Vol. 2. (2), 2016, pp. 117-128

Journal of Narrative Politics

Editor's Interview with Shiera S. el-Malik*

ED: In 'Why Orientalism Still Matters,' you argue that feminist scholars must 'move away from explaining the hidden truth of oppression in order to find potential emancipatory paths.' Orientalism, you argue, is not a phenomenon of culture, but a political move that denies discursive and material relations of power. Insofar as the contemporary academy is situated within (and also to a large extent an expression of) neoliberal relations of power, you ask: what kind of emancipatory and transformative theories and politics might emerge from such an institution? Even critical scholars, you argue, reproduce the tropes of Orientalism, the binaries of neoliberal power relations, and the intellectual domestication of feminism into 'Gender and International Relations.'

At the same time, you talk of the possibilities – the 'shades of grey' and 'conditions of existence' that can emerge from different relations with centers of power. You argue this specifically with respect to Enloe's notion of 'casual forgetting' and Zalewski's insistence that a gender-neutral feminism must be met with suspicion. Can you talk a little bit about the shades of grey that emerge in your own work and thinking on postcolonialism and gender?

SM: One way to think about this is to think about what gets missed when narratives take on clarity of form (stability might be a better word). An example is the link between decolonization and self-determination. There was a point when the meaning of decolonization was not that clear. People argued for self-governance, or different forms of political alliances between peoples and places, including former metropoles. For instance, in the book *Freedom Time*, Gary Wilder shows how Aimé Césaire (Martinque) and Léopold Senghor (Senegal) tried to renegotiate what it meant to think of France and French.[1] He thinks about these cases of 'the future that might have been.' Yet, now when we think about decolonization, the other imaginative possibilities that existed – that might have been – are obscured. The dynamics of power that went into that win are no longer visible. Yusufu Bala Usman offers us another example of a writing of (Nigerian)

---

* Shiera S. el-Malik is an Associate Professor at DePaul University in Chicago where she teaches and writes in the area of colonialism and political thought and international political theory. Selected publications include: 'Subjectivity', in Aoileann Ni Mhurchu and Reiko Shindo, eds. Critical Imaginations in IR (London: Routledge, 2015); 'Why Orientalism Still Matters: Reading "casual forgetting" and "active remembering" as neoliberal contestation in international politics,' *Review of International Studies* 41(3), 2015, 503-525; '*Interruptive Discourses: Léopold Senghor, African Emotion and the poetry of politics,' African Identities* 12(3), 2014, 49-61; *'Against Epistemic Totalitarianism: The insurrectional politics of Bessie Head,' Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 34(4), 2014, 493-505; *'Rattling the Binary: Symbolic power, gender, and embodied colonial legacies,' Politics, Groups, and Identities* 2(1), 2013, 1-16; '*Intellectual Work "In-the-World": Women's Writing and Anti-colonial Thought in Africa,' Irish Studies in International Affairs*, Vol. 24, 2013, 101-120; Shiera S el-Malik, ed., *African Anticolonial Thought of the Twentieth Century*. (London: Routledge, 2016). She can be reached at smalik6@depaul.edu

[1] Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization and the Future of the World*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

history that serves political purposes and shows how distant the emergent narrative was from the struggles that pre-existed its 'win'.[2] This is what I mean by shades of gray and this happens in smaller, interpersonal relations. When I look to upset clear explanation, or when I see competing explanations in which one presents a politics and one is working towards stable consideration (as in the essay that led to your question), I try to examine how these relations work. This matters to me because I think the most violent and consequential conceptions of the world come in the simplest packaging that hides the political work that goes in to making something appear as it does.

Another way to think about this is perhaps to consider what happens when we casually forget.[3] When we casually forget, we make it easier to categorise the world in more clear terms. We make claims about how the world really is or really could be, rather than presenting our interpretation as one plausible explanation. The latter approach helps to keep open the infinite, but not limitless ways of understanding the world. By 'infinite, but not limitless,' I mean to allow for the recognition that ways of understanding the world are contingent and constrained by the historical conditions within which sense-making occurs. With this phrasing, I want to remain aware that historical conditions are also productive and facilitate sense-making in both form and content. So, within specific historical conditions we can imagine infinite ways of understanding the world.

