Interview – Nivi Manchanda

https://www.e-ir.info/2022/05/29/interview-nivi-manchanda/

E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, MAY 29 2022

Dr Nivi Manchanda is a Senior Lecturer in International Politics at Queen Mary, University of London. She is interested in questions of racism, empire, and borders and has published in, among other journals, *International Affairs, Security Dialogue, Millennium, Current Sociology,* and *Third World Quarterly.* She is the co-editor of *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (Routledge, 2014). Her monograph *Imagining Afghanistan: the History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge University Press, 2020) was awarded the LHM Ling First Outstanding Book Prize by the British International Studies Association. She sits on the editorial board of *International Studies Quarterly, Cambridge Review of International Affairs,* and *Security Dialogue.* Until 2021 she was the co-editor in chief of the journal *Politics* and the co-convenor of the Colonial, Postcolonial and Decolonial (CPD) working group of BISA.

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

If I take my 'field' to be understood broadly, there are SO many exciting research agendas being forged and debated. Whilst mainstream International Relations and its cognates – international political sociology, world history, global political economy, international security – remain largely disconnected from the world they purport to study, especially when it comes to questions of race, gender, class, sexuality and ability, the fringes of these disciplines are effervescent and creative subfields. The work of my friend and mentor Robbie Shilliam on race and racism in international politics, and the networks he has spawned, including the Colonial Postcolonial and Decolonial Working Group of BISA, are all exceptionally generative. There is also extremely interesting scholarship on the intersection of race and political economy undertaken by scholars such as Laleh Khalili, Deb Cowen, Lisa Tilley, Jenna Marshall, and Charmaine Chua. I have benefitted tremendously from debates in queer theory such as those advanced by Jasbir Puar, Judith Butler, Gargi Bhattacharya, and Rahul Rao. In the field of critical military and security studies, excellent work is being done by Ali Howell, Katharine Millar, Chris Rossdale, Mark Neocleous and Melanie Richter-Montpetit. There are also incredibly sophisticated theoretical analyses of colonialism and racism that are place-based, such as those advanced by Olivia Rutazibwa, Sara Salem, Rafeef Ziadah and Ajay Parasaram. Political theory is also (finally!) no longer the preserve of dead white men. Scholars such as Jasmine Gani, Barnor Hesse, Patricia Owens and Denise Ferreira da Silva are challenging and re-imagining what it means to do political and social theorising.

Looking slightly farther afield, I am increasingly fascinated by – and learning so much from – those grappling with ongoing conditions of settler colonialism. I am now thinking particularly of the work (and activism) of Leanne Betasomosake Simpson, Glen Sean Coulthard, Nick Estes, Jodi Byrd and Manu Karuka, who are concerned with struggles in North America, but there is also work being done on settler societies and resistance to them in Palestine (Rhys Machold, Noura Erakat), Kashmir (Goldie Osuri) and Brazil (Desirée Poets).

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

My understanding of the world has remained, on the one hand, relatively stable since I was a teenager and, on the other, is unsettled almost on a daily basis. This is perhaps a strange thing to admit, but growing up in an affluent gated neighbourhood in New Delhi left me deeply uncomfortable and sowed an early seed of 'radicalisation'. I had

made up my mind as a child that the world was a dark and unfair place, though I've done a lot of 'unlearning' since then too, especially when it comes to political institutions, not the least the university.

There have been many critical junctures in my academic trajectory that have significantly nuanced my crude apprehension of the world and my place in it. At SOAS as an undergraduate student, I fell in love with Edward Said's work, and he retains a commanding position in my political imagination. I also became interested in what we might call post-structuralist thought at this time, and though I am fairly disillusioned with much of this work now, I owe a massive debt to Michel Foucault (even though I am loathe to admit it!) As a postgraduate student, I was introduced to the work of Frantz Fanon, who has left an indelible impression on my thought and also opened the door to my engagement with the Black Radical Tradition, including the work of luminaries such as Angela Davis, Stuart Hall, and Cedric Robinson.

More recently, the work of people working on the intersection of carcerality and racism, like Ruthie Wilson Gilmore, Simone Browne, Derecka Purnell and Harsha Walia, has made me think deeply about the politics of borders, policing, and security along abolitionist lines. Being at the Politics and IR department at QM prompts me to see the world differently almost every day. The students are exceptional and all my colleagues – especially James Eastwood, Laleh Khalili, Adam Elliot-Cooper, Sharri Plonski, Engin Isin, Sophie Harman, Clive Gabay, Kim Hutchings, Kate Hall, Holly Ryan, Musab Younis, and Layli Uddin – challenge me in the best and most thought-provoking ways.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, literary texts that have a hint of autobiography are the ones I find myself being most moved by recently. In the last few years, I've read the most exquisite works by Hazel Carby, Saidiyya Hartmann, Vron Ware, Dionne Brand, and Julietta Singh, and I find myself turning to their wisdom in moments of both ebullience and sorrow.

