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## WHEN MY WORK IS FOUND WANTING

### Power, intersectionality, postcolonialism, and the reflexive feminist researcher

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#### **Introduction**

Feminist research emerges out of a struggle with power. At least since its professionalisation in the 1960s, feminist scholarship across the disciplines has challenged the male-centred assumptions about the objects and practices of research, and the inequalities and oppressions that result from the neglect of women's experiences. This means, for me, as a feminist qualitative researcher, I am politically committed to hear these in an attempt to shed light, challenge, and counter the patriarchal and gender-based discrepancies of Christianity, which is the main site through which I examine religion and gender. I have been trained to ask, where are the women? What does it mean to take their realities as a starting point for understanding religious narratives, practices, beliefs, identities, teachings, and doctrines? How can feminists work to empower women when treating their lives as the starting point for thinking about religion? How might attention to power relations dismantle and reimagine long held and often repeated marginalising concepts, methodologies, and methods in the study of religion? Alongside these prompts, I attend reflexively to power, which is generally weighted in my favour as the investigator directing my projects, and in my analysis and my representation of the religious and spiritual lives of women. Reflexivity, as an ongoing practice to 'reflect upon, examine critically and explore analytically the nature of the research process' (Fonow and Cook 1991, 2), is one strategy for remaining vigilant to and minimising the ways power circulates through every step in the generation of knowledge.

Reflexivity is usually understood to be one of the 'parameters' of feminist research (Maynard and Purvis 1994, 2). However, despite this commitment and the drive to uncover how patriarchal and androcentric dynamics operate, feminist studies of religion have been less critical of the power relations inherent in its own frameworks—a tendency that has been identified and challenged by intersectional and postcolonial voices. While the analysis of gender and sexuality has been privileged in this field, intersectional critiques have suggested this is limited. Gender is just one part of the 'matrix of oppression' (Hill Collins 1990), as inequality is also rooted in and is compounded by race, class, age, and disability, for example, and therefore can only be examined thoroughly intersectionally. In addition, postcolonial discourses have stressed that 'religion'—as an object of study and a discipline—is a product of the modern, Western, European imaginary.

Feminist studies in religion are part of this legacy but they have often failed to attend to how it has used and relied upon the same category of religion, which has excluded and suppressed those it deems ‘other’.

It might be tempting to think that these challenges are abstract and theoretical. However, as a feminist researcher, if my methodologies are underpinned by assumptions that fail to account for power, this affects how I conduct my research. As Joey Sprague comments, methodology is the place ‘where philosophy and action meet’, and therefore the questions raised by intersectionality and postcolonialism have implications for how my convictions ‘should proceed’ and get ‘worked out’ (2016, 5). This chapter examines how I have tried, sometimes come close, and sometimes failed to action reflexivity rigorously. First, I clarify my use of reflexivity and suggest it is central to checking power and to addressing the demands made by intersectionality and postcolonialism for the feminist study of religion. I then revisit my research in women, feminism, and Christianity to uncover places where my use of reflexivity has been too light. I discuss where my work has been found wanting: I have insufficiently deployed intersectionality when forming my research group and in analysis, and while I participate in feminist practices of citation to draw on postcolonial critiques, I have remained fastened to principles and strategies that continue to construct relations of power.

### **Power and reflexivity in feminist studies of religion**

Ingrained in feminist studies of religion is the identification and dismantling of religious hierarchies and structures that disempower. In qualitative work, this includes considering the researcher’s influence. When I lead and design, conduct and present my research, this is based on knowledge I have generated through interpersonal encounters with those who entrust their lives, experiences, and stories to me, primarily for my purposes (in my case, to fulfil the requirements of my postgraduate degrees and then to maintain my research trajectory). ‘Power plays’ are inevitable (Ristock and Pennell 1996, p. 64 ff.) in any research setting, and there is always the danger that my participants are exploited and manipulated as I try to realise the goals of my project. Keeping a feminist orientation means recognising that any interaction can be imbalanced by inequality, and it means taking responsibility for power and how it shifts.

As an expository position, reflexivity is one strategy for identifying and highlighting how power is distributed. It directs a critical lens on the research and the researcher, and it is ethical because it is used to analyse the relationships on which research is built. Ideally, it is continual (Harding 1987, 1987, 1993), or as Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Deborah Piatelli suggest ‘holistic’ (2012), and runs concurrently with the theoretical and practical choices made at each stage of the research. From the first ‘hunch’ of a new idea to thinking about my work after it has been conducted and published—as this chapter does—reflexivity appraises the approaches, methodology, methods, and the effects of positionality throughout the research. It is a way of marking that there are social and cultural conditions impinging on the process, and it demands that I am self-critical and aware that it occurs in a range of contexts. As Jane Ribbens evocatively states, ‘our research . . . will have our own thumbprints all over it’ (1989, 591). In practice, reflexivity means moving between insider and outsider positions, thinking about the multiple identities and affiliations we bring to and forge in the field and have to navigate, often simultaneously. A reflexive researcher scrutinises their influence and role; it is a ‘taking stock’ of decisions to expose them to ‘the same critical scrutiny as the rest of [the] “data”’ (Mason 2002, 6). I use it to lay bare the circumstances in which I conceive, design, and carry out my work and the subjective and intersubjective factors and forces that converge on the process.

