



Navigating the emotion-embodiment-language nexus in international research: Stories from a foreign researcher and local interpreter

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ABSTRACT

Feminist researchers engage reflexively with questions of how power operates through intersubjective processes like building rapport, obtaining consent, and being accountable in the 'field.' But how do researchers build these connections across embodied and linguistic differences in interlingual research involving local interpretation? In this paper, we delve into our experiences as a foreign researcher and a local interpreter conducting interviews and group discussions with low-income women waste workers in India. We focus on our co-navigations of positionality and power with a focus on language, emotion, and embodiment in connecting with participants and reflect on how interpretation and translation processes can mediate, complicate, and enrich connection-building. We argue that emotional, embodied, and linguistic challenges and opportunities are not uniformly experienced between differently positioned team members and require space to grapple with divergent experiences, understandings, and outcomes that emerge across this nexus. We detail three research encounters, analyzing the nuances of positionality in our divergent roles; our navigations of care and refusal manifesting across the triple subjectivity of encounters; and our strategies for working across languages, embodiment, and emotion in the colonial past-present. The paper contributes to feminist, anti-colonial methodologies by providing insights into our experiences of connection-building in the 'field' and revealing the 'scaffolding' work and relations which support our processes and pursuits of ethnographic research, translation, and accountability.

1. Introduction

How do researchers connect with participants and communities in ethnographic research? Further, how do researchers build relationships of trust and solidarity with participants and communities across embodied and linguistic differences in intercultural research involving linguistic translation? Feminist methodological literatures in the social sciences have long grappled with these issues and highlight the need for researchers to critically reflect on issues of positionality and power relations in research, to build trust and solidarities with participants and communities, to value and privilege marginalized voices, to navigate ongoing informed consent through caring and empathetic relations, to be accountable to participants, and avoid exploitation in knowledge production processes (see, [Miraftab 2004](#); [Nagar, 2002](#); [Pacheco-Vega](#)

and [Parizeau 2018](#); [Rose 1997](#)). A rich body of feminist methodological work also delves into the relational particularities of field research, emphasizing researchers' navigations of the complexities of insider-outsider identities in relation to research participants and of working in colonial past-present contexts ([Faria and Mollett 2016](#); [Mullings 1999](#); [Parikh 2020](#); [Smyth, 2023](#); [Sultana 2007](#)). Further, for international and intercultural research, feminist thinkers also highlight the important role of local interpreters in translating and mediating knowledge production processes, noting a lack of engagement with the experiences of interpreters themselves in ethnographic research ([Berman and Tyyskä 2010](#); [Temple and Edwards 2002](#); [Turner, 2010](#)). Given the commitment of feminist geographers in revealing the processes behind research, this paper contributes to critical feminist geographical methodologies by revealing the "scaffolding" – or the social relations,

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human infrastructures, and activities (see, [Rosaldo 2014](#); [Zuntz 2018](#))—that are foundational in supporting ethnographic knowledge production but are seldom engaged with in academic forums.

In this paper, we take ‘connection’ as our point of focus in order to delve into the relationalities of our work as a foreign (White, Canadian) woman researcher and a local (Muslim, Queer, Indian) woman interpreter conducting interviews and group discussions with low-income, Dalit women engaged in stigmatized urban waste labour¹ in Ahmedabad, India over the span of 18 months. Our aim in retrospectively focusing on our co-navigations of positionality within research encounters is to provide methodological insights into how we connect with others through research and how interpretation and translation processes can mediate, complicate, and/or enrich connection-building and storytelling. We engage across a nexus of language, emotion, and the body to complicate feminist, anti-colonial research commitments to building trust and rapport through research, especially in contexts where participants and communities are marginalized or made vulnerable by local political-economic and social structures.² We argue that emotional, embodied, and linguistic challenges and opportunities often are not uniformly experienced between differently positioned research team members and these relations require space in which to explore and grapple with divergent experiences, understandings, and outcomes in research encounters across this nexus. In these spaces, we don’t just translate language, but continually talk together in-depth about how our presences and the triple-subjectivities of these encounters shape (and are shaped by) the stories being shared, our navigations care and refusal, and perceptions of privilege and accountability which emerge and are embedded our work in the colonial past-present.

The paper proceeds with a review of feminist literatures and concepts pertaining to positionality and power and the embodiment-emotion-language nexus we describe in the paper. We then discuss the methods we used in reconstructing and analyzing research encounters for this paper and situate ourselves in relation to the research participants and context. We then recount three stories from the research, analyzing our co-navigations of the encounters and conclude by providing insights for engaging across the nexus of embodiment, emotion, and language in intercultural, multi-lingual research in post-colonial settings.

2. Power relations, interpretation, and feminist research methodologies

To inform our engagements with women recyclers in India, we find methodological scholarship from feminist geographies, development studies, and anti-colonial praxis to be instructive for thinking through how we engage with positionality in terms of embodiment, emotion, and language in research encounters with participants who experience multidimensional precarities in their everyday lives.

