

### Editor's Interview with Richa Nagar\*

**ED:** In *Muddying the Waters*<sup>1</sup>, and in your chapter in *Narrative Global Politics*<sup>2</sup>, you set out to excavate the connectivity between yourself and your own journeys and the lives and activism of others. This has produced some incredible intersections in your work in terms of showing the reader how we as scholars are also bound up in all these facets of everyday life that shape who we are and how we relate to the world. Could you begin by telling our readers a little bit about how these intersections have emerged in your own life?

**RN:** I appreciate your insightful observation as well as a chance to speak to the importance of these intersections as a way to begin our conversation. I would like to make a couple of general points before getting into the more personal specifics. First, my approach to narrating the intersections between my own journeys on the one hand, and the lives and journeys of those I have become entangled with on the other, emerges from my own disappointments with dominant ways of 'doing positionality' in the U.S. academy -- ways that often fail to peel themselves away from the conceptual and stylistic monolingualism of academic knowledge making and writing. The stories of our own lives and trajectories; the languages, yearnings, and hauntings that we come from and that breathe inside us, mold in critical ways the 'projects' that we come to and how we shape those projects as scholars, thinkers, writers, learners, educators, and creative or intellectual community builders. Yet, the formulaic ways and categorical terms in which 'we' academics often talk about ourselves has led to deep suspicion of the ways in which exercises in locating or positioning ourselves serve simply to legitimize or authorize ourselves. What is needed instead are stories of building deep relationships and of undertaking long, hard journeys with those who become our 'research subjects'; stories of how we live, grow, learn, and change in and through those journeys. Sometimes the details of specific events and encounters in these journeys may be unutterable, or it may be unethical to repeat them; still, the stories of the journeys themselves are valuable knowledge. So the challenge that I have embraced is one that seeks to narrate these journeys, these yatras, these safars in ways that they can become the stories of making situated solidarities through radical vulnerabilities, narration that simultaneously

---

\*Richa Nagar is Professor of the College in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota. Her intellectual, pedagogical and creative labor focuses on writing lives and struggles across the borders of languages, genres, disciplines and geographical locations. Her early work on everyday geographies of gendered and racialized community politics among four Asian communities in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, is regarded as a significant interdisciplinary contribution. Her subsequent work has focused on building long-term relationships and situated solidarities with specific struggles around NGOization and around linking questions of intellectual disempowerment with sociopolitical marginalization and violence. Issues of ethics, responsibility, and translation in writing, artistic production, and alliance work form the core of her scholarship across borders. She can be reached at [nagar@umn.edu](mailto:nagar@umn.edu)

<sup>1</sup> Richa Nagar, *Muddying the Waters, Coauthoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism*, (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphinee, eds., *Narrative Global Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2016).

resists the formulaic ways of reciting our locations that tend to flatten much of the complexity and contradictions of those locations and journeys.

