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Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills

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Kirin Narayan

Everyday Creativity: Singing Goddesses in the Himalayan Foothills

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

ISBN: I9780226407562, 256pp.

Everyday Creativity is set in the Kangra region of Himachal Pradesh, a place flanked by mountains and by some accounts positioned right on top of the demon Jalandhar, who “[lies] under the earth of this region” (35). Drawing on her decades-long relationships with her interlocutors, Kirin Narayan focuses on the lives and songs of several upper-caste Brahmin women. If “singing” in the subtitle is taken to be a verb, Kangra women are singing goddesses into being, perhaps even singing goddesses into their own lives. If singing is taken to be an adjective, the women themselves become the singing goddesses. The book’s pages are filled with transcriptions of songs that are woven together with stories – stories of the singers’ lives, of Narayan’s, of the lives of gods and goddesses, and sometimes all three at once. For example, in a characteristically evocative vignette, Jagadamba Mataji, one of the book’s central figures, exclaims, “There we are, Devaki and Yashoda!” She is contemplating a photograph of herself and her sister singing together, but relishes “the sheer fun of mixing up layers of reality” as she boisterously transposes onto her own self and her sibling the adopted and biological mothers of Krishna, respectively (144–145).

This “moving back and forth between songs and life,” itself “a form of inventive play,” is a prime example of what Narayan calls everyday creativity (143). Using the modifier “everyday” to “shake ‘creativity’ loose from a widespread association with innovation” (xx), Narayan works against grandiose and markedly Western notions

of creativity that feature gatekeepers, geniuses, and individuals and that rely on “institutions, commoditization or acclaim” (xxi). Instead, “under the tutelage of Kangra singers,” Narayan focuses on the life-sustaining act of singing a shared repertoire of songs. The small, improvisatory tinkering involved in “pulling a shared song from memory” – changing a word in a shared song or adding a new line, for example – can themselves be creative acts, regardless of whether a song is “led by an individual or pieced together in a group” (220, xx). These subtle variations are what can highlight connections between specific women’s lives and the lives of the gods and goddesses in songs, ground a song in local geographies and histories, or allow a singer to add “her distinctive mark to the song in performance” (xx). Ultimately, these songs are key to their singers’ flourishing: in lives that are often difficult, songs become a source of pleasure, a “resource for living” (220).

One of the greatest strengths of the book is the deeply considered way in which Narayan navigates and mediates relationships among her interlocutors, her readers, and herself. As Narayan herself wrote over two decades ago, “distance . . . is both a stance and a cognitive-emotional orientation that makes for cold, generalized, purportedly objective and yet inevitably prejudiced forms of representation.”¹ By contrast, Narayan is warm, present, and even loving in her depictions of Kangra women, some

of whom she has known since she was a teenager. (In this way, *Everyday Creativity* is quite the opposite of “hit and run anthropology.”)² Narayan also makes herself vulnerable, including herself in the text in a way that connotes memoir, yes, but not just for memoir’s sake: it also allows for positioning of herself that I would argue is deeply ethical in that makes it clear that her knowledge, like all knowledge, is situated.³

Relatedly, Narayan is explicit from the get-go about how Kangra women’s relationships with songs influence her own life, making her “aware of how [she] too [seeks] out small acts of making something distinctively [hers] in everyday life: whether through combining words on the page, trying out ingredients for recipes, assembling outfits, or stringing sequences of beads” (xx). In making this comparison, she orients her readers toward subject-subject relationships with the people about whom they are reading, inviting us to relate to the singers rather than scrutinize them, however subtly, from on high.

As much as Narayan loves these women, this book is by no stretch an uncritical celebration of their lives, lives that Narayan reminds us are often circumscribed by backbreaking work and lack of control over their households’ financial resources. Narayan also avoids the potential pitfall of setting up a “white men are saving brown women from brown men” relationship between the reader and the interlocutors.⁴ Instead, she recounts, for example, the incident of “an unmarried professional woman friend from Delhi” seeing in Narayan’s files the coda that structures this book (31). After “viewing one potentially repressive expectation after another, [the friend] rolled her eyes to exclaim, ‘Oh God!’”

