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## *Book Review Symposium on Natasha Behl's Gendered Citizenship (OUP, 2019)*



### **Gendered Citizenship and Liminal Space: The Ambiguity of Women's Organizing**

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#### **Abstract**

In this reflection on Natasha Behl's book, *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India*, I highlight its singular contributions to political science, which I attribute to its exemplary engagement with lived experience and reflexivity. Behl leverages both to demonstrate how the wide spectrum of violence committed in the public and private spheres is of central importance for citizenship. I then turn to several conundrums the book raises about women, gender, religion, and politics. Contesting Behl's characterization of Indian women's participation in Sikh sex-segregated religious groups as a form of democratic political interaction, I argue that groups like these are more ambiguous and characterize them as liminal. The distinction is fruitful because it provides a conceptual opening for empirically analyzing the many religious and civic sites in which women organize to better understand the role this participation plays in shaping democratic citizenship.

#### **Keywords**

citizenship – gendered violence – feminism – participation – politics

Natasha Behl's *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India*, makes several interventions in the politics and gender literature and in the political science literature on citizenship more broadly. Behl undertakes the ambitious task of demonstrating two intertwined and long-standing claims of feminist theory: that the division between the public and the private is a fiction and that the personal is political. Indeed, many feminist political scientists, especially in the field of feminist international relations, have asserted that sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), regardless of where it occurs and by whom, is political rather than solely interpersonal (Sylvester, 2001; True, 2010). Bringing this violence—and particularly the threat of violence in private life—into political science, however, can be challenging. Indeed, many political scientists who study SGBV analyze the causes of sexual assault during war, circumventing the private sphere (Cohen, 2013; Peet & Sjoberg, 2020; Wood, 2018).

Behl moves to the other end of the spectrum by investigating “why women’s lives are *potentially* at fatal risk in the everyday sites of public participation and in the private space of the home, when Indian democratic institutions are nominally inclusive in terms of gender equity” (p. 3, italics added). Note the crucial interventions Behl makes in this one sentence. She underscores the “everyday” in a “nominally inclusive” democracy rather than in a country at war. She also refers to women as “potentially at fatal risk,” which captures the disciplining effects of the threat of SGBV, rather than solely the frequency of sexual assault or death. Behl also underscores “public participation” rather than apolitical effects and addresses “the private space of the home” rather than stranger danger. Her one sentence is a declaration that opens new areas of research in political science. Behl demonstrates how this new research can be done by studying the lives of Sikh women in India.

Through her interviews with Sikh women *and* men, Behl excavates the gender norms that infuse their lives. She identifies the myths of women’s impurity (which refer to women’s reproductive capacities and the temptations women pose to men) believed to be rooted in the body and thus beyond the reach of social reform. Notably, the presumption of women’s impurity coexists with the Sikh commitment to equality between women and men. This coexistence is possible because Sikhs define “sexism in a narrow way, which emphasizes certain forms of discrimination and obscures others” (p. 59). The resulting assertion of “Sikh exceptionalism ... asserts that the problem of gender discrimination, exclusion, and violence exists elsewhere” (p. 63). Behl does not find these beliefs to be limited to men. Indeed, she traces how women are complicit in perpetuating their own inequality, particularly senior women who repeat these beliefs as they strive to navigate, rather than contest, patriarchy.

Behl thus invites the reader to sit uneasily with the all-too-familiar ways in which women seeking to survive by swimming with the tide help to maintain gender oppression.

Behl makes clear that the results of Sikh gender norms are profoundly disabling to women. Sikh women are restricted to the home and marriage; they lack the capacity to move into the public sphere and exercise collective power to challenge the limits on their lives. Yet the Indian constitution grants them formal equality. Behl refers to this gap between daily life and the law as “exclusionary inclusion” (p. 4). The concept captures a quintessentially political phenomenon, yet, as Behl points out, very little of what she discusses has been studied by mainstream political scientists.

While few political scientists analyze how power affects the everyday lives of women, even fewer political scientists integrate this analysis with their own lived experience. This is where Behl excels. She is relentlessly reflexive as she weaves many Sikh women’s experiences with her own. For instance, Behl discusses why being a woman in the wrong place at her grandmother’s funeral nearly led to her expulsion. Behl seamlessly links this event to the notorious 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh by underscoring how being a woman in the wrong place at the wrong time can make her vulnerable to physical removal, punishment, and even death. This move conveys how oppressive gender norms underpin both experiences, illustrating a broad spectrum of gendered citizenship, from “the minutest of tremors in our daily life” to “world-destroying quakes” (p. 115). In passages like these, Behl’s perceptiveness and analytical skills impress, even as her feminist self bristles at the astonishing range of injustice that undermines women’s emotional wellbeing and presence in public space, hollowing out any sense of belonging and membership in the polity.

Behl’s feminist ethnographic approach ensures that she situates her informants within their families and community, as well as the law. In doing so, she demonstrates how Sikh women’s lived experience is disconnected from constitutional decrees that assert gender equality. While the Indian state provides precious little protection, Behl identifies resources in the Sikh religion. She finds some Sikh women exploit these resources by creating sex segregated Seva Societies, or religious groups of devotion. These groups value “women’s leadership, religiosity, and equality” and participate in devotions, commemorations, and community service (p. 101). The result, according to Behl, is that “these women influenced *all* homes in their own village and inspired women in other villages to establish their own Sukhmani Seva Societies ... [They] see themselves and other female *sevadars* as integral members of their community worthy of public honor and blessed by God’s grace ... [They] created more egalitarian interpersonal and community relations” (p. 103, italics in original).

By proclaiming “devotional acts as citizenship acts,” Behl brings to the fore how Sikh women created their own pathway to becoming democratic citizens (p. 103).

The finding that women’s religious organizations can open a pathway to meaningful citizenship should not be surprising to feminists, who have long studied these organizations (Bayes & Tohidi, 2001; Rinaldo, 2008; Westerkamp, 2020). Their scholarship has demonstrated that religious participation grants women moral standing and sometimes social and even political influence (Higgenbotham, 1994; Mahmood, 2005). Women’s participation in religious organizations thus can be a crucial step on the long road toward meaningful citizenship. Popular assumptions about religion as oppressive to women—whether in India or the liberal imagination—are overly simplistic.

