

This article was downloaded by: [Harvard Library]

On: 17 February 2015, At: 08:17

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



[Click for updates](#)

International Feminist Journal of Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfjp20>

Assessing, Engaging, and Enacting Worlds

Wendy Harcourt^a, L. H. M. Ling^b, Marysia Zalewski^c
& Swiss International Relations Collective (Elisabeth Prügl, Rahel Kunz, Jonas Hagmann, Xavier Guillaume and Jean-Christophe Graz)^d

^a International Institute of Social Studies, The Netherlands Email:

^b The New School, USA Email:

^c University of Aberdeen, Scotland Email:

^d SWIRCO, Switzerland

Published online: 03 Feb 2015.

To cite this article: Wendy Harcourt, L. H. M. Ling, Marysia Zalewski & Swiss International Relations Collective (Elisabeth Prügl, Rahel Kunz, Jonas Hagmann, Xavier Guillaume and Jean-Christophe Graz) (2015) Assessing, Engaging, and Enacting Worlds, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17:1, 158-172, DOI: [10.1080/14616742.2014.988451](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2014.988451)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2014.988451>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources

of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

Assessing, Engaging, and Enacting Worlds

TENSIONS IN FEMINIST METHOD/OLOGIES

WENDY HARCOURT^a, L. H. M. LING^b AND MARYSIA ZALEWSKI^c IN CONVERSATION WITH THE SWISS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS COLLECTIVE (ELISABETH PRÜGL, RAHEL KUNZ, JONAS HAGMANN, XAVIER GUILLAUME AND JEAN-CHRISTOPHE GRAZ)^d

^aInternational Institute of Social Studies, The Netherlands; ^bThe New School, USA; ^cUniversity of Aberdeen, Scotland; and ^dSWIRCO, Switzerland

Our methods, methodologies, and ways of producing and communicating knowledge not only orient the questions we ask and the knowledges we pursue, but they also direct the effects and purposes of our work. Methods *enact* our worlds (Law and Urry 2004). While many feminist International Relations scholars would agree with this, there are considerable differences in the method/ologies we use, the ways in which we communicate, and what we understand method/ology to mean. These differences were at the heart of the Fifth Annual Critical Voices in Swiss IR Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, titled “Feminism, Difference, and Beyond” and organized by a group of scholars known as the Swiss International Relations Collective (SWIRCO). The conference included keynote addresses by Wendy Harcourt, L. H. M. Ling, and Marysia Zalewski. The conversation here represents further engagement with a number of issues that emerged at the conference as a result of these keynotes.

Coming from different research traditions, informed by different theories, and exploring different issues, the three keynote addresses resonated in their critiques while diverging in their understanding of method/ology. For almost two years following the 2012 conference, we engaged in an email conversation to allow continuous and sustained reflection on these issues. In writing this Conversations piece, SWIRCO members structured and reacted to the different interventions, guiding the flow of the conversation. To some extent this text is an interview – and this is the format of our presentation

– but the term interview does not capture the asynchronous process of the text’s production. The piece might be better understood as a reflexive essay woven into a new aesthetic whole from plural exchanges in person and online.

The process of building these conversations opened up important issues for feminist scholarship and practice, and made visible some tensions within feminist IR. It is rare that we have the opportunity to discuss creative tensions in feminist IR around processes of knowledge production and communication. These issues, however, are too important to be left unaddressed as they not only raise questions regarding how we as scholars theorize international politics, development studies, and more broadly the social sciences, but also problematize the very purposes of the methodological and political intentions of feminist IR. We want to share this conversation in the spirit of recalling and rethinking the methodological challenges of feminist scholarship within IR.

SWIRCO: Methods and methodology have long been a terrain of critical engagement for feminists. What is your take on method/ology?