I think the value of such a vantage point is that it can make it easier to see how acts of closing down meaning, or narrowing possibilities are political projects, simply. The question of where we stand in relation to different political projects is something else.

Now, I've come around to your question about the 'shades of grey' that emerge in my thinking on postcolonialism and gender. I think I'd be much less interested in these empirical referents if the political projects to harness meaning around them were less insidious. I want to poke at the power that makes the world appear as it does and to show that appearances of stability are functions of power. And I am concerned that the working of this power is consequential. It matters to actual people in the world, although it matters differently in the daily lives of different people, and in different times and places. As to what emerges as intelligible out of 'shades of grey' or when intelligibility emerges, I have no control. That depends on the interpreter and the context of relations within which interpreting takes place. This lack of control does not bother me because I am not trying to show the world as it is. I am trying to unfix presentations of the world.

ED: As one of those interpreters, how has your writing specifically worked to keep things open?

SM: I have written about people who I think tried to nourish the imaginative renderings of their time and place, but who maintained a clear eye on the politics that tried to foreclose thoughtful imagining. I am drawn to thinkers who try to think outside the boundaries of traditional knowledge like Bessie Head and Léopold Senghor. Specifically, I try to trace their practice while keeping an eye on what I might learn about how to interact with the possibilities embedded in my own engagement. I started looking at African anticolonial thinking towards the end of my PhD writing by a double accident. I like Spivak's comment in 'The Rani of Sirmur' in which she says

[2] Yusufu Bala Usman, *Beyond fairy tales: selected historical writings of Yusufu Bala Usman,* Zaria, Nigeria: Abdullahi Smith Centre for Historical Research, 2006.
[3] Cynthia Enloe, *Forward*, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 9:2, 2005, pp. 183-4..

that she is looking at India because by 'accident of birth' she has acquired some literacy in that area that allows her to use it to engage intellectual inquiry.[4] By accident of birth, I have absorbed some literacy in continental African anticolonial thinking. The second accident was being an adjunct assigned to teach a class on Ideas and Ideologies. I decided to focus on African anticolonial writing as a way to learn about Liberalism, Socialism, Communism, etc. It probably impacted me more than the students! I found that reading imaginative futures of the decolonization moment requires engaging both the 'time' of institutions (worlding practices) and the other 'times' that yield variable forms of relations. I started to think about how 'futures-that-might-have-been' can be intelligible futures, imaginable futures, but they can also be unimaginable futures or futures that are unintelligible to me. This is the kind of openness that I am committed to seeking out. One way I've found to access the potential of these possibilities, even if they are past possibilities is to look at the work of those who tried to remain open to thinkable and unthinkable futures. I am still doing this. I am currently (re)playing with the work of Fanon and Mariama Bâ. I'm really excited to get on with Claudia Jones and others, but I run the risk of having too many pieces of this puzzle on the go at once.

I've also been really lucky to place my writing alongside others who share similar interests. In our collaborative volumes, the claims we are making about different thinkers develop a robustness and I think engages a kind of wild untamed curiosity about the connections we see and the kinds of claims we can make across the boundaries of [common] sense.[5]

ED: Where do you feel you see the most promising spaces for anticolonial thought? Do you think the academy has a role in these thinkable futures?

SM: I am uncomfortable with the idea of contemporary spaces for anticolonial thought. I'd hesitate to conflate critical anticolonial thinking in the early to mid Cold War period and that which constitutes critical thinking, although today there are resonances. The historical conditions for the conversations and political position-taking that we consider 'anti-colonial' are not the same conditions we currently face. Arguably, the anti-colonial moment exhibited greater imaginative possibilities than current neo-liberal conditions. Part of what I was saying in the article we started this discussion with is that neoliberalism penetrates into our scholarly (including postcolonial and feminist) thinking in ways that limit potential criticality. Having said this, reading the critical engagement of anticolonial thinkers with their world tells us something about what critical engagement today might look like. I am saying that we might learn something about the dialectic between thinkers and the world they thought about. One might say that the most promising spaces for critical thinking can be found 'in the streets', so to speak. They exist at the margins and here I'd reference Enloe's wonderful essay 'Margins, Silences, and Bottom Rungs' (which I have found to be an incredibly useful teaching tool).[6] The chapter shows how such critical work can be found in academic work and I think JNP (and other interdisciplinary,

