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# Diasporic researcher: an autoethnographic analysis of gender and race in political science

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## ABSTRACT

Why do we find pervasive gender- and race-based discrimination and exclusion in the academy and in the field when feminist scholarship has, for decades, provided the tools necessary to make sense of and combat these very exclusions? I share my personal experience to ask what it means to produce knowledge as a woman of color in the academy and a diasporic researcher in the field. I draw on interpretive approaches, particularly autoethnography, to examine the contradictory situation where political science champions objectivity and meritocracy, which should make gender and race identities irrelevant, yet maintains gendered and raced hierarchies, which undermine efforts to diversify the discipline. I argue that this contradictory outcome is best explained by what I call *exclusionary inclusion*, where women and other minorities are formally included in academia, but always on a limited basis. I find that I am not seen by people either in the academy or in the field as a legitimate knowledge producer because of the gendered and raced nature of academia. These results suggest that not all scholars enjoy authority. This analysis is significant because it provides insight into the difficulty of achieving diversity within political science.

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## Introduction

Since the 1960s, feminist scholarship has claimed to be corrective and transformative.<sup>1</sup> For decades, feminist scholars have critically examined power relations within academia and have demonstrated that “objective” observations, theories, methods of inquiry, and institutional practices are political (Harstock 1983; Harding 1986; Haraway 1988; Hawkesworth 2006a, 2006b). Similarly, for decades, feminist scholars have critically examined power relations between researchers and researched, and have found that power operates in shifting, contextual, and relational ways depending on the researcher’s positionality (gender, race, class, sexuality, and other axes of social difference) with respect to research participants<sup>2</sup> (Narayan 1993; Zavella 1993; Narayan 1997; Nagar and Geiger 2007). What underlies this feminist research is an “epistemology that explores and acknowledges the role of politics in the production of knowledge itself and seeks to take account of the political dimensions of science” (Waylen et al. 2013, 29).

As a political scientist conducting fieldwork in Punjab, India, I was versed in positivist methodological approaches, which understand data as observable, and scientific inquiry as objective.<sup>3</sup> As a feminist scholar, I was aware of interpretivist approaches, which understand data as co-generated by the researcher and researched, and knowledge production as thoroughly political. As such, I was aware of the fact that I must account for my own power in the research process. However, I was not fully prepared for the extent to which students and colleagues in academia, and research participants in the field enjoy/enjoyed power over me.

Why do we find pervasive gender- and race-based discrimination and exclusion in the academy and in the field when feminist scholarship has for decades provided the tools necessary to make sense of and combat these very exclusions? I examine the contradictory situation where political science champions objectivity and meritocracy, which should make gender and race identities irrelevant, yet maintains (and, at times, subverts) gendered and raced hierarchies, which undermine efforts to diversify the discipline. I argue that this contradictory outcome is best explained by what I call *exclusionary inclusion*,<sup>4</sup> where women, minorities, and women of color are formally included in academia, but always on a limited basis because their inclusion is determined by the intersection between gender, race, and other categories of difference. I explain how and why white, male standards of knowledge production<sup>5</sup> discourage minority scholars from entering political science, make academia a hostile environment for those who do enter, and often result in the (in)voluntary exit of minority scholars.

In particular, I ask what it means to produce knowledge as a woman of color in academia and a diasporic researcher<sup>6</sup> in the field: How do a scholar's gender and race affect perceptions of them in academia and in field? How do a scholar's gender and race affect their ability to conduct and disseminate research? How do gender and race affect the broader representation of women, minorities, and women of color in political science? What does this tell us about the supposed "objectivity" and "merit" of academia?

To address these questions about how and why my positionality generates insights into gendered and raced hierarchies in political science and in Punjab, I reflect on my embodied and situated research encounters because these encounters are *themselves* political. I draw on interpretive approaches, particularly autoethnography, because this kind of analysis demonstrates that knowledge itself is a product and productive of power. I share my personal experience to demonstrate the gap that exists between decades of feminist scholarship and activism and lived reality in academia.

I find that I am not seen by people either in the academy or in the field as an authoritative, legitimate knowledge possessor/producer.<sup>7</sup> I find that not all of us are empowered to speak and write equally, rather some of us are presumed incompetent,<sup>8</sup> rendered illegitimate before we open our mouths, and othered because of our gendered and raced positionality. I demonstrate that fellow professors and graduate students, who are supposedly my equals, research participants, over whom I theoretically enjoy power, and students, over whom I supposedly have formal power, enjoy some degree of power over me and use similar tools to disavow my position as knowledge producer. These results suggest that not all scholars enjoy power, and therefore what is required is theorizing of the role of the researcher in all phases of the research process (Schwartz-Shea 2006, 102). These findings also demonstrate that the feminist call that political science should study

itself and the research communities in which we work as sites of politics continues to be relevant despite decades of feminist scholarship and activism (Weldon 2013, 86).