¹ Informal recycling is an informal economic activity whereby self-employed workers collect, segregate, and sell recyclable materials from discarded urban waste (i.e. from roadsides, dumpsites, doorsteps, waste bins, etc). Informal recycling labour in Ahmedabad has long been performed by women from Dalit communities who are marginalized through many aspects of social, political, and economic life, most notably through their perceived untouchability within caste labour regimes and their poverty (see, [Butt 2019](#); [Dias and Samson 2016](#); [Wittmer, 2023a](#), [Wittmer, 2023b](#); [Kornberg, 2019](#)).

² We perceived women recycler participants in the study as occupying vulnerable positions in many overlapping aspects of their lives because of the stigmatization they experience due to their occupational affiliation with garbage; their gender, class and caste identities as Dalit women from low-income areas; and because over half of study participants self-identified as being illiterate (see, [Wittmer, 2021](#)).

2.1. Embodied research

Methodological literatures emerging from feminist scholars in geography and the social sciences since the “reflexive turn” highlight concerns about ‘fieldwork’ engagements in international, intercultural, and postcolonial contexts. In considering the ethics of fieldwork and the politics of knowledge production, feminist scholars ask questions about what it means to produce knowledge in a body and identify concerns and strategies that are now core to reflecting on power relations in research praxis for avoiding extractive research, especially in working with communities and individuals who may be marginalized in society. These include strategies to situate researchers in the context of their work ([Haraway 1991](#); [Kobayashi, 1994](#)); to critically reflect on the complexities of positionality and the inter- and triple-subjectivities of research ([Mollett and Faria 2018](#); [Mullings 1999](#); [Parikh 2020](#); [Sultana 2007](#)); to build trust and be accountable to participants, communities, and organizations ([Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau 2018](#)); to privilege marginalized voices and experiences ([Benson and Nagar 2006](#); [Wolf, 1996](#)); and to cultivate robust and ongoing informed consent processes to understand subtleties of refusal in local contexts ([Coddington 2017](#); [Smyth, 2023](#)). Further, in work emerging from engagements with communities and individuals experiencing poverty, scholars cite commitments to responsibility, relevancy, care, and solidarity as key motivations in undertaking work on issues of impoverishment, ([Baillie Smith and Jenkins, 2012](#); [Barford 2017](#); [Lawson and Elwood 2014](#)). These reflexive commitments in feminist research provide a rich set of ethical practices for undertaking research across embodied difference and power geometries.

Anti-colonial engagements with embodied research ‘in the field’ also delve into what the presence of researchers can mean to participants and communities in postcolonial research encounters. Here, research is understood to be set within “colonial past-presents” that inform and extend beyond individual research encounters and where identity and privilege are relationally reproduced and performed in everyday language, encounters, and social norms and are not necessarily tied to assumed and fixed categories or power and privilege ([Faria et al., 2021a](#): 89; [Faria and Mollett 2016](#); [Smyth, 2023](#)). This anti-colonial work poses a challenge to “identity-based reflexivity” statements centered on scholars’ pre-determined categories of identity and privilege. Instead, these scholars emphasize the ways that categories and power geometries are “created, enacted, and transformed in and through these [research] interactions” ([Nagar, 2002](#), p.182-183). By thinking through of the relationalities embedded in research encounters, we can reflect on how the embodied presence of researchers and research activities can evoke various responses, reactions, assumptions, and associations from research participants and communities and reproduce colonial power geometries in a myriad of ways ([Faria and Mollett 2016](#), p.80; [Faria et al., 2021b](#)). These feminist and anti-colonial interventions on embodied research indicate not only the importance of reflecting on questions of what it means to produce research in a body, but also on how these interactions are subject to triple subjectivity – between researcher, interpreter, and participant ([Temple and Edwards, 2002](#)) – and on the ways in which embodiment cannot be separated from emotion in research encounters.

2.2. Emotion in research

An ‘emotional turn’ in geography has advanced empirical and methodological engagements with emotion in research, particularly in qualitative and ethnographic work (see, [Blakely 2007](#); [González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2020](#); [Faria and Mollett 2016](#); [Mahanty et al., 2023](#); [Sultana 2015](#)). This turn has signaled an engagement with emotional experiences during research, not as external to collecting data or as “a mere side-effect of doing ethnography”, but instead, as “emotional labour” and a “central part of the job” ([Zuntz 2018](#), p.6, citing [Blix and Wettergren, 2015](#)). Scholars conducting ethnographic research particularly refer to cultivating “ethnographic sensibility” as a form of emotional skill-building in research ([Henderson 2016](#);

McGranahan 2018; Pacheco-Vega 2016), and in committing to producing real-world applications of research with relevancy to participants and local organizations (Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau 2018; Nagar, 2002). Across the methodological literatures in feminist and development geographies, we notice a lot of engagement with emotion-laden terminologies like trust, care, empathy, and rapport in discussions of power, consent, representation, and knowledge production. However, questions remain about how these terminologies are defined and practiced in research, especially in contexts wherein researchers are working in cross-cultural and multilingual contexts with the assistance of local interpreters.

