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# Landscapes of Loneliness and Interdependence: An Essay on Urban Alienation, Friendship, and the Modalities of Anthropological Fieldwork

**Abstract** Discussions of singleness contain images of pathological loneliness and stigmas of unbound individualism. As such, they reflect residual ambivalences surrounding the (gendered) consequences of urbanization and globalization. But do such portrayals really capture the subjectivities and lived experiences of single women in cities? Drawing on fieldwork among middle-class single women in Delhi, this essay argues that singleness can rather signify an engagement with different conditions of interdependency. The essay takes the somewhat unusual track of reflecting back on the intersubjective nature of anthropological fieldwork to offer glimpses into the different kinds of sociality that characterized both the lifeworlds of single women and the research process itself. In doing so, it is structured in three parts: The first examines notions of urban alienation in relation to urbanization, arguing that they are limited in what they can tell us about the emplaced social dynamics of urban life. The second part presents some research findings on the subjectivity of female singleness, highlighting different relationalities—to others and the city. The final part confronts the practice of fieldwork itself, including an attempt to think through the implications of friendships to remind researchers of our own multiple dependencies and accountabilities.

**Keywords** singlehood; urbanization; gender; fieldwork; feminist methodology

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Changes to family patterns, such as the rise of single households and a late average age of marriage, are increasingly grabbing headlines around the world. The topics of such discussions range from "leftover women" (and, more recently, "leftover men") in China,[1] to changing housing demands due to the rise of single-person households in Australia, to speculations surrounding the future political power of single-women voters in the US. In India, internet memes shared on social media sites poke fun at inquisitive relatives' insistent questioning along the lines of "Shādī kab karogī?" ("When will you get married?"), while bloggers vigorously debate the virtues and dangers of living alone. Some of these discussions of singleness are celebratory in tone; they speak of the triumph of individual choice and of new possibilities for journeys of self-exploration, especially for women. Unencumbered by the demands of relational womanhood, that is, feminine-coded roles that task women with the responsibility of preserving and nurturing the social relations within a social group, a solitary state is seen to harbor significant potential for women to realize their own creative projects. Yet, popular discourse surrounding singlehood and delayed marriage has often warned of the potentially harmful consequences of singleness, framing it in pathological terms. Indeed, if media coverage is to be believed, loneliness, as a "social epidemic" and a "giant evil of our time," is currently sweeping the planet, particularly in metropolitan settings.[2] Such discussions do not merely offer a commentary on current social and demographic trends but are haunted by the specter of "urban alienation," that is, persistent anxieties and residual ambivalences surrounding the (gendered) consequences of urbanization for social organization. Urban singleness as a pathological imaginary evokes images of loneliness, social fragmentation, and the adverse effects of excessive individualism, such as a lack of intimate connection or a diminishing capacity for empathy. In a different context, feminists have warned that even seemingly liberatory formulations of independence, choice, and empowerment have today become implicated with tropes of self-actualization and self-responsibility, which run the risk of stripping them of their original meaning and political urgency.[3] This associative field in which (female) singleness, as the absence of a (romantic) partner or as solitary living, lies suspended, hints at some of

1 See the chapter by Chenying Pi in this volume for an in-depth examination of these terms.

2 Anushka Asthana, "Stories of Loneliness: Two MPs Tell of 'Social Epidemic' in UK," *The Guardian*, January 3, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jan/03/stories-of-loneliness-overwhelm-labour-and-conservative-mps.

3 See, for instance, Angela McRobbie, "Young Women and Consumer Culture: An Intervention," *Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5 (2008); Rosalind Gill, "The Affective, Cultural and Psychic Life of Postfeminism: A Postfeminist Sensibility 10 Years On," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017). These works underscore the cultural, aesthetic, and affective technologies of "postfeminism," and the contemporary uses of languages of choice and individualism to deflect from systemic constraints, while placing the responsibility of navigating uncertainties produced by late-capitalism onto the individualized subject.

the lingering questions and uncertainties surrounding metropolitan life in growing and globalizing cities.

But does this field really reflect the actual subjectivities and lifeworlds of women living alone in metropolitan settings?[4] In 2015, I traveled to Delhi to investigate female singleness among middle-class women for my doctoral thesis. Specifically, I had come to document the impact of social change on practices such as delayed marriage, and the formation of single households, as well as on young women's attitudes towards work, family, and leisure. While I conducted my anthropological field research, I certainly encountered feelings of loneliness and solitude—those of my research participants, as well as my own. I also witnessed strengthening commitments to values of independence and personal autonomy, as life trajectories, understandings of family, and conceptions of individual purpose that had previously been taken for granted were thoroughly re-examined. However, as I was listening to these accounts, singleness also seemed to revolve just as much around the continued relevance of (familial) connections, the process of re-evaluating bonds and forging new ones, as well as around different notions of care, for the self and for others. The concept therefore expressed as much, if not more, about linkages, attachments, and a recognition of interdependency as it did about disconnection and isolation. It thereby troubled images of loneliness as pathology and rejected the stigma of unbound individualism that frequently accompanies (female) singlehood. What may have revealed the most to me about the ways my interlocutors perceived themselves as being alone, either in a fleeting or more permanent sense, were the different modes through which they related to and depended on others, as well as the city they lived in.

While I discuss the results of my fieldwork in more depth elsewhere,[5] in this essay, I will guide my discussion with the help of an autoethnographic perspective. There are numerous reasons why I think this could be a productive track. As a methodological approach, autoethnography focuses on forms of intersubjective engagement during the research process and centers the notions of self-reflexivity and interpersonal experience in ways that can challenge "canonical ways of doing research and representing others,"[6] while also underlining the potential of research as a political force. In my case, however, "autoethnography" does not refer to a form of self-representation of the insider who possesses the particular cultural identity under study in

4 The term lifeworld (from the German *Lebenswelt*) is used in the social sciences and philosophy to denote the domain of everyday life, everyday knowledge, and common-sense social reality. It encompasses both cultural and social structures, as well as individual experience. The concept was first introduced by Edmund Husserl (drawing on Martin Heidegger) and was further elaborated upon by Alfred Schütz, Jürgen Habermas, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and others.

5 Lucie Bernroider, "Single Female Tenants in South Delhi—Gender, Class and Morality in a Globalizing City," *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 5 (2018).