Behl, however, argues that women’s participation in sex-segregated religious associations is politically consequential *in itself*. This claim is contestable but not easy to dismiss. Contestable because one might argue the activities that Behl describes are civic (oriented toward the community) rather than political (engaged in public debate about the common good) (Young, 2000). Yet, Behl contends the activities of the Seva Societies “function as an infrastructure of civic, religious, and political interaction” (p. 103). How are these activities political? According to Behl, “by demonstrating that the religious sphere can be a space of democratic participation and inclusion, especially in the face of exclusionary inclusion” (p. 104). The Seva Societies thus are politically symbolic. They also provide women members with the experience of “democratic participation and inclusion.” This raises an apparent tension. On the one hand, Sikh assumptions about women’s bodily impurity dooms them to exclusionary inclusion and gendered citizenship. On the other hand, Sikh women can use their religion to become civic and even political actors.

I am not entirely convinced this tension exists, however. I have my doubts about the symbolic power Behl attributes to the Seva Societies given the context she describes. It seems unlikely that most of the male power brokers in the Sikh community would agree that women’s participation in these religious organizations carries political weight. Instead, conventional gender assumptions about women’s bodily impurity could drain the Seva Societies of this symbolic power, depoliticizing them. And my guess is that these norms would not just shape what male powerbrokers think, but also what women think—including some of the women in these groups.

Moreover, I remain unconvinced that the Seva Societies are exemplars of *democratic* political interaction. Behl argues these societies engage in democratic political interaction by their sheer existence and service to the community. What is democratic about these societies’ interactions? They

increase women's participation in religious rites vis-à-vis men, challenging sexist assumptions about women's inferiority. This strikes me as insufficient. First, it is unclear whether a democratic impulse extends to how the Seva Societies operate internally. We learn in an earlier discussion that older women "actively police younger women's behavior and action" (p. 99). We also know that one of the two societies Behl studies had to overcome religious, caste, and class differences to create and maintain the group. We do not know how this was achieved. One society has a president while the other has no formal leaders. It thus remains unclear how internally democratic these societies are, which would be important for *democratic* political interaction. Even if Sikh women experience some empowerment by participating in them, whether that experience is democratic is unknown. Also unaddressed is whether the women believe that their experience is democratic and that they have experienced a deeper form of democratic citizenship.

Extending the logic of Behl's argument, I wonder if she would contend democratic citizenship is being practiced in any situation where a women's organization supports women's presence and engagement in a male-dominated space. I believe this would be a mistake. Such an organization may contribute toward challenging sexism, although not necessarily. But we know that undemocratic challenges to sexism are unlikely to foster democratic citizenship, as women's organizations in authoritarian regimes such as Egypt or in Poland during the Cold War illustrate (Botman, 1999; Walsh, 2011). It thus appears that by expanding the concept of democratic citizenship Behl may have eroded some of its egalitarian content. The latter is avoidable. Instead, we might emphasize the autonomy of women's organizations, which Behl does, while also distinguishing between challenges to sexism and democratic procedures and norms.

As an alternative to approaching Seva Societies and similar sites as spaces "of democratic participation and inclusion," I suggest we treat them as liminal. Liminal space is where alternative power configurations and new forms of interaction can exist (Andrews et al., 2019). Liminality captures the ambiguous potential of women's organizations to advance democratic citizenship and invites scholars to study it. Instead of putting groups like these into categories, we might instead investigate which ones adopt democratic procedures and norms and why, and to what effect. Which women in these organizations, if any, turn to formal politics, which women do not, and why? How do different groups view formal politics and why? Which groups become pathways to activism and which ones stymie this activism? Why?

Of course, one of Behl's accomplishments in *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India* is to move beyond formal

politics, in part because few Sikh women are there, but also because she must follow “discrimination, exclusion, and violence” wherever they take her, which extends to every corner of Sikh women’s lives and reveals predictably negative consequences for their citizenship. Sikh gender norms and religious groups, however, offer a complex story, sometimes limiting these women’s experiences and at other times offering them opportunities. It is to Behl’s credit that she seeks to flesh out this complexity, plumbing the tensions and contradictions, inspiring us to consider not only what democratic citizenship is, but what it ought to be.

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# On the Map: Feminist Political Ethnography in *Gendered Citizenship*

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## Abstract

In *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India*, Natasha Behl explores the gap between the promise of gender equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution and contemporary patterns of sexual and gendered-based violence and discrimination in democratic India. This essay explores the political ideas, meaning making, and the interplay of state and civilian discourses undergirding forms of gendered violence illuminated by Behl's feminist and interpretive approach. The essay closes by tracing two themes for further inquiry—feminist geographies and political openings/closures—and offers some preliminary engagement.

## Keywords

interpretivism – feminist theory – political ethnography – gender justice – social movements – feminist geographies

Natasha Behl's *Gendered Citizenship* examines the gap between the promise of gender equality enshrined in the Indian Constitution and contemporary patterns of sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination in India. At the heart of the project is Behl's theoretical and methodological framework of *situated citizenship*—a framework that approaches citizenship as a situated social relationship. This symposium essay explores the terrain of political ideas, processes of meaning making, and the interplay of state and civilian discourses

undergirding forms of sexual and gender-based violence illuminated by Behl's feminist and interpretive approach. The essay closes by highlighting two themes for further inquiry—feminist geographies and political openings/closures—and offers some preliminary engagement.

*Gendered Citizenship* is a deeply and self-consciously interpretivist project. What is at stake in an interpretivist approach is not only how we might develop better accounts of how power works, where and how knowledge is generated, and how people make sense of the world politically in incredibly complicated and often contradictory ways, but also where we might locate resources for political change. Behl registers that the promises of gender equality in the Indian Constitution and in Sikh scripture are not realized, and she brings us into the terrain of meaning making and political action, asking how people make sense of and explain relationships of power and how they enact complex practices in daily life and in associational life that uphold or resist hierarchical relationships and structures of violence. Behl shows us that *this* is where the action is; this is *the* site of politics—where people are negotiating, intervening into, or reproducing political relationships and institutions. *Gendered Citizenship* illuminates this complicated landscape by bringing together empirical and theoretical approaches in a field in which they have so often been divorced, with, on the one hand, behavioralist approaches that do not question their interpretive framework (Beltrán, 2010, p. 158), and, on the other hand, theoretical work that is so often detached from politics on the ground. In chapters 4 and 5, for example, Behl grounds her theoretical account in ethnographic research—including her in-depth interviews with members of the Sikh community—to ask how people interpret or resist gendered discrimination and violence in the context of religious community. Through close readings of interview excerpts, Behl maps the disavowals of gendered violence—as in the simultaneity of claiming gender equality as “already achieved” while justifying ongoing gendered exclusions—and she maps the testimonies about the ways in which gendered exclusions are lived and about the spaces in which gendered norms are upheld or resisted.