Marysia Zalewski: I think the conventional ways in which we think about and study methodology tend to make us a little stupefied. The lines get very quickly drawn around what counts as a good method or appropriate methodology, perhaps especially in such a traditionally narrow-minded discipline as IR, starting in undergraduate classes. This is all very troubling not least because I think methodology is absolutely one of the most fascinating things! How we think we can access the world, what we think is real, how we think we can create knowledge (let alone those ubiquitous and deeply problematic things we call “facts”); these are all crucial. But my sense is that, despite the flurry of excitement around methodology over quite a number of years in the discipline, the vast majority of approaches to methodology are in the service of closing down and sending us to sleep rather than opening up and enlivening us.

Wendy Harcourt: My method is reflective feminist praxis, the back and forth between the doing and reflecting. I see the doing of feminist practice (whether collectively or individually) in advocacy campaigns, protests, teaching students, writing, speaking, listening, or challenging through my dress and life choices, as I set out in my examination of critical debates on gender and development in relation to “body politics” (Harcourt 2009). My analysis critically looks at what I am engaging in, and practice can shift as a result of the critical reflection, which is also about collective assessment of the impact of the practice, my role in it, the appropriateness of the action, and so on. My method also reflects my consciousness of border crossing from academe to activist worlds and all the marginal places in between. So my feminist method is navigating and moving between being a feminist in an academic institution, and being an intellectual/academic in a feminist space (Harcourt and Icaza 2014). I see our conversation here very much in that mode.

SWIRCO: How is this approach to methodology reflected in your research?

Wendy: In my research looking at social movements and transnational feminisms, current methods are not always easy to adapt to traveling ideas and global complexities around shifting concepts and actions. I am interested in how academics influenced by their engagement in activism are working to develop new methods that can “perform” and capture the fluidity of changing understandings of identities, bodies, emotions, networks, power relations, and knowledge. This is particularly important for the in-between places, cyberspaces, people, places, and events that refuse to be categorized. Peoples’ lives in those spaces have to be analyzed and described as they shift and change, and defy easy capturing in current social science framing. Research that seeks to understand today’s rapidly changing world is itself shaping those realities.

L. H. M. (Lily) Ling: I endorse a method called “gender as an analytic” (Ling 2014a; Ling 2014b). By this, I mean paying attention to the social relations and subjectivities that make a certain analytical stance, such as “objectivity” or “rationality”, possible – for it is not a coincidence that those privileged with “objectivity” and “rationality”, for instance, happen to be Western, white, and male. To access these underlying power structures, gender-as-analytic poses three questions: (1) who is saying what to whom and why? (relationality), (2) where are alternative discourses coming from and what do these mean? (resonance), and (3) how can I act ethically and with compassion? (interbeing). Relationality gives us a sense of the hegemonic relations that prevail in a particular domain; resonance refers to the kind of change that may be forthcoming; and interbeing looks into forms of action we could take in light of imminent transitions. I do not pretend that gender-as-analytic qualifies as analytical “rigor” per se. Rather, I propose gender-as-analytic as another way to understand and exercise rigor.

SWIRCO: All three of you seem to be critical of conventional methodologies, and the method/ologies you propose have quite a different ring: critique, reflective feminist practice, and gender-as-analytic. Do you agree that we need “messy methods”, as John Law and John Urry (2004) propose?

Marysia: Law and Urry’s proposal is interesting – though feminist and other critical scholars have made this argument many times. It may be the case that this idea is becoming revitalized because of the recent work on “complexity” and “New Materialisms” (cf. Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010) which re-introduces ideas about “messiness” in interesting ways. Though I am a bit troubled by Law and Urry’s traditional focus on the ongoing authoritative role of the “social scientist”, it is true that social science methodologies, mainstream ones primarily, seem to be precisely about avoiding and obliterating

mess. By “mess” I mean the ordinary ways people move through their days and their lives. Spending just one day perusing the policies and procedures that any organization or institution (like a university, school, government, or NGO for example) has to put in place to deal with the everyday “mess” of life gives a sense of this. The sense of security or orderliness that these policies and procedures may (or are supposed to) engender masks a great deal. Think of Avery Gordon’s idea of “barely speakable fears” (2001: 21) in the context of conference presentations and keynote addresses: these are all wrapped up in the promise of security that methodology supposedly offers.

