NAVIGATING AREA STUDIES: INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS IN MIDDLE EASTERN AND NORTH AFRICAN, SOUTH ASIAN AND LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

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Abstract

In this collaborative article, we – Anwar Mhajne and Crystal Whetstone – investigate our positionalities in diverse area studies through a critical reflection on our experiences as political science graduate students conducting fieldwork for our dissertations. We work across different area studies – the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and South Asia and Latin America – mainly as an insider (Mhajne) or simply as an outsider (Whetstone). Taking an interpretive approach and using the method of autoethnography, we critically reflect on our different fieldwork experiences undertaken as political science graduate students, relying on postcolonialism to guide us. We ask: how can our fieldwork experiences complicate the structures of insider and outsider in relation to our situatedness in different regions of area studies? We engage with a decolonial feminist framework to help unpack these experiences and to imagine how our varied experiences disrupt the colonization processes embedded within area studies. We conclude by identifying eight ways to further decolonize area studies based on our fieldwork and other scholars' work.
Keywords: area studies; positionality; autoethnography; decolonial feminism; MENA; South Asia; Latin America
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Introduction

In this article, we – Anwar Mhajne and Crystal Whetstone – investigate our positionalities in diverse area studies through our fieldwork experiences as political science graduate students. We work across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), South Asia and Latin America through a combination of those from the region ("insiders") (Mhajne) and those not from the region ("outsiders") (Whetstone). Mhajne identifies as Palestinian Israeli, secular and Arab. Mhajne's dissertation was on Egyptian women in the Muslim Sisterhood in the aftermath of the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Whetstone identifies as white Anglo-American whose dissertation was on mothers of the disappeared in Argentina and Sri Lanka.

We ask: how can reflecting on our fieldwork experiences help to decolonize area studies? We engage with a feminist framework to disrupt the colonization processes embedded within area studies. As feminist researchers, we are committed to a "methodology…[in which] we reflexively examine the ways in which our *own* engagement in the world contributes to…violences" in all forms.[1] Through autoethnography, we critically reflect on our graduate fieldwork experiences. Autoethnography – or self-narrative – includes storytelling but goes beyond simple narration to "engage in cultural analysis and interpretation."[2] By interrogating our fieldwork experiences in Istanbul, Turkey, Colombo, Sri Lanka and Buenos Aires, Argentina, we suggest practices that scholars can adopt to decolonize area studies, from graduate students to seasoned scholars.

We follow an interpretive approach in this article, focusing on sense-making, to better understand our respective experiences in the field as mainly an insider (Mhajne) and outsider (Whetstone). Interpretivism provides an ideal methodology given that our research question seeks to complicate notions of insider and outsider in regards to our differently positioned situatedness and is attentive to contextual factors in the research, the research environment and all actors involved in the research.[3] The next section will trace the importance of reflexivity in our research in full. Here suffice it to say that understanding our own positionality in relation to our research and to those whom we encounter

in our fieldwork is a critical part of our work as feminist scholars of comparative and international politics. Reflexivity is critical to both feminist and interpretive work.[4] The method of autoethnography, which is not to be confused with auto-biography, does include the use of narratives, but the purpose of this method is to interrogate the narrative for contextual understanding.[5]

This article proceeds as follows. In the first section, we trace feminist reflex-ivity in area studies. In the second section, we address decolonizing efforts in area studies. In the third section, each author recounts their experiences con-ducting fieldwork. In the discussion section, we critically reflect on what can be done to further the decolonization of area studies through a feminist framework based on our fieldwork experiences and lessons learned as early-stage profes-sionals in academia.

Reflexivity for Feminist Researchers in Area Studies

As feminists, we are committed to reflexivity, a practice that helps us to unpack our own and others' positionalities and our work. Rabia Ali describes reflexivity as a "process of reflection and comparison" that ideally remains ongo-ing throughout the research process.[6] Feminist research encourages "dialecti-cal engagement between reflexivity and intersectionality to contextualize the research(ed)." Reflecting on the multiple layers and social markers of our identi-ties, as well as of our research participants and areas of research helps us to "avoid replicating hierarchies and power relations...[in] knowledge production."[7] This assists in decolonizing research and producing higher quality research.

Reflexive methodologies derive from Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway who suggest that objectivity – when understood as neutrality – is impossible given that where one stands influences one's interpretation.[8] Harding argues that women have a more expansive perspective compared to men, given wom-en's lower social status. This outsider standpoint provides women with an

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[4] Rabia Ali, "Rethinking Representation: Negotiating Positionality, Power and Space in the Field," *Gender, Place & Culture* 22, no. 6 (2015): 783–800, doi: 10.1080/0966369X.2014.917278; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, *Interpretive Research Design*.

[5] Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*.

[6] Ali, "Rethinking Representation," 794.

[7] Wibben et al., "Collective Discussion," 92.

[8] Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Priv-ilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–599, here 588–589, doi: 10.2307/3178066.

understanding of the world that is both different from and superior to the vantage point of those in power.[9] This has been complicated to recognize how positionality is constructed by interacting social signifiers.[10] While the social sciences have historically taken personal experience in research as problematic, "one's own awareness of one's own personal position in the research process [is]…a corrective to 'pseudo-objectivity.'"[11] By interrogating one's social position and values, research is *less* biased than if a researcher's perspectives remain under the surface, influencing research without accounting for such influence.

