

*Special issue: Practising refusal as relating otherwise: engagements with knowledge production, 'activist' praxis, and borders*

## **Reflections**

### **Refusals, radical vulnerability, and hungry translations – a conversation with Richa Nagar**

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Richa Nagar is Professor of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies and holds the title of Professor of the College at the University of Minnesota. Her multilingual and multi-genre work blends scholarship, creative writing, theatre, and activism to build alliances with people's struggles and to engage questions of ethics, responsibility, and justice. We contacted Richa in December 2021 with a request to contribute to our special issue. Richa kindly agreed to engage in a written conversation on questions of refusal as they emerge in her intellectual and political journey and in her trilogy, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (2006), *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism* (2014), and *Hungry Translations: Relearning the World Through Radical Vulnerability* (2019). We present that conversation in this article.

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#### **Isabel:**

Richa, our special issue is very much devoted to the messy boundaries between academia and activism and what it means to cultivate collectivity and solidarity within and across these spaces. Could you begin by telling us a little bit more about your own experience as an activist and feminist scholar; how you think, feel, and practice radical inter-connectedness in your day-to-day life and what you have struggled with the most. The radical vulnerability you describe in your work is a very hopeful and playful practice – and in direct contrast to the realities and demands within academic institutions. How do you manage to stay hopeful and playful within these highly bureaucratized, individualised and extractive spaces of learning, writing and teaching.

**Richa:**

Thank you, Aila and Isabel, for immersing yourself in my work. I appreciate your efforts to connect your concerns about academia and activism with the lessons that I offer about collectivity and solidarity in my writing. As you know from reading *Hungry Translations*, many of these lessons emerge in situ through the paths co-traveled with my saathis<sup>1</sup> in multiple sites of engagement, including the multi-dimensional movement spaces of [Sangtin Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan](#) (hereafter SKMS) in Sitapur, Parakh Theatre in Mumbai, and my classes at the University of Minnesota.

Given the focus of this special issue, I would like to begin with the idea of boundaries and borders. I find it important to resist a partition of academia and activism in terms of 'boundaries,' which are often clear lines of separation even when they are dotted or blurred. 'Borders', by contrast, are permeable zones that allow for continuous flows between, within, across, and despite imposed lines and definitions.

This insistence on borders rather than boundaries is related to a second point that I would like to make about the categories of 'academic' and 'activist.' Not only are they often simplistically presumed to be separate from one another, but their separation is also often problematically layered onto two other dichotomies: one between 'the intellectual' and 'the political' and another between 'the individual' and 'the collective' (for detailed discussion, see Nagar & Swarr 2010). The argument that the intellectual is political and the political is intellectual is often repeated as if it is common sense, yet assumptions about the intellectual superiority of individual academics (especially, academics from the global north) over all others still reign in our world. The hierarchies engendered by this triple layering are central to the epistemic violence that often reduces lived struggles of movements and collectives to data or stories (read: activist, everyday, political, grassroots) to be explored, assembled, studied, and shaped into arguments by theorists and analysts (read: academic, intellectual, individual, expert).<sup>2</sup> Such hierarchies erase the co-constitutiveness of story-theory-strategy-performance where the intellectual-political-artistic labours are a thoroughly enmeshed creative praxis that is only realizable through dynamic and fissured collectivity.<sup>3</sup>

It is true that the radical vulnerability that I describe in my work stands in direct contrast to the modes in which we are trained to perform and become successful within academic institutions. More often than not, 'good' academic training translates into an academic adviser helping their student to find their distinctive voice, aspiration, and confidence as an individual researcher, writer, speaker, educator, and so on. However, radical vulnerability is impossible to achieve as a solely individual aspiration or value. An inherently collective practice, radical vulnerability demands a mutual surrender of egos in search for deep, ethical relationships through which members of a collective can labour together to create and enact dynamic visions of justice. No doubt, such a surrender of egos and sharing of authority and trust can be a very hopeful and playful practice that can birth co-dreamers, co-authors, co-artists, and co-agitators. At the same time, this vulnerability is extremely difficult emotional labour in a world that is shaped by egos and invested in celebrations of individual merit and glory. Radical vulnerability requires letting go of such investments in individual celebrity; it requires acknowledgement of one's own mistakes, greed, and contradictory desires; it demands a willingness to embrace sorrowful and bitter truths alongside laughter and rapture; it implies an unshakeable belief in the creativity that emerges from a shared journey – one in which the risks and dangers are frequently accompanied by the joys and promises of long lasting bonds, community, and struggles for justice (for a detailed discussion of radical vulnerability as politics of hope, see Nagar 2014, 158–182 and Nagar *et al.* 2016).

