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On In/Visibility

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

How does a racialized and feminized body encounter and negotiate its in/visibility in white western academia? In this article, I adopt an autoethnographic approach to respond to this question, drawing on Ahmed's (2007) conceptualization of whiteness, Puwar's (2004) understanding of racialized and feminized bodies as 'space invaders', and a conceptual exploration of silence/speaking out in relation to visibility and invisibility, through personal narratives of women scholars of colour in white western institutions. I then reflect on a series of my own personal encounters as a brown woman scholar in white spaces in Australia, as entangled in deliberate acts of speaking out, of seeking visibility. Through this narrative of vulnerability, conceived as a site of social and political resistance (Montoya 1994, 27; Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay 2016), I aim to show some of the myriad and complex ways in which processes of visibility and invisibly, silence/silencing and speaking out, are stitched up with operations of power, vulnerability, and resistance in spaces of whiteness.

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INTRODUCTION

> *[Y]ou can gather memories like things, so they become more than half glimpsed, so that we can see a fuller picture; so you can make sense of how different experiences connect.*
> Ahmed 2017, *Living a Feminist Life*

> *I write this as an act of defiance, as a work of carving myself into being [...].*
> Motta 2018, *Liminal Subject*

I have been thinking a lot lately about silence and speaking out, about visibility and invisibility, in relation to power, vulnerability, and resistance. Many of us seek visibility in a most basic sense, as an affirmation of our humanity. Our embodied selves seek recognition and acknowledgement, and when this happens, we feel *seen*, that we *matter*. Being visible in this way can also make us (more) vulnerable. When racialized[1] and feminized bodies seek such visibility by speaking out, as bodies that are otherwise dismissed or rendered invisible by the operations of racial power, they are doubly exposed – if their efforts fail, they risk further marginalization and invisibility. Yet, as Butler, Gambetti and Sabsay (2016, 6) point out, modes of vulnerability and modes of resistance are intertwined: acts such as deliberate exposure of the self to (further) harm comprise a mode of agentic politics of resistance (Butler 2016, 22–23). Vulnerability can inform – and be a condition that creates the very possibility for – such modes of social and political resistance by marginalized bodies to forms of oppression, including racism and sexism (25). The question I am essentially asking is – how does a racialized and feminized body encounter and negotiate its in/visibility in white western academia, in and through experiences of vulnerability as resistance to different modes of oppression and marginalization? In this article, I attempt to respond to this question through reflections over a series of recent, generative experiences of encountering and negotiating processes of visibility and invisibility as an academic in professional institutional settings in Australia, entangled with more personal experiences in the wider, white-dominant community.

In the course of trying to weave these experiences together in a way that makes them legible to myself and to others, I turn to the writings of scholars – predominantly feminist, anti-racist scholars and activists women of colour[2] – who until now had remained almost, if not entirely, invisible in my view as an International Relations (IR) academic who works mainly in the sub-discipline of security studies – a deeply masculinized, predominantly white space. The theorizing and narratives of these women blew my mind. For the first time, I encountered words, theories, stories, that resonated at a most fundamental level. These women were explaining back to me, in their bold and courageous, honest words, what it was that I had been coming up against, and trying to navigate in and through some of these experiences of visibility and invisibility (e.g. Anzaldúa and Moraga (eds.) 1983; Anzaldúa 1987; Montoya 1994, 2000; Muhs et al (eds.) 2012; Smith 2000; Ahmed 2007, 2017; Motta 2018). At the same time, it became clear to me that I had to abandon my caution as a highly disciplined writer, and submit to a deeply personal level of reflection through my words. It has been hard work shunning the disciplined and disciplin*ing* voice in my head.

Inspired by, and in kinship with feminist autoethnographic writings, I draw on an interpretive autoethnographic methodology to make sense of my own embodied and situated experiences of visibility and invisibility. I provide the theoretical moorings for my reflections through a discussion of how racialized and feminized bodies come to simultaneously exist as (hyper)visible and invisible – or 'in/visible' – in spaces oriented towards and inhabited by whiteness (Puwar 2004; Ahmed 2007, 2017). I witness and reflect on how doubly-marked bodies (women, of colour) in white western academia often choose silence over speaking out, and explore the

1 I use the term 'racialized' here as relating to the definition of racialization in Hochman (2019, 1246), as 'the process through which groups come to be understood as major biological entities and human lineages, formed due to reproductive isolation, in which membership is transmitted through biological descent.'

2 I am aware that the term 'women of colour' may flatten the differences that exist amongst racialized minority women along lines such as race, caste, class, culture and ethnicity. My use of the term is rooted in its political value, in that it has been, and continues to be, used by women from different racialized minority communities in a politics of solidarity, 'to signal a common cause and collective action' (Matos, Green and Sanbonmantsu 2021) towards naming, resisting, and dismantling systems of oppression and marginalization in spaces of whiteness.

