

ASECS WOMEN'S CAUCUS 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION
INTERVIEW WITH DR. MONA NARAIN, TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
By Taylin Nelson

QUESTIONS RELATED TO YOUR RESEARCH

TN: Hello, Dr. Narain, it's such a pleasure to get the opportunity to talk with you in celebration of the Women's Caucus's 50th anniversary! I'd like to start off by asking what initially brought you to eighteenth-century studies, and what has delighted you most about this field over the years?

MN: It's my pleasure. I went to SUNY Stony Brook for my graduate degree. Most of my educational journey before the PhD was in India, where I lived. I moved for my PhD to the United States, so I would say that I had really powerful mentors in my Master's degree, like Vrinda Nabar. Then I came to Stony Brook and, you know, it started to seem to me that everything happened in the eighteenth century. It was also my colleagues working in eighteenth-century studies, we were working together, so I will name a few. I had other mentors as well, it's important to say that, but in eighteenth-century studies, I had Rose Zimbardo, a very well-known scholar of eighteenth-century theatre. I also had Clifford Siskin, also recognized as a well-known eighteenth-centuryist. Clifford and Rose were important mentors to me. And I would say my colleagues, two of whom are still in eighteenth-century studies, were indispensable: Devoney Looser, Greg Laugero, Mike Hill, and Anthony Vawer. I would say that mentoring is not just top down, it is also horizontal and it comes from the bottom up too. I continue to learn from early-career scholars in very important ways, as well as from people who helped ground me. When one arrives at one's dissertation topic, one remembers who was sitting there! So that's how I graduated towards the eighteenth century. I had a degree in Women's Studies from Stony Brook as well, so those were the two important confluences for me in charting my career.

TN: Were there particular mentors or texts that fundamentally shaped how you approach the field?

MN: I would say there were two theoretical scholars: Jürgen Habermas was very important to my thinking and, at that time of course, Michel Foucault was very important. Both of them write explicitly and extensively about the eighteenth century, and a little later I came to Aphra Behn by Rose. Cliff Siskin taught the Romantics and he was already talking about "systematicity" at that time. I will say that we had a Humanities Institute at Stony Brook and so I had the honor and privilege to meet several people as well as scholars who had been very important to thinking about eighteenth-century studies. Foundational scholars such as the philosopher Seyla Benhabib and the historian Kathleen Wilson were teaching. Now I did not study with them but I was able to hear talks by them, and other important people like Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva – all of that was a part of the privilege of studying where I did and having the kind of mentors and people around me that really helped shape my early career.

TN: That's so cool that you had access to such incredible thinkers! Okay, so this next question is a bit more specific, and hopes to get to the heart of your work: Your scholarship often attends to

the entanglements of aesthetics and empire. What does feminist critique make newly visible in those entanglements?

MN: History, philosophy, theory, and aesthetics are equally important to me. Some might emerge more strongly than others depending on the foci of the work, but I feel like in our field those four things are really important. But you know, I'm a scholar of the Global South, I come from the Global South, and for me it's very clear that gender is a key element to really highlighting experiences, histories, and ideas that are not always covered in those traditional historiographies, traditional literary criticisms, or traditional canons. It provides an element of being able to fill those aporias but also to do the kind of innovative work that is a necessity for scholars. Ultimately, it's about doing the work that feels closest to me. Now, I work in contemporary periods as well. If you see my record, I work on people like Salman Rushdie and such. I skip the nineteenth century completely, although I have great respect for nineteenth-century scholars. But for me, the interest is really about how the early modern period informs the present moment, and so that's how those two literary periods come together for me. And that's where gender is able to give us an understanding, a way of looking at things that are not readily visible with traditional masculinist approaches.

TN: This is really more of a personal addendum to that question, but I'm just really interested in how one balances all of these interests. As someone who studies natural history, I am balancing many fields. My dissertation is doing history, it's doing literature, it's thinking about the Atlantic, it's thinking about the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and it's thinking about what it means to be human, so it's also getting into some theory and philosophy. Natural history is so many things as well as an activity really, to go out and *do* natural history. I wonder if you have any advice on how to balance these kinds of fields and topics?

