

1

WHO IS A SOUTH ASIANIST?

A CONVERSATION ON POSITIONALITY

**Hoda Bandeh-Ahmadi and
Isabel Huacuja Alonso**

Who is a South Asianist? To answer this question, this essay traces the personal and professional experiences of two women scholars of South Asia in academia in the United States: a Chicana/Mexican American media historian and an Iranian American anthropologist. Isabel Huacuja Alonso's book project traces the history of radio broadcasting in India and Pakistan, focusing on the late colonial and early post-independence era. Hoda Bandeh-Ahmadi studies academic institutions, and her current book project is an ethnography of three anthropology and sociology departments in Delhi and Lucknow, India. The two scholars met in 2010 and have remained in contact since.

Both Bandeh-Ahmadi and Huacuja Alonso consciously resisted pressure to become experts of what are perceived to be their "own cultures" and bonded over their shared experiences in South Asia-related academia. Their interest in the region stemmed in part from a simple desire to learn about cultures, histories, and places beyond what was familiar to them—a scholarly pursuit still, in many ways, conceived as the domain of white students and scholars.

In this essay, the authors propose that their shared experiences shed light on how expectations about who is, who can be, or who should be a scholar of South Asia are enforced and reproduced, and they reveal the ways these expectations

shape the creation of knowledge in South Asian Studies in US-based academia. The essay is structured as a conversation or a co-interview revolving around four main questions, and it stems from many informal discussions that have taken place over more than a decade of friendship and scholarly collaboration. The authors hope that the essay's conversational format not only creates a space for frank consideration of personal experiences but also decenters the very idea of scholarly authority in academia, embracing instead a more collaborative model.¹ In the interest of space, they focus specifically on their experiences and on issues of positionality in US-based, South Asia-related academia and, as a result, they must inevitably leave out other important issues. They hope that what they discuss here will also be relevant to other specialties and places and will open up further conversations within and beyond Asian Studies.

Tell me about your research and how you became a scholar of South Asia

HODA BANDEH-AHMADI (HBA): My research, broadly, is on institutions, particularly academic and scientific institutions. I'm interested in their cultures, how and what they reproduce, and how power operates and is experienced in them. My first book project is an ethnography of anthropologists and sociologists in North Indian universities, focusing on several generations of scholars in three departments from 1947 to 2015. I found that what I call scholars' "intellectual kinship"—understandings of who one's kin are in an academic context (like academic lineages)—molds academic cultures and worlds in important ways, shaping interpersonal relationships, hiring practices, disciplinary boundaries, and international academic hierarchies.

I didn't enter grad school planning to become an expert in South Asia as a region. Instead, I eventually chose to work in India because of my research questions, which were then framed around how anthropologists do anthropology, how ethnographic knowledge is made. Some of what influenced these research questions was that I was coming out of an undergraduate anthropology program at Berkeley where department centennial celebrations had me thinking about the history of anthropology. Discussions about the militarization of anthropology after 9/11 helped me connect that history to the present. I was surrounded by faculty who were investigating questions about power, controlling processes, and the anthropology and ethnography of science. I also had a work-study job in my department, so I was seeing "behind the scenes" of academic life. Finally, I was troubled by some narratives of the history of anthropology as a march of progress that began with ancient Greek philosophy.

I wanted to help challenge Euro-American-centric views of the history of anthropology and to combine the anthropology of science with the history of

anthropology so that we could ethnographically study the present of anthropology as well as its past. In anthropology, though ethnography is “our thing,” it’s extremely rare to ethnographically study ethnographers. Anyone considering this focus gets told that they’re committing “academic suicide,” something I’ve personally heard many times. Because these were unusual interests, for a long time, I felt frustrated that I didn’t know what I wanted to study, but in reality, I did know; I just didn’t know if it would be considered acceptable. I finally talked to my undergraduate mentor, Laura Nader, and she told me: you know what you’re interested in, write that. That was how I got up the courage to propose this project to graduate programs.