Reflexivity is also a tool for illustrating the ‘myth’ of objectivity in research (Stanley and Wise 1979). Objective, positivistic paradigms of knowledge have self-presented as the ‘most rational’ that ‘humankind has devised for investigating the world’ (Addelson 1999, 16). This views the creation, analysis, and dissemination of data as unaffected by historical and political interests, or social positions such as gender, race, sexuality, and class, while concurrently failing to recognise that asserting neutrality is a self-interested claim. As Sandra Harding explains:

The conception of value-free, impartial, dispassionate research is supposed to direct the identification of all social values and their elimination for the results of research yet it has been operationalised to identify and eliminate only those social values and interests that differ among researchers and critics who are regarded by the scientific community as component to make such judgements.

(1993, 70)

This ‘god-trick’ (Haraway 1988), which presents knowledge as if from ‘nowhere’, might be associated with the so-called natural sciences, but qualitative inquiry has also been known to render the researcher invisible. In an attempt to mitigate against accusations of bias and scientific unscrupulousness, it has submitted its depictions of social worlds as dispassionate, realistic, actual, and authentic.<sup>2</sup> Reflexivity, by registering and then tracing how research is inflected by the researcher’s values and location, reflects the wider questioning of authority and the suspicion of forwarding one particular viewpoint above another, which is characteristic of late modernity (Giddens 1990, 1991).<sup>3</sup>

There are various forms and approaches to reflexivity (Denzin 1997; Finlay 2002; May and Perry 2017), but it is usually in their writing where researchers illustrate its application. Clive Seale (1997) identifies ‘confessional’ accounts of the researcher’s experiences of ‘being there’ in the field, which include ‘explanations’ that trail their procedures and choices, and names the researcher’s assumptions. Postmodern practices understate the author’s influence in favour of the reader’s interpretation, or deliberately open up the research to doubt and uncertainty, or present collaborative narratives, and can take autoethnographic, fictive, and poetic forms, and can include life writing and autobiography.<sup>4</sup> Reflexive research offers ‘constructions’, ‘representations’, ‘narratives’, and ‘interpretations’, rather than ‘truth’, ‘fact’, and ‘validity’, and it embraces partiality, fragmentation, and the situatedness of knowledge production. For researchers and readers, whichever approach is adopted, reflexivity can mean greater transparency.

For some, reflexivity is an exercise in self-indulgence with little political impact. Daphne Patai is concerned that while it is important to account for ‘positions and circumstances’, feminist researchers are ‘spending too much time wading in the morass of our own positionings’ at the expense of finding solutions to practical, everyday responsibilities and duties (1994, 64). When feminist researchers contemplate the ‘crisis of representation’ raised by postmodern discourses, Patai wonders what happens to material inequalities—those that need care, protection, food (65)—while feminists play the ‘tiresome’, ‘mental game’ of ‘self-reflexivity’ (66).<sup>5</sup> Patai’s essay, by her own admission, is ‘irascible’, but she reflects a commonly held concern about reflexivity. When I introduce reflexive approaches to my undergraduate and postgraduate students, initially there is sometimes reticence. They are often unsure about tone and register, they are sometimes unconfident about using first person narratives, they can find it difficult to gauge how much to detail, and some question whether it is theoretically weightless to just ‘write about yourself’ in academic work. In Carolyn Ellis’ (2004) *The Ethnographic I*, a ‘methodological novel’ that fictionalises a graduate-level course on qualitative methodology that Ellis teaches, her students report similar misgivings: ‘How do you get the courage?’; How do you ‘handle . . .

negative response?'; 'I'm scared readers will think I'm too self-absorbed'; 'But when traditional researchers use their life experiences . . . they don't make their experience the focus' (34–35). It is not just my students who are hesitant. In conversation with colleagues and fellow feminist researchers, I have heard similar doubts. I have been told that including our own experiences is boring for readers, or embarrassing, emotional, anecdotal, and might diminish the seriousness of qualitative methodologies and methods, particularly if painful or unflattering scenes from our lives are exposed. Moreover, reflexivity can appear to detach the author from the 'real world' of research, if it is thought that they care too much about their personal relationship to the field rather than evaluating their findings.

