
In *Muddying the Waters*, Richa Nagar reflects on more than two decades of transnational feminist activism and scholarship, drawing on academic studies and activist collaborations in Tanzania, India, and the United States. There are three key themes travelling through the book: practices of solidarity; the politics of language; and an exploration of the boundaries between activism and academia. It poses questions about the responsibility academics have to those they co-produce knowledge with. Through its explorations of processes of co-authorship, the book questions the uses of appropriate and effective language in addressing research to multiple audiences, across different countries, different languages, and multiple intersections of (social) difference. In places, the book is presented in more than one language (and alphabetic script) simultaneously to emphasize these dialogues. In others, the form of writing moves beyond academic prose, into poetry, co-authored diary pieces, and dramatic forms. In an attempt to foreground this polyvocality, *Muddying the Waters* does not always look or read like an academic text. Consequently, while attempting to make visible the languages and voices through which places come alive, the book is an unsettling and not always “easy” read.

*Muddying the Waters* is an extended journey to “confront and embrace the messiness of solidarity and responsibility” (p.2). From the outset, Nagar asserts that she will attempt to journey through this messiness “without invoking categories such as transnational, postcolonial, or women-of-colour feminisms as pure bodies of thought” (p.2)—hence the title of the book and its impulse to “muddy” bodies of theory and genres of writing. The book attempts to explore how non-metropolitan knowledge can be taken seriously and treated as more than “data” to be interpreted by metropolitan intellectuals. However, Nagar makes clear
that she is not interested in a crude reversal of these hierarchies of knowledge production. Central to the book is the proposition that solidarity and collaborative (political and intellectual) alliances might become “ethical encounters” (Ahmed 2000) when participants allow themselves to experience “radical vulnerability” with each other. This is the recognition that even journeys inspired by trust and hope will be shaped by moments of mistrust, epistemic violence, hopelessness and fear. To make oneself radically vulnerable requires an openness to hearing oneself as the object of others’ suspicions; transcending defensiveness in order to use the interrogation of suspicion to enhance, rather than shutdown, “sensitive negotiations of experiences and interpretations” (p.12) with others in the collective. This is to explore indeterminacy politically and engage in a “politics without guarantees” (p.13).

The first chapter is called “Translated Fragments, Fragmented Translations”, and it develops the concept of “radical vulnerability”. It presents fragments of writing, research, and conversations that occurred in very different locations and at different times to explore the persistent entanglement of autobiography and politics, as a means of exploring how the praxis of radical vulnerability might be written. In this chapter, the text is split into two columns with the intention of disrupting readers’ expectations of how to engage with different genres of writing, as well as disrupting attempts to make easy and coherent interpretations of how the fragments relate to each other. Similarly, some words are left untranslated (into English) in order to emphasize the difficulty of ever fully translating certain concepts between languages and locations. For Nagar, the fragments presented here are intended to make her and her research practice the object of scrutiny.

Chapters 2 to 4 are conceived of as charting an intellectual journey from Nagar’s doctoral research in Tanzania in the early 1990s to her more recent engagements with feminist activism in India. They are intended as a reminder that radical vulnerability requires critical self-reflexivity which pays attention to the institutional and geopolitical locations of the author. Chapter 2, “Dar es Salaam: Making Peace with an Abandoned ‘Field’”, revisits
Nagar’s (1997) essay which was celebrated at the time for its interrogation of her own positionality in relation to her decision not to pursue critical feminist ethnographic research in Tanzania. The piece explores how Nagar’s own body was read in various gendered, racialized, and communally-specific ways by the Tanzanian Asians she studied during her doctoral research. She explains how her decision to distance herself from that field was a starting point on her journey of critical self-reflexivity in transnational feminist work.