*Gendered Citizenship* is also a feminist and critical theoretical project. From the first pages—in remembrance and witness of Jyoti Singh—and throughout each chapter, Behl makes unambiguous the political stakes of ending sexual and gender-based violence. Grounding her analysis in sites from national legal and political discourse to political ethnography, Behl excavates the relationship between gendered violence and state building/state power by asking how and through what historical formations the law enshrines both gender equality and gendered violence. Behl demonstrates how a key site of struggle between the state and religious communities is women's rights and mobility, and she



shows that it is *through* discourses and debates about violence against women that people articulate anxieties about caste, gendered control, social change, and the rights of religious minorities. *Gendered Citizenship* not only examines gendered violence as a product of political, economic, and social structures but also asks how that violence constitutes or underwrites particular arrangements in political life, as in the ways that gendered violence excludes women from democratic participation, or the ways in which women's bodies and autonomy have historically been figured as a kind of trading chip in democratic consolidation and the delineation of public and personal law. Behl examines the interface of contemporary law and public discourse by mapping the ways in which violence against women is defended and justified, as in explanations that survivors of sexual and gender-based violence are themselves to blame due to their choices in dress or due to their so-called "failures" in religiosity, or in explanations that women's legal rights disrupt social order and are to blame for gendered violence (as in the narrative that women and girls' legal rights to land inheritance are to blame for female infanticide), or the justification of violence against women in the name of women's economic security (Behl, 2019, p. 71). Behl's feminist ethnographic and interpretive approach is what is able to capture and put all of this on the map.

Using interpretive and feminist approaches, *Gendered Citizenship* launches a sustained intervention into narrow definitions of the political (Behl, 2019, p. 25) that have what often seems like a vice grip on the field of political science. Her research leans into the gap between formal equality and contemporary patterns of gendered violence to ask how people experience, interpret, and understand this gap. Behl asks what these accounts show about how power operates, what the role of the law is in enshrining or dismantling forms of social hierarchy, and, critically, where we can locate possibilities of and resources for change. Behl pushes political scientists to broaden their thinking about what constitutes "legitimate" sites of political inquiry and political action, and their Western-centric conceptualizations of citizenship. For example, one of *Gendered Citizenship's* key contributions in remapping the boundaries of the political is through Behl's empirical and theoretical intervention into prevailing assumptions about religious space, secular space, gender liberation, and political action. In her ethnographic analysis of civic action in Sukhmani Seva societies—devotional societies founded and run by women—Behl upends the positioning of secularism as the precondition of democratic practices, the presumption that religious sites are apolitical and antidemocratic, and the assumptions that the secular realm is where feminism is possible and that religious spaces are antifeminist. Behl uncovers forms of democratic action that are overlooked or dismissed in these equations. She finds that women

whose political action has been deeply constrained by gendered obligations, cultural and gendered norms, and gendered violence are in fact creating forms of public and associational life together, including organizing to provide medical services, infrastructure improvements, and social assistance. Behl reads the society members' devotional acts as *citizenship acts*, in which participants, as Behl writes, "open up the possibility of significant transformation of gender norms and roles by entering civic and associational life, exercising their freedom of association and travel, and placing women in a position of honor at the center of devotional life" (Behl, 2019, p. 104). These citizenship acts are not only significant in their own right but they also contain the potential for wider kinds of political action and change.

A more implicit thread in *Gendered Citizenship*—and one that I want to draw out here—is spatial and geographic. Questions about space are at the crux of many of the discourses Behl examines in this book, from the demarcation that women belong in certain spaces and not others, to political arguments that the home should be outside the reach of legal reform (as reflected in the continued legal protection of marital rape in the 2013 Anti-Rape Law), to the argument that women should stay home to avoid attack, to women's testimonies of fearing crossing major roads or going further than a half mile from their homes or leaving their homes at all, to women's testimonies of feeling like perpetual outsiders between their natal and married families "with no corner to truly call their own" (Behl, 2019, pp. 69, 77). Behl travels skillfully between and integrates multiple scales in her analysis—illuminating the relationships between more microscale practices (e.g., between family members or in local religious communities) and macroscale institutions, and illuminating how these practices structure and delimit gendered paths of motion, access to education, and democratic participation. Her interviews also register resistant geographies, or what Katherine McKittrick, in her pathmaking work theorizing Black women's geographies, has called "oppositional geographies" within "geographies of domination" (2006, p. xxiv, xix). Behl's interviews also contain resonances with political claims upon the right of *movement* in other contexts—as in what Luis Fernandez and Joel Olson have registered in 2012 demands of undocumented activists in Arizona as demands for the right of *locomotion*, which were, they explained, misheard as demands for citizenship tethered to place (2011, pp. 417–18). Taken together, Behl's and Fernandez and Olson's work sheds light on political demands for geographic mobility and on testimonies about the ways political institutions restrain geographic mobility—a set of accounts that are often misheard and misread. In all these ways, *Gendered Citizenship* expands not only the *what* of the political, but also the *where* of the political,

and it illuminates the relationship between the two, as in the ways political participation is spatially constrained or the ways political meanings and institutions are spatially constructed and how they land on the body.