6 Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2010): 1.

the way the term is most commonly understood. Rather, I want to scrutinize the process of fieldwork itself, offering glimpses into the different kinds of sociality and intimacy that characterized both the particular lifeworlds of urban single women and my own research process, in order to illustrate my thoughts on urban gendered subjectivity and what I came to understand as the productive tensions between singleness and interdependency. On the one hand, I thereby hope to foreground the intersubjective, bodily, and affective dimensions of what it means to move through the specific place and time of the city as a single woman. Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford credit such inventive methodologies with accounting for "the sensory plenitude afforded for knowledge and action,"[7] adding that "[s]uch methods enable us to acknowledge that we are in *medias res*, in the middle of things, in 'mid-stream, always already embedded in a situation, one both settled and unsettled.'"[8] On the other hand, this approach allows me to think through the feminist potential (and pitfalls) of fieldwork and scholarly representation. The intersubjective practice of anthropological fieldwork itself, after all, constitutes an effort to immerse oneself and to build empathetic connections, even friendships, all while grappling with one's own positionality and registers of difference and distance. The end of this essay therefore includes a preliminary attempt to think through the implications of friendships built during fieldwork and the possibilities of research as a relational act of responding, while also accounting for the different positions and identities taken up by me as a foreign researcher and those emplaced in "the field."

This essay is thus structured in three parts. To set the terms of this interrogation, I will start by examining figurations of urban alienation, and the landscapes of fragmentation and solitude they project, as these are the images my later discussion hopes to disrupt. Not only have these narratives captured the public imagination, but they also occupy a firmly established place in academic contemplations on metropolitan life. However, as I will lay out below, they tend to defy the specificity of actual urban locales and are, therefore, limited in what they can tell us about the emplaced social dynamics that characterize single living.

Secondly, I will present some of the findings of my research on the subjectivity of female singleness, arguing that it should not be seen merely as an individualistic rebuttal to the concept of relational womanhood mentioned earlier, but rather as a concept that deeply engages with conditions of interdependency and connection, and indeed with the nature of community in the metropolitan landscape. The particular urban flavor of angst-ridden imaginaries of a creeping loneliness epidemic can be linked to fears over the city's perceived failure to develop an ethic of neighborliness

7 Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford, "Introduction: A Perpetual Inventory," in *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social,* ed. Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 19.

8 Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 8, quoted in Lury and Wakeford, *Inventive Methods*, 19.

and a mode of sharing without being part of the same community. In this respect, doubts arise about the capabilities of the mass-mediated publics of cities to form empathetic and ethical relations. I will, therefore, relate my thoughts to questions of ethics, interdependence, and inter-relationality within the making of new urban and gendered subjectivities. Narratives of sociability, friendship, and care, both for the self and for others, have the potential to tie in with notions of self-care as a feminist ethic of habitation, a recognition of dependency, and the acknowledgement of the self's innate vulnerability as the basis for connecting with others.

The third part involves a more explicit confrontation with the practice of fieldwork itself. Out of my personal experience of conducting research with women of a similar age to myself, I continue my exploration of feminist ethics with reflections on the subjectivity of the researcher, the deeply intersubjective nature of anthropological fieldwork, and the possibilities of "working with friendship" as an approach that crucially reminds us as researchers of our multiple accountabilities. To talk about subjectivity and feminist ethics by way of the modalities of anthropological fieldwork may seem like an unnecessary detour, but I have come to realize that the very nature of the fieldwork encounter—its frustrations and joys, the bonds and trust of friendships formed, the dilemmas of distance and immersion, and its confrontation with positionality and representation—resonates with much of what I have to say about interdependency and a humbling of the self, as well as with the ethical and political possibilities of such encounters. Notwithstanding feminism's "awkward" relationship with anthropology,[9] I conclude with a few thoughts on how research encounters and their ontological commitments might relate to a discussion of transnational feminist knowledge (co)production and politics, suggesting the possibility of building solidarities in an interconnected world through a deeper engagement with the modalities of friendship, dependency, and vulnerability.

## Imaginaries of urban alienation and social change

The theme of urban alienation and depersonalization has a long history in debates on urbanization and urban sociality. For early urban theorists like Georg Simmel,[10] the modern capitalist metropolis figured as the paradigmatic site of strangerhood. While the anonymity of the city would

9 Marilyn Strathern, "An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology," *Signs* 12, no. 2 (Winter 1987). Strathern famously defined the relationship between anthropology and feminism as "awkward," an attribute that, Jeanette Edwards has more recently argued, should be maintained in order to establish a productive, mutually testing relationship. Jeanette Edwards, "The Body, Beauty and Botox: Revisiting the 'Awkward Relationship' Between Feminism and Anthropology" (lecture, Department for Social and Cultural Anthropology, University of Vienna, December 12, 2018).

10 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, [1905] 1950).

offer new freedoms from the coercive obligations of "little" community and small-town prejudice, an onslaught of sensory stimuli, coupled with the rationalization inherent in capitalist labor, would imprint upon the urban dweller a detached, "blasé" attitude that could lead to feelings of "worthlessness."[11] Imaginaries of urban alienation and isolation have gained renewed momentum in depictions of the postmodern urban landscape of late capitalism. Images of urban alienation and loneliness often employ a familiar contrast: interminable rows of housing blocks or apartments stacked on top of each other in high-rises towering into the sky, while an unending stream of people come and go. The solitary figure in the insulated apartment unit is, meanwhile, envisioned as an alienated urban dweller, one among countless anonymous others to whom s/he is a stranger with no kinship or other intimate identification. The intensified spatial proximity of densely populated urban landscapes heightens this imaginary of disconnect, while uneasy discourses surrounding new digital technologies and media warn of the ways these technologies may enhance disconnection among city dwellers.

Suggesting the loss of meaning and attachment, "the fluctuating postmodern city," as literary theorist Deborah Parsons writes, "risks becoming a signless place of directionless nomads"[12] in which "'we cross nothing to go nowhere.'"[13] Populated by what Marc Augé (1995) called "non-places,"[14] this conception of the "signless" city further evokes the supposedly homogenizing impact of global capital flows. In academic discourse, this idea also finds resonance in Saskia Sassen's notion of the global city, a model of urban development embodied in New York, London, and Tokyo.[15] The global city is conceived of as a node in de-territorialized flows of media, capital, and commodities—as a site of destabilization of local and national cultures—rather than as a place of localized production. Moreover, late capitalism is discussed as a destabilizing force that undermines the definitional power of older cultural systems of differentiation in a process that is informed by "institutionalized individualism,"[16] as well as by recurring efforts to salvage what is perceived as a more stable identity. Anxiety, then, not only arises from the potential lack of connection to a "signless" space and its alienated inhabitants, but also from the projection of an uncertain

11 Simmel, "Metropolis and Mental Life," 415.
12 Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.
13 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 185–186, quoted in Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis,* 9.
14 Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity,* trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).
15 Saskia Sassen, *Cities in a World Economy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1994).
16 Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002).

future, as the institutions through which residents previously used to understand themselves, appear unsettled.[17]

