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Letter to Kashmir scholars and colleagues

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Dear scholars of Kashmir and colleagues,

Online discussions of my work have raised important, troubling, and in some cases, irresolvable, questions about anthropological ethics, particularly in spaces of conflict. Many have raised concerns about the relation between my research and my father's former position in India's external intelligence service and have asked me to elaborate on my positionality as an Indian diasporic researcher working in Kashmir. My scholarship, political commitments, and ethics are informed by the political and existential uncertainties that people in Kashmir face; my privilege and the injunction to question it; and the unequal power dynamics always at play in ethnographic encounters. **In my research and writing, I have always sought to prioritize my interlocutors' wellbeing and safety, as well as my own, in light of changing levels of risk in a climate of political instability.**

Working with the Kashmir Scholars Consultative and Action Network (KSCAN) in professional and activist contexts in the US has been an invaluable experience. **In the last two weeks, some colleagues in KSCAN have conveyed to me how not sharing my father's employment history deeply hurt them, and I apologize for not telling them earlier.** I have reached out to them collectively, as well as individually, and expressed my readiness to address these issues. I hope our work can spotlight the dangers and debilitating conditions that people in Kashmir are experiencing and support those whose lives are at stake. **We have common goals of solidarity, and I aspire to continue working with the KSCAN community in a rigorous and ethical way, while recognizing that repair will take time.**

In writing this statement, I hope to provide transparency where things have not been clear, while also inviting more future dialogue about accountability in the field of medical anthropology. This statement is intended to address concerns that have been raised around safety and positionality in the context of my fieldwork encounters and in my book, *The Occupied Clinic: Militarism and Care in Kashmir* (Duke University Press, 2020). **Through more than 13 years of engagement with people in Kashmir, I have learned that disclosure, much like consent itself, is not a one-time event; it happens contextually, relationally, and processually.**

I. Fieldwork encounters

I want to acknowledge that the online discussion of my father's former position has produced strong emotional reactions for many, which I deeply regret. I did not anticipate how some in my scholarly community may have read my not mentioning my father's employment history in the book as signaling a lack of disclosure in the field; this has caused some unfortunate misunderstandings.

My primary ethical responsibility is, and has always been, to my interlocutors. **My father never enabled any connections or contacts in the field, nor did he make any kind of research decisions for me; he was never in the field with me, nor did I ever discuss the details of my work or share any data with him, any security official, or anyone outside my research relationships.** My father worked in Kashmir

on his own, without any of our family present, in the early 1990s, when I was 10 years old. Since then, he has never held any positions related to Kashmir. He has never shared any details of his work with me. During my fieldwork, I did not use his position to condition any of my relationships. My work has never been funded or facilitated by the Indian government or any of its agencies. My father did not read a word of my manuscript until after my book was published, because I did not want his perspectives to color mine in any way.

Some on social media have asked whether my presence caused harm to my interlocutors. Over the past few days, I have reached out to many interlocutors with whom I have long-term relationships, to assure them that any information they shared with me remains safe, confidential, and protected. My fieldwork interlocutors included mental health practitioners, humanitarian aid workers, NGO workers, patients, hospital administrators, journalists, professors, writers, artists, and activists, among others. **Everyone I have reached out to in Kashmir has reassured me that my work has not caused them any harm; they also reconfirmed the independence and rigor of my research practices.**

Informed Consent

I achieved informed consent in the field on an ongoing basis. **In my fieldwork, I have followed all anthropological ethical norms: I kept my fieldnotes and data confidential, separate, protected, and accountable, following the requirements of university-mandated Institutional Review Boards (IRB) and even exceeding them because of the sensitive context. My approach to discussing my family history was deeply informed by the norms of negotiating interpersonal encounters in one of the world's most highly militarized zones.** I have discussed these norms at length with trusted Kashmiri interlocutors during my fieldwork and with those with whom I have connected in light of conversations about my book on social media. When discussing my father's employment history, they offered broader reflections on complicity or spoke of their own complicated familial histories. A Kashmiri feminist scholar whom I recently spoke to said, "occupation produces complicity": while complicity places limits on Kashmiri agency, it does not limit, and may even enhance, the agency of privileged Indian citizens.