In Chapter 3, “Reflexivity, Positionality, and Languages of Collaboration in Feminist Fieldwork”, Nagar explores the concept of “situated solidarities” which she first developed with Susan Geiger (Nagar and Geiger 2007). This concept draws attention to the ways in which specific socio-economic, geopolitical, and institutional differences between those entering into political and intellectual partnerships might affect their ability to work together. Nagar and Geiger argued that too much of the debate about “positionality” in the 1990s failed to ask who feminist researchers were writing for and why. For them, “situated solidarities” are necessary to account for the ways in which the global geopolitical economy affects the different partners in transnational feminist encounters. The chapter also explores how debates about positionality tend, curiously, to fix identities, without appreciating how they might shift and be reconstructed through collaborative praxis.

Chapter 4, “Representation, Accountability, and Collaborative Border Crossings: Moving Beyond Positionality”, is the first to fully engage with Nagar’s work with the Sangtin’s women’s collective of Sitapur District, Uttar Pradesh, India. This chapter extends the previous engagements with questions of reflexivity by arguing for a transnational feminist praxis focused on developing collaboration across “difficult borders”; examining how these collaborations are brought into being through particular sites and strategies; and paying attention to the processes through which form, content and meaning arise out of these collaborations. It ends with a poem, originally written in Hindi, which confronts the limits of academic critique. Nagar claims that the process of writing and sharing the poem with the
Sangtin women she was developing a close relationship with helped remind her that some forms of articulation travel better across some borders than others. It seems this poem is presented here as a moment of “radical vulnerability” in front of academic readers.

The fifth chapter, entitled “Travelling and Crossing, Dreaming and Becoming”, continues to explore the creative political journey that Nagar has taken with the members of the Sangtin Kisaan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS–Sangtin Peasants’ and Workers’ Organization) between 2004 and 2012. This collaboration has produced various forms of collaborative writing in both Hindi and English. Although this chapter charts political collaborations and reflects on creative processes, it primarily offers critical reflections on the ways “in which shared dreams and commitments evolve and fail in an alliance” (p.20). Once more, modes of collaborative writing are used to pose questions about the challenges of sustaining solidarity across radically different institutional locations.

*Muddying the Waters* concludes with a chapter which, although still focused on the experience of alliance work with SKMS, ties together the main themes of the book through “Four Truths of Storytelling and Coauthorship in Feminist Alliance Work”. The first of these “truths” is that:

coauthorship does not merely include the work of writing but the ways that writing is informed–and co-authored–by all the processes and events undertaken by those in alliance. (p.167)

The second “truth” suggests that coauthoring stories is a means of working across socio-cultural difference, institutional location, and language barriers to grapple with the ways that scholarship might produce new realities for those in the alliance. The third explores how all activism might be understood as akin to political theatre, and hence more attention should be paid to how the framing of political problems and demands is coauthored; in other words,
coauthored collaborations extend beyond the written text. The fourth “truth” requires that all authors in such collaborative ventures confront and question their own (and their institution’s) complicity in the inequalities and forms of violence that the alliance works to challenge. Here, again, the question of “radical vulnerability” is a central part of the process of building and sustaining trust within the alliance—opening oneself to the interrogation of one’s privilege by other collaborators and coauthors. This final chapter ends with two translated extracts from a co-authored piece of political street theatre written with members of SKMS. By ending the book in this way, the intention is to once again “decenter” academic knowledge in favour of the “conviviality” of co-authored stories.

Throughout reading Muddying the Waters I kept questioning how successfully the work straddled and played with the boundaries of academia, advocacy, and activism. While a commitment to cultivating radical vulnerability between collaborators might help to unsettle and rebalance structural inequalities in participatory research, I fear this “politics without guarantees” does not always translate well into written texts. It is one thing for collaborators to willingly accept shared vulnerability, but it is quite another for an author to impose this on their readers. And so, I end this review by making myself “radically vulnerable”—despite my considerable sympathy with the transnational feminist project that Nagar and her collaborators have engaged in over the last two decades, I found this book exceedingly difficult to read. The more I revisited the text as I wrote this review, the more I began to accept that, for me, these experimental modes of writing obstructed my interest in the stories of journeys, collaborations, and struggles that I started off wanting to learn more about. While “situated solidarities” might be intended to “build dialogues across locations” (p.12), there is no guarantee that these stories will communicate through the vulnerability that the texts seek to record.

References


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July 2015