MN: Ideas never exist in isolation. They have to be historicized, they have to be theorized. I come from an English department, so that really is my main discipline, but we must immerse ourselves into multidisciplinary work to really understand literary histories and literature in a deeper context, and the same goes for historians and others, right? [chuckles] And so I think that's one of the strengths of literary studies, frankly – that we are deeply humanists in that sense. While other disciplines may or may not feel that way, we certainly do it in very deep ways. I mean, if somebody hears: “Oh, you need to historicize,” your eighteenth-century professors will say, “Well, duh!” How can you do eighteenth-century studies without understanding history, right? [laughing]

But I can understand how that can pose a challenge for early-career scholars in ways that seem hard to balance. It feels like you have to read the whole library. [laughing] So if that means that you have to historicize a little bit more than you're comfortable with, or you have to theorize a little bit more than you're comfortable with, do it. You know, I experienced that with my C18 talk the other night, I said to myself: “Okay, am I going to explain what [Thanatic Care](#) is.” And I came to the decision that I had to. But then, one has to make it relevant to the topic... So I'm just using that as an example.

TN: No, it's a good example as well. I mean, because I had no idea about Thanatic Care, so it was really informative and good that you did bring us all in on that. [chuckles] – I'm not trying to go off topic, but I feel like I'm learning a lot about structure from your writing as well.

MN: Oh, I would love to know what you think you get from it. Because you know what? When you tell me that, I will learn from you.

TN: [chuckles] Okay.

MN: It's never a one-way street, right? Because then what that helps me do is remember that point as I'm writing the next thing.

TN: Well, I found one thing really striking about your article "Oceanic Intimacies." It's a question that I've always struggled with, and it's probably a normal challenge for early-career scholars, but I have a tendency to feel I need to explain everything first and then get into the good stuff, the close readings, afterwards. But I like the way you interweave close reading and context. You give a one-sentence summary about your article, then you give some context, then you give a longer contextual moment – like, two sentences on each of the authors you'll discuss. And I think the repetition is really helpful for readers because then it's like, "Okay, I really know what she's talking about." You know? It seems like a simple thing, how to interweave narrative and context, but sometimes I feel like I have the brain of a social scientist, and I'm like: "I've got to do all of the context first so that you know exactly where I'm going." But I think there's a more artful way, and a way that's more pleasurable for the reader that helps them along too.

MN: You know, that's a constantly learned skill. It's writing...or rather, not writing deductively. [laughing]. And I will say the particular piece you are referencing, the "Oceanic Intimacies" piece, you know, we often encounter very finished pieces. And what we don't see is the drafting stage. This is really important for all of us to remember. I will just say that things don't look quite the way halfway through as they do at the end. And I'm so grateful to Gena Zuroski, editor of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, in helping me with that. I do think that editors are absolutely crucial to the field, and the work that they do is often unseen. And so I do want to identify Gena as somebody who has made my writing, particularly in that piece, better – and other editors, right?

TN: One hundred percent.

MN: And so I hear you. Thank you for sharing that.

TN: For a final question related to your work, I was wondering if you could maybe talk a little bit about your intellectual trajectory, like from the beginning of your research, and where your thinking has gone more recently?

MN: Yeah. Thank you for that. I think that I would describe myself as being taught in a very traditional, British-centered literature way in my undergraduate years, and then gradually I found the eighteenth century. I identified as a scholar who did gender studies and eighteenth-century literature. But as I thought more about it, I felt like my antecedents in the Global South gave me insights that were not generally in circulation. And I felt they really needed to be articulated. And

you notice I'm not necessarily using the word post-colonial; usually, whenever I teach or write or introduce myself, I put parentheses around the word "post" because there's that debate, right? I certainly use "post"-colonial methodologies but also more broadly speaking the Global South, because the kind of work that I do – which is really my major area of expertise – cannot be considered in isolation with other Global South locations, right? And so part of my trajectory now is to bring together these intersections and make them visible in my scholarship, in my teaching, and in my professional work.

TN: That's really exciting. I don't know if you know but with SlaveVoyages.org, the Indian Ocean tab has just been added! Daniel Domingues has been working really hard on doing the Indian Ocean and bringing in all that archive, because it's important for us not to just be looking at the Atlantic and the intra-American but in seeing these archives as deeply connected.

MN: Oh absolutely! In fact, just two years ago I did a graduate seminar on precisely that. That we cannot think about slavery in isolation to the Indian Ocean. And of course, there's great work, particularly by South Africans, on that, you know.

QUESTIONS RELATED TO GRADUATE AND EARLY CAREER SCHOLARS

TN: That's great! Well, thank you so much. That was a wonderful answer. I think maybe I'll move into the next section, which is surrounding graduate students and thinking about scholarly community. One of my very close friends and colleagues, Shruti Jain, was so excited that I was interviewing you. And I'm like: "I think it's not just the two of us. There are definitely other grads and ECRs who are really going to want to maybe hear some of your advice." So I was wondering if you would be open to offering advice that you would give to scholars who want to shape the field, not just contribute to it, and share your thoughts about some of the skills that you value most in graduate students and emerging scholars?