In graduate school, I realized that I was unusual in not already having a specialization in a particular area or region. I was unsure what part of the world I wanted to study. I think many of my colleagues had traveled much more than I had, or had spent some time in a place, or had some personal connection to it, and made that part of their identity to the point of introducing themselves first as an area“-ist.” I didn’t come from a family where we were able to travel much and had barely been outside the US (which, of course, also relates to questions of class). That made the idea of traveling someplace alone where I didn’t know anyone all the more daunting.

Some people suggested I should work in Iran because they imagined it would be “easier” for me. It’s also a place most Americans can’t access to study. Though I’ve never been there, I am fluent in Farsi, so perhaps there was a bit of an underlying sense of a “waste” of an opportunity for some. But I was also aware that the task of representing Iran to US academics would be a fraught one. When something is your area of expertise, you have to respond intellectually to scholarship about it, but there was a lot written about the Middle East and Islam that I found offensive, orientalizing, and personally upsetting just to *read*. I value the work people do to counter that, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to take on that responsibility. It wasn’t what was motivating me as a scholar, and I thought people would just use the fact of my “subjective” position to dismiss anything I might say anyway. I also couldn’t imagine going to Iran, meeting my extended family there for the first time, and managing the emotions and politics of that all while simultaneously attempting international ethnographic fieldwork in a country that hasn’t had regular diplomatic relations with the US since before I was born. Nothing about that seemed “easier” to me.

In the context of a discipline that has historically emphasized studying the unfamiliar, I also saw the suggestion that I work in Iran, not for intellectual reasons but *because* my family is from there, as an insult that both pushed me into a “native” role and denied me the same presumption granted to white colleagues that my choice of field site be intellectual rather than familial. I wanted and felt I

deserved a chance to learn *how to learn* about an unfamiliar place, culture, and language as much as anyone else. I took the decision of field sites very seriously, recognizing it as a huge personal, emotional, and intellectual commitment. I knew how I felt about some scholarship about Iran or Muslims that hadn't taken that commitment as seriously as I would have liked, and I didn't want to make other people feel that way. But I also respected how challenging that would be.

I initially wanted to do a comparative project in multiple countries, but that wasn't feasible for a variety of reasons. I considered places that have larger, institutionalized traditions of anthropology like Mexico, Brazil, Russia, South Africa, China, and, of course, India. An advantage of working in India was that in addition to having large, institutionalized traditions of anthropology and sociology, it also has English-language scholarship. Practically, it was easier for me to jump in and think about scholarship and work. Intellectually, that also made moot those arguments that use language barriers to explain Euro-American scholarship's tendency to not engage with work from outside its own institutional networks.

Ultimately, I chose to work in India because it was a particularly relevant and interesting place to address the research questions I had. About a year into graduate school, I was leaning toward India enough that I took a preliminary trip there—they had some funding for preliminary fieldwork trips in my department.

ISABEL HUACUJA ALONSO (IHA): That's when we met.

HBA: Yeah, that's right! During my first trip to India in Summer 2010. I visited different cities and tried to figure out if this was a place where I could do fieldwork. By the end of the summer, I had decided that, yes, I was going to work in India. And that is how I came to study South Asia. So, now, Isa, tell me about your research project and how you became a scholar of South Asia.

IHA: My current book project is a history of radio broadcasting in Hindi and Urdu in North India and Pakistan. I study how radio contributed to the making and unmaking of the Indo-Pak border (1920–1980). But more broadly, I am interested in the role of the media, and specifically sound media, in the making and unmaking of borders in South Asia. My research combines archival work (including written and aural sources) and oral history, namely interviews with retired broadcasters and radio listeners. Trained as a historian, I am committed to the idea that the study of media, and specifically mediated sound, is not ancillary to our understanding of past societies but fundamental, and that a perspective from South Asia, one of the world's most prolific media-producing regions, is critical.

