Interview – Laura Shepherd

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Laura J. Shepherd is a Professor of International Relations in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Sydney. Laura is the current President of the International Studies Association (2023–2024), a former Australian Research Council Future Fellow (2018–2020), and has been a Visiting Senior Fellow at the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security in London, UK, since 2016. Laura's primary research focuses on the United Nations Security Council's 'Women, Peace and Security' agenda and its attendant dynamics of security, gender, and violence. Laura has undertaken research investigating logics of gender and space in UN peacebuilding discourse and examining advocacy around, and implementation of, the Women, Peace and Security agenda at global, national, and local levels. Laura's Australian Research Council Future Fellowship research investigated the relationship between the Women, Peace and Security agenda and efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism, with a specific focus on Australia, Sweden, and the UK. Laura is particularly interested in feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial approaches to world politics and she has strong interests in pedagogy and popular culture. Laura is author/editor of several books, including, most recently *The Self and Other Stories: Being, Knowing, Writing* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023) and *Narrating the Women, Peace and Security Agenda: Logics of Global Governance* (Oxford University Press, 2021). She spends too much time on Twitter, where she tweets from @drljshepherd.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

This is such an interesting question! First of all, it presumes that I have a "field", and I'm never sure exactly what that means, or rather how I would identify myself or my field. I often refer to myself as "ill-disciplined" in many ways, and this makes it hard for me to tell a straightforward story about who I am as a scholar and where I call "home". My undergraduate degree was in social anthropology and I completed double Honours in feminist anthropology and cultural studies (this sounds much more impressive than it actually is – in reality I barely scraped an Upper Second class degree so perhaps I should have put more energy into a single project rather than dividing my efforts in this way!). It wasn't until I went back to postgraduate education some years later that I learned it was possible to specialise in the study of international relations, which I did, in my Master's program. It was actually a combined program with a fifty per cent gender studies component, which was perfect for me because it allowed me to continue to explore debates in feminist theory and gender studies and to engage with global politics from that perspective. Since then, I completed a PhD in international relations, and all my academic appointments have been in international relations, so I guess international relations (IR) is my field, but I very much feel like an outsider a lot of the time, because I bring both a feminist and an anthropological sensibility to my IR work.

This history definitely informs my views on the most exciting research happening in IR at the moment. I have been delighted to engage with some of the recent feminist work on care and kinship: I am thinking particularly here of contributions by Sara Motta, Roxani Krystalli and Phillip Schultz, and Marie Berry, and I recently had the distinct privilege of working with Q Manivannan and others to think through the politics and ethics of care in our world(s), to "celebrate spaces and practices of caring resistance, and speculate hopeful futures in the discipline of global politics". Many people I know are tired, and in need of additional care, and this cannot help but resonate through our personal-political-professional lives in challenging ways – ways that we have to reckon with for our own survival and to sustain our ability to care for our selves and the others with whom we are entangled. I feel very fortunate to have these thinking resources to draw on.

The other field of scholarship from which I am learning a lot at the moment explores decolonial encounters in/with world politics. Some of these are deeply personal – like an utterly beautiful recent essay by my friend and colleague Monika Barthwal-Datta – and some focus their critique on the discipline and its adherents. I have enjoyed recent essays by Ahmad Rizky Mardhatillah Umar and Maïka Sondarjee and Nathan Andrews on this topic, and there are brilliant works from the last few years that have been profoundly influential on developing my thinking here, notably contributions by Meera Sabaratnam, Robbie Shilliam, and Olivia Rutazibwa. Of course, the insights offered by these brilliant thinkers have real resonance in my context, a place now known as Australia, where I live and work on land stolen from Aboriginal communities, and I have been trying to educate myself about decolonial movements and Indigenous knowledges since moving here in 2011 (Morgan Brigg, Mary Graham and Martin Weber published an extraordinarily good essay on this topic in 2021, which I recommend to everyone and teach with in my undergraduate IR classes now). I am working on a couple of projects now that have benefited enormously from engaging with these important debates and I am grateful to my collaborators and interlocutors who share this commitment to politically engaged scholarship on decoloniality from within the settler-colony we variously call "home".