MN: I think that graduate students and early career scholars are really the future of the field. They are the ones that are already shaping it – with your dissertations and with your initial publications. That's where I would say a great deal of the energy is, right? And so it's so exciting to see your work. For me, both as an editor of a journal and a book series as well, my go-to panels are always the ones where graduate scholars and early-career scholars are presenting, because that's where I learn from you about what is exciting, what is new. And so I think that the energy that is part of your excitement or Shruti's excitement is vital to the field now and shaping the future of the field. I think that there needs to be, and there is, this energy that's far better than it was twenty-five years ago. There needs to be an increasing focus on nurturing that energy, on supporting that energy, and one of the ways that I think it can be done is through the task of editing.

And Gena and I have talked about this extensively. There are other editors who have been in conversation about this too, but I really believe in a feminist philosophy of editing. And that's because, how does your work, Taylin's work, reach a broader public? It's through the intermediary of editing and publishing, is it not? And then if I don't support that work, it gets adumbrated. It never reaches the public, or you get so discouraged. I think almost everybody has a story, hopefully not your generation, of being really, really stung and really disillusioned by horrific reviews, which are, I can tell you, [chuckles] I have received those myself...And they've

stopped me in the track for years, right? And so it is that kind of support that I think is necessary. But here's one piece of advice that I would really share with early-career scholars, is that when you get harsh criticism of your work it is very important to sit with it, but then find whatever way works for you to move on, because there is no work that is not worthy of sharing and building on. You know, it's just that you haven't found the right form yet. Or the right outlet for it..

TN: Wow. Okay, yeah, that is really incredibly helpful. Thank you so much, I think this will mean a lot for folks to hear.

MD: Isn't it? I mean, knowledge in itself is deeply valuable. Don't let somebody else tell you that this is stupid or not worthy. Take their criticism, try to make it better, and make it in a form that you think will be valuable and reach readers better, but don't let anybody tell you that it's not worthy.

TN: Thank you. That was such a beautiful response. I'm wondering if you have any advice on how we might sustain intellectual community amid increasing precarity in the humanities?

MD: Yeah. I think the C18 seminars are a wonderful example of that. And I do think that the in-person ones are very valuable, but the Zoom ones also; they both have their pros and cons, right? And a balance, like the organizers of the Columbia C18 Seminar have accomplished; Carrie Shanafelt is a wonderful human being and a wonderful scholar, and what really needs to be done is exactly what she, Stephanie Hershnow, Ben Weisgall, and Kathleen Lubey, have done, which is make it an inviting space, a space that is very productive to deep conversations, but never negatively attacking, [chuckles] right? And so I loved the 45-minute Q&A where people asked questions, but none of them felt in any way negative, right? And that's exactly the atmosphere that organizers have to inculcate. And so I think that that is very important, but I also believe that this was the question that Kaushik Tekur, who's brilliant, asked immediately: "Do you think archival work is Thanatic Care?" And I think that is vital. What you're doing in Barbados is vital, Taylin.

TN: Thank you! And not just me, but everyone here. There's so many people at the R.O.A.D programme and the Barbados Museum & Historical Society working to digitize the nation's archives and make this happen.

MN: Absolutely, yes. But the kind of recording, recuperating, excavating you are doing is absolutely essential to sustaining our field and collaboration. Because think about it: once you bring out that data, think about how wonderfully you have trained people in palaeography and data extraction. And they will continue to use that, and they will teach other people, right? So I do think that the point that I was making about pedagogy and archives is part of the collaboration and sustenance our field continues to need. That should not be affected by what people on the outside are saying. We should just continue to do our work to the best of our abilities.

TN: Absolutely. One of the things I was so struck by with Kaushik's question and your response was not only that reading, transcribing, and digitizing the archive is an act of Thanatic Care, but also that this is now more than ever important work because of the pervading feeling of disinformation and the very real misinformation circulating in the worlds in which we're living.

MN: Yes, and erasure, right? If it cannot happen in the United States, it can happen elsewhere. Where we place our work matters.

QUESTIONS RELATED TO THE FIELD'S FUTURE

TN: Is there anything, any field or direction or ideas, that you think are maybe underexplored or maybe questions that you're still thinking about that you'd really like to see addressed more in the field?