Now, in regards to how I came to study South Asia. In college, I found it very fulfilling to learn about places different from my own. I grew up on the US-

Mexico border in Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. I visited my extended family in Mexico City regularly, but other than that, the only world I really knew before attending college was the US-Mexico border. So it felt like a thrilling opportunity to be able to learn about places so different from where I had grown up. I became very interested in learning about South Asia after I wrote a paper on Pakistan in a history class about US-foreign relations and 9/11. I remember writing to the professor late at night to ask if I could change the topic of my paper from a project on US foreign policy toward Latin America to a project on Pakistan. He responded, "Sure." Also, one of my closest mentors in college, a sociologist, was Indian, and she went out of her way to make me feel comfortable in her classes, and she became a source of support in a majority white university. Her long-standing mentorship certainly increased my interest in the region.

When I decided to return to graduate school, I planned to pursue a comparative project between South Asia and Latin America. I was unsure of the discipline at the time. I had completed a BA in economics but had liked and had been much more successful in my history and humanities classes. A mentor recommended that in preparation for a PhD program, I should first get a solid background in South Asia and learn a South Asian language. This would also give me time to figure out what discipline might best allow me to combine my technical training and humanistic interests. So I applied for an MA in South Asian Studies at the University of Texas at Austin and was fortunate to earn a scholarship. There, I fully dedicated myself to learning Hindi and Urdu, which I loved, and I traveled frequently to India for language courses. I gradually dropped the idea of doing something comparative and decided to focus solely on South Asia. Also, while pursuing my MA, my interest in history, particularly twentieth-century South Asian history, grew, and I gave up plans of pursuing disciplines closer to my BA training in economics.

HBA: I find it interesting that we both first intended to pursue "comparative" projects and later settled on South Asia. I suspect that by virtue of our backgrounds, we had sort of a built-in comparative perspective in which our questions and thinking were naturally influenced by an awareness of more cultural contexts than just American and South Asian ones. It's unfortunately easy for many of our colleagues to forget that their projects are also comparative. It's impossible for anyone to avoid making implicit comparisons to what is known or familiar. Our comparisons are more likely to be *marked* as comparative because they're informed by cultural knowledge of more than one place that is foreign to some audiences. On the other hand, comparisons are less visible for people who belong to dominant or *unmarked* cultural groups and whose imagined audience is people like themselves.

IHA: That is so true. That doesn't mean that their projects are not comparative; it means that their comparisons are less likely to be interrogated. I think there is great value in having comparative perspectives but even more so in being aware of why and how we make comparisons.²

A number of times in graduate school, my professors and classmates asked, often indirectly, why I was not working on something more closely related to my background, where I would automatically have some advantage (fluency in Spanish, lived experience, and family connections). I always said I did not want to but couldn't explain why. Now, with some distance, I see I was then dealing with trauma related to my own personal experiences, and having to talk about my own identity and take on a "native informant role," as minoritized academics are expected to do, made me uncomfortable. It would not have been "easy," as you say about studying Iran. In my last year of high school, I had moved back with my mother to the Mexican side of the border after my parents divorced. For a period of time, I had to cross the border every day, and my immigration status and financial situation in the US became precarious. Amid that personal life crisis, I was accepted to Cornell University and was offered financial aid as a Mexican citizen, which was the only way I was able to attend college in the US. I left my mother to go to college, but my departure and her precarious situation deeply affected her physical and mental health. While in graduate school, I was still processing all those things, but I did not want to do so publicly. It doesn't mean that I wasn't dealing with difficult issues in my own research and study of South Asia, but like you, I wanted to carve a different path for myself. I found learning a new language especially fulfilling and even liberating during that difficult time of my life.

HBA: It seems we both came to South Asian Studies because we did not want to be pigeonholed into representing a "native" voice or writing about ourselves. Other people's ideas of what was "easy" or "advantageous" didn't necessarily fit our experience. We also both genuinely enjoy learning new languages and about different places, and we did not want that to be denied us.

How have your identity and background shaped your research?