As someone who is committed to agitating institutionalized epistemes, not only in the border zones of academia-activism-arts but also in life more generally, I believe in transforming the spaces of learning, unlearning and relearning by embracing radical vulnerability as a mode of being and growing together (for a detailed discussion, see Nagar *et al.* 2019, 197–240). Thus, radical vulnerability becomes an episteme – a way to feel, connect, and relate; a way to find trust, hope, and meaning; a way to dream, dismantle, and co-create in the big and small moments. Such everyday living comes with risks of getting hurt, injured, and rejected; it can bring on trauma, illness, and fatigue (which are also common features of conventional academic production). However, the fulfilment that comes from walking together often outweighs these sorrows.

This episteme, with all its limitations and weaknesses, is what I try to instil into my university classrooms. For instance, my classes are not competitive spaces where students are assessed or graded on their proven brilliance. Rather, students are expected to surrender themselves to collective journey of unlearning and relearning where – through an immersion of one’s mind-body-heart-spirit – we can evolve *together* as co-learners, co-teachers, and co-creators. At the same time, the bureaucratized, individualised, and extractive nature of academic learning, writing and teaching makes it crucial that radical vulnerability does not become a formula or a demand. For what is achieved organically by moving together for hours, months, and years can be translated in only a limited way into a semester-long class. Still, a semester is a long enough time to seed a praxis of moving, unlearning, and relearning together, and to begin grappling with some of the foundational principles that guide this praxis. Let me name just three of these. First, knowledge is movement of the heart-mind-body-spirit. Such full-bodied movement mobilizes words, actions, art, dreams, and passions. One cannot learn objectively from such movements – we must, in fact, become movements. Two, what the self can expect to receive from the other in a radically vulnerable mode is roughly equal to what that self is able to give to the other in that very mode. Without risking one’s intimate and fragile moments, without risking one’s trust, there is no true giving or receiving. Three, those who seek to build collectivity through radical vulnerability must accept aches, rifts, and tears as the foundational elements of their journey, for it is only by dancing the dance of I/you/we/they that the singular can learn to breathe and thrive in the collective (for a detailed discussion of such pedagogical exploration and examples of journeys that have continued beyond the formal duration of classes that have embraced the spirit of hungry translation, see *AGITATE* 2021 and Ergun *et al.* 2021).

**Aila:**

In your work you are concerned with two different kinds of refusals: one marked by openness and one by foreclosure. Can you expand on these different forms of dissenting subjectivities and your own experience of guarding against “slipping into a binary formulation of a reciprocal refusal” (Nagar *et al.* 2019, 21). Frameworks often privilege vision as means of knowledge production over all other senses; what collective labours of breaking the frame and reweaving the fabric of life and world can be located in embodied action and knowledge production?

**Richa:**

The divergent forms of dissenting subjectivities, and the power of their refusals, are precisely what I theorize in my introduction to *Hungry Translations*. I do so by recalling and retelling the subtle layers of a few learning moments with saathis of SKMS. It is impossible to do justice to those stories in the space of this interview – and I hope that interested readers will read the book – but let me touch on the key points I make there.

To begin with, the “word-poor”<sup>4</sup> realms of the epistemically disciplined are woefully inadequate to grasp the nuanced worldviews and courageous principles that give form, meaning, and momentum to the creative and intellectual yearnings of those who have been pushed to the margins of our dominant systems. For these survivors-artists-activists-theorists – who embody alternative visions of ethics and justice – everyday living often necessitates an active refusal to engage the structuring logics of the disciplined and disciplining minds. At the same time, I caution against a binary formulation of a reciprocal refusal where the dominant frameworks dismiss the poor, and conversely, the poor refuse a monolithic framework that overpowers them. Such a formulation erroneously assumes a single structuring logic or power that is determinative of the world.

