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Storytelling and co-authorship in feminist alliance work: reflections from a journey

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If all writing is fundamentally tied to the production of meanings and texts, then feminist research that blurs the borders of academia and activism is necessarily about the labor and politics of mobilizing experience for particular ends. Co-authoring stories is a chief tool by which feminists working in alliances across borders mobilize experience to write against relations of power that produce social violence, and to imagine and enact their own visions and ethics of social change. Such work demands a serious engagement with the complexities of identity, representation, and political imagination as well as a rethinking of the assumptions and possibilities associated with engagement and expertise. This article draws upon 16 years of partnership with activists in India and with academic co-authors in the USA to reflect on how storytelling across social, geographical, and institutional borders can enhance critical engagement with questions of violence and struggles for social change, while also troubling dominant discourses and methodologies inside and outside of the academy. In offering five ‘truths’ about co-authoring stories through alliance work, it reflects on the labor process, assumptions, possibilities, and risks associated with co-authorship as a tool for mobilizing intellectual spaces in which stories from multiple locations in an alliance can speak with one another and evolve into more nuanced critical interventions.

Keywords: storytelling; co-authorship; alliance work; truth; accountability; trust

Resisting/remaking the rules

Since I have chosen ‘storytelling’ as the first word for my title, I think it is appropriate to begin this article with a story. In January 2012, I watched a new play in Hindustani and English in Mumbai’s Prithvi Theater, written by Purva Naresh (2012) and directed by Rabijita Gogoi. The play named *Ok, Tata, Bye-Bye* was based on a documentary that the playwright had made several years ago about an impoverished community living next to a highway between the Indian states of Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. This community depended for its survival on truckers who stopped in their village for food, petrol, and sex. Girls born in this village were taught that they were not to be married, for they were born for sex work and to become breadwinners for their families. The play revolves around the complicated attempts of a diasporic Indian documentary filmmaker called Pooja, who arrives with her British partner and British funding, to make a film on the lives of these sex workers through the oral narratives of two young women, Seema and Roopa. Pooja believes that if she can record Seema’s and Roopa’s stories as sex workers, she would then

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be able to raise support from NGOs in Britain to intervene in and save these young women from their awful fate.

Of these two potential storytellers, Roopa, who has had some primary schooling, seems to have internalized the same narrative of her own victimhood that drives Pooja's project – and Roopa is more than happy to provide the story that Pooja wants her audience to hear so that Roopa can be saved by Pooja and Pooja's philanthropic friends. In fact, Roopa happily provides a fake story that reinforces all of Pooja's assumptions because she is aware that providing that story may open up new doors of opportunity for Roopa. Seema, on the contrary, has never been to school and passionately embraces everything that her life offers her, including the terms and conditions of her profession. Seema fiercely rejects Pooja's assumption that she is a victim of terrible circumstances, and continuously pushes Pooja to acknowledge all the ways in which Pooja – despite her privileged class position, expensive movie camera, and ideas about women's emancipation – is also chained by oppressions parallel to Seema's own.

The events of the play can be interpreted in several ways but for the purposes of this article, I would like to make the following points about Seema's and Roopa's very different responses to Pooja's overtures. Seema refuses to be Pooja's co-author unless Pooja is willing to be interrogated and judged by Seema in the same way as Pooja wants to interrogate and judge her. In so doing, Seema explicitly confronts the 'power geometry' (the term is Massey's, see Massey 1993) that connects elite knowledge producers to their subaltern counterparts. Roopa, by contrast, plays the same power geometry – the putative superiority of Pooja's feminism and the relatively immense resources that underwrite it – to her own ends by signing up to be a participant and co-author in Pooja's project. Altogether, the two responses highlight the complexities of subaltern agency and the ways in which the formulations of radical desire might be unruly, ill-tempered, incomplete, conformist, and/or seemingly contradictory, and refuse to align with hopes of dialectical resolution on some 'pure' theoretical terms. At the same time, Roopa and Seema push their audiences to interrogate their own assumptions about marginality, oppression, liberation, and charity in the same way as they challenge Pooja's, and the three women's struggles with collaborative storytelling become an effective way to convey the messiness of representation in alliance work.

As I watched the play, I could not help noticing the parallels between the concerns about the representation of experience in documentary film-making that drove the drama and the ongoing debates about the ways in which dominant forms of academic engagement (including, but not limited to, feminist research) serve to reinforce the persistent hierarchy of knowledge producers and knowledges. When the structure of knowledge production largely disallows research subjects from interrogating, evaluating, or dislodging the knowledge produced by the academic expert, the status of academic researcher as the 'true intellectual thinker' remains undisturbed, along with the hierarchies that elevate theory, research, and academic knowledge production to a higher plane than method, community-based dialog, and non-conventional academic writing. This hierarchization categorizes as 'methodology,' or 'activism,' or 'atheoretical,' most efforts that seek to destabilize or advance academic frameworks on the basis of dialogs outside academia (Nagar and Swarr 2010). Chatterjee (2011, 2) elaborates further on this problem when she argues that:

critiques which frontally challenge the terms of hegemonic knowledges, and are grounded in critical or radical praxis, (in language, stances and modalities of expression) are often dismissed as unsophisticated, untheoretical and 'too activist.' Indeed, ... even with the important feminist questions raised about the intimate relationships between epistemology

and power, formal scholarly evaluation is often wary and dismissive of research that is open about its commitments and investments to radical and progressive critique and social change.

In effect, then, we have a perpetuation of recurring problems in academic knowledge production: knowledges that dominate and languages that exclude to safeguard the closed interpretive communities that have become – in Said’s (2002, 128) words – ‘constantly shrinking fiefdoms forbidden to the uninitiated.’ Furthermore, in ‘safeguarding’ their closed interpretive communities, these shrinking fiefdoms reinforce what Carroll (1990, 138) has called ‘the class system of the intellect’:

The class system of the intellect parallels in intellectual life the class system in the realm of so-called ‘productive’ labor and capital. It uses claims of ‘originality’ and associated terms (‘innovation,’ ‘creativity,’ etc.) to rationalize and justify claims to property in ideas and lines of inheritance, preserving for small groups ... both intellectual hegemony and control of a variety of rewards and privileges ... [T]he system operates in substantial measure on various forms of appropriation and exploitation of the material and physical labor of those relegated to lower classes, including predecessors erased from memory and history. Academic ranks and hierarchies are situated in this system... but should not be confused with the more general class system of the intellect, which extends beyond academia.