Such discourses are of course not without merit. They speak to changing socio-economic arrangements shaped by late capitalism and the new sets of uncertainties and contradictions this system produces, as it "requires its subjects, as *individuals*, to operate on hope, aspiration, and images of the good life while its financial, actuarial, and algorithmic instruments increasingly render us *dividuals* who are indexed by our profiles as bearers of risk, disease, debt, or dysfunction."[18] The discourse of the globalizing city makes important contributions to a theorization of the impact of a global capitalist system on urban landscapes; however, it tends to produce a view of urban development as dominated by a unified and unidirectional force, namely the law of capitalist globalization, that generates more or less identical sets of effects and problems in different cities around the world. Yet, as critics of this approach have convincingly argued, urban transformation takes place within the particularity of a specific, situated urban setting and, therefore, generates variable outcomes. For instance, in his discussion of Dubai, Chad Haines acknowledges that much of the city's spaces, such as gated communities and malls, may be seen as non-places.[19] At the same time, he notes the need "not to slip into free-floating notions of disconnected, alienated people and spaces," instead arguing that everyday lives, dreams, and contestations of urban dwellers are very much "grounded in territorialized spaces, defined by state projects as much as by global capital flows."[20] Thus, despite late capitalism's association with transnational flows, urban dwellers still experience its contradictory effects within the very concrete conditions of their specific urban settings.

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17 The cinematic language of Hollywood has often deployed the images of glassed high-rises in East Asian cities as backdrops for the visual dramatization of urban alienation (see, for example, the films *Lost in Translation* and *Babel*). Indeed, as Timothy Yu points out, European and North-American dystopian science fiction in literature and cinema has, from the 1970s onwards, routinely drawn on Orientalist tropes and signifiers to depict the dystopian city of the future. Fantasies of Asian cities are, Yu argues, used to displace "alienation and anxiety generated by the structures of global capitalism." Timothy Yu, "Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: 'Naked Lunch, Blade Runner,' and 'Neuromancer,'" *MELUS* 33, no. 4 (2008): 47. Urban studies and planning discourses have, meanwhile, popularized a dichotomy between so-called First World models and Third World megacities as sites of imminent catastrophe, crisis, and chaos. See, for example, Mike Davis's apocalyptic vision of megacities as "planet[s] of slums" in Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2007). Ananya Roy has thoroughly criticized this constellation, pointing towards the need to acknowledge the existence of multiple, different epistemologies of planning in cities of the Global South, see Ananya Roy, "Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, no. 2 (2005).

18 Arjun Appadurai, "Moodswings in the Anthropology of the Emerging Future," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 2 (2016): 2; emphasis original.

19 Chad Haines, "Cracks in the Façade: Landscapes of Hope and Desire in Dubai," in *Worlding Cities: Asian Experiments and the Art of Being Global,* ed. Aihwa Ong and Ananya Roy (Np: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 161.

20 Haines, "Landscapes of Hope and Desire in Dubai," 162.

In India, the themes of urban alienation and strangeness are embedded in historical conventions of community and caste segregation, as well as in what Thomas Bloom Hansen has called an "overdetermination" of space.[21] Hansen argues that Simmel's writings presume an (at least somewhat) unmarked character of the city—"a context of relative visual homogeneity."[22] The South Asian city, on the other hand, is characterized by incessant practices of social inter-reading for a "recognizable set of diacritical marks that place strangers in a known category, and, thus, make it possible to place them in a hierarchy of social status and appropriateness".[23] Moreover, like other cities in which capitalism and neo-liberalization have contributed to an increase in competition and precarity, as well as to a shift towards consumer-citizenship, urban development in India is increasingly molded by elite residents' desires to control their social environment and recognize themselves in its landscape in an ever-narrowing sense.[24] Strategies to manage fears of the stranger and the desire for sameness have (as elsewhere) involved mobilizations against different categories of outsiders, such as diasporic populations and the urban poor, accompanied by a retreat into regulated environments of gated residential complexes that offer both privatized infrastructure and an exclusive mode of sociality.[25] While gated enclaves have been most prominently linked to new aesthetics of urban securitization and (upper-)middle-class fears of crime, literature on the Global South has highlighted the way these spaces also speak to desires of the affluent to detach themselves from local urban landscapes marred by an inefficiency of public services and a range of "nuisances," and to take part in globally projected elite lifestyles.[26] In the South Asian context, authors have, moreover, linked this shift towards self-organization to a "bourgeoisification" of Indian cities that prioritizes the interests of middle-class constituencies while abandoning collective responsibilities towards the marginalized and underprivileged sections of

21 Thomas Bloom Hansen, "Strangers, Neighbours, and Political Order in the South Asian City," in *Interrogating India's Modernity: Democracy, Identity, and Citizenship*, ed. Surinder S. Jodhka and Dipankar Gupta (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

22 Hansen, "Strangers, Neighbours," 31.

23 Hansen, "Strangers, Neighbours," 28.

24 Lata Mani, "Sex and the Signal-Free Corridor. Towards a New Feminist Imaginary," *Economic and Political Weekly* 49, no. 6 (2014).

25 Gated residential enclaves are indeed part of a worldwide trend. See, for example, Teresa P.R. Caldeira, "Fortified Enclaves: The New Urban Segregation," in *Theorizing the City: The New Urban Anthropology Reader*, ed. Setha M. Low (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999) on Latin America; Steven Robins, "At the Limits of Spatial Governmentality: A Message from the Tip of Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2002) on South Africa; Christiane Brosius, "The Enclave Gaze: Images and Imaginaries of Neoliberal Lifestyle in New Delhi," in *Images That Move*, ed. Patricia Spyer and Mary Margaret Steedly (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2013) on India; Andrew Nelson, "Betrayed by the Neoliberal State, Neglected by the 'Jangali' Company: The Anxiety of Autonomy in an Elite Housing Colony in Kathmandu, Nepal," *City & Society* 29, no. 1 (2017) on Nepal.

26 Brosius, "Enclave Gaze," 76.

society.[27] Seclusion, securitization, and the reproduction of visual coherence in urban space have been described by Sharon Zukin as the "aestheticisation of an anti-urban lifestyle,"[28] decidedly opposed to visions of urban life in which trust among strangers might be built through social interdependence and solidarity. Rather than focusing solely on the dissolution of older forms of social integration and community, questions regarding urban alienation and the possibilities of empathy and connection in the city may then do well to engage in a discussion of current global trends involving the privatization of collective urban spaces. For my purpose, however, the more relevant point is that discussions of strangeness, of the (in)comprehensibility of space, and a potential lack of connection, must account for the embedded nature of such terms, as well as the distinct spaces and forces (including the state, labor regimes, cultural discourses, and local histories) that characterize the specific social environments in which they are experienced.

