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Feminisms, Collaborations, Friendships: A Conversation

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

This conversation about feminist friendships and coauthorships emerged from a collective interview with Richa Nagar, conducted in 2011 by Özlem Aslan, Nadia Hasan, Omme-Salma Rahemtullah, Nishant Upadhyay, and Begüm Uzun (hereafter, the Toronto Group) for the Turkish feminist magazine *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar* (Feminist approaches in culture and politics).¹ The Toronto Group are five doctoral students and student workers at the University of Toronto and at York University in Toronto. Located in departments of political science and sociology, they formed their group as a critical intellectual space outside their formal academic affiliations and conducted a series of interviews with feminists of color that were published by *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar*. Richa Nagar is a feminist scholar, teacher, and alliance worker who writes as a theorist, poet, theater worker, and *sangtin* in English, Hindi, and Awadhi. Her academic research has evolved at the nexus of transnational and postcolonial feminisms, critical geography, and political praxis. This conversation, which came about in 2014 and

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1. The interview was conducted, transcribed, and edited by the Toronto Group in English; reviewed and revised by Richa Nagar; and then translated into Turkish by *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar*, an online feminist journal based in Turkey. The journal, which began in 2006, is published by a women's collective that aims to build bridges between academics and activists.

2105, focuses centrally on her coauthored book with Sangtin Writers, *Sangtin Yatra: Saat Zingiyon Mein Lipta Nari Vimarsh* (2004), which was published in English in 2006 as *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India*, and her more recent book *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism* (2014).²

JOURNEY OF A FRIENDSHIP

Intrigued by the collective efforts embodied by the book *Playing with Fire*, we, the Toronto Group, sat down in 2011 with Richa to talk about the process of collaborative writing, how it challenges hegemonic modes of knowledge production, and what types of relationships sustain such an engagement. That initial interview sparked conversations about each of our journeys as activists, intellectuals, and immigrants who live multiple, often bi-national, political lives. After the interview, the Toronto Group undertook the intensive labor of transcribing and editing it over several months, and we emailed it to Richa in India in December 2011 for further refining before translating it into Turkish for publication. An opportunity to read and reflect on the transcribed interview proved generative for Richa, for whom it sowed the seeds for an upcoming lecture for the Gender, Place, and Culture Jan Monk Distinguished Lecture series, which she delivered in February 2012.³ The “truths” of coauthoring feminisms that crystallized in this lecture owed their origins to the interview and led Richa to envision the book that would eventually become *Muddying the Waters*.

Thus, our initial face-to-face meeting paved the way for a serendipitous and close intellectual partnership, giving the interview a long and

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2. Anupamlata, Ramsheela, Reshma Ansari, Vibha Bajpayee, Shashi Vaishya, Shashibala, Surbala, Richa Singh, and Richa Nagar, *Sangtin Yatra: Saat Zingiyon Mein Lipta Nari Vimarsh* (Sitapur: Sangtin, 2004); Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar, *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (New Delhi: Zubaan Books; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Richa Nagar, *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014).
 3. The lecture, titled “Storytelling and Co-authorship in Feminist Alliance Work: Reflections from a Journey,” was delivered at the Gender, Place, and Culture Jan Monk Distinguished Lecture at the University of Arizona on February 10, 2012, and again at the Association of American Geographers in New York in March 2012.

vibrant afterlife and an important place in Richa's intellectual journey as a *sangtin* (an Awadhi word for close companions in solidarity) and in the translations of that journey for the academy. When, in 2013, Richa learned about *Feminist Studies's* interest in the theme of feminist friendships, she wrote to the Toronto Group proposing to build upon the interview. Two and a half years after our initial meeting, we found ourselves connected again across continents, revisiting our conversation, and elaborating on its specific threads as we reconsidered friendship as feminist praxis.