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multiplicity of meanings and uses of silences by such bodies, and how they are linked to and interact with experiences of being in/visible in white western academia. I then superimpose on these discussions a narrative of a sequence of encounters that took place over a short period of time, and in close proximity to one another, that I read as moments of in/visibility as encountered by my brown, woman self, in the white western academy, and the broader dominant white community where I live. I hope to be able to show the reader how processes of invisibility and visibility are entangled with operations of power and vulnerability, and how encounters of vulnerability can be an emergent and ongoing mode of resistance within the white western academy (Butler 2016, 25).

THE SELF AS A SITE FOR INQUIRY

Autoethnographies are 'highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experiences of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding' (Sparkes 2000 in Caivano and Naumes 2021, 25). While personal in nature, they go beyond individual experiences to provide insights 'into the social, cultural, and political dimensions of an observed population.' (Ibid). The dominance of positivist methodologies in the Social Sciences continues to serve as a policing force in terms of what is or is not considered 'objective, rigorous and verifiable' research. Simultaneously, the role of the self as the researcher and producer of knowledge is considered peripheral (Brigg and Bleiker 2010, 782). The researcher self is considered separate to, and detached from, the 'external' material world, and others who inhabit it: the objects of 'factual' and ''scientific' inquiry. This approach privileges 'a certain style of writing, a certain way of being on the page, a certain *voice*' (Doty 2004, 380) that constructs the writer as 'a faceless, formless authority positioned at a removed distance from the quest for theoretical progress.' (389). It drains all human emotion, embodied sensation, and intuition from our writing, making it 'too often cold, detached, devoid of soul and human identity [...]. The 'other' of language, of ourselves is obliterated beneath the white, white collars of objective social science.' (Doty 2010, 1050; 2004, 381, 389).

An autoethnographic approach problematizes this subject-object separation and, therefore, any claims to objectivity on behalf of the researcher; it opens up a space for interrogating sociological and political phenomenon *through* a necessarily subjective and political retelling of the embodied experiences of the researcher (Brigg and Bleiker 2010, 788; Caivano and Naumes 2021, 29). More than personal stories, autoethnographies 'are an important site of resistance.' (Montoya 1994, 27). Women of colour and third world feminist scholars have been relying on autoethnographies for some time now to vocalize marginalized experiences, scrutinize power relations, and build embodied knowledge that focuses on 'the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and gender, challenges the use of woman as a universalizing category, and pluralizes feminism.' (Behl 2017, 585. See Anzaldúa and Moraga 1983; hooks 1981; Anzaldúa 1987; Crenshaw 1991; Zavella 1993; Narayan 1997; Latina Feminist Group 2001; Mohanty 2003, Tellez 2013, Bishop 2021, Watego 2021). Feminist and critical race theory scholars have shown that this kind of storytelling may close the epistemological gap that often opens up between bodies that are privileged in particular ways, and those that do not have this privilege (Delgado 1989 and Montoya 1994 in Harris and González 2012, 3). As such, this kind of storytelling 'reject[s] the notion that a standardized form equates with scholarly rigor [... and] allow[s] for inventive forms and styles that are elsewhere rejected or seen as merely supplementary.' (Caivano and Naumes 2021, 28).

In reflecting on my recent experiences of in/visibility as a racialized and feminized body in spaces oriented towards and inhabited by whiteness, I do not lay any claim to generalizability or universality; nor do I present these experiences as the most devastating. Rather, I hold them up to the reader to show how these (inter)personal encounters are connected to broader structures and operations of power and vulnerability. I write to add my voice to 'a symphony of voices that show that negative experiences are occurring, and that we object that these racialistic things are occurring to us as individuals and to us as a group.' (Smith 2000, 1128). My account is another, small stitch in the vivid, powerful and telling tapestry[3] that others have been weaving, of their experiences of being racialized and feminized bodies in white western

3 This imagery is a gift I have gratefully received from Dr Leila Morsy.

academia, and how, galvanized by such experiences, they have spoken out in/through their activism and scholarship.

THE IN/VISIBILITY OF MARKED BODIES

Writing about in/visibility as a racialized minority, woman, embedded in, and moving in and out of, white institutions – in a white settler colony – is risky. It is a 'renegade act' that 'further mark[s] …[an] already marked bod[y].' (Puwar 2004, 138). To be a universal body is '[t]he capacity to be unmarked by one's body, in terms of race, gender or for that matter any other social feature […]. It is a 'privileged position' that is 'reserved' for those who are not bedraggled by the humble shackles of nature, emotion and, in effect, the bodily, allowing them to escape into the higher realms of rationality and mind.' (57). The white, cis male body continues to be the somatic norm in professional spaces in the West, including academia, despite the growing presence of (post)colonial, queer bodies in the white western academy (Ibid, 8). Drawing on Fanon's work, Ahmed explains whiteness as an orientation; it 'orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space.' (2007, 149). Spaces 'acquire the 'skin' of the bodies that inhabit them. [… and] also take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others.' (157). The white western academy is a space that is oriented around whiteness, a space that extends around white bodies as a space that has already taken their form (158). Fitting comfortably within this space, white male bodies become invisible as the privileged norm (Puwar 2004, 57). On the other hand, racialized minorities, especially women, are viewed as 'matter out of place', their presence in these spaces has a distinct socio-spatial impact (32). They are 'space invaders' – their occurrence 'defies expectations. People are 'thrown' because a whole world-view is jolted.' (43). For western scholars who are used to traipsing the world as 'universal figure[s] of academic knowledge', studying 'native' others, 'the sharing of the seat of power (knowledge) with those one studies can [… unsettle] institutional positionalities and runs the risk of causing ontological anxiety.' (45).