Emerging from these literatures, we are thinking through critical questions about how we recognize and identify emotions across cultures and languages and are considering how our perceptions, recognition, and labeling of others' emotions goes on to inform our reflexive praxis, theory building, and relationships with participants. To do so, we reflect on theories of practice from clinical fields like social work, psychotherapy, and healthcare ethics which enable us to think practically about this question of 'how' we build connections with others through the practice of emotional skills in research. For example, Brown (2021) describes empathy as one's ability to understand and "reflect back" what another person is experiencing (p.9). Empathy is understood as vital to emotions research and clinical practice, where cognitive empathy³ – or perspective taking and the capacity to recognize emotions in others without taking them on yourself – is especially important (Bondi, 2005; Brown, 2021; Decety and Yoder, 2016; Wiseman, 1996). Working with and through emotion thus does not rely on one's ability to fully comprehend and categorize a complexity of emotions expressed by participants or team members. Rather, it requires relational active processes of listening, attending to non-verbal cues, and paying attention to the ever-changing situation around the conversation and the power relations therein (see, Mahanty et al., 2023). In this way, we consider cognitive empathy a continual practice of reading across these overt, subtle, and situational cues in an effort to connect to what someone is expressing about their experience and then communicating in a way that lets them know that you are there and not distancing yourself from their fear, joy, shame, or anger. We find these theories of practice to be helpful in deepening our praxis for not only of listening to difficult stories in our work, but also in our efforts to recognize the subtleties of consent and refusal in research with participants who have very different life experiences to our own. These themes also arise in Faria and Mollett's (2016) nuanced analyses of emotions in colonial past-present contexts of fieldwork mentioned above. Yet the work of interpreting encounters and producing knowledge are further complicated and under-explored in research involving local translators and research assistants.

2.3. Language and interpretation

Methodological reflections from international qualitative research in feminist geography and the social sciences highlight the important role of local interpreters in knowledge production. These literatures highlight how, more than just providing linguistic translations, interpreters act as "cultural brokers" in research (Temple and Young 2004, p.171; Berman and Tyyskä, 2010). However, an interpreter's embodied presence, beliefs (social, political, religious), physical and spoken responses to participants, and participants own perceptions of the interpreter complicate research encounters with various impacts toward enriching, stalling, or disrupting interactions (Jones and Ficklin 2012). In this paper, we build upon work which problematizes the relative invisibility of interpreters (see, Caretta, 2015; Temple and Edwards 2002; Turner

³ Often described in these literatures in contrast to affective empathy, or experience sharing, where one emotionally attunes into another person's experience.

2010), by providing insights into our embodied, emotional, and linguistic co-navigations of research as a foreign researcher and local interpreter.

Our reflections on these practices and strategies are informed by our use of daily debriefing sessions and field note-taking practices where we reflected on the day's research encounters. These practices enabled us to explore our positionalities and shifting relationships with the research, participants, and each other in daily conversation via "everyday talk" or what Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) refer to as "kitchen table reflexivity," enabling researchers to interrogate the fluidity of identity within the research and to "not simply reduce identity to a laundry list of perceived similarities and differences" (p.747). These conversations also enabled us to talk through and unearth deeper meanings emerging from the interviews by discussing what was said, emphasized, what happened, what historical or place-based references were made, the dialects or slang used, the non-verbal cues (i.e. body language, gesture, eye contact), and the ways that we sometimes differently interpreted events. We find Richa Nagar's (2018) conceptualization of "hungry translation" to be an apt articulation of "the impossibility of arriving at perfect translation ... [which] keeps the relationships hungry for continuing to grapple with fluid and unresolvable sets of incommensurabilities" emanating from "an intense relationality and the shifting specifics of a given moment." (p.29).

The above feminist, anti-colonial, international, and practice-oriented literatures help us to reflect on questions about the intersubjectivities of how we connect with others, value stories, and produce knowledge in international research. We are also considering the temporalities of this work, that while we are discussing encounters as 'snapshot moments' in time, they are necessarily situated in the colonial-past-present, with a more longitudinal construction. Core to our approach in debriefing and reflecting on these encounters together is then the practice of continually "reminding ourselves and one another of the violent histories and geographies that we inherit and embody despite our desires to disown them (Nagar, 2019, p.239). By engaging across embodied, emotional, and linguistic navigations of positionality within our engagements within these stories, we dwell in moments of discomfort, joy, uncertainty, and bittersweet to carefully consider the ways in which we continue to practice research and learn from encounters in context.

3. Collective biography and auto-methods

Our methods for this paper involve memory work and story reconstruction inspired by literatures on collective biography and autoethnography in feminist geographies and the social sciences. Collective biography is a structured methodological approach that enables multiple people to "problematize experience in a systematic way in order to generate insights into wider social processes imbued with power" (Hawkins et al., 2020, p.2). With an eye toward grappling with normative discourses, practices, and structures, collective biography methods prompt participants to sense our own and others' experiences of our vulnerabilities and roles in relation to these structures (Davies and Gannon 2006). Although collective biography practices generally involve groups (i.e., of at least four people), we take inspiration from this structured collective approach used by other feminist geographers (see, Hawkins et al., 2016; Kern et al., 2014) to inform our work in reconstructing and analyzing our research encounters. In doing so, we also look to autoethnographic methods in the social sciences to inform our approach in reflexively analyzing and representing our intersubjective experiences and relations through writing (Moss and Besio 2019; de Leeuw et al., 2017).

