

Book Review Symposium

Richa Nagar in Journeys with Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan and Parakh Theatre,
Hungry Translations: Relearning the World through Radical Vulnerability, Champaign:
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Commentary 1 – Witnessing Radical Vulnerability

Only twice in my life has the experience of reading an academic text moved me to tears. The first was when reading *Drawing Out Law* by Anishinaabe legal scholar John Borrows (2010), a text written in the storytelling methodology of Anishinaabe law, wherein legal principles are expressed through stories that unfold across key sacred sites upon the land. As a Kwagw'ł scholar, I was moved by the radical possibility of animating ancestral knowledge on the page. The second instance was when reading *Hungry Translations: Relearning the World through Radical Vulnerability*. Richa Nagar recounts rehearsing a dying scene for a play, which is being workshopped by a group of 20 people from diverse backgrounds and life experiences: in the cramped apartment which is their rehearsal space, kitchen, and office, we see Nagar lying beside Mumatz, writhing and moaning and crying out the death moment together. In this intimate scene, the reader is gifted with the ability to witness the shared spaces in which Nagar and her collaborators move together, not only toward creating new knowledge or forging paths toward social change, but shifting the terms of their engagement. Nagar, a university professor based in the United States, rehearses the pains of dying alongside a woman who is at once an actor, a critic of the gendered politics of community theatre, and a housecleaner, whose body and face are shaped by long-term physical labor accompanied by hunger. Indeed, we learn that Mumatz signed up to play the role of this dying woman because, she says, “I know this story in a way that they can’t” (p.116). I felt moved to tears not by the death or dying, but by the tenderness of

Nagar's reverence for Mumatz, and the fullness of the shared geography they create in that small room through the movement of their breath and bodies.

I choose to begin with this moment – this powerful scene in *Hungry Translations* and its impact on me as I read from my own small home office in unceded Lekwungen territories in the settler colonial nation of Canada – as a response to Nagar's call for scholarship created through "radical vulnerability", which "cannot be an individual pursuit; indeed it is meaningless without collectivity", as "the singular relearns to breathe and grow differently in the plural" (p.30). The insights Nagar shares through journal entries, plays, poetry, syllabi, and storied recollections of shared processes of knowledge creation and community mobilization are difficult to describe here, which is part of their beauty. Like the community processes they recount, each section of the book must be experienced, in all its affective complexity. As Nagar writes of the process of workshopping a play across differences of languages, castes, and religions, she reflects, "this discomfort is not easy to categorize or name; it stirs us and it baffles us, even as it eludes our grasp" (p.118). This also aptly describes the experience of moving through the book, as it invites the reader into processes of opening up and disrupting preconceived ideas about the lives of the people in it, while shifting the spaces of our own engagement.

Hungry Translations is richly textured with scenes of struggle and triumph, of hard-won small victories, and fraught negotiations of self-definition. The reader is invited to witness Nagar walk alongside her co-authors in their refusal of epistemic nihilation: "For SKMS, a refusal to be nihilated means rejecting the discourse where Dalit kisans and mazdoors are reduced to the status of being the 'poorest of the poor' or as being on the 'margins' and therefore unable to produce and mobilize knowledge and politics to better their own situation" (p.9). We see power and agency expressed in what might seem like small or inconsequential moments within longer and larger struggles. The book invites a kind of intimate witnessing that can only come from scholarship premised on altogether different terms than those usually used to engage collaborators, especially peasants, farmers, laborers, those of lower castes – people and communities who are normatively defined by their marginality and vulnerability.

As academics, we often position ourselves as serving to translate across the chasms of social difference within which knowledge of the Other is formed. But the translation in *Hungry Translations* is not that. Nagar writes not to bridge the gap but to actively invest in pathways to knowledge which are formed without the gap. As Nagar and her SKMS saathis astutely observe, “The entire system of this country and this world is in infinite need of a figure of impoverishment whose stomach is forever hungry and who can be endlessly helped, protected, and developed” (p.100). *Hungry Translations* refuses and actively seeks to upend the processes through which one’s power is formed via uplifting those “in need”. Rather, the social positions on either side of the supposed divide – the academy, on one side, and the ‘community of concern’ in research, on the other – are not static but alive with movement, fluidity, and vibrant resistance via their interrelation. Nagar ruptures the gap through intimate immersion, “disrupting such categories as writer, educator, activist, artist, kisan, and mazdoor, these ever-evolving solidarities [that] enable the formation of multiple interpretive communities so that people in the so-called margins cannot become raw materials or suppliers of stories” (p.31). Nagar is within the stories unfolding in the book, yet in her careful and ethical writing, it is in the relational nature of the work over time and across shifting sites that theories of hungry translation take shape. Is Nagar the author and expert of hungry translation? Is she a researcher who invites a range of collaborators in? Or is she responding to calls from her longtime networks to work closely together toward the kind of world for which they hunger together? The movement between and among various points of view and representational forms is, in my view, where the triumph of *Hungry Translations* lives.

In taking up shifting voices and methods, the book responds to calls within philosophy, critical geography and other disciplines, for forms of representation in scholarship that “look and listen ethically” (Spivak 1996) and resist impulses to neatly close off meanings of violence, of agency, of difference, of injustice. As voiced by geographer-poet Sarah de Leeuw (2017: 316), in order to avoid replicating the violent conditions critical scholars seek to recount, there is a need for “re-formed writing, writing that works to right, writing that refuses the very forms, the

graphings, that have assisted in building the colonial violence pervading so many geographies”. Through such refusals and reformations, Nagar responds to geographer Katherine McKittrick’s (2016: 5) call to invest in “undoing the deadly yet normalized workings” of colonialism and imperialism, without gesturing toward the possibility of tidily concluding knowledge creation processes in which violence is absent. The book is woven through with reminders that the goal is not to perfect the act of hungry translation, but to keep resisting the need for closure, for answers, or for claiming a position of authority.