I am always perplexed by these misgivings. Rarely do I come across examples of reflexive writing that read like inappropriate, irrelevant, and indulgent navel-gazing. In the work that has influenced my thinking, reflexivity is used judiciously and in service of the argument and the position evinced, similar to how data and scholarly literature is marshalled to put forward a thesis or defend an argument. In Anna Fisk's (2014) feminist theological reading of women's contemporary fiction, she pieces together 'fragments' of the narratives of Sarah Maitland and Michèle Roberts with stories from her own life—relationships with family and friends, health, well-being, music, bodily self-harm, childhood memories, and her connections with the God of the Christian tradition. Fisk is wary that personal narratives can suggest a stable, fixed, authorial voice, therefore she presents her autobiographical reflections as an 'artifice', using them to argue that life writing is a performative act that can only create 'certain versions' of herself (16), which also depends upon her reader interpreting the plural depictions of her loves and anxieties. However, as well as extending understandings of authorship, her weaving of life writing with her analysis of women's writing contributes to key areas of feminist theology. When discussing the themes of suffering, sacrifice, and sin, Fisk brings her emotional and physical (sometimes self-inflicted) wounds to argue that in feminist theology's concern with 'defeating suffering . . . overcoming the damage of patriarchal violence' (113), it has looked too quickly away from pain. In response, Fisk mines women's literature for images of Christ that witness joy, the embodied reality of suffering, and personal and social sin; she wants to find ways 'of identifying with the suffering body of Christ that acknowledges that suffering is how things are, rather than how they ought to be' (114). Fisk's personal, intimate narratives are raw and moving and they are theoretically generative.

To suggest that reflexive accounts do not privilege everyday, lived disparities fails to acknowledge that feminist studies of religion often focus on the material. For example, Chloë Gott (forthcoming) traces her emotions while researching Irish Magdalene laundries. Gott's account is based on her secondary analysis of 81 oral history interviews (digital transcripts and audio files) from the Justice for the Magdalenes Research archive with women who were formally confined and other key informants. She describes her visceral anger as she engaged with the women's traumatic and sensitive testimonies and their long-lasting emotional impact on her. She felt rage at the injustice and, in one case, at an interviewee who offered a sympathetic depiction of a member of the Garda (Irish police force), who were sometimes complicit in the violence of the laundries. Gott also felt ashamed. Despite the valorisation of the personal voice in feminism, academics are not really supposed to feel so deeply about their projects and the experiences of their participants.<sup>6</sup> Gott uses her grief to argue for the importance of considering the embodied affect in the interpretation of data and extends the ethics of undertaking 'sensitive' research to the well-being of the researcher during data analysis (not just in the field), while highlighting the deprivation the women lived through. Her exploration of her emotion does not come at the cost of denying the material realities of her participants but helps reveal the multiple forms of injustice they endured.

While reflexivity might be troubled by ‘pressing questions’ (Berry and Clair 2011, 96), it is central to sound research practice. When reflexivity is not employed, some of the ways power circulates in the execution of the research might be concealed, and, problematically, written out. It is only by attending to issues such as the relationships between the researcher, the research project and participants, and the emotional labour of undertaking fieldwork that the unsanitised and bumpy processes as well as the successes can be worked in. Reflexivity opens the research up for appraisal by revealing rather than hiding the full range of experiences.

When I go back to my accounts of my research, there are moments of reflexivity as I regularly claim it is key to my feminist approach. I try to be honest about my research choices and point out their limits; I embrace ‘the mess, confusion and complexity’ (Regan, Kelly, and Burton 1994, 46) so my research is not written ‘hygienically’ (Stanley and Wise 1979). For instance, when examining women’s spiritual reading practices (Llewellyn 2015), I describe how I negotiated with participants who wanted to change the interview transcripts and showed them how their formal written accounts were presented, before publication. I explain that I underestimated the sensitive nature of qualitative interviews. When participants shared their profound experiences—separation, bereavement, loneliness, physical and mental illness, sexism, violence, and isolation—I describe how I struggled to detach myself. I found it impossible to hold back my emotional response and maintain the ‘professional’ demeanour the textbooks had taught me was expected. Instead, I used this to challenge established ethical protocols that establish the distant researcher. These examples suggest I mainly use reflexivity to leave a map of my research choices: justifying qualitative methodologies and methods; discussing the limits to my sampling design and data analysis; and stating how I navigate ethical issues such as consent, anonymity, and confidentiality. Part of my motivation for taking this approach is because qualitative work is difficult to replicate due to the complexities of studying behaviours and experiences. A particular phenomenon is always tied to a specific time or place and owing to the organic manner in which a qualitative researcher needs to react to the changing demands of a project; it is not always possible, or warranted, to repeat a piece of research (Mason 2002). However, as I document ‘as much as is possible of the procedures that have led to a particular set of conclusions’ (Seale 1997, ebook), I am trying to convince my reader, and myself, that my work is trustworthy. I comment on the limits of time and funding when deciding who to travel to for an interview, I come clean about changing from open to semi-structured interviews, and I explain that I invited participants to choose their own identifying details and pseudonyms. I also discuss the times I felt disempowered and when feelings of inadequacy arose, usually when participants questioned by expertise, to show that power is restless in qualitative work and that it can oscillate between researchers and the researched.