[4] Gayatri Spivak, '*The Rani of Sirmur: An essay in reading the archives*,' *History and Theory* 24 (3), 1985, pp. 247-272, 252.
[5] Shiera S. el-Malik and Isaac Kamola, eds., *Politics of African Anticolonial Archive*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming.
[6] Cynthia Enloe, *Margins, Silences, and Bottom Rungs: How to Overcome the Underestimation of Power in the Study of International Relations,'* in *The Curious Feminist: Searching for Women in a New Age of Empire*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 19-42.

inter-institutional, and inter-national pockets of the Academy – I point to these spaces because oversight is more difficult in these types of sites) is another example of this kind of critical work. We might also think within the academy about who is in the margins. We might consider the dynamic work of some artists, some bloggers, some street activists, some alternative publications, some Tweeps. This is why I got excited reading someone like Bessie Head. I'm currently awash with the poetry of Emtithal 'Emi' Mahmoud and Safia Elhillo. The way they wield language and the dynamics they are able to capture fascinates me.

Generally, though, the Academy's commitments are to institutional reproduction and legitimacy. And contemporary historical conditions include a neoliberal political economy that is shaping academic institutions, promotion and tenure and what counts as scholarly outputs, and it has to be said, largely relies on contingent faculty and very poorly paid staff positions. I am thinking in particular about the cleaning staff at my university (who are mostly women from somewhere else). The university reduced their contracts, so instead of cleaning out offices at the end of every day, they do so only twice a week.

ED: Can you talk a little bit about your own commitments to critical engagement and what this means for you personally?

SM: The one thing I know is that I don't 'know' much. This is a banal statement, but it keeps me uncomfortable. In my late teens and early twenties, I felt hampered by my inability to articulate what I 'knew' intuitively. In the time that has passed, I've learned about the infinite (but again) not limitless kinds of knowing that I might engage and I started to think more carefully about the questions I am asking. There is an art to the struggle of developing queries! I've heard Naeem Inayatullah use the term 'cultivated intuition'. I really like the idea of practicing intuition which becomes cultivated and connected with other practices of listening and thinking and coming to 'know'. For me, this yields a sort of balance between the 'embedded researcher' and the research that is produced. Cultivated intuition might recognize that all researchers of social phenomena are embedded in that social phenomena whether or not it appears to be so.

This yields a sort of 'state of discomfort' that can be interesting. My relationship to it is personal, as it might be for many people, who I've heard describe examples of moments in which their self confronted a world that did not jibe with it. This is a sentiment that resonates with me. The question of who I would become occupied me early on: from watching school bullies tackle the different (the perceived 'weak'), discovering myself to be a girl in Saudi Arabia in relation to police officers, experiencing my brother as a child target of kidnappers also in Saudi Arabia, being Arabised/Muslimised/racialised in a hyper-liberal Chicago neighbourhood, explaining to the dominant girl in school in Chicago that I wore the same LEE jeans daily because those were my trousers, ignoring the constant whispers 'is she black or is she white?', being called a whore at high school in England even though I was a naïve virgin, being told that my English is excellent for someone born in Lebanon, watching cashiers refuse to touch my skin when giving me change in Ireland, to discovering that my PhD dissertation cited many of the same authors my father cited in his PhD dissertation (Psychology). I experienced most of these by the time I was thirteen and so learned early the possibility 'jibing,' of neat and tidy fits, can be rare.

I think the state of discomfort is interesting also because it is ordinary and productive. I understood my experiences as incongruous but ordinary 'facts of life.' I also felt them to be pressures that I needed to navigate carefully in order to avoid losing myself. They were impactful

for how I came to understand myself in-the-world. I've not been able to explain this satisfactorily. I remember finishing eighth grade and telling myself that I needed to make some decisions about where I was headed: how would I cloak and protect myself from the nasty 'politics' of the big school, but still participate. I guess I'm saying that my commitments, such as they are, took shape early on and they did so in an environment where the established frames made little sense to me and for me.