To what extent has the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement drawn from the Black Panther Party (BPP) both in theory and in praxis, and where do you see the possibilities and obstacles for the former to move beyond a primarily protest-based movement? How can the BLM movement make sure that its radical dimensions survive being co-opted?

This is a good question, and chimes with some of the issues I've been grappling with in my recent work on policing and the BPP. From what I know of the BLM movement, many of its founding members – it's quite a dispersed and decentralised organisation, not a hierarchical one – have explicitly credited the BPP as inspiration, and have said that they are working in the tradition of the Black Power movement of which the Panthers, but also Malcom X and others, were touchstones. That is not to say they are identical: the times have changed and so have the demands. The BPP started primarily as a party for self-defence and then diversified into welfare programs, social, and even medical care. The Black Lives Matter movement has a more specific 21st century message; it is not fighting in the same way for civil rights or equality in the eyes of the law. This is a de facto fight, not a de jure one, and the main battleground is police brutality and the carceral state. But one of the things that both of these movements have managed to do really well, though they are based in the United States primarily, is have a global message and build solidarity with different movements and peoples across the globe (linking with global movements and struggles in India, Brazil, South Africa, Palestine, and BLM UK as its own movement), and I think that's a really exciting overlap between those visions and actions.

In terms of the possibilities and obstacles to move beyond a protest-based movement, I don't necessarily think of BLM as just a protest-based movement. I think that they are already advancing a political and social agenda, have very salient points to make for organization, and as we saw those were taken up in Minneapolis, especially after George Floyd's murder. Some of the best academic texts are turning to movements for intellectual inspiration rather than vice versa, that is mining movements for data, which sadly still seems to be the dominant trend. Although BLM has a far-reaching political program that extends beyond protest, the obstacles stem from the fact that politics in the West is largely still a conservative domain: it appropriates, and it tames or de-barbs most radical possibilities. Thus, for a movement that is so explicitly based on social justice, decarcerality, and abolitionism, I am not sure that it should be co-opted into a mainstream political agenda – whether that's an obstacle or a strength or simply a different political terrain on which BLM is operating, I guess depends on how we look at it and what are own priorities and

Interview – Nivi Manchanda

Written by E-International Relations

agendas are.

The kind of co-optation you mention in the second part of your question can only work if we forego some of the emphasis on capitalism. If we're thinking of race and racism as merely representational or 'optical', then it's easy to co-opt. But if you keep the interlocking systems of oppressions – harking back to intersectionality – then it becomes much harder. Nike could then never be part of the BLM movement, for instance, because they have sweatshops in China. Then you have a far more global understanding of capitalism and an anti-capitalist understanding of what that movement is and what that movement should do. I find Robin D Kelley's work especially insightful on this.

Your theorising of racial militarism through the Panthers challenges dominant understandings of the US as a nation-state rather than as an Empire in ways that are similar to analyses by Indigenous Peoples from Turtle Island. Where do you think these two analyses of the US converge and diverge?

I think that's a really excellent question. While there are some very important differences between the critique of the US state advanced by the Panthers, and especially Huey Newton and Indigenous scholars and activists, there is also too much made of how different a Black understanding of the US state is, compared to Indigenous critiques. Both the Panthers and the theory of intercommunalism, as articulated by Newton (which the article goes in some depth about) and Indigenous scholars are concerned with the US's claims to sovereignty as being quite thin at the best of times, and totally illegitimate most of the time, based on an imperial agenda, as well as being essentially – historically and politically – invalid. The Indigenous claim to land and sovereignty is based on the fact that they were the primary caretakers of those lands, regions and eco-systems, and this has interesting resonances with the Panthers' apprehension of the US as a fundamentally colonial and racial capitalist state – it is both a settler-colonial and an imperial state. That is a really important convergence, but there is also divergence: in some ways, Black people who were violently brought to what we call the US through Transatlantic Slave Trade are also arrivants (to use Jodi Byrd's word) on this land in a way that Indigenous Peoples are not. That by no means precludes the possibility for solidarity; indeed, it demands an understanding of the US state as racist in different ways to its Black and its Indigenous population, and in other ways to its other migrant populations as well – South Asians, East Asians, and so on.