This autoethnographic analysis is significant because it provides insight into the difficulty of achieving diversity within political science (Alexander-Floyd 2015; Mershon and Walsh 2015; Sinclair-Chapman 2015). The American Political Science Association (APSA) Task Force on Political Science in the twenty-first Century (2011) finds that despite efforts to diversify, women and racial minorities are underrepresented, while female faculty of color are severely underrepresented among political science faculty in the US.<sup>9</sup> This underrepresentation is startling especially given current demographic shifts in the US. In 2000, more than a quarter of the US population was ethnically marked minorities, including African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans, and by 2050, half of the US population will be members of ethnic minorities. These demographic shifts raise a significant question for political science as a discipline: How can political science remain politically and intellectually relevant in an increasingly diverse context? I argue that, to remain relevant in a diverse context, political science must expose the absence of women, minorities, and women of color in the discipline, must reveal the degree to which this absence leads to partial and biased knowledge, and must integrate these individuals in theories, institutions, and practices from which they had been excluded. By doing so, the discipline becomes more relevant to contemporary political struggles, inclusive of different positionalities and perspectives, and responsive to gendered and racialized hierarchies.

I extend the idea of the “field” to encompass two kinds of sites: the site in the third world<sup>10</sup> where I conducted research and the second site in the first world where my research will be read (Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Khan 2005). As a scholar, who is simultaneously located in third and first world institutions and communities, it is critical to ask what borders I cross, in whose interests, and how my practices replicate or disrupt gendered and raced hierarchies (Nagar and Geiger 2007). My presence in the field disrupted research participants’ understandings of women as restricted to home and marriage (Behl 2014), while my presence in academia disrupts conventional norms about knowledge production.<sup>11</sup>

I draw on my experience from 2004 to 2015 as a graduate student, doctoral fellow, post-doctoral fellow, visiting professor, and assistant professor at large research-intensive public universities and small teaching-intensive private liberal arts colleges. Several aspects of my identity were/are salient. I am a young Punjabi-Sikh woman born in the US to general-caste, immigrant parents from Punjab.<sup>12</sup> I speak English and Punjabi. I practice the Sikh faith, but have not been baptized and do not keep unshorn hair.<sup>13</sup> I am an attractive woman, who is short in stature, petite in build, has dark black hair, and wheat-colored complexion – a complexion that is understood as fair and desirable in India and non-white and undesirable in the US. When I conducted my fieldwork, I was not married. Even as a graduate student, I was in a significantly higher class than many research participants.

Research participants often saw me as a young diasporic Punjabi-Sikh woman. At other times, research participants saw me as a non-resident Indian or a person of Indian origin. My positionality as a diasporic researcher undoubtedly shaped the interview data. My prior knowledge, Punjabi language mastery, race/ethnicity, religion and familial contacts enabled me to gain access in a way that other researchers may not. As a perceived insider,

participants saw me as more trustworthy and perhaps this led to more valid data on sensitive topics. However, I simultaneously encountered disadvantages as a perceived insider.<sup>14</sup> Students, colleagues, and administrators in academia often see me as a young woman of color of South Asian or Indian origin. At other times, students and colleagues see me as Indian, Indian American, and/or Asian American. As a perceived woman of color, gendered and raced stereotypes impact how I negotiate mentorship relations, how I navigate the classroom, and how I manage tenure and promotion evaluation.<sup>15</sup> My identity is more complicated and fluid than what I describe here. These characteristics, however, are often most important to those I work with.

I do not make any claims about producing generalizable knowledge. Instead, I claim that the reader can only know about my research through an analysis of my location. Writing in this fashion raises difficult questions about whether and how to tell stories about people one knows and cares about.<sup>16</sup> To ensure students, colleagues, and participants' confidentiality, I use pseudonyms throughout the paper. As a scholar, who lives and works in the first world and conducts fieldwork in the third-world, I am sensitive to my relationship with "my community." I, like many other women of color who critique sexism within their communities, am often silenced by the fear of being accused of betrayal by community members (Combahee River Collective [1977] 1997; hooks 1981; Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981; Feminist Review 1984; Anzaldúa 1987; Collins 1990; Zavella 1993; Islam 2000). I am also aware that criticism of third-world communities often serves to further stereotype third-world people by reinforcing the view that brown women need to be freed from brown men (Trinh 1989; Mani 1990; Patai 1991; Visweswaran 1994; Narayan 1993, 1997; Spivak 1999; Mohanty 2003; Khan 2005). With an awareness of these criticisms, I choose to write because it "disrupt[s] sanctioned ignorance ... and expand[s] feminist awareness of additional dimensions of the politics of knowledge" (Hawkesworth 2006a, 135).

In the following section, I draw from feminist and critical approaches to methodology and adopt an autoethnographic approach (Hawkesworth 2006a, 2006b; Ackerly and True 2010, 2013; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). In the next section, I examine how my positionality disrupts gendered and raced norms in political science through an analysis of sexual harassment, stereotypes, and mistaken identity; and I reflect on my positionality as diasporic researcher, with attention to the three primary ways power operates through my interactions with participants – women's religiosity, women's rights and duties, and diaspora. I conclude by discussing how these situations provoked by my failure to fit standard expectations illustrate the difficulty of overcoming exclusionary inclusion, diversifying academia, and producing knowledge.