We have been discussing this paper since our debriefing sessions in 2017, where we were reviewing, discussing, and transcribing follow-up interviews and group workshop discussions with women recyclers in India. In late 2021, we found space to finally dive into this idea and we each reviewed our field notes and journals, WhatsApp chat thread, and

the observation notes we each included at the top of each interview transcript, making note of entries where we reflected on how we were feeling, how we were connecting (or struggling to connect) with participants, and any reflections of the translation and debriefing processes. We held a series of monthly meetings through 2022 where we reflected on shared writing prompts (or ‘memory questions’) and followed an iterative process where we talked through our respective writings, attuning to the embodied and emotional experiences of our stories, and then through these discussions, narrowed our wider discussions down to 4 specific encounters to reconstruct, discuss, write, and analyze together. At this stage, we also listened back to audio recordings (when applicable) to help with our writing and analysis. Similar to the research process itself, our writing and analysis of these moments has required our sustained commitment to having regular conversations, structured reflections, and to care for each other in our approach to humble, non-judgmental dialogues and enduring friendship.

4. Positioning ourselves within the research

As a white Canadian citizen, my work (Josie Wittmer) on the social dimensions of waste labour in India is embedded in colonial histories and legacies of British imperial rule in India, where British (i.e. white) bodies, rules, and practices were associated with the colonial projects of civilization and modernity (Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Raychaudhuri 2001). My presence in India is also linked with the growing involvement of European and North American governments and intergovernmental institutions in India’s economic and social development landscapes of the last 30 years. Here, neocolonial structural economic reforms and projects of international development have led to foreign experts, consultants, development workers, and researchers traveling to/from India to implement various programs, with various motivations and impacts (Kothari 2006; Murali, 2017; Rai 2002). Throughout the research, my embodied presence in the interviews as a ‘gori’ (a colloquial term for a fair-skinned woman many participants used to refer to me) evoked various stories and emotions from participants linked to these colonial and developmental past-presents.

While gender provided some necessary common ground (i.e. over talking about marriage, mothers-in-law, and women’s health issues) and participants could be more at ease with my presence, racialized colonial discourses around the perceived superiority of whiteness and ways that whiteness had been directly experienced by participants in developmental contexts (i.e. through the presence of NGOs in some areas) led to many participants initially representing themselves to us in ways that might prompt a certain response from me. For example, when we first approached women to participate in the study, some might emphasize their poverty, asking for money or other benefits while others highlighted their strength and self-sufficiency to gain respect and admiration for their independence. From these early encounters, I learned to introduce myself to participants as a student from Canada who wanted to learn about recycling from the ‘real experts’ (as opposed to politicians, planners, etc.). I spoke in Gujarati to introduce myself and tried responding to women’s questions to emphasize that I was learning Gujarati because many of the participants expressed pride in their language and many did not speak much Hindi.

The ongoing legacies of colonial power structures embedded in our research encounters also intersect with oppressions of religious and sexual minorities in India. As a Queer Muslim woman who grew up inside Ahmedabad’s old walled city in a lower socio-economic family, my work (Mubina Qureshi) as an interpreter on this project is intertwined with local dynamics of class, caste religious, and heteronormative forms of violence. The othering of Muslim bodies and communities in India has roots in the colonial politics of enumeration, categorization, and separation, which fed an emerging discourse of division through which people came to think of themselves as members of a religious group rather than as citizens of a unified state (Kaviraj 1997; Chandhoke, 2009). Today, these colonial notions of separation combine with

contemporary politics of Hindu nationalism⁴ to “articulate an urban citizenship against Ahmedabad’s religious minorities,” which continues to reproduce the city as an exclusionary and violent place for religious minorities (Desai 2012, p.32; Chatterjee 2009; Roy 2023). Hailing from a caste oppressed community myself, these research encounters were a constant reminder to me of the necessity of solidarity-building with other caste-oppressed communities while also being reflexive of my privilege in coming from a ‘higher’ caste relative to the women recyclers and from a formally educated position. Further, as a Muslim woman, I have experienced discrimination (including the fracturing of my neighbourhood during the 2002 riots in Gujarat) and know that the suspicion and othering of Muslim people is still strongly embedded in many communities. In this context, popular perceptions of Muslim women have been limited to stereotypes of submissive, ‘burqa/niqab’ wearing ‘others.’

During the research, the participants did not realize or could not assume my religious (or Queer) identities because I did not outwardly present myself in a way that would reveal them. My brown skin colour, my ability to speak and understand different dialects of Gujarati, my attire and gender expressions as a woman (wearing a simple *kurti*), and my interest in their stories made me more acceptable to participants as an insider, “a local girl” (as many older women expressed), and “one of them” (or a Hindu), evidenced in the fact that some were comfortable to make rather hostile off-hand comments to me about ‘Muslims’ during the interviews. When such comments were made, I reacted innocuously and if/when appropriate, engaged them in a short constructive dialogue about the importance of building solidarity between minority caste and religious groups using local contextual and linguistic examples (e.g. of the 2002 riots and ways that majoritarian politics and propaganda from upper caste and class groups spread hatred in our communities). However, my outsidership was also obvious due to my ‘modern’ look (having a short hair style), English language skills, and my job working with a *gori* had the effect of privileging me above other local people, including themselves. I deliberately avoided talking about my Queerness, religion, or political views to build rapport and to maintain my safety. Although we endeavored to minimize the distance between ourselves and participants, navigating my position as an insider-outsider was complex, as at times, I had to emphasize my modern, educated, or ‘westernized’ differences as a protective measure.⁵

5. Stories from a foreign researcher and local interpreter

“YOU are intruding on HIS space!”