ED: Do you think that your experience and the way you inhabit it was shaped by your family? It is fascinating to discover that your own doctorate and your father's cited the same authors. Can you tell us about those intergenerational connections?

SM: Social relations are immensely complicated, right? They are intersections of world history, discursive dynamics, history of social relationships, interpersonal relations, experiences, emotional relations, and so on. So, I think the answer to your first question of whether my family shaped me is yes and no. My parents are fairly open-minded, socially conservative, and private. I hear their voices in my head as I live my life, or I might put it this way: as I move in the world, I carry their way and I carry ways that they also inherited. Even so, it is important to remember that they came to their personhoods under very different circumstances than I did. I will concentrate on this point here.

Both of my parents are from fairly small places that were isolated when they were growing up. But, my early memories were formed while we lived in graduate student housing in a massive city (Chicago). This context is far removed from the context within which my parents came to make sense of the world and themselves in it. It is one which was multicultural before Multiculturalism was what it came to be, one in which the local public school was decent, but standardized testing had begun, one in which my friends were children of graduate students, or service workers at the U of C, or worked downtown (children of U of C faculty often went to the local private school) in the late 70s and early 80s.

So, not only was I in what to my parents could only have been a metropolis at an unique time in US history, post-Vietnam, post-1973 Oil Crisis, post-Civil Rights, post Black Panthers (I don't know about the extent to which this history entered their lives, but we arrived in Chicago in its aftermath), I also shared a place with children whose family structures were incredibly different than my own (which was also not my parents' experience!). I learned about the very different kinds of order and authority than that which existed in my home. It is funny to remember the things that shocked me. They interrupted my understanding of order and authority related to gender, class, nationality, parental control. I remember a next-door neighbor girl a bit older than me who was allowed to play with boys and not wear a shirt! I still remember my amazement at learning of another one who slept on a mattress on the floor. In. Her. Underwear. (Instead of nightclothes)! I simply could not understand how she stuck chewed pieces of gum on her wall and picked them off occasionally to chew more! Both of her parents were graduate students, I think and her father was the primary-carer, which in retrospect was unusual for the time period. It matters, perhaps, that these kids were 'white' Americans from families who tended to be northern and liberal, for, at the time, there seemed some correlation between that and their relaxed orientations towards authority. These kids seemed 'free'. Other kids were African American, English, Finnish, Thai, Trinidadian, Grenadian or various mixtures. These kids ran when called in to avoid 'the beating' (!), or the appearance of not obeying their parents and

getting in trouble. At least, some kids joked about this then. These were the kids who were learning wily ways of navigating the authority that pressed down upon them. All were transient, as I suppose we also were. But, these were eye-opening experiences for me. I learned about how difficult it is to make sense of things that don't seem to make sense given one's frames of recognition.

These brief notes above are a few examples of what I remember of my childhood reactions of amazement at learning that there are different ways to be in the world that don't necessarily reflect a lack of order or authority, no matter that the kids from stricter families read it in that way. As I said, I sometimes laugh at recalling my honest-to-goodness shock at some of the things I saw, but it was not all simply 'amazing' interactions with different ways of being. Some of them were violent.

We also played with kids in the neighbourhood, from buildings other than ours. This neighbourhood is now completely torn down by the U of C and transformed into its ever-expanding medical center and laboratories. The penetration, though, started early and relations were troubled. When I was about 4, a much older kid stood out in the alley staring at me. I was on the second floor balcony staring at him. He picked up a rock and threw it at me a distance of about 150 feet. It smacked me in the forehead and yielded a vicious purple lump that covered a third of it. My mother just cleaned up the blood. And I remember no more discussion about it. I now connect this with Jon Burge and the both ambient and physical violence that permeated Chicago at the time.