## Theoretical framework

Most research strategies in political science draw upon positivist conceptions of the scientific method (Somit and Tanenhaus 1967; Greenstein and Polsby 1975; Finifter 1983; Seidelman and Harpham 1985; King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Geddes 2003). These positivist underpinnings assume that a "direct relation exists between knower and known" (Hawkesworth 2006b, 29). Positivism assumes that "facts" are unproblematic, immediately "given," and that their understanding requires no interpretation. According to positivist methodologies, political scientists can capture objective reality because

adherence to rigid procedures – in the context of systematic experiments, logical deductions, and statistical analysis – controls for the researchers' subjectivity. As a result, positivist methodological approaches claim to be "neutral," and deny any political dimension to scientific inquiry.

Feminist and critical scholars challenge positivist claims of neutrality and argue that knowledge production itself is thoroughly political (Harding 1986; Twine and Warren 2000; Brown et al. 2003; Hawkesworth 2006a, 2006b; Tickner 2006; Nagar and Geiger 2007; Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Ackerly and True 2010, 2013). These scholars call for a self-reflexive examination of how researchers' position—their personal, professional, and structural positions – frames social scientific investigations, and potentially bolsters systems of domination. These scholars develop analytic tools that interrogate accepted beliefs, challenge shared assumptions, interrogate faulty arguments, and reframe research questions. According to feminist and critical scholars, political science should study itself, and its research communities as sites of politics. These intellectual moves, for Weldon (2013, 86), "challenge fundamental assumptions about what it means to be a political scientist ... that have long been taken for granted in the field."

There is no single feminist or critical approach and many scholars combine multiple analytic tools in a single analysis.<sup>17</sup> What is common to all these approaches is that they take issue with dominant approaches to knowledge production as gendered and racialized "ways to truth." What these scholars call for is a commitment to critical reflexivity, attentive "(1) to unequal power relations, (2) to relationships, (3) to boundaries of inclusion-exclusion and forms of marginalization, and (4) to situating the researcher in the research process" (Ackerly and True 2013, 136). Critical reflexivity is a "marker of quality ... because it makes the research process ... more transparent, thereby maximizing the trustworthiness of the researcher's claims to knowledge" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 104). I share information about my interactions with research participants, scholars, and students to allow readers to determine the reliability of my claims to knowledge.

### ***Intersectional autoethnography***

Autoethnography is a practice of critical reflection on the embodied experience of knowledge making (Doty 2004; Shehata 2006; Brigg and Bleiker 2010; Dauphinee 2010; Löwenheim 2010). Autoethnography provides social scientists with a means to account for their positionality in the research process. The goal of autoethnography is to challenge the subject-object separation by placing the researcher's experience at the center of the phenomenon under investigation. By doing so, autoethnography can map power relations within the knowledge production process. In particular, autoethnography makes visible two kinds of violence – one perpetrated on the researched in the course of all writing and representation (Dauphinee 2010) and the other perpetrated on the researcher through forced adoption of a particular voice, which follows the dictates of the profession (Doty 2004). By revealing these two forms of violence, autoethnography acknowledges, explores, and perhaps minimizes these forms of violence.

Autoethnography can be traced to multiple sources.<sup>18</sup> One source is scholarship by women of color or third-world feminists, which centers the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and gender, challenges the use of woman as a universalizing category, and pluralizes feminism (Combahee River Collective [1977] 1997; Anzaldúa and Moraga 1981; hooks

1981; Feminist Review 1984; Anzaldúa 1987; King 1988; Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991; Behar 1993, 2003; Zavella 1993; Narayan 1997; Latina Feminist Group 2001; Mohanty 2003; Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006; Téllez 2013). These scholars often use autoethnography, oral traditions, narratives, storytelling, biography, and testimony to give voice to marginalized experiences, to analyze power relations, and to challenge conventional views on epistemology. The Latina Feminist Group (2001, 2) utilizes *testimonio* to inscribe, “those lived realities that would otherwise succumb to the alchemy of erasure.” Similarly, Sangtin Writers and Nagar (2006, XLVI) use autobiography to “reclaim the meanings of empowerment and to intervene in the global politics of knowledge production.”

Anzaldúa (2003, 83) asks, “Why am I compelled to write?” Anzaldúa responds in the following manner:

I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten ... To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul ... To show that I *can* and I *will* write ... And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the outraged gasp of the censor and the audience. Finally, I write because I’m scared of writing but I’m more scared of not writing. (83–84)

I write because it generates a space for marginalized voices to be heard, creates new knowledge of gendered and raced structures in academia, and explains the severe underrepresentation of women of color in political science. I write because my personal experience echoes the experience of other minority scholars who do not have the privilege to write, who are victims of the hostile environment, who experience exclusionary inclusion characterized by isolation, discrimination, marginalization, and (in)voluntary exit.

### **Research encounters in the academy and field**

In this section, I examine how my positionality disrupts gendered and raced norms in political science through an analysis of how I am treated as “other” by research participants, scholars, and students. The primary tools of this othering are sexual harassment, mistaken identity, and stereotypes. As a perceived woman of color, some students and colleagues see me as a sexualized object. Others see me as anything but scholar. Still others expect me to be nurturing, and deviation from this expectation is punished. I share these encounters not to be self-indulgent; rather, I share these experiences because writing my individual experience is to write a larger political experience where particular gendered and raced bodies are marginalized in academia despite decades of feminist scholarship and activism. I share these moments because writing in this way is itself a political act.