Yet, racialized and feminized bodies are simultaneously (hyper)visible and invisible. In their 2017 study investigating experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) academics working in universities in England and Australia, Lander and Santoro find that in both contexts, BME academics 'felt marginalised, and encountered subtle everyday racism manifested as microaggressions that contributed to [their] simultaneous construction as hypervisible and invisible, and as outsiders to the academy.' (Lander and Santoro 2017, 1008). Racialized and feminized bodies are conspicuous because they do not fit the norm of the universal human, yet they are *in*visible because they are *not* the somatic norm (Puwar 2004, 58). Since these bodies do not reflect the normative figure of authority, there is doubt cast upon whether they are able to 'measure up to the job […] They have thus to prove that they are capable of doing the job. They bear a burden of doubt.' (59). They also carry a 'burden of representation'; as marked bodies they are viewed as representative of the qualities and capabilities of the groups they are identified with. They are infantilized, i.e. presumed to be far more junior than they actually are within professional hierarchies (60). As super-surveilled bodies, they are expected to perform in perfection, while their smallest mistakes are seized upon and amplified (61). In a sea of white bodies, the particularity of a body of colour – especially a female body – remains hypervisible. 'Oh how noticeable we are in the sea of whiteness […]' (Ahmed 2017, 131). Being in this position come with a feeling of stress, a sensation of being out of place, of not belonging. Negotiating this stress takes energy, it is exhausting, unrelenting work. As Ahmed writes of brown bodies, we realize this only when we feel the relief that washes over a brown body when it enters 'a sea of brownness.' It is then, she points out, that the effort of occupying the other space oriented towards, and inhabited by, whiteness reveals itself: '[i]t is like you can feel the weight of tiredness most acutely as the tiredness leaves you.' (163–164). In a sea of whiteness, a racialized woman's body is doubly burdened – she is judged for how she performs the gendered script of 'woman' as well as the professional script of 'expert', the latter 'based on a male norm that constitutes the exclusion of all that women symbolise.' (Puwar 2004, 93). Bringing the two performative scripts together involves a significant amount of labour, including the careful management of 'femininity in a social position constructed in masculine terms, with a [white] masculine body in mind.' (Ibid). This includes managing how her body takes up and occupies space. Voice is embodied, and the modification and extension of the body through dress 'articulates, constitutes, and contests gendered political authority.' (Allman

2004, 7). Performing the script of 'woman' and 'expert' not only involves what a woman of colour wears, but also how she moves, speaks – *if* or *when* she speaks. As a brown woman writing about being a brown, woman scholar-educator in white western academia, in a white settler-colonial state, I am aware of the potential, negative consequences of this act. Yet, as Ahmed (2017, 36) says,

> Sometimes: surviving the relentlessness of sexism as well as racism might require that you shrug it off, by not naming it, or even by learning not to experience those actions as violations of your own body; learning to expect that violence as just part of ordinary life; making that fatalism your fate. Sometimes: we have to teach ourselves not to shrug things off, knowing full well that by not doing something we will be perceived as doing too much [...] we sense there will be consequences. We sense the pain that might follow, as well as the punishment.

Visibility is, as so many have pointed out, a double-edged sword. A part of me remains wary about the ways in which the act of writing this article makes me visible. It further marks my already marked body in my 'home' discipline of IR/security studies, which continues to be a highly masculinized, overwhelmingly white space; where women scholars are a minority, and women of colour even more so. In this space, early career researchers are disciplined to engage in citational practices that foreground hegemonic bodies of work in order to establish membership in the discipline (Duriesmith 2019, 70). Despite my scholarship centering critical perspectives and methodologies in IR/security studies, I continue to be asked by anonymous reviewers of my scholarly manuscripts to cite hegemonic bodies of work, or to justify the relevance of my work in relation to this scholarship: *The author should work harder to justify why non-constructivists should read this treatment; [the manuscript] is a bit too one-sided and nakedly so. [...T]he author needs to engage much more closely with the 'other' non-discursive side in order to make her/his argument tenable.* It took me some time to become attuned to this power dynamic, and how it serves to entrench the centrality of certain issues, perspectives and approaches, and to further marginalize and invisibilize others (Ibid). Institutionally, the act of writing further marks my body out as 'trouble'. Still, I write, because I have felt the power of finding myself in the stories of other women of colour; the power of words spoken/written by a body you have never met, describing sensations that, until that moment, you had not realized were *real,* in the sense that they did not begin and end in your own embodied self, or were not a figment of your own imagination. I write to show others who may (still) have the need for this affirmation and validation, that these encounters *happen(ed)*, and that/how they *matter(ed)*. I write because I have seen the fearlessness with which Black women scholars in particular have spoken out to foreground race, racism and white supremacy in my own discipline, and outside, at great professional and personal risk. I write ''[t]o show that I *can* and that 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.' (Anzaldúa 2009, 30).