Two important refusals stand out as the foundation for this transformative approach. First, the book refuses to situate the wounds or vulnerabilities of Others at the centre of its theorizing, and, second, it simultaneously refuses to situate stories in relationship to scholarly texts, invoking a citational politics which does not seek to validate its claims via the scholarly canon. Whereas scholars often look to stories of Others’ pain and violation to fuel theories of oppression and resistance – particularly feminist, decolonial and anti-racist theorizing – Nagar centres the messiness of her own fleshy being-in-relation as that evidence. We are invited to witness fraught, weighty processes of coming to know one another, acknowledging the shared limits of the ability to ever fully know experiences which are not one’s own. Though the text is bookended with engagement with scholarship that has similarly sought to shift the terms of knowledge creation across distances of space, time and social location, the bulk of the text brings the stories into conversation with other formats, other times, other geographies concerned with Nagar’s communities of collaboration. These refusals confront the colonial assumption that all knowledge is up for grabs (as per Smith 1999) or should be made within reach of those of us seeking to “do good” through our scholarship. Perhaps most powerfully, Nagar’s poetry (p.203) peppered throughout the book reminds us of the dance between knowing and not-knowing that collaborative work with others demands:

yet you demand another story
as if my tongue was not my own hot
flesh
you retell
without shiver or stammer without
feeling in a piece of your bones
for a second my
wounded everyday sort of
joy, pain, of
[...]
you will never
realize, you cannot
know

Here we witness the resistance of people whose stories of pain and violence, survival and struggle, have been extracted or demanded by scholars for decades. Passages such as these demand to be experienced, inviting the reader to confront our own consumption of others' suffering as the basis of solidarity or critical analysis. We are moved to ask how those of us who seek to advance social justice struggles in our scholarly work inadvertently build our own identities via the voyeuristic display of the suffering of others. Partaking in hungry translations such as those enacted by Nagar and her collaborators "requires that we do not merely travel to the *Othereal* worlds that form the basis of our knowledge claims" (p.33) but instead embed ourselves in relationships and entwined worlds from which other possibilities can be forged. This is indeed a particularly urgent question right now, as many of us advancing decolonial and anti-racist struggles are taking up questions of police brutality, racial violence, and the deathly impacts of environmental racism in line with ongoing uprisings across the globe. Where do we

situate ourselves as we undertake work about world-ending violences, and on whose terms?

Another important insight into answering these urgent questions is provided in a scene in which Nagar's collaborators respond to the university's insistence that, because their research hasn't yielded any recognizable data or scholarly outputs, her work did not comprise research with "human subjects", thus not requiring ongoing ethics oversight. Richa S, a longtime collaborator, laughs, "Hum sabko mubrak! This is good news" (p.103), revealing the insightful ways that Nagar's colleagues navigate relations of power, all too aware of the lens through which the university views them. As an Indigenous scholar whose work is formed out of long-term collaboration with networks of grassroots anti-violence workers, youth leaders and activists, I know all too well the limited ways that our institutions and our methodological paradigms allow for collaborative work. Feminist, decolonial and other critical research methodologies provide frameworks of community-based research (CBR), participatory action research (PAR), arts-based research and other supposedly radical approaches for working across the spaces of "the community" and the university. These paradigms are used to frame research relations within methods textbooks and course syllabi, as well as national and institutional research ethics guidelines. Yet, as a scholar and teacher of courses on methodology, I have long been troubled by the way these frameworks imagine the unequal power relations between university researchers and communities situated "out there" beyond the realm of authoritative knowledge creation. The inability of these paradigms to account for the more messy, lived, and fluid dynamics between academics and our long-term collaborators are made starkly apparent throughout this book, but especially in this moment when the ethics board simply deems Nagar's work to not actually be dealing with "human subjects".

Through a multitude of shared moments across many years and diverse projects, Nagar shows us what is possible within knowledge creation processes that spill out of the neat categories of CBR, PAR and other predetermined frames for research. This is instructive for many of us whose work arises out of contexts in which our own lives and identities are entangled, as well as for scholars who write from within decades-long relationships with people

and communities. Within university ethics guidelines and critical research paradigms, we are often asked to account for our own power by situating ourselves but are not required to shift or upturn our situatedness. *Hungry Translations* offers insights into both the possibility and impossibility of doing so. No project template or funding stream can account for what is shared in the book – only a deeply personal commitment to situate oneself within emergent processes that may or may not result in an academic “output”. We can sense that the valuable work described in the book has been done in stolen moments between “official” or recognized labor within the university. This should cause us to ask what might be possible if this type of relational labor was valued as necessary for academics to invest in practices which actively avoid creating harm for the people whose lives our work centers on. Hungry translations require us, as academics, to reshape the value assigned to ourselves as writers, experts or academics. In telling stories of others, we are always also telling stories about ourselves.

The beautiful and breathing theorizing of Richa Nagar, Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS) and Parakh Theatre sets a new stage of possibility for critical and socially engaged scholarship. I see much of my own work within Indigenous communities reflected here – the quality of knowledge that comes from living alongside kin who remain invisible to my colleagues in the academy other than in representations of risk, subalternity, marginality and victimization. All of us concerned with questions of power, violence and injustice should be seeking ways to align ourselves with the questions and storying in this deeply transformative book.