I also critically reflect on my positionality as diasporic researcher, with attention to the ways power operates through my interactions with research participants – women’s religiosity, women’s rights and duties, and diaspora. As a perceived insider, some research participants held me more accountable for norms of personal behavior. Others found me to be lacking in my adherence to a Sikh way of life. Still others saw me as a girl, not a woman, and as a layperson, not a scholar. I share these moments not because I expect research participants to share my views, which are shaped by Western liberal institutions including institutions of higher education; rather, I share these encounters to demonstrate that respondents understand the category of woman in relation to home



and marriage, and my presence in the field disrupted this understanding leading to some difficult interactions. The narrative I offer below reveals the pain I experienced as I navigated gendered and raced spaces, and it invites readers to experience this pain themselves, and connect it to the experience of minority faculty who experience exclusionary inclusion because they are measured against a white, male standard of knowledge.

### **Sexual harassment**

I have been the target of sexist comments, sexist humor, and sexual harassment in academia. I was and often am seen as sexual object, in part, because of stereotypes about women of color's hyper-sexuality (Caplan 1993; Agathangelou and Ling 2002; Lugo-Lugo 2012). For example, during my first year of graduate school, I asked a male professor of color if he would serve as my mentor. We were both very excited to work with one another. I shared the good news with members of my first-year cohort. It soon came to my attention that a male member of the group, an immigrant and minority, was telling other graduate students that, "The only reason that Professor X is working with Natasha is because he wants to sleep with her." He also said, "Natasha isn't a political scientist ... she will never finish the Ph.D. program." I felt betrayed, belittled, and hurt. After this incident, I retreated from the graduate student cohort. I realized that the students could not be trusted, and I would soon realize that the faculty could not be trusted as well.

During my third year of graduate school, a faculty member betrayed me. It was late at night and I was already in bed asleep. My cell phone rang; the call was from a Professor Miller. When I picked up, I heard Mike, a male graduate student of color on the phone. Mike told me that he was hanging out with Professor Miller and Cynthia, a prospective graduate student, and "they were ranking the hottest women in the department." Mike said, "I ranked you the hottest, but Cynthia thinks she is the hottest woman." At this point, Professor Miller intervened; he informed me that Mike was drunk dialing me. I was shocked. My only response was to ask Professor Miller about my qualifying field paper. I asked if he had read it and if I had passed.

At first, I did not tell anyone about the incident. But I could not get the idea of Professor Miller talking to graduate students (Cynthia joined the program in the Fall) about me as a sexual object, ranking me and other women on a scale of hotness, discussing tits, asses, legs, lips, etc. I was also embarrassed by my response. Why did I ask about my field paper? Why did not I tell them to fuck off? Why did not I respond in a more appropriate way? What would a more appropriate response be?

It took about a month, but I finally told my mentor. The words came pouring out. My mentor named the incident for what it was, *sexual harassment*. Prior to that, I was not able to categorize or name it – what kind of social scientist am I? My mentor's response was incredible. He said that I had grounds to file a formal complaint and that he would support me. I decided that there was no need for a formal complaint – part of me justified it because it was not that *bad* and the other part justified it because I needed Professor Miller to complete my Ph.D. To this day, I am embarrassed and ashamed that I made this calculation; that I created some kind of hierarchy of harassment and only really *bad* things warranted formal complaint – sexual assault, rape, gendered violence ... I am embarrassed and ashamed because at other times in my life, even when really bad things have happened, I failed to report... .



I wish this was my only experience of sexual harassment. Unfortunately, this is not the case. I do have more power now because I am a professor. But this power is experienced through my gender, race, and age. For example, in 2015, while teaching South Asia Politics, a student objectified me in an anonymous midterm evaluation. One of the questions I ask in the midterm evaluation is, “What would encourage you to participate more?” One student responded by saying, “Professor Behl in a bikini”.

I read the evaluation, laughed, and threw it away. I tried my best to treat all students with continued respect and civility. I would have intervened if this happened to another woman, especially a young undergraduate. But sometimes I wonder why I *allowed* it to happen to *me*. This incident was made even more complicated by the fact that I was 15 weeks pregnant, something I had not yet disclosed to students, faculty, or administration. It was jarring to know that a student in the classroom saw me as sexual object, especially as I was beginning to see myself as mother. My experience of sexual harassment – perpetrated by professors who enjoyed formal power over me, fellow graduate students who were theoretically my equal, and students who I supposedly enjoyed power over – demonstrates how power relations for some in academia are reversed. I repeatedly questioned myself to these experiences, asking why I let it happen to me, what I could do differently, but in actuality I, like other minority faculty, lack power in these situations. By asking these kinds of questions, I was perpetuating the myth that my experience of sexual harassment was my individual failure, rather than a structural and systemic problem.