The qualitative researcher is encouraged to reflect on their insider/outsider status and how that might impact their research question, methodology, research location, and the interpretation of the data. An *insider* researches populations of which they share a common characteristic such as identity, language, and similar experiences with the research participants.[12] Being an insider usually enables the participants to trust the researcher. The shared identity could allow participants to share their experiences with the researcher because they assume that the researcher understands their experiences.[13] Thus, "participants are typically more open with researchers so that there may be a greater depth to the data gathered."[14]

While *outsider* researchers have to "build trust over the course of their work, for insiders, established trust is the foundation upon which they construct their research."[15] However, an insider status can derail the research process beyond the access stage because participants might fail to express and reflect on their experiences fully because they assume that the researcher is already familiar with it. Moreover, the researcher's experience might be the dominant factor guiding the interview questions and data analysis rather than that of the participants.

9 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 580–585.
10 Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33, no. 6 (1986): 514–532, doi: 10.2307/800672.
11 J. Ann Tickner, "Feminism Meets International Relations: Some Methodological Issues," in *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, ed. Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 19–41, here 28.
12 Marilyn E. Asselin, "Insider Research: Issues to Consider When Doing Qualitative Research in Your Own Setting," *Journal for Nurses in Professional Development* 19, no. 2 (2003): 99–103, doi: 10.1097/00124645-200303000-00008.
13 Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle. "The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8, no. 1 (2009): 54–63, here 58, doi: 10.1177/160940690900800105.
14 Ibid., 58.
15 Mariam Attia and Julian Edge, "Be(com)ing a Reflexive Researcher: A Developmental Approach to Research Methodology," *Open Review of Educational Research* 4, no. 1 (2017) 33–45, here 38, doi: 10.1080/23265507.2017.1300068.

For instance, a researcher might focus on common factors between them and the participants and de- emphasize factors that are different, or vice versa. Insider research is viewed by some as problematic because insider researchers have a personal investment in the research setting.[16]

This leaves us with the question of whether you have to be an insider to truly understand, communicate, and analyze your participants' experiences. Fay addressed the question, "Do you have to be one to know one?"[17] He argued that being an insider is not necessary nor sufficient to help you "know" the experience of the group under study. He explained, "Knowing an experience requires more than simply having it; knowing implies being able to identify, describe, and explain."[18] Fay also argued that people are usually so caught up in their own experiences that they fail to distance themselves enough to conceptualize the experience of other members of the group adequately.

Considering these issues, we can see that there are negative and positive implications for both being an outsider or insider researcher. Recent scholarship has disrupted binary constructions of insider/outsider and "researched/powerless and researcher/powerful model," which stresses how identity and power is dynamic and fluctuates depending on the circumstances.[19] Unpacking power relations remains integral to reflexive and decolonial thinking even as there is growing recognition that both researchers and research participants hold power. Research participants choose what to share and what to keep to themselves and researchers depend upon participants to generate data.[20] Moreover, it is important to acknowledge as researchers that the stories we tell "are incomplete, situated, and imbued with the power of our own interpretation."[21]

We agree with Fay that a dialectical approach helps address the complexity of sameness and differences between the researchers identity/ies and the group they are researching. As Fay explains, "[i]n a dialectical approach, differences are not conceived as absolute, and consequently the relation between them is not one of utter antagonism."[22] As Dwyer and Buckle explain, "Holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group. Likewise, not

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[16] Dwyer and Buckle, "The Space Between," 58.
[17] Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: A Multicultural Approach*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 9.
[18] Ibid., 20.
[19] Ali, "Rethinking Representation," 790, 795.
[20] Ibid., 791–792.
[21] Katarina Kušić and Jakub Záhora, eds., *Fieldwork as Failure: Living and Knowing in the Field of International Relations* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2020), 4.
[22] Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science*, 224.

being a member of a group does not denote complete difference."[23] Viewing insider and outsider status as shifting by context and even "particular *moments*" allows for a richer reflexive process.[24]

Who is an insider and outsider requires an intersectional approach that takes a person's entire identity into account and analyzes which aspects of identity are relevant in a specific situation.[25] Sasha Roseneil's use of insider/outsider follows participation in political movements as a basis of intersectional identity. Research on social movement organizations or other groups (such as domestic workers) is enriched when the researcher herself has been a part of the movement.[26] In this sense, each of us is an outsider to the women whose political lives animate our research. It is the responsibility of the researcher to be aware of their positionality and how their context influences not only their access to and interactions with the community, but also the way the data is analyzed and expressed. Nevertheless, there are connections among some of us and our research participants, including regional connections. Anti-imperial scholars – many of whom might be deemed insiders – have troubled area studies by developing new fields of inquiry to decolonize it.

Disrupting Area Studies' Colonialist Origins: Postcolonialism and Decolonialism

The origins of MENA, South Asian and Latin American area studies point to area studies' entanglements with US imperialism. As area studies broadened to include insiders, postcolonial and decolonial studies were developed to dismantle inaccuracies in area studies and promote greater diversity in epistemology and methodology. We map out this history to disrupt area studies' origins in imperialistic Cold War geopolitics, which through the inclusion of insiders and insider allies led to postcolonial and decolonial studies.

