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Witnessing places of meaning through poetic call and response

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Ali Black, with Nandini Sahu

Witnessing places of meaning through poetic call and response

Abstract:

This paper presents part of a poetic ‘call and response’ exchange between two poets who have never met. It shares the contemplative witnessing and ‘responding’ of an Australian poet to the poetic ‘calls’ of an Indian poet. Whilst the focus for the project was exploring the physical geography of place, the style of the Indian poet’s calling poems – and indeed the Australian poet’s responding poems – were entangled with ideas encompassing much more than geography. Dreams, desires, despair, loss, and hope wove around, and in ‘place’ of, geographical descriptions. The inquiry process was imperfect, and traversing time differences, language, culture, ways of understanding, and technology to share lived lives was no easy task. Yet, aesthetic methods invited socially and ethically engaged scholarship and contemplation. This paper offers glimpses of how two women poets produced poetic data to explore and witness lives and see and be moved by the other.

Biographical notes:

Dr Ali Black is an educator and arts-based narrative researcher. Her research and scholarly work seek to foster connectedness, community, wellbeing, and meaning-making through the building of reflective and creative lives and identities.

Dr Nandini Sahu is an Indian poet, writer, and critic. She is also Professor of English at the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India. She has written several books and is an acclaimed poet.

Keywords:

Poetry as data – poetry as research – women writing lives – meaning-making – call and response

all is welcomed as instructive the resonances
reverberations sound throughout the text relationship
is the medium through which we catch an angle
reflected something that compels us opening to
another in this way helps to undercut the (illusion
of) solidity of self the process is
gentle more consciously care-filled
(Walsh & Bai qtd. in Walsh et al 2015: 1)

Introduction

This paper is a collection of encounters, interactions, data – texts, resonances, reverberations, and openings. It blurs research methodologies, contemplative practices, arts practices, spirituality, and listening to challenge the norms of regular academic research – and not just in process and form, but also in its desire to attend to another, to listen with care, and to open to another’s lived and imagined worlds (Walsh et al 2015).

Academic writing promotes the veiling of the lives we are living and the feelings we are feeling (Black & Loch 2014; Doty 2010). However, for this project, our processes epitomise what Suzi Gablik calls ‘connective aesthetics’ – aesthetics focused on relationship, on listening and viewing, on calling and responding to each other’s writing, to each other, with respect, compassion, and care (1992: 2). The approaches we engaged in helped us ‘be-with’ our lived experiences and enabled what Walsh and Bai call a ‘witness consciousness’ (2015: 25); our poetic methods also engaging ‘*art as witness*’ (Agosin 1996: 13-15).

Poetry is a unique encounter. A way of knowing, it offers a way to write and speak from within the stories we are living, have known, and hope for (Wakeman 2015). Poetic and aesthetic interactions produce data to help us connect these in-between spaces in which we are living, working, feeling, and thinking (Allegranti & Wyatt 2014).

This paper shares pieces of our produced data, the living-working-thinking-storied aspects of our poetic and aesthetic interactions, and our forms of inquiry that represent something of ‘self’, ‘other’, and ‘experience’ (Norris et al 2012). This ‘methodology of the heart’ (Pelias 2004) and our writing apart/together caused us to relate differently; to experience the world differently, more soulfully (Henderson et al 2020); to *call* to and *respond* to another (Black & Loch 2014); to witness (Walsh & Bai 2015).

What follows arose out of a loose collaboration of producing, reading, and responding to poetry. The collaboration involved many poems (a myriad of previously-published and previously-written poems) by Indian poet Nandini Sahu, from Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, India (three of which are presented here); and six new poems written specifically for this project by Ali Black, an Australian academic and creative (three of which were written in *response* to Nandini’s poems and are presented here). We were encouraged in the original call for papers to engage in a shared exploration of the physical geography of place.

However, the style of Nandini's calling poems – and indeed Ali's responding poems – encompassed much more than geography. Dreams, desires, despair, loss, and hope wove around, and in 'place' of, geographical descriptions.