As we revisited the original interview, we began fresh conversations over email, Skype, and, though less frequently, meetings in person. Increasingly, our work took place through cyberspace, which, in turn, transformed the ways in which we collaborated—not always for the better. Cyber collaborations, we found, can limit the scope for friendships in collaborations, since they often make engagements and interactions less personal and more decontextualized. Nevertheless, these technologies permitted us to continue a transcontinental conversation that we could not have sustained otherwise as we each moved through different phases and spaces that sometimes placed us in starkly different locations and circumstances with respect to one another.

In the following conversation, Richa discusses the critiques of the politics of knowledge making that were made possible through the collaborative work of the *sangtins* in producing *Sangtin Yatra* and *Playing with Fire*. While some fragments and anecdotes from our original interview that are echoed in *Muddying the Waters* can also be found here, this conversation is chiefly an elaboration on the theme of collaboration, feminist friendships, trust, and radical vulnerability that have allowed the *sangtins* to collectively navigate the hierarchies of knowledge production and the publication of their ongoing stories and struggles.

THE CONVERSATION

Collaborations, Alliance Work, and Knowledge Production

Toronto Group: Since 2000, your intellectual and political projects—often emerging from a critique of dominant modes of knowledge production in the academy—have become more collaborative. How do you think collaborative work pushes us to rethink how we produce knowledge?

Nagar: As a feminist writer and alliance worker located chiefly but not exclusively in the US academy, I have been concerned about the ways in which professionalization of feminism has happened around me — not only in the academy but also in the NGO circles and artistic forums that I have learned from and grown with. I have also been concerned about how our intellectual and political stances and labor become marketable commodities and give us name, rewards, and celebrity. It is important to specify the materiality of the political and intellectual work that we do and the ways in which it circulates, and how there are parallel processes operating in academia, the arts, and the NGO sector. There is no field of intellectual and creative engagement that is untouched by the messiness and contradictions of professionalization and commoditization. In the sphere of political movement building, too, similar processes turn a handful of individuals into heroes whom others must worship or follow. As a transformative program, then, the concept and practice of collaboration can only be meaningful and radical if people coming together from these different locations commit themselves to grappling collectively with these contradictory processes and their material and symbolic implications at both abstract or generalized levels and in grounded ways. However, as I have noted repeatedly, the idea of “collaboration” — just like notions such as “sustainability” or “empowerment” or “interdisciplinarity” — can be compromised if approached as a formula. A collective commitment to address contradictory processes and their implications requires us to address in nonformulaic ways our complicities with (neo)colonial, capitalist, heteropatriarchal, casteist, communal, and racialized structures, institutions, and practices. Even as we try to resist, we often inhabit — and benefit or lose from — these ambiguous and contradictory relationships. How do we then recognize our complicities with the violence inflicted by these structures and learn to address those complicities ethically and responsibly? And how do we define our ethics and responsibilities in dynamic ways when we inhabit collectives where people are placed in unequal positions and locations, and where the struggles are forever in motion?

Let me answer your question through the lens of my collaborative relationships with my colleagues in Sitapur who have come to be known as *sangtins* after we wrote the Hindi book, *Sangtin Yatra* (literally, the journey of *sangtins*) between 2002 and 2004. *Sangtin Yatra* emerged as a collective autobiographical, creative, and political journey through which

eight women activists living and working in Sitapur's villages formed an alliance with me to share the intimate stories of their lives, in ways that simultaneously constituted an insightful collective critique of the NGOization of poor women's empowerment and of the dominant ways of producing knowledge about those who are mostly excluded from formal institutions of learning. The writing of *Sangtin Yatra* sparked the anger of the director of the organization where my coauthors were working and led to a controversy that first paved way for the English edition of the Sangtin Writers' book *Playing with Fire* and subsequently gave birth to a movement called Sangtin Kisaan Mazdoor Sangathan, or SKMS, an organization of several thousand small farmers and laborers, both women and men, the vast majority of whom identify as dalit.