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Commentary 2 – Hungry Translation

Richa Nagar's eloquent book takes us on a journey. *Hungry Translations* casts a wide net forcing us to rethink what we mean by translation. Nagar invites us to enter into "vibrant, even disturbing, epistemic conversations with bodies out there that sing, perform, and protest" (p.8). I want to point to some of the parts of this book that push our conceptual frames in unexpected directions. In particular, I was drawn in by the small vignettes Nagar seizes on to capture larger stories. For instance, in the interaction between Sunita and Tarun, Nagar recalls Sunita calling Tarun "bhaiya" (brother), and between Tama and Tarun, when Tama shows Tarun the small bottle of mustard oil from which to cook parathas for visitors; in these vignettes are condensed small gestures that speak to larger epistemic encounters. Here, Nagar deftly navigates this dense encounter and has us think expansively about kinship beyond narrow confines of filial relationships. Through these relationships a hunger is forged – a hunger "for politics through theatre" (p.18). This leads Nagar to think deeply about hunger by, on the one hand, recognizing the limitations of "experts", and on the other, the unbound imaginations fueled by hunger illegible by dominant frameworks. She says, "experts on the poor have no trouble recognizing that those who live with the hunger of underfed bellies are also hungry for justice. However, the same experts participate in epistemic nihilation of the 'poor' by refusing to appreciate their hunger for justice as a nuanced creative and intellectual hunger governed by social imaginary" (p.19).

The lack of understanding what the hunger for justice looks like is about translation. But translation here does not simply mean understanding or the ability to comprehend the other person; translation here means much more. I want to draw on Nagar's examples to illustrate what she means. In an example that is both familiar and everyday, Nagar exposes radical potential. At a conference in Cambodia, Nagar explains the process of decision making. Rambeti, one of the Dalit farmers and members of Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan, a collective that Nagar has worked with, refuses after three days of participation in the CGIAR Climate Change, Agriculture, and Food Security workshop to proceed further. Nagar quotes Rambeti as saying,

“They say they want to learn from us, but our conversations tell me that we can never be partners as long as they keep talking in the same sentence about my cow’s carbon emissions and the carbon emissions of global corporations” (p.22). This act of radical refusal is about “political geographies of subaltern struggle [which] are increasingly configured in ways that necessitate encounters with difference, inequality, and hierarchy, and these encounters involve simultaneous translations across uneven terrains. When these translations are read as inherently ‘unjust’ by any of the parties, there is little hope for dialogue” (p.26). What Nagar here is pointing to is the possibility of “local articulations [that] are not epistemologically nihilated or obliterated” (p.27).

The inability of experts to comprehend the “intellectual hunger” of the poor as Nagar points out is not about better ethnography or more perfect translations. Rather she says that a hungry translation is “distinguished by its insistence on a collective and relational ethic of radical vulnerability that refuses to assume that it can arrive at a perfect translation” (p.29). Throughout the book, this unique and profoundly generative frame of radical vulnerability invites us to literally a different language of communication. And it was in Nagar’s narrative about the play and the participants’ relationship and journey through the play that this idea of radical vulnerability came alive. Through the wonderfully rich, detailed work of translating Premchand’s “Kafan” into Parakh Theatre’s “Hansa, Karo Puratan Baat” lie some of the most evocative parts of the book. For instance, where Nagar arrives at a new way to think through embodiment – particularly when Mumtaz takes on Budhiya’s role (p.116). Or the different ways in which the actors – Gaurav, Alok, Meena and Mumtaz – in “Hansa” come to embodiment as Nagar illustrates through fragments of their diaries (p.148). You get a palpable sense of their journey and struggle and at the same time incredible excitement and a sort of nasha, intoxication, with the collective inhabiting of process. It was in reading through this part of the book that I found perhaps the clearest sense of what Nagar was working through about the possibility for hungry translations through radical vulnerability.

Ultimately, the book is not an ask for more perfect translations, but rather it asks us to dare imagine the liberatory potential that emerges from radical vulnerability. And it is in that

vein that I want to forge a link between Nagar's hungry translation and radical vulnerability with what has been happening in India in the past few months. Since the end of last year until the pandemic sent the country into lockdown, there were incredible protests around the country against the draconian Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC). Nagar's book offers a guide to think about these protests as well as the pandemic that ground the world to a halt. CAA creates a pathway to citizenship for those who are deemed "illegal" belonging specifically to Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian communities from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan who entered India before 2014. The Act does not offer the same protections to Muslims and others from these places or to those fleeing other parts, such as the Rohingyas from Myanmar. In response to the widespread protests across the country, a pogrom was unleashed by Hindu mobs in February 2020, under the banner of the Hindu right against Muslim communities in East Delhi. The violence that ensued left at least 40 dead and over 200 injured while the Delhi police, who report directly to Amit Shah, the home minister, stood by as the violence was unleashed. Images of Hindu men atop masjids taking down minarets evoked the mobs that stood atop the Babri Masjid in 1992. What was it about the protests that unleashed such violence and anxiety? What made the Hindu rightwing rush to erase the slogans and protest graffiti that had changed the landscape in Jamia Millia Islamia University?