In the context of my research, such a consideration necessitates a look at the practices and modes through which middle-class women reach for a sense of place and belonging in a city marked by social segmentation and transnational flows. Delhi's shifting cultural geography as a site of commercial and cultural exchange is associated with the extension of value horizons that also offer new possibilities within the realm of gender and sexuality. Here, challenges can be mounted to the fixity of gendered role expectations, such as the idealized female identity of wifehood and motherhood. This could enable temporary deferment from, or, potentially, a more lasting modification and resistance to preexisting systems of regulation.[29] These changes are enabled in part by encounters with new sites and contexts, including university campuses and friendships. Such hopes are also entangled with consumerist markers that have come to define aspirational middle-class status in India.[30] Iconic images of singleness are now inspired by American television shows: the image of a solitary customer sitting in a café no longer reads as an emblematic picture of loneliness, as

27 See Amita Baviskar, "Cows, Cars and Cycle-Rickshaws: Bourgeois Environmentalists and the Battle for Delhi's Streets," in *Elite and Everyman: the Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, ed. Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray (London: Routledge, 2011); D. Asher Ghertner, "Nuisance Talk and the Propriety of Property: Middle Class Discourses of a Slum-Free Delhi," *Antipode* 44, no. 4 (2012); Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). The latter had been part of earlier Socialist visions of Indian city-life in the 1960s and 1970s; see Brosius, "Enclave Gaze."

28 Sharon Zukin, "Urban Lifestyles: Diversity and Standardisation in Spaces of Consumption," *Urban Studies* 35, no. 5–6 (1998): 836.

29 For a discussion of the gendered possibilities inherent in hybridized zones, see Michiko Mae, "Auf dem Weg zu einer transkulturellen Genderforschung," in *Transkulturelle Genderforschung: Ein Studienbuch zum Verhältnis von Kultur und Geschlecht*, ed. Michiko Mae and Britta Saal (Wiesbaden: VS, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007).

30 See Ritty A. Lukose, *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

long as it shows a young inner-city dweller, whose favored workplace is the local leather-couched coffee shop, as she types away while sipping a cappuccino. This new working culture was cited by my research participants as a sign that the city is now on par with the hip metropolitan centers around the world. Thriving on the creative energies of the young, particularly on their consumerist and entrepreneurial drives, the city finally appeared to be "freed" from conservative and more austere notions of city-life that had governed the Delhi of the past.

Possibilities of both female privacy and female participation in the city's social and economic life, however, remain heavily constrained by systems of containment and regulation designed to mitigate anxieties over cultural destabilization, which are often explicitly focused on gendered norms and perceptions of "immorality." On a national level, a movement towards religious conservatism has, moreover, accompanied urban changes, further circumscribing the possibilities women can make use of in the city.[31] Cultural discourses, for instance, formulate notions of "female respectability" as a prerequisite of middle-class identity and a mode of self-governance,[32] determining how "good" middle-class women ought to engage with the wider landscape of the city, which places they can legitimately be in, at what time, and in what kind of attire. Metropolitan femininity is, hereby, formulated as an attribute of the determined, respectable (upper-)middle-class woman, capable of handling multiple roles as a career woman, a respectable daughter, wife, and mother. While women's engagement with public space is certainly shaped by that which Hansen described as the multiple social codes prevalent in South Asian cities,[33] it is additionally affected by the experience of fear and the public discourse on women's safety. In this respect, single women living alone are deemed particularly vulnerable.[34] A safety discourse focused on containment and technological surveillance can be seen as further stifling middle-class women's participation in public life beyond the segregated and privatized spaces of consumption and work, even as recommended safety precautions tend to define the work of keeping oneself safe as a woman's own responsibility.

In summary, the context in which singlehood is lived in Delhi is far removed from imaginaries of a vast expanse of "signless" space and the supposedly de-territorializing forces of globalization. While the urban setting described above still suggests certain elements of fragmentation and

31 See the essay by Sanjay Srivastava in this volume.

32 See Jyothsna Latha Belliappa, *Gender, Class and Reflexive Modernity in India* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Smitha Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian: Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

33 Hansen, "Strangers, Neighbours."

34 This point is usually made with reference to common sense rather than statistics, as most gender-based crimes are still committed by perpetrators known to the victim rather than unknown intruders. See *Crime in India 2012 Statistics* (New Delhi: National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, June 2013).

withdrawal, themes of isolation, connection, and (in)dependence took on different, often unexpected expressions during my research. I now turn to a discussion of these alternatives and of what they may tell us about the inherent potentials suggested by a different conception of urban subjectivity.

## Subjectivities of singleness

> *I didn't stay too long. I shared an auto-rickshaw with Tannistha,*[35] *she did all the price negotiations as usual. We talked about how people sometimes let their guard down a bit in autos and taxis, like they let go of their composure or are simply exhausted and can't hold out until they're home, although, of course, there is the driver to consider. We had to raise our voices above the onslaught of honking cars and speeding motorcycles. Then, there are enough reports on unsafe taxi rides too, though I haven't had too bad experiences myself. I used to be way more apprehensive about staying out too late or going back home on my own. I'm much more comfortable now. When I got home, I could hear Neha shout up to my apartment from her balcony, asking if I was alright. Tannistha soon messaged me to let me know she had got home alright too. Neha and I shared a night cap on the balcony and spotted a couple lying next to each other on a blanket on the patch of dried-up grass in the square park bordering our apartment block. The night might have veiled them in darkness, were it not for the orange-yellow glow of the streetlight allowing their rare display of public intimacy to be in full view. Every morning some boys play cricket in the same park. We often watch them from my window, while I make us coffee. (Notebook excerpt, 5th January, 2016)*

The women I worked with were acutely aware of the potential pitfalls of their "way of life," as it removed them from the social (and financial) security offered by the middle-class family or a marital home.[36] Whether these women had perceived the environment of the parental home as nurturing or oppressive (or a combination of both), it had at least supplied familiar coordinates of social belonging. In a context in which, despite women's increased visibility in public life, prolonged singlehood and solitary living can come to stand in for Westernized lifestyles and identities, transgressing the "safe" timetables and spaces dictated by social conventions could exacerbate this sense of risk and precarity. Experiences of judgement could trigger feelings of isolation and doubt, even as stigmas evoking immorality,

35 All names used are pseudonyms.

36 My target group were working, middle-class women, mostly living alone (a small percentage lived in flat-shares), in the age group of twenty-five to forty years old.

selfishness, or pity could feel particularly wounding.[37] My research participants, moreover, felt that any hardships they faced were interpreted as direct consequences of having made unconventional choices, and, therefore, had to be shouldered (at least publicly) without complaint. The new transnational language celebrating single professional women as an embodiment of a new kind of empowered femininity also seemed to have ambivalent implications.[38] Several women indicated that this image in fact made it more difficult to address vulnerabilities and moments of doubt, as it had introduced a new type of shame—one associated with not being tough, self-sufficient, or empowered enough to satisfy the role of the independent and emancipated woman.