The extended length of our various poems, and the sometimes-disrupted nature of our writing and communication with one another during the project, led us to focus this paper on the first phase of our interactions where the *calling voice* is Nandini, and the *responding voice* is Ali. Three of Nandini's poems set up the call. Each calling poem is presented one at a time. Between each of Nandini's poems, Ali provides a personal reflection of what Nandini's poem evoked for her. Then, the poem Ali penned in response is presented.

Ali's responding pieces are textual offerings communicating what Ali witnessed and felt – the 'resonances and reverberations', the 'angles that reflected something' (Walsh & Bai 2015: 1). These responding pieces yield meaning; they are anecdotes of the 'discourse passed between bodies', of 'action and thought'; they are the 'making visible' of the 'passing and changing of meaning' (Prosser 2009). Ali's responding products become new data – artefacts of witnessing and meaning-making – made up of 'narratives of the self' and 'fragments of story', 'memory', and emotion; responses that rather than subjecting to technical critique we are allowing to 'make their own mark without the double act of re-interpretation' (Prosser 2009).

Nandini presented Ali with three poems: 'Aside', 'Freedom', and 'In the Andamans'. To these poems Ali responded with 'Align', 'Some day', and 'Atoll dreaming with you'.

Poem one, Nandini calls to Ali

'Aside' by Nandini Sahu

In the morning
 I'm a daughter-in-law serving hot tea
 stitching broken bottoms cleaning, cooking, frying, stirring, wiping my son's nose,
 sometimes slapping him when the ever-complaining man
 watches me. I'm a wife. In the day I'm a college
 teacher, facing young, obsessed, young girls and boys,
 trying hard to look professional, wearing the mask of an official fool.
 Again, in the afternoon
 I'm a mother, loving, kissing, playing, caring, rearing, hearing the daily saga
 of phone bills, market prices, taxes, policies, news-bulletins, chiding the maid for
 cutting vegetables rather small
 or chopping onions on the wrong side.
 In the evening I'm a showpiece, a perfect business butt, bargaining, wearing a
 matching lipstick,

thinking of the evening menu, smiling, smiling, ever smiling behind a mysterious face, knowing every detail of mornings, afternoons, never ending nights. Yes, in the nights till he smiles proud and sleeps. And then! And then I drag the world to my feet, a dreamer that I am. I reach the unreached, swim in an 'oh no!' world of fancy, quench my feminine thirst, dry my hungry limbs. I am every woman, dribbling, pouring desire into the feminine dummy. In the morning I am a daughter-in-law, wife, mother, researcher again, mute, content (?) I'm the goddess who knows the things that are to happen and what will not since time has ploughed scars on my virgin mud.

Reflections, resonances, and reverberations: call/response encounter one

Nandini's poem, 'Aside', resonated immediately. The constant action Nandini described (serving/stitching/cleaning/cooking/frying/stirring/wiping/trying/wearing/loving/kissing/playing/caring/rearing/hearing/bargaining/thinking/smiling/knowing) connected Ali to her own stories of being many things to many people, to her own feelings of being stretched and scarred, of striving and efforting. Ali also knows what it is to be called to perform, to juggle and engage with seeming never-ending roles and demands. At this time of reading and writing, Ali felt exhausted and despondent. With every email, every hour, every relationship, she is asked to give more. Her body has been screaming at her, pain shooting around her upper body making her reflect on the toll of the stress she is carrying. Nandini's struggle is Ali's struggle. And so, in her witnessing of Nandini's experience, and in her poetic interactions back, Ali dreams for them both some respite from the struggle. Nandini's poem caused/causes Ali to pause.

It caused/causes her to remember her own experiences, and the experiences of others: how Nandini/Ali/many women move from place to place, role to role, managing a myriad of expectations and carrying many responsibilities with little respite within a day or across a year. Nandini's words connected Ali to memories and memories shifted emotions, bringing recognition and empathy. Ali wanted to touch Nandini's shoulder, hold her hand, and say: *I see you, you are enough, make space for yourself, listen to your wise Goddess within*. These are words Ali wants to hear in her own life. These are desires she wants to make real for herself too, for all women: places of spaciousness, stillness, listening, remembering, rest.