The field is not just out there, it is also always here, and we must constantly interrogate and entangle our understandings of "here" in relation to "there" while unsettling ourselves and our comfort zones. In the context of *Sangtin Yatra* and SKMS, for example, it has been important that the sangtins do not merely produce knowledge about their struggles from their location(s) in Sitapur; they have also sought to critically analyze the academy as a material and political site where people read or consume their political and intellectual labor. When two of the Sangtin Writers, Richa Singh and Surbala, joined me for five weeks in the United States to discuss *Playing with Fire* in various academic and activist forums in 2007 — at the Annual Meetings of the Association of American Geographers in San Francisco, at Syracuse University, and in dialogues with labor organizations and with chapters of the Association for India's Development in Minnesota and California — our joint encounters with others in those locations gave birth to sophisticated insights about the pettiest, as well as the most generative, things that we observed in the spaces we traversed together. Sometimes the pettiness came in the form of outright mistreatment by airline staff or in a restaurant. Other times, it came in the form of questions that asked us to specify who among us was the "real" sangtin. Our appearances and accents frequently led our interlocutors to label Surbala as the "rural body" in struggle, me as the source of "ideas," and Richa Singh as the person who ran the "show." At first, we found ourselves getting wrapped up in the competitive aggression triggered by these questions. But then we paused to reflect on their sources and effects and gained profound insights into how the politics of ego and stardom, and the compartmentalization and hierarchization of

different kinds of labor, were precisely the neoliberalized configurations of power that we were critiquing in our work; and we realized how easy it was to get caged by them — whether in NGOs in India or in a seminar or dinner conversation with academics or activists in the United States. We soon recognized that this is what multi-sited collaboration is about: It is about unsettling and concretely grappling with spaces or stances that we wrongly assume to be pure or innocent or simple — whether in NGOs or political movements, whether in the development offices or villages of Sitapur, whether in the classrooms of US, Canadian, or Indian universities. The critiques that emerge from collaborations across borders must simultaneously trouble diverse spaces and positions from where knowledge is made, mobilized, consumed, and remade.

Deep and sustained collaboration across unequal places can help us appreciate and learn from illegitimized or invalidated knowledges, and it can give us the tools or languages to grapple with our responsibility towards other(ed) worlds, knowledges, and epistemes. The radical potential of a given collaboration stems from this possibility of responsibly and ethically enacting complex, nuanced, and multilingual critical interventions and translations that are impossible to imagine from any single “pure” location. Otherwise, there is nothing about collaboration that makes it inherently better than neoclassical economics, for example.

Toronto Group: The competitive environment in the academy — fostering a particular kind of capricious, egocentric, but also fragile, individual identity — makes collaboration very difficult. The kinds of collaborations you describe are thrilling because they replace competition with an ethic of friendship. This isn’t about prioritizing the collective over the individual, but actually it is freeing the individual from the competitive environment that stifles collectivity. In that sense, this journey must have been strengthening for you as well.

Nagar: You are absolutely correct. A freedom from the insecurity of competition strengthens me. But it does not strengthen me alone; it strengthens others in the collective as well. In the case of my alliance with sangtins, for instance, the collective is the organization or the movement called SKMS. The strength that the collective gains through collaboration gives each member or ally of SKMS the courage to ask difficult questions of each other while understanding that we all are

embedded in structures and locations that produce complicities and mistakes. Yet, as long as honest collaboration exists, it gives us the confidence to co-evolve as thinkers, doers, and dreamers in entangled ways.

Every social and political movement has to wrestle with difficult questions about power, privilege, voice, representation, and exploitation. Some, however, grapple with these questions up front while others cannot explicitly engage these questions for one reason or another. In SKMS, where intellectual and academic spaces have been a critical part of the evolution of the movement (the journey emerged from a controversial attack on the book *Sangtin Yatra* for instance), there is a political sensibility that privilege does not reside in just one or two predictable locations or individuals; that if the movement is committed to being antihierarchical in its vision and praxis, then it must wrestle with the unpredictable ways in which power, privilege, exploitation, and epistemic violence work; and that it has to destabilize the ways in which the media continue to look for heroes — whether those heroes come in the form of academic authors or political leaders.

Toronto Group: How does feminist collaboration differ from other types of collaboration, and what is the role of friendship, or *saathi*?

