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Race, Privilege, and Identity in French History

Mita Choudhury
Vassar College

My professional life as an historian of eighteenth-century France began in the mid 1990s at a time when the study of political culture and gender flourished. And by most standards, it has been successful and productive as I have carved out my own niche. Being a woman of color hasn't hurt me, but it would be naïve to say I was unaffected by my identity. Well-meaning people ask, "Where are you from?" – a question that does not refer to what state or city. I answer with pride, referring to my south Asian background and the various places I've lived. I chose this identity, although aware of the tinge of exoticism, and shades of Montesquieu. But there are other questions that are problematic: "Eighteenth-century French religious history? Are you interested in colonialism?" "Why didn't you choose Indian history?" Occasionally, I see the skepticism in the eyes of my students about my expertise or a brief moment of doubt on colleagues' faces.

Despite good intentions and genuine curiosity, these questions link my mind to my physical appearance. It suggests an identity imposed as opposed to one chosen. There is an assumption that who I am will naturally determine my choice of subject. The connection between my background and certain subjects carries with it legitimacy and authenticity, which makes my ethnic identity and gender the engines of my intellect. Some may bristle and say that links between personal experiences and subjects of study are normal. And yet, while it may have flitted through my head, I've never asked someone why they don't pursue white, middle-class U.S. history. At best, such a question would appear absurd, and at worst, offensive.

The fact that the inquiries I have navigated are seen as unexceptionable at the same time that this second question is never asked, reflects, I believe, certain hierarchies within the academic world. Such hierarchies hardly resemble some neat pyramid structure but are more like a tangled web reflecting gender, race, class, and academic pedigree. Nor do these categories carry equal weight. There are coded (and sometimes not so coded) ways in which race and gender are things to overcome in order to prove one's academic legitimacy. On the other hand, "pedigree," whether it's in the form of graduate, especially Ivy-League, training or linguistic fluency rarely seems to trigger similar hesitation. Somehow these inequities seem inherently anti-intellectual. From my perspective, there is also a distant echo of the most subtle and insidious form of colonial violence: epistemological subjugation.

My own experience of such domination has been minor. Recently in a meeting, a male colleague attributed comments I had made earlier to another woman, a white woman. Later, this was described to me as "the echo chamber," a space where your words are heard only when

articulated by others who subtly possess greater legitimacy. This is the world of microaggressions, where one incident seems meaningless. Pinpointing the dynamic is difficult, and when I have tried to raise the issue, people dismissively turn the conversation in another direction. But I am not angry, resentful victim because I occupy multiple identities, a reflection of what Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw has theorized as “intersectionality.” As a person of color, I do not fall into categories that are easily recognized in the US: African American, Latinx, or east Asian. My south Asian origins are rooted in British imperial history, not in the US. What does it mean to be a part of people who have no history in certain locations? It involves a certain kind of invisibility, to be an elusive “other” beyond the usual dichotomies of us and them.

At the same time, I am also keenly aware that I enjoy certain privileges. Like many south Asians who arrived in the 1970s, I belonged to a well-educated group. As a result, although my skin color and the history of my community set me apart, I still possess the armor of class, which erodes certain differences. In appearance, I represent the model minority who fits into a certain narrative of immigration. Teaching at a small liberal arts college has given me the benefit of institutional affiliation, and I would be remiss not to acknowledge that I have taken advantage of the prestige, and made my “patriarchal bargains.”¹ My situation reflects what Patricia Hill Collins has identified as a matrix of domination in which an individual “is *both* a member of multiple dominant groups *and* a member of multiple subordinate groups.”²

Moving forward, it is this complexity, indeed contradiction, that needs to be addressed both in our field and our profession. As historians, many of us enthusiastically engage with topics involving marginalization and oppression, even if sometimes we are reluctant to recognize its existence within our ranks. In the current political climate, such recognition seems increasingly urgent. Yet we continue to operate with the rules and structures that uphold privilege. I would argue that questions of race, gender, and sexuality cannot be addressed sufficiently and with nuance without the acknowledgment of this tension and its pervasiveness. I can only hope (and I am optimistic) that we can achieve such dialogue without anger and backlash.

Mita Choudhury
Vassar College

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¹ Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenges of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2007), 59.

² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Power, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 230.