(31). In other words, *Everyday Creativity* is profoundly anti-exoticist without ever openly declaring its anti-exoticism.

Narayan has sought “to open [the] pages [of *Everyday Creativity*] to readings in many keys” by “letting stories lead” (xxii). We speed forward and back across time, visit different interlocutors, and follow Kirin Narayan to spaces where women are singing (mostly for other women): weddings, kitchens, a hospital bedside, and various birthday parties, including one for the tulsi goddess Sali. The book itself is creative, almost novelistic: themes thread themselves through chapter after chapter, and Narayan uses various literary devices, including . . . suspense! Metaphors of water flow abundantly: Narayan herself is always “filling up” her tape recorder the way one might fill up a water bottle. Nothing at all in this book is clunky, needlessly technical, or overwritten. It is a book that is both lean and lush. Nothing feels extraneous, and though it is crafted so carefully, one might say that it, like the songs described on its pages, flows like water.

Narayan’s narrative approach allows her to provide what is one of the book’s strongest contributions: stunningly multi-vocal and nuanced readings of song texts. Each chapter is filled with translations of these texts nested within stories that weave in and out of the past. The interpretations are varied and palimpsestic: different people have helped Narayan interpret them, and she writes about the different interpretations as coming out of different contexts, describing those contexts through stories. The transcriptions are elegant in and of themselves, though Narayan must have made so many decisions in order to present them this way. She chooses strategies like transcribing one line of the

Pahari text to give the reader a taste of the original language and then letting the rest of the text continue in English. Sometimes when the words repeat, Narayan will vary the translation to give us different depths of meaning. Though Narayan provides the kinds of classificatory information about songs that a reader might desire, the book resists taxonomizing. Narayan does not, for example, insist on using the words *pakharu* or *bhajan* over and over again, even though she gives us this information should we need it.

Likening her own writing process to her interlocutors' practices of singing, Narayan writes that "grafting . . . Kangra metaphors [of songs as plants] into [her] writing helped [her] find a form for this book" (30). Indeed, the book's six chapters follow the song-and-plant metaphors from "base" to "head," with many "fruits" along the way. Simultaneously, the book is organized around "attaining," "playing," "going," and "bathing," four gerunds from a coda that both concludes several songs and "affirms underlying cultural expectations" (30):

that a girl should gain secure social status through heterosexual marriage that takes her to a different home; that a woman's fulfillment lies in giving birth to sons; that a woman disempowered by old age or widowhood will increasingly need help from Bhagavan; and that everyone would like the chance to wash off their sins in a holy river (31).

By following the coda and therefore Kangra women's stages of life, the book organizes around the types of songs associated with different life stages. Finally, and unsurprisingly, the book follows the progression of real time: Kangra is changing; Narayan is getting older; some of her interlocutors are no longer around.

Everyday Creativity is so whole, engrossing, and complete-feeling within a single medium: text. At the same time, sound is strikingly absent from a book about song, a genre in which words and music marry. I found myself wondering occasionally what the songs sounded like; whether songs shared melodic materials; what, sonically speaking, might change from rendition to rendition. For this reason, I wished that there were accompanying audio recordings or even more sonic descriptions within the text.

This book is for folklorists, philologists, ethnomusicologists, and anthropologists; for scholars of Hinduism, scholars of South Asia, and scholars of the voice; for ethnographers and other writers who are working to remediate uncritical relationships with distance, who want to write beautiful academic texts, and who strive to "welcome in outsiders."⁵ Finally, this book is for all those—including those outside the academy—who would bask in the glow of these life-giving songs and stories. In Narayan's words: "I send all these songs onward, then, beyond the radiant presence of singers who have been so generous to me through the years and toward potential new audiences" (225).

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NOTES

1 Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" *American Anthropologist* 95/3 (1993): 680. Narayan is also referencing Dorinne Kondo, "Dissolution and Reconstitution of Self: Implications for Anthropological Epistemology," *Cultural Anthropology* 1/1 (1996): 74–96.

2 Ibid., 677.

3 Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14/3 (1988): 575–99.

4 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?": Revised Edition, from the "History" Chapter of *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* in *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 48.

5 Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" 682.