Nandini's poem invited and invoked mud-goddess-lotus remembering and anecdotes (Prosser 2009). '...mud' – the final word of Nandini's poem reached into Ali's stories, memories, and imaginings. She mused on Nandini's imagery of goddess and mud. In her first poems to Nandini, Ali wrote about walking the beach. Concluding her morning beach walks, Ali has for a long time incorporated a lotus-rising-ritual. There are a series of steps and platforms heading up the hill on her way home, and at the top of each platform Ali performs a symbolic gesture

and mimics with her hands a lotus rising out of the mud. This bodily/spiritual action is a way of metaphorically raising the muddied experiences of her life to the heavens, letting them go, and opening to something beautiful and new, opening to the blessings of the new day.

Nandini's imagery called Ali back in time, to wonderful experiences and places. Ali's first overseas holiday with her husband was to Bangkok, and they went to a restaurant called The Sukhothai. It was incredibly romantic, and lotus flowers were audibly popping in the nearby ponds adjacent to their dinner table. With this remembering and writing, moments of awe and magic, tenderness, and love were felt anew. Ali's mud-goddess-lotus remembering connected her with feelings magical, loving, and hopeful. These poetic and aesthetic interactions and connective aesthetics invoked by Nandini's 'Aside' and Ali's 'Align' have 'supported emotional movement' from places of exhaustion toward places of surrender, love, and hope (Allegranti & Wyatt 2014). They invite Ali/Nandini/others to experience more consciously and soulfully the worlds and the in-between spaces in which we are living, working, feeling, and thinking. With this exchange we are in dialogue with ourselves, with poetry, with lived lives, cherished things, wildish energies, and innermost worlds (Henderson et al 2020).

Ali responds to Nandini's poem 'Aside'

'Align' by Ali Black

Women, how might we find ourselves? Find our place?
How might we listen
to our bodies
to our hearts
to our inner knowing?

We are called to do so much
and be so many things
to many people
too many people.

I look within for guidance and my inner compass calls to me

N
W E
S

She calls me to turn, turn, turn, turn toward
stillness
s p a c i o u s n e s s a n d
i n t o s a c r e d m o m e n t s where I belong
to myself.

This is what I ache for, what I seek,
what I will bring to my life.

She whispers in my ear:

You are lotus.

Beautiful, ancient. Your

flowering

petals are

unfolding

slowly

one

by

one.

I have stumbled. I have suffered.

But I am remembering.

I am rising from the muddy water.

I AM lotus.

I am determined now

to bring myself to me. Everyday.

I am wilful in my choices.

I am choosing who I am

in my stitching, cleaning, cooking, frying, stirring, slapping, trying, loving, kissing,
playing, caring, rearing, hearing, chiding, bargaining, wearing, thinking, relishing,
smiling, knowing, dragging, reaching, dreaming.

Everyday.

I am turning, turning, turning, turning,

quenching my feminine thirst

and drying my hungry limbs.

I am pouring desire into my cup, into my heart, into my belly, into my womb.

Everyday.

I am noticing

fully present

with all that I am.

I am emerging, my beauty so remarkable, now fully exposed.

I know who I am.

I am wise.

I align.

I am Goddess.

I am love.

I AM LOTUS.

Poem two: Nandini calls to Ali

'Freedom' by Nandini Sahu

Sometimes I ponder
that my country's limbs
are crushed down somewhere in the busy traffic of a metro
while freedom hides with shame in its sixty-fifth year
under the bed of the battered baby deserted by parents, unknown,
in the trauma centre of AIIMS, New Delhi, India. "Average three infants deserted
daily
in the capital"—reports the daily newspaper.

My fingers numbed by the cold wind. Bruises everywhere in the hurt air.

Here, molested children and abandoned old parents prize their freedom
in wakeful dreams.

And
silently smile.

I scream inward
to refurbish the old world. The sun is a falling rock.