In the second year of the research, we were sitting down in a park to share some study findings, information for local resources, and snacks/chaï with five participants when a rather large domestic dog enthusiastically ran up to us and started running in circles around our group.

[MQ]: Immediately, I knew the women were afraid of the dog – they even said so. I looked around for the owner – a man in his late 20s wearing a name brand athleisure outfit and holding an empty dog leash

⁴ The project of Hindu nationalism, or ‘Hindutva’ (a nationalist ideology whereby India is viewed as a Hindu nation) has long been advanced (in combination with economic liberalization) by the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has held a majority government in Gujarat since 1990 and India’s Central Government since 2014 (Björkman 2014; Desai 2012).

⁵ For example, some participants asked about Mubina’s caste or last name, which would reveal her family’s religious affiliation. A common response for her to avoid this question was saying that I didn’t believe in caste hierarchies, to which one participant noted to another, “see, she is educated and modern, so doesn’t believe in traditional things like us.” After debriefing on this encounter, Josie learned to identify how this question and was able to interject and distract from this line of questioning, usually by asking if the women wanted to see a photo of her family or partner.

was calling out to the dog, but it continued to run free. I called out to him, asking if he would please come take his dog away from us. He responded with indignation, shouting – “this is his usual place and YOU are intruding on HIS space”. I took this to mean that we did not belong in this place – indicating that poor, Dalit women did not belong in the public park. I was furious but remained calm. I led him away from our group to avoid embarrassing the women and explained to him that dogs are a fearful thing for *these* women, that *they* are not familiar with dogs as pets, and that *we* are guests here today. I had to assert myself using my language skills and education status – using a polished ‘proper’ form of Gujarati learned in local Gujarati medium schools to imply that I was of a privileged or educated class, like him. After a few exchanges in this way, he calmed down, caught the dog, and put its leash back on. As he started to walk away, he called back to me, “Now don’t say anything more, otherwise I will tell the dog will bite you!” In this encounter, I was focused on calming this man and managing my own emotional and verbal responses to his behaviour in my efforts to lead him away from the group and be sensitive to the women’s feelings and pride. When I returned to the group, I was feeling so frustrated and didn’t know how to start translating the exchange in the moment, but was relieved that the group was already seated back down, laughing and taking out the snacks. I was able to take a breath and think about the workshop again, knowing Josie and I would unpack the encounter in detail afterwards.

[JW]: When the dog ran up to us, I immediately recognized the women were afraid because they stood up and were trying to move away from the dog (an excited Labrador retriever), talking quickly and gathering closer together each time it returned. I instinctively jumped up with the women and focused on intercepting the dog and sending it away, even pretending to throw a ball. Mubina and I and communicated quickly in English that I would manage the dog and she would locate the human. While she was talking with the man, I tried to reassure the women in Gujarati, saying “*thik chhe, shanti*” (it’s ok, be calm) and used a hand gesture I had observed locally to indicate calm. Once the dog was leashed, I gestured for the women to sit back down with me. I could understand Mubina’s interaction was tense from the tone, so I started taking out the snacks we had brought and the women started helping me arrange them on plates. As the man and dog departed, we heard him say something back toward Mubina, which I didn’t understand, but I could tell from his tone and the women’s facial responses that it was rude. I reacted by looking at the woman with an exasperated facial expression, widening my eyes, and exhaling loudly while making a subtle dismissive hand gesture (another which I had observed in the local context) towards him. They all started laughing and giving me high-fives – which Mubina also received when she sat down with us a moment later. We then chatted with the group for an hour, despite us pausing frequently to ask if they wanted to leave and get back to work as they had earlier requested a ‘quick’ meeting with us.

5.1. Reflections on positionality and divergent roles and experiences

Occasional interruptions from bystanders were one of the biggest complications we navigated in connecting with participants in public spaces and their communities alike. Such interruptions necessitated our reflexive improvisations, including a mix of subtle and overt signals, facial expressions, quickly spoken plans in English between us, body language (i.e. matching positioning - sitting on the ground with participants- and angling ourselves/attention toward the participants and away from others), and linguistic strategies to communicate with each other, the participants, and other actors momentarily entering the interaction. As [Faria and Mollett \(2016\)](#) describe different people’s readings and reactions to their embodied positions and statuses in the field relative to colonial legacies and presences, we similarly had to try and read, understand, and respond to different interruptions to our conversations with participants based on how different people approached, physically positioned themselves, and spoke to us. We then to quickly develop strategies that leveraged our different embodied

positions and linguistic skills to address the interruptions while simultaneously explicitly showing the participant(s) that they were our priority. Research encounters are porous spaces subject not only to the triple-subjectivity of the researcher, interpreter, and participation, but also the multiple subjectivities of those who may momentarily pop in and out of the interactions.