Several feminist scholars have highlighted the epistemic violence enacted by this ‘system of the intellect’ and reflected on the ways in which this system can be interrupted through a self-conscious and deliberate set of pedagogies, methodologies, and tactics. Rege’s (2010, 90) critique of mainstream sociology in the Indian context can be applied to mainstream social sciences more broadly:

Women, dalits, adivasis, may be included as substantive research areas of sociology and in optional courses but this inclusion keeps the cognitive structures of the discipline relatively intact from the challenges posed by dalit or feminist knowledges. Thus ‘good sociology’ continues to be defined in terms of the binaries of objectivism/subjectivism, social/political, social world/knower, experience/knowledge, tradition/modernity and theoretical brahman/empirical shudra.

Rege challenges this approach through one that is based on the Phule-Ambedkarite principle of ‘Educate, Organise, Agitate.’ Far from being a sequence of progressive steps or actions (e.g., educate → organize → agitate), this mode of engagement can be imagined as a nonlinear, continuously evolving, co-constitutive dialog where education becomes inseparable from organizing struggles over recognition and redistribution for social transformation. In this multidirectional pedagogy, all the participants are teachers and learners and ‘the possibilities and constraints on agency as it intersects with social formation cannot be predefined’ (Rege 2010, 95).

In *Ghostly Matters*, Avery Gordon makes similar points about subjugated knowledges and subjectivity when she defines haunting as that ‘domain of turmoil and trouble... when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving’ (Gordon 2008, xvi). Gordon turns haunting into a methodology that interbraids the individual, the social, and the political in order to grapple with the social-subjective matter to ‘richly ... describe, narrate, and explain ... the costs, the forfeits, ... and the losses of modern systems of abusive power’ (Gordon 2008, xvii). This methodology resists the assumed distinctions between subject and object of knowledge, between fact and fiction, between presence and absence, between past and present, between present and future, between knowing and not knowing and commits itself to learning from ‘that which is marginalized, trivialized, denied, disqualified, taxed, and aggrieved’, and it commits itself to ‘redistributing respect, authority, and the right to representability or generalizability – the

right to theorize’ – a right which Gordon argues, ‘entails the capacity to be something other than a local knowledge governed or interpreted by a putative superior’ (Gordon 2008, xviii).

A radical rethinking of how we can (re)make knowledges and redistribute the ‘right to theorize’ through a dialogic approach of educating, organizing, and agitating requires a serious engagement with geography. What Hart (2002, 313) notes in the context of activist mobilization is equally applicable to reworking the rules of academic knowledge production: ‘Any strategy to mobilize ... must be firmly grounded in particular configurations of material and cultural conditions, and engage directly with specific local histories and translocal connections, as well as with meanings, memories, and the making and remaking of political subjects.’ These meanings and memories are inseparable from what McKittrick (2006, xiii) calls the ‘language and concreteness of geography – with its overlapping physical, metaphorical, theoretical, and experiential contours ... as they overlap with subjectivities, imaginations, and stories.’ Thus, theories, poems, plays, and narratives that have been erased, dismissed, or rendered invisible can ‘disclose’ new spaces and places, giving birth to poetics of landscape that can creatively ‘influence and undermine existing spatial arrangements’ (McKittrick 2006, xxiii).

If one recognizes all theorizing as an exercise in storytelling, then it is also possible that the epistemic violence of existing paradigms and frameworks can be resisted, mitigated, or confronted by telling stories differently. Hemmings (2011) observes that the tales that feminist theorists tell intersect with wider institutionalizations of gendered meanings, and therefore, it matters *how* feminists tell their stories. She writes (Hemmings 2011, 1–2):

For example, stories that frame gender equality as a uniquely Western import, as a way to measure or enforce economic and democratic development, resonate disconcertingly well with feminist stories that place ‘feminism’ as a radical knowledge project firmly in the Western past. When feminists celebrate the move beyond unity or identity, when they lament the demise of a feminist political agenda, or when they propose a return to a feminist vision from the past, they construct a political grammar ... Feminist theorists need to pay attention to the *amenability* of our own stories, narrative constructs, and grammatical forms to discursive uses of gender and feminism we might otherwise wish to disentangle ourselves from if history is not simply to repeat itself.

However, paying attention to our storytelling is no easy undertaking. Here again, Hemmings reminds us that as narrations about the past, stories are motivated by the positions that the tellers occupy – or wish to occupy – in the present. Moreover, ‘since fullness in representations of the past can never be reached, a corrective approach will always be likely to erase the conditions of its own construction, particularly if it purports to give us the final word. To correct the story which writers should we use? How would this happen without reification? Who will tell this story? What methods might be proposed for fullness ...?’ (Hemmings 2011, 13–14)

Co-authoring stories, as recent work by feminist geographers suggests, opens up rich possibilities for creatively grappling with such questions, especially in alliance work where academic knowledges intersect with knowledges that are produced in/through struggles in sites that are not bound to the academy (cf. Bondi et al. 2002; Mountz et al. 2003; Benson and Nagar 2006; The Community Economies Collective and Gibson 2009; Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2011; Pratt 2012). Collaborative storytelling allows co-authors from varied locations to draw upon and scrutinize their multiple – sometimes conflicting – experiences and truths while exploring, enhancing, and elaborating upon how these interconnect with ‘expert’ knowledges. Far from seeking perfect resolutions or ‘the final word,’ such an exercise requires us to confront the fact that ‘power is never really external to dialogue, participation and experience’ (Rege 2010, 97). This approach opens

up new spaces to examine the complexities of organizing and struggle in relation to subjectivity, a topic that has received inadequate attention. As Armstrong (2002, 92) notes:

Recent feminist theories usually accord struggle an honorable mention. However, their primary focus on the subject and subjectivity ignores the integral relationship between organization and struggle; what works in feminism, how it works, and what feminism support[s] ... [In discussing only] the feminist subject and feminist subjectivity [w]e have lost explicit articulations about vital questions of representation in organization, but also of leadership and interconnection with other political movements ... We have lost the opportunity to [debate feminism as] an ongoing process of resistance and assertion.