Sometimes I wonder why my country's limbs
are crushed down somewhere in the false assurances
of power and failure
and in the fate of the girl gang-raped in a bus
by aged men and a minor. Her silent death in a hospital, afar, stirs
the depths of our rage.
I look at freedom in the eye, freedom, the dry drone of
just a ritual.

In my ignorance, I wish to end this season.
The chaotic drumbeats freeze around me turning into twisted pillars.
Each hour, each second
pass through my waiting veins
like the shadow of a triumphal arch.

I try to understand the only freedom I discern:
the freedom of the womb
and the freedom of the ashes.
Freedom hides somewhere in the contours of my country's body, alien.

Reflections, resonances, and reverberations: call/response encounter two

Nandini's second poem, 'Freedom', was confronting. Nandini's words exposed such anguish and suffering, 'the bed of the battered baby', 'infants deserted daily', 'molested children', 'the girl gang-raped in a bus'. The trauma that exists in Nandini's country (and Ali's) enveloped Ali, and (dis)quietened her. There is so much to grieve. Ali reflected on the 'limbs' and 'contours' of her own country and the headlines in the Australian news: compassionless imprisonment of refugees; ongoing racism and deaths in custody; continued investment in fossil fuels despite thousands of scientists and protesting children calling us to heed the climate emergency. It seems 'the sun is a falling rock' wherever we live. In Australia, we imprison our Indigenous children, as early as ten years of age. We give up on telling the truth about our greenhouse emissions and undo needed targets. We make laws to imprison those who dare to say action is needed, and now. Men in power who claim to love God, act godlessly. Compassion is in short supply. Fake news abounds.

In our poetic interactions together, we sit-with and witness the hopeless and the helpless. There is mutual recognition (Allegranti & Wyatt 2014). *Freedom* is the key word for us both. We problematise the motives of media and politicians. We question together. Is Freedom a place? Do we find freedom in places of despair and rage? In our minds? In our hearts? In our homes? How might the human race find their way back? Is there good inside of us? How is it that we accept that our children are molested and abandoned, our women are raped, violated, and murdered? How is it that we leave our young people to rise up on their own and criticise them at every turn for trying to wake us up from our apathy? Will truth prevail? Will we, Nandini and I, you, embody and crusade for something new, something else, for freedom?

Nandini's 'Freedom' poem invited Ali to engage in inquiry and look into history to investigate 'freedom songs' – who sang them, what they sang, when they sang them. Ali spent several hours on the internet searching, researching, and reading. She read again about the civil rights movement, read words from the songs of slaves. She was searching for hope and wanting to connect with those who believed freedom would come.

Ali sought to respond to Nandini with compassion and care through the writing of a freedom song that might serve to acknowledge the pain and the trauma and encourage and strengthen them both. Ali's poem 'Some day' contains words and phrases from the protest song and anthem of the civil rights movement: 'We shall overcome some day' and incorporates Martin Luther King's (1968) closing words from his 14 March speech at Grosse Pointe High School where he extolled 'no lie can live forever, surely truth crushed to earth will rise again?'

In a similar cycle to 'Aside'/'Align', the discourse and reverberations that pass between bodies and poems shifts between stories of trauma and despair to give voice to hope and belief. Our poetic methods and data, and the lyrics and words of others engage 'art as witness' (Agosin 1996: 13) and invite our 'witness consciousness' (Walsh & Bai 2015: 25) opening places to 'see ourselves in the other' (Allegranti & Wyatt 2014: 538-539).

Ali responds to Nandini's poem 'Freedom'

'Some day' by Ali Black

When will we realise our freedom songs?

We shall overcome: A buried anthem in my heart.

Its echo is so tiny, almost soundless: *We shall overcome...Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome, some day.*

Despair surrounds me.

Envelops my being, and my sense of hope.

'Some day' feels so far away.

Compromise constricts.

Injustice suffocates.

Ugliness and trauma assault my senses. *Bruises everywhere in the hurt air.*

Limbs, hearts, hopes, bodies, lives, countries, beauty, crushed!!

Politicians, social media, 'us' and 'them', fan the hate and greed.

We are dying and displaced—living things, mother earth, compassion, care.

'Some day' feels so far away.