Moving from these general observations into the more personal realm, I think the most important aspect I recognized even as a newcomer to the US academia in 1989 -- was the fact that I had come from a deep embeddedness in a rich diversity of lived languages -- written and unwritten -- that I inherited or learned from those who raised me, and those who were part of my everyday environment. Growing up where I did, in a multi-generational lower middle-class joint family in the interior of the city of old Lucknow -- with Hindi, Urdu, Urduized Gujarati, Awadhi, and Braj, all vibrant with a range of accents and melodies, as well as with literary influences that also included Marathi, Bangla, and Russian -- I came to the 'sophistication' of English and English-medium schooling in ways that were jarring and that created rifts between my old and new worlds but that also gave me sensibilities and tools to move between the worlds. It took me a long, long time to feel comfortable in English. I still vividly remember the moment in 1983 when I spoke my first more-or-less spontaneous full sentence in English before my mostly English-speaking classmates in LaMartiniere Girls School, and the feeling of immense relief that swept over me when I realized that the words had come out in a way that did not trigger amusement or correction. I had been in that school since January of 1976 and it took me more than seven years to say a sentence that was not learned from the books or memorized to get good marks in a test. I remember the fears that engulfed me when my mother or Sanchit Baba, who raised me, showed up on the premises of that school because I worried that my classmates or teachers might say something that amounted to ridiculing them. Yet, I also came from the home of a famous novelist and of well respected actors and artists, and every day our large courtyard was frequented by at least half a dozen people, including neighbors, poets, writers, researchers, journalists, actors, activists, laborers, and students. My father was regularly visited by local nautanki artists and singers who were living on the economic margins, and for whom he would try to get stipends from the Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi for their forgotten artistic contributions. My uncle, who was a drama producer for stage and television, would often have rehearsals of his plays in the same courtyard, and the whole neighborhood would be present there on those occasions. And then, there were times when major film shoots would be scheduled in our house and the whole city seemed to pile into every little corner of the house. My sister and I were often responsible for running around and serving chai and mithai to all those people who came, even as our grandma fretted about the expenses of feeding and entertaining so many people and keeping the appearance for the sake of a big family naam. Growing up in that house was like growing up simultaneously in 'the university' and 'the field.' The sounds of harmonium, sitar, dholak, and garbas echoed along with so many stories told from so many mouths... stories written by big names as well as ordinary stories of ghosts and saints, of goddesses and witches, of cruel colonial officers and kind white nurses; stories of child widowhood and insanity alongside harrowing intimate episodes of drug addiction and violence.

Without repeating the influences and examples I have discussed or shared elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> I would simply like to say that learning how to tell stories ethically and responsibly is at once intense intellectual, political, and creative labor. The work of inserting and interweaving ourselves and our people, our pasts and presents, our intimacies and complicities into what we narrate teaches us how to be more honest and attentive knowledge makers, and it also makes us grapple more deeply with the ever present possibility of epistemic violence in our narration.

**ED:** This question of journeying – across cultures, social and political landscapes, and languages – highlights the importance of both place and movement in the development of your thought. Could you talk a little bit about how you see language – and the multiplicity of language and languages – as enabling of the different ways of seeing and being in the world? Are there some languages in your experience that lend themselves more readily to ethical thought along the lines that you have identified above?

**RN:** Your emphasis on place and movement in relation to ethics and languages is very evocative. For me, the question of languages that "lend themselves more readily to ethical thought" is profoundly related to questions of accountability and responsibility: How do we define our responsibility as knowledge makers and to whom? Whose critiques matter to us in a given instance and why? And how do these concerns translate into our ability to respond to those whom we deem as our critics or evaluators?

These questions, by their very nature, resist straightforward answers especially when knowledge is simultaneously produced, consumed, (re)interpreted, and mobilized in multiple worlds and across multiple sociopolitical, linguistic, geographical, and institutional borders. Because we are simultaneously responsible to multiple interpretive communities, there is no other way but to live and create in multiple languages--conceptually, literally, symbolically. In my case, this recognition has translated into the necessity to blend--and to move among--multiple genres and forms of storytelling and narration: For example, academic writing that moves between stories, anecdotes and theorizing; qissa goi or oral storytelling that deliberately melds ways of modern theatre with those of 'traditional' nautanki; and journalistic writing that blends poetry, pictures, and protest. Some of this labor I undertake in English, some in Hindi/Hindustani, and some in Awadhi. These forms take turns, blend in, and interrupt one another to become languages that jump or flow or spill across borders, in ways that allow me to work with diverse communities of interpreters, readers, viewers, and critics.

Most of the time, such back and forth between many worlds and multiply-placed interpreters is impossible without co-authorship. By co-authorship, I mean co-owning of