Area studies is often traced back to the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA), a response to the USSR's launch of Sputnik, which generated fear among US lawmakers that Americans were falling intellectually behind the

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23 Dwyer and Buckle, "The Space Between," 60.
24 Bahar Baser and Mari Toivanen, "Politicized and Depoliticized Ethnicities, Power Relations and Temporality: Insights to Outsider Research from Comparative and Transnational Fieldwork," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 41, no. 11 (2018): 2069.
25 Ibid., 2070.
26 Sasha Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and Political Action at Greenham* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995), 7–8.

country's Cold War rival. NDEA was enacted to ensure a stronger education system in the United States, therein casting knowledge production in service of national security.[27] From 1959 to 1987, NDEA allocated $167 million to support area studies.[28] While the NDEA is linked with area studies, area studies programs date back to the early twentieth century. Even then, such knowledge was used to serve military and other strategic purposes.[29] Private funders, such as the Ford Foundation, have also invested great sums into area studies.[30] When the Cold War ended in 1989/1991, there were calls to streamline area studies with the presumption that with the great power conflict over, there was less need for area studies.[31] Additionally, with globalization's presumed homogenization, many viewed area studies as unnecessary. However, globalization meant a greater need for area studies to understand how processes of globalization are transformed at the local level. This resulted in a growth of area studies centers over the last two decades, reinvigorated through "trans perspectives" linked with an increasingly globally connected world.[32] Moreover, following the 2001 9/11 attacks, area studies in service of strategic ends was once again on the rise.[33] Yet growing progressive voices – mainly insiders – in area studies over the decades since the NDEA have worked against this and helped to decolonize area studies.

Middle Eastern and Northern Africa (MENA) studies arose from biblical and Semitic studies, fields wrought from European colonization of "the Orient." "Orientalist studies" eventually moved from only studying the past to also looking at contemporary societies. Because MENA came out of the early fields

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[27] Timothy Mitchell, "The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science," in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David Szanton (San Diego: The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2003), 1–24, here 2, http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/editedvolumes/3/2, 2003.

[28] Mitchell, "The Middle East," p. 25–26, footnote 12.

[29] Nicholas Dirks, "South Asian Studies: Futures Past," in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David Szanton (San Diego: The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2003), 2, 4, http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/editedvolumes/3/2, 2003; and Paul W. Drake and Lisa Hilbink, "Latin American Studies: Theory and Practice," in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David Szanton (San Diego: The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2003), 3, 5, http://repositories.cdlib.org/uciaspubs/editedvolumes/3/2, 2003.

[30] Mitchell, "The Middle East," p. 25–26, footnote 12.

[31] Ibid., 2.

[32] Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge, "Introduction: Knowledge Production, Area Studies and the Mobility Turn," in *Area Studies at the Crossroads: Knowledge Production after the Mobility Turn*, ed. Katja Mielke and Anna-Katharina Hornidge (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 3–26, here 7–9.

[33] Andrea Teti, "Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy," *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 1 (2007): 117–145, 117–118, doi: 10.1177/1354066107074291.

of Semitics and biblical studies, it was the first area studies to take off in the academy and gained traction after World War II.[34] The short-lived American Association for Middle Eastern Studies – founded in 1955 – was discredited and brought down through donations from Zionist organizations. In 1966, the Middle Eastern Studies Association (MESA) was founded and included a significant number of social scientists. MESA's inaugural meeting in December 1967 followed the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Yet MESA's board prevented discussion of the conflict, suggesting that taking sides nullified claims that their scholarship was "scientific," a long-time preoccupation of social scientists. In response to MESA's avoidance of the Arab-Israeli War and over concerns of MESA's possible CIA links, the Association of Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG) was founded in 1967 as a counter to MESA. Edward Said and others with anti-colonialist perspectives used the AAUG to contest orientalist narratives in MENA scholarship.[35]

Said's *Orientalism* "put establishment Middle East studies on the defensive" with the rhetorical question of what is the Middle East but a construct of the Western imagination.[36] Said argued that "Orientalism" misrepresents the Middle East in binary and reductive terms as the opposite of the West, backward, exotic and irrational. Said's work gave rise to postcolonial studies. Postcolonialism evaluates "the material and epistemic legacies of colonialism" through experiences in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia and takes seriously ongoing imperialisms.[37] Postcolonialism is interested in the long-lasting effects of European colonialism, particularly in constructed binaries that privilege the so-called "West" and Western ways of thinking, while rendering local practices backward.[38]

Like MENA, *South Asian studies* is linked with postcolonialism given that South Asian studies stems from ancient Indic civilizational and Sanskrit studies. As with MENA, South Asia was deemed part of "the Orient" and housed within Oriental Studies. After World War II, South Asia was separated from Oriental Studies.[39] Many of the earliest South Asianists received research funding through the CIA's precursor, the Office of Strategic Services, pointing to the national security and other strategic concerns of area studies. Early South Asianists stressed Hinduism and Sanskrit as foundational to South Asia, even

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[34] Mitchell, "The Middle East," 3–5.
[35] Ibid., 9–15.
[36] Ibid., 16.
[37] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 1–9.
[38] Mitchell, "The Middle East," 16.
[39] Dirks, "South Asian Studies," 1–3.