Co-authoring stories in/through feminist alliance work makes it possible to mobilize experience and memory work in ways that connect questions of feminist subject/subjectivity with those of representation in organization, leadership, and movement politics. Unlike nostalgia, which reconstructs and/or reinterprets a self-contained past for itself, memory work – including that in the form of diaries, stories, and testimonios – seeks to imagine ‘new sets of beginnings’ (Armstrong 2002, 111). Thus, co-authoring stories can empower activist efforts by allowing for a ‘polyvocal framework attuned to a complex politics of difference; a process versus product-based [approach to knowledge production, and] an explicit pedagogical rhetoric that encourages readers to become potential allies’ (Connolly 2012, 171–172). As a self-reflexive critical practice, then, co-authoring stories can interrupt the forms of epistemic violence identified by Gordon (2008) and Rege (2010) and trouble what Jacqui Alexander calls ‘inherited boundaries of geography, nation, episteme, and identity’ so that they can be replaced by frameworks that underscore ongoing ‘reciprocal investments we must make to cross over into a metaphysics of interdependence’ (Alexander 2005, 6).

Let me now turn to my second story – please be patient as I try to capture its unfolding in multiple ‘stages’ and sites – and use it as an entry point to articulate what I call ‘five truths about co-authoring tales.’ I choose the term ‘truths’ in order to recognize the importance of knowledges that rely on experience, memory work, and truth claims. Through these five truths, I reflect on the labor process, assumptions, possibilities, and risks associated with co-authorship as a tool for mobilizing intellectual spaces in which stories from multiple locations in an alliance can speak with one another so that they can evolve into more nuanced and effective critical interventions.

Unfolding stories and stages: resisting conclusions

In the San Francisco meetings of the Association of American Geographers in 2007, Geraldine Pratt generously organized an *Authors meet Critics* panel around *Playing with Fire* (Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006), a book based on the translation of the Hindi book *Sangtin Yatra* (Anupamlata et al. 2004) which I co-authored between 2002 and 2004 in close partnership with eight grassroots activists living and working in the Sitapur district of India. Through dialog and autobiographical writing, our collective explored how organizations seeking to empower poor women often conceptualize issues in ways that facilitate the domination of those organizations by the elite, and that contribute to the sociopolitical and intellectual disempowerment of the rural poor. We examined hierarchies that marginalized the perspectives of grassroots workers, and we conceptualized processes that could empower the rural poor to articulate their own vision for change. This critique of mainstream women’s empowerment projects triggered public debates, laying the groundwork for the broader movement, Sangtin Kisaan Mazdoor Sangathan (SKMS), which now includes more than 6000 peasants and laborers,

both women and men, 99% of whom are dalit ('untouchable'). SKMS emerged in 2005 with a massive mobilization of peasant women and men to restore access to irrigation waters and the movement resolved to grow without depending on donor funds. SKMS also took up the issue of underpayment of wages and exclusion of dalit women from specific forms of paid labor. That same year, India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) was launched. SKMS pushed for its fair implementation, building a sustained agitation to ensure fair access to work and wages. As the movement grew, SKMS stepped into the volatile terrain of demanding unemployment benefits for those who had not found work.

Sangtin saw Gerry Pratt's invitation to the 2007 AAGs as an opportunity to advance our alliance work and two of the eight activists, Surbala and Richa Singh, traveled from Sitapur to San Francisco to attend this panel, and played a central role in shaping the complex dialogs that preceded, accompanied, and followed the panel. Surbala's and Richa Singh's 5-week long trip to the USA was marked by difficult conversations and painful reflections on subjects and languages of – and hierarchies in – knowledge making as well as efforts to rethink the dominant meanings of fieldwork in academia and in the 'women's empowerment' sector of the development establishment. During those 5 weeks of traveling through academic and activist spaces in Minnesota, California, and New York, Surbala, Richa Singh, and I kept diaries, and these reflections laid the foundation of our second book in Hindi, *Ek Aur Neemsaar* (Nagar and Singh with Vaish and Pande 2012), which was released in January 2012 in Sitapur. *Ek Aur Neemsaar* is a diary of the making of SKMS in the aftermath of the debates triggered by *Sangtin Yatra*. With this quick backdrop, I first want to share a translated section of *Ek Aur Neemsaar* that begins with an excerpt of Surbala's diary and then shifts to third-person narration. I then describe an event that followed the reading of this excerpt in Sitapur.

TRANSLATED EXCERPT FROM *EK AUR NEEMSAAR* (pp. 124–125) BEGINS:

We were headed to Syracuse. As soon as I walked through the security check, the machine shrieked in the same way that it had done in New Delhi and Amsterdam. The culprits were my bangles and anklets. ... The anklets came off, but the glass bangles with iron rims were impossible to take off—they had been on my wrists for 19 years. I passed the check point after the usual drama, but for the rest of the trip I kept worrying, 'How often will I have to deal with this? These bangles will draw me in the circle of suspicion each time we travel somewhere.'

The bangles became a barrier in my way—just like those stubborn questions that become thorns in my heart until I resolve them. ... I recalled in that instant how once a gender-trainer from the city interrogated us in MS for putting sindur [vermillion] in our hair. Sindur, she claimed, was symbolic of patriarchy. In some branches of [NSY]¹ village-level workers were prevented from putting on sindur. But in Sitapur, we refused to comply with this expectation because we believed that it was a form of ideological exploitation. Sindur and bangles give us tremendous respect in the places we come from. So why should we give these up simply because they are deemed unfeminist by our gender-trainers?

—From Surbala's US diary, April 2007

In Syracuse, Surbala cut her iron-rimmed bangles after 19 years and left the pieces in the hotel's trash. Someone who was a witness to all this could argue, perhaps, that it was easy for Surbala to get rid of her bangles because she was in a place where her bangles carried no meaning. But for Surbala, whose identity as a woman was intertwined with these bangles for almost two decades of her marriage, it was a huge mental struggle to convince herself that the removal of bangles was critical for her to make the rest of her path smoother. If someone had pressured her to remove her bangles and anklets because these would cause problems along the way, Surbala would have never removed them. Even if she had, she would have considered such a pressure as 'ideological exploitation.' As Surbala points out, 'Arriving at

the conviction that those bangles had to be cut and discarded had to be my own journey. In pretty much the same way as a butterfly must find its own strength to break its cocoon. Only then, will the butterfly be strong enough to reach its full flight' (Surbala's US diary, April 2007). Unwanted assistance in breaking its 'cocoon' can be a curse for the butterfly.