My experience of sexual harassment in academia demonstrates that categories like “student,” “professor,” and “woman” are experienced as intersectional, and determine how one is seen and what one sees. My experience also reveals one of the mechanisms that creates a hostile environment, and leads to isolation, marginalization, and (in)voluntary exit of certain gendered and raced bodies. Lastly, my experience of sexual harassment demonstrates the need for continued feminist scholarship and organizing that does not homogenize the experience of women and does not assume that racial solidarity leads to gender equality.

### ***Mistaken identity***

As a doctoral fellow, postdoctoral fellow, visiting professor, and tenure track professor, students, colleagues, and administrators regularly mistake me for a student, secretary, and support-staff, anything *but* a professor.<sup>19</sup> As I walk on campus, students have repeatedly asked if I am a fellow student, at which point, I explain that I am a *professor*. Often, male students hit on me during this encounter. After realizing their mistake, most students are embarrassed by their assumptions and apologize. A few students, however, asked, “Are your parents very mean, are they strict?” “Are you some kind of whiz kid?” Such statements reflect a model minority myth, which assumes that Asian Americans are “family-oriented/clannish, intelligent/devious, hardworking/robotic” (Kim 2004, 349). Some students have questioned my credentials and professional experience: “Do you have a Ph.D.?” “Have you taught this course *before*?” Such statements reflect students’ disbelief that I could be a knowledge producer with the appropriate credentials.

As a doctoral fellow at a small liberal arts college in a small conservative town, my experience of mistaken identity almost led to violence. Residents of the town did not think highly of the college and there was a contentious relationship between the two.

There were very few restaurants and bars where faculty, especially faculty of color and queer faculty, felt comfortable. My friend, Stephanie, a white lesbian woman in her first year of a tenure track position in the political science department, heard about a new restaurant so we decided to go. We met at the restaurant and were enjoying each other's company until a young white man in a military-looking jacket came and sat next to me. He asked what we did and we mentioned that we were professors at the local college. Then he asked, "Where are you from?" Stephanie responded "Michigan," an answer that satisfied him. He asked me, "Where are you from?" I responded, "California." He pressed on, "No, where are you from, from?" I again stated, "California." He asked, "Where is your family from?" At this point, I was going to respond again with "California," but he became hostile and accused me of being Pakistani. Stephanie and I turned our backs on him and continued our conversation. He got out of his seat and got into my face and said, "I will fucking bomb you, you fucking Paki ... I will bomb the college, the whole town." Stephanie stood up on her chair and got in the guy's face and yelled, "Get the fuck out of our faces ... Get the fuck out of here." The gentleman left while yelling racist and violent comments.

Stephanie and I were left shocked and scared. We were upset that no one in the restaurant intervened. The bartender never asked the man to leave; he never offered to call the police. Stephanie discussed the incident during a political science faculty meeting. To her surprise, no one in the faculty expressed concern for our safety. Later, Stephanie asked if anyone spoke to me privately. I told her no. We were both terrified ... terrified that this man may find us, he may hurt us ... terrified that our colleagues were not concerned about our well-being, they were not concerned about the safety of the lesbian and the woman of color. Stephanie left the tenure track position at this small liberal arts college for another tenure track position. I left as well even though I was offered a postdoctoral fellowship followed by the possibility of tenure track opportunity hire.

An ethnographic analysis of my experience of mistaken identity demonstrates that authority is not uniform, not all of us are empowered to speak and write equally, and the category of professor is not singular, rather it is experienced in an intersectional fashion based on gender, race, sexuality, and age. My experience also points to one of the many processes that result in a hostile work environment for women of color, minority, and queer faculty, who are measured by a white, male, heterosexual norm of knowledge producer and often exit academia to preserve their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.

### ***Gendered and raced stereotypes***

As a perceived woman of color, I have experienced othering through gendered and raced stereotypes. In the classroom, I often ask difficult questions in soft, non-threatening, non-judgmental ways because I am afraid of being read as an angry woman of color, an unsympathetic bitch, and/or a cold unhelpful woman. According to Caplan (1993, 66)

If you do any nurturing ... that work may be invisible ... it can even be used as "proof" of your lack of professionalism; but if you *don't* nurture, your ... behavior becomes highly visible, and you are considered a "cold bitch".

This is further complicated for women of color who are associated with the role of caretaker – mammy, domestic, servant, and nanny (Agathangelou and Ling 2002; Sampaio 2006; Lugo-Lugo 2012).

Early in the academic semester, I often play along with students' stereotypes of me as nurturer. However, over time, I create an intellectually rigorous and critical classroom environment committed to dialogic learning in which our gendered and raced assumptions – my assumptions as well – are used as examples to dismantle and challenge. I extend to students the resources necessary for self-reflection through course readings, classroom discussions, and written assignments. By the end of the semester, I often critically reflect with students on my pedagogical approach of using gendered and raced stereotypes to my advantage in an effort to dismantle them.<sup>20</sup>

Often, however, this project fails and results in an awkward, difficult, and, at times, hostile classroom environment. Some students are not comfortable with my move away from the nurturing woman of color to the critical scholar who challenges their assumptions. One example of this failure occurred in Fall 2014 when I taught a graduate course on Global Feminisms. The course was going well, until Week 12 when students began their presentations. One of the presentations lacked intellectual rigor, mischaracterized the text, and failed to understand basic ideas. When I raised these issues with those presenting, two students in particular took issue with my questions and claimed I was *lashing out*. In response, I dedicated the next class session to make sense of the incident through the course material, through feminist praxis. The classroom activity was not as successful as I had hoped.