My writing is a ‘natural history of the project’ (Seale 1997, ebook) that explains the methodology and methods (Coffey and Atkinson 1996, 191) and probes the limits of my research design. There are also times when I have disclosed to readers (and my participants) my location, positionality, and relationship to the field. When interviewing, it is not unusual for me to share details of my life with participants (if they ask), and I have had some profound conversations that do not make it into publications because my interviewees requested it, or because I felt it was too personal, or there was a danger that my experiences would take attention away from my participants.<sup>7</sup> However, recently, I have been questioning whether my adoption of reflexivity in this particular mode has been ‘enough’ (Trzebiatowska 2010). I tend to fall into performing the ‘waltz of the “as a”’ (Miller 1992, 121) as I usually only offer a list of biographical information at the start of my work—in my case, ‘as a white, middle-class, heteronormative woman and a former Catholic’—but without explaining and showing how this moulds and forms my thinking

and writing. Despite the import of the personal for feminism, and while feminist scholars of religion often write of their own intimate struggles, pain, joys, loss, and their implicated relationship with the research (Morgans 2018; O'Donnell and Cross 2020; Walton 2007a, 2007b, 2015)—this has not generally gone ‘hand in hand with detailed autobiographical reflection’ (Fisk 2014, 3). When I only briefly provide an itinerary of my traits, I miss out exploring and evaluating how I am embedded in my research and the difference this makes.<sup>8</sup> This also means there are places in my research where my primary aim is to keep a check on my power slips. As the voices who analyse the relationship between feminism, religion, intersectionality, and postcolonialism have argued, there is a problematic presence of power that is not acknowledged in feminist research in gender and religion, including my own.

### **Insufficiently intersectional**

When African-American women, like Maria Stewart in 1832 and abolitionist and former slave Sojourner Truth in 1851, articulated their experiences of white power and patriarchy as black women, their protests highlighted that inequalities and exclusions seldom occur separately, but across structures and identities. Emerging from black feminism, intersectional analysis (Crenshaw 1989, 1991) examines how gender and race, as well as class, sexual preference, ethnicity, nationality, ableness, religion, and any other markers of individual, group, community, and structural identity, amalgamate (Sung 2006; Zack 2005). As Brah and Phoenix explain:

We regard the concept of intersectionality as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts.

(2004, 76)

Intersectionality has been part of feminist analysis long enough that it ‘has lives’ (Nash 2016, 18). Yet, it is only recently that religion has undergone intersectional theorising, and when it does feature, it is most frequently combined with gender and sexuality.<sup>9</sup> This could be, as Andrew Yip and Peter Nynäs (2012) suggest, because gendered and sexual identities, attitudes, and behaviours are often closely interlinked and are deeply entwined in religious institutions. Subsequently, it can become too easy to assume that focusing mainly on religion, gender, and sexuality—‘the big three’—constitutes intersectionality. I would add that because intersectionality can emphasise the various aspects of biography, there is also the tendency to develop an ‘add in and stir’ method that just catalogues the multiple identities that comprise people’s complex lives.

My use of intersectionality is often insufficient. Previously (Llewellyn 2015), I have used it to explain the third-wave feminist insistence on multiplicity and difference in response to the essentialism that underpinned the categories of ‘woman’, ‘women’, and ‘experience’ in some feminist theorising. I prioritised the relationship between self-identifying women, feminism, religion and spirituality, and the activity of reading, and thought that referring to my participants’ class, race, age, geographical location, ableness, spiritual identity, sexualities, and gender variance was sufficient to show I had been inclusive in gathering my research group. But, really, I was just itemising my participants’ descriptors. In an appendix, I offer a profile of each woman but start with a brief overview: ‘Sophia: 33, Indo-Canadian, middle-class, straight, single’; ‘Rachel, 22, working class, white British’. I identify them by a first name of their choosing, followed by their terms for their religious or spiritual identity.<sup>10</sup> For example, Eleanor identifies

as ‘Pagan and Christian’, and Scarlet made clear that I was to describe her as ‘Quaker/pagan/lesbian/feminist/pacifist’. This was, in part, to argue that participants adopted plural spiritual identities and practices to exemplify an individualism that is often present in women’s expressions of their spiritual selves (Wilcox 2009; Woodhead 2008; Sointu and Woodhead 2008; Trzebia-towska and Bruce 2012). I drew a comparison with this, and the diversity of positions claimed in anthologies of self-identifying third-wave feminist authors. For example, Barbara Findlen opens with a list of the different identities claimed by her contributors, ‘white, middle-class college kid; wild and unruly; Chicana single mother; Asian bisexual; punk; politically astute, active woman; middle-class black woman; young mother; slacker’ (2001, xvi). I was documenting my participants’ self-definitions to draw a parallel with third-wave feminist practices that seek to ‘to create identities that accommodate ambiguity and . . . multiple positionalities’ (Walker 1995, xxxiii). However, this recording just became a mechanism for finding ‘several identities under one’, and as Yuval-Davis argues, this is not ‘the point’ of intersectionality (2006, 205). I neglected to draw out, in any depth, how the women’s self-understanding related to different structural inequalities. Therefore, I limited my opportunity to follow how power, in its plural forms, leans in on women’s religious and spiritual lives and their encounters with feminism and reading.