Those who swear by the label 'feminism', as well as those who trash it, are often guilty of equating feminism with an already cooked recipe of ideas and positions. Many of these people assume that feminist practices can be widely found among educated, urban, salaried women and that these women are capable of empowering another category of women who are dalit, exploited, and subordinated. What are the issues of these supposedly subordinated women? How must they be empowered? How should they form their relationships with their lovers, husbands, mothers-in-law, sons, and daughters? The solutions associated with these questions often sit in canned forms on all the so-called feminist shelves. Expert feminists will not be able to listen to our movements unless they are prepared to throw out these canned assumptions en masse and restock their shelves with a new approach to feminism. Our companion Kamala, from the Khanpur Village, finds it imperative to resist the language of those women's NGOs, which repeatedly tell her to prove her credentials as an 'empowered' woman: 'If you are truly empowered, go fight your man for your half of the bread!' Kamala retorts: 'Which half of my roti should I fight for when my family's access to any roti at all is gravely endangered? Fighting for half a roti is meaningless for me in the absence of a struggle for the whole roti.'

TRANSLATED EXCERPT FROM *EK AUR NEEMSAAR ENDS*

The original Hindi version of the above excerpt, along with two other passages, was read at the book release function of *Ek Aur Neemsaar* in Sitapur on 5 January 2012. On a cold, foggy day, the event was attended by 250 people, approximately half of whom were members of SKMS and another half were residents of Sitapur, with a handful of activists and public intellectuals visiting from Lucknow. At the end of the event, a feminist activist and theater director from Lucknow immediately sought out Surbala and asked sarcastically: 'So Surbalaji, when are you going to break your bangles again?'

Surbala was hurt by the pointed way in which this question came to her, as well as the question's outright dismissal of the critique of mainstream feminism that her deeply personal reflections had helped us to launch in the book. But she replied in a level tone, 'Why should I break my bangles twice? I will do something else that will surprise you.'

As Surbala recounted this incident to an inner circle of co-workers in the movement, she noted how the demands of her family and her organizing work had kept her away from her writing, and how this encounter reminded her of the importance of her own engagement with knowledge production and of her own ability to powerfully articulate critiques of dominant paradigms and platforms. Surbala and two other saathis (members of SKMS) present in the discussion resolved to write journals regularly and bring them to the monthly meetings of SKMS so that their reflections can be interbraided with SKMS's organizing work, and can advance the dialog with mainstream frameworks that refuse to engage seriously with difference.

This story helps me articulate five interrelated and interdependent truths about co-authoring tales through alliance work. Although my discussion builds specifically on previously referenced conversations in feminisms, the truths below relate to a wide range of collaborative efforts that seek to enact horizontal forms of solidarity for achieving social transformation.

Five truths about co-authoring tales in feminist alliance work

The meanings of Surbala's encounter with the feminist theater worker from Lucknow will most likely be lost unless the story is embedded in the 10-year-long journey of an alliance

from the writing of *Sangtin Yatra* to its translation and circulation as *Playing with Fire* and from there to the making of *Ek Aur Neemsaar* and its book release event in Sitapur. The process of producing knowledge about a single event is often informed by complex journeys and relationships in an alliance, and this process can itself inspire ever evolving agendas and visions while refusing compartmentalization of research from pedagogy, of academic from activist labor, and of theorizing from organizing. In this expansive and syncretic understanding of co-authorship as alliance work that moves through and across different contexts and spaces, co-authorship does not merely include the work of writing but also the ways that writing is informed – and co-authored – by all the processes and events undertaken by those in an alliance. Thus, alliance work is not just about a co-authored piece or speech, or a jointly organized rally. Committed alliance work is about building multifaceted relationships through trust; it is about how and where we stand with one another when it comes to co-authoring ideas and struggles; it is about how we engage difference, disagreements, mistakes, and dissonance – what I have called ‘wounds and fissures’ that mark the collective ‘we’ (Nagar 2006). It is with that trust and commitment that a speech or protest letter that might be presented by a saathi (member) of SKMS may be written by me as well. Or a saathi who can create powerful songs may become the co-author of a play that seeks to represent the struggle. In this way, the skills of activist strategizing, of making a song, of deploying powerful words in a speech, of moving people with drama, or of analyzing complexities in academic prose become co-constitutive in this kind of work. This leads me to my first truth:

First, co-authored stories are continuously evolving in/through all the sites of struggle that are part of the alliance. These co-authored tales of alliances are constituted by people who build multifaceted bonds through dreams, dissonance, affect, and trust, and who make and sustain movements through everyday relationships, emotional investments, and creative skills.

In her chapter entitled ‘Forgotten Places and the Seeds of Grassroots Planning,’ Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2008) focuses on places that have experienced the abandonment characteristic of contemporary capitalist and neoliberal state reorganization. She draws attention to the resourcefulness of people in these locales who – despite the daily violence of environmental degradation, racism, underemployment, overwork, shrinking social wages, and the disappearance of whole ways of life *and* those who lived them – refuse to give up hope (Gilmore 2008, 32). If identities change in/through action and struggle, asks Gilmore, what sort of political-economic and cultural projects can highlight the structural and lived relationship between marginal people and marginal lands in both urban and rural contexts and inspire residents in these locales to explore ways in which they can ‘scale up their activism from intensely localized struggles to something less atomized and therefore possessed of a significant capacity for self-determination’ and ‘life-affirming social change’ (Gilmore 2008, 31)? This question leads her to propose a *syncretic* approach to research and activism that offers provisional resolutions to contradictions and challenges by engaging problems, theories, and questions in terms of ‘their stretch, resonance, and resilience.’ Similar to Rege’s vision of Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogy, Gilmore (2008, 37–38) envisions such syncretic practices as having the ability to garner unpredictable energies through collective action to (a) reach further than the immediate object without bypassing its particularity (stretch); (b) support and model nonhierarchical collective action without necessarily adhering to already existing architectures of sense making (resonance); and (c) enable questions to be malleable rather than brittle, so that the project can remain connected with its purpose, even as it encounters and engages the unexpected. This brings me to my next truth:

Second, if politically engaged scholarship begins with a politics of recognition and intentionally grapples with the ways that such scholarship can help to produce the new realities that it is fighting for, then co-authoring stories is a way of working across sociopolitical, cultural, and institutional locations and skill sets to do this grappling while also forging generative connections across struggles.