HBA: I think growing up with parents who immigrated from Iran made me more likely to develop the concept of intellectual kinship—to be able to "see" it and take it seriously. I want to be careful not to reinforce stereotypes of the Middle East or India as more "traditional," especially because forms of intellectual kinship exist everywhere. But it was something I'd been exposed to in different ways, that I'd occasionally heard referenced more openly and without the stigma that exists in many academic contexts, like ideas that one has moral obligations to one's teachers

that are similar to what one owes one's parents. A second influence I've come to recognize in retrospect is growing up in a college town as the daughter of research staff at a major research university. I was surrounded every day by the hierarchies and inequalities that are taken for granted in communities around universities. Experiencing that certainly made me more sensitive to seeing and addressing how some people's voices and intellectual contributions are not valued.

IHA: It's taken me nearly a decade to understand the connections between my work and my background, although it seems rather obvious now. The experience of growing up on the Mexican border made me very attuned to how borders could be simultaneously rigid and porous. I think that was why I was always so committed to studying both India and Pakistan and both Hindi and Urdu, despite being advised repeatedly against "trying to do too much" in a single dissertation. In my research (both archival and ethnographic), I paid close attention to what the ethnomusicologist Alex Chávez calls "sounds of crossing," or the ways ordinary people push and pull at the "real and metaphorical edges of the nation-state."³ Of course, that ability to travel back and forth from India to Pakistan was made possible by my foreign passport, a privilege so often denied to South Asian-origin scholars. I am also poignantly aware that being based in the Global North—and the access to resources that entails—made it possible for me to travel for research to India. (The difficulties that scholars based in the Global South face, the ways these restrict research topics, and how that is related to a longer history of imperialism are hugely important issues that we cannot do justice to in this brief essay.) But what I wish to emphasize here is that the sensibility and commitment to understanding border-making was one that undeniably stemmed from my own personal experience. Yet, as I said earlier, as obvious as it might seem now, I did not really realize this connection until after I completed my dissertation. It was not something that I could explain in grant applications that would be immediately valued as a strength.

As you know, I became poignantly aware of the connections between my research and my background while teaching South Asian history at California State University, San Bernardino, where the majority of the students are Latinos and where many had similar border experiences to mine. I hope seeing me as a professor of South Asia was empowering to them. Frankly, though, I benefited the most. I owe much of my recent growth as a scholar to Cal State students; being in the classroom with them enabled me to see value in my positionality.

HBA: Absolutely. This reminds me of how crucial mentorship is to counteracting challenges like the ones we faced. In both of our stories, having even a couple of mentors who supported and encouraged our interests made an enormous difference. Our stories are also connected in that our positions bring important contributions to our field of study, but because we were not fulfilling

expected roles (to become experts of what is perceived as “our culture”), it was very hard for others (and sometimes for ourselves as well) to see our possible contributions and to find value in our work early on.

IHA: I also want to add that finding value in my own positionality has also allowed me to respond to other types of queries. For example, I am often asked by family, friends, and academic colleagues alike why I “abandoned” my identity—as a Latina, Chicana, and *fronteriza*—to study South Asia. (Sometimes, this is phrased more aggressively, as betrayal—that I somehow betrayed my community or that I am not proud of “my roots.”) I get that from my parents and family a great deal, but also from Chicana/Latina and Latin American academics. In the past, I had no answer to that. I now respond that I have not abandoned anything, and that I couldn’t, because whether I like it or not, I will bring my identity and background to my scholarly work.

Describe some of the barriers that you have faced in the field as a non-South Asian but minoritized scholar in South Asian Studies

IHA: First, I am now speaking from a position of considerable privilege, as an assistant professor at Columbia University. But when you and I started our conversations on this topic, I certainly wasn’t. It took a long time for my research to receive recognition. Given that I now have access to a platform of sorts, I think it’s more important than ever that I talk openly about the challenges I faced. And the whole thing about waiting until I am tenured: well, I am not going to do that because that mentality is precisely what hinders much needed changes in academia.