I think part of the answer lies in what Nagar explores in her book – the idea of solidarity forged through radical vulnerability. What began to form in the cold days and nights of Delhi's winter was solidarity between castes and communities that was threatening to the current dispensation. There were many instances of solidarity on display. One of which began in the middle of cold, foggy January when a large group of Sikh men and women gathered under a flyover bridge and began to unload a portable gas stove and large utensils and set up a langar, a community kitchen, to feed people. Within hours a kitchen was set up and food was being distributed to those protesting. It was an instance of incredible solidarity born out of memory and refusal to repeat the horrors of India's Partition. This was just the beginning of demonstrations of

solidarity among Sikhs and Muslims who had gathered at Shaheen Bagh. As these men and women walked from Punjab some carried signs that said, “Bhai se bhai ladne na paaye, phir se 47 banne na paaye” (may brothers never fight again, may 1947 never be repeated again). Social media sites were flooded with images of Hindu and Muslim women making chapatis together, a Sikh man massaging the leg of a Muslim man, people sitting together in the cold of night and raising their fists together to slogans of aazadi, freedom. Recitations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s poem “Hum Dekhenge” (“We Will Witness”) echoed throughout the protests against CAA and against the violence. It was awe inspiring, and for many of us who were following what has been happening, there was growing anxiety and trepidation as well as horror at the violence that followed. But as the moments of solidarity that emerged across the country lent some hope in the despair, for me it connected with what Richa Nagar implores in her book. That radical vulnerability generates possibilities that are beyond language. The Sikhs who come to feed the Muslims protesting in Delhi all the way from Punjab open a way of being with them by the pain of shared histories and as those who have witnessed pogrom of 1984 and were subjects of 1947. What the Sikhs who came to Shaheen Bagh demonstrated was a relationality which “inspires a situated solidarity where our minds and bodies, our hearts and tongues can always be open to diverse ways of knowing and co-creating” (p.30).

But there is a special resonance about the langar and the sharing of food among different groups of people. For the Sikhs, it dates back to Guru Nanak’s teaching about giving food to all, but it extends beyond that: it is also about breaking with India’s caste divisions which are based in notions of pollution and purity where dominant castes would not share food and water with those of subordinate castes and where Hindus would not share food with Muslims. In the communal kitchen, and in the multiple other ways that people have come out to make food and chai, these protestors dismantle efforts by the Hindu right to congeal the boundaries of caste and purity by casting Muslims as dirty and dangerous. Those protesting at Shaheen Bagh recognized early the strategy of the Hindu right and articulated their call for justice in terms of solidarity between Muslims and Dalits. When I went to Shaheen Bagh, posters of Ambedkar and Savitribai

Phule adorned the tent and recitations of poetry underlined shared history and struggle. So, when the Sikhs joined all this with the langar, it had significance beyond just feeding the hunger of the belly. Rather, it speaks to what Richa Nagar crafts in her book as hunger for justice realized in the collective solidarity of sharing. In explaining situated solidarity Nagar says, “far from replaying inherited lessons or interpretations about differences of caste, class, or geographic location, the creative process enables unanticipated articulations of swaanubhuti, albeit in ways that one’s own histories and geographies become interwoven with those of other coactors, even as the collective searches for new analytical resonances and epiphanies through empathy or samaanubhuti” (p.187).

Let me end with this, that in this moment of unprecedented global pandemic, now more than ever we need to heed Nagar’s words about radical vulnerability and solidarity to find ways to connect. We are already seeing around the world where the pandemic is reinforcing divisions on the basis of caste and race. Where under the current mode of functioning, the lives of so many are expendable, we need to learn from this book to reach for translations across divisions and borders as we face collective vulnerabilities.

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Commentary 3 – Hunger, Texture, Complicity

Sometimes our stories center on us and sometimes they focus on another, but no matter what or who a story is about, its teller and receiver are almost always implicated in representing or translating a self that is entangled and co-constitutive with an other. It is precisely through these translational acts that all politics become politics of storytelling (p.207).

There is no-one in critical feminist geography who even comes close to writing like Richa Nagar. Clear-eyed, courageous, and committed to transparency, with her prose and poetry always abundant with her inimitable creative flair, she offers us a way to consider radical vulnerability in and out of the academy.

Her latest contribution, *Hungry Translations* stopped me in my tracks.

When my copy arrived, water-logged and warped from the publisher, I was admittedly irritated and annoyed. The book crinkled in my hands, the pages bumpy and noisy. Some sections proved difficult to read because of its terrain. I couldn't make out some words; others were hidden from view, hiding in plain sight. It is only later that I would see that this particular texturing spoke volumes to me. I began to see how the content had morphed through its contact with water, from whatever staunch fountain it came in contact with through its complicated border-crossing. I began to see the topography as deliberate; both physical and emotional – offering a different kind of receiving, retelling and, in that, responsibility (Nagar 2014). I had to rethink my refusal to see that topography as something different, rife with possibility.

It is the lingering on refusals in this book that gave me pause. Using the concept of hungry translations, Nagar aptly demonstrates an otherworldly engagement with politics, reminding me of what the Indigenous scholar Daniel Heath Justice (2018) might call a way of imagining otherwise. The geography here is uneven and textured; and in refusing a foreclosure on and through these unequal locations, on this unjust terrain, that distance-difference is not just accentuated but offers a remarkable site for collective sociopolitical and epistemic justice. The interconnected moments of collective refusal are beautifully illustrated here. Nagar so beautifully shares with us a glimpse of collective and relational ethics of radical vulnerability. In refusing

the possibility of a perfect translation, Nagar reminds us of the potent geographies of scale that portend opportunities for unique confluences of time and place. It is the transparency that is also worthy of note. Nagar notes that she is authorized to excavate different meanings of the moments of refusal through the enabling of long-term relationships and analyses and her entanglements with the groups she works and their ability to “agonize together” over the meanings and implications of exchanges occurring at different junctures (p.27).