The third truth revolves around the theme of representation, and I share several lessons from my journey with SKMS as a way to make my points. To begin with, everybody represents somebody in politically engaged alliance work: I might represent Surbala in my academic writing; Surbala might represent her encounters with people in the US academy in a monthly meeting of SKMS or she might represent SKMS's saathis such as Tama and Sarvesh in an argument with the Chief Development Officer (CDO) of Sitapur; Tama might represent the CDO in a song that he sings at a rally; and we all might represent SKMS in multiple forums. In all these instances, each one of us is required to make tough decisions about which stories, experiences, vulnerabilities, or disagreements we can politicize and circulate; and which/whose complicities with violence we can share, when, why, how, and for whom. As an anti-hierarchical movement, SKMS has some well-established practices. For instance, if there is a protest, no one person speaks into the microphone for more than a few minutes and the mic keeps moving from one person to another so that everyone's voice can help to shape the protest. Similarly, when the District Development Officer says, 'Send your representative to me, I will negotiate with that person in my office', the saathis (members) of SKMS respond, 'No, you climb out of your chair and talk to all of us; all of us are representatives of the movement.' In these ways, the movement underscores that everybody who participates in a struggle must continuously think about his/her task as a representer.

This kind of alliance work demands a constant rethinking of the relationship between authorship of words and authorship of struggles. After winning the battle with the director of NSY,² six of the authors continued their jobs with NSY, received promotions, and significant raises in their monthly honoraria, and they voluntarily became distant from the emerging movement, SKMS. However, when SKMS began to get recognized as a force in Sitapur, several of them offered to quit their jobs and become full-time members of SKMS if SKMS could give them honoraria similar to what they were making in NSY. As founders of Sangtin who wrote the book, *Sangtin Yatra*, these women felt that they were entitled to a place in SKMS, and that such place should be accompanied by monetary compensation. But the stance of the 5000 members of SKMS at that time was that since SKMS had no donor funds, every saathi should volunteer at least 6 months of their full-time labor to movement building after which time SKMS will provide some monetary compensation to those members with whatever resources it has available. In other words, there was no privileged place for the authors of the book, *Sangtin Yatra*, because several thousand others had become authors of the everyday struggles that were unfolding in the villages of Sitapur.

The written word holds different kinds of meanings for – and gives different kinds of power to – differently situated members of an alliance at different times. For instance, the writing of the book *Playing with Fire* played a critical role in mobilizing support for the authors of *Sangtin Yatra* when we were attacked by the director of NSY-UP, but the written word ceased to be relevant for the most part as soon as the struggle for irrigation water moved forward. Academics tend to locate authorship and its meanings by fixing the printed word in a text, but alliance-based co-authorship derives its radical potential from its ability to mobilize spaces for both legitimized and hitherto erased (or invisible) critiques to speak with one another, so that they can evolve into more nuanced critical

interventions in multiple sites. A multisited dialog that is grounded in a political struggle should allow people from each of those sites to be aware of how their circumstances and strategies are articulating with those in other sites, and what that articulation is enabling or not enabling in each of those sites. These examples allow me to state my third truth as follows:

Since co-authored tales in alliance work selectively mobilize experience for particular political ends, the labor of the writer/translator/academic hinges on how he/she reduces and expands stories in relation to context and audience. In this sense, all activism can be likened to political theater, and those responsible for the labor of writing must continuously make ethical decisions about the relationship between the conversations happening in the backstage and the content that is to be presented on the front stage based on the political terrain of a given context and audience (Shank and Nagar, *Forthcoming*). Because of this selective mobilization of experience and frontstaging/backstaging of political conversations the possibilities and labor of co-authorship are always in process. It is important to remember, then, that the written text alone is too limited to apprehend the complex intersections among feminist subject, subjectivity, and organizing; the work that is enabled by the authors' multifaceted engagements with difference at particular historical and political moments; or the resonances of these engagements in the multiple sites where alliance-based knowledges are interpreted, consumed, contested, and reshaped into other knowledges.

If the structures of oppression and subordination are legitimized through professions, i.e., cults of expertise that have the power to create knowledge and to selectively empower or devalue knowledges, then the kind of co-authoring I am arguing for demands that we simultaneously trouble this picture in multiple sites. As professionals who are in the business of producing knowledges, it is not desirable or democratic for university-based researchers to solely produce critiques that refer to and/or address largely closed circuits of experts who are often already talking to one another. This closed off circuit, as Mohanty (2003) suggests, keeps otherwise insurgent knowledges in roles of accommodation in relation to corporate university structures. We need to make interventions through which the privileges and resources afforded by the academy can be mobilized to advance knowledges from sites that are systematically excluded, illegitimized, or rendered invisible in the dominant 'class system of the intellect.' Writing through academic spaces allows us to push the predefined assumptions and boundaries of what is legitimized as important knowledge. It also allows research funds to be utilized for enabling practices that seek to redefine expert knowledge. This further implies that for significant chunks of time academics in political alliances might produce knowledges for audiences outside of the university. For example, we might edit or write sections of community newspapers, pamphlets, poems, and plays; we might do it in languages that are labeled as 'vernacular'; and these pieces of writing might subsequently get mobilized in what is co/authored for our academic audiences, thereby disturbing the hegemonic routes through which knowledge is circulated.