During my fieldwork, people described how public identities and positionalities in Kashmir were circumscribed by the ongoing criminalization of dissent, limitations on free speech by the Indian state, and by the broader social milieu, where approximately 100,000 people are employed by the Jammu and Kashmir state police, Indian military and paramilitary forces, and thousands are informally employed as informers. Complicities are also generated: because of long-term disruptions to the economy, the Jammu and Kashmir state government is the largest and most stable employer outside of the agricultural sector. Many interlocutors shared how their own political commitments were forged out of, and against, their own familial ties in the state bureaucracy, military, paramilitary, or security units, including the Army, Military Intelligence, the Jammu and Kashmir Police, Criminal Investigation Department (state intelligence), the Border Security Force, the Central Reserve Police Force, the Intelligence Bureau, the Research and Analysis Wing, and more.

After learning of my family history, interlocutors in Kashmir compared my subject position to being the child of an Army colonel or police officer. As one person, who himself had a complicated family history but has pro-independence politics, succinctly captured: "I'm in the muck everyday." He argued that for him, the question was not about complicities per se, but how people worked through them. Rather than exceptionalizing my family history, interlocutors in Kashmir have noted how people's lives and livelihoods are entangled with the state; this is an inescapable reality--and contradiction--of life in Kashmir. **Conversations about my family background and positionality were not merely about my own situation; they very often involved mutual exchanges of personal and sensitive information. Including these conversations in the book would have violated this carefully developed trust and could have potentially brought additional scrutiny for my interlocutors.** Instead, throughout my fieldwork, in the writing of my book, and even now, I practice protected processes of transparency to ensure my interlocutors' safeties.

Interlocutors who guided my research design also explained that directly stating that I was the daughter of an Indian intelligence officer would misinform people, conveying that I was, in fact, a functionary of the security state. This kind of declaration, they said, could potentially endanger my life. I was also deeply aware of how governmental connections have been historically used to compel people to speak. To create an environment of informed consent, I worked to separate myself from the history and political economy of research in/on Kashmir by Indian intellectuals, much of which has been directly funded by the Indian state and has misrepresented Kashmiri voices. Some Indian academics have cultivated intimate ties with Kashmiri research subjects, only to then write pro-state narratives (p. 199). Others have arrived at field sites flanked by police cars or Army personnel. Such research has operated as much through coercion as consent. Remaining cognizant of this troubled history, **I felt announcing myself as the daughter of an intelligence officer would exercise undue influence on my interlocutors:** patients might fear the consequences of not speaking with me, while clinicians might feel pressured to grant me access to confidential material. In the police-run substance abuse clinic where I worked, police personnel may have tried to enlist my cooperation. **In this milieu of heightened surveillance, I could best protect my interlocutors' personal views and narratives from undue scrutiny and my own safety by maintaining the independence of my research practice from any state influence or oversight.**

During fieldwork, I shared my identity in a processual, nuanced, and contextual way, to balance these multiple concerns and constraints. Interviewees recognized me as north Indian. Some were curious and others suspicious about the unusual presence of a lone, female researcher. In conversations, interlocutors commonly asked about my family background. **I always said that my father worked with the central Indian government, which in Kashmir, signaled my intimate ties to the Indian state. For some, this was enough to not speak with me. When interlocutors sought additional details about my father's work, I explained that he worked in the Cabinet Secretariat, a government unit that includes R&AW and ARC, organizations in which my father held positions. Through these conversations, my interlocutors recognized that my father worked for intelligence agencies.** Although some on social media have assumed that my interlocutors would find this information risky or harmful and would choose not to speak with me, I received a wide range of reactions to my father's employment history, depending on my interlocutors' positionality and political views. After each of these kinds of

conversations, I asked my interlocutors if they felt comfortable continuing to talk to me, thereby creating multiple opportunities for them to walk away. Some chose not to associate with me, while others changed how they spoke to me. Some became more guarded, avoiding discussion of their personal situation in favor of broader political commentary, while others became keen to talk, seeing me as [a messenger](#) who could carry their critiques directly to the Indian state, to Indian or US audiences (p. 191). Still others asked for more information before continuing to talk; for example, interlocutors sometimes asked to see evidence of my publications. This was an important trust-building exercise, which I honored as part of the additional informed consent required in a context like Kashmir. **In this way, step by step, I worked to cultivate accountability, safety, trust, and informed consent. I respected any and all decisions my interlocutors made.**