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Interview with Class War University: Desiring Alliance and Complex Translations in Activist Research (Conducted 11 July 2012, Posted July 2013) <http://classwaru.org/2013/07/25/desiring-alliance> ; Richa Nagar, *Muddying the Waters: Co-authoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Richa Nagar, 'Immobility, Intimacy, Movement,' in Naeem Inayatullah and Elizabeth Dauphinee (eds.), *Narrative Global Politics*, (London: Routledge, 2016); Richa Nagar with Özlem Aslan, Nadia Hasan, Omme-Salma Rahemtullah, Nishant Upadhyay, and Begüm Uzun, 'Feminisms, Collaborations, Friendships: A Conversation,' *Feminist Studies* (in press); Richa Nagar, 'la Feminizmin Zor Sorulari Uzerine,' *Interview by Selda Tuncer for the Turkish feminist journal, AMARGI*, No. 25, June 2012, 13-20 (English translation at [http://www.academia.edu/2541413/An\\_Interview\\_with\\_Richa\\_Nagar\\_An\\_Honest\\_Dialogue\\_on\\_Difficult\\_Questions\\_of\\_Feminism](http://www.academia.edu/2541413/An_Interview_with_Richa_Nagar_An_Honest_Dialogue_on_Difficult_Questions_of_Feminism)).

authority with those who enable the creativity in the first place. The kind of blending of genres and languages that I describe above has resulted in diverse forms of co-authorship in my work: with Sangtin Writers and members of Sangtin Kisaan Mazdoor Sangathan<sup>4</sup> (hereafter, SKMS) in Sitapur; with academic writers, companions, mentors and family members--some of whom I began to tell certain stories with (or about), but who did not live to see the final shape of those stories; and with co-actors, co-scripters, and co-protestors. One of the most beautiful and inspiring things about entering into these diverse forms of co-authorship is that there is no one formula or definition of what constitutes the ethical. Rather, the nuances and requirements of ethical creation and dissemination emerge from the specificities and contingencies of each co-authorship. Perhaps the single most fulfilling recurring moment in these endeavors is when, despite the sometimes vast differences in our locations, a coauthor tells me that I have put into words, exactly what they were feeling, thinking, or hoping and when they happily take co-ownership of the expression. This allows for a generous space of creativity and growth where there is neither 'me' nor 'you,' only ours; yet there is space for both 'me' and 'you' to grow. As a writer, narrator, and translator who often writes with those who did not get formal academic degrees, I feel that this merging of the feelings, intentions, hopes, and words across borders is a powerful sign that what has been co-created, has been done in a language that is ethical.

**ED:** That question of recognition feels very important to me – when a coauthor feels you have captured her thoughts/feelings/ideas exactly. Do you think that attention to difference and multiplicity in identity, location, language, and so on, can produce unexpected connections? What has surprised you the most in this regard?

**RN:** Your emphasis on connections, as well as on their unexpected nature, is both perceptive and significant. Mainstream forms of academic disciplining push us toward 'capturing' or 'apprehending' the thoughts, feelings, ideas, desires etc. of those whom we study (with or for), and this pushing happens regardless of the specific kinds of relationalities or methodologies we are committed to living, exploring, or highlighting. Yet, one of the most valuable insights that one gains from the kind of co-authorship I am describing here emanates from the acknowledgment that our thoughts, ideas, feelings, and theorizations are always evolving and in flux, and somehow our tellings, our narrations have to embrace the responsibility of conveying or bringing to life this dynamism. In a way, and this can be disturbing to the common sense of many academics, this dynamism requires us to grapple with the reality that there can be no permanent loyalty to that which we try to 'capture' in the form of written or spoken words. Let me give a couple of examples and then link them back to your point about unexpectedness and surprises.

When as a collective of nine writers, we began to create a co-authored narrative in the form of *Sangtin Yatra*, we articulated a set of lived truths and interpretations: About the ways in which NGOs working on questions of women's empowerment enabled their employees to analyze and act upon the interbraided nature of casteism, elitism, patriarchy, and epistemic violence in some realms while foreclosing an honest critique and engagement with similar

---

<sup>4</sup> Sangtin Kisaan Mazdoor Sanagthan is a movement of more than 6000 farmers and laborers working in 70 villages of Sitapur District in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Most of the members or *saathis* of SKMS identify as Dalit and more than half of them are women.