Finally, *Gendered Citizenship* raises questions for me about political openings and closures, political victories and failures, especially in movements for gender and racial justice. As Robin D. G. Kelley has argued in *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, too often our standards for evaluating social movements pivot on whether or not those movements “‘succeeded’ in realizing their visions rather than on the merits and power of the visions themselves” (2002, p. ix). “By such a measure,” Kelley explains, “virtually every radical movement failed because the basic power relations they sought to change remain pretty much intact. And yet it is precisely these alternative visions and dreams that inspire new generations to continue to struggle for change” (2002, p. ix). In *Gendered Citizenship*, Behl documents the widespread mobilizations for gender justice in the wake of the assault and murder of Jyoti Singh, including the landmark report of the Justice Verma Committee (JVC) that included a proposed bill of rights for women including the protection of women’s rights to sexual autonomy, an expanded definition of what counts as actionable violence, and an expansive definition of gender justice to include addressing violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people. And yet, in the face of these openings, heteropatriarchal commitments were rearticulated and ultimately legally prevailed in the passage of regressive stipulations in what would become the 2013 Anti-Rape Law that maintained an exemption for marital rape, excluded LGBTI people from legal protection, and exempted soldiers from prosecution in civil courts. Despite this retrenchment and closure, I wonder how we should understand the reach of the potent visions enunciated by the JVC report. Political failures are never absolute (nor are political victories), because so much happens in the political contest itself that lives onward even after a formal defeat—in political visions, new repertoires of organizing, new articulations of political conditions and ideologies, and, as I explore elsewhere, transformed forms of political identifications (Beard, 2022). I wonder how those who collectively mobilized for gender justice and forged the JVC report pulled on earlier activism? How might the mobilizations surrounding or the visions enunciated in the JVC report provide inroads to theorizing the political and descriptive category of “woman” in understanding and fighting against gendered violence in India? What if visions called upon by the JVC may not be lost? How did the mobilization transform participants? What forms of political association and possibility were forged that haunt and even undermine the patriarchal closure? How do the movement’s political visions reach into the present?

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# Caring as Research, Researching with Care

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## Abstract

In *Gendered Citizenship*, Natasha Behl proposes a theory of situated citizenship that makes visible the practices of exclusionary inclusion that explain the gap between women's formal equality in the Indian Constitution and their actual lived experiences of inequality and violence. By focusing on the lived experiences of women, Behl's approach foregrounds reflexivity and meaning-making. In doing so, Behl provides a blueprint for research in political science that centers care and community.

## Keywords

feminism – ethic of care – ethnography – methodology – interpretivism – sexual and gender-based violence

In *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India*, Natasha Behl answers important questions: how and why are women's lived experiences still plagued by violence in the public and private spheres when gender equality is constitutionally mandated in India? Behl proposes a theory of situated citizenship that highlights the role of identity, difference, and power in embodied experiences of citizenship. Such a theory makes visible the range of practices and mechanisms of exclusionary inclusion that explain the rift between formal equality and lived experiences of inequality. The focus on lived experiences allows for a thorough examination of citizenship where public participation and civic life are contested every day. Methodologically, Behl's interpretive, feminist, and ethnographic approach foregrounds reflexivity,

positionality, and meaning-making. Behl's book is a much-needed example of caring as a part of research and researching with care. In this essay, I argue that given the current state of the world – a pandemic, violent conflict, rising inequality, and climate change, Behl's work provides us with a blueprint for research that centers care and community.

Behl uses ethnographic data and interviews with members of the Sikh community to develop a situated approach to citizenship. Using semi-structured interviews and participant observation, Behl highlights how Sikh women uphold and resist exclusionary inclusion at home and in their communities, and thereby live lives of partial citizenship. While research participants define women's participation in Sikh institutions and rituals as equal to men, their participation is limited by gendered norms of women's essentialized roles as caregivers, homemakers, wives, and mothers (pp. 60–68). At home and outside, failure to meet these essentialized notions can lead to multiple forms of gendered violence (pp. 90–99). At the same time, women use their restricted roles in Sukhmani Seva Societies to contribute to the development of their communities as leaders and decision makers (pp. 104–11).

Behl applies her theory of situated citizenship and her ethnographic findings from Sikh communities to make sense of the 2012 gang-rape of Jyoti Singh in New Delhi. By focusing on multiple and messy experiences of exclusionary inclusion, Behl stresses the need to *see* and *understand* beyond traditional definitions and practices of citizenship and belonging (pp. 115–18). In doing so, Behl asks us to move beyond purely formal and legal understandings of citizenship – something seemingly novel to political science but routinely described in fields like anthropology, sociology, and law by scholars from the Global South and indigenous communities. Engagement with non-American scholars beyond traditional political science such as Audra Simpson (2014), Akhil Gupta (1995), James Holston (2008), Poulami Roychowdhury (2020), and Prabha Kotiswaran (2011) would create a richer text and allow for deeper comparison across countries and contexts. Such engagement would offer additional nuance to understanding the “inclusion” of exclusionary inclusion. Do the exclusions outweigh the inclusions? Feminist organizations and women's groups have shown that working with the state is as important as working outside/against the state. Illustratively, my forthcoming research on feminist activists highlights the multiple axes of action required to create meaningful reduction in sexual violence – state and legal reform, grassroots programming, and behavioral change campaigns.

Behl's methodology stresses care not only to the subjects of her research but also to the process of research. Her feminist ethic of care exposes the “violence of the patriarchal order” (Ahmed, 2017) by making us look beyond traditional

understandings of citizenship, equality, violence, and power. Through focusing on the following, Behl builds a research project that prioritizes a feminist ethic of care (Ackerly & True, 2019):

- attentiveness to power
- attentiveness to boundaries and intersections
- attentiveness to relationships among all stakeholders
- attentiveness to self-reflection at each stage of the project.

Behl's work follows in the footsteps of feminists like Cynthia Enloe (2004) who argue that power structures are dependent on a lack of curiosity among mainstream academia and practitioners. The categories of "natural," "traditional," "always" (all of which are equated with maleness under the guise of neutrality) imbue structures with timelessness, legitimacy, and visibility (Enloe, 2004). These categories are based on experiences and knowledge, which are routinely centered around men. Behl asks us to think about whose voices are heard in the public realm, and whose voices are heard seriously. Taking someone or something seriously implies listening carefully, paying attention, and taking time. Behl goes beyond just asking "where are the women?" (Enloe, 2004). Her methodology includes unearthing power dynamics and upending the "natural" way of doing things (Ahmed, 2017).