The Jon Burge Police Torture Scandal is an incredible and ordinary case of systematic torture of mostly poor black men in Chicago for about 20 years (primarily 70s and 80s). It is incredible because it came to light, in part because a group of Northwestern Law School students began investing cases of Death Row prisoners and found evidence of innocence and confessions delivered under conditions of torture – a skill Burge honed in the Korean War, apparently. It is ordinary because I think it is not exceptional. I imagine that, although I don't know the extent to which, this formed part of the backdrop of these years. I gather that the torture was widely known. The chair of my department said that he first learned about the torture ring in the 70s when a 'crazy' man was etching into the window of the old #6 Jeffery city bus: 'Jon Burge tortured me.'[7] This tells me something about how we might be listening for evidence of power

[7] After I'd written this, Michael McIntyre told me that I misremembered his story. In the 8 years since I heard it, this is what I remembered. But, here is what Michael said in his email (22 March 2016): 'You remembered the gist of what I told you, but what happened wasn't quite that dramatic. I didn't encounter the guy carving it into the plexiglass. Instead, I saw a flyer wheatpasted to the #6 bus stop right across the street from Kenwood Academy [in Chicago]. The flyer was handwritten, photocopied onto colored paper (I don't remember which color), and had all the stigmata one associates with something produced by someone with mental illness: funky punctuation and layout, sentences that curve around the edges of the page, etc. But I do remember quite clearly that the author said he had been tortured by Jon Burge at Area 2 police headquarters.' I am curious about whether I heard him wrong at the time, or whether I wove in an imagined story over time. At any rate, I don't have time to follow this thread here. Still, it raises questions about the contingency of communications and the perhaps 'randomness' of the way that stories, meanings, experiences, and imagination bleed into one another. Importantly, though, the story exposes the theme of listening and remembering, in particular, the kinds of conveyances that are audible. I do remember that I was teaching Richard Price's *The Convict and the Colonel: A story of colonialism and resistance in the Caribbean* (Durham: Duke, 2006) when Mike first told me the story. Both stories reflect utterances by people who suffered at the hands of central authorities and whose communiques existed outside of the realm of the audible or intelligible, except, perhaps, as examples of mental illness.

dynamics in these kinds of concrete moments.

My father and I talk a lot about relations like this. We talk about people. I think I get from him a matter-of-fact approach to the world (or to the workings of power in the world) that intersects with a sort of anger, and sadness at what people have to do or suffer in the world (at the hands of others), and amusement and excitement at human ingenuity and creativity. I don't know how we came to share citations. I never actually read his dissertation until I finished mine. His vantage point is more traditional social science than mine, and we argue about that. But, I think I inherit from him a sort of extra-ideological viewpoint. I say 'a sort of' because I don't really believe this is possible! But I mean to say that ideological frames are also part of the way we analyse the world. I think he might say he is committed to studying human behaviour. I am committed to studying power (specifically, politics though my remit is wide). I have a load of stories that I can use to show how I learned about relationality from both of my parents, but I'll leave off with this one example from my father.

My father took me to see the movie The Jungle Book. I was quite small, maybe 4 or 5. He explained to me that the movie might be used to explain the important positions of the world. (We were aware of countries early on since we crossed borders and had a diasporic family.) Mowgli is Third World. Bageera is good imperialist. Shere Khan is bad imperialist. The apes are African American. The vultures are cockney. And Balloo is a well-meaning idiot. I'll leave you to guess! Lol. This may not be a radical analysis, but it impacted me greatly to think about all of these positions in relation to each other.

I have not really thought systematically about all of the kinds of mechanisms through which intergenerational connections get made. But I've noticed that what I remember, what I hang on to, as I try to make sense of the things I see, hear, feel, and learn no matter how painful they might be, is the stories that give form to my way of thinking.

ED: This question around 'how we listen' seems so critical to me. It also raises the question of what we can hear. How do you think academics might better begin to listen and what might this mean for our scholarship? What might our scholarship be able to do with a different way of listening?