violence in other realms.<sup>5</sup> While we co-created this analysis as a group, the truths and interpretations, the thoughts and feelings that went into making this analysis were intensely negotiated -- through fears, through tears, through cautious telling of sacred secrets. Yet, even in their tentativeness and non-fixity these negotiated fragments were powerful enough that when the authors of the book, *Sangtin Yatra*, were attacked for their critique of NGOization, the collective withstood those attacks and we were able to find support from multiple quarters to make sure that the journey on which the collective had embarked, and the dreams that had begun to take shape with the emergence of a collective critique, could not be trampled. So the journey continued to unfold but the contours of the dreams changed, the participants changed, the struggles expanded in previously unforeseen areas such as livelihoods, irrigation, farming, health, river erosion, displacement, and state corruption, etc. With this, the energy, insights, and the knowledges emerging from collective learning moved in many new directions.

So, if you ask me what was surprising or unexpected about this whole journey that has been unfolding since 2002, I would say, everything: the beginning of the journey occurred through a serendipitous encounter, the transformation of that encounter into a collective commitment was unexpected, the evolution of that commitment into a book, of the book into a political battle with an NGO, the continuation of the journey during and in the aftermath of the battle, and its gradual growth into a movement that has continued to sustain itself and to grow strong -- all of this has been unexpected. And yet, what has not been unexpected is the labor of building deep, deep relationships that can withstand difficult blows of disagreements, of misunderstandings, of temporary diversions in individual paths and desires, of refusals and difficult decisions that some of us make that do not work for others at a given time.

Interestingly, if I were to enumerate incidents from the community theater work that I have undertaken with Tarun Kumar in several places -- Minneapolis, Uttar Pradesh, Mumbai -- I would say that it has been marked by very similar surprises. That the journey takes off is sometimes not a surprise, but the directions in which it goes, the people who become part of it, the difficulties that make you afraid that the journey might end, and its continuation despite periods of intense bitterness or hardships. All of this is full of surprises, which in a way is not surprising at all because it is precisely in the surprises that the possibility of creativity lies. Without serendipity, everything would be predictable -- there would be no creativity in politics or knowledge making. This work that I am talking about does not happen through pre-formulated proposals that predict in advance what intervention the researcher or scholar is going to make. This kind of work can only 'predict' open-ended hopes -- often in the face of utter hopelessness -- because it is grounded in very strong relationships, that are rooted in trust, and whose languages and translations are committed to journeying together, because we know that ultimately the journey will enrich us as a community -- intellectually, socially, politically, creatively -- despite the hardships, hurdles, or disagreements that we may not be able to resolve.

**ED:** This is a fascinating set of observations: that theoretical or methodological loyalty is untenable, that surprise has theoretical and empirical value, that the journey itself is epistemologically relevant, and that pre-formulated, predictive proposals cannot fruitfully

---

<sup>5</sup> The English translation of *Sangtin Yatra*, along with an analysis of the attack on the authors and the debate generated by the book, appear in Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven Lives in India*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

illuminate our way. This seems to me to be an approach that can embrace the possibility of unanticipated consequences and opportunities, and also the risk of failure. Could you talk a little bit about the efforts that failed?

**RN:** That's a very helpful summary, Elizabeth. To begin answering your question, let me reiterate your last point, but in slightly different terms: This mode of being in relation to knowledge production embraces the possibility of not only unanticipated consequences and openings in the journey, but also of unforeseen risks and mistakes. I am deliberately avoiding the word, 'failure,' because 'failure' may be too inflexible a term to allow for a nuanced exploration of what those risks and mistakes can teach us theoretically, empirically, and epistemologically. A few examples of these unforeseen risks and mistakes might help me clarify this point. After undertaking intensive research and writing in the 1990s on the gendered and racialized politics of place and identity among four Asian communities in Dar es Salaam, I had to distance myself from that work for a number of reasons that were as much about the conditions of my personal life as they were about what I was learning about the demands of the US academy and what I could or could not negotiate within it at that time. But it was precisely those challenges and limitations, which led me to chart a very different path in the academy that focused on co-producing intellectual work in several languages and sites, in ways that could consistently wrestle with questions of ethics and responsibility in relation to multiply-situated interpretive communities.