Nagar: Since one cannot assume a standard definition of feminism, I am wary of prescribing something with well-defined parameters called “feminist collaboration.” At the same time essential principles of a feminist collaboration include a collective commitment to work through questions of intersectional power and knowledge in ways that theorize our unequal locations and positions and that seek to address those inequalities intellectually and politically in structural and discursive terms. This engagement cannot happen in terms of predefined positions; it can only be a forever-evolving set of issues and processes. To the extent that such collective commitment is impossible to sustain over a long term without deep relationships that can withstand hard blows, friendship and trust are, at once, the most basic and the most demanding requirements of such collaboration. By feminist friendships, then, I mean relationships that enable continuous evolution of our beings and mindsets, of our values and visions in conversation with one another without feeling threatened by one another. Such feminist friendships are about imagined and lived processes through which we learn to recognize each other’s

insights and strengths and through which we come to trust and love one another with our weaknesses and mistakes. In other words, the kinds of friendships I am talking about are committed to a praxis of love that requires becoming radically vulnerable together. Without such radical vulnerability, there would be no commitment to evolving shared principles or languages of ethics, accountability, and responsibility; without it, there would be no translations that can creatively grapple with the politics of academia or community, art or activism.

The terms used for friendships that have evolved in and through SKMS are instructive. *Saathi* means a member or companion of the movement. The term that carries a deeper meaning in SKMS is *sangtin*, which stands as a word of enduring long-term solidarity and intimacy. In Awadhi, *sangtin* is a feminine term that specifically denotes the closeness of a woman who stands with another woman companion through all the joys and hardships of life. In SKMS, however, both men and women have deliberately embraced the term. Being a *saathi* in a movement is the equivalent to being a “comrade,” but being a *sangtin* implies, first and foremost, an emotional bond and a multidimensional intimacy that allows for other forms of companionship to be explored and nurtured and that allows for bonds to grow in all areas of life and not simply in terms of some narrowly defined goals of an organization or a political project.

The friendships and collaborations that emerged from *Sangtin Yatra* made us all aware of our codependent knowledges and existence as well as the importance of acknowledging and highlighting that codependence, while also helping us to appreciate how our locations and positions made us simultaneously powerful *and* vulnerable in different ways. Each author of *Sangtin Yatra* recognized the power that came from being part of the collective and how that power allowed her to be heard when we spoke together and how her voice weakened when we were split apart from one another. The art (and power) of claiming our analytical and intellectual insights collectively was one of the most significant political lessons that we discovered together, one that has continued to guide the journey of SKMS. At the same time, there are intricacies associated with this lesson — intricacies that determine which encounters, insights, disagreements, or dreams can be narrated or translated for whom, where, when, and how.⁴ We also had to confront the truth that

4. For an elaboration on this argument, see Sofia Shank and Richa Nagar, “Retelling Stories, Resisting Dichotomies: Staging Identity, Marginalization

writing a book together did not mean that all of the authors could continue a shared journey after the book. Each author had to make her own decisions about whether or how she was going to be a part of the movement building that evolved after *Sangtin Yatra/Playing with Fire*.

There were other lessons, too, that humbled us and reminded us of the limits that our locations and positions impose upon us. For instance, one member of the writing collective, Anupamlata, discussed her closeness with her husband throughout the process of collective writing; their partnership was for her a chief source of strength through which she could fight the social and political hurdles we collectively wrote about. Within a few months of the publication of *Sangtin Yatra*, Anupamlata's young husband died of an aggressive cancer. Although Anupamlata had strong beliefs about how she wanted to live her life after him, she could carve out limited spaces to act upon those beliefs, and none of us could help her much in that struggle. Anupamlata's journey over the years has inspired crucial moments of reflection for several of us about how our locations and histories continue to both enable and imprison us despite what we may have been able to dream together as sangtins during the writing of *Sangtin Yatra*.