going so far as to suggest (without evidence) that Muslims upset India's "cultural unity." Far-right Hindu nationalists – who engage in violence against minorities, especially Muslims – have found such arguments useful to their violent political project. Initial South Asian scholarship essentialized the region through ahistorical understandings that, for example, claimed Muslim-Hindu conflict as inevitable, and read contemporary events against understandings of "ancient India."[40] A movement in the 1970s developed "ethnosociology" to stress India's point of view. It operated in an essentialized fashion that spurned anything not "native," again emphasizing India as unchanging as well as singularly Hindu.[41] Postcolonial studies includes South Asian area studies and launched subaltern studies, which moved postcolonial theorizing to highlight society's most marginalized along lines of "class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture."[42]

Latin American area studies has not had to contend with the Orientalism of MENA and South Asian studies. Because of this, Latin Americanists both abroad and in the region have experienced higher rates of collaboration compared to those in other area studies. However, this is not to say that there are not inequities along the North-South axis, particularly in terms of funding that favors regional outsiders. Due to several philanthropic foundations focusing on the region dating back to the 1930s, Latin American studies is the US's most robust area studies.[43] Transnational collaboration between the US and Latin American academy – which has been much more a two-way street than other area studies – has resulted in a greater diversity of scholarship compared to other regional studies, including in methods and critical theory.[44] Nevertheless, the earliest scholarship on Latin America in US academia included blatant racism that promoted notions of "backwardness" endemic to the region, not unlike tropes found in Orientalism. The Latin American Studies Association (LASA) and major Latin America journal boards, however, have included regular participation by Latin Americans. Given the significant negative interventionism by the US in Latin America because of Cold War politics, LASA became a space of criticism of US security policy in stark contrast to MESA's conservatism.[45]

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[40] Ibid., 4, 28, 8–9, 16.

[41] Ibid., 22–25.

[42] Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1475–1490, 1477; and Dirks, "South Asian Studies," 33.

[43] Drake and Hilbink, "Latin American Studies," 1–2, 4.

[44] Ibid., 8–9; Anne Sisson Runyan, "Decolonizing Knowledges in Feminist World Politics," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 20, no. 1 (2018): 3–8, doi: 10.1080/14616742.2018.1414403.

[45] Drake and Hilbink, "Latin American Studies," 10, 3, 5.

What postcolonial theory began, decolonial theory continued. Decolonialism is linked to Latin American studies, with an emphasis on indigenous perspectives. Scholars outside of Latin America participate in decolonial studies, especially in regions that have undergone settler colonialism.[46] Settler colonialism in the Americas meant that Europeans exploited these regions through colonial practices and settled the lands. This led to new societies based on racialized categories that placed Europeans and their descendants as elites over indigenous and Afrodescendant populations.[47] Decolonial studies highlights how European colonialism launched "modernity" through the global capitalist system and binary constructions of European social practices as scientific and superior, read against the rest of the world as irrational and backwards.[48] The entrance of insiders into area studies led to the development of postcolonialism and decolonialism, two sub-fields that point to how positionality plays a key role in interpretation.

By reflecting on our insider/outsider positionalities in our research sites, we challenge the strict dichotomy between insider and outsider underpinning much of area studies. Through ongoing interrogations of our dynamic insider/outsider positionings, we show both the challenges and benefits of relating differently or similarly. Further, following IR scholars such as Linda Åhäll who explores the significance of micropolitics of the everyday to national security and other so-called forms of high politics, which can invisibilize and normalize colonial practices in what on the surface appears to unproblematic practices,[49] we consider the embedded implications of our different positionalities within our research.

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[46] Priti Ramamurthy and Ashwini Tambe, "Preface," *Feminist Studies* 43, no. 3 (2017): 503–511, here 503–505; Kiran Asher, "Spivak and Rivera Cusicanqui on the Dilemmas of Representation in Postcolonial and Decolonial Feminisms," *Feminist Studies* 43, no. 3 (2017): 512–524, 519, doi: 10.15767/feministstudies.43.3.0512.

[47] Asher, "Spivak and Rivera Cusicanqui on the Dilemmas of Representation in Postcolonial and Decolonial Feminisms," 519; Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America," *International Sociology* 15, no. 2 (2000): 215–232, 216-217, doi: 10.1177/0268580900015002005.

[48] Quijano, "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America," 221.

[49] Linda Åhäll, "Feeling Everyday IR: Embodied, Affective, Militarising Movement as Choreography of War," *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019): 428–435, here 438–439, doi: 10.1177/1043659614527321.

Two Autoethnographies in Istanbul and Colombo and Buenos Aires

In this section, we overview our diverse fieldwork in experiences using autoethnography as a method. While self-narrative is a component of autoethnography, it is the analysis and interrogation of these self-narratives that form the core of autoethnography.[50] By interpreting the subtexts of our fieldwork experiences within a feminist framework, we seek concrete actions that can be taken to decolonialize area studies, which we outline in the final section of this article.

Mhajne

My interest in researching Islamist women's activism began at a young age. I grew up in a conservative Muslim family in Umm Al Fahem, Israel, the home of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement. During the first 19 years of my life, I was surrounded by strong Muslim women who actively endorsed and promoted religious teachings and voted for the Islamic movement in every municipal election. As a teenage rebel, I always argued with these women on women's issues, political agency, and gender roles in the family. This interest became more prominent when I moved to live in Beer Sheva, a mainly Jewish city in Israel. There, I had discussions with some of my Jewish classmates on Islam and women. My colleagues viewed Muslim women as oppressed and Arab/Palestinian cultures as backwards because of their treatment of women. Later, I moved to the United States where I heard similar sentiments in US media and from private individuals. My personal experience with Islamist women showed me there is a significant misunderstanding of religious women in general and Islamist women in particular that needs to be addressed. I decided to dedicate my research to understanding Islamist women's political organizing to help me rationalize my own lived experiences and to contribute to providing an academic explanation for their activism.