In turn, this new path (which evolved from the previous one) brought its own lessons: Before *Sangtin Yatra*, I had started to build a close collaboration with a feminist NGO in Andhra Pradesh over a period of several months, but then the organization communicated to me that they had made a decision to not collaborate with academic researchers; as a result, all the dialogues and plans that went into the process came to a halt. This refusal by the organization caused pain not only for me but for some others also, but it also made me better prepared -- intellectually, politically, and emotionally -- for the difficult conversations and complex vision-making that subsequently took form with sangtins in Sitapur. It is not an exaggeration to state that the chance encounter that led to the beginning of *Sangtin Yatra/ Playing with Fire* and eventually led to the birth of SKMS would have never happened if I had embarked on my planned collaboration with the aforementioned organization in Andhra Pradesh.

Allow me to also share a couple of quick examples from *Sangtin Yatra*. Not all the nine women who co-authored the book in Hindi between 2002 and 2004 could pursue the dreams that we wove together, and six authors had to distance themselves from the movement-building activities that led to the making of SKMS after 2005. In abstract terms, the reasons for this distancing were not very different from my need to let go of certain forms of my attachment to Dar es Salaam: It was not that they did not love the journey or its labor, it's just that the combination of the structures and conditions that they found themselves in did not permit them to continue the journey with SKMS.

In the course of the collective journey that did continue with SKMS, there have been multiple instances of refusals and mistakes. I am remembering occasions when either the sangtins collectively refused others who invited the alliance to participate in certain dialogues or storytelling; or, when the alliance was itself invested in building some dialogues with other groups or struggles but when the efforts did not go very far. To cite one specific instance, when two members of SKMS came to the USA in 2007, a number of us in Minneapolis worked hard to organize a conversation with several members of organizations that represented Minnesota's hotel

workers and farm workers. However, it proved very difficult to have any deep conversations that carried relevance for the workers who participated in the conversation. So much of our organizing effort was focused on getting the bodies from multiple sites of struggle in one place and so confident were we (as organizers of the conversation) about our own ability to communicate about these specific struggles, that we forgot to prepare ourselves for the difficult task of preparing generative translations that could carry enough resonance across struggles to make the fifty or so people in the room to want to begin a conversation organically. One way to describe this event would be to call it an effort that failed to take advantage of an amazing learning opportunity. Another way to describe it would be that our inability to generate a productive dialogue despite our intense desire to have that dialogue taught us a few critical things about the labor that it takes to prepare the soil on which translations can be planted. Without that preparation, no matter how nuanced our insights or vision, we just won't be able to take the dialogues beyond a superficial narration of stories where all we end up doing is creating a 'multicultural' event rather than facilitating the beginnings of fresh collective analyses.

In trying to remember and narrate these instances and events, I realize that your question about 'efforts that failed' has actually proved to be quite generative. It has triggered a series of reflections that I hope have helped me to convey the point that if we learn to value mistakes -- as moments that can teach us critical lessons about our assumptions, contextualities, methodologies, and epistemes -- then it is impossible to declare anything in these collective journeys as failure. It is often the unforeseen risks and mistakes that push us to more clearly define our intellectual, political and creative commitments while teaching us to grapple with their inseparability from forever evolving practices.

**ED:** It is very challenging to embrace the kind of fundamental uncertainty you're talking about, and I don't just mean from an academic perspective, although that is obviously an important site. It seems to me that this is actually a philosophical question -- a question of epistemology -- of what it means to know -- of how we know. And, of course, who is doing the meaningful knowing? To dwell in an intellectual space where the standard scholarly operating tools are no longer of reliable value is to be necessarily at the mercy of others. It strikes me that this is not simply a posture of pragmatism for you, but of intellectual hospitality. Do you see your approach in that way? As a posture of hospitality?

**RN:** Embracing uncertainty as part of co-evolving with others is most definitely a question of epistemology. I would add, too, that this epistemic position is intensely intertwined with ethics and justice. If the terrain of knowledge production were fundamentally equal and non-violent, then hospitality would have been a good way to describe this approach towards receiving and molding knowledges in the world. However, when the landscape of knowledge making is inherently uneven and unjust, this mode must become an overtly political one.

