

Out of Space: Securitization, Intimacy, and New Research Challenges in Post-2009 Iran

Shirin Saeidi (Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, ssaeidi@gmu.edu); Paola Rivetti (School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland, paola.rivetti@dcu.ie)

In post-2009 Iran, not only is space gendered for a variety of reasons ranging from customs to state intervention, but public space has become less accessible and secluded for security purposes. To securitize the state or replace a sense of trust with that of suspicion, states blend the gendering of space with the architecture of seclusion. In the United States, for instance, the separation of males and females in the prison industrial complex includes seclusion of bodies and often places gender nonconforming people, immigrants, and those with HIV in disproportionate levels of physical danger.¹ In Iran, architectural adjustments with the aim of seclusion have significantly increased since the 2009 protests. In Tehran, for instance, shisha shops in the mountains, which used to be common sites of leisure, are randomly raided by security forces. As a result, to participate in such spaces means to hide in the back areas and corners and partaking in an activity that not too long ago was legal. It follows that the combination of gendering and seclusion of space disrupts the formation of organic relationships and generate real, falsely stimulated, and contested intimacies. How we approach intimacies in this complicated situation determines in important ways the impact that this new spatial scheme will have on our research agenda, analysis, and perhaps even safety.

Scholars have illustrated how states manipulate intimacy at different stages of their formation. Lisa Lowe argues that intimacy develops closeness, which can bring about liberation or domination. Lowe highlights the presence of closeness in moments of explicit violation during

the life of a state, such as during legalized slavery, and she also notices that the “residue” of closeness can be touched through seemingly benign processes such as free trade relationships between states.² Similarly, Ann Stoler invites us to think about empire and colonialism not in terms of “legacy” but as “ruins” that people live with, and sometimes within, to highlight the continued links between intimate encounters and (post)colonialism.³ Elizabeth Povinelli has illustrated how states control the transformative power of intimacy by connecting it with love, the formation of families and nationhood.⁴

While we do not deny that loving, intimate relations can develop through seclusion or despite it, during research we also encountered ways in which it skews relationships. In what follows, we discuss two experiences where we were manipulated by the intimacy resulting from the architecture of seclusion in gendered spaces. This resulted in our overdetermined focus on some frameworks and categories as opposed to others that may have been equally useful. The combination of seclusion and intimacy is a salient feature of the present moment in Iran (and elsewhere), and thus we hope this contribution will be informative for students conducting research in gendered spaces (in the Middle East and beyond) who expect to find solidarity or conflict revolving around rights, gender, and feminist politics. They may find this to be the case. However, we suggest that students also pay attention to other politics, beyond a traditional understanding of gender. Students should be willing to question their own investments, attachments to and engagements with analytical lenses, such as gender, and enlarge their pool of choice.

In the winter of 2013, Shirin Saeidi was at the Ammar film festival in Tehran to carry out research on the evolution of Islamic cinema after the 2009 presidential conflict. During the

festival, she was introduced to the wife of a martyr whose husband was killed by international forces in the post-1989 period. Over the course of a year, Saeidi became close to this interlocutor. It should be noted that the two women only met at this wife of a martyr's home because her high level of publicity meant that in the public sphere, they were often under surveillance.

During different fieldwork trips between 2006-2008, Saeidi had conducted extensive research on Iranian war martyrs and their families (Iran-Iraq war, 1980-88). Saeidi had seen how these families often position themselves as representatives of the Iranian people, and use their elevated position in the Shi'i state to advance people's rights. But Saeidi was unsettled about how this post-war wife of a martyr would uncritically address rights and religion in post-2009 propaganda programs geared towards limiting citizenry autonomy. Saeidi became irritated by what she perceived as a vast difference between her friend's public behavior and private thoughts. This is in the post-revolutionary Iranian context where families of martyrs generally have more freedom than others to speak "truth to power" due to their elevated citizenry status. Nevertheless, this friend rarely employed her insightful analysis of Iranian society when speaking before the camera. When she would invite Saeidi to her home, she would ask which organs she worked for in the United States. She was also one of many friends who claimed to have access to confidential knowledge on Saeidi's "security problems." These conversations put Saeidi in a challenging situation where she had to prove, to someone that had befriended her and whom she stood in solidarity with, that she was not a spy. The two women ultimately lost communication when Saeidi stopped engaging, but Saeidi always thinks about this friendship because for some time now she has had a gut feeling that she missed something analytically significant in the interactions. The extended period of seclusion at this interviewee's home

produced a contested intimacy between the two women as both struggled to trust one another, despite having an otherwise intense, and meaningful, relationship.