SM: One way I've found to better listen is to query the frame through which one is listening. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

I've been teaching with James Ferguson's *Global Shadows* in an upper-level undergraduate/graduate course. It is a great collection of essays in which Ferguson is analyzing frames of recognition and positing them as incredibly consequential. He concentrates on the frames that give form to how 'Africa' is made sense of in contemporary global politics. I've been struck by how many students are reading it as a book on Africa and that presents some truths about Africa. One day, I put up a picture of one of Thorton Dial's sculptures.[8] I asked them 'How do you approach a sculpture?' This is what they listed:

title of the piece
historical context
materials/textures/colours/size

[8] http://soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/thornton-dial/work/art-alabama

what is being represented?
who is the sculptor?
what emotions does it evoke?
what is being conveyed?
relationality between components
how it is curated
how do I 'read' it/how do others?
orient myself/walk around it

Then, I asked if they could approach their reading in the same way? This lead to a lengthy conversation in which the consensus started out as 'no'. In a reading, they said, the author is telling you what they are saying, so the need for a process like this one does not exist. Some had taken art classes and gave what amounted to disciplinary boundaries as evidence. Others suggested that since they 'know' how to read they just 'listened' to what the author was telling them. I asked them if writing was a craft? What would it look like to approach their reading as if it was a crafted writing? In the end, we came to some understanding about how we might approach scholarly work as 'art' that we need to come to it as carefully as we would if we were approaching 'art' that we know we don't understand, and as something that might surprise us. I hope that this type of orientation can yield work that centers a kind of complex relationality, in which the epistemic roots of certain frames of recognition can be upset in order to allow other ways of making sense to emerge.

You point to the question of what we can hear, which is an important one. Global power dynamics, along with historically powerful practices of racialising and uneven resource distribution, work to render certain speakers inaudible. Even without these dominant modes of sense-making, it is likely that no single person can see or hear everything. All frames of recognition are limiting in ways consistent with the context/process that constitutes them. Because of this, I'd posit that one of the most important tasks of a scholar is to be clear about the conditions of possibility for the frames that they are using, the frames that they can use, and what these frames allow them to do. The very process of doing this work destabilizes the power of any dominant modes of sense-making. I try to do this in my work, but a lot of people do this really well. One of the most powerful examples that I've been reading and re-reading at the moment is bell hooks' 'Feminism as a Persistent Critique of History,' but arguably most of the work I've mentioned here can be seen as interruptive.[9]

ED: This feels like it liberates the scholar as much as it constrains her. At one level, this changes the basic function of the main corpus and purpose of IR scholarship – namely, its claims to 'know' the world. Do you feel like these constraints (acknowledgement that we cannot 'hear' everything) have an emancipatory potential (we cannot 'hear' everything and so we cannot stretch ourselves into places that we do not already inhabit in some way)? Or are they also possibly the fetters of those who can justify never looking beyond their own beliefs and concerns? Can you talk a little bit about the tension there, if you see a tension at all?

[9] bell hooks, *Feminism as a Persistent Critique of History: What's love got to do with it?*,' Alan Read, ed., *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1996.

SM: I don't think I was trained to understand that my function is to produce claims to 'know' the world, unless maybe I am producing claims about how the world comes to appear through power relations. But, it is difficult to abstract those relations from the context through which the work to make that appearance seem stable and consolidated. IR's claim to 'know' is something I both understand and ignore. It would prevent me from doing the work I want to do. I leapt those hurdles in a hostile department organized around powerful claims regarding what counts as knowledge. And, frankly, I am uninterested in worrying about the discipline from that angle. But, what it is to claim knowledge is a politics, and that I find very interesting indeed! This is precisely the reorientation that I found traction with in the post-9/11 academy and I still present it as an option to students who are trying to create space for them to do what they want to do. Although, as my advisor noted once, I chose the harder road. Nevertheless, I still find exciting the kind of work that interrupts the kind of closures that such 'claims to know' embolden. You are probably correct that some might use a claim about limitations to justify a closed-minded, anti-intellectual provincialism. That is an available political position, i.e. that we cannot know and therefore need not engage others. But the tension between liberty and constraint does not agonise me. That is politics, no?