Sadly, however, our world is reigned by frameworks that tend to nihilate the political subjectivities of these saathis and of all those people in the global south that are reduced to ‘poor,’ ‘hungry,’ ‘malnourished,’ or ‘rural’ bodies. Indeed, the desires and careers of countless certified experts (academics, development practitioners, policy makers) revolve around helping or rescuing these bodies, even as they dismiss the ways in which these same people actively create politics and knowledge by living and honing complex visions of what is ethical, what makes for a good life, and what brings hope. This fundamental conflict is at the core of why the hope of the hungry is entangled with a creative praxis that refuses imposed terms, languages, and frameworks.

To give flesh and breath to my argument, I turn to selected moments, or delicate connections, that have proved transformative for unlearning and relearning in collectivity. The first such moment is when SKMS saathi Sunita returns the money that another (relatively privileged) saathi offers to her for the treatment of her critically ill daughter, while also insisting lovingly that he continue to stand with SKMS. Then I linger with two other instances: in one of these, SKMS saathi Tama enacts his insatiable passion for making music with more privileged saathis even as he expresses his awareness of an unjust world where acute hunger of the belly is an everyday reality for him and his mother. In the other instance, saathi Prakash expresses his yearning to create a play with a saathi like me, as I sit in Minnesota and mourn with him the widespread loss of wheat and mango crops in Sitapur during that season. Later, I dive into an event in Cambodia where saathi Rambeti refuses to continue SKMS's participation in a global working group on climate change, gender, and food security, thereby pushing SKMS to forgo a US \$5K grant. In each of these moments, saathis defy dominant understandings of what it means to be poor or hungry and they tap into the multiplicity of structuring logics and life worlds to offer new concepts, critiques, and agitations that are a part of their struggle to build a different world. Following Pham (2018), I argue that their dissent is part of a historically constituted living subjectivity that can reconstruct political relations and order by breaking the frame and recomposing the fabric of life and world.

However, dissent is neither monolithic nor a dead end, and so I distinguish between the two kinds of refusals that you summarize in your question. The first one (exemplified by Sunita, Tama, and Prakash above) desires an ongoing relation between self and other despite the unevenness of the terrain on which such relationships must be lived. Such refusals remain open to the serendipitous ways in which politics and justice may be realized. The second form of refusal (exemplified through Rambeti's stance) forecloses the possibility of such a relationship in the face of grave epistemic violence. Both refusals seek to reweave the fabric of life and world; however, while one takes the risk of opening itself to an ongoing relationship with the other, the second sees no hope in such risk taking or trust placing. A commitment to hungry translation, then, is a commitment to keep unlearning and relearning through an ethical grappling with these layered dissents.

To your question about the privileging of 'vision' in established frameworks, I am not sure whether such privileging is actually successful in displacing other senses as a means of knowledge production. The kind of relationships that I describe in the first form of refusal, for instance, hinge on a full-bodied togetherness. This togetherness, created through a mutual surrender of egos, involves everything from speaking, listening, singing, dancing, playing, and touching to smelling, tasting, crying, laughing, and butting heads. In fact, 'envisioning' in a collective can only happen through entanglements that engage the mind-heart-body-spirit in this mode of surrender. The vocabularies and metaphors that result from such entanglements become crucial for articulating not only a hunger for justice, but also a methodology for realizing that hunger. To give you a flavor of such metaphors, I will share an example. In an event that celebrated twenty years of our collectively-authored book, *Playing with Fire*, SKMS saathi Surbala discussed what it has meant for our organization to build collectivity across divides of caste, gender, and class. She said:

Whoever has a privilege needs to accept the challenge of giving up that privilege. So, for example, if I am going on a cycle and another person is walking on foot, then if I am truly determined to build a friendship with that person, I must let go of my bike and walk on foot alongside them. So from our [different places in the movement and in the world], each of us [in SKMS] tried to understand the ways in which we were privileged and the challenges that we faced in standing together and what we would have to let go of. And because our determination and friendships were strong, we were able to do this work [with honesty].<sup>5</sup>

What is noteworthy in Surbala's words here, is the powerful simplicity of her metaphors – the walking, the biking, the moving, the befriending by sacrifice. Her metaphors are grounded in the everyday; they define a concrete action and lived knowledge; they encapsulate a principle of, a commitment to, and a vision for collectivity that is inseparable from embodied movement.