Yet, their struggles did not have to be shouldered alone. As women (and men) extend the period before marriage, or strike out in alternative trajectories, and live financially independent lives, friendships in particular gain new weight. In countless instances, my participants cited the value of friendships and newfound solidarities, or, as some called them, their "chosen families." These friends spent a great deal of time together—mostly in each other's apartments, going out together, or on occasional trips out of the city. Significantly, they all claimed that independent living had changed the nature of sociality in their lives. Not only could they participate more freely in these activities as they were removed from the social control of the family, but these friendships also formed important emotional as well as material support systems that were integral to managing life in the city. They exchanged resources, lent each other money, supplied contacts for work opportunities, and helped each other find housing. Having friends nearby could help dispel feelings of vulnerability. When a stranger had come to her front door in the middle of the night, one of my participants (a thirty-two-year-old documentary producer) had called her friend who lived nearby. When I asked her why she had not called the police, she commented, "I could call and police would have just come in some time, but I wanted to see someone I know, so that's why I called her and I wanted to feel protected, that's why I called her."

Friends were also involved in more elaborate plans of deception to circumvent social controls. Another of my participants (a twenty-eight-year-old shop assistant) was living with a boyfriend without her parents' knowledge. When I asked her what she did when her parents came to visit, she told me, "One of us crashes at a friend's place, that's how we do it here. Everyone deals with some kind of stuff from home and your friends help you out." A co-operative spirit, then, became a moral imperative among friends as a response to generational conflicts and fissures that were seen as affecting most people in the same age bracket—such as parents disapproving of their lifestyles, marital pressures, and stigmas surrounding

37 See the essay by Kinneret Lahad in this volume.
38 See the introduction to this volume.

"alternative" ways of living beyond heteronormative conjugality.[39] The social pressures my respondents faced could intensify their dependency on each other as well as their reliance on reciprocity. In order to effectively extract themselves from authorities who would see their activities as morally transgressive, social groupings needed to share common value orientations. Many had met like-minded people through college or work, and they also stated that their own values and personal development had been fundamentally shaped by these interactions. As another participant (a thirty-year-old photographer) told me, "Friends are so important for how much you change in life. Of course, parents have brought you up, but then it's really who you are surrounded by later."

Given Delhi's disastrous reputation regarding women's safety, many women gravitated towards safety in numbers, traveling in groups, and coming up with informal security precautions, such as notifying each other when they had arrived home safely. Ordinary walks to the market or the park together could establish familiarity and comfort through modes of sociability in the open, serving to boost women's spatial confidence in male-dominated public spaces.

In the Indian context, friendship is often overlooked in favor of marital or familial relations, as relations of kin and community have historically structured social interactions and support networks.[40] In relation to consumer cultures, friendship is, moreover, often sketched as a temporary and unstable relation linked with individualism, and the seeking of temporary affiliation and excitement during adolescence.[41] Several of my respondents indeed expressed uncertainty about whether their friendships would remain as close later in life, especially as some might still get married and have children and, therefore, have less time on their hands. It should, moreover, be noted that friendships entail forms of peer regulation and can also depend on the individual's ability to participate in collective consumption and leisure activities, which require both financial resources as well as sufficient social and cultural capital to fit in. Nevertheless, friendships enabled singleness to become a space of greater autonomy and self-exploration, as they allowed individuals to contemplate alternative sites of social belonging beyond a dependency on a (male) partner or relative. Friendships and mutual care therefore became central modes through which belonging was established in the city. After all, as

39 See Cari Costanzo Kapur, "Rethinking Courtship, Marriage, and Divorce in an Indian Call Center," in *Everyday Life in South Asia*, 2nd ed., ed. Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) for an example of how social networks formed in call-center workplaces help women to manage the difficult process of divorce.

40 Henrike Donner, *Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-Class Identity in Contemporary India* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Patricia Uberoi ed., *Family, Kinship, and Marriage in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993).

41 Nita Mathur ed., *Consumer Culture, Modernity and Identity* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2014).

Lauren Berlant writes, "intimacy builds worlds."[42] Indeed, it helped build spaces to nurture "unconventional" existences by establishing new, valued sites and relationships to "have 'a life.'"[43]

Another source of connection was provided by the city itself. Going out could offer a sense of release from the (at times) claustrophobic spaces of small one-bedroom apartments. Occupying common spaces of the city could be a source of great pleasure,[44] engendering a sense of participation and submersion in the currents of the city's public life.[45] The well-known environments of one's neighborhood could offer a shared sense of familiarity, like places in which shopkeepers knew your favorite cigarette brand and vegetable vendors kept you updated on seasonal goods, while roadside food stalls offered valued opportunities for public sociality. These single women then actively took part in the kind of convivial co-production that shapes a city's public social life, likely much more than previous generations of middle-class women, for whom engagement with public spaces was a more troubled and contested affair.[46]

Certainly, there were also lingering ambiguities and moments of doubt present in the narratives I listened to during my months of fieldwork in Delhi. While navigating the city and carving out spaces of belonging could generate a sense of participation, this connection remained somewhat brittle. Personal experiences of sexual harassment and intimidation restricted a sense of connection and trust in the city's public spaces. Through their experiences in the city, my interlocutors had become experts in navigating the various ways the body could be read in public (and in private too). This did not entail a strict list of dos and don'ts, but was situational, the outcome of flexible reassessments. It was, moreover, heavily dependent on the individual's socio-cultural location within categories of belonging, such as class, community, origin, religion, and caste. While traveling through the city, alone or in company, could be a daunting experience, this knowledge often came to inform a new sense of self-confidence. In our last interview, one of my respondents (the before-mentioned thirty-two-year-old documentary producer) told me, "Delhi makes you. People say Delhi is not a safe city for girls, but I think Delhi really makes you, the city really makes you strong in a true sense, in how a woman can conduct herself alone, while walking on the road and living alone. You know it's not easy, you've been in Delhi, it teaches you every single day!" In these instances, the panorama of dense urban habitation, so often viewed from the quiet vantage point of one of the many balconies and rooftop terraces that grace Delhi's

42 Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 282.
43 Berlant, "Intimacy," 285.
44 Shilpa Phadke, "If Women Could Risk Pleasure: Reinterpreting Violence in Public Space," in *Nine Degrees of Justice: New Perspectives on Violence Against Women in India*, ed. Bishakha Datta (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2010).
45 See also the chapters by Paromita Chakravarti and Shilpa Phadke in this volume.
46 Anne Waldrop and Sissel Egden, "Getting Behind the Walls and Fences: Methodological Considerations of Gaining Access to Middle-Class Women in Urban India," *Forum for Development Studies* 45, no. 2 (2018).

apartments as the day draws to a close, was not a sight that overwhelmed the beholder. Anonymity did not designate alienation and loneliness but rather new possibilities of self-worth, and of new connections with others and the wider social landscape of the city. With this image, I do not want to succumb to overly celebratory accounts of female singlehood. Rather, I want to highlight how single women handle multiple social relations in the complex cultural geography of the city they live in, and how these multiplicities inform their subjectivity. As young women and men move to cities for work and education, increased mobility, coupled with greater economic independence, and increased exposure to mass media have combined to create changes in middle-class social spheres and gendered attitudes—no doubt including significant impulses towards greater personal autonomy and individualization. Yet, these changes are crucially negotiated within local contexts and systems of meaning which do not altogether lose their relevance. As noted above, significant constraints, systems of regulation, and stigmas remain, and single women routinely encounter different forms of precarity. However, as the women I encountered tried to make sense of and negotiate their place in a changing world, they reached for new forms of recognition and affiliation, and modes of gendered disciplining, though certainly constraining, remained partial and incomplete. The sense of self that my interlocutors articulated, appeared adept at forming and managing multiple social relations, attachments, and spatial belonging.