Research Design and Access

Some on social media have argued that, given my family history, I should never have worked with patients who were experiencing trauma. I deeply respect this concern. **My access to the clinic was always conditioned by hospital administrators and clinicians, not by my father's connections or resources.** My project was primarily about medical and psychiatric expertise and was conceptualized together with colleagues in Kashmiri hospitals who sought an anthropological account of the mental health crisis. Rather than focus on victims of state violence, I documented the fallouts of humanitarian and psychiatric care as part of the broader logic of militarism. In so doing, my effort was to hold the state--and all its agents--accountable for its psychic violence, which remains invisible or difficult to capture. **I wrote this book because I wanted to work through my own political implications, to document, and in a very small way, make amends for those harms, without claiming innocence (See South Asian edition, pp. xx).**

During fieldwork, my decisions about what experiences to elicit or move away from were also informed by familial relationship to the security apparatus. For instance, rather than ask people to reproduce narratives of trauma that had already been extracted from them by scholars, journalists, human rights groups, lawyers, and others, I focused on interactions between medical and humanitarian experts and their patients or clients (Chapter 5, "Debrief"). For accounts of state violence and torture, I relied on secondary sources, such as human rights and NGO reports (p. 117-120). **In clinical settings, I primarily worked in OutPatient Departments, spaces where multiple clinicians and families interacted simultaneously, in order to minimize the impact of my presence.** I observed holistically how patients accessed mental health services for all forms of mental distress, not exclusively those with traumatic stress or PTSD. However, as I self-reflect in one scene (pp. 5), all ethnographers affect what they observe. In the Introduction, I describe a moment in the OutPatient Department when a psychiatrist, without my consent, asked a patient to switch from speaking in Kashmiri to Urdu so that I could better understand them. I describe the hesitation of the patient, as well as my own discomfort, in how my presence caused her to switch from the language of intimacy to the language of expertise. **Additionally, I followed the norms of privacy and confidentiality laid out by NGO workers and clinicians and did not sit in on one-on-one psychotherapeutic or counseling sessions.** Rather than conduct in-depth interviews in hospitals, I interviewed patients in settings of their choosing. I never shared my notes or

details of my research with anyone outside my research relationships. I can and will continue, in every way possible, to prevent my interlocutors from being endangered or compromised.

II. Positionality and privilege

From the social media discussions that have unfolded, as well as my conversations with interlocutors in Kashmir, I have learned how **understandings of positionality are shaped differently in professional, activist, and fieldwork contexts. However, in writing this book, my interlocutors in Kashmir were my primary community of accountability. Many of them have encouraged me to continue my research precisely because they feel my family background makes my critique more powerful.** Others tell me they feel my family background is secondary to my research commitments. As one of my clinician interlocutors put it in a recent email to me, *“I know you are a research scholar committed to your work. I might agree or disagree with your work but I am sure that you did your work as honestly as your work demanded. It doesn’t matter to me what family you belong to.”* This perspective is also echoed by [other Kashmiri academics](#).

I am still reckoning with the multiple layers of my privilege, subjectivity, identity, and positionality, including nationality, race, class, gender, sexuality, caste, and family background, and how these impact me as a person and researcher. When I began this project in graduate school, my interests were in political violence, but I lacked a fieldsite. Anxious to have a project in place before entering my third year, in 2008, a faculty member at Cornell suggested Kashmir. Because my father never talked about his work there decades ago, and because I was still naive about the history of Indian state intervention, I did not then see the significance of my decision to work there in relation to his employment history. **In writing the book, however, I realized that my political commitments and my research were not simply intellectual positions, but also emotional ones that situated me in stark opposition to my father.**

Over time, I developed my own voice, critique, and understanding of Kashmir that is separate, independent, and antithetical to what I have passively or actively learned in my family and as a privileged Indian. For example, I write: *“there is no such thing as an innocent Indian...there is no innocent way for any scholar of Indian origin, including myself, to engage with Kashmir...without acknowledging our own embeddedness in histories of violence and harm”* (South Asian edition, xiv). My entire book problematizes how even relations of “Indian” care or love delegitimize Kashmiri desires for self-determination. Through my arguments, I encourage those in positionalities similar to mine to undertake projects of coalition or solidarity (SA edition, xiv-xv). Taking such a public stand has had deep and long-term relational ramifications within my family and has come with emotional and political risks, which I have willingly taken. Since my father read my book, we have had a number of extremely difficult conversations about our political differences and worldviews. I had broken with the expected duties of a “daughter” in patriarchal kinship structures.