Also, there are different ways of 'knowing'. Yesterday, I learned that the executors of a nine-year old boy in a Chicago alley actually meant to torture him by cutting off his ears and fingers. Instead, they shot him in the head execution style. I can imagine encountering them. I've encountered people who killed before and I 'know' that people can commit (and do think about committing) horrible acts of violence. Yet, while I can imagine encountering the killers' (in this case) humanity and I am aware that what might be revealed in such an encounter might challenge my thinking if I approach with curiosity, I find it hard to imagine accepting these men's actions in an empathetic way. There are limits to toleration and moral judgments work as kinds of limits. We might see this as a constraint and an unwillingness to engage. We could see it as a political stand. We might see it as a claim to be different than those who participate in acts so horrible that one might lose a way to speak about it. I am suggesting that not everything is acceptable, that people draw lines. These lines may appear different for different people and justified in different times places, and carry the appearance of stability for different lengths of time.

But, coming to terms with the inexplicable or the irresolvable can be a creative, productive, and painful practice. There is nothing to say that tensions need to be resolved. When I was 19, I was friendly with a boy in my college. I knew him as a particularly kind and generous person with a wonderful sense of humour. One day he was troubled. He told me that he was 8 when a 13 year-old local boy raped him. He told me the story and shared his feelings about it before he started sobbing. I just sat with him, listened, and empathized. I remember being aware that he did not seem to feel the release that I would have expected after revealing his pain. The sobbing increased and he burst out that when he was 13, he raped an 8 year-old boy. And there we were. Two 19 year olds wrapped in this horrid story that I think of as a story of violence that continues to live. The point I am making is that irresolution can be understood as a kind of knowing, and perhaps a heart-breaking practice of knowing.

Let me turn to your comment in emancipation. I recently published an essay in which I discuss this question about the responsibility of scholars to avoid foreclosing explanations of behavior. I used as main thread an example of a researcher trying to make sense of people's

response to a movie. This is well-detailed in Norma Moruzzi's 'Notes From the Field'.[10] The abridged version is that she watched an Iranian film that had been heralded as a feminist achievement, but the main character is saved from an abusive marriage by her stalker. This struck Moruzzi as anti-feminist, but as I said the film was touted as an incredible feminist film. She asked and asked and asked about it until she learned that Iranian women read the film as a metaphor of their experiences of the 1979 Revolution. It is noteworthy to me that Moruzzi noted this disconnect. Instead of forcing her conclusions, she subordinated her initial response, kept possibilities open, and listened, until she came to an understanding in relation with those who agreed with the description of the film as feminist.

To the extent that I am concerned with emancipation, I work hard to think about how one can be emancipated from the idea that these power dynamics and tensions are resolvable. This redirects my focus to the relations of power and the kinds of relations that can yield what I might consider to be an honorable humanistic way of relating in the world and to people, which I think Moruzzi displayed in her work. I also really love bell hooks' short essay on feminist critique that I mentioned above. She writes about being put on a feminist panel that was meant to critique Frantz Fanon's patriarchal analyses. She takes several clever turns in this essay, but the most relevant for our discussion here is the way she relates her own literacies and attempts to be a kind and generous reader. I will work backwards here. She learns to see Fanon and her father as people in pain, as people also subject to the alienating power of patriarchal imperialist relations. This acknowledgement allows her to recognize not only their limitations, but also the kinds of interpersonal relations she developed literacy in as a child, i.e. the kinds of relational practices within which she was socialised. Her skill and success at navigating patriarchal relations led her to read Fanon for his liberating ideas instead of feeling blocked by his reproduction of those kinds of relations. She relates that it was growing up scared of her father that helped her developed the capacity to 'duck and roll' in the face of patriarchal blockades. She holds that one must still challenge the limitations of those who work to create imaginative openings, even as their lived experience and training is visible. She is arguing that we can forgive people for their socialisation rather than simply dismiss them for presenting 'imperfect' critical engagements. Indeed, persistent feminist critique, in this sense, is precisely reading with an eye for the embedded connections, which is also generous.

ED: 'Reading with generosity' feels like a very ethically necessary strategy. Perhaps such a strategy can reveal the possibility that there are virtually no people who are not 'in pain'. I do not mean to suggest that we should now flatten or equalize pain (and its attendant oppressions) – on the contrary, it seems to me that this recognition has the capacity for our scholarship to undertake different readings and interpretations, some of which might exist in contradiction or tension. As a final question, what does attention to these ethical landscapes offer to students of international politics?