## Ethics of interdependence and inter-relationality

What might this mean for a discussion on subjectivities of singleness, of images of isolation and excessive individualism? Many of the observations above echo postmodern concepts of subjectivity (such as the "hybrid" or the "nomadic" subject), which, in an effort to counter essentialist conceptions, aim to acknowledge the heterogeneity of human experiences, attachments, and desires. In Rosi Braidotti's terms, a "nomadic" subject reveals a "non-unitary and multi-layered vision, as a dynamic and changing entity"[47] that "actively yearns for and constructs itself in complex and internally contradictory webs of social relations."[48] Such concepts indeed reflect the diversity of attachments I encountered as well as the modes in which unified systems of regulation were continuously disrupted. While recognizing the need to blur the unitary bonds of sex, race, class, and nation, the "hybrid" subject of postmodernity, however, runs the danger of suggesting a radical focus on the self, potentially producing, as Leela Gandhi puts it, a "crippling solipsism," thereby hampering a positive reconstruction

47 Rosi Braidotti, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject," *Comparative Critical Studies* 11, no. 2–3 (2014): 176–177.
48 Rosi Braidotti, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject," 181.

of the social fabric.[49] Gandhi argues that the subject of postmodernism, with its evocation of polymorphous desire, represents a subjectivity of relative social privilege and affluence that "is encouraged to approach the world / social fabric simply as the source of her enjoyment,"[50] and therefore, gravitate towards an "ethics of excess."[51]

However, the narratives of sociability and emplacement I listened to are much more relational in nature, reflecting a deep-seated mutuality and an openness to acknowledge fundamental vulnerabilities and dependencies. They resonated with the kinds of selfhood portrayed in the work of urban sociologist Martina Löw, who wrote one of the first studies on women living alone in Germany.[52] Löw found echoes of her participants' experiences and practices in a Foucauldian culture of the self, particularly in its description of a form of self-care which is used as a crucial basis for sociality. This type of self-care simultaneously valorized the time spent alone as well as the practices of exchange and attention given to society (in fact, it saw the first as a precondition for the latter). The forms of individualism and sociality observed by Löw were, moreover, enabled by a specifically gendered subjectivity: young women are trained to exercise different modes of care as a part of childhood socialization. Capacities to manage different social relationships, and to tolerate uncertainty and tension, thereby become part of feminine identity construction. My aim here is not to imply the merit of naturalized constructions of feminine emotionality or to reinforce the image of women's innate giving nature, which are often used to justify their supposed suitability for nurturing roles in paid and unpaid labor. Rather, I suggest that the practices I encountered contained attempts to link an awareness of one's own fragility and vulnerability with the ability to build empathy and connect with others in ways that could underscore (emotional) dependency over notions of self-sufficiency. This seemed particularly tied to a context in which young women found themselves "humbled" by being in conflict with established social expectations and having to forge new and unsettling paths.[53] Moreover, their engagement with the urban landscape, as described earlier, demonstrates that the city, rather than promoting only excessive individualism, can itself offer possibilities of connection that challenge city dwellers to contemplate "[w]hat kinds of constraints are integral to our interdependence and inter-relationality and thus in need of being woven into our conception of freedom and choice."[54]

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49 Leela Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," *Cultural Studies Review* 9, no. 1 (2003): 14.
50 Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," 13.
51 Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," 14.
52 Martina Löw, "'Ich sorge für mich selbst.' Alleinwohnende Frauen und die Kunst der Existenz," *Zeitschrift für Frauenforschung* 12, no. 1–2 (1994).
53 See also Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004) on the recognition of vulnerability, not as a disparagement of the self, but as a necessary precondition for the establishment of ethical relationships.
54 Mani, "Signal-Free Corridor," 29.

These observations may trouble the images of alienation and disconnect I described at the beginning of this essay, though it might be questioned whether they have any implications for the political and ethical possibilities the city's social life may harbor. It is critical to remember that many of the affiliations, friendships, attachments, and the elective communities city dwellers seek out, for the most part enact a search for sameness—for association with others of similar sexual, intellectual, and political alignment. The pull of similitude privileges the capacity to form empathetic relationships only with those proximate to one's own social group, thereby undermining the ethical and political commitments to the community.[55] The political potential of community requires the subject to acquire an openness to forms of sociality that allow for unpredictable interactions that, in turn, estrange the subject from her "own" domain, thereby "exacerbating the condition of its insufficiency."[56] While these are crucial limitations to keep in mind when looking at new affiliations and the possibilities for wider (political) solidarities in the city, it is important to remember that many of those coming to big cities to form new friendships, attachments, and communities often do so having escaped (or having been cast out from) what was once "their own."[57] In the city, as Richard Sennett wrote of a potentially modern sense of place, they are therefore inevitably encouraged to "expose, acknowledge and address the discordant parts of themselves and one another."[58] Though friendships can certainly reaffirm old norms and categories of difference, they can also be central to unlocking this potential of the city as a site of new recognitions and hopeful subversions. Grounded in a recognition of dependency, mutuality, and vulnerability, friendships offer a degree of dynamism, potentially enabling new, unexpected interactions across difference that may gradually extend the reach of empathy beyond those closest in taste and disposition to ourselves.

While engaging similar themes of friendship, mutuality, and vulnerability, the last section of this essay shifts towards an interrogation of these terms as central experiences characterizing both the practice of fieldwork and the subjectivity of the researcher. I argue that friendship, dependency, and vulnerability, as modes of relating to one another, should

55 Drawing on Derrida's politics of friendship, Gandhi proposes that the renegotiation of subjectivity and community could be tackled via the trope of "guest-friendship," a conception of friendship that explicitly involves a love and an openness for what is foreign, "strange." This idea, she continues, represents a fundamentally utopian concept, as it necessarily takes the form of a deferred friendship: "a utopian mentality shows the way forward to a genuine cosmopolitanism, always open to the risky arrival of those not quite, not yet, covered by the privileges which secure our identity and keep us safe." Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," 19.