OF SILENCE AND IN/VISIBILITY

Silence, and being/staying silent, can have multiple meanings, and its use by racialized minorities, especially women of colour, can be manifold, including as 'a source of comfort and reassurance, as well as a site for strategizing and resistance (Parpart and Parashar 2019, 44). The meanings and uses of silence are complex and diverse, and often elide those who interpret them from perspectives rooted in the dominant culture (Montoya 2000, 859). At a fundamental level, silence can be used as 'a coping mechanism, a choice, an action that can help deal with toxic and often dangerous situations.' (Parpart and Parashar 2019, 5). It can provide a reflective space, for healing and re-evaluating 'one's position, values and identity.' At other times, it can be a deliberate choice in resisting injustice, hurt and humiliation (6). Silences, when weaved together with, or shadowing, spoken or written words, can also be a powerful way of communicating (Ibid). Sometimes, women of colour 'shrug off' sexist and racist acts of microaggression because we think they are committed unknowingly, or without the intention to cause harm. We may also shrug off such acts when we believe the interpersonal power dynamics are stacked against us, and the trade-off involved in calling these acts out would

make our already marked bodies hyper-visible, opening them up to more harm, and this is not a risk we are prepared to take.

The desire to avoid hypervisibility can lead to an experience of double invisibility. Reflecting on her own experiences as an Asian-American woman in an educational institution in the United States, Mitsuye Yamada describes how she felt safe in her 'smug illusion' that she 'was *not* the stereotypic image of the Asian woman' in the US, given her career as an English teacher in a community college (1983, 36). When encountering veiled racism in casual social settings, rather than calling it out, she would 'let it go' because she thought it 'pointless to argue with people who didn't even know their remark was racist.' However, she realized later that her act of 'let[ting] it go' further reinforced the stereotype that was being constructed; her act of passive resistance, as she saw it, 'was so passive no one noticed [she] was resisting; it was so much [her] expected role that it ultimately rendered [her] invisible.' (Ibid)

Lorde writes that our silences are driven by our own personal fears, of which the greatest is the fear of becoming visible. Her daughter tells her, 'you're never really a whole person if you *remain* silent' (1984, 42, emphasis added). As a Black female professor teaching an all-white classroom, Onwuachi-Willig recounts her own experience of holding back when presented with an opportunity to work her own racialized and feminized identity into a discussion around a legal hypothetical case, involving a Black woman suing her employer for discrimination based on race. She traces this hesitation back to more than her usual concerns about: how to draw on her own identity as a Black woman 'in a way that could overcome the presumption of incompetence usually imposed on professors of color'; her understanding of her own self as being 'more vulnerable to student perceptions as a professor lacking in objectivity and pushing [her] own agenda,'; class-based insecurities, and the general feeling of being out of place in academia. Beyond these concerns, she identifies her apprehension as stemming from uncertainty about knowingly creating a scenario where she would be 'making [her]self both a subject and object—of being both highly visible and completely invisible at the same time: being visible as a piece of evidence on display but completely invisible in terms of understanding about [... her] being.' (2012, 146–48). The experience leaves her feeling relatively powerless in being able to push her students harder when discussing a race-based analysis. After reflecting on her silence, and when presented with a second opportunity to engage with the same case with her students, Onwuachi-Willig makes the choice to speak freely, challenging her students with her insights, thereby '[making] it harder for them to view [her] as a delegitimized object, making [her] choice to speak a powerful one [...].' (148).

As I indicated earlier, in spaces oriented towards, and inhabited by whiteness, being silent as a racialized and feminized minority can be an act of protecting the self. It can be an attempt to making the self invisible, in hostile spaces where (hyper)visibility is a given. This act of self-protection and self-preservation, however, may extract a cost. As Motta (2018, 32–36) notes, for racialized and feminized bodies, silence can be 'a weapon, a tactic of survival, and a place of possibility [...,] the condition of possibility for the possibility of self-respect and dignity [...]. Yet, in deploying 'processes of 'not-speaking' as a means of survival' we are 'cut[...] off from our capacity for a life well-lived and loved. It leaves us individually and collectively with soul wounds in which we remain cut off from ourselves, each other, and our creative capacities.'

Junior faculty members from racialized minority communities, especially women, often fear being marked out as 'trouble' if they speak out about their experiences of race and gender-based discrimination. They succumb to the 'tyrannies of silence', a term Smith borrows from Lorde (1984, 41) '[...] which demand silence and fear in exchange for the tenuous promise of tenure at some point in the future.' (Smith 2000, 1107). Tragically, being silenced in this way can leave those who are most in need of support and affirmation, isolated and disconnected from those who can provide it (Ibid, 1116). Onwuachi-Willig (2012) highlights the balancing act junior women of colour faculty find themselves performing, in terms of speaking out in ways that are identity-affirming, and staying silent as a survival mechanism that is identity-negating. Here, she emphasizes the critical role of senior faculty members of colour, and of 'unforgivable silences.' (150). The latter refers to 'the times when we must speak, if not for ourselves, then for the sake of others.' She describes how senior colleagues of colour at her first institution chose not to be shamed into unforgivable silences that would help maintain 'a presumption that the average white male professor's experiences are the same as those of women of color.' Instead,

they spoke out and educated their white, male dean about the burdens and challenges faced by female faculty of colour. In doing so, they created a space for junior women faculty of colour like her who were coming up behind them, 'whom they knew would not have the same voice with which to speak.' (150–151).