I am not sure where to start, but let’s begin with graduate school. The questions I would ask in classes, the comparisons I wanted to make, often seemed odd in a classroom with only white and South Asian students. Once, I overheard a classmate in a seminar calling me “crazy” because I had said that we should consider the state of indigenous languages in Latin America when studying language politics in South Asia. I also felt a difference in the ways some faculty treated me. These were subtle things, but they had significant consequences. To give you an example, I would gather courage to approach a famous professor at a conference, and they’d say, “You have an accent, where are you from?” and start telling me about their trip to Teotihuacan or about middle-school Spanish classes. Here was a missed opportunity for connection and conversation about research. So much academic networking happens through the sense of connection from shared experiences and backgrounds, and I didn’t have much of that.

Even after finishing my PhD, these types of interactions continued. For example, during a campus visit, I was asked if I planned to pursue research

on Latinx things later since the city where the university is located had a large Latinx community (and particularly Mexican American/Chicanx). I was being interviewed for a South Asia history job and was taken aback. I responded that I had other ways of connecting with Latinx students and did not need to change my research trajectory. The professor's facial expressions showed he felt my response was defensive. Maybe it was because it was a terrible question. I didn't get that job, and I don't know if that exchange had anything to do with it. But my point here is that I had to constantly explain myself and my presence in South Asian Studies in ways that my white and South Asian-origin classmates and colleagues did not have to do.

Conversations with you and other minoritized, non-South-Asian-origin scholars of South Asia have allowed me to see my experience as part of a pattern. A dear friend of mine who is also Latinx and studies South Asia has similar experiences. He noted that when he mentions studying Indian history, people would ask him again and again, "Indians [i.e., native peoples] from Latin America, right?" He would then have to spend the next half hour justifying his presence in South Asia-related academia.

HBA: That's happened to me too. After I'd completed three years of fieldwork in India, a well-known anthropologist asked me about my fieldwork in Dearborn (which is known for its large Arab American and Muslim communities), assuming that I must have studied other Muslims.

IHA: Yes. This might all seem innocuous, but subtle expectations about who is, who can be, or who should be a scholar of South Asia can make or break a career. Another friend, a climate change scientist who specializes in India and is neither white nor South Asian, had two (white) senior professors and research collaborators who forced her to include Indian scholars as coauthors even though they had not contributed to the research or writing of the article. When she pointed out the tokenism, these (white, not Indian) senior professors retaliated and almost successfully kept her from graduating with her PhD. Over and over, we have heard from our non-white, non-South-Asian-origin friends who study South Asia that their ability to speak for and about South Asia has been questioned more than that of colleagues who do not share that positionality. Not being taken seriously as a scholar can have major consequences.

As you know, I had a particularly awful experience that almost derailed my career. The last year of my PhD, two academics, both white and with secure tenured positions at an elite university, had access to my research by means of their institutional position. They appropriated key ideas from my work, publishing them later as their own without citing me or giving me any credit. It was a difficult situation that affected me emotionally and professionally in more ways than I can describe here. In reflecting on why and how that happened, though I can never

know for certain, I believe these academics might have treated me differently had I been white and male or if something in my background signaled that I would later be in a position of power. Intersectionality is key here; one can't parse out the roles of gender, racialization, ethnicity, class, and so on, as these all work together. But I also think they would have been more conscious and careful if I had been South Asian. These scholars teach and research South Asia and deliberately perform allyship with South Asian colleagues. Robbing a South Asian colleague, whose "culture" they are studying, would have seriously endangered their "ally" image. I have come to realize that these scholars saw me as an easier target because I ultimately did not fulfill expectations of who is, who can be, or who should be a scholar of South Asia. I recognize that some of this might have been unconscious, but that doesn't make it any less damaging to me.

Now, I want to make it clear that all minoritized scholars, including those who take on representative roles in academia, face difficulties, as do white scholars in vulnerable positions. At the same time, being a minoritized scholar who studies what is perceived as their "own" culture can provide some limited protection in academic circles in the US. Presently, there is at least an acknowledgment that we must listen to people's lived experiences and that there should be a place in academia for these voices, however restricted this space is. (I fully recognize that comes at the cost of often being the target of people and institutions that are resistant to change.)