What makes Nagar’s contribution so striking is its incommensurability. It is not one thing, ever; and in fact it refuses that possibility. It moves in its complex scaffolding from segments of a play, to breathtakingly evocative poetry, to formal student commentary, to journalistic offerings. Its creative expanse reminds us of what might be possible in academe if we would be more willing to consider radical vulnerability, to move seamlessly and not-so-seamlessly beyond academic discourse, those disembodied voices, to the other spectrum and realms towards a “collectively honed praxis” (p.199). I hope, for some of us, it will grant us personal as well as professional permission to speak up in all our hungers. And this is what Nagar does with creative kindness to challenge epistemic violence: she speaks to the hungry, and hungered. In some ways I did not know how hungry I was for this kind of creative intervention until I read this book. She reminds us that hunger and the hungry actively create politics through an innovative practice of ethics and praxis. For her, there is a possibility of relearning worlds and words we use if we commit to a radical vulnerability. By mapping out those intimate cartographies, through the use of a green sari here, a steaming paratha there, a different vocabulary emerges, one that allows our haunted inheritances to emerge as central to our stories.

For me, this book was a map. It was a cartography to show me what my hunger yearns for, but because of fear of reprisal and humiliation, I do not choose. Nagar confidently takes our hand and walks us through how she adeptly co-ordinated a space for students to see how “all politics are politics of storytelling” (p.205) and that “a praxis of ethical engagement with politics can be imagined as a praxis of retelling stories” (p.205). She doesn’t just describe, but reflects on the nests of care she has participated in producing. Dotted with languages other than capital “E”

English throughout, and generously offering an index at the end of terms with which others may not be as familiar, reminding me of the work of Berlant and Stewart (2019) in *The Hundreds*, I see this project as a kind of offering to build resonances beyond translation. Nagar sees the stage as many, many things: “a site and moment of performance ... *staging* as a deliberate, yet relational, fluid, and forever-evolving act. Pedagogy ... becomes a praxis of embodied performance ... ” (p.206).

There is no romanticization of serendipity and luck here, and rightly so. It is impossible for me to respond to this book in this moment without speaking of pandemic times, in this time of not-knowing. Nagar, I think, would encourage us to embrace that not-knowing. Her book provides us with the template to do just that. Her exchanges, encounters, interlocutions that make up the flames of this book remind us that the process and poetics of sharing become an entangled theory of theatre, movement, and translation (p.206). Her focus on a deep relational process allows us to trust in the evolution of revolution, to refuse the complicity of a lack of courage.

And so a question for you, the reader, as I contemplate the importance of crafting the anti-colonial question during a time of pandemic: can we see this book as a kind of portal (Roy 2020) towards a new way of being? For me, the answer is yes. The question for you is: will you take the risk to consider its possibilities, too?

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Commentary 4 – Politics without Guarantees

“All politics are politics of storytelling”, Richa Nagar writes in *Hungry Translations*, her book-length exploration of what it means to move together across difference in three collective sites that she herself has moved through for close to two decades: the Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS), a movement of mostly Dalit kisans and mazdoors (peasants and workers) based in Uttar Pradesh’s Sitapur district; Parakh, a Bombay-based people’s theatre collective; and the North American classroom at the University of Minnesota, where she teaches (p.205). Telling stories of her passage through all these collective sites in India and the United States, Nagar explores the multiple senses in which people come together in social, political, embodied, and emotional movement across violent structures of power and difference – and do so through story and performance. Across the book, she invests in the possibilities of storytelling and performance to “mend old tears and give birth to new solidarities” (p.7). This is the method that anchors her impassioned call to undertake “politics without guarantees” (p.251), rather than shrink away from the messy challenge of building solidarities across differences of caste, gender, class, race and nation.

How might one step forward in solidarity without displacing another? Or to use Nagar’s own words, “What kind of responsibility comes when we receive a story from the ‘other’ side? What does it take to retell stories of another without making that other into an Other?” (p.220). *Hungry Translations* arrives in light of ongoing public conversations, in so many different global sites, about what it means to tell another’s story as a gesture of solidarity. In many academic and activist contexts, it seems like any gesture of solidarity is fraught with the risk of appropriation and open, justifiably, to questions about how “raising one’s voice” on behalf of another might sometimes amount to drowning out that voice, reinforcing historical power differentials whereby some populations are condemned to only being represented by others. In light of these conversations, rather than backing away from solidarity work or restricting oneself to working solely with “one’s own group” (a gesture that inevitably raises the question of intragroup

difference), Nagar insists that we can and must nevertheless move together in the necessarily imperfect space of coalition building. For Nagar, all academic and movement work entails translation, and collective politics entails not only telling one's own story, but also telling the story of another – even if that other is a member of one's own group. She exhorts us to undertake what she calls “hungry translation” (p.29) – undertaking, that is, the act of retelling another's story alongside one's own in a gesture of co-authorship, fully aware that it is impossible to do it full justice; that ethical solidarity will always hunger for more.

In calling for hungry translations, Nagar also makes a call for “radical vulnerability” – a relational ethic that for her indicates not “endless generosity and openness” but “reminding ourselves and one another of the violent histories and geographies that we inherit and embody despite our desires to disown them” (p.43). She writes, “Such grappling with the simultaneous presence of the protagonist and antagonist in all of us is necessary for just translations – that is, for modes of retelling that agitate against the structures and epistemes invested in guarding the binary of ‘the emancipators’ and ‘those in need of emancipation’”. It is clear, then, that not all modes of translation are just, as we have learned from decades of feminist and anti-imperialist theorizing about the dangers of well-intentioned rescue politics vis a vis those whose oppression is seen as their defining feature.