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

In some ways I think my understanding of the world has changed a lot, and then in other ways I feel like I still see the world the way I did when I was younger. Growing up in South London, I was aware of feminist politics and racial politics from an early age. The first Brixton uprising against racist and heavy-handed policing of Black men and boys was in 1981; I can remember fires and police lines and a feeling of being on edge, of confusion. My mum and her partner both taught in a local secondary school for kids with learning and behaviour support needs; most of the kids they taught had been involved with the police, or had family who had been involved with the police, and it seemed, in my house at least, that the uprising was a tragic and violent inevitability, a product of how society treated – continues to treat – Black men and boys. Racial politics were spoken about openly in my house, and the interplay between race and gender that informed the 1981 uprising and then the 1985 violence that followed has always been a part of how I make sense of the world.

That said, my attentiveness to race was inconsistent in my professional and intellectual life and I regret that. I didn't make space for analysis of race in my early work, which was very much focused on gender as a relation of power and which drew primarily on feminist theory. I read feminist postcolonial scholars, of course, and I talked a little about race as a vector of power, but it is only in more recent work that I have begun to sit with questions about the privileges of Whiteness, and epistemic Whiteness in the discipline, and the functions and effects of colonisation and coloniality. I mentioned in my response to the previous question that I now teach about decoloniality and Indigenous knowledges, but what I didn't add is that I discuss these themes in the first substantive week in the undergraduate Introduction to International Relations unit that we offer at the University of Sydney. I've always taught in this kind of unit (I love teaching first year undergraduate students, I learn so much!) and the development of how I teach it really does reflect my own intellectual growth and continued learning.

Why is a gendered lens crucial in the security field and in what areas would you like to see it applied further?

I think it is pretty well established now that gender matters in global politics (I have published a book with that title that's now in its third edition!), which includes peace and security. It's by no means the case that everybody working in peace and security institutions accepts the extent to which gendered power operates in peace and security settings, but there are now institutional structures and commitments that make it quite hard to just ignore the gendered dimensions of any peace or security initiative. People identify with different genders and experience their bodies differently depending on their gender identity; that is just a part of being human. The fact that peace and security initiatives involve humans who are inevitably embodied – and who therefore express and experience gender – is relatively uncontroversial these days, I think. Similarly, the idea that different groups of humans (women, men, non-binary people, etc.) have different needs and interests is not that hard to grasp and even in peace and security settings has begun to inform action.

There is a lot of talk, however, about intersectionality, which I think *can* be hard to grasp – or at least, grasp effectively. To me, continuing to push for more inclusive practice in peace and security requires recognising the differences within groups: not all women, for example, have the same needs and interests, because systems of discrimination intersect to position different women differently in any given context. But all too often, intersectionality is used in a way that makes oppression seem additive, or layered, rather than what I understand to be the intention of the concept, which is to draw attention to the way that the forms of oppression are impossible to disentangle. So an "intersectional lens" isn't satisfied with splintering women into ever smaller groups according to categories of exclusion, but rather seeks to understand how, *in a given situation*, vectors of power are combining – intersecting, if you will – to produce how each individual is "read" or interpreted by others and the impact this has on their agency in that situation. I would like to see much deeper and more reflective reckoning with this in the peace and security sector – and one of the key vectors of power remains gender/sex, within which I would include sexuality. The heteronormativity that underpins a huge amount of peace and security programming is rarely interrogated and I would like to see the exciting work being done by scholars of queer theory, such as Jasbir Puar, Rahul Rao, and Cynthia Weber leveraged and harnessed to have practical impact (noting, of course, the important contributions that people like Jamie Hagen, Cai Wilkinson, and Anthony Langlois have already made).

Which developments in the "Women, Peace and Security" agenda have been the most significant?

To me, the most exciting work on the Women, Peace and Security agenda that's happening now is focussing on how people engaged in peacebuilding and conflict prevention at the community level are leveraging the agenda (or ignoring it completely) in the peace work that is their everyday lives. I suppose this can be broadly considered in terms of "localisation" but it is more than that to me: it is about recognising that the agenda was driven by people like these, people – most often women – who work in and with their communities to build peace, and that actually these are the people to whom WPS actors should be accountable, even though we often describe it as "the United Nation's Women, Peace and Security agenda" (or I do, at least!). It was a coalition of women who carried the impetus of the agenda from Beijing to Windhoek to New York in 2000 and these women had lived experience of conflict and its aftermath. The placement of "women and peace and security" on the agenda of the UN Security Council in 2000 – the seemingly inconsequential move from which the sprawling ecosystem of the agenda was seeded – was spurred and supported by people working in communities to foster peace, and we as scholars and analysts need to remember that. As I have written elsewhere:

One particularly significant contribution to this debate was Soumita Basu's analysis of the erasure of interests, voices, and knowledges from the Global South in the WPS agenda and the domination of the agenda by the interests, voices, and knowledges from the Global North (Basu 2016). The spatial and locationary politics of the WPS agenda are thus implicated in the production of knowledge about the agenda, and important post-colonial critiques have been leveled at the WPS agenda's reproduction of colonial hierarchies and its ignorance of – or lack of interest in – the impact of these hierarchies (Parashar 2019, 830–831; see also: Pratt 2013; Martín de Almagro 2018, 7–8).

Contributions to scholarship on WPS that are attentive to space, race, place, and power, that are careful to situate concepts in context, and that are committed to building connections and relationships through research and practice are, to my mind, the most significant and also the most exciting.

You have recently published *The Self, and Other Stories: Being, Knowing, Writing.* What prompted you to write a personal account of your life as a researcher and your writing journey in academia?

To be honest, I didn't really know what the book was about until I started writing it. I'm not sure I intended for it to be so personal a narrative and I certainly didn't realise that it was mostly about writing until I had drafted several of the essays and I began to reflect on the threads that helped them cohere. My first attempt at autoethnographic writing was eventually published in the journal *Critica Contemporanea*, as part of a special issue curated by Elizabeth Dauphinee and Paulo Ravecca (this article was later reprinted as chapter 3 of *The Self, and Other Stories*). I wrote most of that essay while on sabbatical in the UK and I presented it for the first time at a seminar hosted by the Department of Gender Studies at the LSE; I was completely terrified in a way that I had not felt while presenting my work for a very long time, and I can remember thinking that this was either a very good, or a very bad, sign. I think I

was looking for a way to avoid feeling stuck. I went into that sabbatical period feeling like a well running dry – like any attempt to think through ideas for new projects was skimming scant fresh water off the surface and risked churning up the sludge of old ideas to repackage and republish, and that was going to be a problem. Looking back, I was living with a form of burnout, but instead of resting I gave myself this different creative outlet, as a way of jumpstarting my research activities for the next few years. It worked, for a while, and it produced this book in the end, which is a little unusual (though it is also a love letter to the work of others who write in this register, including Elizabeth Dauphinee, Paulo Ravecca, Naeem Inayatullah, and Roxani Krystalli) and was refreshing, if sometimes difficult, to write. (If you haven't yet read the book, and are interested in doing so, it is free to download from the "Features" tab on the webpage)

Can you outline the value of the autoethnographic method? What place does autoethnographic literature have in world politics and in your field?

Having come to IR by way of anthropology, I brought with me an understanding of all "social science" (and we can put aside the debates about exactly what that means for now) as a form of people-writing (ethno-graphy). More than that, or perhaps because of that, I also brought a deep commitment to reflexive practice in my scholarship. To me, this means considering how my self as a researcher shapes and forms the choices that I make in research design and execution at every stage, from the inception of a research question (which usually starts as the glimmer of an issue that pulls at my consciousness and makes me wonder and want to know more) to the "collection of data" (which in most of my work can involve anything from curating collections of documents to co-producing oral histories, via more conventional interviewing or less conventional conversational encounters in which I am both participant and observer) and its analysis. Because this sensibility has always informed my work, it was a very small step to bring autoethnography within reach.

Having said all that, I don't know that it's my place to justify the use of autoethnographic method in world politics, really. I'm a dilettante in this area, a newcomer to the craft, and while I revel in the freedom it affords me, I am painfully aware that I have written my share of stilted sentences that pass as science and paid my dues and it is probably that experience that allows me the freedom I enjoy, rather than the mode of writing itself. But one thing that brings me joy is how much courage colleagues have now – the doctoral and postdoctoral researchers I work with these days are so much braver than I was (than I am, most of the time!) and that is something in which we can all delight, because it means that they are pushing boundaries and writing what they want to write and writing the way they want to write and so I suspect we'll see a lot more creative methodologies in the future, which can only be a good thing.

In chapter three of your book, you state that you find solace and purpose in identifying as a feminist and as an academic. Could you elaborate on how that helps you direct and focus your research and writing?

