

Love of the Angriest Kind: Notes on Belonging

Ami V. Shah¹

The personal is theoretical. Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert.

Sara Ahmed²

I have a love-hate relationship with my anger. It often starts with surprise when anger creeps up within me: Why anger, why are you here? Where have you emerged from? Rather than dissipating, however, the anger lingers. I begin to hate it. Anger, how have you become this elephant in the room, forcing me to contort around you? Please, take a step back, return down your path: you were not invited here, and you are not welcome.

Yet, the anger knows that it is not overstaying its welcome; that its work has just begun. It stares me in the face, reminding me that our paths are the same. We both have often been not invited and unwelcomed. With this reminder, the other feelings return – that disjointed floating feeling of disconnection, that sense of being on the sidelines, and I start to understand, justify, and even embrace the anger. Slowly, I turn back to it. I acknowledge its presence, engage in its claims, and, if I'm brave, head down the scarier path of self-reflection, coming to terms with being an accomplice in my own erasure.

It took me much too long to realize what it means to be uninvited in academia - academia was where my family of immigrants and their offspring were supposed to “earn” our belonging in a small city in the United States’ mountain west. Brown, pagan (and proud - ha!), proving your smarts gained one some minor acceptance, some credibility, some worth. For this unspoken scheme to work, one coupled book smarts with cultural conformity in all the ways - speak and write well in English, wear “American” clothes, present yourself appropriately, eat with a knife and fork... think like you are expected to think.

Think like you are expected to think.

¹ Ami V. Shah is an Associate Professor in Global Studies at Pacific Lutheran University. She holds a DPhil in Development Studies, and teaches and writes about critical understandings of the global south and development, the emotive politics of representation, and decolonial international relations and pedagogy. She can be reached at shahav@plu.edu.

² Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017.

Yeah, this was about the book smarts then too.

And goodness how GOOD at that I was! (Am?) I was the quintessential undergraduate puppy. Shall I memorize for you? Provide that proof exactly the way it was done? Explain the importance of that theory? Sure! You'll love me back, right? And yes, you are right that the great powers are the only states that matter!

Well shit. The anger comes back, forcefully cordoning to the side any sense of pride or accomplishment and centering instead the loss that has occurred. Conforming in the discipline of international relations – and more largely in academia and the society I found myself in – involved devaluing myself, my experiences, my history. I had already diminished my own value within my extended family and my tiny immigrant community by what I wasn't doing. I was not pre-med. I was not studying the hard sciences. *I wasn't even pre-law*. I know, I know. This sounds like an episode of *Kim's Convenience* or one of the other new “minority sitcoms” that poignantly capture immigrant life while making it saccharine and cutesy. But these were not fictionalized realities - they were mine. They still are. I'm well into middle-aged life and yes, my occupation and focus still constitute a site of contention. So then is my reality cutesy? I admit these sitcoms draw me in; there's so much there to relate to, to love. And so much to laugh at. What does that mean for people like me? Who is relating? Who is loving? Who is laughing? How have I unknowingly made myself into an object to be laughed at? And do I mistake that objectification for my own belonging?

I'm getting ahead of myself; I never said this reflective path was straight. Being complicit in one's own erasure is a special type of darkness that creates its own shadows to traverse. But I learned all the IR I was supposed to learn without realizing how much my learning involved erasing. I accepted the supposedly objective discussion of how the world worked and why, of which histories mattered, and that all roots of the current good in the world were somehow magically created in ancient Greece. I reiterated these discourses without questioning their own social construction; I accepted their claims of innocence.³

Through accepting so-called canonical IR, I reflected its categories back onto the world. Trained first in the United States as the Cold War hurtled to its close, I accepted the assertions of the USA's power and potential emergence as a global messiah: Feed the World! Free the World! Lead the World! A dangerously aspirational self-subject-positioning as part of the feed/free/lead ideal white washed my own otherness and stripped not just a country, but its people, *my family*, of their dignity and worth on the world stage. But admitting this means admitting something else: that these people and places were never really part of the IR world. And that “these people” included me.

³ Meera Sabaratnam, “Is IR Theory White? Racialized Subject-Positioning in Three Canonical Texts.” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 49(1) 2000: pp. 3-31.

If we think of people who matter in conventional IR, well, then I never mattered. As a child of former colonial subjects living in the Diaspora, our family stories and national ties and history meant very little to the discipline beyond being troublesome, pesky mosquitoes that got through the net separating the great from the rest, nibbling to remind our hosts of our existence. We were problems to be swatted at. My homeland existed as a place of development, disaster, conflict, hunger, poverty, rights abuses, pollution, corruption, and when we caused a little shake to jog memories - nuclear weapons. Occasionally it gained attention for its call centers, or a heartwarming story of so-called “resilience” or “innovation,” or a reference to Gandhi and essentialized, exoticized, romanticized non-violence. Be the change.