In another piece for this roundtable, Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux argues that securitization of the state in Libya results in the channeling of information into a researcher's project. In Saeidi's experience, the state's control over her access to people meant that Saeidi sought to decipher the intent of her connections as a tactic for trying to understand their positionality in relation to the data that was being shared. Taking part in this intrusive practice meant that Saeidi's interlocutor became increasingly impatient with her too. In addition to disrupting the development of an organic relationship, the search for intention in secluded and securitized environment also skewed Saeidi's data analysis. When Saeidi was pleased with the citizenry participation of interlocutors, for instance, intentions became less central to her analysis. Saeidi stopped searching for her interlocutor's intentions when this wife of a martyr was publicly supportive of other people's rights struggles. At her job, she often used her political power to support the employment of unruly staff members. Single handedly, this wife of a martyr has reconstructed national notions of martyrdom by remaining defiantly ambivalent about representations of her martyred husband and extensively highlighting the extraordinary capacities of his female relatives. Quite surprisingly then, she has legitimized the narratives of the wives of martyrs who are feminists or anti-establishment but remain unknown. More generally, her disposition also lends support to those Iranians who recognize the limits of the nation-state and its normativity by having fun, embodying extreme individualism, and taking part in self-promotion. At the same time, this "pro-people" positionality also upholds the state's Republican traditions and appeals to other segments of the state's population. In other words, it is not necessarily in conflict with this interlocutor's more security oriented activism in other

places. The gendering of space, securitization, and the contested intimacies that they produce may influence our critical perspective, and this could mean that we take some observations for granted and further disrupt relationships.

Yet other frameworks for understanding this interlocutor's citizenry participation were unimaginable because as a researcher Saeidi had not, with her entire body present, experienced what this young friend was enduring as a newly widowed woman. Could it be that this interlocutor's religious and political practices relate to analytical lenses other than authoritarian resistance/co-option, piety politics, or "good citizenship"? It was only after Saeidi began to critically engage with an experience in her own life that she could better understand the complexity of this interlocutor's subjectivity. In March 2015, only ten days after her daughter Nur was born, Saeidi's twenty-one-year-old cousin, Rana Saeidi, was killed in a car accident in Ahvaz, Iran. Rana, who would set her clothing in the most elegant of ways, who refused to eat ice cream because it was too fattening, lost one eye in the accident and shattered one side of her body. There is something profoundly alienating about mourning when the sorrow is entirely yours. For Saeidi, it required love and sympathy not just from friends and family, but also complete strangers.

Having experienced the tragic and unexpected death of a young person she loved, Saeidi knows that another framework for making legible her interlocutor's association with the state is mourning and the need to overcome alienation for sustaining life. Contrary to what at first might seem glaringly obvious, a lack of female solidarity or an absence of democratic politics were not the only, or even most significant, lenses for deciphering this wife of a martyr's pull towards the post-2009 state. Saeidi's inability to see that this widow stood emotionally at the intersection of mourning and alienation is interesting as it may relate back to her refusal to confront death on

her own, always insisting on doing it collectively through love and writing. At the time, Saeidi did not see that at some junctures “the great difficulty is to say Yes to life”⁵ again. In this instance the gendering and seclusion of space created a contested intimacy that made it difficult for Saeidi to escape herself or the absoluteness that accompanies death. As such, Saeidi failed to integrate God, mourning, shock, alienation, and unexpectedness into her initial analysis and her exchanges with this interlocutor. Sometimes our interlocutors may be unwilling or unprepared to care for us. Similarly, and for a variety of reasons, a research’s ethics of care may not connect with her politics of care. The dynamics of our fieldwork must be discussed to uphold the scientific character of what we do.⁶

While fragmented intimacies develop because of gendered and secluded spaces, as Saeidi illustrated, their presence may also indicate that other dynamics are at work beyond varieties of gender separation. In fact, gender-based analytical lens may, in some instances, trick the researcher if she or he is not able to integrate other perspectives. Paola Rivetti’s research looks at how Iranian pro-democracy activists, critical to various extent of the Islamic Republic, have managed to survive the state’s authoritarian interventions during the 2009 protests and subsequent repression. Talking to the largest number of activists is therefore crucial to her work, and she has tried to engage with male and female activists involved in different activities. Her presence in the field has always stimulated very diverse reactions, ranging from suspicion to enthusiasm. Over years of research, she found it easier to get access and connect with male activists, regardless of their politics, from moderately progressive Islamic thinkers to radical liberals.

Rivetti has always thought that the reason for this was her Western nationality and

gender, identity markers that, she thought, made her exotic to the activists' eyes. Female activists initially engaged with her, but generally they were quick to shy away or progressively reduce contact despite Rivetti's efforts. By contrast, male activists often offered to help enlarge Rivetti's network, providing new contacts and also guidance in the field of activism, which includes a diverse range of informal groups that quickly appeared and disappeared but often are composed of the same people. They provided great help and companionship. The spaces Rivetti shared with them changed at the turn of 2009. Before that date, they often met in busy coffee shops or on university campus, while after spaces for meetings became more remote and secluded, such as less popular and less well-known coffee shops. Private spaces, such as houses, were generally avoided, but some meetings happened there if a group of people of both genders was involved.