In many ways, the struggle for legitimizing knowledges is about gaining access to channels of circulation. Some academics find 'scribe' to be a helpful label for the work we do in enabling this access, albeit as people who do not always inhabit the immediate space of the movements we are involved with. However, an academic working in an alliance is not simply a scribe since she also has the responsibility to ask the toughest questions that 'insiders' may not be able to pose in the same way. Even when a movement is being celebrated for its critical work, it is often easy to slip into exactly the same problems that it is critiquing and we must always make the spaces to address these risks and slippages. But the academic can gain the trust that allows her to carry out this responsibility only if the movement is authorized to question her practices and if she is also available to do what the movement needs her to do. To a certain extent, each member of an alliance has to ethically

navigate her responsibility as an independent critic and as a member of a collective; but this necessary negotiation between the 'I' and the 'we' can often become more delicate and demanding for the academic, especially if the academic has the primary responsibility of narrating and translating the alliance's struggles for multiple audiences located in very different worlds. Thus:

Four, despite the limits of the academy qua corporate entity, universities can be used as sites for radical forms of co-authorship that trouble the established cults of expertise. Rigor in this work, however, is possible only through delicate negotiations between the 'I' and the 'we,' which in turn require ongoing reciprocities and investments rooted in trust and in shared commitments and values that may themselves undergo continuous revision.

After weeks of organizing meetings and rallies and laboring in the heat for 18-hour long days, Surbala sometimes sits down and embroiders as a way to relax. It is a creative skill that Surbala learned as a child and through which she continues to express herself. The embroidered material is sold by SKMS to generate meager resources for its organizational work. Surbala once said to me, 'Writing to you is what embroidering is to me. My embroidery supports the movement in the same way as your writing does. If my embroidery is not causing a crisis for me, why does your writing cause a crisis for you?' These are helpful considerations for academics in an alliance because they push us to (a) recognize how the members of a peasants and workers movement process the same kinds of questions and contradictions that academics wrestle with; (b) locate and theorize our own labor in relation to other forms of labor that enable and empower a struggle; and (c) understand the critical role that trust and trustworthiness (Scheman 2011) play in building and sustaining alliance work.

The location of each member of SKMS reveals specific layers of contradictions. In the case of Richa Singh, the former district coordinator of NSY who has been a principal organizer of SKMS, the movement may not see her as *the leader*, but the politicians, the bureaucrats, and the media want to see her as the hero and *the leader*. Sometimes she can negotiate this attention on the terms of SKMS and sometimes she cannot. But this attention and her location also mean that Richa Singh is the one who gets the violent threats that nobody else gets. On the surface, then, she is a sawarn (upper caste) leader of the movement who enjoys privileges that others do not, but she also pays the cost and takes the brunt of the harshest critiques. Similar contradictions also inform the political life of Tama, a blind dalit man, who composes beautiful songs about the saathis' struggles but who himself hesitates to eat in the home of a dalit person lower than himself in the caste hierarchy. These examples help us to appreciate how co-authoring stories allows an alliance to explore and interrogate the complex intersectionality of caste, gender, education, privilege, and location. The intersectional politics of difference can create walls between any two members of the movement and rarely can we find perfect resolutions to these contradictions in a continuously evolving struggle. However, when people are confronting everything from the state to the rules of their communities and families to the ways in which their bodies are expected to behave, everything becomes a fraught terrain. On the one hand, such all-encompassing, long-term political work demands that each member of an alliance question how they live their relationships and demonstrate their affections, how they internalize or resist the institutions of family and marriage, how they reject or benefit from the all-pervasive systems of caste/class.

On the other hand, this kind of alliance work requires each member of the collective to be skeptical of the increasing professionalization of our political and intellectual labor. For example, feminists all over the world have criticized the ways in which the professionalization of feminism through the academy, NGO circles, the media, and mainstream politics aids the 'translation' of our intellectual and political stances into marketable commodities that give us name, rewards, and celebrity. As a transformative program, then, the concept and practice of

co-authorship can only be meaningful if people coming together from different locations commit themselves to addressing these processes and their effects. Even as we try to resist, we often occupy ambiguous and contradictory places in relation to colonial, capitalist, imperial, and patriarchal structures and with respect to how our actions and choices interact in complex ways with the market. How do we, then, recognize our complicity with the violence inflicted by these structures and our own responsibilities and limits in addressing those complicities? For instance, we might want to begin with challenging the dominant reading practices in our classrooms, families, and political alliances. But after having made that beginning, it may not be sufficient to read how we are complicit with violence. We must also ask how our alternative reading practices can help us locate – and relocate – ourselves and whatever we call our commitments, interventions, or contributions. We must reflect on whether/how we are disrupting or troubling the structures of violence that we are critiquing and whether/how we are intentionally or unintentionally reinforcing those structures. Co-authorship is one way to imagine and enact such practice because it helps us to complicate multiple ‘fields’ in relation to one another without imposing a formula through what Sánchez-Casal and Macdonald (2002) refer to as ‘communities of meaning’ or ‘knowledge making communities.’ When Richa Singh, Surbala, and I spent 5 weeks together in the USA and participated in academic and activist forums – in Berkeley, San Francisco, Stanford, Richmond, Syracuse, and Minneapolis – it gave us new insights into the politics of the spaces we traversed and experienced together, thereby unsettling any assumed independence or purity of those spaces, whether in NGOs or political movements, in the development offices or villages of Sitapur, or in the classrooms or research centers of the US universities. We were able to produce critiques that recognized these diverse spaces of knowledge making as belonging to an interconnected field of power.

If the responsibility to represent in alliance work is an ongoing one, two questions for feminists engaged in this work are: first, how do we imagine and enact a thorough, fluid, and multisited methodology of accountability which allows us to theorize complex intersections of location and power, as well as their attendant contradictions, without attempting to find easy resolutions? Second, how might such a methodology articulate the accountability of the academic to the non-academic collaborators, the accountability of the activist to the people whom he/she represents, and the accountability of both the academic and the activist to one another and to the struggles they claim to stand for?

In approaching these questions, it is helpful to reflect on what Scheman (2011) calls an ‘epistemology of trustworthiness’ in the context of a crisis generated by the question of why the knowledge claims that come from inside of universities ought to be credible to those outside of – and too often alienated from – them. For Scheman (2012, 3), this epistemology refers broadly to:

the conditions under which it is rational to accept what others say about matters that concern you. Those conditions, require on the one hand that the institutions within which the relevant inquiry takes place are trustworthy, something that ... calls for demonstrated commitments to social justice; and on the other hand that modes of inquiry involve respectful engagement with the diverse communities that are knowledgeable about the objects of that inquiry and dependent on or likely to be affected by the results of it.