Montoya (1994) points out, that speaking is an exercise of privilege. Privilege acts as a safety net, or a 'buffer zone; it is how much you have to fall back on when you lose something. Privilege does not mean we are invulnerable [... but it] reduce[s] the costs of vulnerability; you are more likely to be looked after.' (Ahmed 2017, 238). Shepherd (2016, 10) emphasises the 'inescapably relational' nature of positionality; in different social encounters, depending on the context, the same body may be read differently, through perceptions of race, gender, class, caste, ethnicity and nationality (Ibid). As I write this, I am aware of the layers of privilege that give me the ability to speak out. I come from an upper-caste Hindu, Indian family; I am a cishet woman; a tenured, mid-career academic in a white western higher education institution; a middle-class migrant belonging to a racialized minority community in a white settler colony, living and working on land stolen from Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander communities, and benefitting from its theft. As a brown woman living in the west, I am now fairly weather-worn, having lived two continuous decades outside my home country: a decade in Australia, and before that, another in the UK. In the rest of this article, I weave together a series of encounters that took place *because* of my conscious decision to make myself visible – to speak out *more*, be silent *less*. The act of writing is an effect of these encounters; simultaneously, it is yet another encounter, another act of resistance to those who negate the intersectional, embodied knowledge, experiences, *voices* of women of colour. It has its own set of effects in terms of making in/visible certain parts of my self. This kind of writing is akin to 'jumping off a cliff. It's opening your stomach and examining your entrails and telling others, "This piece of gut is about the time such and such happened and it is connected to other people and the world in this way and that." (Anzaldúa 2009, 187). It reveals, amplifies, but also obscures, conceals. It feels strange, writing these words – as I mentioned earlier, this is not the kind of writing I am used to, or have been disciplined to write as an IR scholar. As I feel the tension between the urge to write and not-write – between the need for visibility and *in*visibility – work its way up the nerves in my hands and into my elbows, I draw inspiration from the eloquent words of Lorde (1984, 42), who points out that, as racialized minorities – especially women – speak out so that they may be seen, and face a heightened vulnerability as a result, 'that visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength. Because the machine will try to grind you into dust anyway, whether or not we speak.'

ENCOUNTERING IN/VISIBILITY

I walk into the seminar room, buoyed. I have just given an invited lecture, followed by an extensive Q&A, at a government-funded defence institution on my research on strategic narratives, to a large cohort of senior armed forces officials and defence civil servants from Australia, and a few from the wider Indo-Pacific. All, but a tiny minority, are white, men – of this tiny minority, some are white women, others are men of colour. During the break between the lecture and the Q&A, I step out to get a cup of tea. I walk through a sea of white male bodies. I catch my breath. I am the only woman of colour in this sea of white, male bodies.

In the days leading up to this event, I have spent less time thinking about the material I have to teach (this part is easier, I tell myself) and more about the materiality of my brown woman self. *"She already looks like a Senior Lecturer!"* These words of a senior manager, a cis white male, uttered in excitement as I walked past him to my promotion interview in carefully picked out monochromatic, western corporate wear, are forever etched in my brain. Now, I contemplate how to enter an institutional space steeped in militarized masculinities; a space designed for, and around, hypermasculine cis white male bodies, where women are rare, and brown women practically non-existent. I have internalized some notion of how a body such as mine must be presented in order to occupy the space given up to an 'expert' in this space. I decide the only way to be 'seen' as an 'expert', whilst not standing out (too much) as the out-of-place body, is to shroud myself in western corporate wear, or as they say, 'power dress'. I pack clothes and shoes to wear that will render my body both visible (as the 'expert') and 'invisible' (as the brown woman who does not belong) in this space.

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The first post-lecture seminar group comprises of around 10–12 participants, all men, except one woman; all white, except two men of colour. Discussions get off to a good start. Most participants are engaged and cordial, some even jovial. Then, as we discuss the rise and fall of narratives, someone mentions the Brereton Report.

The Brereton Report details allegations of war crimes committed by the elite members of Australia's armed forced in Afghanistan.

> *Flashback: I am in my undergraduate International Security classroom, discussing the report's key findings with my students shortly after it was published in late 2020. 'Tell me how we can understand what happened,' I ask my students, 'without understanding how postcoloniality, white supremacy, gendered power relations, militarized masculinities operate?'.*

I find myself repeating these words, realizing only as I speak them, their potential impact on this particular group, in this sea of whiteness, of militarized masculinities, interrupted by three brown bodies, one of them mine. As the words leave my mouth, I feel the air in the room become still. It hits me: *these people probably knew (people who knew) those people incriminated in the report.*

"I don't accept that," the only other woman in the room pushes against the table to shove her body back as she speaks, away from my words. "Labels like 'white supremacy' and 'white privilege' are just thrown about all the time these days, and it's unacceptable." Arms crossed, hard stare. I have said words that were unexpected, unwelcomed. I am the one who is 'just throwing' these 'labels' around. I feel a weight beginning to settle on my skin.

