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On the necessity of critical race feminism for women, peace and security

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ABSTRACT

This intervention is concerned with whiteness as central to the operation of women/gender, peace and security in academic settings. That is, G/WPS in universities is founded on white authority and expertise and consistently orients itself from the privileged viewpoint of the global north. Through two brief examples, I show how the generation of research on G/WPS consistently centres and relies on white starting points, in order to convey the 'necessity' of G/WPS in the university and to government funders. In doing so, the use of critical race theories and Black feminist concepts, as well as the presence of Black scholars, remains marginal.

'If whiteness is what the institution is oriented around, then even bodies that do not appear white still have to inhabit whiteness' (Ahmed 2012, 41).

This year sees the equal celebration and criticism of all that is associated with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. On the one hand, marking the 20 years that have passed since the inception of 1325 signals that issues regarding gender, peace, and security (GPS) have steadily remained on the global humanitarian agenda and to some extent in the public spotlight. On the other hand, increasing contestations over different aspects of the United Nations-centred Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, from activists and grassroots organisations calling out superficial and empty-handed state promises and academics challenging gendered and sexed binaries, colonial hangovers, and the continued dominance of global north-centred programming, has meant that 1325 and related resolutions remain problematic in the eyes of many feminists, in particular (Shepherd 2016; Pratt 2013; Wright 2020; Martin De Almagro 2018; Holvikivi and Reeves 2020). While the numerous collections of essays published in the last years attempt to address the more critical interventions in debates about protection, prevention, participation, and postconflict reconstruction, drawing on a variety of theoretical traditions such as 'continuums', 'variations', and 'political economies' alongside more recent uses of queer and postcolonial theories (Hagen 2016; Parashar, Davies, and True 2016; Jauhola 2016; Achilleos-Sarll 2020; Shepherd 2020), there lacks an interrogation of GPS and WPS from the perspective of intersectional and critical race theorists. What can we learn about peace and security from critical race feminism (CRF), and how is this vital to thinking and acting for the next 20+ years?

I start from the argument that whiteness is central to the operation of WPS as a normative and political practice because of its current manifestation in, and from, global governance *institutions*. However, I illustrate the foundational aspects of whiteness and the WPS agenda by focussing on academic settings. I put forward the argument that GPS/WPS in universities is a white knowledge project which consistently centres knowledge from the geo-epistemic home of the global north (see Haastrup and Hagen this issue).[1] It is also characterised and emboldened by white authority and

expertise reflected by the domination of academic publications by scholars in departments of International Relations, International Law, and Strategic and Security Studies (rather than in departments of Peace and/or Gender Studies, for example). As Parashar argues in recent work, the 'intellectual economy of WPS privileges normative whiteness and the voices of western feminists who command resources, claim expertise and advance theories to understand conflict outside of the global north.' (Parashar, Davies, and True 2020, 24). This is evident in a multitude of ways in academia and university spaces: the domination of junior and senior white faculty researching and teaching on GPS/WPS (Monash, Georgetown, PRIO; LSE[2]); the content of syllabi, much of which reflects the ubiquity of white and/or global north authors (even especially in reflexive and internalised critiques of the field of WPS itself); and, finally, the range of speakers at events sponsored by universities and other similar research institutions – many of which continue to include women of colour, but often and importantly, simply as what Parashar calls 'case studies'– appearing frequently as practitioners, activists, artists, but virtually never as faculty. While, as my own presence attests, there are a range of activists and scholars representing diverse perspectives and faculty of colour working in these institutional spaces, yet there is a clear absence of Black feminists and Black academics as well as Indigenous and Aboriginal scholars. As bodies already 'out of place' because they do not constitute the 'somatic norm' in university settings (Puwar 2004), Black, Indigenous and people of colour (BIPOC) faculty are almost never 'incorporated' into the GPS/WPS intellectual project as agents of knowledge and expertise. This is especially problematic considering that so much of the WPS agenda is seemingly interested in what I call *womenoverthere*[3]–women ethnicised and/or racialised as the archetypal victims of conflict and armed violence, many of whom feature on the front pages of UN and other governance promotional material or on the cover of academic publications, too. This is a jarring differential in representational terms when considering the politics of speaking, knowledge production, and resources for academic research and practice. It is as if BIPOC faculty cannot simultaneously be the knowers *and* the objects of knowledge – they cannot be the repositories of GPS/WPS knowledge and also those in charge of crafting the field, embodying the expertise and speaking authoritatively (see Haastrup and Hagen; Pan; this issue). This is one of the ways in which whiteness is not only foundational to GPS/WPS, with its longstanding connections to the fields of IR and Law (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020; Sabaratnam 2020), but also productive of the dividends associated with academic capital accumulation. And amongst the diverse feminist approaches to, and within, GPS/WPS, why have the feminist political economy theorists not considered this lopsided division of labour, production and representation in academia? Why have the 'erasures and marginalisations' been reproduced in this new formation of institutional feminism and academic gender, peace, and security? (Parashar 2020, 24; choi this Forum; D'Costa this Forum).