In terms of research on sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), by asking us to "see and understand beyond," Behl asks us if and why certain forms of violence are deemed appropriate for political deliberation. Why is it that the 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh received so much attention? Why is it that gruesome acts of rape are front-page news? What about the visibility of the more daily forms of gendered violence and harassment? By refuting the classic public-private divide, Behl asks why certain instances of sexual assault are more likely to receive attention than the daily incidents of domestic violence against (female) citizens in their homes (Enloe, 2004). SGBV is only sporadically allowed into the public realm when it is extraordinary, scandalous, or spectacular (Butalia, 2000; Das, 2006). This leads to a double silencing – silencing on the part of the state for negating violence, and (forced) silencing of victims who are stigmatized and shamed for speaking out (Enloe, 2004).

By employing a feminist ethic of care, Behl highlights how patriarchy is upheld by states, cultural institutions, families, and international systems (Tickner, 2014; Sylvester, 2002). Paying attention includes an analytical curiosity and attentiveness to silence. The approach eschews a focus on just "high politics," and favors an understanding "from below" (Butalia, 2000). Through accounts of ordinary citizens and minorities like the Sikh women in Mohali, Behl's feminist ethic of care in research goes beyond direct descriptions and questions dominant narratives of politics and research.

As an interpretive approach, Behl's work emphasizes meaning, process, and history. It gives us access to multiplicity through the arts of noticing (Tsing, 2015). This necessitates paying attention to events and assemblages across times that could lead to the discovery of dynamics, relationships and hierarchies that might have otherwise been ignored. Through noticing, Behl sees the difference between the "story we know" (formal equality) and the "story we need to know" (lived reality of inequality, partial belonging, and violence; Tsing, 2015). In line with noticing, *Gendered Citizenship* benefits from a multi-sited approach too. By focusing on multiple sites, dimensions, scales, and times, Behl deftly examines the circulation of meanings, creation of identities, and experiences of belonging from multiple vantage points.

Mainstream political science has prioritized objective, rational, and positivist research. Alternatively, Behl's research ethic of care is rooted in social meaning, culture, and relationships. It is attuned to positionality, bias, and power. It is more than just data or information – it is a story. As Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey (2003) note, storytelling extends an individual or discrete transaction temporally and socially. The power of researching with care lies in its narrative capability to embrace the intimacy of biography with theoretical explanation (Goldstein, 2020). Behl's approach to citizenship, thus, opens space for cogeneration and interpretation of new kinds of data (pp. 115–18). In doing so, Behl unearths hidden stories and experiences such as acts of devotion as citizenship.

Most importantly, Behl's approach forces us to think through the knowledge we produce as researchers and how this affects the social worlds we seek to explain (Pachirat, 2017). This is especially pertinent given Behl's identity as a diasporic researcher. As a woman of South Asian and Sikh descent, Behl subverts the positivist binary of researcher/researched and insider/outsider. As Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman (1983) note, Behl's positionality made her an insider and outsider simultaneously. Throughout her book, Behl stresses times she felt close to her research participants because of their shared identities and times she felt lonely because of her identity as an American/researcher/outsider. Behl's attempt to cogenerate situated meanings prevents "hit-and-run" anthropology (Narayan, 1993). Her aim to create discourse with others rather than from or about them is worth underlining here. Additionally, Behl's repeated and long-term ethnography allowed for a better understanding of how individuals behave and how societies change with time (Behl, 2017a). This implies a sort-of fugitive anthropology (Berry et al., 2017). Fugitive anthropology is not merely about conducting research but realizing that researchers are connected to the places where they work through familial ties, diasporic relationships, and investments in political struggles – all of which can and



should hold one accountable even after one's physical departure from the field (Berry et al., 2017). Behl's research subverts the assumption that the field is an outside or other space. Rather than geography, the field travels "with and within" her body (Berry et al., 2017).

Through a feminist ethic of care, Behl underscores the role of embodiment. Embodiment works in three ways: reflexivity, writing, and ethnography (Hanson & Richards, 2019). Embodied reflexivity highlights how aspects of field sites and the people Behl studied are obscured by established procedures and dominant assumptions of academia and research (p. 116). Embodied writing highlights how Behl's body and identity as a Sikh woman is implicated in the research process of a political ethnography of Sikh women. Embodied ethnography highlights the body and identity as tools to get closer to the worlds of research participants. Additionally, all data and knowledge emerge from experiences, conversations, and interactions by the bodies that engage in them. Behl's study greatly benefits from the access she was granted due to her shared identity with the research participants. It is central to her unearthing lived experiences of partial belonging and equality of Sikh women in India.

Perhaps the most significant impact of Behl's feminist ethic of care is the establishment of non-hierarchical relationships where the researcher and the researched invest their time and share experiences (Campbell, 2002; Hanson & Richards, 2019; Pachirat, 2017). Through long-term participation and shared experiences, Behl was able to provide participants with a safe space for catharsis, self-reflection, and self-acknowledgement. Behl's approach involves actively thinking about the wellbeing of participants and letting that concern guide the research project. Behl's book would be further strengthened by a more explicit account of the women of the Seva Societies and how they perceived the research – were they given a chance to read how their stories were told? How do they feel about their stories being shared? An ethic of care should ensure wellbeing through the process of research but perhaps also through the dissemination and potential impact of the research. If Behl plans to extend this research project, hearing from her past interlocutors would create an interesting opportunity to gauge the long-term and knock-on effects, if any, of a feminist ethic of care.

Relatedly, Behl's feminist ethic of care shows how emotions during the research process are impossible to ignore or separate out. The emotional experience of feeling angry, sad, or surprised by participants' lived experiences is a resource for thinking about citizenship. In contrast to positivist research, Behl's approach fuses emotions and thoughts – thinking and feeling are symbiotic (Campbell, 2002).

*Gendered Citizenship* also foregrounds the impact being in the field and in academia can have for the researcher. Risks faced in the field are filtered through each ethnographer's positionality. Working on issues of violence, conflict, or inequalities can have lingering effects for a researcher. Awareness of the emotional toll of research and acknowledgment of the racialized and gendered nature of academia is necessary to minimizing secondary trauma and preventing burnout (Behl, 2017b; Behl, 2019b; Behl, 2020; Theidon, 2014). Additionally, Behl uses her concept of exclusionary inclusion to highlight survival as a form of protest and self-care in academia (Ahmed, 2017; Lorde, 2017). Self-care is about the creation of community assembled out of the "ordinary, everyday, and often painstaking work" of looking after ourselves and after each other (Ahmed, 2017).