Anonymous student evaluations from the class corroborate my interpretation. One student stated, "In the beginning Dr. Behl responded well to questions, and encouraged open discussion in her class. However ... that changed towards the end." Similarly, another student stated, "She was not very encouraging." Still another stated, "Her feedback is usually very critical and cold. Not a whole lot of praise, encouragement and complimenting." These responses exemplify students' expectations of me as a nurturing woman of color, who should validate students, not intellectually challenge them.<sup>21</sup>

This was the minority view in the class, as a majority of the students responded positively to my use of feminist pedagogy:

I found that Dr. Behl's way of teaching the course was both moving, empowering, and reflective of the type of work covered ... It always felt like a place where I could safely voice my interpretations ... without being judged. Also, the way the course shifted from the professor as the knowledge producer to the students as knowledge producers ... was quite astounding and commendable.

One student explicitly addressed the classroom climate in their evaluation:

Some students may not have understood Dr. Behl's objective to encourage strong arguments [supported] with evidence. This affected their classroom rapport. However, I think they also were more tied to their own personal perspectives, rather than willing to accept challenges to their understanding of the world.

The gendered and raced content of my courses and my critical pedagogical approach in the classroom represent another form of disruption because the content of my courses challenges the traditional political science canon while my pedagogical approach disrupts traditional notions of rigor and objectivity. As a woman faculty of color, I embody multiple disruptions and I navigate these disruptions by explicitly acknowledging them and working through them with students. My experience demonstrates that how I am seen affects how and what I see in the classroom. My experience also illustrates that power

is not uniform, nor is it held solely by professors, rather, some of us are punished because of our gendered and raced positionality. Lastly, my experience demonstrates the need for continued study of political science and the research communities in which we work as sites of politics despite decades of feminist scholarship and activism.

### **Women's religiosity**

Next, I critically reflect on my positionality as diasporic researcher in Punjab, India. As a perceived insider, some research participants held me more accountable for gendered religious norms. For example, participants explicitly told me that my attire did not meet Sikh religious standards and that my name was not a proper Sikh name.<sup>22</sup> At the end of his two-hour interview, Jasveer Singh Gill, a 54-year-old general-caste man, asked me in a judgmental fashion, "What kind of name is Natasha Behl? How can you do research on Sikhs when you do not even have a Sikh name?" I was startled by the question and confirmed that my name is not a Sikh name.

For Gill, my public performance of my religion was insufficient because my parents failed to give me a proper Sikh name, and as an adult, I failed to rectify their mistake by adopting Kaur as my surname. Gill was judging my ability to be a knowledge producer based on my gendered performance of religion, and according to him, I was not up to the task. Gill's questions also point to the difficulty of simplistic understandings of identity politics in which only Sikhs can speak for Sikhs. For Gill, I was not sufficiently Sikh enough to study the Sikh community and represent its interest. Gill assumes that the Sikh community is uniform and its interests are singular. Gill's statement also raises the question of how to define Sikh. Are Amritdharis (the most religious of Sikhs) the only people who can study the Sikh community? Or can others who are perceived as less religious also study the Sikh community? My encounter with Gill points to a larger phenomenon in which third-world scholars are perceived as too westernized, insufficiently native, not black enough by the minority communities to which they "belong," and simultaneously perceived as racial other, gendered minority, too different to be sufficiently academic by the professional communities to which they "belong" (Narayan 1997).

Beena Kaur, a 65-year-old general-caste woman, characterized me as a shameful Sikh woman, who failed to meet the standards of proper Sikh attire:

Nowadays, forget a woman wearing her *dupata* [scarf] on her head ... The *dupata* has flown away. Sleeveless arms, very, very small blouses ... The meaning of this is that today's woman has become shameless ... And men are becoming hunters ... Guru Gobind Singh Maharaj said, "Read *bani* [the word of God] and wear *bana* [religious dress]" ... a modest *salwar-kameez* [long-shirt and pants], and *dupata* on one's head ... If a girl is herself strong, if a girl dresses well ... then no man has the nerve to even get close to this girl ... However, if we ourselves have turned on our proper attire, then how is that the Guru's fault?

Kaur's focus on women's religiosity allows her to shift all culpability for violence against women to women themselves by stating that women's adherence to proper attire determines their status and treatment. Kaur assumes that women are the objects of sexual desire and men the desiring subjects. By doing so, Kaur frees men of any responsibility for "hunting" women, while legitimizing violence against women. After expressing her views, Kaur said to me, "Please don't take offense, but look at your sleeves." I was wearing a traditional *salwar kameez* with short sleeves, and my *dupata* was around my

neck, not on my head. Kaur saw me as a shameless Sikh woman who deserved to be hunted as sexual object. According to Kaur, I was available for the hunt, available for violent mistreatment because of my immodest attire. As a perceived insider, I found myself in a vulnerable position because my positionality may have led to more trust and resulted in more complete responses to difficult questions, but it also exposed me to gendered norms used to justify sexual harassment and violence against women.