I had to go back and find the location in the text where I talked about finding solace in these identities, and I think it's worth noting that in that passage I am not writing so much about *being* these things, but rather *how* being these things constitutes and guides me. I wrote:

It is in these affective connections that I find solace, even purpose; they enable me in ways that I cannot fully comprehend. Being a feminist, being an academic: these are relational identities for me, subject positions that cannot exist—not only philosophically but also in material, embodied sense—without others, but not others against whom to define myself but others with whom I can navigate these insecurities and explore the silences in the account that I give of my self.

It is interesting because when I first read the question, my first thought was that these identities only provide solace and purpose insofar as they bring me into community with others. So I am glad to see that is in line with what I originally wrote!

So much of research and writing is touted as being an individual enterprise, but there is no element of my research and writing that is not nourished by, and better for, the communities to which I belong, the communities that sustain

me and challenge me to do better, and which hold me up and hold me to account. Lorgia García-Peña wrote an incredible, powerful book called *Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Colour*, which I believe everyone working in the academy should read. Obviously, I am not a woman of colour and I am in no way trying to appropriate García-Peña's experiences, nor insert myself into the community for whom she writes. But the formation of community is a political undertaking and there is a connection there in our experiences. As I wrote later in that same chapter:

I need to narrate my self in relation to my multiple others, in relation to our encounters, in order to understand the quality and texture of those connections, and to understand how they will continue to nourish me. This is a transformation of community: to ask that we as a community nurture and nourish each other not only in an abstract sense, by practicing hope and kindness, but in the very concrete sense of recounting – or accounting for – our selves as we are constituted in our encounters and how, as such, we are – I am – never individual, never alone.

The solace and purpose is in those encounters, those connections, and in what we can build in community, as a shared endeavour. This is as true for my understanding of feminism as it is for my understanding of academia.

How has your relationship with academia evolved over the years and where does it stand at today?

Well, I don't think I would have conceived of the answer to the previous question in the same way twenty years ago as I do today. I think I bought into the myth of meritocracy in academia for far too long; when I started my PhD program, I was craving a way to prove my worth to myself, as a women in my mid-20s with a sucking vacuum where my self-esteem should have been, and what better way to do that than to achieve professional plaudits in a notoriously competitive industry, in which everyone tells you repeatedly that only the best can succeed? Of course, this is nonsense. I wish I hadn't believed it then and I wish people would not perpetuate this myth now. It is good to be good, as the saying goes, but it is better to be lucky – and better still to be White, English-speaking, elite-educated, cis-gender and just the right combination of desperate and disconnected, so that you're willing to move halfway round the world for the right job opportunity (as I was in 2010 when I moved from Birmingham, UK, to Sydney, Australia).

I referred to academia as a "death cult" in *The Self, and Other Stories*, and I was only half joking. I still think the best piece of mentoring advice I ever received was that the institution will never love you back. I spent a lot of time trying to prove that advice wrong – to make myself indispensable, to make myself known, to make myself into something I thought I was lacking. In that process, I made a lot of bad decisions and I am still ashamed of how poorly I treated people at times. But I am committed to using whatever platform and privilege I have now to be honest about the toll that the myth of meritocracy takes on disciplinary neophytes, and to try and foster more hospitable spaces in which people can flourish in joy instead of waiting fearfully for the next rejection or piece of negative feedback. All of my work now is collaborative, and I try to direct all of the resources I can access to benefit those who enjoy less institutional privilege than I (and many of my peers) do. It's an ongoing and imperfect process, but it makes the work feel moderately more meaningful than chasing individual recognition.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations and Politics?

The best advice I have for scholars of politics and international relations is pretty much the best advice I have for all humans: take care of yourselves and your people; be generous; and meet people with grace. I have singularly failed at all three at various times throughout my career – the fact that I am currently living with burnout and using sick leave provisions to work part-time because my poor depleted brain simply cannot cope with a full day's work is testament to my failure at the first – but these are my current aspirations, because these reflect the kind of academic community I want to see us build together, for our shared future. Generosity is not just about resources; it is about generosity of spirit, of accommodating and welcoming with love even those people and ideas that challenge us. Meeting people with grace similarly means understanding that we do not have access to the interior lives of the people with whom we are entangled or whom we encounter in our work. I think generally it is good advice to try to extend the maximum possible good faith in our professional lives – as in our personal lives, I suppose. I try to remember that we are all

flawed and imperfect humans doing the best we can; that's all we can ask of each other, and the most that anyone can ask of us.