In the same study, only one woman out of 36 identified as a woman of colour. At the time, I suggested this was in keeping with the whiteness of feminist contemporary spiritualities. I cited other studies that rationalised this to help me make sense of this demographic profile, and I named feminist work that warned that deliberately recruiting women because of race could be construed as tokenism. In my methodology, I explained that although I had advertised in black majority churches in the UK, I had been unsuccessful in recruiting more black or Asian or minority ethnic women. I thought by explaining this, I was acting reflexively and that my focus on religion and gender was sufficient to tackle women’s exclusion from understandings of contemporary Christian and spiritual reading cultures. By not thinking intersectionally, however, I obscure the pathways that cause inequalities of race, class, ableness, and so forth in the activity of reading. In my current project, which explores motherhood and voluntary childlessness in Christianity, my first round of advertising produced a dominantly white research group. Consequently, I made use of snowball sampling and directly contacted black, Asian, and minority women’s Christian groups that resulted in more interviews with women of colour. This is not just a question of representation: it matters for analysis. Their experiences reveal the ways women’s religious reproductive agency is racially coded in Christianity (Llewellyn, 2016).

While there are examples of feminist research that are attentive to the multiple expressions of advantage but may not explicitly cite the term, ‘intersectionality’ is becoming more prominent in the study of religion and gender. Recently, Sarah-Jane Page and Andrew Yip (2020) and Sarah-Jane Page and Katy Pilcher (2020) have published volumes focusing on intersectionality in religious studies. Yvette Taylor and Ria Snowdon (2014) reflect on the interplay of age, religion, sexuality, gender, and class through a queer, intersectional study of young, Christian, lesbian women in the UK. Participants were marginalised from church spaces owing to their gender and sexual identities, while class-based structures often compounded the extent to which the women felt they ‘fitted in’ (399). Heidi Mirza (2013) foregrounds intersectional analysis in her study of professional Muslim British women to highlight how their expressions of identity were embodied through a racialised consciousness effected through living in Britain, their individual faith and ‘embodied modesty’, and their memories of ‘home’ and transnationalism. For feminist studies of religion, intersectionality is central to highlighting the distinct and overlapping ways inequalities are embedded across spaces, times, and locations, and it can reveal

the inseparable connections between identity categories and structures of power. However, as I reflexively consider my approach, it is clear I have not confronted the other ways power moves through my discipline and my work.

### Postcolonial citations and displacements

For Sian Hawthorne, there has been ‘a regrettable dearth of postcolonial reflection as a mainstream activity in the field of religion and gender’ (2018, 44). The feminist challenge to the androcentric and patriarchal power relations of religion and the use of intersectionality to interrogate how race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion operate concurrently are crucial shifts. However, feminist studies of religion also need to engage in a reflexive ‘turning back of inquiry’ (Gray 2008, 936) to confront the colonial legacies upon which the categories of religion and gender—as objects of study—are founded. For me, my training in religion and gender includes exposure to feminist postcolonial scholars. While I cite and reference their work, which has been offering this critique for at least 20 years, my use of reflexivity has not stretched to think through what those determining conditions have meant for my approach to religion and gender and how I might displace them.

Feminist scholarship has contended with the essentialist categories of ‘woman’ and ‘women’s experience’ without questioning that its rendering of ‘religion’ and ‘gender’ was premised on and benefited from its own modes of dominance and suppression, conditioned by Western colonialism. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty famously identifies in ‘Under Western Eyes’, there are bodies of feminist work that

discursively colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/re-presenting a composite, singular ‘third world woman’—an image which appears arbitrarily constructed, but nevertheless carries with it the authorizing signature of Western humanist discourse.