Feminist Friendships and Radical Vulnerability

Toronto Group: Friendships can open up a space for different kinds of trust and engagement but they can also become hierarchical and exploitative. What were the strategies you developed to avoid the violence that can come out of intimate relationships?

Nagar: The most effective tool that has worked for us in the collective is the recognition that each one of us is complicit in inflicting or supporting the kind of violence that we are critical of, and that identifying and naming that violence is not a sign of weakness. On the contrary, such recognition is a requirement for becoming radically vulnerable, and it makes each one of us stronger as individuals and as part of a collective. Thus, SKMS recognizes the ever-present possibility that the very trust

and Activism in Minneapolis and Sitapur," in *Rethinking Feminist Interventions into the Urban*, ed. Linda Peake and Martina Rieker (Oxford, UK: Routledge, 2013), 90–107; and Nagar, "Introducing *Muddying the Waters*: Coauthoring Feminisms Across Scholarship and Activism," and "Four Truths of Storytelling and Coauthorship in Feminist Alliance Work," in her *Muddying the Waters*, 1–22, 158–82.

and engagement that we invoke and celebrate can become hierarchical and exploitative if not interrogated, critiqued, revisited, and revised on an ongoing basis. Contradictions and flaws then, are not aberrations, but a normal and ongoing part of the journey. It is only by feeling, reflecting upon, and theorizing these contradictions and flaws that we learn to address the functioning of power and to produce visions of justice that do not feel trapped in slogans, models, or formulae. It is only by engaging these vulnerabilities that we can hope for movements: movements of dreams and journeys, movements that abound with new meanings and possibilities of friendships.

Toronto Group: The idea of “becoming radically vulnerable together” is striking and suggests great promise. Could you elaborate more on that? What does radical vulnerability actually look like? What makes it radical? How does radical vulnerability differ from accountability?

Nagar: Radical vulnerability can be defined as a mode of being that allows members of an alliance to collectively imagine a kind of coauthorship that cannot be reduced to the formal production of written texts. Instead, coauthorship becomes a dynamic way of sharing authority in an intellectual and political alliance where there are no sovereign selves or autonomous subjects; where the narratives are shaped by what Spivak has termed beautifully a “love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying;” and where the relationship between the “original” and the “shadow” cannot be fixed but is continuously in motion.⁵ Sustaining such journeys in alliance with intensity and commitment—across continents, oceans, time-zones, and life’s immediate demands—does not necessarily imply an erasure or dissolution of the voices of those who might be seen as “privileged” in the alliance (I place quotation marks around “privileged” because, as we know, our privilege can also be our loss). Rather, the journey allows each member of the alliance to articulate their own politics and creativity even as it merges with, or writes about, a collective journey that is bound up with the making of a “we” (rather than an “I”). What is accomplished, however, is due to the

5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Politics of Translation,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2000) 370.

collective courage of all the coauthors — a courage that would be impossible to achieve without radical vulnerability. Fixing any one history of praxis, or fixing any one meaning of praxis, is antithetical to this project. Instead, the meanings of praxis must be co-owned; they must co-evolve across time and place, in and across multiply positioned coauthors and readers who step into alliances. In such praxis, radical vulnerability cannot be just a catchall phrase or end point. It is a recentering and a fluid mode of alliance work. Radical vulnerability cannot be achieved without complex processes of translation, for it is in the delicate and ongoing negotiations between fragile translated fragments and moments that the political and creative labor of defining alliance work happens.

In common usage, the idea of accountability often implies responsibility toward those people or issues that we feel some kind of ethical commitment to. Radical vulnerability builds upon that sense of responsibility by requiring deep relationality — that is, sustained entanglements defined by trust and friendships that make sharing of authority both necessary and organic.

Toronto Group: Many of us have become familiar with the concept of vulnerability through Judith Butler's work in *Precarious Life*, for example, where vulnerability seems to be a condition that carries in it possibilities for reconstituting relationships between the self and other, or even for reconstituting the self and the other, through being “outside” or “beside” ourselves.⁶ In your conceptualization, vulnerability is an activist stance or relation that one voluntarily aspires to and engages in as part of feminist friendship and collaborations. In what ways does your conceptualization of radical vulnerability relate to the possibilities of being “beside” ourselves?

