

Book Review: Nagar, Richa (2014). *Muddying the Waters: Coauthoring Feminisms across Scholarship and Activism*. Urbana, Springfield, Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

*Desirée Poets**

Richa Nagar's *Muddying the Waters* emerges out of the difficulties and (im)possibilities encountered in the creation of politically meaningful scholarship that inevitably crosses multiple borders. Those between academia and social movements, academic and non-academic writing, or geographical and linguistic borders. Placed firmly within the literature, language and methodologies of feminist ethnography, Nagar's work is a call for politically engaged and ethical research that takes matters of epistemic violence seriously. For the author, such research cannot shy away from the tensions, risks and challenges involved in the building of solidarities and alliances between researchers and the researched 'on the ground.' These 'situated solidarities'¹ are achievable when activists and scholars speak *with* each other to become 'radically vulnerable' through trust, affect and critical reflexivity without losing sight of their institutional, material and geopolitical positions. Collaboration cannot do away with the inequalities inherent in such work. On the contrary, its political possibilities not only recognise but also emerge out of those intersectional differences of class, gender, caste, race and location.

Muddying the Waters is a constructive critique of dominant assumptions on fieldwork and knowledge production that can be observed even within postcolonial feminist scholarship. As an alternative to these assumptions, Nagar does not provide a set list of criteria for 'how to,' go about producing politically meaningful research. Instead, it is through analyses of her journeys – across the sites of academia, NGOs, social movements and community theatre in the US, Tanzania and India – that the book arrives at more general contributions to discussions on methodology and epistemology, which form the main content of the final chapter. To this end, the book explores the political and epistemological possibilities of storytelling, auto-biography and creative writing – theatre and poetry, for instance – both within and beyond the academic realm. The anecdotes, diary entries, stories, plays and poems included in the book can only reveal partial truths to the reader, reminding them that it is impossible to fully access 'lived experience' and to neatly make sense of the encounters that take place during fieldwork. This partiality is reinforced by Nagar's conscious decision to not translate certain words, concepts and texts. As she writes, this reinforces the notion that some things cannot or should not be translated or 'made accessible.'

On a similar note, these non-academic texts produce partial knowledges that are politically relevant *because* they do not claim universality, being instead situated in the contexts and struggles of the people with or by whom they were created. In this way, Nagar successfully navigates poststructuralist critiques of knowledge production and problems of

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¹ Richa Nagar, *Muddying the Waters*, p. 17.

representation while remaining committed to social change and radical protest. Furthermore, non-academic writing makes knowledge and analysis more accessible to those who were not trained in academia. Not considered ‘experts,’ such groups or individuals are usually excluded from the production and consumption of what is deemed ‘proper research.’ As such, *Muddying the Waters* makes a strong case for the power of such methodologies. In this context, it urges its academic audience to address the political economy of truth making and question who we are ‘writing for; how; and why?’² Its strongest appeal is for the responsibility to ensure that academic products are not extractive, but collaborative.

Muddying the Waters leaves no doubt that we cannot achieve ‘perfect theories’ or straightforward answers to the problems it poses. Throughout the book, it makes an effort to leave more questions than answers and pushes the reader to repeatedly think *through* the stories they encounter without allowing them to arrive at universal conclusions. In line with Nagar’s epistemological and methodological approach, it is through the author, through her stories, her encounters, alliances and dialogues with others that *Muddying the Waters* comes to situated knowledges and theoretical contributions. These undoubtedly speak to readers in contexts, fields and locations that are very different and/or distant from Richa Nagar’s. Despite its appreciation of the inevitable difficulties and impossibilities of collaborative work, *Muddying the Waters* carries a realistic message of hope and faith for researchers, NGO workers, activists and public officials who wish to produce analyses that are of relevance to the activities and lives of those to whom they feel committed in their work, wherever they are.

Muddying the Waters makes an important contribution to debates on the need for political meaningfulness in academic production by offering an illustrative example of how it can be achieved. Always thoroughly self-reflexive, Richa Nagar never shies away from exploring her unsuccessful experiences. She successfully places the interpersonal relationships as well as the political and intellectual collaborations that she has developed in the US, Tanzania and India within a wider context beyond the politics of representation. As a result, she is able to better gauge what the kind of research in which she engages should, can and cannot achieve. Without turning into an easy-to-follow box-ticking exercise, the book equips its readers with analytical tools to identify and begin to develop responsible and ethical research projects that cross geographical, socio-political and institutional borders. More than anything, *Muddying the Waters* urges us to keep making ourselves radically vulnerable: to keep making mistakes, keep forgiving, keep loving and keep returning to the messiness of our work in the belief that there is value in fieldwork and that there are possibilities for politically engaged scholarship.

² Richa Nagar, *Muddying the Waters*, p. 18.