### Isabel:

In your book *Hungry Translations* you write "it is in the impossibility of arriving at completion and of knowing the destination with certitude that the hope for the journey resides" (Nagar *et al.* 2019, 43). We

are intrigued by the political possibilities and openings that can be found within impossibilities, closures, and absences. Can you tell us a little bit more about your approach to impossibilities and incompleteness as well as how it demands us to radically reimagine temporalities of justice and hope. What possibilities can be found in the present moment, the future, and in non-linear approaches to temporalities.

**Richa:**

What you quote at the beginning of your question is my definition of a hungry translation. In this definition, a translation does not seek to be an equivalence between the original and its shadow; rather, translation is a labour and art, it is the politics of telling in turn. Following this, I argue that a hungry translation can be seen as a non-stop striving for ethical retelling – an ever evolving relation between self and other – where each one constantly works to listen, feel, trust, and retell ethically, despite the challenges of walking together on an uneven terrain, and despite an understanding that each retelling will be incomplete and imperfect.

In other words, hungry translation is a praxis of love. In love, we walk, we dance, we explode, we let go. In love, we become curious and enchanted, ecstatic and miserable, hopeless and strong. In love, we give, we receive, we transform, at times reflecting the textures, tastes, words, and gestures of a lover without even realizing it. There is a beautiful poem called 'Samajh'<sup>6</sup> by the Hindi poet Katyayani that I have translated in *Muddying the Waters* thus:

*We became deer  
Grazed forests intelligently  
Undertook journeys after careful planning  
Fought wars with martial perfection  
Applied all our attentiveness in understanding issues  
And set aside countless carelessnesses  
for the rare  
momentary  
unexpected  
moments of love.*

Ever so delicately, Katyayani establishes radical vulnerability as a requirement for love. Love can only be lived in the “countless carelessnesses” and not in the “martial perfection” with which we develop our frameworks and strategies to fight the battles we think we already know. For, how would love be love if its course were predictable? If it did not jump, flow, flood, and meander like a river? If there was nothing for it to stumble or slip on? The second love loses these qualities, the second it knows with certitude that it has arrived at its destination, it ceases to be a river: it becomes static and brittle – hard as ice.<sup>7</sup>

As a relationship between self and other on a bumpy terrain, hungry translation is a relation of ever flowing and ever growing love – one that is always in journey, always in process. As long as a self and another yearn to learn about each other, as long as they strive to walk and dance and slip and rise together, there is hope for them to move, play, become, and create together ethically. Indeed, the very promise of their journey hinges on the humility and the acceptance that they cannot fully reach or access the other, and this knowledge and hunger enlivens and empowers their togetherness and gives it meaning, substance, goal, and direction. The moment the self is convinced that she knows all there is to know or retell about the other, the journey comes to a halt. There is nothing more to unlearn and relearn; there are no memories, sensations, or stories to grapple with; there are no lives, afterlives, or hauntings to feel; there are no mistakes or sacrifices to make in the struggle to retell and share authority ethically.

It is this spirit of impossibilities and incompleteness that has reverberated again and again in the work of collectives I have had the good fortune to co-build or co-travel with. Sometimes it is encapsulated in the idea of 'safar jaari hai' (the journey continues). At others, it is conveyed in the

idea of unsettling knowledges and ethics. And at yet others, it is embodied in the work of agitating knowledges and pedagogies. In all these instances, the verbs imply a continuous movement: an impossibility of arriving at completion and of knowing the destination with certitude. For the hope of justice is found in the continuation of the journey, not in the expectation of arrival. In terms of temporalities, such an approach cannot fit into projects or deadlines, nor can it profess fixed truths or stable conclusions: it can only hold truths that flow with lives and struggles. It is a dance where linear understandings of past-present-future spin, vibrate, and explode to radically transform our understandings of what was or is, what could have been, and what is yet to be. It is an ongoing train ride in which saathis ascend and descend at different platforms based on their hungers and needs, sometimes abandoning the journey temporarily or permanently, and sometimes returning to continue the journey at unpredictable stations.