In the winter of 2016–2017, I conducted fieldwork for my dissertation, "Political Opportunities and Strategic Choices of the Muslim Sisterhood in Egypt," in Istanbul, Turkey.[51] In 2013, I intended to conduct interviews in Egypt with members of the Muslim Brotherhood and their affiliated political party,

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[50] Chang, *Autoethnography as Method,* 43.

[51] Anwar Mhajne, "Political Opportunities and Strategic Choices of the Muslim Sisterhood in Egypt" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2018).

The Freedom and Justice Party. However, I was not able to go to Egypt. My visa application to go to Egypt has been pending since 2014. I found out later on through a close colleague, who I will not reveal their name for security reasons, that my visa was rejected because even though I am Palestinian and Arab, the individuals reviewing my visa application viewed my Israeli passport and interest in women's issues with suspicion.

Another reason why I could not go to Egypt is that in July 2013, the Egyptian army ousted the first democratically elected president after the events of the January 25 revolution. The president was Mohammad Morsi from the Freedom and Justice Party. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who Morsi had appointed as minister of defense, led the takeover. Even though Morsi was democratically elected, he attempted to implement problematic policies, such as temporarily issuing a Presidential decree in 2012 to expand his powers. In addition, Sisi cracked down on Islamists and other political opponents following the coup. For instance, on August 14, 2013, security forces in Cairo slaughtered about a thousand mainly unarmed Morsi supporters. As a result, Egypt now has thousands of political prisoners. Morsi himself died in an Egyptian courtroom in 2019.

This massive crackdown made it challenging to conduct fieldwork in Egypt safely for both the researcher and the research participants. Indeed, my Egyptian colleague, Walid Salem, a University of Washington doctoral student, was imprisoned for months in Egypt on suspicion of spreading false news and belonging to a terrorist group. When he was imprisoned, Walid was in Egypt, conducting interviews for his research on Egypt's judicial system. In addition, many women I interviewed in Egypt via phone, such as Huda Abdelmonem, were eventually imprisoned.

Due to the crackdown, I found establishing contact with members of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially the women, who are now being targeted in more significant numbers than under Mubarak's regime, challenging. I luckily met a Ph.D. candidate from SOAS, University of London, at the Institute for Qualitative Multi-Methods Research whose adviser worked with the exiled Egyptian Brotherhood members in Turkey. The professor graciously agreed to introduce me to Amr Darrag, a notable Muslim Brotherhood leader who served as Egypt's Minister of Planning and International Cooperation before the military coup in 2013. Previously, he served as a member of the Executive Board of the Freedom and Justice Party and the Chairman of the party's Foreign Relations Committee. I scheduled my first interview with him during my layover in Istanbul on my way to Israel.

Knowing the suspicion my Israeli passport could bring, I identified myself as a Palestinian from Umm al Fahem. I was naively surprised when he knew my town. Umm al Fahem is an Arab town in the Northern part of Israel where Sheikh Raed Salah founded the Northern Branch of the Islamic movement. Islamists in the region know Sheikh Raed Salah for his advocacy for the preservation of the al-Aqsa mosque and his vocal resistance to Israel. Two more personal meetings and emails followed the meeting. Amr Darrag introduced women and men affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood who live in exile in Egypt. Some of the people he connected with me were open to having a conversation and wanted me to include their names in my writing. Others avoided my calls, declined to be recorded, or asked to be anonymous. I interviewed 15 men and women affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood using a snowball sample.

Even though I disagreed with them, and I am weary of the involvement of religion in politics, I was thankful for them for trusting me with their stories about the Egyptian state. Some of them shared their trauma of losing a family member in one of the pro-Morsi protests after the coup; others told me how they are stuck in Turkey and cannot finish their graduate work in Europe because the Egyptian government refused to renew their passports, rendering them stateless. Even though I was an insider in many ways – I spoke Arabic, grew up Muslim, and was born in the Middle East, I was also an outsider because I was not Egyptian, I was not an Islamist, and I held a contentious Israeli passport. However, the unique history of my town and its ties to Islamist movements in the region made me more of an insider than an outsider.

Another element that complicated my research was the political situation in Turkey in late 2016 early 2017. My Israeli passport, which had my US visa, was stolen during my first week there. I had to worry about replacing my Israeli passport and then replacing my US visa while in Istanbul. The next day, on December 10, 2016, twin bombings in Istanbul killed at least 44 people, mostly police officers, and wounded 155 others. On December 19, 2016, the Russian ambassador to Turkey was assassinated in Ankara. On New Year's Eve, a gunman shot and killed 39 people and wounded 79 others at the Reina nightclub in Istanbul. Navigating these challenges was even more difficult because I was an outsider to my research site, Turkey, and I did not speak Turkish. This made it hard for me to stay in the country long enough to interview more people. It also made reaching the participants and meeting them at their preferred locations challenging.