Our response in this scenario involved a practice of cognitive empathy – or perspective taking – in recognizing the complex relationalities of the people, social relations, and space interacting around us ([Brown, 2021](#); [Mahanty et al., 2023](#)). Here, we were both deliberately mindful of caste relations and the ways untouchability emerges through subtle (and overt) interactions in public space – like the claiming of space for a dog – and we drew inferences from the women’s response to the dog and our knowledge of caste, class, and gender hierarchies that it was important for us to deal with the situation calmly and quickly so as not to draw further attention. Practicing empathy in this situation was not about taking on a feeling of fear for the dog, but was about understanding that this scenario was creating fear and potentially shame and had potential to escalate and make the women even more uncomfortable in the space, so we acted in ways that expressed our comprehension of these intersecting social norms, embodied presences, and emotional responses in ways that we hoped would foster solidarity with them, rather than producing distance.

Our positionalities and the colonial past-present contexts were always embedded in these interactions – both as part of the cause *for* them and in our responses *to* them in different spaces and at different times. For example, although we tried to be careful to choose locations and times at the convenience/suggestion of participants and to find spaces where our presences wouldn’t draw unnecessary attention, this incident reminded us of the continual renegotiations of identity and space required in our work. Just because we had used that park for interviews without issue in the past, it didn’t mean that our use of this space wouldn’t be challenged this time, as this was not a usual space for women recyclers to hang out.

Finally, this encounter also highlights the ways that challenges, connections, and strategies are not uniformly experienced by the two of us because of our different positions and skills in a particular setting. An emotional, embodied, or/and linguistic challenge for one person could be occurring at the same time as an opportunity for the other to connect. Emotional encounters could be extremely difficult for a local interpreter to translate or navigate in the moment but could simultaneously be an opportunity for a foreign researcher to physically express solidarity, care, and/or connect. Although our responses in these situations often necessitated improvisation in the moment, they were informed by our prior work during in-depth daily discussions where we talked through challenges, developed terminologies, strategies, and subtle signals with each other, and learned how to tune into each other’s emotions, for example, in recognizing each other’s physical expressions of stress and communicating about the support we each need in such circumstances.

“If I explain all these things, I will cause her sadness”

As we were winding down a follow-up interview with a participant we both cherished and had visited on invitation at her home, Josie asked Mubina to ask the woman if she had any questions for us or anything further she wanted to tell us or to emphasize about what we had discussed together. In response, she took both of our hands, looked between both of us and spoke:

[MQ]: She said “what more can I ask of you? My life is very difficult and full of sadness. If I explain everything, I will cause her (Josie) sadness.” I felt that she was perceiving Josie as ‘a fragile white woman’ – a common local stereotype of female whiteness – and I struggled to find the words to convey the meaning of what she had said for Josie. I quickly translated, “she’s saying her life is difficult and she doesn’t want to cause you sadness.” However, there was also an implied connection for me, where despite our differences in class and education status, as a local woman, I could perhaps understand her difficulties, which she feared

would upset a white woman. I interpreted her physical and verbal response toward us was an act of care – that she did not want to upset us, especially as guests in her home, with any more stories or sadness and would prefer for us to feel happy in departing her home.

[JW]: When she spoke and squeezed our hands, I squeezed her hand back and held her gaze while holding her 5-month-old grandson on my lap with my other arm. When Mubina translated what the woman had said, I understood her combined physical and verbal response as a kind refusal – that she had shared all she wanted to share with us that day. I avoided the urge to try and communicate that I could handle hearing difficult stories and instead responded through Mubina that we were grateful for her time and were thankful for stories she had already told us. In my blend of Gujarat-English, I then added, “*tamara* (your) smile is *bau saras chhe* (very good/beautiful).” Here, I was referencing a point she had emphasized earlier in our conversation – that she was proud of her smile because she had not “ruined her teeth by using *chhikni* power and chewing tobacco like other women” in her community. Rather than asking her to continue to be vulnerable with us, I tried to acknowledge something she had emphasized with pride about herself so she too could end our visit happily and not with sadness. We then all embraced, I handed her grandson back to her, and we departed from each other.

5.2. Reflections on interpreting care and refusal

In debriefing on this interview, we talked through the nuances of the participant’s statement, that she didn’t want to make us, but especially Josie sad by telling *all* of her stories, and the different meanings that we each interpreted out of her statement and body language in the moment. Mubina further unpacked the nuances of her interpretation of the participants’ words and meaning in terms of the implications for understanding white femininity and how the participant was being sensitive to us both and wanted us to feel happy and well in the space of her home.⁶ Josie then explained her understanding of this moment as a refusal to tell more stories and her decision to stop asking questions and to instead refer to her smile in ending the time together on a point of pride for the participant. By unpacking and reflecting on the words, emotional expressions, and body language comprising this moment across our different positions, we were able to gain a deeper understanding of a simple interaction as a simultaneous expression of refusal and care. We could also understand in this moment how participants define and distinguish the privilege, abilities, and/or intentions of researchers (and team members) relative to their own social values and experiences (Mirafab, 2004). In this way, interpreting across languages and cultures had the impact of complicating but also enriching the interaction, which then went on to inform our future navigations and improvisations in the research.