I briefly reflect on some recent developments to think through the argument that the academic forms of GPS/WPS are founded and emboldened by whiteness. I consider the adoption of CRF within GPS/WPS spaces as an opportunity for discussion on the necessity of taking seriously such theories as intersectionality; in strengthening an understanding and commitment to anti-racism that should be a central part of any gender, peace, and security academic organisation and of paying attention to what Black feminist scholars are saying outside of the conventional disciplines interested in conflict (D'Costa this Forum). GPS/WPS inspired by 'empathetic cooperation' (Sylvester 1994) could exercise a broader form of reflexivity and engage in decolonising and anti-racist practices more directly, perhaps by paying attention, minimally, to what peace and security looks like when the starting point is not with women or gender in the singular. However, my experience is that there is a deep reticence in doing this work and making space – as there is in almost any part of the neoliberal university. In the two examples I present below, I suggest that both point to the necessity of CRF for discussions of gender, peace, and security and for countering the 'thick suffocating fog of whiteness' (Lewis and Hemmings 2019).

Two recent blog-posts put forward intersectionality in relation to discussions of 1) survivor-centred approaches to conflict-related sexual violence[4] and 2) women's violence and the law in

considering the case of Shamima Begum.[5] Both of the posts address key concerns for WPS scholarship, and *touch* on issues of intersectionality in order to highlight the ways in which gender alone, as a single-axis, is insufficient to understand the challenges that women affected by conflict (or any woman's life, for that matter) face in everyday life. The posts demonstrate that when intersectionality is invoked, it is impossible to pay attention to sexism as the primary structure and system of oppression. More importantly, the posts go some way in exposing the interlinkages and interdependence of systems of power and make visible those individuals and groups *multiply* marginalised by conflict and postconflict processes. But in rotating attention towards those affected by conflict by applying an 'intersectional analysis' or intersectionality as a 'heuristic device', there is no accountability for using Black feminist theories without [the presence of] Black women (Nash 2008, 2017; Bilge 2013; Hancock 2007), a key concern of intersectionality scholars more recently. White feminist academia recircles when it is able to capitalise on black feminist theories without challenging the foundations of power as they are reflected in universities.

Intersectionality is a radical concept that originates in the context of black feminist and critical race theories, Black women's lived experiences, and as an epistemic intervention in gender studies itself. Intersectionality points to the fact that experiences are never determined only by one system of oppression, such as patriarchy, but are intersected by capitalism and racism, resulting in multiple and cumulative effects of structural disadvantage. This theory has an obvious appeal for those thinking through the complexity of experiences in conflict and postconflict contexts as it allows an examination of the multiple layers that structure women's (and men's) lives. But what happens when critical Black feminist theories are introduced into GPS/WPS contexts as I demonstrated above? What is the transformative value of such critical theories in the absence of broader forms of inclusivity and equality? An important point to note: Black women faculty and scholars are conspicuously absent in these spaces and discussion. In this way, intersectionality comes to *stand in* for Black women (Bilge 2020), and ends up being a *technology* that draws attention to differences but without challenging inequalities in both conflict zones and academic settings. Thus, intersectionality without Black faculty, tells us something about the ongoing production of white epistemic power. To adapt Cynthia Enloe's words, I ask 'Where are the Black women in WPS/GPS?' (see also D'Costa this issue asking 'Where are the Kalpanas?').