(1984, 335)

The testimonies of ‘third world women’ are not only unseen, but the history of feminism has participated in foundational colonialist and imperialist narratives that underpin the West’s ‘self-understanding’ of its progressive and modern exceptionalism, rationalism, and secularism (Hawthorne and Van Klinken 2013, 161). These conditions are also the understructures which shaped the study of religions—its methodologies, methods, and subject matter—and produced a particular, universal Eurocentric category of religion. Premised on Christian discourses, this was imposed on ‘other’ contexts and delimited, violently, what signalled truth, rationality, and civilised practice and belief.<sup>11</sup>

It was not until the beginning of the 21st century that feminist conversations about gender, religion, and postcolonialism emerged and broke significant ground in highlighting feminist scholarship’s proven capacity for replicating the forces and powers that silenced the people that feminism was supposed to empower.<sup>12</sup> As ‘white feminism’s’ Western gaze focused on gender, it marginalised race and subsumed the complex, pluriform, mobile experiences and representations of those undercut by colonialism in its theorising and politics. This is clearly illustrated in Saba Mahmood’s highly influential *Politics of Piety* (2012 [2005]), where she draws on Judith Butler and Michel Foucault in her ethnographic study of the women’s grass-roots mosque movement (*Da’wa*) in Egypt. Mahmood argues that modern, European, liberal, and secular feminism measures women’s agency by its ability to resist and subvert patriarchy, therefore if women are perceived to ‘comply’ with religious authorities, particularly



in gender-conservative forms of faith, then this is thought to signal their lack of autonomy. This too narrowly interprets agency as direct action against hierarchical systems and renders women who do not appear to explicitly rebel, or who appear to observe and fulfil patriarchal norms and teachings, as unenlightened and submissive. Mahmood's participants, however, make choices about dress, shy and modest behaviour, relationships, and work. They resist men's interpretation of what is required to live piously but creatively engage with the sources and tenets of Islam to cultivate faith. Postcolonial approaches in feminist studies of religion foreground unanticipated forms of subjectivity that destabilise expected gendered religious adherences and practices.

Feminism that brings postcolonialism, religion, and gender together calls for a reflexivity that accounts for the researcher's embeddedness, location, and subjectivity in the Western ontological, epistemological, and methodological trajectories of religion and feminism (Joy 2001) and entails realigning the gendered, religious, secular priorities of the West. For me, for example, in practice I try to follow what Sara Ahmed has called the 'politics of citation' (2017) which demands the inclusion of scholars, experiences, sites of study, contexts and practices, and questions that dislocate what I, as a white Western feminist, might take for granted about the meanings of religion and gender. However, there is always a danger of appropriation. One of the problematic ways this surfaces has been in my telling (and retelling) of my reading of *The Color Purple* by womanist thinker, activist, essayist, and novelist Alice Walker, in a course I took as a third-year undergraduate. I was an international exchange student spending a year in Canada, and the course was in feminist theology—the first time I had taken a class in this subject and the first time I had been taught by a woman at university (it was the 1990s, and I was on a philosophy and systematic theology programme at an established institution). After the initial introductions, our lecturer handed us an excerpt from Walker's epistolary novel. *The Color Purple* depicts the life of Celie, a 14-year-old black girl living in the American South. Celie writes letters to God and to her sister, Nettie, about her life and the racialised, sexual, and economic violence against Celie and the other women in her community. We were reading the oft-cited part of the novel where Shug, Celie's friend, confidant, and lover, asks Celie, 'Tell me what your God look like' and the two women share their vision:

He big and old and tall and graybearded and white. . .  
Then she tell me this old white man is the same God she used  
to see when she prayed. If you want to find God in Church, Celie,  
she say, that's who is bound to show up, cause that where he live.  
[. . .]  
Cause that's the one that's in the white folks' white bible.

(Walker 1991, 165)

I loved the novel and the film adaptation but was unaware of its popularity in feminist studies of religion, particularly feminist literary theology. In addition, I had not seen the challenge that the novel posed to the constructed image of God that I had inherited from my Roman Catholic upbringing at church and school, which was reinforced during my undergraduate studies in systematic theology. I had only considered God as white, male, and patriarchal, without question. When the class ended, I was confused. My classmates and I left a little dazed following our excited and lively exchanges, and we were wrestling with how to handle the implications this reading experience had for the Christian tradition. I was disorientated, as I knew that my

political, theological, and personal horizon was shifting. In my learning journal—a coursework requirement—I describe my response:

It is about the experience of women, their everyday living and how this interacts with their spirituality. . . [which] has been smothered by male images of a God that does not connect to their life experience . . . I find that quite disturbing that I had not really thought about this before.

I am, of course, deeply embarrassed when I think of my 20-year-old self writing this: I cringe every time I read it. It does illustrate, however, how feminist engagements with literature, in theology and the study of religion, have made a seamless connection between the religious lives of women of colour and the religious lives of white women, without acknowledging the appropriation of those stories for its own aims (Llewellyn 2015; Walton 2007). Like many others in feminist studies of religion, I learnt from womanist and women of colour, who have drawn on the novel to illustrate how black women's spiritual heritage is excluded by white feminist theology.<sup>13</sup> Citation can help guard against appropriation, but this does not necessarily relocate the secular, Western, white discourses that have underpinned my examination of women's religious reading practices.