My experience demonstrates how and why academia is a hostile environment for minority faculty who experience a dual denial – denial of their “belonging” to minority communities, and a denial of their “belonging” to professional communities – which leaves them isolated and marginalized and results in their exclusionary inclusion. An autoethnographic analysis reveals how gendered biases operate in knowledge production processes; gendered biases that feminist methodological approaches make visible.

### ***Women's rights and duties***

Participants' expectations about women's rights and duties as limited to home and marriage operated in my interactions with participants. Many participants asked about my marital status. Participants were surprised that I was unmarried and traveled to India without a male companion. The fact that I was not married seemed to reinforce participants' view of me as a girl. Often, older participants – especially male participants – spoke to me in a condescending manner; saw me as young, naïve, and uninformed, and saw themselves as an authoritative knowledge source. For some participants, I failed to meet expectations of what it means to be a Sikh woman, restricted to home and marriage. Furthermore, my failure to meet expectations regarding women's rights and duties affected how participants saw me, and what I saw as a researcher.

I often used my gender to ask difficult questions in soft, non-threatening, non-judgmental ways. I played along with participants' gendered stereotypes and asked them to enlighten me. I found this to be the best approach when conducting interviews with domineering male participants. I found it unsafe to challenge expected gender roles by behaving confident and authoritative, especially given that I already disrupted conventional gender roles as an unmarried woman traveling to conduct research. I found it unwise to also challenge the gendered expectation that I offer respect and deference to men and elders.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the classroom setting, where I am able to strategically occupy students' gendered and raced stereotypes in an effort to dismantle them, in the field, I was unable to engage in this kind of strategic occupation of stereotypes. In the field, I played into participants' gendered stereotypes as a way to co-generate data, an act that some may find dishonest and deceitful.

This autoethnographic account demonstrates the need for continued feminist scholarship and activism, reveals how norms in the field lead to discrimination and marginalization of some gendered and raced bodies, and explains why some researchers are characterized as young, naïve, and uninformed. I did, however, retain some power because I, unlike female participants, exited and removed myself from these gendered expectations. I could and did return to my privileged life in the first world, where I enjoy the resources required for academic self-reflection.

## **Diaspora**

The least threatening interaction I had with participants was when participants saw me as a diasporic Sikh returning to her homeland to learn more about her religion, culture, and community. Participants who understood me as a member of the Sikh diaspora were forthcoming, pleasant, and considerate of the differences between my first world and their third-world experiences. Participants often commented on my Punjabi language mastery, my assumed commitment to my race/ethnicity and religion, and my continued relationships with my family and community. For example, many participants were impressed with my Punjabi language skills. They often expressed great pride and appreciation of my maintenance of our shared mother tongue even though I lived in the English-speaking world. Some participants even contrasted my mastery of Punjabi with the loss of Punjabi language skills among middle- and upper-class Punjabis, who choose to teach their children Hindi and English. These participants expressed concern about the decline in Punjabi language use in Punjab and feared that the language would be lost. Other participants expressed appreciation of my assumed commitment to my religious and ethnic community. For these participants, I was a “good” diasporic Sikh who understood her identity as linked to Punjab, our shared homeland. These participants saw it as their duty to teach me about “my homeland,” “my religion,” and “myself.”

I characterize my interactions with these participants as safe. Even within these safe relationships, however, participants presumed that I was incompetent. Some participants found it necessary to teach me about myself and understood themselves as an authoritative source of knowledge. I was seen as girl, not woman, as layperson, not scholar. My experience in the field illustrates the problematic role of authentic native informant because in practice, I could not perform identities such as “native,” “authentic,” and “Sikh.” My experience also confirms feminist findings by revealing how some gendered and raced bodies are not empowered to speak and write equally, rather these bodies are presumed incompetent, rendered illegitimate, and othered.

## **Conclusion**

Critical reflexive attention to my own positionality – in political science and in Punjab – illustrates how gendered and raced biases operate as mechanisms of power in processes of knowledge production, and how these mechanisms create a hostile environment for minority faculty. In addition, reflexivity generates intrinsic insights of its own, which would not have been visible to me if I had maintained the illusion of a positivist neutral observer. I learned that categories, like “native,” “insider,” “Sikh,” “woman,” “woman of color,” “professor,” and others, do not exist as stable and pure categories, and are always experienced as intersectional. I also learned that how I am/was seen in these two locations, affects what I see or do not see, what I learn or do not learn. Lastly, I learned that power is not uniform, nor do scholars solely hold it.