Nagar: In my ongoing struggle with questions of expertise and translations in knowledge making, I believe that I embraced a praxis of vulnerability long before I formally used this term to describe my journey. So my deployment of “radical vulnerability” does not directly draw on Judith Butler's discussion of vulnerability even though there are important

6. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004).

affinities in our attachment to the notion of vulnerability. I gratefully acknowledge the work of Haley Konitshek, whose comparative reflections on vulnerability in *Precarious Life* and *Muddying the Waters* I draw upon to respond to your question.⁷

The praxis of feminist friendships and coauthorship relies on a central precept: that vulnerability is not a weakness or denigration of the self. Instead, the dangers and risks of openness are a fundamental truth of human life. The boundaries of the “I” are made discrete and rigid only insofar as that “I” imagines herself as autonomous or radically *other* from the “you” or the “they” that hold the possibility of coming together and becoming a “we.” However, if these journeys of the “I” and the “we” get defined by situated solidarities, then the possibilities of alliances are inseparable from a deep commitment to ever-evolving critique that is grounded in the historical, geographical, and political contingencies of a given struggle. The praxis of “becoming radically vulnerable together” hinges on something more than the potential for injury as a necessary condition of proximity and togetherness. Radical vulnerability demands that alliances across starkly unequal locations open themselves to critique, suspicion, and possible injury (as in the attack by the NGO director on the authors of *Sangtin Yatra*) to embrace what I call a “politics without guarantees.”

By politics without guarantees, I mean a collaborative process of weaving together critiques, stories, and dreams; or an entangled process of theorizing and world-ing, which undoubtedly opens up the self to critique, but which also gives birth to a new ontology of the self where critically self-reflexive collaborations, translations, and coauthorship require a radical deterritorialization of the power to name, to address, and to critique. Thus, if the politics of alliance making are about making oneself radically vulnerable through trust and critical reflexivity, then such vulnerability requires us to open our actions to generative mistakes, to living critique, to collective negotiation. It opens up our locations and our speech acts and writing acts to interrogation, suspicion, and assessment by those to whom we must be responsible. It requires us to

7. Haley Konitshek, “Vulnerability in Feminist Praxis and Theory,” Unpublished paper, 2015.

recognize and share our most tender and fragile moments, our memories and mistakes in moments of translation, in moments of love.

So if Butler regards vulnerability as a necessary condition for an ethical relationship, then radical vulnerability can be seen as a necessary condition for love, friendship, and situated solidarities across borders, which opens up the possibility for togetherness without guarantees: to not (want to) know prior to the journey where the journey will lead us, but to walk together with the commitments and dreams that we have decided to weave, unweave, and reweave *together*, believing that the risks and dangers of the journey are bound to be smaller than the enrichment and meaning that the journey will give us. This praxis of radical vulnerability implies more than just an opening up of the subject. It means foregoing the very category of a “subject” that assumes a singular, autonomous self. Ethical relations embedded in situated solidarities across locations require an active co-constitution of an intersubjective space without a sovereign self. It embraces vulnerabilities involved in affect, trust, love, and friendship that imply giving up more than a desire for corporeal and moral protection of the individual from an other. Indeed, we might not always trust others or ourselves not to make mistakes. We cannot, since we are all limited by our locations and languages, by our pasts and presents. But to love requires us to dissolve our academic or creative egos and to have faith that, even with our mistakes, limitations, and differences, the meaning and value that we gain from our purposeful togetherness runs deeper than the injuries that our vulnerabilities threaten us with.

Toronto Group: Despite its promise, isn't it quite challenging to sustain a radically vulnerable friendship or collaboration? How do the members of a collective deal with the pain and disappointments coming out of these radical encounters among each other?