The everyday experiences and knowledge of colonialism, independence, forced migration, pogroms, etc., were quick blips of world events that were rendered unimportant in a Eurocentric world system and discipline. Similarly, the non-West’s achievements, hopes, happiness, were not notable or worthy of time. It took me longer than I’d like to admit to recognize this. It also took me longer than I’d like to admit to connect that sense of not mattering and of searching for belonging to my eventual home in critical development studies, and the longer process of re-engaging with IR as a person who now asserts that yes, I do matter. My family matters. My homeland matters.

And anger deepens, because the processes of conforming, reacting, reflecting, not conforming, challenging – all of them – all of them come with risks and fear. What would it be like to be able to walk through life without that fear? Without having to assert value, striving to command respect without being *seen* as angry? What would it be like to walk through life without having to assert your existence?

What to do to be able to live that life?

Kick at the edges of the canon.

“But will they be prepared for graduate school?” “Are they learning what they are supposed to know?”

Incorporate perspectives of the Global South.

“This is just because of your own identity.”

Center race as a primary category in the discipline.

“These culture wars are out of hand; the reality is these countries and perspectives *are* the most important in the world system. Stop denying it.”

And then, whilst swirling in this waltz of fragility, be kind, be gracious, and ensure you have documented justification.

Now the anger and I walk as one; we are past scoffing but respectability norms curtail throwing. *What to do?* As we walk, we turn toward each other in despair and ask “all this? What for? Why even do this work?”

Sara Ahmed reflects that theoretical abstraction is detachment, asserting instead that “the personal is theoretical.” Recognizing my existence then, in IR and the “real world” writ large, is not just a political act, but a theoretical one. It has the potential to push past the posturing of care politics to create an alternative world. This potential may be packaged in hope and utopian visions, but I’m here for it. I’m here for the warm fuzzy, sure, and for the anger to dissipate a bit and some shadows to disappear for now.

And now I have come to love parts of this anger that confronts me, stalks me, becomes me, and turns me around. Beyond acknowledging that the anger is valid, that feelings matter in academic work, the anger has shaped me, opened my eyes, mind, and heart to other ways of being in this profession, and in this discipline. There’s nothing necessarily striking or revolutionary or astute in this telling... But it is mine, and it matters. It matters to the students who come to see themselves within the discipline too, and the world it creates. It matters that they matter. And I love that they can see and articulate their own place in IR.

I hate the reflection anger throws at me; I love the impetus it has provided to assert the centrality of my students in the discipline, to do IR as if they matter. Teaching in and of itself is an act of love – an act of striving to journey with others on a path of discovery and understanding and questioning, and to be willing to go on that journey together, sit through the discomforts and eureka and puzzles. And love can also be seen by showing our students that yes, they too matter. As my own classroom increasingly becomes a site of demographic diversity, what does it mean to peel back the layers of IR? What does it mean to push past inclusion that celebrates presence in the classroom, to inclusion that is welcoming, dignifying, edifying, and yes, even loving? To show students that here too, there were/are people like you, and that here too, IR happens, and that here, too, you mattered and still do? Disruption, decentering the mainstream is not just a project of displacing colonized knowledge at best or fighting in the realm of identity politics at worst, but also a project of radical inclusion and one of hope. A project of love.

A few decades ago, I was on the phone with my mother, who no longer walks this earth. Our conversation was routine, and thus forgettable. Years later, memories of the conversation emerged. To paraphrase:

Mom: “What is your paper about?”

Me: “The Indian Mutiny.”

Mom: “The Indian Mutiny? What’s that?”

Me: “Mom, you see, in 1857, Indian soldiers....(blah blah blah in know-it-all young adult voice)”

Mom: “Oh, you mean the First War of Indian Independence.”

I have perhaps recounted this conversation too many times in recent years. I’m not sure exactly when I started remembering this conversation so clearly - I even remember the paper a bit, and the dorm room I was in during that phone call. I have a love-hate relationship with my anger. I hate how much it rattles me, it questions my existence, it forces me to reflect on a traitorous existence. And yet, anger, thank you for showing up, for arriving uninvited, and guiding me along this path toward love. I love that you brought me here, that you returned this memory, and that you encourage me daily to embody and enact your lessons.