Second, being a minoritized scholar who takes on a representative role often gives one access to a network of people who can understand one's struggles, even if it is a limited network. It can be isolating to navigate academia without such a network, even when one has sympathetic and caring mentors. One of the issues I faced during and after the appropriation issue is that I did not have a strong network that could help me make sense of the specific ways the dynamics of race and ethnicity played into my experience. In particular, I was surprised at the unwillingness of some of my South Asian classmates and some colleagues, who themselves had experienced discrimination in academia, to even try to see racial and power politics at work in my case. But I also struggled to get support from Latinx/Chicanx colleagues as well. After much hesitation, I finally gathered the courage to approach the Latino caucus of a professional society. Initially appalled by my experience, they promised to help, but they ultimately recommended I seek the advice of the Asian group instead, which left me feeling terribly alone. Thankfully, I was able to eventually build a network of support and a community through meeting people like you, but it took a tremendous amount of work to do so.

In any case, the point I wish to make here is that minoritized scholars without access to the two things I mentioned—(1) some existing, even if reluctant,

acceptance of the necessity of including your voice and (2) access to a network of support of people with similar life experiences—can become even more vulnerable to all kinds of abuses. This can also have repercussions in the classroom, on the job market, during the tenure process, and for the review process of academic publications. I could detail some equally difficult experiences with review processes where some of the same patterns seem to have been at work, and the core issue was that scholars who could not (or did not wish to) see me as a scholar of South Asia put me under a greater level of scrutiny, and their opinions were ultimately given more weight than they merited.

HBA: Like you, I also encountered gatekeeping as a graduate student. Though anyone may encounter gatekeeping, gatekeeping is also central to reproducing social inequalities like gender and class hierarchies or white supremacy because it's a tool for people to set themselves apart as superior, or, as Toni Morrison put it, for people to "only be tall because somebody is on their knees."⁴ I think at least some of the gatekeeping I encountered was influenced by the fact that I am an Iranian American woman. For example, one way I experienced gatekeeping was having my choice of field site turned into a debate on which faculty (some of whom barely knew me) could opine. I was actually told that some faculty did not believe I was doing what I really *wanted* to do and questioned whether I was "committed" to working in India. This came after I'd had to defend my decision of not wanting to work in Iran or the Middle East—even after I'd spent a summer in India developing relationships and learning to navigate a new place alone, enrolling in South Asian Studies courses, studying Hindi, and after personally finally committing to a field site (something I'd been considering for over a decade of studying anthropology). I find it hard to imagine that I would have had my legitimacy as a *student* (not yet then even a "scholar") of South Asian Studies thrown into question, or that I would have been forced to defend my commitment to doing fieldwork in India in these ways, had I been white and male or if I had been filling a "native" South Asian representative role.

I also faced challenges in applying for fieldwork grants. On one grant, a reviewer classified me as a "native speaker," refusing to award points for learning a non-native language for fieldwork (for me, Hindi) because of my native fluency in Farsi. With another grant, my application was sent to an Indian reviewer I'd met whose institutional position created a conflict of interest. Interestingly, some of the reviewer's comments seemed to be trying to put me in my place while positioning himself as having more appropriate area knowledge. For example, they asserted that I hadn't needed to study Hindi because they believed (incorrectly) that all the teaching in the departments I studied was done in English. Like you, I had to put a lot of energy into making sense of this experience with little information. I think there was a reason the granting agency knew of this person and reached

out to them; they were part of American academic networks and, even if in restricting ways, benefited and gained legitimacy through representing India and Indian academics to those networks. Perhaps they unconsciously saw a non-white person from the US writing about Indian academia as a threat to their “territory.” I can’t ever really know, but I think it’s important to recognize that, regardless of positionality, even the best-meaning of us can fall into structures that encourage gatekeeping.