With reference to international security studies, you write that "A 'decolonial' discipline may not be achievable, but an anti-racist one is not just possible but also essential." Why is it essential and why do you suggest it might be worth shifting from studying 'security' to studying 'violence'?

This article was part of a special issue dealing with security studies, and I had to talk about the subdiscipline of Security Studies since I was dealing with parts of that disciplining in my own work. Nonetheless, my point was simply that if we are dealing with or trading in disciplines in the university, which we unfortunately are, even if we try to get rid of them, I don't think the problem of decolonizing would go away. We might be left with this one vast trans-disciplinary or anti-disciplinary endeavour, but at its roots, it's not going to be revolutionary or decolonised in any meaningful sense. Yet, studying the realm called security through 'security studies' without taking into account racism and anti-racism, is basically a failed enterprise, because you're left with a hollow and quite vapid understanding of the most important aspects of so-called security. The reason why I said that a decolonial discipline might not be possible is precisely because of this question: what does decolonizing the university look like? It might mean the abolition of the university as a space. Then a decolonized security studies or decolonized International Relations might be a contradiction in terms. While a decolonised university, especially on unceded land, is impossible (because it remains metaphorical as Tuck and Yang have argued), I don't think an anti-racist one is.

Security studies *is* an imperial discipline, perhaps par excellence. However, if you want to study some of the things that animate security, then we can start with the question of violence. As soon as we pivot that question towards violence rather than Security, we start tending to different subjectivities and positionalities, and that's definitely a worthwhile endeavour, even within the confines of academia.

What does a racial militarism framework and an anti-racist security studies approach tell us about the war in Ukraine?

Interview – Nivi Manchanda

Written by E-International Relations

Ukraine is a very particular subject and a particular place. On the one hand, it is considered as on the fringes of Europe — less 'civilised' than Western or Proper Europe. Maria Todorova's work on this construal of Eastern Europe and the Balkans in particular is excellent. For instance, a lot of the animosity and racial hatred that animated Brexit was directed towards Eastern Europeans: Romanian and Polish communities. Moreover, if we think about anti-racism – Russia is often racialised as non-white, but Russia's aggression in Ukraine is an imperial one – we should think about our own implication interpreting and casting the peoples of Eastern Europe as racialized others, going back to the Balkans which was constructed as the Sick Man of Europe in the First World War or understanding the 'Eastern bloc' according to the logics and grammar of difference that is more gradated than simply white and not white. On the other hand, some of the stuff coming out of Ukraine is also shocking: there is a lot of anti-Black violence in Ukraine. For instance, Black students and Indian students are being told that they cannot leave Ukraine; Polish families are very happy to take white or seemingly white Ukrainians, who they welcome as their kin but are rejecting the claims of asylum seekers from Ukraine who are Black; border guards who are hurling racist abuse at them; the Ukrainian forces harassing them, and so on. Further, the international reaction is quite telling. It has been largely good, though there has been all kinds of nationalist war-mongering, and while I'm not a fan of NATO, the international solidarity displayed towards Ukraine is overall a positive outcome. Nonetheless, it is strikingly different to Afghanistan and how we in the West reacted to Afghan refugees, which was a conflict even more directly of our own making – or Iraq or Syria. Therefore, Ukraine occupies a quite distinct and particular place when we think about anti-racism, because it's very multi-faceted – not that other places are not, but both those sides need to be taken into account, and paint quite a complex picture.

You emphasize the need to do away with the binaries of "**activism**" **versus** "**academia,**" **but warn that this would require** "**changing everything.**" **Where do we start and what are some of the main obstacles in realising this vision?**

The 'change everything' is obviously a riff on Ruth Wilson Gillmore's new book, which is called*Change Everything: Racial Capitalism and the Case for Abolition*. In terms of the binaries, the main obstacle is academia. On the one hand, the academy claims that it is interested in impact and the 'real' world, and on the other, this is measured in a way that is indexed by metrics that are so obtuse, so policy-oriented in a way that has very little to do with activism or on-the-ground radical change. Where do we start? We just start by being aware of our own political commitments when we undertake what we think are purely intellectual projects. Further, I don't think we should study those as different things. That is not to say that there shouldn't be rigorous intellectual grounding to our work, but that especially in international politics, nothing is outside of the 'normative' in the sense that everything is based on some sort of politics. Instead of disavowing those politics or pretending that there is only neutrality, we need to sharpen our focus, especially in the context of the neoliberal academy where our research is invariably shaped by funding pressures, impact factors, and the vagaries of the job market.