***The Occupied Clinic* was my first, sustained effort to use my privilege and family background to provide the most honest and nuanced ethnographic representation of militarism’s harms as I could.** Rather than limit a statement of positionality to a few pages, which I was concerned could be dismissed

as virtue signaling, I chose to infuse the entire text with reflections on these questions. The book explores the structural inequalities that enable me to speak and write about Kashmir: I can come and go much more freely and with much less risk than my Kashmiri interlocutors (p. xix); my body is not targeted by Indian armed forces; on the contrary, the violence enacted on Kashmiri bodies is meant to make Indians like me feel safe (p. 112). Kashmiri researchers, academics, and journalists who have criticized the Indian state have faced increased surveillance, arrests, harassment, and have been denied the right to movement through fly bans and work restrictions. As an Indian researcher, I have not faced these challenges.

Between the releases of the US and South Asian editions of *The Occupied Clinic*, which were six months apart, and now, a year after the book's release, I have continued to reflect, question, and write through my privilege and positionality. For example, in book talks, I have described an incident that took place during a preliminary research trip. I had asked my father (who was in Delhi at the time) to arrange a car to pick me up from the airport in Srinagar and take me to my guest house, as I was unfamiliar with Kashmir at the time and did not know my way around. A Kashmiri colleague saw me and later quizzed me about it. From this experience, I learned the importance of maintaining a barrier between my project and my father's resources (South Asian edition, pp. xiv). I realized I also had to educate myself about the ethical perils Indian researchers bring with them to the field. After this early lesson, I conducted research completely independently, and I never sought nor received any further assistance from my father or any of his contacts.

In understanding my family history and the forms of accountability it calls for, my thinking has been inspired by the concept of "restive" complicity. As [Tamsin Kimoto](#) writes: "a restive orientation to our theory and praxis allows Asian American feminists to theorize our own liberation in ways that also attend to our investments in settler colonial projects" (2018: 139). **Restive complicity demands a continuous and ongoing working through of positionality, privilege, and political commitments. Throughout my life, my father's profession has been completely opaque to me, because he never shared any details with family or friends. And yet, as an anthropologist, my work clearly critiques both the security and humanitarian impulses of the state.** I am still asking myself: how can I reckon with, or be responsive to, a history that I know little to nothing about? In my writing, I have noted my ongoing struggle to unravel "multiple layers of colonial knowledge and practice, all of which live inside my mind and body" (South Asia edition, xiv). I am, even now, "certain that I have got things wrong and I take full responsibility for those elisions and errors" (South Asia edition, xiv). Given the conversations that have occurred in the afterlife of *The Occupied Clinic*, I see it as necessary to further explore how intimate histories and their silences have shaped me. This is not a straightforward or easy task. Our understanding of who we are and what motivates us changes and is not always transparent. **Discussing my family history has never simply been about stating a fact, but rather, requires a longer, auto-ethnographic examination of what my father's posting to Kashmir when I was 10 years old means for me working there almost 30 years later.** This is something I have already been exploring. A few weeks prior to online discussions of my book, in a Wenner-Gren workshop entitled, "The Anthropology of Anxiety," I shared with my co-participants my intention to contribute a chapter on my family history in relation to my work as an anthropologist.

While painful, this conversation has made me profoundly aware of the ways ethical action in the field can differ from our professional anthropological expectations, particularly around what it means to be transparent. My aspiration is to be accountable to both contexts. I know that my responses may not satisfy everyone; after reading this, some may decide they would have done or chosen differently, or they may wish I had. Some have suggested that I should never have done this project. Ultimately, I believe that Kashmiri people are best positioned to respond to questions about the usefulness of my work. **I deeply respect the views that have been expressed, while also standing behind my scholarship. I am committed to thinking through the uncomfortable questions that have been raised and using them to reflect, grow, and transform.**

In solidarity,
Saiba