By interrogating situated academic encounters, this article investigates dimensions of academic life that go undetected in mainstream positivist discussions. Positivist methodological approaches often tell a limited story because they assume that researchers enjoy power over the researched, and overlook how gendered and raced norms operate in academia. In contrast, by analyzing my individual failure to fit standard expectations of a



legitimate scholar, I explain how white, male standards of knowledge production discourage minority scholars from entering political science, make academia a painful environment for those who do enter, and often result in exclusionary inclusion characterized by isolation, discrimination, marginalization, and (in)voluntary exit of minority scholars. This article explains why, despite efforts to diversify, minority faculty continue to be underrepresented in political science because political science upholds the myth of objectivity and merit, while maintaining the gendered and raced nature of the discipline. Lastly, this article calls for continued feminist scholarship that does not homogenize the experience of women and does not assume that racial solidarity leads to gender equality.

## Notes

1. Some feminists seek to integrate women into existing frameworks and institutions on the premise that men and women should be treated equally. Others challenge the use of women as homogenous categories reflecting the common essence of all women and recognize the implications of the erasure of difference. Still other feminists question the very idea of a pre-given feminine subject that shares interests. For a detailed discussion, see Dhamoon (2013).
2. I use the term research *participant*, rather than research *subject* because this term acknowledges participants' agency in the research process. For a detailed discussion, see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012) and Ackerly and True (2010, 2013).
3. I conducted fieldwork over multiple trips to Punjab between 2000 and 2010. I engaged in extended participant observation, sustained immersion, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews.
4. For a detailed discussion of exclusionary inclusion, see Behl (2014) and Rocco (2014).
5. I do not intend to obscure the way power operates within the category of white male as this category is experienced as intersectional. There are significant differences within this category based on age, class, status, and sexuality, and one can imagine similar studies that examine the positionality and power of young white working-class, disabled, and/or queer men in academia. Rather I use the concept – white, male standards of knowledge production – to demonstrate that it operates as the default mode from which others are judged. The norm of white, male knowledge production harms everyone, including those who fit the norm and those who do not, in varying ways and to differing extents.
6. For a detailed discussion of diasporic researchers, see Henry (2007).
7. Henry argues that diasporic researchers have difficulties “positioning themselves ... as authoritative agents in the field, especially when they find it difficult to make claims to ‘authentic’ places of ‘origin’ and ‘pure’ ethnic and racial identities” (2007, 71).
8. For a detailed discussion, see Gutierrez y Muhs et al. (2012).
9. In 2010, 86.6% of female political science faculty were Caucasian, 6.1% were African-American, 4.4% Asian Pacific Islander, and 3.0% Latina (APSA Task Force 2011).
10. I rely on Narayan's definition: “Third-World subject ... refer[s] to individuals from Third-World countries temporarily living ... in Western contexts, to individuals who were born and have lived in Western contexts but have social identities that link them to immigrant communities of color, and to all individuals who are members of communities of color in Western contexts and do not have any sense of an ‘immigrant’ identity” (1997, 121).
11. For a detailed discussion of women of color in political science, see Sampaio (2006).
12. In Sikhism, no scriptural sanction exists for caste distinction, but nonetheless, a caste hierarchy exists (Puri 2003).
13. Sikhs can be characterized by religiosity: The most traditionally religious is Amritdhari, those who keep unshorn hair and have undergone the baptismal ceremony. The second is Keshdhari, those who keep hair but have not been baptized. The least traditionally religious is Sahijdhari, those who do not keep unshorn hair and have not undergone the baptismal ceremony.



14. Researchers' positionality – demographic and locational – influences access to research participants. Intersectional categories of difference can generate access to research situations – or block it (Henderson 2009; Ortbals and Rincker 2009; Townsend-Bell 2009). Also, locational positionalities draw one into particular networks rather than others, which influences knowledge production (Pachirat 2009; Zirakzadeh 2009).
15. Many scholars find that academic institutions create an inhospitable climate for women faculty of color (Narayan 1997; Agathangelou and Ling 2002; Sampaio 2006; Gutierrez y Muhs et al. 2012).
16. For a detailed discussion, see Narayan (1997), Shehata (2006), and Nagar and Geiger (2007).
17. Some scholars rely on standpoint theory (Harstock 1983; Harding 1986; Haraway 1988; Smith 1990; Collins 1990). Others deploy gender and race as analytical categories (Scott 1986; Omi and Winant 1986; Glenn 2002; Beckwith 2005; Hawkesworth 2006a). Still others turn to intersectionality (Dhamoon 2011; Hankivsky and Cormier 2011; Wadsworth 2011).
18. See, for example, cultural anthropology (Rabinow 1977; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Trinh 1989; Abu-Lughod 1991; Narayan 1993; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus and Fischer 1999; Khan 2005).
19. For a detailed discussion, see Gutierrez y Muhs et al. (2012).
20. Narayan describes this as “strategic occupation” that enables third-world feminists to resist stereotypes while occupying them (1997, 154–155).
21. For a detailed discussion of the impact of gender and race on student evaluations, see Lazos (2012).
22. Baptized Sikhs are required to wear a modest Sikh *bana* [dress] and adopt Sikh surnames, Kaur [Lioness/Princess] for women and Singh [Lion] for men, which are devoid of caste affiliation.
23. Scheduled Caste men did not expect such deference, whereas general-caste men often spoke over me, interrupted me, and did not allow me to speak.

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