56 Gandhi, "Friendship and Postmodern Utopianism," 19.

57 See Lucetta Kam's chapter in this volume for an equally valid argument that mobility itself can be seen as a privilege not everyone can afford.

58 Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 354.

not be regarded as drawbacks hampering scientific objectivity. Rather, they can themselves be seen as methodologies that have the potential to decolonize and pluralize knowledge production.[59] In keeping with (feminist) scholarship which is increasingly exploring new modes of collaboration and co-authorship in order to "trouble diverse spaces and positions from where knowledge is made, mobilized,...and remade,"[60] working with friendship underscores our multiple accountabilities, as well as the different kinds of vulnerabilities that arise out of our unequal social locations. I argue that in an interconnected world, these cues prove vital to the making of new feminist alliances across borders and fields of practice.

## The subjectivity of the researcher and the feminist possibilities of fieldwork

A significant part of anthropological fieldwork, and its core methodology of participant observation, rely on the modalities of friendship. Participant observation functions as a form of intimate emplacement, "a *long-term* intimate engagement with *a group of people* that were once *strangers to us* in order to know and experience the world through their perspectives and actions in as *holistic* a way as possible."[61] Participant observation "moves along with," suggesting the need for both proximity and time. Its principle relies on the prospect of getting to know people intimately, engaging in daily habits and routines, in an effort to understand how people apprehend their social worlds, and how meanings are continuously embedded and reproduced in everyday life. Immersion is seen as an essential component to understanding people's actions within their specific context. The intimacies of fieldwork as long-term engagement involve experiences of instability and rupture; they contain many emotional states, such as happiness, frustrations, and tensions. As the women I worked with helped me to slowly become acquainted with the city, the lessons I learnt were not only illuminating for my research, but also had implications for my own decisions concerning everyday mobility in the city. My own body, its markers of social class, age, gender, ethnicity, and nationality also defined my experience of the city and the interactions I had while out and about. I learnt

59 Priti Ramamurthy recently highlighted this potential in a lecture delivered at the RC21 conference in Delhi. See Priti Ramamurthy, "'Delhi' of Dostis (Friends): What Kind of Brotherhood?" (Antipode RC21 Lecture, presented at the International Sociological Association Research Committee on Urban and Regional Development annual conference, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, India, September 2019). Drawing on her work on friendships among working-class male migrants in Delhi, she argues that working with friendship unsettles some of anthropology's predetermined foci, such as its "obsession" with kinship.

60 Richa Nagar, Özlem Aslan, Nadia Z. Hasan, Omme-Salma Rahemtullah, Nishant Upadhyay, and Begüm Uzun, "Feminisms, Collaborations, Friendships: A Conversation," *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 2 (2016): 507.

61 Alpa Shah, "Ethnography? Participant Observation, a Potentially Revolutionary Praxis," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (2017): 51, emphasis original.

about the many forms of embodied knowledge involved in ordinary navigation and dwelling in the city, through the sociality of fieldwork—the many transport rides that shuttled us across the city of Delhi, countless joint excursions, shared moments of elation and surprise, discomfort, and tiredness. There are inevitable vulnerabilities that emerge out of unfamiliar surroundings—vulnerabilities that are often compensated by those nearby. My interlocutors yelled at auto-drivers who had overcharged me or the men who had brushed up against me on the street.[62] In one instance, friends made sure I got home safely and had the chance to see a doctor when I had suddenly felt dizzy at one of the biggest student protests, surrounded by thousands of people, in central Delhi. In this way, research participants became friends, and emotional trials were negotiated together. Among many movements in and out of the field, becoming accustomed to the new rhythm of a place, and settling into a shared daily life, I was dependent on the ways others accepted me into their social worlds, as well as their help, whether in material or emotional forms, for coping in a new environment. "[O]ver time," Alpa Shah writes, "we will be profoundly intimate with the people we study, sometimes become kin, certainly no longer strangers, and will be able to maintain that productive-but-difficult tension between involvement and detachment as friends and scholars."[63]

At the same time, proximity and the privilege of being accepted into others' daily lives also entail a set of ethical commitments on behalf of the researcher. These are especially poignant in the context of anthropological fieldwork, in which research outcomes may depend on the creation of various forms of intimacy, trust, and empathy, and the relationship between researchers.[64] Moreover, field research demands a degree of abstraction in order to be able to question what is taken for granted and to relate practices to larger contexts of social and historical formations. Regarding these simultaneous processes of immersion and estrangement that accompany fieldwork, anthropologist Didier Fassin states that "[t]he combination of presence and distance thus has the consequence that familiarity is never devoid of alienation."[65] Despite feeling pleased with how my fieldwork was going, I had to ask myself what to make of such measures of closeness and distance. How could I address the way my own (gendered) bodily and emotional states shaped the fieldwork experience and the knowledge it

62 In a context where women's access to public space is challenged, the drawbacks of being a female researcher include threats of harassment, increased surveillance, or restrictions on mobility.

63 Shah, "Participant Observation, a Revolutionary Praxis," 51.

64 Feminist scholarship has made significant contributions to highlighting the ethical complexities of such relationships, noting how demands for scientific detachment can result in objectifying and exploitative relationships. See, for instance, Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Ann Oakley, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge, 1981).

65 Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), xii.

produced, without overburdening the narrative and taking away from the different worlds of risk other women are exposed to? Most importantly, how could I practice genuine accountability towards my friends and interlocutors? Central to these commitments were certainly transparency and reciprocity. I made an effort to always state my research objectives explicitly and offer my own personal information in order to enter into a more reciprocal flow of information. The women I maintained long-term relationships with frequently made off-hand references to my study. When I was staying next door to one of my participants, who had become a close friend, she jokingly told a common friend, "She's living right at the source now. I'm basically on-tap." She quickly assured me that she did not mind the occasional question; we often spoke about my progress, and I promised to share my work, once finished. Still, I continue to struggle with my accountabilities towards those who shared their time with me and to grapple with the fraught politics of representation in my writing practice. I have to routinely check my notes to establish what was shared in what context, so as not to breach anyone's trust. How peculiar it is now, after the fieldwork has ended, to analytically dissect friends' lives, or to discuss insight gained from them, at conferences.[66] These thoughts sharpen my commitment to representational fidelity, to be true to my fieldwork experience and to what our conversations and my reflection have led me to believe. I wish to account for the complex and intricate terrains of other people's lives, which are interminable and most importantly, irreducible. Flattening them out by turning them into objects of case studies would, as Tim Ingold put it, constitute a betrayal.[67] There is, moreover, a need to acknowledge that the stories the researcher hears in the field, are themselves transient. They are, after all, the kind of fluctuating stories we tell ourselves about ourselves at different junctures in time. The sharing of friendship and trust during fieldwork, therefore, most crucially underscores a responsibility to continuously interrogate the issues of authorship and representation in knowledge production.