The intimacy that developed from this increased spatial seclusion seemed to confirm Rivetti's initial hypothesis that men predominantly engaged with her because of the "liberality" that they assigned to her as a Western woman. However, when in 2016 and 2017 Rivetti sought contacts and direct conversations with feminist activists, she realized that the same seclusion and intimacy developed. These feminist activists, like their male counterparts, spoke very openly about their thoughts and opinions as mutual trust was established. While their body language was different, the approach that male and female activists had toward her, a foreign researcher, was similar: dense, intense, and, at times, even tense political conversations developed along with a personal connection, made of trust and curiosity, sheltered from the public eye because of security concerns.

Rivetti realized that the way men and women behaved during their interactions had little to do with her gender and ethnicity, and more to do with the organization of power within activist/oppositional networks. In mixed groups, it was predominantly male activists who felt

entitled to “speak for” the group. Rivetti noticed that this position often reflected their informal leadership, a result of the activists’ knowledgeability and self-confidence. Gender was present in the construction of leadership and visibility; but it was one factor among the others: textual knowledge and familiarity with revolutionary notions, and time to devote to activism are in fact core to leadership building. In female groups, women felt entitled to speak for their group, and enjoyed greater self-confidence and freedom from male leadership.⁷ While gender lenses partially explain why access to men⁸ coming from mixed political groups was easier, they only tell part of the story. Only by lessening gender lenses, Rivetti became aware that other dynamics were at play, beyond gender itself, in the formation of leadership and the distribution of power among and within groups.

More generally, remaining open to analytical possibilities other than the categories we are personally invested in, is a necessity for field researchers in all instances. When talking to liberal-minded activists, Rivetti realized that the intimacy that they came to share allowed activists to be very open about their opinions. They not only criticized the Islamic Republic and the lack of safety for those willing to engage in political activism, but addressed specific policies that, according to them, contributed to worsening the economic and political situation in the country. Such policies were the economic support to martyrs’ families and state-led industrial planning. Social welfare and the presence of the state in the economy kept a vibrant entrepreneurial class from developing, thus making the advancement of democracy in the country less and less likely. On the one side, Rivetti registered such opinions with interest, as reverberations of a world-hegemonic discourse conflating liberal democracy, democratization (or “transitions to democracy”) and free-market economy, and carrying geopolitical implications. On the other side, she also engaged such opinions critically and freely spoke her mind about them.

However, the activists' reluctance to discuss their positions made her increasingly impatient *vis-à-vis* what sounded to her like unleashed neo-liberal conservatism with an Islamophobic undertone. Eventually she had to halt interactions with two activists because the dialogue had become too contentious.

While seclusion helped Rivetti to establish intimate and trustworthy relations, it also made her disproportionately focus on her personal role in the production of knowledge, with the possibility that she missed relevant elements coming across in the interactions. In a way, seclusion as an expression of the gendering of space backfired. Rivetti's personal difficulty was to accept that discourse as an "evasion" of the state's manufacturing of the ideal subject, who is characterized by feelings of Islamic piety and ideals of social justice. While focused on broader, geopolitical hierarchies of meaning (which are highly relevant)⁹ or her personal frustration, Rivetti risked missing the process through which international fixities localize. This process happens through critical engagement with locally dominant values and identification of possible alternatives,¹⁰ and provides a space for different forms of subtle and explicit refusal.

The coming together of the gendering of space and seclusion has elevated the possibility for field researchers to be "caught in" very intense and intimate interactions that may enhance some analytical lenses at the expenses of others. This happens precisely because intimacy offers the necessary closeness for unusual processes and unexpected behaviors to develop, resulting in contested intimacies. In this short piece, we thus suggest that field researchers remain open to different possibilities and be vigilant when investing in intimate conversations with people in the field. This will help them grasp seemingly concealed dynamics.

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- ¹ Eric A. Stanley and Nat Smith, eds., *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Baltimore, Md.: AK Press, 2011).
- ² Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).
- ³ Ann Stoler, "Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination," *Cultural Anthropology* 23 (2008): 191–219.
- ⁴ Elizabeth A. Povinelli, "Notes on Gridlock: Genealogy, Intimacy, Sexuality," *Public Culture* 14 (2002): 215–38.
- ⁵ James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (New York: Laurel Book, 1956), 10.
- ⁶ Dvora Yanow, "Dear Author, Dear Reader: The Third Hermeneutic in Writing and Reviewing Ethnography," in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power*, ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 275-302.
- ⁷ Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870–1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (1979): 512-29; Erika Biagini, "The Egyptian Muslim Sisterhood between Violence, Activism and Leadership," *Mediterranean Politics* 22 (2016): 35–53.
- ⁸ Jillian Schwedler, "The Third Gender: Western Female Researchers in the Middle East," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39 (2006): 425–28.
- ⁹ Paola Rivetti and Shirin Saeidi, "What Is So Special About Field Research in Iran? Doing Fieldwork in Religiously Charged Authoritarian Settings," in *Doing Political Science Research in the Middle East and North Africa: Methodological and Ethical Challenges*, eds. Janine Clark and Francesco Cavatorta (London: Oxford University Press), under review.

¹⁰ I find the notion of “confession” is particularly helpful in examining how this process happens. Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 215–17.