Focusing briefly on “losing the footing”, we might return to the idea of “feminist messy methods”. Traditionally these have veered toward greater inclusivity – of peoples or practices, of ways of producing knowledge. This makes “feminist methods” much “messier” than traditional (masculinist?) mainstream method/ologies, which can make the idea of feminism having (a) method/ology seem oxymoronic. This has always (at least in the genre of Westernized feminist scholarship) been somewhat problematic, even dangerous for feminists. Why attach oneself to “feminized mess” if one wants to appear authoritative, or be “heard”. So “messy methods” are challenging for scholars, but perhaps they better reflect “reality” than more “orderly” traditionally masculinist methods.

Wendy: If the methods we are involved in are creating realities then we need to understand our role in our interventions as researchers, which is challenging in our global, complex, and unpredictable world. I would agree with Law and Urry that “understanding and practicing the complex and the elusive” is uncomfortable (2004: 404). Feminists are at ease with discomfort – it is what most of their work is about, both for them and the subjects they investigate, and the lives they want to enter and change with their research. Working on the borders, across disciplines, feminists are probing the given, the invisible, the pain of violence, the non-voice, the non-agency of the subject, oppression, histories no one thought to keep, cultures that build up whole literatures, constitutions that aim to subjugate one gender or deny the existence of others, and are speaking out about bodies that bleed, give birth, are bruised and battered. This is uncomfortable and messy but the only way we are going to get closer to understanding and changing lives and injustices.

Lily: Law and Urry make a convincing argument that methods enact the world, and these have both epistemological and ontological foundations. However, I am not sure I understand what Law and Urry mean by what they call “messy methods”. Why should rigor be excused for feminists or postcolonial theorists or anyone else who tries to theorize about complexity, multiplicity, and non-linear development? I agree that analytical parsimony reflects the concerns of a nineteenth-century world and its methods, (which is at the heart of Law and Urry’s critique), but analytical rigor need not mean parsimonious theorizing

only. Indeed, one of the benefits of drawing on the complexities, multiplicities, and non-linearities that non-mainstream theorists focus on is that these may provide another pathway to analytical rigor.

Marysia: I don't think that the idea or practice of "messy methods" implies a lack or absence of rigor. Indeed the "messy methods" approach may be *more* rigorous – if we understand rigor (at least in part) to facilitate more appropriate and effective "mapping" of what it is the researcher is trying to study/understand. But we also need to carefully consider the deployment of and effect of the word/idea of "rigor" in our methodological and theoretical enquires. Rigor is not a neutral word by a long shot; indeed it is heavily imbued with disciplinary and normalizing practices. Perhaps if "messy" were released from its negative nuance, it would not materialize as unappealing but rather the opposite. Though I think we over-estimate our powers when we think we can prise apart meanings from words at will (or through institutions which seemingly give us power, like the university) and make things mean what we want them to mean. Acting "as if", I think is extremely important in one's own everyday life, but institutionally the story is a different one.

Lily: By the same token, we can release the word "rigor" from its mainstream social scientific definition and reframe it in a more multi-layered and mutually-interactive way.

SWIRCO: How do you conceive of the notions of "data" and "archive", which are so closely associated with method/ology?

Wendy: Living in the world of instant information via the Internet – and the breaking down of the protected academic walls of knowledge – makes the concept of data and archives much more fluid, political, and alive. It challenges our sense of knowledge and data. The difficulty is to know what are the procedures behind the knowledge – what are the signs that indicate that the data is trustworthy or manipulated, or just made up? Creating our sense of data and knowledge, and communicating to others that this data is trustworthy – in other words, finding out new ways of doing data and archives – is what feminist knowledge practice does.

Marysia: For me data does not have to necessarily be closely associated with method. It is so only if we tether ourselves to conventional and tired formats. Though of course it depends on what we understand "data" to mean, and how our methodological choices facilitate decisions about what counts as data, or indeed a field. In terms of my own work, I hope it appeals to and opens up new archives – ones that are not necessarily standard. Judith/Jack Halberstam speaks of "silly archives" (though "silly" can appear to be a dangerous word to use academically) such as animated film: s/he offers astute analyses of

Chicken Run and *Monsters, Inc.* for example. Rather than installing a new hierarchy of archives I would say that my aims are to make visible new (other) archives and especially ones that do not seem as if they are academically valuable. Perhaps in this way, the monopoly of established archives will come to seem more imposed than obvious and natural.