MN: You know, I work in such diverse areas, [chuckles]. So I'm working on two pieces right now. One I shared with you. And then there's a work on Margaret Cavendish that I'm doing right now. I'm very interested in questions of gender and space, and continue to be so. I do think that eighteenth-century studies is such a vital period, precisely going back to my very first answer: everything seems to be happening then. Both good and bad, right? [chuckles]. And those global cross-cultural encounters that start happening in great measure, have the ability to animate this field in ways that I am certain will continue to keep it very vital. I do think also that eighteenth-century studies tends to be far more interdisciplinary than many other fields.

TN: I know, that's what struck me about the eighteenth century. I was like, "Wow, it's so much more diverse and interesting and unsettled." It's not quite as, you know, strict and as things become later on.

MN: Yeah. Yeah. So I think that that's the plurality of eighteenth century studies – its vital heart. And as long as we continue to work in plural ways, I think it will remain very, very, very urgent, very, very interesting, and with so much more to be discovered and said.

QUESTIONS RELATED TO THE WOMEN'S CAUCUS

TN: Thank you. Now I want to move into the final section of questions. I actually don't know much about the Women's Caucus or its history, really. I've attended a luncheon or two, but I'd love to hear about your experience of it, maybe how it's changed over time. Have there been any changes in feminist and inclusive scholarship that make you really optimistic about the future of the field?

MN: So I'll just say that the Women's Caucus has always been at the forefront of good work in eighteenth-century studies. It's been a welcoming space for many. And there are some real stalwarts in the field who, I would call them second and third generation feminists, who really cleared the path for so many of us to follow. Two of them are in the new *ECS* commemorative issue – Sue Lanser and Ruth Perry. But I would also mention Jocelyn Harris and others. And then a whole second and third generation of people, of women, and of Women's Caucus scholars, who have been chairs of the Caucus, right? And so one of the things to think about when it comes to inclusivity is how large the caucus is. I think it's the largest caucus in ASECS. For example, the luncheon is almost always sold out of tickets! [laughing]. That tells you about its importance, its inclusivity, and its embrace of different people, right? And it's always worked in ways that have not been uni-focused. So the Women's Caucus always represents three different aspects of our work: research, professional, and teaching, you know? So, the tri-focus,

often woven together, has been inclusive in ways that our field is often not. And so, in that sense, the Women's Caucus history, as well as its form, represents the best of what we do in our profession, right? And actually seeks to be inclusive. Speaking of building on previous work, the Women's Caucus has really evolved, for example, digitally, [laughing] right? We have some really fantastic people who do that kind of work. So, you know, we used to fill out those forms, and actually, I was the caucus co-chair when that first turn happened, and it was by chance because the room's Wi-Fi would not allow us to work in a way and the construction of the room would not allow the microphone to reach people.

TN: Oh, gosh!

MN: And so we said, "Okay, well, let's just do this on the internet!" and it was actually Kirsten Saxton and Emily Kugler. I hope you'll put that down. I really want to note their leadership that sort of moved the Women's Caucus to a more digital format and toward even more inclusivity – really wonderful trustees who have gone on to do excellent work. For me, my proudest moment with the Women's Caucus was helping set up the Intersectional Prize, and helping endow it. I'm actually also very proud of my university TCU and thankful to all of the other donors who have supported that endowment. But it represents, I think, one of the forward-looking ways that the Women's Caucus really has been shining the light on how to move forward with our work. And the *ECS* commemorative issue really represents the work of the Women's Caucus. I so enjoyed working with Nicole Aljoe and Francesca Luigia Savoia – all of us from three very different backgrounds but intensely and happily collaborative. And so that embrace of diverse viewpoints, of diverse racializations, of diverse work, is one of the powerful ways that the Women's Caucus has worked. We often invite people from the Race and Empire Caucus to judge the Intersectional Prize. And so the Women's Caucus is never an exclusive entity. It's always been an inclusive entity, and that's why I'm so honored and proud to be a member and to work with it.

FINAL QUESTION

TN: That was so wonderful. Thank you. I'm sure this is going to make so many people feel really appreciated and proud alongside you. I'll just ask the final question and then let you go because, yes, it's almost been an hour! Mona, if you could distil one piece of wisdom drawn from both your scholarship and your life in the academy, what would you most want to share with the ASECS community today?

MN: I'll say two things. For early-career scholars, a single kind of career trajectory is not the only one to make meaningful contributions. All kinds of career trajectories do that, and I certainly, from time to time, had a circuitous or wobbly one. But, you know, that's what makes me who I am. And, it makes me unique. And second, it's important to value different kinds of work. That's what I would say: embracing different trajectories, different kinds of work, and valuing different kinds of work is vital to keeping eighteenth-century studies the energetic field that it is.