Shall we live in peace, walk hand in hand to overcome?

Put our batons and prejudice away? Put our hands to our hearts? Love the earth?

Love each other?

Stop, my brother, my sister,

Stop. Listen to the cries of your soul.

Let tears move through your veins and strengthen you.

Faint not. We must not grow weary of doing good.

We must not grow weary of being kind.

We must believe

"No lie can live forever"

"Truth crushed to earth will rise again".

Rise my heart.

Faint not.

Fear not.

Yield not.

Some day—or, TODAY.

Poem three: Nandini calls to Ali

'In the Andamans' by Nandini Sahu

In the golden archipelago we reached in the morning, we were caught unawares
by the eerie wind and the moist sun both taking birth,
mid-wifed by the sea.

Androgyny was there in
the sea's exotic appearance; we had a well-grounded belief
in her ability to prevail; loud cries of hawkers,
street urchins and vendors in the small township.

The town looked bleak, downtrodden with fatigue.
The day passed in the sea and salt.

Port Blair. In the night the gentle breeze
and a honeyed moon.
The sea had entered my head.
I dreamed of a place where we would be peasants in the morning, parents in the
evening and poets in the night.
"And end up being failures in all three!"
The self-assuredly cynical edict as ever.

Port Blair. The islands beyond are rarely inhabited.
Nothing other than dense forests of mangrove.
Silence is the single feature of its topography.
The tender coconuts flooding with water, the sellers' gaze fixed
in the horizon,
the recent tsunami in their eyes. Flocks of herons heading across the water,
preparing for
the coming inundation as if it were a practiced family ritual.

The Cellular Jail—the Indian Bastille, a National Memorial
at the seacoast of the Atlanta Point of Port Blair.
Tough in truncated form,
a silent witness to the patriots
sent to Kaala Paani by the British.
The prison spoke—no Kaala Paani, no far-flung place is so remote
as to escape the flood of history. I revered to every brick that tells a heart-rendering
tale
of suffering and sacrifice.
With 696 prison cells and four gallows, no aperture to watch the blue or

count the stars. Martyrs like Veer Damodar Savarkar, visitors like Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose,
are made immortal here.
In every nook and cranny
of the desolate breathless rooms through closed spaces sans moonlight, the jail, by the
seaside
exposed to the afternoon blaze along long rows of prison cells, death roves.
Suddenly the light-and-sound rushes away,
hiding in my anxious eyes, lighting fire in the seas.

The Negrito and the Mongoloid tribes.
Didn't they pierce the earth with a plough share?
Don't they stand for innocence incarnated?
I look intently at the dense forests so full of their placid tales covered by sheets of
mystery.
The Jarawas, Onges, Sentinelese, Great Andamanese,
the Shompens, Nicobarese,
the last remnants of the race belong to an old world nourished by Mother Nature.
The War of Abardeen is an invisible spectator to their survival.
So near yet so far
among invisible barricades and walls, they grow up there
with festivities, weddings, fun and laughter away from our world of sophistication.
Their only endeavour
to keep us away from far off fighting tooth and nail.

There were arches for our welcome everywhere with garlands from nature. The Ross
Island, Viper Island,
Snake Island, Corbyn's Cove Beach, Marina Park, Gandhi Park, Anthropological
Museum, Zoological Survey of India Museum,
Science Centre, Long Island, Baratang Island, Chidiya Tapu and the Havelock Island.
Havelock. The pocketed fragrance of sea weeds and fish in the air.
We swayed in water wind-wild wagging
vanished in the veil of sacrosanct. In the morning the boatman's eyes suspended on
the western horizon like one in a barber's saloon.
The lavish resort, with a private beach, jhoolas and canes chairs sea-facing; the luxury
cruise, Makruzz,
air-conditioned, private cabins, watching the blue, humming a tune. The number of
days spent by the sea made me long to move away
more into the jungle.
There, mangroves and forests of tall coconut and supari trees sharpen the wind's
anxiety.
The calm breeze oscillated, clasping the
supari tops alone—
while the sky gazed on, wind