Ultimately, *Gendered Citizenship* demonstrates a feminist ethic of care in two ways: doing justice to the human beings at the center of research, and doing justice with words (Doty, 2010). Through a feminist curiosity, arts of noticing and paying attention, taking care, and asking questions, Behl provides a necessary and timely blueprint for researching with care and caring as a part of research (Enloe, 2004; Ahmed, 2017; Tsing, 2015). Her approach can be summed up by poet, Mary Oliver (2017) in her poem, "Sometimes": "Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."

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BRILL

# Situated Citizenship: A Theoretical and Methodological Intervention

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## Abstract

In this essay, I ask: Who has the power to theorize? And how do we challenge narrow understandings of what counts as theories, theorists, and theorizing? I draw on alternative intellectual histories—feminist, intersectional, interpretive, and decolonial—that are attentive to expanded definitions of the political within and beyond the Western world and to the internal diversity of often taken-for-granted categories of analysis. Next, I show how these intellectual histories open up the space for *Gendered Citizenship* by briefly outlining the main concepts of the book and their significance for political science. In this section, I also respond to the contributors to this symposium. I am grateful to Dipali Anumol, Lisa Beard, and Denise Walsh for their thoughtful and careful commentaries.

## Keywords

interpretivism – gendered violence – intersectionality – gender justice – lived experience

## Introduction

Why is *Gendered Citizenship*, a book that centers the lived experience of minority Sikh women in Punjab, India, featured in a journal on comparative political theory? Some readers might wonder where the theory is in this book. Other readers might ask who the *theorists* are. Still others might wonder if

this counts as political *theorizing*. I, too, have shared these questions about my own scholarship. I have often described my scholarship as theoretically informed empirical research. However, I struggled to call my research empirically grounded normative theory. It has taken me time to *write* and *speak* these words. I often thought to myself “Who am I to *theorize* about anything?” At times, I engaged in a kind self-censorship and silencing by questioning my own expertise, training, and competence in the canon of political theory—a canon that often seemed to center the Western world, whiteness, and men (Gordon, 2014; Collins, 2019; Bierria, 2020). At other times, I internalized external forms of silencing that deemed me too biased to be a legitimate empirical scholar and too particularistic to be engaged in the process of theorizing (Smith, 2012; Ackerly, 2018; Collins, 2019). “As a graduate student, I was often told: ‘What I am doing isn’t political science; you won’t finish the PhD; you won’t get an academic job’” (Behl, 2019a, p. 117). Why do I engage in a kind of epistemic self-censorship when it comes to theory and theorizing? Why isn’t the space of theory available to all of us to claim? Why are some of us silenced within the process of theorizing? Who has the power to theorize?

In other writings, I recount how my epistemological and methodological choices interact with my embodied positionality to render me illegitimate and to make me more vulnerable to violence as a student, scholar, and teacher (Behl, 2017, 2019b, 2020). In this essay, I highlight the intellectual histories that make my scholarship possible—histories that are attentive to expanded definitions of the political within and beyond the Western world and to the internal diversity of often taken-for-granted categories of analysis. Next, I show how these intellectual histories open up the space for *Gendered Citizenship* by briefly outlining the main concepts of the book and their significance for political science. In this section, I also respond to the contributors to this symposium. I am grateful to Dipali Anumol, Lisa Beard, and Denise Walsh for their thoughtful and careful commentaries.

### Who Has the Power to Theorize?

Often theory is understood as an abstract, intellectual pursuit—something done in isolation without empirical data and something done by individual thinkers, often white, male thinkers (Collins, 2019, p. 13; Hawkesworth, 2019, p. 11; Bierria, 2020, p. 301). How do we challenge narrow understandings of what counts as theories, theorists, and theorizing? One way forward is through the subfield of comparative political theory, which expands understandings of “the political” while also being attentive to the Western/non-Western binary (Sakurai & Tampio, 2021, p. 2; Freeden, 2021, p. 3).

Michael Freeden identifies two distinct features of comparative political thought—the first is “an elaboration of the political, so as to comprehend its myriad forms... [and the second is] the plural diversity...of cultures whose significance has been particularly underrated to date in political and philosophical studies” (2021, p. 4). Christine Keating (2007) argues that “One of the strengths...of comparative political theory...is its challenge to institutional structures and modes of theorizing that exclude or marginalize consideration of non-Western political thought.” She finds that these exclusions overlook “transformative work being done to recast democracy on more egalitarian and inclusive terms in postcolonial polities” (Keating, 2007, p. 132). Similarly, Jane Gordon (2014) argues that “within the US academy no new development has created more disciplinary space for the project of creolizing political theory than comparative political theorizing.” She explains that comparative political theory, which is informed by hermeneutics and postcolonial thought, seeks to expand political theory to include human dilemmas, not simply Western ones (Gordon, 2014, pp. 203–4).

However, there are limitations to comparative political theory. Gordon points out that the “conceptual apparatus of ‘comparative political thinking’...is in some cases misleading and, in others...even a misnomer” (2014, p. 205). For her, “much of the work going on within this rubric is not comparative at all” (Gordon, 2014, pp. 205–6). What comparative political theory often overlooks is the internal diversity of seemingly fixed and distinct categories such as “Chinese” or “Indian” (Gordon, 2014, pp. 7–8).

The intellectual history that I draw from, including feminist, intersectional, interpretive, and decolonial scholars, “find[s] that the meaning of key concepts, the fullness of history, and the understandings of power dynamics have become emaciated because they were not informed by the lived experience of those outside of their discipline’s rehearsed categories” (Ackerly, 2018, p. 144). In response, Brooke Ackerly calls for a grounded normative theorizing that “is a dynamic and multidimensional process of theorizing through engagement with struggle” (2018, p. 145). Jane Gordon calls for a creolizing of political theory to reflect “actual human practices and the more adequate instantiations of political legitimacy that might emerge from them” (2014, p. 2).

I, like so many others, who draw from these intellectual histories, center lived experience in my understanding of normative political theory. As Ackerly explains “‘experience-based’ or ‘grounded’ normative theory...use[s] a methodological approach to normative theorizing in which the insights of those whose lives are affected by a normative problem...are brought to bear as textual resources for addressing that problem” (2018, p. 13). And yet, these ways of knowing are largely seen as suspect in political science.