While I may use lived religious approaches to open up understandings of religion in everyday gendered religious lives that are left out of Christianity (Ammerman 2006; McGuire 2008), my work is not 'representative of the richness and dynamism of those of us who live and exist on the margins of society' (Evans-Winter 2018, 2). When I exclude the rich, textured, diverse voices and experiences of women (and others) who choose to occupy the interesting marginal spaces (Smith 2012, 205; hooks 1990), I reflect what black feminist Venus Evans-Winter calls a 'white middle class culture' of research (2018, 2). For example, in my methods, I am always the 'researcher' collecting data for a project as I mainly rely on interviews and participant observation. I code, interpret, and organise the material given to me by participants, at my request, which I will then publish under my name in ways that exemplify a certain tradition of constructing theory, concepts, and understandings. I might attempt strategies for offsetting this as I take collaborative approaches to interviewing that enables reciprocal exchange, offer participants the opportunity to read transcripts and the draft publication pieces, and invite the women in my studies to choose the way they would like to be represented in the work. These tried and tested tactics are familiar to most researchers claiming a feminist orientation, but it remains my research agenda driving my projects, rather than in response to their particular interests or concerns.<sup>14</sup> This is an example of what Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), based on Kaupapa Maori research, argues is a Western form of knowledge generation that marginalises indigenous ontologies and epistemologies. Academic fields of study, like religion and gender, emerge from perspectives that occlude, and she prioritises self-determination and indigenous ways of knowing as a research ethic. Smith advocates, for example, participatory methods that 'share' control of the research (193) and are therefore more likely to positively enhance the research group at the heart of the project. As postcolonial and decolonial voices suggest, feminist studies of religion need to deploy methods that decentre the 'expert' authority of the academic (and the Western academy) and position indigenous individuals and communities as researchers, rather than the researched.

In addition, I also remain tethered to very specific types of research that clusters on texts—women's creative writing, field notes, transcripts, journal articles, book chapters, books—and reflects a very particular understanding of what it means to know and interpret. My adopted academic modes, the 'reading, writing, talking', are from a system in which the 'centre of

knowledge' is the US or Europe, and therefore there are many who do not and cannot see themselves represented (Smith 2012, 36–37). Laura Grillo's (2013, 2018) ethnography of female genital power rituals in Côte d'Ivoire does not rely on this type of colonial vernacular but turns to women's ritualised self-representation. These sometimes secret but sometimes public rituals are performed in times of crisis, in which participants—postmenopausal women—cover their often naked bodies in white clay and leaves and dance suggestively while carrying branches. Grillo reads this local performance, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, as a form of strategic essentialism which asserts the women's identity and power, and thus circumvents the imposed language of the Western imperial hegemony because it is a non-discursive and embodied ritual protest. In thinking reflexively about what postcolonial work in religion and gender has highlighted, I have shut out religious knowledges that are grounded in the 'hybrid languages, cultures, thought process, and discursive dances' (Evans-Winter 2018, 2). Displacing my assumptions about how identities, practices, and beliefs are communicated and conveyed opens up new ways of understanding and makes visible the fullness of women's gendered religious lives.

## **Conclusion**

Taking up feminist research is a reflexive position that can assist in upsetting the established hierarchies of power and the binary oppositions of researcher and researched, knower and known, political and personal. It eschews the notion that research is value-neutral, accepts that conclusions are partial, mediated, and situated rather than universalising, and creates approaches that can minimise power and exploitation. However, feminist thinking in religion and gender, like my own, has not always been reflexively attentive to its almost exclusive focus on the relationships between religion and gender and its own power as the product of Western, colonial, secular discourses. If being reflexive is the recognition that my gaze and my social position has shaped the research questions I ask, the way I ask them, and how I interpret and convey the answers, I may have challenged the androcentric and patriarchal grounding of my discipline, but this has come at a cost to intersectional and postcolonial theorising.

I have given versions of this paper at a conference and as part of a postgraduate event in my department. On both occasions, I was asked, rightly, what this reflexive account implies for my research: what am I going to do next and what am I going to do differently? In response, I think it means actually making use of the scholarship that has challenged feminism's power. Rather than citing it empty and without changing my approach, assumptions, or methods (which I have sometimes done), I want to be open to the creative possibilities it generates. Intersectional analysis suggests 'endless' (Page and Shipley 2020) permutations of research. In thinking about motherhood, for example, there is much more to learn about the lived experiences of race, class, age, disability, gender variance, and sexuality and how this configures self-identifying women's mothering practices in relation to their religious lives; or how childlessness—by choice or by circumstance—is impacted by individual and structural intersections and what this denotes for religious identity and belonging. I am also struck by what I might learn by moving away from my tried and tested methods that privilege my lines of inquiry. As I think about the direction of my future research, I want to embrace how postcolonial approaches can 'render [religion and gender] an expansive, hospitable space' (Hawthorne 2018, 52). For Clare Louise Radford (2017), who explores community approaches to changing socio-economic inequalities, Western 'taxonomic' systems of knowledge and research design can 'screen out' the quotidian experiences of marginalised groups. She turns to postcolonial feminism to design

participatory methods to uncover what is transformative and liberating and how meaning is made in the ‘margins’:

This demands that I listen again, and again, with others; listen to elements of conversations, interviews and workshops that I have or are likely to exclude as being irrelevant because they are not ‘about’ inequality as defined by the academic discipline, faith community, or voluntary organization with which I associate. People’s experiences continue to be erased when everyday life is screened out, or sorted into different categories; ultimately, when people are treated as offering ‘useable’ information, rather than as collaborators, co-interpreters.