Another example. On the 21st of October 2020, in response a general debate on Black History Month being held by Members of Parliament, the UK Government's Equalities Minister Kemi Badenoch took to the despatch box to describe critical race theory (CRT) as 'an ideology that sees my blackness as victimhood and their whiteness as oppression'.[6] This is a seemingly opposite example of the ways in which critical race theories are being mobilised. In this situation, the party in power is publicly sidelining, marginalising, and stigmatising the use of CRT as part of the domestic curriculum. Terms such as 'white privilege' are mentioned here, as examples of racially 'biased' teaching in schools. Vouched for by a Black MP and Minister, the video clip had a ripple effect across social media sites. What is the impact of such official stands in relation to critical theories and how might this lead to the narrowing of reforms within the academic and practitioner spaces of GPS/WPS? As I view intersectionality as a foundational part of CRT, I wonder what effect this is bound to have on academic spaces more broadly, as well as institutional centres of women/gender, peace, and security, more specifically. What is the future of academic research and teaching in GPS/WPS if the general political atmosphere is hostile to such social justice theories? Under what c/Conservative expectations, and on what terms, are academic Centres of GPS/WPS established and produced? What kind of curricula and subsequent academic culture should we expect to see when right-wing parties in power support the institutionalising of GPS/WPS (as has been the case in at least two of the sites named above)? What white political foundations and figures haunt the academic conversations, grant proposals and appointments of professors?

If such academic fields make their life through the same ideas of race and civilisation as traditional academic disciplines (Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020; Sabaratnam 2020) what are the consequences for those practitioner communities (or communities of practice) that

institutionalised forms of GPS/WPS are speaking to? If critical race feminist theory is used without attention to a politics of representation or stigmatised and banned by political parties, what space is there for activists and grassroots organisations to challenge the ongoing epistemic dominance of global north institutions?[7]

I use these brief examples to show how the generation (or evolution) of research and teaching on GPS/WPS continues to centre whiteness in a number of ways. As academic homes of GPS/WPS continue to 'talk with' state governments for exclusive consultancy contracts, access to the global stage, and humanitarian celebrities, BIPOC faculty remain a small minority. This 'white fog' contributes to a depoliticisation of GPS/WPS in academia and maintains white privilege and the continued exclusion of Black women from 'a seat at the table' (D'Costa this Forum) both in global governance circles and academia (Mills 2007; Wekker 2016; Lentin 2020). This is where the theory of intersectionality and the contributions of critical race theory (CRT) could enable the GPS/WPS academic spaces to be ones that concentrate less on the pacification and satisfaction of governments in the hope of funding and ones that push and challenge systems of oppression and structures of inequality both academically and globally. Where, for example, does the campaign initiated by intersectional feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Say Her Name', feature in discussions about the 20 years of the 1325? In this campaign, Crenshaw argues that Black women in the US have continually been marginalised even within efforts to draw attention to police brutality against Black men. In 'saying' their names, Crenshaw points us, as GPS/WPS scholars, to the critical theories that we need to help us challenge the global inequalities that persist and that continue to hinder efforts to make the WPS Agenda one that is committed to anti-racism in all respects. If we listen carefully to critical race feminists in order to expose academic GPS/WPS to scrutiny we might avoid 'rehabilitating' it, and instead see the centres and the margins that much more clearly (hooks 1994).

Notes

1. Political or policy example: A case in point is the continued focus on National Action Plans and their potential to reflect more local perspectives and visions for better and more secure futures for women. NAPs remain divided along geopolitical lines: NAPS from the global north are doggedly outward facing, with transfers of knowledge in all aspects of security and gender going in one direction.
2. This is in contrast to the first institutional space of WPS which was at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Centre in Ghana. This Institute, known as WPSI, is embedded and located within the Ghanaian Armed Forces HQ, and the Centre, which runs MSc and PhD programmes through the University of Ghana. However, it is not an independent university institution nor is it a purely civilian space.
3. In homage to Enloe (1990).
4. (https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/wps/2019/12/10/enter-intersectionality-towards-an-inclusive-survivor-centred-approach-in-responding-to-conflict-related-sexual-violence/)
5. (http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103903/1/WPS_2019_11_20_women_s_violence_and_the_law.pdf)
6. https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/kemi-badenoch-black-history-month-white-privilege-black-lives-matter-b1189547.html?jwsource=cl
7. https://aidnography.blogspot.com/2020/06/racism-aid-industry-development-curated-collection.html

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