This encounter reveals that care is something that we navigated across the triple-subjectivity of our research encounters. Caring is not merely something that researchers do for participants in attempts to empathize or connect through research activities but can be a shared experience, where participants also care *for* researchers and team members (Faria and Mollett, 2016; Nagar 2019). We observed this in how participants invited us to their homes and the ways they were careful in how they spoke in sharing their stories or pain with us. We also came to interpret care as being necessarily linked to time, whereby

⁶ Local cultural norms and customs emphasize the importance of welcoming and treating guests well – or the ‘*guest is God*’ as a mentality. In this context, it is important that guests leave your home feeling cared for and well (i.e., happy and well-fed). Common greetings when you are welcoming people to your home in Gujarati are centered around food (e.g. “*jami lidhu*” – “did you eat?” or “*jami ne aaya?*” – “Have you come after eating?”) where food is quite core to cultural and linguistic expressions of care, especially by women. In visiting participants’ homes, we were always offered some kind of snack or chai as part of this culture of hospitality and care.

giving time – by stopping work or inviting us home as well as explaining details and telling stories—participants were also expressing care for us and our work.⁷ However, we also learned that as an inter-cultural and multi-lingual team, we could express, understand, receive, and respond to these triply subjective forms of care in different ways through our (sometimes differing) observations and felt responses to verbal and non-verbal language based on our different embodied positions/identities and cultural knowledges.

Working with care as feminist geographic praxis in this setting required a grounding of our linguistic, embodied, and emotional navigations of power and positionality in the colonial past-present (Faria et al., 2021b). From our experiences working together as a white, foreign researcher and local interpreter, we contend that this takes a slow and iterative approach to building connections and interpreting meaning across a language-emotion-body nexus with each other and in encounters with participants. This work also required our diligence in attending to the various ways through which we continually learn to recognize and respond to care and subtle refusals (and caring subtle refusals) in our work of building connections and navigating iterative informed consent processes. In this way, attuning into the embodied racialized and caste colonial hierarchies embedded in our encounters necessitated ongoing reflection and discussion between us to not exploit care (as stories, time, and hospitality) offered to us. Yet, as exemplified in the next encounter, some refusals were not so subtle to interpret.

“People like you come and nothing changes for us!”

In the second year of the study, we returned to a *basti* (housing colony) where many women recyclers live. As we spoke with a few former interview participants about organizing a potential group discussion to share some information, more women gathered around us, speaking and shouting over each other.

[JW]: I could understand from the tone and intensity of the 8–10 women who had assembled and from Mubina’s glances at me, that the women were not pleased. All I could do in that moment was attend to and nod in agreement with her. We learned in earlier interviews that this area had a fairly active NGO presence, where local organizations had held meetings in the *basti*, and even called the women to come to their office for events when visitors from abroad (i.e. from funding organizations) had come. I assumed that because of this familiarity with these kinds of group meetings, sharing information and resources from the study would be a fairly straight forward processes in this community, but I was wrong and could observe that Mubina was becoming stressed.

[MQ]: The two women we first approached were keen to have us come for a workshop discussion but the neighbours who assembled were asking over and over how much money we would pay them to join our meeting and what benefits we were giving. Another woman explained that a local NGO came to the *basti* with *gori* women “like her” (Josie) before, who took their photos and gave money to some people but not others. They insisted that we tell them who those people were and when they would receive money from such people. Amidst all the voices, another woman, agitated, shouted, “people like you come and nothing changes for us!” I was starting to feel overwhelmed and an instinct to just get out of there. I quickly translated this specific story about the people coming and giving money for Josie to explain to her why the women were so upset. We continued to hold the space and listen to their stories.

[JW]: When Mubina translated some of what the women were saying, I did my best to physically show my processing, shock, and disappointment about this experience of injustice and asked her to

⁷ Care also was expressed in several instances by women who said, they “were praying for us” or “hoped we could both get good jobs from what we had learned,” explicitly acknowledging the unequal gains in research which are often a critical focus in feminist reflections on power in fieldwork (Kapoor, 2004; Mohanty, 2003).

communicate that we *also* thought it was unfair that anyone would give money to some people and not others and that we didn't know who those people were or work with an organization like that. The women started to soften their physical postures from having their hands on hips or arms crossed to be more relaxed. I said to Mubina that we could thank them for their time and leave the *basti*, but she replied, "wait, let's just see."

[MQ]: Observing the women's response to our reaction to their grievances, I thought we might stay a few minutes longer to listen and give space for them to express their frustrations about this experience. A few of the women vented a bit more, but a couple of the women in the group started to reproach the others, saying, "why are you telling this to them? They weren't the ones who did this to you!" That is when I started to gain confidence and took the opportunity to explain that we were there to share what we had learned from the survey and interviews we did the previous year – that we had come back. I also reminded them that we did not take photos or give any money – we just gave the steel cups as gifts⁸ for those who participated in the survey in their work areas, which the women seemed to remember fondly.

[JW]: Observing this notable change in the emotional setting of the group as they calmed down and many were seeming to agree and nod along with Mubina was saying, I again said to her in English that we could still just thank them and leave but could also offer to come back another day and time of their choosing to talk about the study results and have some snacks together, but only if they wanted. I thought that giving them the chance to choose to invite (or not invite) us would enable them to feel empowered in a situation (i.e. of having foreign visitors in the *basti*) where they previously had injustice.