Rather than center these questions solely on the university, a methodology of accountability in the context of feminist alliance work requires all the co-authors to inspect how each of their locations might enable the conditions under which an epistemology of trustworthiness can be sustained, and what kind of strategies might be needed to address the factors that stifle it. This, in turn, demands a continuous exploration of the radical possibilities of postcolonial, transnational, women of color, and Third World feminisms and the kinds of interventions that

can help us radicalize our pedagogies to explore these intersectional histories and the production of knowledges through these histories. Only through such a methodology can feminists challenge the ways in which our institutional structures and practices continue to ignore our own complicities in structures of violence and insist on segregating 'internationalization' from 'diversity,' research from pedagogy, activism from the academy, and theory from method. This brings me to my fifth truth:

As a multisited, polyvocal cross-border feminist engagement with questions of power, privilege, and representation, co-authorship in alliance work demands that all the authors question their own complicities with the violence of colonial histories and geographies and with capitalist relations of power; as well as their own embeddedness and investments in and relationships with institutional reward structures, markets, and celebrity cults. This questioning must be a part of an always evolving methodology of accountability that pushes each member of the alliance, individually and as part of a collective, to analyze our shifting intersectional locations and contradictions; and to confront the ways in which the institutions and organizations supporting our critical work might be themselves complicit with the forms of violence we might be opposing.

In other words, co-authoring stories in alliance work demands radical vulnerability from those who inhabit different communities of meaning, whether academia, activism, or elsewhere. If feminist alliance work is to realize its transformative possibilities, collaborators must recognize each other as co-authors joined in relations of affect, trust, imagination, and critique, ever open to interrogation by one another, and willing to forego the putative superiority of their protocols of understanding and sites of knowledge making.

As reflections from an ongoing journey, the five truths I have articulated above are not meant to serve as final conclusions, but as points to recenter otherwise marginalized conversations about what/whose knowledge counts as important and how academic knowledges ought to be produced. In the end, allow me to revisit these arguments through a scene of a play co-authored by members of SKMS (Sangtin Kisaan Mazdoor Sangathan 2010).

Co-authoring intersectionality and alliance: Aag Lagi Hai Jangal Ma (The Jungle Is Burning)

In the sweltering heat of August 2010, Bitoli and Kusuma left their villages in Pisawan Block of Sitapur District to undertake a 3-hour-long trip to the town of Sitapur. There, they were joined by 10 more saathis of SKMS: Meena, Jamuna, Radhapyari, Roshanlal, Manohar, Ramkishore, Sri Kishan, Anil, Surendra, and Tama, as well as additional supporters, including Kamal, Shivam, Rajendra, Richa Singh, and me. The women and men saathis were of different ages and personalities, they came from different villages, and some of them had been active in SKMS for several years while others were just beginning to get acquainted with the Sangathan's work. However, these differences were soon absorbed by an all consuming process of remembering and retelling, of enacting and creating as we all came under one roof for the next 5 days and nights, setting aside our preoccupations and worries; our farms and homes; our families, parents, and children. From this process evolved a street play in Hindi and Awadhi, *Aag Lagi Hai Jangal Ma* (The Forest Is Burning). Developed by this group under the direction of Tarun Kumar, a Mumbai-based theater and film artist and a friend of SKMS, the play analyzed the politics of class, gender, and place in relation to struggles around the NREGS and sought to advance SKMS's understandings of and resistance to the injustices associated with the state development machinery and its approach to rural lives and livelihoods. In lieu of a conclusion, I offer the last scene of this play in translation, as it theorizes and enacts intersectionality and alliance through co-authorship. As each actor announces his/her own perspective, concerns, or truth, he/she

contributes to a fuller collective truth of the struggle that could not be realized without the process of co-authorship. The play ends with a song that resonates strongly with Alexander's (2005) call to cross over into a 'metaphysics of interdependence.'

SCENE THREE

Meena – (asks the audience) Can deflating one officer truly end state corruption?

Sri Kishan – *Arey*, how will this corruption end? Don't we know how deep its roots are and how widely their tentacles are spread?

With the beat of the dholak (drum), the following line from a song is recited by all:

कहब त लाग जाई धक्क से!

If I speak honestly, you will feel a stabbing pain!

Roshan – Look at the state of our schools – whether it's the mid-day meal, or whether it's the state of education.

Kusuma – The porridge that comes to the Aaganwadis is sold away for pennies. The porridge that is given for the children of the poor is actually eaten by the animals of the rich.

Jamuna – And what can I say about the government hospitals? Sometimes it's the doctor who is missing and at others, it's the medicines.

कहब त लाग जाई धक्क से!

If I speak honestly, you will feel a stabbing pain!

Surendra – Thousands of litres of water are pumped in and out of swimming pools in the cities. In the Gominagars of Lucknow and the Vasant Kunjs of Delhi electricity is supplied round the clock. If we can get access to all that electricity and water, we can produce loads after loads of wheat and rice.

Anil – So many of us don't even have a tiny farm. In the registers of the government, the entitlement is in our name but the real control is in someone else's hands.

Manohar – It's not as if the fields of those who control their own lands are blooming, anyway! The mazdoors (laborers) and kisaans (peasants) suffer beatings of the stick in order to get access to a little bit of fertilizer.

Ramkishore – How can we ever get the fertilizer? We don't even have the *Kisaan Bahi*.³

कहब त लाग जाई धक्क से!

If I speak honestly, you will feel a stabbing pain!

Tama – The salaries of the central government folks have increased. The legislators and the members of the parliament give themselves raises every other day. But how much has our daily wage increased in proportion to theirs?

Roshan sings with a beat on the dholak:

मेंहगाईं हमका मारै डारे सुनो गरीबन भइया!

Inflation is killing me, listen my companions in poverty!

Roshan – (with another beat on the dholak) What can I say? For two years now, I have not tasted arhar daal. Tomatoes are forty rupees per kilo. What can we get in the wages of a hundred rupees a day? If you and I won't die of disease and hunger, then who will?