Nagar: The premise of your question seems to be that being radically vulnerable involves more pain and brings more disappointments than other ways of being. I would question that premise and argue that, in fact, radical vulnerability reduces the pain and disappointments because it is a way of being in an entangled and productive relationality where you are no longer carrying your burdens as an isolated self or an autonomous subject. If radical vulnerability becomes a mode of being with

one another in and through a praxis of love, then it becomes as natural as breathing. You trust yourself and your relationships with the collective as ones where you embrace all the pleasure and pains, the risks and gifts that come with that praxis. Radical vulnerability in this sense is not a strategic choice; it is a path through which life unfolds in relation to others who are a part of the shared epistemic communities or communities of struggle.

Coauthor(iz)ing Knowledges

Toronto Group: Related to the collaborative nature of research and knowledge production, this knowledge is still necessarily authorized through you. For example, in this idea of coauthorship, the voices of women in Sitapur only become intelligible through your voice and your access to publication. How do we negotiate this paradox of agency and authorship?

Nagar: I would like to engage this question by posing a question in return: why do you think this knowledge is necessarily authorized through me? Are there assumptions that can be productively interrogated? The matter goes back to the fraught question of representation. If the academic or the creative writer (that is, the person who has the power to write words) thinks that s/he is the sole representer of a struggle, then that assumption needs to be complicated in the kind of intellectual and political labor that the sangtins have embraced. In politically engaged work, everybody represents somebody else as well. For example, I might represent my colleague and coauthor, Reena; Reena might represent an important activist and artist of SKMS who is called Prakash; Prakash might represent Bitoli, Manohar, Tama, or Rambeti—other saathis, or members of the movement, with whom he interacts on an everyday basis; and we all might represent SKMS in different ways at different times. SKMS sees itself as a leaderless movement so if there is a protest at the district development headquarters, one well-established practice of SKMS is that no single person keeps the microphone in their hands for more than a few minutes and the mic keeps moving from one person to another. The same logic or political understanding operates when the District Development Officer, or DDO, tries to end a protest by ordering SKMS saathis to send a representative who can negotiate with

him. The saathis of SKMS refuse point-blank and establish the impossibility of such representation. They say, "No one person can represent us because the movement can only be represented collectively. Rather than asking us to send a representative to negotiate with you, then, why don't you step out of the comfort of your *kursi* [chair/ status] and talk with us as a collective?" By disrupting the DDO's command in such a way, the movement simultaneously theorizes representation; it postulates that anybody who is engaged in SKMS's struggle cannot cease to think about her or his task as a representer. This commitment to tirelessly engage the question of representation also pushes us constantly to rethink the multiple meanings of author and authorship in an alliance.

I am not giving a simple answer to your question because it is important to keep this terrain messy. Here is another example related to the points I have made: *Sangtin Yatra's* critiques of NGOization and the debates it sparked were important for mobilizing people in Sitapur's villages initially, but in some ways the written word ceased to be relevant as soon as the struggle for irrigation water started moving forward. When we talk about what is authorized or not authorized, it is important to reflect critically on the ways in which academics tend to locate authorship by fixing the printed word in a text. If we want to reimagine collaborations as dynamic and evolving creative and intellectual alliances that might enable critical transformation in multiple sites of knowledge making, then we have to look at how different members of a movement theorize their own responsibility as authors and representers of a struggle, and how an attention to those theorizations demands that "we," as academics, fundamentally challenge our own ways of approaching the notions of authorship and authority.

Toronto Group: Sangtin Writers have authored a chapter in *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* in which there are three names along with your name: Richa Singh, Surbala, and Reena. In that chapter specifically, can the other authors write in English, or would they write an academic book like that? How do we challenge academia's ideas of authorship? How do we acknowledge and negotiate academia's prevailing ideas of "publish or perish?"

Nagar: Let me address your questions by stating some of the reasons why writing in and through the academic spaces has been important for

my collaborative work with sangtins. First, it allows my SKMS colleagues and me to push or challenge the predefined assumptions and boundaries of what is regarded as significant or legitimate knowledge in the academy. This also implies that resources devoted to research can be deployed to produce knowledge in nontraditional ways that seek to redefine what counts as expert knowledge. It also allows for significant chunks of time and energies to be focused on knowledge makers and audiences who are often rendered invisible in the dominant knowledge-making practices.