Due to their intensity and affectivity, research encounters themselves could then constitute a dislodging that could be seen as a "nomadic shift," "a creative sort of becoming… that allows for otherwise unlikely encounters and unsuspected sources of interaction, experience and knowledge."[68] The intensity of interactions in the field confronts the researcher with her own dependencies and accustoms her to what Daniel Miller described as the

66 See Asha L. Abeyasekera, "Ethics and the 'Indigenous' Anthropologist: The Use of Friendship in Ethnographic Fieldwork," in *Sage Research Methods Cases Part 1*, ed. Nathan Emmerich (London: SAGE, 2017) for the similar, if not more complex, questions that the indigenous anthropologist faces when she works with friendships that predate fieldwork.

67 Tim Ingold, "Anthropology Contra Ethnography," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (2017).

68 Braidotti, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject," 182.

"humbling experience of ethnography."[69] As a form of sympathetic listening, this "humbling" ideally contributes to a more receptive state of empathetic proximity, forcing us to fully recognize the co-dependency of knowledge production, while simultaneously reminding the researcher / writer of the various structures (capitalist, patriarchal, [neo]colonial, racialized, etc.) she is herself embedded in.[70] This understanding of scientific subjectivity as a self-questioning one that recognizes its ethical accountabilities, as well as the contextual nature of the researcher's beliefs, enables knowledge to become pluralized, defying expectations and prefigured assumptions.[71]

The need to interrupt the mostly unacknowledged universalization of parochial (Eurocentric) theoretical paradigms has been well-established within feminist scholarship. The task to continuously re-examine categories of feminist scholarship is particularly pertinent due to feminism's "dual character as both an *analytical* and a *politically prescriptive* project."[72] In a similar vein, Marilyn Strathern argues in *Before and After Gender* that the aims of Western notions of feminism cannot be separated from the culturally specific conceptions of personhood prevalent in Western societies, in which the gendered inequalities they seek to address, are grounded.[73] I take from this a need to remain attentive to culturally and historically formed images of emancipation and resistance so as to review my own understanding of ideology, and to the fact that the terms of feminist projects are not universal but rooted in particular intellectual traditions. Saba Mahmood concludes that it is not enough to be "faithful to the desires and aspirations of 'my informants' and [urges her] audience to 'understand and respect' the diversity of desires that characterizes our world today."[74] Rather, she argues for the need to highlight that "the political project of feminism is not predetermined but needs to be continually negotiated

69 Daniel Miller, "Anthropology is the Discipline but the Goal is Ethnography," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7, no. 1 (2017): 30.

70 See Nagar, Aslan, Hasan, Rahemtullah, Upadhyay, and Uzun, "Feminisms, Collaborations, Friendships."

71 This understanding also stands in stark contrast to what Gillian Rose called a "social-scientific masculinity." Rose describes this masculinity as one that "peers into the world, denying its own positionality, mapping its spaces in the same manner in which Western white male bodies explored, recorded, surveyed and appropriated spaces from the sixteenth century onwards: from a disembodied location free from sexual attack or racist violence." Gillian Rose, "Women and Everyday Spaces," in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 365. She goes on to quote Donna Haraway's description of the "'West's' escalating dominations of abstract individuation, an ultimate self untied at last from all dependency, a man in space." Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 151, quoted in Rose, "Women and Everyday Spaces," 365.

72 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 10, emphasis original.

73 Marilyn Strathern, *Before and After Gender: Sexual Mythologies of Everyday Life* (Chicago: HAU Books, 2016).

74 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 38.

within specific contexts."[75] There is great potential in an open-ended inquiry into the variety of "empirical workings of gender" to dismantle the "hubris of much contemporary politics, which, in sublime ignorance of the past, not only naturalizes the present but limits the possibilities of the future."[76]

Finally, a question that remains unanswered is how to address the conditions brought about by intensified globalized cultural exchange, international migrations, transnational mass media, and consumer cultures, amid varied processes of local translations and re-interpretation.[77] In short, the question is how to investigate the constitution of gender difference under conditions of interconnected lifeworlds, "[f]or somewhere along the way, the meaning of 'struggle' and 'fight' as well as that of 'difference' and 'others' and 'us' have all transformed beyond recognition."[78] The challenge is no longer to render the unknown understandable but to recognize the multiplicity and entanglement of cultural configurations. There is a need, then, to examine the mutability of cultural categories under conditions of cultural change, while simultaneously highlighting internal heterogeneity and diversity. Cities, in this regard, can be seen as spaces of intense deconstruction and redefinition, yet they also demonstrate the persistence of gendered orders and their reconstitution under new conditions of globalized consumer capitalism. These developments have further implications for the ethics of feminist research and writing.[79] They call for a style of writing in which ethnographic co-presence is preserved and the sensibility of participant observation, as a mode of correspondence intent on understanding yet recognizing the researchers' positionality, is accounted for. We may tie these requirements to existing formulations of feminist writing practices that do not claim to speak *for*, but to speak on the basis of inquiries and reflection, in order to arrive at a dialogue that others can respond to (see, for instance, Audre Lorde's notion of "responsible writing"[80] and Trinh T. Minh-ha on "speaking nearby"[81]). Moreover, in order to mount challenges to the status quo and to create possibilities

75 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 38.

76 Mrinalini Sinha, "A Global Perspective on Gender: What's South Asia Got to Do with It?" In *South Asian Feminisms: Contemporary Interventions*, ed. Ania Loomba and Ritty A. Lukose (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 370–371.

77 As Braidotti writes, "one of the features of our present historical condition is the shifting grounds on which periphery and center confront each other, with a new level of complexity which defies dualistic or oppositional thinking." Braidotti, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject," 180; see also Mae, "Auf dem Weg zu einer transkulturellen Genderforschung."

78 Annemarie Mol, "Differences within: Feminism and Us," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 3 (2016): 406.

79 They also demand a redressal of power imbalances within academia, and the facilitation of a greater degree of exchange, as well as a reallocation of resources to other modes of knowledge-making that reach other audiences.

80 Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983).

81 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Georgetown University Press, 1989).

for dissenting and diverging voices to be heard, we need to formulate our arguments out of engagement between interconnected realms. As forms of relational sociality that force us to critically confront our vulnerabilities and accountabilities, the modalities of friendship may well guide us in such a project to generate "situated solidarities across locations,"[82] which ask us "to recognize and share our most tender and fragile moments, our memories and mistakes in moments of translation, in moments of love."[83] Correspondence, interdependency, and engagement with difference are, after all, creative processes that challenge us to respond more adequately to changing conditions and imagine new (political) possibilities.

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