In the context of solidarity work across differently situated groups, the call to translate another's story inevitably raises the question of whether the story of the other requires translation at all. Nagar thus cautions that “we must strive to translate at some points, and refuse to translate at others” (p.43). In Parakh Theatre's workshop in Bombay, we see a group of professional and non-professional actors, from a range of class and caste locations, coming together with the aim of creating a theatrical production together based on their prior group reading of Hindi and Urdu fictional works. Premchand's famous and infamous short story “Kafan” (1935) is the story they settle on reworking into a new script, expanding the original such that only the second part of the new play cleaves to Premchand's original story. They come together in (theatrical and also political) movement despite their divergent understandings of a text that has since come to be

known as both a searing critique of feudal caste relations and a problematic text by an upper-caste male writer that reduces the lower-caste woman to a cipher. As Nagar recounts, the workshop coordinators who were aware of these critiques of Premchand's text choose not to convey them, thereby allowing the group to arrive at its own understanding of the text. Nagar then details the all-absorbing process of rehearsal whereby the members of the group, through multiple revisitations and performances of the text, arrive at renewed collective understandings of "Kafan" on a daily basis. Here we see the refusal to translate allowing a new text to emerge through collective movement of the group (the text of this new co-authored play is included in the book).

This movement – moving together – is not without its frictions and hierarchies, of course. For example, Nagar describes the gendered tussle between many of the male actors and Mumtaz, a Dalit Muslim domestic worker hailing from Karnataka, who had taken on the role of Budhiya – the woman in Premchand's story whose primary role is to die of labor pains while her husband and father-in-law eat stolen potatoes outside after two days of acute hunger. Nagar recounts how the male members of the group take up space during rehearsals, try to impress each other, and even attempt to outdo Mumtaz in her role of the dying Budhiya when they are temporarily swapped into her role. Nevertheless, she transforms Budhiya from a negated character in the corner of the room, bringing her own embodied knowledge to the role. "I feel I know this story in a way that they can't", she insists (p.116). The point isn't that collective movement will allow the group to overcome differences but precisely that such movement can happen with deep tension in its very guts; tension that cannot always be worked through or resolved.

The inherently risky nature of translation (always "hungry" and imperfect) as an engine of collective movement comes into sharp focus in Part Four, where Nagar offers a specific method for forging collectivity through the use of theatre and storytelling. Nagar's very detailed "Syllabus in Fifteen Acts" offers a series of skillfully crafted and purposefully risky exercises in vulnerability. Rather than taking the classroom as a site separate from those of research or community engagement, the Syllabus seeks to create the classroom as a "site where politics are

actively made and remade” (p.206). Core to the setup of this class, titled “Stories, Bodies, Movements”, is the instruction to each member to “share your partner’s story as if it is your own story” (p.221). The pedagogical exercise is designed to rehearse the specter of appropriation that haunts many contemporary discussions around translation and solidarity. Thus, the carefully written questions on the syllabus ask (p.222):

- What did it feel like to “own” the story of your partner?
 - What did it feel like to let go of your own story? What was it like not to be able to make eye contact with your partner while telling their story and again while listening to your own story being told?
- [...]
- How did you make decisions about editing the story, on what should be said and what should remain unsaid?

These questions prompt the “player” to think about the risk of letting go of their own story, and also about the risk of telling someone else’s story. There is a different kind of vulnerability in both. The exercise and attached questions raise questions worth thinking through; what it may mean, for instance, to invite everyone into such vulnerability when some groups are already socially vulnerable in relation to others in the classroom. After all, it is much easier to be vulnerable when one is holding some/more power. Empathy is the glue that must hold the collective together, and so “empathetic reflection” is one of ten “props” that are included on the Syllabus. Certainly, we might acknowledge the risk of empathy as a basis for politics, bearing in mind Saidiya Hartman’s (1997: 20) caution that empathy “fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead”. Even so, Nagar invests in the possibilities of transformation through empathy as an embodied way of knowing another and from there, moving together. Needless to say, the exercise of telling another’s story may not always succeed in forging a singular collective – in the final part of the book that Nagar co-authored with the

seminar participants, it is clear that not one but multiple collectives began to form in the class (p.246). But this is precisely the kind of vision Nagar pushes us towards – a politics without guarantees that is nevertheless worth undertaking in the hope that one can enter into collective movement from a place of necessary complicity, without resolving the mess of tension and conflict that swirl at the heart of all collectivity, and to do it nevertheless.

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Author's Reply – Agitating, Moving, and Becoming Together

I read, I reread, and then read again the words offered by Sarah, Rupal, Minelle, and Deepti... I see a crinkled copy of *Hungry Translations* in Minelle's hands, the water stained pages heavy, bumpy and noisy as she flips them to detect a topography where her struggles with border crossings bleed into my own... I momentarily close my eyes and find Sarah in her small home office in unceded Lekwungen territories. Tears slip down my cheeks as I watch her walking across many worlds to relive my connection with Mumtaz while the two of us try to "know" in our bodies the labor pains of dying Budhiya in a tiny apartment near the Muslim Qabristan in Mumbai's Jogeshwari... Then, breathing Rupal's words, I watch Sikh men and women in Shaheen Bagh in Delhi carrying signs that say, "Bhai se bhai ladne na paaye, phir se 47 banne na paaye" while the lyrics of hundreds of women protestors in that space ring in my ears – "Laazim hai ke hum bhi dekhenge, hum dekhenge..." And through all of this, I am acutely aware of Deepti's cautious and probing attentiveness to hungry translations, reminding us of the endless missteps and heartaches that necessarily accompany any attempts to "enter into collective movement from a place of necessary complicity, without resolving the mess of tension and conflict that swirl at the heart of all collectivity".