My experience of both self-censorship and being actively silenced is not unique. Unfortunately, epistemic violence, oppression, and injustice are the norm for many of us who find ourselves at the margins of academia due to our epistemological and methodological choices and our embodied positionalities. Linda Smith explains: “Having been immersed in the Western academy which claims theory as thoroughly Western...indigenous voices have been overwhelmingly silenced. The act, let alone the art and science, of theorizing our own existence and realities is not something which many indigenous people assume is possible” (2012, p. 72). Similarly, Zenzele Isoke describes, “Against all odds, the black intellectual manages to overcome an ‘officially imposed silence’; that ironically was drilled into her by her own assimilation into the political culture of the ‘professional discourses’” (2018, p. 159). She finds that the language of professional discourses “forces us to pound our ideas into Cartesian formulations of objectivity, and to conceal our deepest intellectual impetus behind other people’s words and other people’s ideas” (Isoke, 2018, p. 163). Patricia Hill Collins reminds us that “many have traditions of theorizing, yet the forms their theorizing takes are varied and may not be recognizable as theory” (2019, p. 146).

What if we understood theorizing as explanation and meaning-making processes? What if we acknowledged that the work of theorizing occurs not only in universities, but also in our families, religious spaces, and communities? What if we were to choose alternative intellectual histories to better understand theory, ones that recognize that theorizing is not just for the elite? What if we were to elevate a kind of thinking that so often gets labeled as “studies” but not “theories,” such as intersectionality studies, decolonial studies, and critical race studies? These alternative intellectual histories open up the space from which to challenge underlying assumptions about who is considered a theorist, what it means to theorize, and where the labor of theorizing occurs (Collins, 2019, p. 10; Bierria, 2020, p. 301).

Leanne Simpson (2014) describes theory as “explanation of a phenomenon...generated and regenerated continually through embodied practice and within each family, community, and generation of people.” For her, theory isn’t simply an intellectual exercise; rather, it is a process (kinetic, spiritual, and emotional process) for meaning making at the level of the individual, family, and community. Most importantly, she argues that theory “isn’t just for academics; it’s for everyone” (Simpson, 2014, p. 7). Similarly, Alisa Bierria (2020) challenges the assumption in philosophy that only “those who receive sustained academic training in philosophy can count as people ‘doing’ legitimate philosophy.” For her, such narrow understandings of philosophy and philosopher do not reflect the “reality of philosophy as a common part of human



experience, and it obscures critical philosophical production happening outside of...academic and other professional contexts” (Bierria, 2020, p. 307). Likewise, Collins argues that “Educated academics are not the only ones who produce critical social theory, but they are the ones who are more likely to claim it and benefit from it” (2019, p. 5).

What these scholars share is a commitment to embracing embodied lived experience as a key dimension of theorizing—be it “Nishnaabeg intelligence” (Simpson, 2014), “grassroots philosophy” (Bierria, 2020) or “intersectionality as critical social theory” (Collins, 2019). And yet, it is precisely this focus on embodied lived experience that is devalued in Western political theory: this way of knowing isn’t understood as theorizing (Collins, 2019, p. 12). For some scholars, non-normative approaches to theorizing intersect with their non-normative bodies and identities, which means that deviating from the norms can be painful and dangerous (Bierria, 2020, p. 310). But it can also open up the possibility to not only “dream alternative realities’ but to create them, on the ground in the physical world, in spite of being occupied” (Simpson, 2014, p. 8).

In the next section, I will explain how *Gendered Citizenship* not only draws from the scholarship discussed above, but also contributes to it. I will outline some of the key concepts, arguments, and contributions of the book while engaging with the contributors to this symposium.

### Bridging Empirical and Theoretical Approaches

*Gendered Citizenship* examines the contradictory nature of Indian democracy by weaving together an analysis of the 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh with ethnographic data with members of the Sikh community. The book asks, “why do we find pervasive gender-based discrimination, exclusion, and violence in India when the Indian constitution builds an inclusive democracy committed to gender and caste equality?” (Behl, 2019a, p. 2) To make sense of this question, I dwell in the gap between the abstract *promise* of equal citizenship enshrined in the Indian constitution, and the *empirical realities* of gender-based discrimination, exclusion, and violence in democratic India. I focus on the Sikh community because, like Indian democracy at large, it too is founded on gender and caste equality that is not fully realized in practice. Again, I dwell in the gaps between the religious *promise* of gender equality and Sikh women’s complicated and contradictory *lived experience* of citizenship. This, in turn, enables me to center Sikh women’s embodied lived experience in the theorizing

process as I make sense of uneven and unequal experiences of citizenship in democratic India.

To do this work, the book introduces a general theoretical and methodological framework—situated citizenship—to understand the contradictory nature of liberal democracy in any context and then applies this framework to understand uneven experiences of Indian democracy (Behl, 2019a, pp. 3–4). As a theoretical approach, situated citizenship calls for an understanding of citizenship as both legal status *and* embodied social relation (Behl, 2019a, p. 3). By doing so, situated citizenship requires an analysis to citizens' access to civil, political, and social rights while being attentive to mediating forces that limit citizens' standing as members and participants in their communities (Behl, 2019a, p. 4). "As a methodological approach, situated citizenship demands an attentiveness to embodied lived experience, meaning-making processes, and self-reflexivity" (Behl, 2019a, p. 17). It expands existing methods of studying citizenship to include interpretive approaches. Lastly, it requires that as researchers we be situated within local contexts to understand citizenship.

Situated citizenship is significant because it maps the contradictions between law and lived experience in liberal democracies while locating potential sources to challenge these contradictions. First, situated citizenship is open to the observation that the categories and spaces in which citizenship can be practiced are continually being expanded and contested in sometimes unusual places and unexpected ways. Second, it holds the tension between abstract normative theory and lived experience at the center of any analysis. This opens up the possibility of creating new forms of knowledge that can, in turn, force a rethinking of taken-for-granted concepts. Third, it relies on interpretive research design and methodology to open up the possibility of collecting new kinds of empirical data. These new forms of data can potentially make visible overlooked forms of political life (Behl, 2019a, p. 24).