Lily: I agree with Marysia here – we should certainly reconfigure the notion of “data” to go beyond conventional sources such as statistics or even the historical archive. What constitute “data” must reflect their philosophical rationale. We need to ask, why do we study what we do and in the manner that we do? No assumptions can be made in this regard.

SWIRCO: Continuing with the idea of non-traditional data, what is the importance of telling stories and drawing on popular culture for a feminist politics and method?

Lily: Telling stories effects what I call “chatting”. The story itself can provide insight but the telling of it creates an atmosphere, a relationship, and a kind of meta-communication. Everyone loves a story. It reminds one of childhood treats. But stories also give listeners a venue for entering into a subject that may be too complex or frightening to consider otherwise. Enlightenment science has given us many good things but it has also taken away much. One important facet of human interaction is the role of metaphor and allegory. Ancient texts often use these to convey a key point. Not only is the language poetic but it also conveys wisdom. Many times, also, this metaphoric/allegorical language draws on nature. Hence, both speakers and listeners value the environment as a source of insight, and not just in terms of climate change, but a wider sense of beauty and consciousness. For example, I have written an Asian-feminist “fairy tale” for IR (Ling 2014b). It draws on traditional Indian and Chinese storytelling to convey a world and its politics not filtered through the West or Westphalia.

Marysia : I will start here with a quote from Jenny Edkins: “We don’t like not knowing, so we pretend that we do” (2003: 12). I think this helps to illustrate that all theorists, analysts, and academics “tell stories”. It is what we do, indeed I think it is *all* we do. Though of course these IR stories get wrapped up in glittery (methodological) packages that make them appear “other” than stories and more like “truth” or “fact”. All that any of us is ever doing is telling stories; feminists are no different than any other scholars/activists in this regard. I would hope we can become less committed to pretending otherwise.

The landscape of popular culture tells us a great deal about contemporary societies. It is where millions of people immerse themselves for vast portions of every single day, and it is not devoid of intellectual, epistemological, or political frames – far from it. People learn a great deal about right and wrong,

justice and morality, and all manner of category identifications – not least gender – and about how to live, think, and be. As such, popular culture is an immensely significant archive upon which to draw to tell our “stories”. Thus my use of popular culture is not so much as a “side-show” or prop, but the “thing” (IR) itself.

Wendy: Telling stories and working with popular culture is unquestionably at the heart of feminist politics and methods. The difficulty is to create the space for feminists in different cultures to listen to “other” feminist messages. One method in which I have been engaged is feminist intercultural dialogues – an exciting but difficult process – where concepts such as mothering can have very different histories, meanings, and political, ecological, and social realities, and it requires careful listening to others’ stories. In these dialogues, we have discussed pain and anguish as well as pleasure and celebration. They have led to difficult moments where emotions spill over, where people find it hard to engage with the anger, the anguish, and the needs expressed. The methodology of the project is key to the outcome. We are trying through the sharing of stories to engage in an “un-learning” of previous knowledge on sexuality and the body, which in turn allows us to collectively regenerate new understandings and knowledges.

SWIRCO: Conference presentations, too, are a certain form of storytelling. In what ways do conference presentations invite us to do something different than a piece written in a journal?

Marysia: What should a conference presentation do? Make people think? Have something enter their heads that was not there before? Make people think differently to when they entered the room? Linger in their heads afterwards? Make them want to read more? Annoy them, inspire them, interest them? All of these perhaps and more – but surely not to tell them what they already know, whether in the form of “facts” or, more importantly, in the form of a “comfort text”, or one that “maps easily onto our usual ways of making sense” (Lather 2001: 205)?