My fieldwork experience highlights multiple challenges and access points. My initial contact with the Muslim Brotherhood was possible through a Western professor working at a Western university. After the coup, the Muslim

Brotherhood focused on reaching out to and engaging with Western institutions as a way to challenge the common perception of them as anti-human rights and democracy. Various scholars and think-tank analysts had access to the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership living in exile in Turkey, the United States, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere outside Egypt. In this sense, even though my identity as an Arab from a Muslim family helped establish trust between my interviewees and me, my positionality as a scholar working in the West and writing in a language accessible in the West was helpful for the Muslim Brotherhood. It helped me gain initial access to members of the leadership in Turkey.

As to the data analysis, my upbringing in an environment full of strong religious women in a state context hostile to their movement (in the case of Umm al Fahem, Israel banned the Northern Branch of the Islamist Movement in 2015 and imprisoned its leader Sheikh Raed Salah on multiple occasions) has prepared me to understand and relate to the women's experiences, vulnerabilities, and intersectional positions. However, not being completely an insider, in the sense of not sharing a national identity with these women, was helpful for me to develop an analysis that is conscious of elements of ideological bias. One of the reasons I did not study Islamist women in my hometown was because it was too close to home. I was worried that by being an insider sharing too many common identities with the research participant, I would not be able to fully identify and understand their political organizing because I am submerged in their daily realities. I was also worried that I would be unable to represent and express my accurate findings comfortably due to my direct connections and family ties to these groups. Studying Islamist women's organizing in a somewhat similar context helped me understand and write about the Islamist Movement in Israel.

Whetstone

In fall 2017, I conducted fieldwork for my dissertation, "Nurturing Democracy in Armed Conflicts through Political Motherhood: A Comparative Study of Women's Political Participation in Argentina and Sri Lanka," in Colombo, Sri Lanka and in spring 2019, in Buenos Aires, Argentina.[52] My positionality as an Anglo white US citizen makes me an outsider in both contexts. I speak no Sinhala, Tamil or Spanish, further reinforcing my outsider status. Prior to fieldwork,

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[52] Crystal Whetstone, "Nurturing Democracy in Armed Conflicts Through Political Motherhood: A Comparative Study of Women's Political Participation in Argentina and Sri Lanka" (Doctoral dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2020).

I had envisioned conducting interviews with participants of two groups of mothers of the disappeared, the Mothers' Front and the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo. However, in Colombo, I learned that most members of the Mothers' Front had passed away. This pushed my project in a new direction, to an examination of the legacy of the mothers of the disappeared. The interviews I conducted were mainly with scholars but also civil society actors. Most of the people I interacted with were middle class and highly educated. Nevertheless, the inequities that paint the global South as "backwards" and "uncivilized" remain at the fore of both popular culture and academia.[53] It is imperative for outsiders to remain vigilant regarding these dynamics, which I lost sight of at times.

Some of the Sri Lankan scholars I spoke with conveyed their warranted suspicion of me. One stressed the pattern of global North scholars coming to the global South to collect data and leaving without giving back anything, a problem that has been called to attention in recent decades.[54] An archivist made it apparent that I was unwelcome at the library. It is critical for global North scholars – especially those of full outsider status – to reflect upon such messages. I also had to question myself when I sought to challenge arguments of some Sri Lankan scholars. While we shared middle class status and academic backgrounds, even as a graduate student, it was incumbent upon me (given the power dynamics) to pay attention to how I worded critiques. Too often I dismissed that I held power since I was a graduate student. Being white in the US academe – even as a graduate student – carries weight with it, whether I realized that or not. I owe my dissertation advisor and other committee members a deep debt for their help in pointing out this issue when I began the writeup portion of my fieldwork. Continuing with reflexive thinking even when fieldwork ends is critical and this lesson points to the need to collectively reflect on positionality.

My time in Buenos Aires was shorter. Perhaps for this reason I did not experience any questioning of why I was researching in Argentina. Some do not consider Argentina part of the global South. Argentina is part of the G20 and many of its middle and upper classes – who lean politically right – argue that Argentina is more akin to Western Europe than Latin America, often in starkly racialized

53 Crystal Whetstone and Murat Yilmaz, "Recreating the Third World Project: Possibilities through the Fourth World," *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2020): 565–582, here 567, doi: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1702457.
54 Aisha Giwa, "Insider/Outsider Issues for Development Researchers from the Global South," *Geography Compass* 9, no. 6 (2015): 316–326, here 316–318, doi: 10.1111/gec3.12219.

terms.[55] My status as a white American with money to travel sent signals in Argentina I was not always aware of. When heading back to the US, I left some books at my rental, including one on Marxism, for future visitors. I had thought I would stay in touch with the flat owner as we had been friendly. But once the book was discovered, our contact ceased. I suspect that I was assumed to think along the lines of most – certainly not all – middle and upper class Argentines, who are ardently anti-Marxist.

Throughout dissertating, I regularly asked: Who was I to do this project? Would not a Sri Lankan or Argentine scholar be better suited? Others would see more and differently than I. For some outsiders – at moments or over time – they become part of a community, but I do not think I can ever become an insider in South Asian or Latin American area studies. The groups that I studied in my dissertation are mothers of the disappeared and I am not a mother, much less a mother of a disappeared person. Likewise, the disappeared in both the Mothers' Front and Madres of the Plaza refer to particular moments in history. I identify with Sri Lanka and Argentina but think even if I moved to one of these countries and learned local languages, I would not be much of an insider. Where I view myself as an insider is in how I critique my government's policies in national security, global trade and other areas that harm not only Sri Lanka and Argentina but people throughout the world, including marginalized communities in the US. By studying the perspectives of communities outside the mainstream in the US and abroad, I have gained understanding of the devastation wrought by the empire. As a white middle class American, I have a responsibility to work to change US policies because these policies have benefited my family in very apparent ways.