Even as the world spirals in and fights multiple pandemics – including those of COVID-19, anti-Black racism, anti-Muslim violence, and the relentless brutality of many settler colonialisms – the sorrows I hear over and over again from academics young and old pertain to bullying, harassment, institutional abuse, and gaslighting; of mental illnesses and traumas inflicted by the desires and aspirations planted by our white and savarna supremacist institutions. These modes of inhabiting the academy seem to have acquired the form of another deadly virus that is consuming so many of us. To be blessed with this forum organized so generously by Rupal Oza and to be presented with the powerful and deeply authentic engagements by her, Deepti Misri, Minelle Mahtani, and Sarah Hunt in the midst of these pandemics, then, is an invaluable gift that I receive with humility, gratitude, and respect. The poetic ways in which each

of these “critics” have breathed their own quests for justice into their commentaries on the book inspire me to string my own response in the form of reflections in conversation with their thoughts – reflections that can continue to interbraid theory, movement, and translation while learning to relinquish all desires or claims to know or retell authoritatively.

* * *

Hungry Translations embodies a search that began for me during the retelling of *Sangtin Yatra / सं गतिन यात्रा* (Sangtin Lekhak Samooh 2004, 2012) as *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven Lives in India* (Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006) and then acquired new dimensions during the making of *Ek Aur Neemsaar / एक और नीमसार* (Nagar and Singh 2012) and *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism* (Nagar 2014): a search for ethical ways of sharing incommensurable lessons from journeys undertaken with the sweat, blood, words, and dreams of countless co-travelers in worlds that are often Othered through the aspirations and languages of experts. *Hungry Translations* strives to stage on the page the shared agonies, joys, and sorrows from those journeys, without claiming to speak for the marginalized and without getting suffocated by institutionalized canons, frameworks, or such disciplinary labels as “transnational feminisms” or “geographies of resistance” or “decolonizing methodologies”. Through this striving, I join soul-mates such as Sarah Hunt who tirelessly teach us to value the “knowledge that comes from living alongside kin who remain invisible to my colleagues in the academy other than in representations of risk, subalternity, marginality and victimization”. In refusing the compartmentalization of mind-body-soul-spirit and in retelling moments of continuously becoming together, such an undertaking insists that academics, artists, activists, and organizers give up our desires for authoritative knowledge claims and for perfect answers and closures, while simultaneously learning to, what Minelle Mahtani so delicately summarizes as, “speak up in all our hungers”.

But how do “we” learn to speak in all our hungers when so much of what we have been

taught to “succeed” focuses on consuming the other in order to advance oneself? What does it take to unlearn that violent hunger that nihilates the other and to relearn our hungers as continuous striving for ethical relationships between the self and other? How do we begin to seek knowledge through the mundane and dramatic moments that constitute that endless striving?

If translation is a relationship between self and other on an unequal terrain, then the dominant sociopolitical and epistemic landscapes that we inherit are characterized by unethical and violent translations whose hunger only nihilates the other. In assuming and claiming that they can arrive at objective understandings, equivalences, analyses, or solutions, such translations commit violence – in academic and artistic pursuits, in development policy, in NGO apparatuses, and in social movements. It is only when a translation or retelling is embedded in long-term collective journeys of radically vulnerable co-becoming that the self and the other can hope to hunger together for social justice – justice that can be legislated – as well as for poetic justice – justice that only rages in the form of a yearning. Indeed, it is the distance between social and poetic justice that fuels these journeys of co-traveling and co-dreaming and embeds them in the messy politics of embodied doing, being, and becoming. These journeys cannot be sustained merely through theoretical, political, and methodological commitments; they require radical love and trust so that there is boundless space both for making mistakes and for granting forgiveness in pursuit of the shared vision of justice. As long as the self and other yearn to walk together in this joint search, there is hunger in the relationship. When that yearning – to keep moving together hungrily, and therefore, to unlearn and relearn together – ends, the possibility of ethical translation and ethical solidarity also ends.

Radical vulnerability, then, is not a “skill” that can be offered or acquired in a graduate course, nor it is a “stance” that an instructor can demand of a student, or that a researcher or organizer can request from the people she works with. It is an organic process that only unfolds through an intense intellectual, emotional, and psychological immersion in the relationships that guide the journey. Furthermore – as Sunita, Tama, Prakash, and Rambeti help me articulate in the first part of *Hungry Translations* – radical vulnerability includes at least two kinds of

refusals: those that remain committed to the possibility of hungry translations despite the violent nature of the underlying sociopolitical terrain, and those that entirely foreclose such a possibility. The four entangled sections of *Hungry Translations* that follow the first part embody the politics and poetics of both of these refusals. For instance, in retelling the stories of the making of Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS) and of its battles with the Indian state, on the one hand, and with the hearts and minds of its saathis (companions), on the other, my responsibility as a hungry translator is to relay the dynamism and revolutionary energy of these journeys without turning them into narratives that can be consumed by the reader who stands outside of the journeys. Thus, my narration must embody a passionate love for the struggles of my saathis; it must communicate with a deeply textured intimacy the stories and sensibilities that all of us who walk with SKMS have shared with one another in multiple languages and idioms; yet, it must be marked by a humility and tentativeness that refuses to vest in the writer or the reader the power to judge the movement or its work.

