others can possibly find so much to say to complete strangers. She's mobile, global in positions and identifications, more than glancingly aware that global mobility is privileged mobility, and privileged mobility rubs hard against the ordinary. It's an identity contradiction to live with, one that alerts the eye to unexpected juxtapositions –women slashing soybeans outside Harare glimpsed through a Vermeer window in Delft. In the 1814 Lake District house, British husband cooks Indian for PhD students who routinely drop by on Sunday afternoons. Out in Phoenix, New York meets California, ultra conservatives clash with liberal newcomers, and Mexico and Native Nations will not be denied. Throughout, it's important to 'just dance,' lately to the rhythmic rhymes and fast sharp moves of hip-hop. Women rappers answer back to insulting lyrics. A head of Global Studies roller skates along a corridor of Gothenburg U; she writes rap lyrics in her spare time. She's Swedish. Down the coastal highway at Lund, the *mise en scène* is fine ballroom attire and a lengthy award ceremony. Mind drifts. Kigali and the family party of a Rwandan PhD student studying in Sweden. Everyone dancing. Over to Puglia. Ever notice that small alleyways of Tokyo are brilliantly composed? Assyrian reliefs now in London. Yankees games. Dogs with names starting E. Not minor at all: Keith starts up the Devil for the 50th time. Joan Jett and Blackhearts keep a crimson punk reputation. Andy Warhol paints a musical.

Hit the pause button.