When you’re just entering a field as a student, you look to senior scholars for guidance, for help making this massive body of scholarship feel more approachable, and for a social space where you can safely learn from mistakes as you attempt to engage with ongoing discussions your own way. If you instead find the opposite when you’re in such a vulnerable position, it can be truly terrorizing. I was fortunate to have had a couple mentors who were there for me through this. Even now, I worry about talking about these kinds of experiences. The professional power dynamics are difficult to navigate; there’s the fear of stigma, of being labeled a problem, the fear that some may shun you to preserve relationships with more powerful colleagues or that others may take any sign of vulnerability as an opportunity to pounce. All of this greatly exacerbates the problem, making people experiencing it feel isolated and alienated from the academic community. Like you, it’s taken conversations like ours for me to be able to see these kinds of experiences as part of broader patterns. If we don’t make them visible, it’s too easy to internalize negative messages or, even worse, one day participate in perpetuating the systems or processes behind gatekeeping ourselves.

I see the risk of becoming complicit as serious because, as in your case, I think some of how I was perceived was unconscious. For example, I might have been read as less “committed” to working in South Asia for a number of reasons that were influenced by my background: I approached working in India out of an intellectual interest more akin to how anthropologists design projects in the US. In some ways, I rejected regional classifications (like “South Asia”) inherited from Cold War foreign policy, which are now also social groups with their own academic cultures. While I’m certainly interested in India, my interest was and is less about understanding India as an object in itself than about understanding and thinking about anthropology and institutions through research *in* India. Finally, the fact that I felt and expressed humility about the intellectual and personal commitment that I was taking on by studying India made people think I was not serious, in ways that are probably also gendered.

IHA: Yes, I think that our extra caution in approaching our field of study, which stems from knowing what it feels like to be “studied” and how hurtful it can be when that work is not thorough, is often interpreted as lack of competence and confidence. US academia, I feel, fetishizes confidence, authoritative voices, and

self-promotion, but that confidence often comes from a lack of self-awareness. It is, frankly, overrated.

HBA: And like you've said, these perceptions have serious impacts. That issue of how I'm read is very much related to how my scholarship is read as well because it's also about my position relative to an audience that is, at least in the US, still largely assumed to be white American or sometimes South Asian-origin academics. That means that you and I may have to work harder to show that our findings are important or interesting because what we notice and find in our research is less likely to be framed around the questions that those audiences already recognize as the important ones. It also makes it harder to participate in the kind of "reflexivity" that anthropologists commonly include in ethnographic writing. The reflections on the impact of positionality in the field that white anthropologists might share in their writing are something they assume most of their audience will understand, if not identify with and at least be interested in. If I reveal information about what it meant to be a practicing Muslim during fieldwork, I can't assume an understanding audience at all due to the Islamophobia I've experienced in both India and the US. I know colleagues with other identities, like Dalit ethnographers, also struggle with the greater vulnerability involved in revealing sometimes stigmatized information.⁵

What do you think your own personal experience reveals about who can or should be a scholar of South Asia in US academia and about the study of South Asia in US academia as a whole?

HBA: Well, I think our experiences make visible unacknowledged but deep-seated expectations about who can or should be a scholar of South Asia. That it is often difficult for colleagues to make sense of us and others in similar positions as scholars studying South Asia shows how, for many in US academia, knowledge of the region continues to be imagined as stemming from two kinds of scholars: an unmarked white (usually male) scholar and a "native" scholar. In this imagination, whereas the white scholar's authority derives from his supposed objectivity from being unmarked, the "native" scholar's authority derives from his proximity and intimate relationship to the region. Although these assumptions are often implicit and, as we noted earlier, never fully uniform, the truth is that they continue to profoundly shape this and other fields of research.

IHA: Exactly. Also, the point is not really whether South Asian scholars embrace a "native" scholar identity or whether white scholars consciously present themselves as unmarked or "objective." Many actively reject these categorizations. The point, however, is that there is an implicit and often unacknowledged benefit in conforming to these expectations, just as there are disadvantages to not conforming to it.

It is also important to note that this dichotomy of the “native” scholar versus the “white”/unmarked scholar ultimately hurts all minoritized scholars, including South Asian scholars, as it centers whiteness (imagined as European and/or American) and ensures whiteness unconsciously remains the point of comparison, departure, and/or arrival in scholarly research. The dichotomy in its own way also ultimately upholds white supremacy. I think the struggles that you and I faced stemmed, at least in part, from a refusal, sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious, to center whiteness. When that student in that graduate class called me “crazy,” he was calling me crazy for demanding that Anglo-American world to which he belonged, but which he saw as the unmarked “norm,” not be the implicit place of comparison.