The answer to this question will also depend on the conference theme, on the audience, the status and purpose of the conference, and so on. When we are opening a conversation about how we do our work (which invokes methods, methodology, and communication) we do need to think more explicitly and carefully about the institutional setting. The “conference circuit” is a significant part of the institutions we work in, though we rarely analyze it, especially regarding the ways it re-produces the power politics and hierarchies of the profession. Neither do we question whether conference presentations are less about pursuing important questions regarding international politics and more about power and position/ing. We would be wise to more closely analyze the purpose of conference presentations.

SWIRCO: What, then, are conference presentations for? What do they do, for you as academics and for your audiences?

LILY: To my mind, a conference presentation is for “testing out” an idea – to see how members of the audience respond to a particular approach or argument. It should stimulate debate at the immediate moment of presentation but also provoke deeper insight later on, when the sound and fury of performance and ego are bracketed in memory and, hopefully, contemplation takes over. In this sense, a conference presentation differs significantly from a written piece in that, for the latter, neither author nor audience is able to respond directly to one another, possibly affecting how each thinks of the other as well as the subject under discussion.

Wendy: While I agree with Marysia’s depiction of conferences reproducing hierarchies, I have always seen a conference presentation as a performance, a moment of connection where ideas are proposed to an audience in ways that can be far more exhilarating than reading a paper. Perhaps because I have attended far more non-academic than academic conferences, I see conferences as knowledge/production events that are crucial to the operation of networks of academics and advocates. A conference presentation needs to communicate clearly with the listeners, to push them into thinking beyond what is comfortable, to provoke and share emotion and feeling as well as intellectual analysis. The performance has to seduce the audience into seeing things in new ways, to entertain in order to convince. It is also about creating the sense of us, as the social community, of those sharing the passion of the idea rather than the solitary researcher.

Marysia: I am not sure I share the division invoked by Wendy – the one separating emotion from intellectual analysis. One of the problems from which the social sciences suffer – at least, that is, the generic field in which I sit – is the persistent modeling on “the sciences”, or at least an imagination of what the sciences are, where “objectively produced findings” are presented and perhaps some new discovery might be made. The claims to “originality” and “objectivity” which litter or *haunt* academic work in the fields in which we are embroiled, alongside the growing competitiveness in an increasingly market-led, neoliberal business model, have increased the “status identification” tendencies and “one-upmanship” that so often feature in conference settings. The emotional charge producing and bolstering academic exchanges in this context well illustrates the fantasy of a boundary between the “emotional” and “intellectual” – especially if a paper does not fit the usual mould, is tentative or exploratory, disturbing or unexpected, which can either be met with curiosity and questions, even incredulity, or indeed provide a platform for aggression and ego performance.

Wendy: I would still say that conferences allow for more collaborative dialogue than written work does. A written piece, one which claims academic authority, usually has to be far more staid. It has to do a lot more work than the performance of a conference paper. It is crafted in ways that must also convince, yet it cannot afford to provoke too much. It has to be situated within the literature, refer to the disciplines. There is far more scope for the authorial voice to guide and make the connections for the reader, but also less connection, and less sharing. In an article, the authorial voice is weighted with other voices not open to spontaneous possibilities, whereas a conference paper can engage different voices and try out different entry points into the subject.

Recently I worked with colleagues to design an academic conference held at the Institute for Social Studies on “civic innovation” where we did not have authorial voices but rather worked with variously designed open spaces where all could speak adapting techniques from activism – with “town hall” open mic sessions, drawings, world cafés, and “building” a structure/sculpture of cards and boxes together based on our different observations. What interested me was that the feminist academics (mostly women) were the most vocal and by far the most comfortable as a group with such improvised creativity, welcoming the active methodological challenge to the academic norm of panels and keynotes.

SWIRCO: If verbal communications present such possibilities, but also significant limitations, why (and how) should we employ them?

Wendy: Living in a cyberworld means that even academic conversations go far beyond just the here and now of the given lecture or talk. Social media – from Twitter to YouTube – allow the conversation into spaces beyond what the speaker imagined or intended. This can mean that academic communications can be creatively and usefully linked to different feminist engagements. My work aims to make those links – translating academic speak into activism and policy advocacy – or just bringing together these different forms of feminist practice in strategically useful ways. Tactically, in a keynote for instance, the point is to make interventions fun, entertaining, and informative – hopefully so people get that “ah ha!” moment – whatever works to make connections that open up the insights of theorizing, such as employing images from popular culture.