[MQ]: I told the group that we would leave for today and said we would only return to talk about the research and get their opinions on the study if they invited us. The group came to a consensus that 2:00pm the next day would be a good time, as it is when they have a break after making lunch and would be feeling relaxed. While all the crowd did not attend, we had a productive discussion with five women the following day.

5.3. Reflections on affective encounters with whiteness, class, and caste in the colonial past-present

Our embodied presences as a white foreigner and an educated local woman in research encounters sometimes evoked skepticism, suspicion, anger, and memories of past injustices. In cases like the one described above, participants or other people working or living nearby associated us with previous visits from local NGOs and foreigners through various poverty-alleviation programs, development projects, and resource distribution drives, which were perceived to have failed to produce desired change, distributed resources inequitably, or were simply a waste of time to them. With reference to [Faria and Mollett's \(2016\)](#) reflections on the ways in which racialization and whiteness, in particular, is felt—we could observe and feel the ways through which a white researcher's presence evoked various memories, stories, and emotional responses from participants, that included but were not limited to "awe and disdain, trust, and suspicion" in the research (p.80). These affective encounters with whiteness must be situated in relation to the colonial and developmental or neocolonial past-presents of our work in India, where people experiencing poverty may have felt wronged or have positive experiences of receiving benefits by others who looked like us (i.e. educated local NGO workers and white foreign visitors).

Our racialized and classed/casted embodied presences in this encounter produced a strong emotional reaction. However, by

⁸ We compensated participants for their time in the survey and interviews with small in-kind gifts of stainless steel cups, chosen in consultation with local researchers and organizations to not be considered coercive or impact local researchers' potential access to participants in the future.

continually reflecting critically on the perceived embodied links and associations with these colonial and neocolonial past-presents, we were able to remain in place (physically and emotionally), to hold the space and calmly endure the women's accusations and listen to the descriptions of how they had been let down by others "like us." We both expressed that we agreed with them through our words, affect, and body language. Our response to stay and listen allowed for the situation to deescalate quickly, with some community members even standing up for us (another expression of caring for researchers). This situation required us to rely on what we had already learned in navigating and improvising in the work, to practice critical reflexivity, and to communicate with each other through body language, quick spoken words, and our eyes. Josie had to rely fully on Mubina to speak with the group (as there was little time for translation) and these more subtle strategies of reading the tone and body language of the group. She also felt responsible to continually remind Mubina that it would be ok to leave if the situation was too tense or became unsafe, but in hearing the voices in the group coming to our defense and in observing a de-escalation in the affect of the group, Mubina wanted to try and stay. In recognizing the impact of staying and listening, Josie then leave recognized an opportunity to both respect the group's refusal of our presence that day, but to also provide them a sense of power in choosing whether to invite us to return or not. Here, it was necessary for us to understand and engage with our perceived association with others "like us" who had come into this space in the context of NGO and development projects and the various benefits and harms that these projects and presences had produced.

6. Notes on navigating the nexus

In this retrospective reflection, we reveal the linguistic, embodied, and emotional "scaffolding" of an ethnographic research project to contribute to feminist methodological engagements between researchers, local research assistants and interpreters, and participants across languages, cultures, places, and bodies. We focus on our navigations of positionality and power across a nexus of language, the body, and emotion in our respective roles (as a foreign researcher and local interpreter) to shed light on how we struggled and found opportunities in connecting with women informal recyclers from low-income Dalit communities in a multi-year study in urban India.

We argue that emotional, embodied, and linguistic challenges and opportunities are not uniformly experienced between differently positioned research team members and require space in which to grapple with divergent experiences and outcomes in research encounters across this nexus. It has been a vulnerable and valuable exercise for us to remember, write, and analyze these three research encounters. However, through this work, we aim to advance feminist engagements in 'the field' via our situated reflections on the nuances of positionality as intersecting with divergent roles, experiences, and strategies of team members; on interpreting care and refusal across the triple subjectivity of research encounters; and on the affective encounters with whiteness, class, and caste in the colonial past-present.

This collaborative work across language and culture requires attention and time, not only cultivating iterative and ongoing process of consent with participants in the research, but in attending to the ways in which research team members experience and tune into emotional, linguistic, and embodied dimensions of everyday life in the 'field' as core to reflexive praxis. Yet, we also acknowledge that the slow and iterative ethnographic research processes that we describe require time and funds, and are not always feasible coming the institutional spaces of neoliberal academia. To us, the main objectives of ethnography are to connect with others, build narrative trust, and practice story stewardship. Yet these commitments and their practice become more complicated in research when storytelling is subject to triple subjectivities of encounters between researchers, interpreters, and participants and are mediated by cultural, linguistic, and emotional experiences. As we have discussed some of the ways we navigated this complexity and, in some

cases, found additional richness in our divergent experiences of research encounters, we hope to inspire others to keep more of the social scaffolding on their work.

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Scaffolding

We confirm that this work is original and has not been published elsewhere, nor is it currently under consideration for publication elsewhere. We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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