and mellow light smeared on its face.
Seafood outlandish, mouthwatering. Snorkeling, scuba-diving,
kayaking,
canoeing, speed-boat and the glass boat rides
made me rise above thoughts of hunger,
anger, cynicism
or the fear of the blue.
Looking at a dazzling variety of aquatic life forms—
from gargantuan sharks to microscopic shrimps—I realized
water makes everything beautiful, even venomous arboreal snakes
perching on corals and weeds.
Out of the blue blanket of water
a sense of wonder and awe oozed out
singing the song of emeralds, pearls and corals.
The sea was a mystery—bottomless and bottommost.
In the surf-spangled Radha Nagar beach of Havelock
the transparent water sang an ode to the west wind.
I was left with no more questions no more queries
no more quarrels and no accusations.
Life in its purest form,
beauty undiminished, revamped. Speaking to the fishermen
I guessed,
they know the sea and all her sulks, her mood swings. They are, perhaps, better than
cetologists who know all dispositions of Dugongs, Dolphins,
Whales and estuarine sharks.

This boundless sovereignty of the sea!
May this county of the sea upsurge and transcend infinitely! May all that is inert and
obsolete be sunk and entombed in water
and in the earnest corners of the heart.
May all that is novel take birth. May new songs be born.
Couplets, triplets, haikus, quadruplets or sonnets
in the grandeur of the Andamans! May my rhythm be the innumerable jazz of the
ocean.
The top-of-the-sea wild-dance! In waves on waves on waves. Oh, the bard in me! Be
the ocean,
meet and intermingle, the inverses manifold and elevated.
Oh, the Muses in me!
Be Samudra Gupta or the Ancient Mariner. Be the Queen Empress called the Blue!
The Queen Empress of all poets!

Reflections, resonances, and reverberations: call/response encounter three

Our third poetic encounter connected us most closely to the physical geography and topography of place. Yet even so we found ourselves continuing our musing on the nature of wo/man, connecting to spiritual concepts and engaging in theoretical and therapeutic quests. Still we found ourselves exploring the degradation of ecologies – familial, social, economic, political, national, environmental, and global – while focusing our hearts on following beauty, love, hope, and tenderness and leaning into compassion and care for all living beings, and for Mother Earth herself.

Nandini's poem, 'In the Andamans', speaks to a love of the sea, its beauty, magic, and mystery: 'Out of the blue blanket of water a sense of wonder and awe oozed out, singing the song of emeralds, pearls and corals'. Nandini's imagery evoked for Ali memories of her own experiences of 'blue blanket' sensations and smells, colours, and sounds. 'I realized water makes everything beautiful', Nandini writes. Ah yes, how this phrase reverberated and resonated. Such healing has the ocean brought to Ali across her lifetime – during childhood holidays with loved ones now deceased, and her now daily walks before workdays begin. Ali considered the everchanging colours, behaviours, and personalities she has observed 'within' and 'outside' and alongside the reliable ebb and flow, 'the utter entanglement with material and human others' and the 'individual and collective—and—political hope' the awareness that arose provided her (Alligranti & Wyatt 2014: 540).

Our poetic interactions engaged us in listening and witnessing 'not just with the human but with the material "other"' (Allegranti & Wyatt 2014: 539).

[L]istening to the other ... involves listening not just to oneself and the other, but to the boat, the river, the stars, the changing weather patterns, the waves, and their co-implication in each other. It listens to changing, emergent thought and reflects on it, is integrally co-implicated in it. (Davies 2010: 57)

Through our ethically engaged scholarship and contemplation we are listening to 'the breeze' and 'the honeyed moon', the 'dense forests of mangrove', 'tender coconuts flooding with water', 'herons', 'sea weeds', and 'fish'. We are listening to the 'turquoise patterns swirling, splashing, soothing, nourishing' to 'sea creatures celebrating', and to the 'sky and grasses' watching and witnessing with us.