Marysia: This is a complicated question. It suggests to me that we think we have a robust measure of control over our words and what gets heard and/or communicated. As academics our major currency is indeed words, whether we offer them in written or spoken form, and there are surely limits to both, though the distinction between them is questionable. Here I will gesture towards a couple of thoughts which will not answer the question as much as suggest ways it might be useful to start thinking about the question.

First, I think Luce Irigaray speaks brilliantly to this when she says, “If we keep on speaking the same language together, we’re going to reproduce the same history” (1985: 205). The limits and incarcerations of all forms of communication, and the structuring limitations that academic – or more appropriately, *disciplinary* – formats demand amount to the same old stories told over and over. The second thought is from Karin Fierke: “the act of speech that flows from the dying body is a performance” (2012: 95). Fierke’s discussion of political self-sacrifice and the work of emotion in world-making (specifically in regard to “suffering bodies” such as hunger strikers or those who self-mutilate for a political cause) opens up serious questions about what can “speak” or enact a form of communication which does not involve words either written or spoken.

Lily: The utility of spoken communication, which is face-to-face and physically present, not via telephone or Skype, is the encouragement of a relationship between speaker and listener. Both gain a sense of each other through body language, eye contact, and the mutual to-and-fro of what can only be described as an emotional/spiritual exchange. In other words: intimacy. It places discussions into a social context so that even heated debates and disagreements cannot destroy underlying feelings of friendship, respect, and love (if these were intended in the first place). I call this “chatting” in my book, *The Dao of World Politics*. Chatting is a practice used by men and women to discuss “common concerns in common terms”, often in a relaxed and comfortable social setting and in a spirit of mutuality and community (Ling 2014a: 123). Chatting can have transformative effects, for it gives its participants something extra: a bond that transcends their present differences as visitors/hosts, colleagues/friends. Accordingly, direct, spoken communication is best for fostering a *personal* relationship.

Of course, non-spoken or written forms of communication can also lead to a relationship, especially in this era of the Internet. But it may or may not involve direct contact with the author. This has advantages as well as disadvantages, depending on the nature and context of interaction. The kind of virtual “chatting” presented by this forum, for example, is both useful and important. Rarely is there the opportunity for keynotes and their audience to pursue a subject over the long-term and in a leisurely manner, without restrictions of performance or other conference-type constraints. But if the initial contact is made in person, any subsequent communication through virtual chatting or otherwise will be stronger, I believe.

SWIRCO: In her conference presentation in Geneva, Marysia referred to the idea of “low theory”. What is “low theory” and what does it accomplish?

Marysia: Using the word “low” attached to “theory” tends to invoke some anxiety. Inevitably, the specter of “high theory” with all the attachments of heroic and most often male philosophers makes the idea of “low” theory

suspect and, for feminist scholars/activists strategically, probably inadvisable. Perhaps “low” is just the wrong word to use, though I think that anxiety is always interesting to ponder. The idea of low theory comes most recently from Jack/Judith Halberstam’s book, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). In this s/he describes low theory as “theoretical knowledge that works at many levels at once, as precisely one of these modes of transmission that revels in the detours, twists, and turns through knowing and confusion” (2011: 15). This appeals to me as it seems to be more far-reaching and more inclusive and thus a more appropriate “method” for saying anything of interest or importance about the serious international/political issues we are all interested in. What “ordinary” people do and think in the everyday is just as, if not more, important as published authors; as is working *with* the detours and confusions as opposed to trying to clear them away (back to “messiness”).