No one else speaks. The two men of colour remain silent and still. They are from overseas, I have no idea what they make of my words, or of the response from their white female counterpart – what they make of my positionality, and that of their own, in this moment.

This is, of course, not the first time I find myself having to justify using these words, to show why they help explain how a nonwhite body – my body – has been treated as unworthy, unequal, *less* human, in a particular context. I have faced a range of microaggressions in institutional settings and in the community in my years of living in Australia and the UK; some I have resisted, others I have let go. Some have galvanized me, others have been damaging.

I feel a switch inside me flip. *Right*, I hear the voice in my head say. *If there is one thing I will do before I leave here, it will be to take this on head-first*. In that moment, the scholar-educator takes over, I am back in the classroom.

In the exchange that ensues, I ask why my words are disturbing. I point to the lived experiences of people of colour, to global politics and the dehumanization of bodies of colour, to the lesser value placed on them in relation to, and by, white bodies. I bring up the ongoing, every day violence of the settler-colonial state against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia.

"This is why white people in Australia don't want to talk about Aboriginal issues,' another white man speaks. 'When we do, we get called 'racists'. So, it's better to just walk away.'

Being able to walk away, I explain, IS white privilege. It is having that choice to walk away because you will not be any worse off for it; it is not having to worry about the colour of your skin, or that of your child and what racial slurs they may be called at school because of it. Not having to worry about being killed because you are Black while walking, driving, crossing borders, laying still.

'Let's move the discussion back to the conceptual level,' A voice of institutional authority, heavy with discomfort and caution, intervenes. 'Things are getting too personal.'

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A few days later, at the same institution; in a different seminar room, a different group. I am the only woman physically present in the room. We are discussing cyber security and deterrence. I am dressed in a full-sleeve, closed collar blouse, and a pencil skirt that falls below my knees. Sitting directly opposite to me, a white male armed forces official is talking about the need to

keep any successful effort at deterrence secret, so as not to reveal a state's cyber espionage capabilities. This, he proceeds to say as his eyes locked with mine, would be like 'lifting your skirt up and exposing yourself vulnerabilities to your adversary…'. The words accompany a gesture mimicking the lifting of a skirt, from waist upwards, his arms stay up as he finishes his sentence.

> *Flashback: A couple of days ago, one of the female participants comes up to me during lunch and asks, 'Is there any feminist literature focusing on strategic studies?' She is one of only a handful of women in the group. Something has prompted her to seek out scholarship that centers a gendered worldview.*

As the man speaks and gestures, I become hyper conscious of my female body, the clothes I am wearing, the clothes that I was naïve enough were some kind of armour.

Can't he see me?

He is still talking. I pull myself back to the classroom, quietly grab my phone, and google the article I am instantly reminded of: Carol Cohn's powerful 1987 autoethnographic piece on 'Sex and death in the rational world of defence intellectuals'. It is an article I prescribe to my undergraduate students when teaching feminist approaches to security. Cohn writes about this precise thing I'm witnessing: the use of sexual, deeply gendered, patriarchal imagery by defence analysts to talk about (nuclear) weapons, (nuclear) war and strategy. Talking in this 'expert jargon' means you gain further access, you are not patronized, or dismissed as 'ignorant, simple-minded' (Cohn 1987, 708).

I let the man finish speaking, and slip into the moment before anyone else responds to say, 'I know you haven't had an opportunity to engage with feminist security studies scholarship during this course, but it's quite important that you add this to your reading lists.' I continue: 'If you do one thing after having met me, please read Carol's Cohn's 1987 article, called 'Sex and death in the rational world of defence intellectuals.' Someone asks me to repeat the name of the article. I read out the full reference, they jot it down and immediately circulate it to the wider group.

The man apologizes. I move the discussion forward. Strangely, it is only after a few more seconds pass that I feel a prickling heat rise in my face.

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On the journey home, I am exhausted, but elated. I am generally proud of how I have negotiated these charged encounters, galvanized by my ability to respond powerfully and adequately, and come out of these encounters relatively unscathed and intact. I think to myself: *my skin is/has grown thicker than I had realized*.

I arrive directly for dinner at the home of a family from my child's school. A few other local families are there too. Towards the end of the evening, I find myself sitting with two other mums: both white, both roughly my age, give or take a few years. Still feeling upbeat, I tell them about these recent encounters. I expect them to share – as friends, feminists, women – my outrage at what transpired, and be proud of how I handled things. I expect some feminist back-patting to be sure.