Your question immediately brings to mind a story that some of us in the SKMS alliance created in 2007 on the basis of a modified Awadhi folktale. In that story, which has come to represent SKMS's philosophical position on the question of sharing authority across borders, an arrogant pundit climbs on a boat to cross the river and tries to strike up a conversation with the boatman; but each time the pundit makes an attempt to do so, he demeans the boatman by boasting about his own authoritative knowledge of all kinds of 'isms' -- capitalism, marxism, feminism. At the end of the story, things suddenly turn around and the boat starts sinking in mid-

stream. This time, the boatperson -- who has been very humbly accepting the pundit's pronouncements about the latter's own greatness, turns to him and says, 'You know everything pundit ji, so go ahead and swim.' But alas, the pundit only knows his books and lecturing, he hasn't learned the practical skills of life; so the story ends with the boatman jumping out of the boat and swimming across the river to save his own life and the pundit drowning in the river owing to his conceited claims to wisdom. The pundit's misplaced assumptions about the superiority of his own knowledge and his mistaken belief that the boatman has nothing to teach him leads to his death. If the pundit had shown some humility about his knowledge, chances are that the boatperson would have extended his hand to the pundit and the lives and knowledges of both could have been saved.

I find this story powerful -- not only because it uses a simple storyline to communicate an ugly truth about how certified intellectuals refuse to learn from the uncertified bearers and makers of knowledge in our everyday world -- but also because it articulates a violent end to the story in its desire to be fair to the boatperson (even if that is not the common way in which politics of knowledge production unfold in our everyday world). This ending underscores the question of epistemic violence as one of life and death.

Since I have learned my most important lessons in knowledge making on this kind of terrain, I would describe the epistemic stance adopted by the story as one that entails a conscious mode of sharing authority, which results in co-owned truths, insights, struggles, stories, and courage -- and where both the pundit and the boatperson are willing to be humble, open-minded, and vulnerable enough to learn from each other without minimizing or destroying the other. Each would recognize in themselves and the other, the co-existence of both pundit and boatperson. In this process of journeying together -- the pundit, as well as the boat person -- would have a chance to build enough trust with each other to participate in a praxis of love. This praxis would enable both of them to accept vulnerability as a radical stance: where they can let go of their egos and where they can each listen, unlearn, and relearn; agree and disagree; co-own achievements and mistakes; and shift their positions and truths in sincere conversation with each other in order to contemplate and enact an ethical and more mutually hospitable way of being in the world. In the absence of such praxis, hospitality runs the risk of becoming a patronizing and/or unethical gesture.

**ED:** What has surprised you the most about your journey?

**RN:** That's a beautiful question, Elizabeth. In a nutshell, it is the endless resonances from the most unexpected places that have surprised, and that continue to surprise, me the most. Ever since I embarked on a path that rejected the idea of scholarship and teaching as segregated from other forms of creativity -- for example, writing, theatre, and organizing in the form of multi-lingual border-crossings -- I have been repeatedly told that this is too strange, or impossible, or idealistic, or lonely a path, and that academia might not be the best place from where to embrace this approach to knowledge as a life-long commitment.

Yet, in the last twenty or so years of trying to find alternative ways of not just inhabiting the spaces of the academy, but also the spaces of arts and political activism, I have been amazed to encounter so many people in so many places who are hungry for precisely this kind of journey. It is the ubiquitousness and the power of this shared hunger that has surprised me the most -- whether it is among the students, or among the members of social movements and non-profit

organizations, or among low-paid workers and artists, or among those whose lives are spent working chiefly in their own homes. At the risk of making a grand generalization, I would say that all those creative souls who have felt suffocated by the disciplining of knowledge or creativity in any form, want to find a more liberated path to receive knowledge, to breathe knowledge, and to make knowledge. And when a coming-together of such minds, bodies, and souls happens, the most wondrous energy flows. It is the never-ending power and beauty of these creative encounters, and the ever-present possibility of finding companions and co-travelers on this journey, that has surprised me the most -- in the most enriching and humbling ways.