By centering an analysis of embodied lived reality, situated citizenship highlights how citizens understand and experience the promises of formal equality while being attentive to the mechanisms by which these contradictions are incorporated into daily life in multiple domains from the intimacy of the home to civil society, religious community, and the institutions of government. By shedding light on these often-overlooked contradictions, I account for a puzzling experience in liberal democracies worldwide: Why is legal equality insufficient for achieving democratic equality? The book provides both theoretical and empirical answers to this question while developing a novel theoretical and methodological tool, situated citizenship, which others might use to study democratic contradictions in other parts of the world and among other marginalized groups.

Each chapter explores the potential for liberatory politics across different sites, including the state and law, civil society, religious community, and home. This exploration culminates with an examination of Sikh women's participation in devotional organizations, Sukhmani Seva Societies, to show how situated citizenship can expand the very meaning of citizenship. I demonstrate how situated citizenship can move us beyond (1) traditional approaches to citizenship that center abstract formal equality, (2) narrow definitions of the political focused on state and government, and (3) Western-centric notions of citizenship, which assume that strong religious ties are antithetical to modern citizenship (Behl, 2019a, pp. 24–26).

Situated citizenship, as a theory and methodology, can lead to unexpected findings. By centering the lived experience of Indian women, I demonstrate how the state and formal, legal equality can operate in undemocratic and exclusionary ways (Behl, 2019a, p. 5). I also show how seemingly undemocratic groups like religious communities can be a surprising resource from which to create more egalitarian gender relations (Behl, 2019a, p. 112). Through a situated analysis of citizenship, the book also maps “how similar gendered norms...operate in state-citizen relations, in interpersonal relations, in religious relations, and in kinship relations to limit women's inclusion and participation, to police their behavior and bodies, and to determine their worth and standing” (Behl, 2019a, p. 5).

The scholarly task, for me, is to use empirical data to question and rethink existing categories of analysis in political science (Behl, 2019a, p. 52). For example, in the book, I “take the category of woman, differentiated based on religion, caste, class, nation, and sexuality, as the subject of empirical study” (Behl, 2019a, p. 52). I do not assume that “the category of woman exists a priori, shares a common interest and identity, and can be used as part of our analytic toolkit” (Behl, 2019a, p. 52). Rather I remain open to differences within this category while also explaining how, when, and why some women come together across differences to forge contingent solidarities and coalitions.

Lisa Beard (This Issue) finds that through an “interpretivist” and “feminist and critical theoretical approach” *Gendered Citizenship* brings together “empirical and theoretical approaches in a field in which they have so often been divorced.” It is through this bridging of empirical and grounded theory that I trouble the boundaries of some of the most essential concepts in political science.

The ethnographic research that informs the book was carried out over multiple trips to Punjab, India, between 2000 and 2010, during which time I engaged in extended participant observation, sustained immersion, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Behl, 2019a, p. 30). This resulted in cogenerated

data on gender roles, gender norms, and gendered violence. Through an interpretive research design, the book explores a continuum of gendered violence. “At one end of the spectrum is violent sexual assault and rape. At the other end of the continuum are gendered norms and informal rules that determine who has access to food, healthcare, education, inheritance, and property rights” (Behl, 2019a, p. 9). I call attention to the similar logics at play across the entirety of this continuum (Behl, 2019a, p. 115). I do so through a feminist ethic of care that fuses “emotions and thoughts” (Anumol, *This Issue*).

As Denise Walsh (*This Issue*) says, I bring “violence that occurs in private life into political science.” Many political scientists who study gender-based violence analyze the causes of sexual assault during war and overlook the everyday nature of violence in nominally inclusive democracies (Walsh, *This Issue*). This, in turn, ignores how women’s lives are potentially at fatal risk in both the private and public spheres.

Through a close reading of interview responses and ethnographic data, I uncover forms of democratic action that are often overlooked. I find that some Sikh women overcome contradictory and conflicting gendered norms to build contingent coalitions. These women “envision and enact more egalitarian interpersonal and community relations through their devotional practices, which understand gender equality and minority rights as coexisting and human and divine agency as interdependent” (Behl, 2019a, p. 14). These women gain access to public spaces, build solidarities across differences, and create more egalitarian relations. The Sukhmani Seva societies founded and run by women provide civic and public services, medical services, infrastructure improvements, and social assistance.

I read these devotional acts as citizenship acts because these women are entering civic and associational life, they are exercising their freedom of association and travel, they are placing women in a position of honor at the center of devotional life, and they are opening up the possibility of significant transformation of gender norms and roles (Behl, 2019a, p. 104). These citizenship acts open up the possibility of creating more egalitarian ways of relating in liberal democracies even in the face of gendered discrimination, exclusion, and violence. They also provide insights into the possibility of re-imagining the democratic potential of women’s religious agency in liberal democracies by understanding religiosity not as an obstacle to citizenship but rather as a way of enacting it (Behl, 2019a, p. 88).

Denise Walsh (*This Issue*) suggests that we treat these devotional acts, not as citizenship acts, but as liminal acts because she is not convinced that “these societies are exemplars of democratic political interaction.” I am open to the idea that these devotional acts might be a kind of pre-figurative politics

occurring within liminal spaces. I am open to new categories of analysis as they relate to the political life of non-Western, nonsecular women. However, I insist that as scholars we study the devotional practices and organizations of devout women because they have the capacity to transform (and reinforce) informal institutions, rules, and norms, as we see with Sikh women in Punjab. I call on scholars to remain open to the possibility that secular mechanisms designed for inclusion can exclude while forms of devotion assumed to be undemocratic can be inclusionary (Behl, 2019a, p. 116).

### Conclusion

I want to return to the question of who has the power to theorize. One way to answer this question is by expanding the very meaning of theorizing to include explanation and meaning making that occurs within and beyond the discipline of political science. By doing so, we can recognize that the analysis of co-generated data, the process of contextual meaning making, and the relational embodied practices within the fieldwork, “deskwork,” and “textwork” are a kind of theorizing (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 101). By centering embodied lived experience, such approaches can bridge multiple divides, including empirical and theoretical, emotional and rational, and secular and religious divides. Such approaches may also open up the possibility of theorizing with care in the research process.

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