SM: A generous reading is not simply an ethical reading that starts from an awareness of the human condition and the ways people struggle – from this angle, everybody struggles. It might help to remember that bell hooks is not making an abstract argument. She is writing about the pain of a black, working-class man in Kentucky in the middle of the 20th century. To my mind, an

[10] Norma Moruzzi, *Women in Iran: Notes on film and from the field*, *Feminist Studies* 27(1), 2001, pp. 89-100.

ethical position must account for the historical conditions within which these struggles take place. It must be able to account for the kinds of living we haven't yet acquired access to. It must consider the end goal in order to avoid voyeurism. I think you are right to point out the contradictions and tensions! Why we feel the need to resolve so much of these contradictions is unclear to me. I try to orient myself with an acknowledgement or a reminder of the incredibly rich and varied ways of being and making sense of the world as well as the various sorts of ties that bind. For example, I watched my father and my husband recognize in each other a village-ness. They are two people who ostensibly might never have met. It frequently strikes me as odd that the idea that my father is from a village tends to land with ease, while the idea that my husband is from a village is often met with amusement – Nubia meets Appalachia. Yet, they spoke to each other about outhouses, communal responsibility, religious fundamentalism, education, being the ones who left and got PhDs. They talked about how people really live and experience living in small places. They are interested in how people make sense of the world. It was a sort of translocal recognition, but there were differences also and spaces for learning. I seldom hear scholars of international politics make these kinds of connections.

I think a generous reading also requires honesty about how power works and about where we are located within the dynamics that shape and contour our interactions, but not to give lipservice to positionality as a 'meaningless piety,' as Spivak calls it early in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'[11] Cynthia Enloe talks about feminist curiosity. I might here privilege the term curiosity, for I think it can yield insurrection. Curiosity requires reading and engaging with what is before us. It requires being prepared to be surprised, reading past the author's limitations, searching for new-to-us patterns of communications, literacies, sense-making. I think reading with curiosity is generous, because it challenges the way so many of us read – for what we know. We look for what makes sense to us rather than allow the confusion and complexity stretch us. At ISA 2016, I watched a discussant challenge her panel to read for gender, an audience member challenge the same panel to consider race, and another point to class. I observed a panelist try to point out that gender, race, and class are potentially meaningful in context alongside others like religion and nationality, for example, and that these three might work to hide those other possibilities. Curiosity (and I would say feminist curiosity) encourages readers to be listeners and participants in relations that yield sense-making that we might not have foreseen. So while the above interaction ended with a sort of disengaged heckling, it did not need to be that way.

While I'm talking about how power works, I'll take the opportunity to say that I recently observed one of the worst case of gendered harassment that I've been privy to without being on the receiving end of things. I walked in to a panel session and watched an established scholar whose work I've always loved ask a co-panelist and young-ish recent PhD inappropriate and personal questions. She shrank, looked around and evaded the questions. The more she did that, the more he pushed her to respond. The familiarity suggested to me that they knew each other well, but I asked the person next to me if he thought we were witnessing something strange. It seemed odd to him, too. So, I hollered from the back of the room, who cares if A was dating B or C? Why does he have to be dating anyone? What is this?! No body answered and the panel started. Later, during Q&A another woman asked a question. She spoke using words and hands

[11] Gayatri Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Nelson C. and Grossberg L. eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 271-313, 1988.

gestures. As she said something like 'in the hands of', this same senior male scholar interrupted and asked 'Do you mean these big hands?' which I read in the context of the recent US Republican presidential primary debate; Donald Trump responded to a comment about the size of his hands (and therefore his penis?). The woman said, 'Sorry, wrong choice of words,' and immediately redirected herself and her question. It was skillful. This was a form of gendered bullying. The female audience member basically punched him back artfully, which is what we must do to bullies. (I later learned that the familiarity was entirely one-sided, and that the co-panelist felt herself to be in a weak position.) These examples/experiences can be read as the embodiment of gendered inequalities, one brought to bear in concrete situations but nonetheless constitutive of more widely dispersed patterns of inequality. They reflect the relationship of everyday world politics and ordinary daily practices in places of scholarship such as ISA panel sessions. I note this here to say that I find that power and responses to power are dynamics out of which we cannot extricate ourselves.