While doing my PhD, I reflected upon my status as the granddaughter of an Okie who grew up impoverished and despised in California as an outsider, and the granddaughter of a working-class mother who put in time at factories and nursing homes. Both my grandmothers eventually became secretaries, part of the feminized pink-collar ghetto of the 1960s and 1970s. This led them to middle-class lives in their middle age, options due to their status as white women in the US, a global superpower, and before automation upended secretarial work. In unpacking my motivation for my dissertation while conducting my fieldwork, I realized that I want to bring attention to the global South, still neglected in

[55] Enrique Garguin, "'Los Argentinos Descendemos de los Barcos': The Racial Articulation of Middle Class Identity in Argentina (1920–1960)," *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2007): 161–184, doi 10.1080/17442220701489563.

political science scholarship. I conduct research on the global South because it is missing and because it matters. While I cannot understand what I research in the same ways as those who share greater points of connection, I hope that my contributions encourage more (white) Americans to take an interest beyond the US and push Americans to demand that their government reverse harmful policies that put America first.

Decolonizing Area Studies through Academic Practice

We seek to answer: how can reflecting on our fieldwork experiences help to decolonize area studies? We dig further into our respective fieldwork narratives to find concrete measures to decolonize area studies. Additionally, we find inspiration in Catia Confortini's analysis of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), a women's organization that developed in World War I with the aim to end war. While the group initially held stances that essentialized women and ignored the issues of women of color and women living outside of the global North, WILPF evolved in through members' use of a feminist critical methodology. Over time, it helped WILPF to recognize the needs and issues of more than its original white, middle class members from the US and Europe and to critically reassess the concept of security. According to Confortini, feminist critical methodology empowers people:

> To identify and remedy actual or potential forms of oppression and exclusion... in their own practice
> [To welcome] input and ideas from (potentially) all
> [To engage in] critical self-reflection...[on their] assumptions, language, and embeddedness in a particular historical and ideological context
> [To engage in] recurrent evaluation...[of their] practices and ideas.[56]

Confortini's construction of a feminist methodology provides an ideal framework to consider methods for decolonizing area studies. In this section, we unpack our fieldwork and dissertation experiences while reflecting on area studies' norms and development of postcolonialism and decolonism.

The fieldwork experience of Mhajne points to the complexities around defining insiders and how researchers' insiderness shifts based on the issue at hand,

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[56] Catia Cecilia Confortini, *Intelligent Compassion: Feminist Critical Methodology in the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 114.

over time and given various and intersecting identities of both researchers and research participants. Mhajne's identity as a Palestinian Arab Israeli was both disadvantageous and advantageous in her research. While it prevented her ability to enter Egypt, meeting Egyptian women members of the Muslim Sisterhood living as refugees in Turkey was facilitated by her connection to Umm al Fahem, her hometown. While not part of the Muslim Sisterhood or even religiously identifying, Mhajne's background made her an insider in a sense, for she had grown up around the Islamic faith, which helped her to understand participants.

Mhajne's experiences point to how researchers inhabit both insider and outsider spaces in ways that disrupt a binary and static insider/outsider positionality. Nevertheless, the insights that Mhajne perceives in her research projects will inevitably yield more depth than anything a total outsider such as Whetstone can glean. This makes reliance upon (partial) insiders' scholarship paramount to ensure the most accurate and rich analysis in area studies. However, full outsiders can become (partial) insiders if they spend enough time living in/with a community.[57] Regardless of a researcher's positionality, Confortini's feminist critical methodology concept that she attributes to WILPF could be deployed by any researcher to engage in reflexive thinking. Each of us is implicated in a web of harm. Understanding both our privileges and oppressions will improve the analysis of our research, regardless of whether or how much we can fully mitigate harms.

With this in mind, we identify eight major ways to decolonize area studies through scholarly practices. One of the most obvious ways to decolonize area studies is by frequently citing insiders, however defined. We by no means suggest that insiders are simply from the region. Instead, an insider is better constructed as a researcher who shares some identity markers with the participants. The insider does not fully have to belong to the community they research, but are able through some of their cultural and personal contexts to relate to some identifying elements of the communities they are investigating. The only way texts become "classics" is if they are referenced regularly. A basic political action is to cite insiders from the global South and other marginalized communities. In kind, it is a decolonial act to avoid citing any studies that rely on essentialism or reductivism, a move that also results in more accurate research. Furthermore, it is a decolonial practice to reject citing any outsider who fails to set foot in the region of which they are supposedly an expert, or who does not cite insiders. This would also strengthen the integrity of research. Relatedly, another obvious

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57 Baser and Toivanen, "Politicized and Depoliticized Ethnicities," 2072–2073.

way to decolonize area studies is to cite postcolonial and decolonial scholarship. These fields represent "insider" area studies in full fruition with an emphasis on insiders' perspectives.

A second major method to decolonize area studies is to collaborate with and support global South scholars, whether they work in US academia or outside of it, in research projects, conference panels, round tables and other scholarly events. If the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we can find ways to "come together" even if they are geographically apart. Collaboration in the truest sense – working as partners – will result in superior scholarship and a more inclusive area studies.