Instead, one of them immediately gets defensive. She throws a steady torrent of claims and questions at me: *the government has done 'a lot' for Aboriginal people; don't I think things are much better here than, say, in China? Black-on-Black violence kills more Black people in the US than White-on-Black violence; slavery had an economic rationale.*

The shock of her reaction ripples through me, paralyzing me, even as I try to respond to her. Her words pummel my tired and weary body. I was entirely unprepared to be confronted by white fragility – not in this space. *This is my community*. I am shattered, betrayed. I struggle to recover. I cannot recall all my exact words at that point, ultimately something mumbled about the conversation being emotionally taxing for me, how people of colour get shut down when they bring up experiences of racism. The conversation comes to a close. The other woman has been listening to us both, nodding sympathetically at my stories, and once or twice challenging the other woman quietly. She thanks me for sharing my experiences. I sense her solidarity, but I wish she had done more, said more.

The emotional labour and violence takes its toll. For the next few days, I walk around feeling wounded, disoriented, disheartened, mourning the loss of something that I am unable to fully articulate. Something has shifted.

SPEAKING OUT

I am heavy and ripe with these experiences, when I find myself at an all-day institutional exercise, discussing strategy in relation to research and teaching in my school. I see many colleagues after a lengthy period of time, months spent working from home during COVID19-induced lockdown, with limited access to campus. There are warm embraces with many, quick catch-up chats peppered with jokes and laughter as we settle in. I have not mentioned my recent experiences to any one of them yet, though I do hint to one or two close colleagues that there are tales I have from my trip for the teaching engagement. The sessions for the day are designed around 'education and research culture'. The first session focuses on teaching and begins with small group reflections. At my table we discuss trust, openness, transparency. I am very much a part of these discussions; at the same time I am struggling quietly with unresolved feelings from the previous encounters. As a senior colleague asks each table group to share something from their discussions with the broader group, someone at my table mentions 'resistance'. I feel a strong emotional reaction rising inside me. *If we are going to talk about culture, we need to talk about racism and sexism.* I find myself raising my hand and pointing out the need to acknowledge, and appreciate, the emotional labour of people of colour, especially women. A senior colleague asks if we could stop and discuss the issues I've raised, rather than leaving it for another day. To my surprise, the school leadership decides to throw out the agenda for the next session and clears a space for discussion. I am invited, if I can bear it, to lead by saying more after we return from lunch.

After lunch, I walk up to the front of the room and take the mic. I start by saying something about how I wish they could feel what I'm feeling right now, in my skin, standing up in front of them. *I am terrified of what I might say, but I'm going to say it anyway.* I find myself relating to my colleagues the experiences I have described above, and how in and through these moments, I have decided to 'not give a shit anymore.' I tell them how *I have had ENOUGH, I will no longer stay quiet and call out every incidence of racism and sexism, I will BE that person who you might think has a chip on her shoulder, because frankly, FUCK that. I don't give a shit anymore. I have skin in this game – and I am done being polite*. I ask white colleagues to share the burden – to think about what it means if only a body like mine is the one speaking about race, racism and sexism in the classroom. As I am speaking, I see a colleague – a person of colour – wipe a tear from the corner of their eye. I see others colleagues nodding, someone hoots.

I return to my seat as my colleagues applaud me, some come up to embrace me, eyes welled up, to express their support. It feels cathartic. I then watch as one by one, three more colleagues of colour get up and take the mic. Others stay put, remain silent. One colleague of colour tells me quietly that they would never feel safe doing what I had just done. Another tells me they are made to feel unworthy on a regular basis by other colleagues.

***

Some days later, I am sitting across from a white, male colleague. He looks me in the eye, and says:

> "I don't see race."

INVISIBLE BODIES

A second wave of COVID19 infections engulfs India. Delhi, my home city, collapses under the weight. There is only bad news, of sickness, desperation, death and devastation. There is no oxygen, there are no hospital beds, no ICUs. My twitter feed is flooded with Indian friends, colleagues, others, pleading for help for loved ones, for strangers, from cities in India and around the world. My own voice joins the cacophony of despair and frantic desperation. In a WhatsApp group, I plead for (leads on) medicines, oxygen concentrator, oxyflowmeter, an 'oxygen bed' at a hospital.

Days and nights start to fuse together, and I lose my ability to recall where I am in the week. I start keeping notes of the multiple things I am chasing every waking minute as my family, spread across continents, rallies to save one of their own from thousands of miles away. I write to my school's leadership team and tell them what I, my family, my people, are going through. I request them to extend support and solidarity to staff and students who may be affected; they respond immediately, positively.

A senior colleague amplifies my request for support and solidarity, to someone in the highest echelons within the university, someone charged with issues of 'diversity, equity, inclusion', and gets a nonresponse: *I have passed this onto the X's office*. The top-tier leadership at the institution stays silent. More people die. Still nothing. I think of all the times in the past decade or so, that I have been asked by the institution to provide inputs towards its 'India Strategy'. I have lost count of the times I have been asked to appear, to engage with visiting public officials and scholars from/on India. Made hypervisible as someone from, and with links to networks on/in India, that could be leveraged to increase the recruitment of more international fees-paying Indian students. Now, I am invisible.

Meanwhile, the Australian government bans all direct flights from India, then criminalizes anyone who defies the ban to fly to Australia from India if they have been there in the past 14 days. Up to five years in jail and/or a $66,000 fine.

