

*Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in
Twenty-First-Century America* by Inderpal Grewal.
Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 335 pages.

Inderpal Grewal, Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University, has brought together feminist and securitization studies in what has become a growing focus upon the antithesis of the Lysistrata presumption, that is, that women, and particularly mothers, will naturally resist war of any kind, and thus securitization in its current militarized format. Rather, the current and expanding vision of women's adaptation to militarized securitization, an especially American version, stresses quiet, elite, indeed "exceptional" (in the sense of American exceptionalism) women warriors. These American, or American-like, women, products of a vision, if not reality, of their exceptional status, support quiet war against the ultimate threats: "Islamic terrorists" and "criminal illegal aliens."¹

Grewal explores the "traditional masculinity influences" upon conceptualizations of securitization, that is, formulations of "risk"

and militarized responses, with traditional tendencies on the part of many women toward compliance with the anti-humanitarian bases of American exceptionalism and American securitization in the twenty-first century. She demonstrates convincingly that the growing departure of conceptualizations of security from the humanitarianism of much of contemporary feminism, along with the populist demonization of specific ethnic groups, particularly Muslims, underscores the pervasiveness of neo-liberal ideology, and especially the undermining of feminist humanitarianism, under a guise of “globalism” in the contemporary American, if not Western, *weltanschauung*.

Grewal’s earlier works² explore the thesis of contemporary male-dominated and militarized securitization from the context of the “security moms,” a theme subsequently picked up by other authors.³ In the opening lines of her 2006 piece, Grewal asks, “How do we understand what is happening with feminism when feminist discourses are used to bomb and to liberate, when feminist discourses, strategies, and injuries become available in new and unintended ways to empower, to secure, and to destroy?” In this light, the new securitization concerns, in this interpretation at least, are thought to undermine the humanitarian bases of post-1960s feminism, constituting a kind of new feminism devoid of restraints in the drive to “protect the family,” or “protect my children” from foreign (read: “Muslim”) threats.

“Security moms,” the most recent social “beneficiaries” of American exceptionalism, then, are seen to monitor everything around them, striving to push back terrorists and other threats to the family, in this Manichean, good vs evil, worldview. The drive for order, guarding (so far as possible) against the most feared threats: “Islamic terrorists” and “criminal illegal aliens,” has come to take precedence. Grewal concludes in her impressive work that

as sovereignty is dispersed under neoliberalism, and as histories of race and empire continue to subtend citizenship, both militarism (in the form of the shooter or the spy) and humanitarianism (in the form of the NGO worker or the humanitarian) keep alive US exceptionalism through the work of the exceptional citizen. (126)

Context is all-important in Grewal's analysis. Her argument unfolds in a powerful condemnation of contemporary concepts of securitization, although it is even more concerned with the ingraining of a violent and colonial culture.

None of this is new, Grewal reminds us. Rather, it is the eventual product of mostly Christian (and disappointed) men who sense, without any clear realization, that they have been victimized by the fading of neo-colonialism and the loss of perquisites of economic empire. The rise in global threats, and specific scapegoats, provide a kind of political explanation for the declining fortunes of the Western middle class male. The Second Amendment to the US Constitution provides a phantasmagoric solution to "the problem," as do arbitrary "no fly" and "terrorist lists." When the killings of innocent schoolchildren with semi-automatic weapons become intolerable, such security-focused men can turn to mild reform: perhaps the limitation of gun ownership for people on a "list," irrespective of whether or not they have been convicted of anything.

While a rush to publish may have occasionally characterized Grewal's work (for example, Grewal's 2006 article, where the title "Twentieth-Century" should read "Twenty-First Century"—a striking proofing error at best), this book is a carefully crafted volume, with most impressive documentation, a critical contribution that explains the pervasiveness of the "security mom" and its complement, a fascist near-future, where the vision of Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* is presumed by Grewal to have become at least a partial reality. In Grewal's book, we come to understand how the field of security studies, à la Barry Buzan—that is, a relatively narrow, regional risk assessment and military (or militarized) response structure—appeals to the populists, the current political rage. A sense of insecurity predominates, is targeted at scapegoats (i.e., Muslims and Latinos), and is tempered always with American exceptionalism. It is a confusing mix at best. The "security moms" in this insecure world are celebrated for choosing traditional female roles, with one possible exception: they strive (and are expected to strive) to keep the home fires lit (and, of course, to produce future police officers and soldiers) *while* anticipating the worst and most threatening outcomes, with a view, ostensibly, to monitoring

and somehow mitigating them. All of this is tempered with the elitism latent in American exceptionalism, and a video game “shooter’s culture,” where, it is thought at least, “the exceptional citizen is trained to be a soldier through online games” (201).

Neo-liberalism and neo-colonialism arguably have been embedded in the metropolises of the West. This elitist, and even murderous, nightmare can only remind us of the 1950s–60s cartoon character, Pogo, who proclaimed, “I have seen the enemy, and he is us.”

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NOTES

1. Leti Volpp, “The Citizen and the Terrorist,” *UCLA Law Review* 1575 (2002): 8–23.
2. See Inderpal Grewal, “Security Moms” in the Early Twentieth-Century United States: The Gender of Security in Neoliberalism”, *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 34, nos. 1/2 (2006): 25–39.
3. See Bree Kessler, “Recruiting Wombs: Surrogates as the New Security Moms,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 37, nos. 1/2 (2009): 167–182.