A third significant way to decolonize area studies is to publish in open access sources. Countless global South scholars are unable to access the expensive databases available at even less well-off academic institutions in the US, even as this problem also impacts under-funded US institutions. By publishing in inclusive platforms (so long as they meet tenure-track requirements), we can end the dominance of global North institutions in academia. As early career scholars, we are cognizant of the limitations on academics working in the US given tenure-track demands. However, one of the most critical ways to decolonize area studies is to broaden the conversation. This minimally necessitates access to the conversation.

A fourth major way to decolonize area studies is for researchers to be frank regarding the colonial and imperial contexts influencing their research sites and participants. While discourses in both popular culture and academia paint the global South as "backward," it is incumbent upon area studies scholars (especially outsiders) to embrace a feminist transformative approach aiming to not only document and analyze, but also to produce recommendations to help address global inequalities. Area studies scholars must broaden and present conversations on imperialism to policymakers to help them recognize how these histories influence the present, including current economic inequities within and between countries contributing to global lack of human security. They also should highlight how understanding history is vital for assessing, devising, and implementing foreign policy responses and international initiatives to promote sustainable peace based on global justice and equality.

Fifth, recognizing that education is still unequal in many regions of the world, publishing findings in collaboration with research participants (as it makes sense) and giving back to the communities we interact with helps decolonize area studies. Feminist researchers try to avoid speaking for our research participants as well as avoid viewing them through our societal and other biases,

including those gained through our academic training.[58] Our research is intended to help scholars and broader communities to understand methods to empowerment. We publish in journals for our careers but have also sought other ways to communicate our findings with the broader public, such as pieces in *The Conversation*, as well as by sharing our ideas in community-based groups. Holding local workshops, engaging in insider-based research where research participants and/or community insiders participate in some (or all) parts of the research process produces community interventions that hold greater effect and more accurate research.[59] It is also essential to make the published work accessible to the research participants by directly sharing it with them and encouraging any feedback.

Sixth, based on Whetstone's field experiences, decolonizing area studies requires a deep humility when conducting fieldwork. While there will be moments of deep discomfort even for those who might identify as partial or even full insiders, such discomfort should be used to propel researchers to become (more) attentive in how they conduct research, and conduct themselves during fieldwork, such as by being aware of the power dynamics and engaging in empathy to promote greater social justice. Recognizing that frankly, outsider researchers may not be welcomed by communities is understandable. Rather than wallowing in pain or embarrassment over slights and accusals, researchers should accept these practices as making them aware of their partial insider or outsider status and to (re)commit to reflexivity and to honoring commitments made to the community. Discomfort is not exploitation and the feelings of the researcher is not what matters. Taking the feelings of actors encountered during research into account in the research process must remain the focus to decolonize area studies.

Seventh, based on Whetstone's fieldwork experience, to further decolonize area studies, there is a need for researchers to be fully aware of the past and ongoing practices of empire and particularly if the researcher is an outsider, to be actively engaged in working to educate fellow outsiders about this history and the ongoing practices of empire and to work to change the international community's and their own government's practices. While we are still junior scholars and still learning, it is incumbent upon those in area studies – but especially

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[58] Wibben, Confortini, Roohi et al., "Collective Discussion," 90–92.

[59] Lisa M. Vaughn, Crystal Whetstone, Alicia Boards, Melida D. Busch, Maria Magnusson, and Sylvia Määttä, "Partnering with Insiders: A Review of Peer Models Across Community-Engaged Research, Education and Social Care," *Health & Social Care in the Community* 26, no. 6 (2018): 779–781.

outsiders in area studies – to speak up in casual settings, the classroom, lectures, conferences, workshops and other spaces to highlight the impacts of past empire and the ramifications of continued empire on marginalized communities and states globally. Both Argentina and Sri Lanka – particularly the latter – are currently undergoing economic crises with Sri Lanka also enduring a political crisis. While some of the causes are local, understanding the global positionality of Argentina and Sri Lanka and the ongoing colonial legacies that have rendered these areas of the world on the (semi-)periphery, the internal colonialism in the global North is tightly woven to this and warrants unpacking. Area studies scholars are in an ideal position to correct the still common misperceptions that the global South is "behind" due ignorance rather than the exploitation of past and ongoing colonial practices.

Eighth, Mhajne's fieldwork interactions show us that being an insider does not have to mean inhabiting every identifying element of the community you are studying. Commonalities such as religion, language, or geographic location could help initiate contact and establish rapport. However, it does not guarantee that the researcher will be able to gain unique insights. The researcher needs to constantly reflect on their insider/outsider status and how it influences their research process and presentation, depending not only on their personal and sociopolitical contexts but also on the contexts and interests of the research participants. These participants do not passively respond to the researcher's identity. Some are strategic actors who grant and/or deny access to specific data and/or individuals.

To conclude, in this article, we traced the development of positionality in relation to its impact on area studies and reflected on our graduate experiences conducting fieldwork in Istanbul, Colombo and Buenos Aires. By unpacking these experiences and engaging with a feminist framework developed by Confortini, we argued for eight major methods that we suggest offer a path to decolonize area studies within the power of any academic researcher to pursue. We are committed decolonial feminists and area studies researchers who seek to make area studies accurate, accountable, diverse and inclusive, which can only happen through regular reflexivity and continual decolonization.