That is equally applicable in the realm of pedagogy. In some ways, the classroom is the best place to broaden that agenda: when we are in the classroom, we are not merely doing ivory-tower-type things, but we are weighing in on debates, shaping conversations, learning things ourselves, and if we are serious about what we call 'research-led teaching,' then it's quite an easy way to think about how we are doing activism *and* research, *and* politics.

Can you tell us a bit about your new project on borders, what it is about and why it is important?

I have been thinking about the question of borders and border abolition for a few years now, and while this was triggered initially by the idea of carcerality and its operations in racist migration regimes, it became even more interesting to me to find these threads in four thinkers who were very distinct, though they were writing at the same time. They are: Temsula Ao from the North-east of India, Gloria Anzaldua who has very famously written about border zones, Jean Genet who is a French playwriter, and Huey Newton of the Black Panther Party, who I've done some work on. When I read their stuff, I was really interested in the fact that they were mostly implicitly (except in the case of Anzaldua who is very explicitly) drawing on tropes and ideas and notions to do with borders and border zones: how we trespass or transgress them, how we learn from them, and how we behave in border zones and in conditions of bordering, among others. As I read them, I realized that a lot of the work on borders today, especially on 'open borders' or 'no borders,' whilst important, and politically urgent, has sometimes dropped from its purview other

Interview – Nivi Manchanda

Written by E-International Relations

ways of being with the border and experiencing the border. I think that these four people, writing about the same time in the mid-20th century from four different parts of the world, add some sort of texture to that story of bordering and border-zones. My new project is basically an intellectual history of these four thinkers, trying to find the kind of convergences as well as the divergences within them, and ultimately trying to say something about our present moment and going beyond the notion of 'no borders.' This includes talking about solidarity, relationality and anti-capitalism in those spaces, and from very different perspectives.

As part of this new project on borders, you propose to think beyond border abolition. What do you have in mind here and how is that commensurable with political projects that still resist the still physical borders, borderzones and the color lines they uphold?

The first thing I want to say is that I don't want to throw shade on those struggles – those struggles are extremely important, politically necessary, and absolutely need to be happening. I think, actually, that border abolition and the 'open/no borders' scholarship can learn quite a lot from prison abolition, and if we take abolition or an abolitionist framework seriously, then 'open borders' or 'no borders' will take a decidedly different tenor and have a different materialization. That's because, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore says, abolition is about presence: it is about the presence of different sorts of frameworks, about non-carceral ways of being, about welfare programmes, about anti-racist structures, and so on. That's where the 'open borders' perspectives come across as slightly attenuated, because its political horizon is not necessarily limited, but so attuned to or focused on the border or on the border regime, that we are not left with more politically inventive or radical ideas of what that might mean. That's where it comes up against the question of how we can undo the structures of border regimes and not merely just the border regimes themselves.

Further, these four thinkers write about being with the border and tease that out as a strategy of resistance, even though that might not be obvious or what comes to mind immediately or intuitively. Nevertheless, in many different contexts, border zones themselves have been spaces of fugitivity and resistance, allowing people to do what the boundaries of a state might prohibit. Perhaps a narrow focus on just the border itself might do some damage to movements that use and toy with that space in creative and stealthy ways.

What is the most important advice you could give to younger scholars?

On the whole, younger scholars have got it right. My experience of PhD supervision and attending conferences where early-career researchers are presenting has given me the distinct impression that as conditions get worse – precarity, worsening pay, diminished job satisfaction – the analysis of these conditions gets sharper and more granular, especially by those at the receiving end of neoliberal academia's worst excesses. This is by no means a romanticisation of our present moment, merely an observation — and therefore, my 'advice' to junior scholars has less to do with what they should be doing, and is more a comment on the dismal state of affairs in the British (and perhaps global) academy. For working class students of colour especially, my advice would be to organise collectively, to take what they can from the university ('steal', in Moten and Harney's memorable turn of phrase), and to know that the university is based on exploitation, expropriation and appropriation as much as any other industry. It is hard not to judge your worth as a scholar by the metrics that profoundly shape our existence as academics, but some of the most worthwhile and thoughtful work comes from outside academic structures (and strictures!) and is generative in a way that cannot be captured by impact factors and journal peer reviews.

Finally, as a word of practical advice, take advantage of mentoring opportunities wherever possible. The Colonial Postcolonial Decolonial (CPD) working group has a large mentoring network for PhD students and early-career students that organises workshops, social activities, and collaborative writing projects; pairs more established scholars with junior colleagues to offer advice on publications, PhD vivas; and have informal chats about how to tackle academic challenges and offer some respite from the alienation we can all feel in academic spaces.