After an excruciating, traumatizing week of trying to save him, my father-in-law dies.[4] I see my husband, unable to travel to be with his sick father, and after his death, with the rest of his grieving family, return to work. His trauma, his dissonant body, unseen. He is invisible, too.

(UN)WEAVING THE SELF/MAKING THE SELF VISIBLE

My friend T. messages. She has helped set up a resource bridge for award-winning master weavers across India who have been devastated by the pandemic. The bridge links the weavers with patrons who appreciate handloom/the art of weaving, and are happy to commit to a minimum spend. I ask T. to put me in touch with two of the weavers, and they fill my Whatsapp with pictures of beautiful, hand-weaved sarees of all hues. Over the next days and weeks, I spend hours looking at these images – a much-needed distracted from the grief and trauma my family and I are dealing with. I realize the last time I wore a saree in a professional setting was while guest lecturing into a short course on security in Delhi a few years ago. As I look at the pictures, I sift through them thinking: which sarees could I see myself lecturing in, here in Sydney? I close my eyes and recall vivid memories of my mother draping her saree, the swift motions with which her right hand went back and forth over the fingers of her left hand to make the pleats, tucking them deftly into her waist, just at her belly button, in a matter of a few seconds. I think about how some of my Indian colleagues – feminist IR scholars from India, predominantly – often wear a saree while presenting their papers at the big annual IR conference that takes place in the US. This is not something rare for them, but rather something they do regularly back in their own home institutional environments; it is a part of their regular, everyday life. As an undergraduate at a women-only college in Delhi, I recall my lecturers teaching always in sarees. I am envious.

I pore over the images of the sarees, pondering which one(s) I'd be comfortable wearing to one of my lectures. I buy two from the Chanderi weaver and two from the Maheshwari weaver, both in Madhya Pradesh, in central India. The weaves and patterns of these sarees are ancient, enduring. Wearing these weaves in the classroom/lecture hall would be an act that requires some courage (*'Is she dressing up? Is she making a political point? Why is she wearing that? Is it Harmony Day?*'). It might further expose me, and 'fix' my identity along ethnic lines. Yet, I visualize it as an act of resistance – of reclaiming power over my self, the power to re-mould the space I walk into, to fit a body like my own, wearing what I feel like, *without* any fear of a constraining hypervisibility. I recall my angst over how to dress for the teaching engagement at the defence institution. I realize, I need to redefine what it means to

4 Another week passes before a university-wide email, a regular institutional communication, arrives in my inbox. There is a paragraph addressing the situation in India, and a link to a video message of support. It means little, if anything, at this stage, yet the fact that I mention it here is reflective of my own failure to resist the voice of institutional caution in my head.

'power dress', for myself, and not for the white heteropatriarchal colonial/colonizing gaze, that privileges deeply entrenched, racial and gendered norms of what an 'expert' in the academy looks like. By having submitted to these norms in the past, I feel I have been complicit in their structural reproduction. To disrupt these norms, I need to disrupt their ritualistic repetition, 'to enable a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.' (Butler 1997 in Puwar 2004, 80–81). THIS feels like power dressing to me. I want to reclaim my body, my self – on my own terms – from the clothes that are deemed as reflecting/reflective of (white) power and (white) expertise in the white western academy. I want to put my body in the soft, silken weave of a Maheshwari, and feel the power of a self that is not afraid of being (un)seen.

CONCLUSION

Personal narratives of vulnerability by women of colour scholars are important sites of resistance, rooted in intersectional, embodied knowledge (Bhattacharya 2016). They provide insight into the myriad and complex ways in which processes of visibility and invisibly, silence/silencing and speaking out, are stitched up with operations of power, vulnerability, and resistance in the white western academy. They are also sites of collective power-making. In and through the process of writing such narratives, we revisit difficult, painful moments, but also grow outwards from them. There is re-wounding, but also healing and transformation; breakages, but also connections; a sense of isolation, before we find community. As we search for ground upon which to sit, contemplate, and write, we draw strength and courage from the bodies, voices, words of those who have come before us, who have risked and dared to occupy space, to speak and write. Armed with this strength and courage, we break down the protective walls we have built around us over time, walls that may not only be ineffective, but that close off 'creativity, authenticity, and joy, and foster deep misgivings about one's role in academia and thwart one's job satisfaction, peace, and mental health.' (Ibid, 310). As the walls come down, we find, and are *found by*, others (Bishop 2021, 368).

Women of colour, especially Black, Latina, *mestiza* women, have been writing about their experiences in the white western academy for a long time, making visible the 'soul wounds' Motta speaks of. They have been sharing these experiences, and how such experiences have galvanized their own feminist and antiracist scholarship, pedagogy, and activism. Their narratives of vulnerability have also inspired others to speak out, their words creating affirmative dialogic spaces for others to join and seek comfort, safety and power in/from. I imagine these women gathered together in a bright, sun-lit room, hunched over a quilt they are sewing in feminist love and care for one another. Each patch they stitch together reflects the richness of their individual experiences, while coming together with the rest in a breathtaking aesthetic that is more than the sum of its parts; unfinished, its open edges an invitation to others like me to come, join and keep quilting together. A few minutes ago, I entered the room, and began to sew a little patch of my own.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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