Sri Kishan – Have you encountered a single restaurant or *dhaba* in Piswan or Sitapur where our children are not seen washing the dishes?

कहब त लाग जाई धक्क से!

If I speak honestly, you will feel a stabbing pain!

Tama – Our well wishers at the top may or may not increase our wages, but they certainly make sure that there are plenty of shops at every intersection to supply us with gutka, bidi,⁴ and liquor.

Ramkishore – If the hungry worker drinks the government's liquor, the government is happy and its liquor becomes legal. But if we make our own liquor, the police raids our homes!

कहब त लाग जाई धक्क से!

If I speak honestly, you will feel a stabbing pain!

Manohar – All of this agony makes sense only if we can save this earth of ours. Hardly a downpour happens and every town, every city seems to be on the brink of flooding. And why wouldn't it flood? These enormous roads and mansions have swallowed our trees and forests.

Meena – Wherever you look, polythene and plastic are obstructing our paths. The kumhars (potters) in our villages are dead.

कहब त लाग जाई धक्क से!

If I speak honestly, you will feel a stabbing pain!

Bitoli – *Arey*, all these tears and complaints of ours have gone on for decades. No matter which government comes or goes, the poor continue to be subjected to the same old games. Policies and schemes are run in our names; research and analyses are conducted in our names, but it's the mansions of the rich that become taller. And it's not as if these owners of big mansions who live on our sweat and blood reside only in Mishrikh and Pisawan – they are spread all over the world. Whether it's Lucknow and Delhi, whether it's Israel and America!

Anil – Tell me one more thing? The drama that we saw in the home of Kamala and Ramautar – which grand scheme did that drama belong to? (After a pause) Don't think that such dramas happen only in our huts. In the big mansions, there are even bigger dramas between women and men.

Radhapyari – *Baap re baap*. This is not a drama. This is a fire. A massive fire that will engulf us all.

The whole group sings with Manohar and Tama:

आग लगी है जंगल मां

चिड़िया आग बुझाय रही

हाथी खड़ा तमाशा देखे

हाथी खड़ा तमाशा देखे

अत्ती बात समझ ना पावे

चिड़िया आग बुझाय रही

जंगल जरी तो ओहू ना बचिहे

अपना गर्व देखाय रहे

लेकर चिड़िया चोंच में पानी

जंगल आग बुझाय रही।

हाथी अगर न आग बुझाई

चिड़िया के संग जरि-मरि जाई।

There is a fire in the jungle, the bird is extinguishing the fire.

The elephant looks on. He just looks on.

The elephant does not understand, it's the bird who is extinguishing the fire.

When the jungle burns, he will burn, too. But he is preoccupied with his own pride.

Filling water in her little beak, the bird carries on fighting the fire.

If the elephant does not join in, he will also burn with the bird.

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Notes

1. NSY is the pseudonym used by Sangtin writers for the NGO, which employed seven of the nine authors of *Sangtin Yatra*.
2. See endnote no. 1.
3. Kisaan Bahi is a form of administrative land record that determines a peasant household's access to fertilizer.
4. A mild stimulant, *gutka* is made from crushed betel nut, tobacco, catechu, paraffin, lime, and sweet or savory flavorings. *Bidi* is a cigarette made with tobacco flake and rolled in tendu leaf.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

La narración de historias y la coautoría en el trabajo de alianza feminista: reflexiones de viaje

Si toda escritura está fundamentalmente ligada a la producción de significados y textos, entonces la investigación feminista que desdibuja los límites entre lo académico y el activismo trata necesariamente sobre el trabajo y la política de movilizar la experiencia para fines pacíficos. La coautoría de historias es una importante herramienta por la que los y las feministas que trabajan en alianzas a través de las fronteras movilizan experiencias para escribir contra las relaciones de poder que generan la violencia social, y para imaginar y actuar sus propias visiones y su ética del cambio social. Dicho trabajo demanda un compromiso serio con las complejidades de la identidad, la representación y la imaginación política, así como un repensar los supuestos y posibilidades asociados con el compromiso y el conocimiento experto. Este artículo se basa en 16 años de asociación con activistas en India y con coautoras académicas en los EE.UU. para reflexionar sobre cómo la narración de cuentos a través de fronteras sociales, geográficas e institucionales puede enriquecer el compromiso crítico con cuestiones de violencia y luchas para el cambio social, a la vez que perturbar los discursos y metodologías dominantes dentro y fuera de la academia. Ofreciendo cinco "verdades" sobre los cuentos de coautoría a través del trabajo en alianza, se reflexiona sobre los procesos laborales, supuestos, posibilidades y riesgos asociados con la coautoría como herramienta para la movilización de espacios intelectuales en los que las historias de lugares múltiples en una alianza pueden dialogan entre ellas y evolucionar en intervenciones críticas más matizadas y efectivas.

Palabras claves: narración de cuentos; coautoría; trabajo en alianza; verdad; responsabilidad; confianza

女性主义结盟工作中的说故事与共同著作：旅程中的反思

如果所有的书写在根本上皆与意义和文本的生产紧密相连，那么模糊学术与社运分野的女性主义研究，便必然与为了特定目的地动员经验的劳动与政治相关。共同创作故事是女性主义跨界结盟的主要工具，藉此动员经验、以书写的方式反抗生产社会暴力的权力关系，并想象和启动她们自身对于社会变迁的愿景与伦理。此般工作必须深刻涉入认同、再现与政治想象的复杂性，并重新思考有关涉入以及专业知识的预设及可能性。本文运用与印度社会运动参与者以及在美国共同著作的学者之间长达十六年的伙伴关系，反思跨越社会、地理与制度疆界的说故事行动，如何得以促进对于社会变迁的暴力与斗争问题的批判性涉入，并扰动学术界内、外部的支配性论述与研究方法。本文藉由提供五个透过结盟工作所共同著作的“真相”，反思有关共同著作的劳动过程、预设、潜能与风险，其中共同著作做为动员知识空间的工具，在该空间中来自各地的故事结盟后得以相互对话，并发展出更为细致且有效的批判性介入。

关键词：说故事；共同著作；结盟工作；真相；可究责性；信任