Moreover, the dichotomy of the “white” versus the “native” scholar has also had other consequences in South Asian Studies that might not be immediately obvious. It is, for example, an open secret that even though caste is a well-studied topic, the representation of Dalit and lower-caste scholars in USA-based South Asian Studies is abysmal. South Asian academics in the USA are overwhelmingly upper caste. I have long wondered how it is possible that the very field that produced “subaltern studies” has such poor representation of low-caste scholars and, more importantly, how it is possible we have had so few conversations about it. While Dalit scholars have long noted the caste politics of South Asia-related academia, it is only recently that upper-caste scholars have felt an urgency to address the issue directly and to openly talk about their positionality and caste privilege. There are many dynamics at play here, including a much longer history of systemic erasure and oppression of Dalit intellectuals in South Asia itself that we cannot possibly adequately address here. But in all truth, I think this dichotomy of unmarked/“white” scholar versus “native” scholar has distracted us from (and enabled) pervasive inequalities in this field of study, preventing tougher discussions (and reckonings) with positionality. This silence can only continue with the complicity of South Asia scholars of all backgrounds.

HBA: That’s true. I think often upper-caste South Asian scholars in the US have helped preserve, even if unconsciously, the silence around caste because it protects their authority to represent a “native” voice. Similarly, white scholars may be reluctant to alienate some upper-caste, South Asian-origin colleagues whose “native” authority they rely on for legitimation as regional experts.

We’ve got our work cut out for us. I can only hope that this short conversation will challenge us all to reimagine what a colleague looks like, what value we think people of different positions can bring to our fields, to what extent our beliefs about whether particular ideas are “important” have more to do with *who* they’re important to, and whether our idea of who a “South Asianist” is, is defined more by social in-groups than scholarship. While there may not be easy solutions to

many of the issues we've mentioned, I think we can begin to see some possible directions and lessons.

First, we've both learned that having conversations with scholars who also don't fit into imagined or expected roles is a crucial way to counter social processes that isolate us and push non-South-Asian-origin scholars of color away from research in South Asia. I know that for me, conversations like this one have been very helpful to see that experiences that felt intensely personal were in some ways not even really about me. Building community—conversations with you, but also with many others—is what has enabled us to collaboratively develop the realizations and ideas we've shared here. Second, perhaps the greatest challenge that we faced in putting together this essay was how to not make our conversation about individuals but about larger issues at stake. That made us intensely aware that one of the greatest challenges facing academia right now is how to create a space for honest discussion that can create change. We hope that this essay is a small step toward that. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, complicity is an issue that greatly concerns us, and it is a central theme in this essay. It is, after all, much easier to see the patterns of power at work when you are at the receiving end; the trick is to be able to take those lessons with you when you're in a different structural position. It is for this reason that our goal should be to make that space for conversation and for conflict and discomfort but also a space for self-reflection.

Notes

1. So in some ways, what we are doing here is lending “an ear,” or better yet, a “feminist ear,” to borrow Sara Ahmed's words, to each other. Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 3.
2. Laura Nader's work on comparative consciousness is particularly relevant here. Nader, “Comparative Consciousness.”
3. Chávez, *Sounds of Crossing*, 33.
4. Morrison, *Charlie Rose*.
5. There is, of course, so much to discuss about our experiences and positionality during fieldwork, but these complex issues are difficult to meaningfully address in this conversation about US-based academia.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. *Complaint!* Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.
- Chávez, Alex. *Sounds of Crossing: Music, Migration, and the Aural Poetics of Huapango Arribeño*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.
- Morrison, Toni. Interview. By Charlie Rose. *Charlie Rose*. Aired May 7, 1993. Video, 55:11.
- Nader, Laura. “Comparative Consciousness.” In *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, edited by Robert Borofsky, 84–96. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994.