(2017, 130)

Conceding my ‘expert’ status as a researcher leaves room for others to identify what questions matter in their lives and to be co-producers in the research I undertake and the way I undertake it. This might not rely on sticking so closely to semi-structured interviews and observations but instead creating opportunities for dialogue, workshops, and discussion with individuals and communities to set agendas and goals for research and to co-generate knowledge about gendered religious worlds, concerns, and experiences. Moreover, I want to maintain and continue pushing my use of reflexivity. Without it, I may offer some insight into women’s experiences, patriarchy, and androcentrism, but any suggested intervention will continue to be found wanting if gender remains the sole basis of my analysis and if the categories upon which that is based are received, uncritically, and the power they yield is used unreflexively.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the editors, Caroline Starkey and Emma Tomalin, for their insightful feedback and for their tireless support and patience during the writing of this piece. In addition, I would like to thank Clare Radford, Joanne Winn-Smith, and Daniel Nield for their helpful comments on an early version of this chapter.
- 2 For other overviews of the emergence of reflexivity and a critical appraisal of its use in qualitative methodologies see Fine (1994) and Marcus (1998).
- 3 This does not mean that objectivist, empirical, or non-reflexive qualitative projects are redundant, but instead suggests that claims are stronger when the conditions through which knowledge is produced are made explicit (Harding 1993).
- 4 See, for example, Bochner and Ellis (2016), Bold (2011), Ellis (2004), Ellis and Bochner (1996, 2000), Richardson and Adams St. Pierre (2005), Slee (2018), and Walton (2014).
- 5 The crisis of representation is associated with postmodern approaches, and it emerged as a core concern in the social sciences in the 1980s (see Clifford and Marcus (1986) for a noted and influential articulation of this discussion). It questioned the extent to which fieldwork in disciplines such as sociology and anthropology captured an objective reality existing outside of the researcher and suggested that accounts are constructed through the researcher’s interactions with their participants and their social and cultural worlds. Moreover, it highlighted that fieldwork is composed through multiple acts of interpretation; what is offered is a representation that can act as ‘windows on the social’ (Thomas 1999, 75). This allows access, albeit partial, to the mediated nature of research that draws upon and investigates experiences. As Angela McRobbie argues, ‘representations are interpretations’ as they use ‘a whole set of selective devices such as highlighting, editing, cutting transcribing and inflecting . . . these invariably produce new permeations of meaning’ (1982, 51).
- 6 For exceptions to this, see Hoel (2013), van Klinken (2019), and Stanley and Wise (1979).
- 7 In some ways, this echoes the concerns about using reflexivity I have mentioned earlier. Moreover, they reflect that writing reflexively, like all methods, can raise ethical challenges for the researcher. For a useful discussion of the potential risks involved in writing personally and reflexively see Fisk (2014) and Ellis (2004).

- 8 In a forthcoming publication that explores women's reproductive choices and agency in Christianity, I attempt to push my use of reflexivity. I examine how my status and identity as a voluntary childless woman subverts and reverses the usual hierarchy between 'researcher' and 'researched' and the ethical implications this has for feminist research (Llewellyn, forthcoming).
- 9 The following work points to the underuse of intersectionality in the study of religion: Bilge (2010), Bilge and Denis (2010), Frenkel and Wasserman (2020), Reimer-Kirkham and Sharma (2011), Sharma and Llewellyn (2016), Vakulenko (2007), Wilkins (2008).
- 10 Participants self-selected how they would like to be referred to in published work. Some opted to use a pseudonym or their own first name, others neologisms; one participant requested that I refer to her spiritual identity with a line ('-') to signal that no term captured this aspect of her life adequately.
- 11 See Asad (1993), Fitzgerald (2000), Masuzawa (2005).
- 12 See, for example, Ahmed (2001), Joy (2001), Donaldson and Pui-Lan (2002), King (1994), King and Beattie (2004), Pui-Lan (2005).
- 13 Cannon (1988), Cannon (1989), Culpepper (1988), Kamitsuka (2007), Williams (1985).
- 14 See Eleanor Tiplady Higgs' (2021) examination of the YWCA in Kenya. As a white researcher, she positioned herself 'as a student and my research participants as authoritative sources based on their professional knowledge and personal experience' but acknowledges this was premised on her research questions.

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