Similarly, the translation of Parakh-Mumbai's making of the play, "Hansa", must invite the readers into the intricate folds of the six-month long journey with the actors, director, musicians, and workers, whose creative process breathed life into Budhiya and transformed the story "Kafan" from a savarna critique of caste-violence to an intense grappling with Dalit critique of caste. In embracing this retelling across the divides of class, caste, gender, time, place, and language, my own words must struggle to embody the ways in which the text as well as the interpretations of the story were rendered entirely unstable in this collective labor: all the characters, including Madhav, Budhiya, Ghisu, and Thakur (landlord), could only be realized in the aliveness of the unfolding performance where each rehearsal revealed new meanings to those who were reliving the "Kafan" of 1935 through their everyday lives in Mumbai in 2014. At the same time, I must refuse any temptation to make "accessible" the deep sociopolitical and spiritual meanings that undergird the interbraiding of Premchand's (2004) story with Kabeer's bhajans, or that impregnate "Hansa" when it is co-created by Mumtaz, Meena, Anil, Sajjan, and the rest in the Awadhi language for an audience in the Yari Road area of Mumbai. To come close

to these meanings, the reader must embrace her own journey with the text and with the process – a deep homework in the mind and soul. My responsibility as a translator, I must remember, is to offer a heartfelt invitation to the reader to embark upon that path while firmly refusing to undertake that labor for the reader. For, undertaking that labor for the reader would violate the commitment of *Hungry Translations*.

This brings me to Part Four the book, “Stories, Bodies, Movements: A Syllabus in Fifteen Acts” (henceforth “Fifteen Acts”), which Deepti Misri lingers with in her commentary. Fifteen Acts exemplifies one of my ongoing attempts to create spaces where the lessons from journeys such as SKMS and “Hansa” can be learned by students in the classroom of an R-1 university in the United States – not through an empirical command over them, but by immersing in the embodied nuances of the challenging and risky labor that knowledge makers such as Rambeti, Sunita, Tama, Prakash, Mumtaz, Sajjan, Meena, Anil and others undertake when they become radically vulnerable as part of their committed struggle to achieve justice; yet, these same knowledge makers are continuously dismissed and rendered as Other in academic and NGO spaces. Some of the key requirements of the class – for example, inserting oneself, one’s family, and one’s ancestors in the texts we read or view; learning to see oneself as both protagonist and antagonist, and grappling with our own bodies as epistemic sites that are in intense relationship with other bodies – push against dominant modes of learning and being in the academy. All those who walk together in the shared space of the class, regardless of their formal status in the institution (e.g. undergraduate, graduate, faculty, visitor, etc.) have an opportunity to internalize the inseparability of theory, pedagogy, and epistemology by feeling the difficult psychological, emotional, and political labor of radical vulnerability as well as the necessity of refusing to become vulnerable when organic collectivity cannot be achieved. Thus, while empathetic reflection is one of the ten props for this class, Fifteen Acts cannot, indeed should not, *demand* an empathetic mode of “knowing” the other. Far from assuming that such empathy can or should be pursued as a desired goal by all, the point of Fifteen Acts is to: (a) strive for an anti-hierarchical space for embracing or refusing radical vulnerability; (b) confront

when and why empathy and radical vulnerability become possible or impossible; and (c) build a common ground on which the possibility of radical vulnerability can be explored or refused and where the joys and pains of solidarity work can be understood without compartmentalizing the body-mind-soul-spirit. The “Closing Notes” of the book, authored with Siddharth Bharath and Sara Musaifer, share some glimpses of what each of us found through this all-consuming year-long journey with *Fifteen Acts*.

Rupal Oza notes the sheer *nasha*, the intoxication, of co-journeying with struggles such as those in Shaheen Bagh, and how the power of such co-journeying makes it critical for us as humans to embrace our collective vulnerabilities as well as translations they necessitate across divisions and borders. As a savarna faculty member in the US academy, who is also an intoxicated *saathi* of SKMS and Parakh, a perpetual question for me is: how can I embrace such translations and their resonances, while also naming their limitations and potential violence in the many locations that I occupy and traverse? How can I continue unlearning and relearning ways of making intimate geographies with my *saathis* while also underlining the ways in which those geographies will always be haunted by pasts and presents of the complicities that I have inherited and that I participate in every day? How do I share methodologies and moments of solidarity that defy available languages, while also being caged by languages that are available to me? These and many other similar unsettling questions about voice, language, marginalization, and dispossession cannot be “tackled” by becoming more preoccupied with myself or by merely reciting my positionality. Rather, these questions must become epistemic agitations – not only for me, but for all those who become my co-travelers and co-agitators in the spaces that otherwise tend to nihilate the voices and wisdoms of my *saathis* and Hunt’s kin. In my little big world, the journeys that began with SKMS in Sitapur and Parakh in Mumbai have continued to nurture new collective energies thousands of miles away: The online journal, *AGTATE!* *Unsettling Knowledges* (<https://agitatejournal.org/>) and the Imagining Transnational Solidarities Research Circle (<https://www.facebook.com/pg/Imagining-Transnational-Solidarities-Research-Circle-102157474897194/>) are two examples of collectives that have been birthed by shared

hungers to pursue a restless movement with the kinds of questions and commitments that I describe above. A hungry translation can only be truthful to its commitment if it continues to spread and intensify shared yearnings and spaces for such co-authored agitations. Safar jaari hai. The journey continues.

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