



Samting Nating: Pacific Waves at the Margins of Feminist Security Studies

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Forum: The State of Feminist Security Studies: Continuing the Conversation. This forum comprises seven pieces conceived in response to the recent *Politics & Gender* Critical Perspectives section that featured contributions from Carol Cohn, Valerie Hudson, Jennifer Lobasz, Laura Sjoberg, Ann Tickner, Annick Wibben, and Lauren Wilcox (*P&G* 2011, Vol. 7, Issue 4). Throughout, we refer to this collection as “the CP section.”

Keywords: Pacific islands, feminism, security studies

Taking the idea of “continuing the conversation” literally, we structure our dialogue with subheadings from the Tok Pisin language of Papua New Guinea (PNG), our region’s most populous and resource-rich nation, on the world’s second largest island. Although the two of us call Fiji home, and have family ties to other Pacific Islands, this hybrid language represents both our thinking and mixed heritages well and is a reminder of Claire’s student days in PNG.

Samting Nating

Teresia Teaiwa: Recent articulations of feminist security studies (FSS) suggest that the Pacific Islands are geo-politically marginal to the field. How can feminists still be reproducing such hierarchies of knowledge and authority in the twenty-first century? But maybe hierarchies are endemic to the field of Security Studies? Carol Cohn famously documented how spending time with defense intellectuals can lead to their views of the world rubbing off on even the most conscientiously critical analyst (Cohn 1987). Should we lament the lack of a coherent body of Pacific Island FSS or count ourselves fortunate to have avoided such a biased view of what is worth knowing?

Claire Slatter: It would be interesting to pull together all of the published and unpublished writings of Pacific Island feminists over the years.

TT: Vanessa Griffen’s chapter in *Sisterhood Is Global* documented the beginnings of Pacific Island women’s formal engagement with the international women’s rights movement (Griffen 1984). From the heights of the 1970s and 1980s anti-nuclear movement, especially the protests against nuclear testing in the Marshall Islands and French Polynesia, through the “events” in New Caledonia, the decade-long civil war in Bougainville, successive military coups in Fiji, and civil

unrest in Solomon Islands, Pacific Islands, women have been actively critiquing and reclaiming concepts of “security.”

CS: And numerous conference papers produced by Pacific women over the last 40 years have not found their way into the public domain. If we gathered these together, we might find that a coherent body of Pacific Island FSS does exist, even if we have never named or claimed it as such. And there’s the rub—none of us sought to define or to claim expertise in an academic subfield on the basis of our historical experience and sustained critique of militarism and “super-power” and “big brother” politics in the region. But maybe we should recognize FSS as a diverse field of knowledge?

TT: That’s an important point you make about how the work which might constitute a body of Pacific Island FSS hasn’t been translated into a professional field of expertise.

CS: We may be marginal, or *samting nating*, to mainstream FSS as presently constructed, but we take a close interest in the work of feminist IR scholars like Jindy Pettman, Ann Tickner, Christine Sylvester, Hilary Charlesworth, Bina D’Costa, and Katrina Lee-Koo. We appreciate and often share their analyses of global issues. Most Pacific feminist scholars would identify with Carol Cohn when she writes, “my motivation centers on problems in the world I want to change—not on a field of academia I want to change” (Cohn 2011:583).

Samting Wankain

TT: Claire, your work on neoliberalism reminds us that Pacific Islanders are not only obliged to learn about events in the rest of the world so that we understand how they might affect us, but simply because we should care about people elsewhere (Slatter 2006a,b, 2010; Slatter and Underhill-Sem 2009).

CS: I owe my global consciousness to DAWN (Development Alternatives with Women for a New era). DAWN’s concerns about security are shared by ordinary people all over the globe who are affected by the same forces of unbridled capitalism, militarism and war, land grabs and resource plundering, and various forms of fundamentalism. In a 1997 article on climate change, Suliana Siwatibau, veteran Fiji feminist activist, challenged those of us in the South who ritually accuse the North of unsustainable consumer excesses. She wrote: “Yet many people in the North are just as vulnerable and powerless as the people from the South, and many people from the South live just as unsustainably as do those from the North. The issue of justice is not so much an issue between nations or regions as an issue between those people who gain from the exploitative systems that drive our development, and those who are the victims of those systems. The challenge is not to look at nations, but to look at systems and at the relationships of people with these systems” (Siwatibau 1997:167). This kind of discourse unites people working to change the world. This is our *samting wankain*—our similarity.

Because we don’t have the resources to undertake primary research on conflicts and war in other parts of the world and their implications for both development and global security, we appreciate the analyses of feminist IR scholars shared at conferences in our region. At the 2005 Otago Foreign Policy School (FPS), Christine Sylvester expressed concerns about the exclusion of any reference to the minimization of conflict and the injury and suffering inflicted by states on their own citizens and others. This struck a chord with those of us from the region concerned about recent experiences of militarism and military repression within Pacific Island states. Her suggestion that states in general had become “the creators of human security disasters” and her rhetorical question

“How can MDGs be achieved in the midst of ongoing violence?” were boldly directed at developing states, Pacific Islands states included, and in a manner familiar to inside critics (Sylvester 2009) It was also heartening to hear Hilary Charlesworth at the same Otago FPS, questioning the short-term “military form of security” and emphasizing that longer-term sustainable security depends on conditions of economic and social justice, as well as the absence of violence (Charlesworth 2005). Her analysis resonates with our own (Slatter 2001; Teaiwa 2008).

Saming Narakain

CS: The security of Pacific Island people has long been placed at risk by a variety of forces, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. There is much in the region to engage and teach feminist security scholars who are prepared to shift their gaze from the center to the periphery or margins.

TT: You are making me realize that we have engaged and can continue to engage with any version of FSS on our own terms. You’re also making me reconsider the wisdom of taking a combative approach to challenging the epistemological biases and marginalizing practices of those whom we might otherwise consider friends and allies.

Things *are* different—*saming narakain*—in our region. For one thing, we have more water and ocean than any other part of the world. I have tried in the past to theorize about the “fluidarity” (as opposed to solidarity) that is evident in much of the praxis I admire in first-wave Pacific Island feminists like you, Claire (Teaiwa 2005). Your contributions to this dialogue abundantly demonstrate this ethos once more, and I am both humbled by and proud of it. *Tenkyu tru*. Thank you.

CS: *Tenkyu tumas*, Tere. It is always a privilege to dialogue with you.

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