Low theory is not necessarily about rejecting “high theory”, though. Indeed low and high theories are not distinguishable at one level, at least in terms of available conceptual or analytical tools, or even where to look to make sense of the world (or the bit we are interested in). Though, in disciplines like IR the attachment to “high theory” is a strong draw: not just any theory will fit the demands of disciplinary desires. “High theory” is usually deemed best especially when attached to heroic theorists. But I still think that “low theory” offers more or something *other*, something that speaks to a way of exceeding what Trinh T. Minh-Ha calls “a certain knowledge” (1991: 94), by which I think she means hegemonic, masculinist knowledge. A key connecting point here is that low theory hovers below and around the radar of disciplined knowledges and, crucially, seeks not so much to *explain or instruct but to involve*.

Lily: I don’t like distinguishing “high” from “low” theory. What are the criteria to make this distinction? And what are the implications of these criteria? Any consideration of the abstract as a way to explain the concrete constitutes theory, in my opinion. In other words, I do not think we can theorize without involving some level of abstraction. Otherwise, how does the theorizing take place?

Wendy: Marysia is right that talking about low theory creates anxiety – a sense of not belonging to the “right” theorizing that is recognized in the academy. After our discussions I enjoyed joking with people about how I do low theory. There was a lot of uneasiness in their response – people wanting to reassure me that I did indeed “do theory”. What I think Marysia is inviting us to see as low theory is engagement, involvement, and practice. So again, turning to the example of the experiments we are doing at my institution that combine activism with academic methodology: we held a three-day forum without PowerPoint, using cards where people wrote “tweets”, “comments”, or “visions” and stuck them on boxes which were built up over the

three days into a structure that was placed prominently in the common meeting/eating space. Along with “fishbowl” exercises, speed dating talks, and interactive global market sessions, we worked to weave together in various spaces and modes the participants’ understanding of politics, markets, and sexuality.

Marysia: I like the idea of Wendy’s three-day forum. The use of “experimental” and “deviational” forms offers much potential for breaking boundaries around knowledge production. It is also a way to show how “theorizing” takes place all the time; it is not something that is confined to the “abstract”, as Lily suggests.

SWIRCO: How do one’s standpoint or location matter for how we analyze method?

Lily: Standpoints are important, of course. But there is no one standpoint. In other words, one cannot reduce a location, say Switzerland, to one standpoint. Clearly, there are differences in standpoint depending on social class, education, occupation, interests, and so on. What matters, in my view, are the intersections among standpoints. How does one negotiate these? What are the conflicts and complicities that arise? How do we make sense of them?

When multiple standpoints are contextualized philosophically, we get a sense of the multiple worlds from which they come and the hybrid legacies we must deal with on a daily basis. Herein we find the common humanity to international relations, both the practice and study of it, since *everyone* must contend with such legacies.

Wendy: In my writing I speak about place rather than location, and in that my sense of a static standpoint somewhat falters. I personally live in two places, Rome and The Hague. I hold two passports, have voted in four states, and I engage politically at a European transnational level. So I speak about place-based globalism, where different places connect. My reading of place follows Doreen Massey’s definition of place (2004) as inflected by the global. For me the notion of “a meeting-place” enables us to theorize place as within networks of relations and forms of power that stretch beyond specific places. I see places whether experienced at local, national, or global levels as neither natural nor fixed. Our experience of place flows across spatial scales from the body to the household to the community, national, and global levels. People negotiate place as they protect and conserve places, enhance and modify places, create connections with other places at different levels. Our attachments to place are about social, spiritual, and cultural meaning and identity as well as economic need.

Marysia: The idea of standpoint is such a crucial part of the development of feminist theory empirically, politically, epistemologically, and theoretically.

The “God’s eye view” (so often associated with “high theory”) has been much discredited by feminist work (and other critical work). It, of course, matters very much “who we are” and “from where we speak”, especially when we profess knowledge in some form or other. But imagining we can control that, or isolate which bit belongs where, is suggestive of a lingering faith in the “God’s eye view”, which feminists have demonstrated as theoretically and politically bereft.