Let me offer an example. With the publication of *Sangtin Yatra* and *Playing with Fire* it became obvious to the members of the emerging movement that we needed a newspaper where saathis of SKMS—with or without formal literacy—could continue to pose difficult questions about expert knowledge and to claim spaces of knowledge-making in hitherto unforeseen ways. This exploration initially consumed considerable energies. Between 2005 and 2007, I spent months assembling notes and stories from saathis and conceptualizing, editing, and writing sections of SKMS's newspaper, *Hamara Safar*. The idea was to create something that could be owned by all the members of the emerging movement. *Hamara Safar* has gradually become a powerful resource owned by the movement—intellectually, socially, and politically. It has many authors, including those who have not acquired formal literacy, and it has allowed for complex articulations and translations to emerge. The pieces of writing that appeared in *Hamara Safar* in Hindi and Awadhi have been mobilized in rallies and protests as well as in what has been coauthored for the academic audiences in English.

Allow me to also make a point about practices of translation in my collaboration and alliance work with SKMS. Although saathis do not read English, there is a shared understanding—or perhaps I should say, shared trust—that what I write in English about SKMS enables others to learn about the work of the movement. In other words, saathis understand the significance of translational practices that allow for narration in ways that certain stories about the movement's work can circulate outside of the immediate context of the movement. There is a shared awareness that the struggle for legitimizing knowledges that are rendered invisible or insignificant is about gaining access to channels of circulation. Many saathis of SKMS have a difficult relationship with formal education and with the English language because of the ways in which they have been systematically marginalized in, and by, the dominant

systems of knowledge. At the same time, it matters a great deal to them that through relatively accessible and multigenre writing (including academic writing in English), their work gains visibility and support—regionally, nationally, and transnationally. This, in turn, is aided by the fact that the academic writing that appears in English has been frequently informed by my own active participation in shaping some of what is authored about SKMS in Hindi and Awadhi in formal and informal channels. And all of this writing and translational praxis is enabled by shared ethics and methodologies through which all knowledge production happens in the movement.

In a long-term alliance where people come together from unequal locations, formal writing gives different powers to different peoples at different times. It is guaranteed that some battles will be won and others will be lost; so the question often hinges around which losses or compromises are acceptable to the collective and when. For instance, when *Playing with Fire* was published, the University of Minnesota Press refused to place the names of all the nine authors individually on the cover of the book. Even harder was the insistence of that publisher to separate me from the remaining eight writers who were identified collectively as “Sangtin Writers.” In contrast, the Zubaan Press in New Delhi published the same book and identified all the nine authors collectively as Sangtin Writers. Once the Sangtin Writers became a known entity, however, no academic press raised an issue with naming any sangtin as an author, or with embedding my name with the names of my nonacademic coauthors as long as we identified as sangtins.

Working in collectives and movements requires us to make tough decisions about which stories we can politicize and circulate, where, and for whom; which complicities with violence we can share, when, how, and for whom. Similarly, we must choose which fights we will fight to the end and which fights we will interrupt in order to make compromises that may seem necessary. What matters most at these tough junctures is that the decision should be a collective and ethically made decision. A togetherness that is grounded in trust, situated solidarities, and radical vulnerability enables a collective to continuously explore different ways of being and evolving and of narrating the stories and theories that matter to its struggle. This kind of collectivity continuously enables spaces for enacting unprecedented encounters and for unsettling established

practices and structures, allowing for fresh negotiations and unforeseen openings in the creative process.

Acknowledgments

The space provided by *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar* to carry out the initial collective interview in 2011 has proved foundational for this conversation. Richa Nagar is indebted to Dia Da Costa and Haley Konitshek for their insightful engagement with *Muddying the Waters* and to Luna Allen-Bakerian, David Faust, and Himadeep Muppidi for their comments on earlier versions of this conversation, all of which have helped to shape its final form.