We are engaged in processes of witnessing 'human others', of witnessing 'self', 'other', and 'experience' (Norris et al 2012). Ali pieced together the fragments of story Nandini scattered 'In the Andamans' and used the internet to further explore places and ideas illuminated in Nandini's poetry. Ali visited virtually the places Nandini spoke of and to which she had never travelled. Ali learned of histories and looked at photos and images that accompanied the stories she found. She read about Port Blair and the Cellular Jail. She engaged with the disciplinary concept brought to life through this Panopticon of seemingly constant surveillance and recalled what she had learned in her undergraduate studies about Foucault (1977) and his concepts of surveillance, power, and control. She connected to the oppressive supervision, the central tower

concept, the trauma for those who were made constantly visible, imprisoned, monitored, and exposed in the round prison. She wondered: how do we hold power to account? How do we ensure we make time to stop to listen, witness, and ask questions?

Nandini's poem evoked the contrast of the beauty of the natural world and the ugliness of mankind. Nandini's beautiful phrase, 'water makes everything beautiful', resounded again and again, '...water makes everything beautiful'. Ali thought of the symbolism water holds for mystics and believers – of birth, renewal, new life, and transformation. This symbol of regeneration called to Ali and came alive in her writing.

Ali responds to Nandini's poem 'In the Andamans'

'Atoll dreaming with you' by Ali Black

Your poetry of islands calls to me
awakening me again
to the beauty of nature,
the magic of the sea,
of the morning.

The sea, exotic, prevailing.
Supporting life, and flowing verse.
Your white-sand beaches encrusted with forest-lined edges.
Turquoise patterns swirling, splashing, soothing, nourishing.
Sea creatures celebrating.

Sanctuary.
Silence.
A topography of beauty and sustenance.
Tenderness abounding with the absence of man.

Man. Imprisoning hearts, exiling bodies and hope. Criminal.
The Cellular Jail. Solitary cells. Torture.
A wheel of hopelessness, exhaustion, and death.
Incarcerating dreams with a rhetoric of rehabilitation.
Constant surveillance, an architecture of oppression.
Docility, utility, the goal. Still.

How different the natures of Goddess and man?
The moon and stars illuminate our perversity.
And Mother Earth endures her wounding at our hand.
The sky and grasses watch and witness.

How can we open to the mystery?
Welcome wonder and awe?
Is the answer in our own cells? In the sea?
Water makes everything beautiful...

Water makes everything beautiful...
It sings a birthing song,
a sacred song of regeneration.
May we sing along with the waves—
the song of emeralds, pearls and corals.

May we open the closed spaces of our hearts to love,
expose our eyes to the light,
remember acts of desolation,
cleansing our bodies in the water,
and move towards new life.

Places of meaning and hope

This paper captures the early resonances and reverberations that first sounded as Nandini's poetic call was initiated, and as Ali employed a 'witness consciousness' (Walsh & Bai 2015: 25) and then responded. The notions of place that fed Ali's and Nandini's travels along poetic and cross-cultural terrain extended beyond geography into past-present-future, into mythology and history, and into inner lives and worlds.

Poetry as a 'connective aesthetic' (Gablik 1992: 2) supported exploration of complex, lived, spiritual, and heartfelt experiences as well as socially and ethically engaged scholarship and contemplation. Poetry enabled the creation and sharing of a tapestry of lives and relationships. The call and response process (Black & Loch 2014) invited spaces for listening and witnessing as text and phrases uttered by Nandini caught for Ali an 'angle', 'reflected something' back to her, opened her to another way of seeing or feeling that was different from what she had seen and felt in the moments before she had read Nandini's words (Walsh & Bai 2015:1).

Projects like this, which invite and rely on acts of 'calling and responding', offer reminders of the value of offering and receiving poetic gifts and gestures, 'narratives of the self', 'fragments of story', imagination, and 'memory' (Prosser 2009). Perhaps through such acts we can live with greater awareness of who we are, with greater awareness of another – human and more-than-human, recognise shared experiences and resonant emotions, and ultimately grow and live more wisely, compassionately, and sustainably. Perhaps it will be these kinds of poetic and aesthetic interactions and acts of witnessing and meaning-making that will remind us we are all connected and walk us safely toward hope and home?

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