SWIRCO: You seem to agree on many points: on the limits of conventional methodology, on the need to broaden our archives, and on the fluidity of stand-points. But you seem to have different levels of comfort with the idea of messy methods and with the question of methodological rigor. You also set different emphases in your preferred methods. Story-telling, chatting, and inter-cultural dialogues may not contradict a focus on low theory, questioning, and valorizing messiness. But they constitute different methodological approaches and perhaps even favor different politics. There may be further tensions between a commitment to feminist knowing that starts from body politics grounded in political practice, a worldist knowing that starts from cultural difference, and a low theory approach that seeks to work with detours and confusions.

We do not want to overdraw the differences in these approaches. Yet we find that it is important to draw attention to the tensions in the way they treat the relationship between method, praxis, and politics; a relationship that is key to feminism as normative project. We believe that feminist IR scholarship gains when it recognizes within the diversity of feminisms different methodological commitments, forms of reflexivity, and knowledge politics. And it gains when it is able to self-consciously ride the tensions between these differences. Thank you for your insights!

Wendy Harcourt
International Institute of Social Studies, The Netherlands
Email: harcourt@iss.nl

L. H. M. Ling
The New School, USA
Email: LingL@newschool.edu

Marysia Zalewski
University of Aberdeen, Scotland
Email: m.zalewski@abdn.ac.uk

SWIRCO
Switzerland
Email: rahel.kunz@unil.ch

Notes on contributors

Wendy Harcourt is Associate Professor of Critical Development and Feminist Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies of Erasmus University, The Hague, The Netherlands. She was editor of the journal *Development* from 1995–2012. She has published six edited collections and her monograph *Body Politics in Development: Critical Debates in Gender and Development* (2009) received the 2010 Feminist and Women's Studies Association Book Prize.

L. H. M. Ling is Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs, New School for Public Engagement, and Associate Professor, Milano School of International Affairs, Management, and Urban Policy, at The New School in New York, USA. As of 2014, she is co-editor (with John M. Hobson, Sheffield) of *Global Dialogues: Developing Non-Eurocentric IR and IPE* (Rowman & Littlefield International). She is currently developing a research hub titled *OASIS: A Holistic Paradigm to Healing Our Worlds*.

Marysia Zalewski is Professor and Director of the Center for Gender Studies at the University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, United Kingdom, and Visiting Professor at the Gender Institute, London School of Economics. She is widely published in the field of gender, feminist theory, and International Relations and was the recipient of an International Studies Association Eminent Scholar Award in 2013.

The Swiss International Relations Collective (SWIRCO) is represented in this piece by Rahel Kunz (University of Lausanne), Elisabeth Prügl (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva), Jonas Hagmann (ETH Zürich), Xavier Guillaume (University of Edinburgh), and Jean-Christophe Graz (University of Lausanne). Founded in 2008, SWIRCO has organized annual international conferences in Switzerland on various facets of critical IR.

References

- Bennett, J. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cooles, D., and S. Frost. 2010. *New Materialisms*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Edkins, J. 2003. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fierke, K. 2012. *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gordon, A. 2001. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Halberstam, J. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Harcourt, W. 2009. *Body Politics in Development: Critical Debates in Gender and Development*. London: Zed Books.
- Harcourt, W., and R. Icaza. 2014. "Going Beyond the Comfort Zone: Reflections on the ISS Sexuality Research Initiative Interculture Dialogue on Sexuality, Reproductive Health, and Rights in Development." *Gender, Technology and Development* 18 (1): 131–145. doi:10.1177/0971852413515355
- Irigaray, L. 1985. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lather, P. 2001. "Postbook: Working the Ruins of Feminist Ethnography." *Signs* 27 (1): 199–227. doi:10.1086/495677
- Law, J., and J. Urry. 2004. "Enacting the Social." *Economy and Society* 33 (3): 390–410. doi:10.1080/0308514042000225716
- Ling, L. H. M. 2014a. *The Dao of World Politics: Towards a Post-Westphalian, Worldist International Relations*. London: Routledge.
- Ling, L. H. M. 2014b. *Imagining World Politics: Sihar & Shenya, A Fable for Our Times*. London: Routledge.
- Massey, D. 2004. "Geographies of Responsibility." *Geografiska Annaler* 86 B (1): 5–18.
- Minh-ha, T. T. 1991. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: Routledge.