### **Aila:**

This special issue also reflects on the ways that academic scholarship translates people's uneven experiences into fixed categories, such as that of the 'citizen', 'migrant', 'refugee', 'asylum seekers', 'translator' but also the 'researcher' and 'activist'. In your work you insightfully speak of how academic knowledge production "encages" and contains "the nuanced creative and intellectual hunger that is governed by social imaginary" (Nagar *et al.* 2019, 12) of the poor into imposed theories, terms, languages, and frameworks. You wonderfully discuss how even within activist and engaged research contexts, theory is derived from a process of abstraction and extraction that is detached from people's everyday experiences and struggles. We were wondering whether you see hungry translations – the work of engaging in an ongoing relation between self and other despite the unevenness of the terrain in which such translations take place – also as a way of reclaiming theory for collective liberation. In other words, do you think it is possible, through hungry translations, to save *theory* from the university/academic institutions and to reconstitute theoretical production as a fundamental activist practice?<sup>8</sup>

### **Richa:**

Absolutely. A commitment to hungry translation – or the work of engaging in an ongoing relation between self and other despite the unevenness of the terrain in which such translations take place – is an essential practice for reclaiming *theory* for collective liberation.

I am not so sure whether theory needs to be "saved" from academia; however, the academy cannot be assumed to be the exclusive or privileged site for theoretical production. Such assumptions need to be dismantled at every step and indeed, this is what I have attempted to do in much of the work that has emerged through co-authored journeys with my saathis, including in *Hungry Translations*, *Muddying the Waters*, *Playing with Fire*, and *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis*. I have tried to re-live, re-tell, and re-present the creative praxes of SKMS and Parakh Theatre not simply as activism or artistry, but also as profoundly grounded and ever-evolving theorizations of such concepts as solidarity, collectivity, translation, hunger, ethics, and justice. So yes, theoretical production is a fundamental activist and artistic practice. And equally, activist or artistic practice – when immersed in the principle of hungry translation – is an essential exercise in theory- and meaning-making with a commitment to shift what is unjust in the direction of just. In this work, theory, story, strategy, and performance are so tightly inter-braided that it is impossible to separate their strands. Moreover, this braid is entirely resistant to dominant formulations that place theory in a hierarchical separation from methodology or epistemology, or that regard research as distinct from pedagogy, or that artificially peel away product from process. Liberated theory is born in this braid, like flowers grow on a vine: it is immersed in ongoing journeys, it strives for ethical relationships, and it is committed to unstoppable dreams and labours that yearn for justice. And liberated theory does all of this without assuming a priori what justice or ethics look like in a given time, place, or struggle.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Saathi can be translated as friend, companion, comrade, co-traveler.

<sup>2</sup> Xaxa (2020) and Lashkar (2020) capture this point beautifully in their poems that have inspired the work of *AGITATE!* a journal and blog that have emerged from an abiding commitment to radical vulnerability and hungry translations as discussed in this Conversation.

<sup>3</sup> This idea of collectivity as necessarily fissured and scarred first emerged as “a blended but fractured ‘we’” in *Playing with Fire*, a book I co-authored with Sangtin Writers (see Sangtin Writers & Nagar 2006). This co-authoring played a critical role in the birth of SKMS.

<sup>4</sup> I borrow the term “word poor” from Muppidi (2015, 1).

<sup>5</sup> See Surbala’s response (30:20–31:20 min) in SKMS & Zubaan Books 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Samajh can be translated as: insight, understanding, wisdom.

<sup>7</sup> This discussion is a continuation of what I began to articulate in the first chapter (“Translated Fragments, Fragmented Translations”) of *Muddying the Waters*. There, I note that radical vulnerability involves “acknowledging, recognizing, and sharing our most tender and fragile moments, our memories and mistakes in moments of translation, in moments of love. For, it is in the acknowledgment, recognition, and sharing of these moments, memories, and mistakes that we live our trust and faith, and where we often encounter our deepest courage and insights. It is also in these fragile, aching moments that we come to appreciate alliance work as constituted by fragments of journeys – some fully lived, and others abandoned at different stages . . . interrupted passages through which the co-travelers recognize the power of becoming radically vulnerable together. These fragmented journeys are marked as much by opening ourselves up to the risks of becoming wounded, as they are marked by silences and withdrawals, and by returning to forgive and to love – again and again” (Nagar 2014, 23).

<sup>8</sup> Here, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable conversations that I had with my collaborators at the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research in Athens (FAC), Anna Carastathis, Myrto Tsilimpounidi, Marleno Nika and Aude Sathoud around the relationship between theory and activism. I am particularly grateful to Myrto Tsilimpounidi who introduced me to theories that saved their life and consequently mine and who first expressed their desire to save theory from academic institutions and who keeps on struggling to achieve this.

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