

Mentoring and Being Mentored: South Asian Women Writers

Sharanpal Ruprai and Sheniz Janmohamed
in Conversation

We first want to acknowledge the land that we are occupying as we write this: Sharanpal Ruprai is located on the traditional territory of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation; and Sheniz Janmohamed is located on the territory of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Anishinaabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples, the closest neighbour being the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation. We offer our gratitude and love to all the lands that have supported our living and well-being.

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This paper presents a discussion between us, two South Asian Canadian writers who are passionate about mentoring the next wave of writers. The idea started with a phone call in the summer of 2017 between Sharanpal Ruprai, a poet and Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Winnipeg, and Sheniz Janmohamed, a poet, artist educator, and land artist based in Toronto. That initial phone call turned into an ongoing series of conversations about race and CanLit, South Asian feminism and friendship. We realized that the conversations go well beyond the two of us and so thought it would be

useful to share with others here. One of the main topics that kept coming up in our discussion was about mentorship and how often we feel, as South Asian women of colour in Canadian literature (CanLit), a lack of support. Our structural impediments were/are time, physical location, and financial constraints. Our conversation here addresses our own need for mentorship across genres and within various South Asian communities. Our late-night phone calls were scratching the surface of creating new works of art and connection but also mentorship of artistic practice. After some self-reflection and research, we realized that the conversation format itself was a form of mentorship and has a long tradition within South Asian Canadian women's work and anti-racism work.

Did you read any literature by South Asian women that pointed you in the direction of being an artist? The record of our dialogue that follows opens with our reflections on reading literature by South Asian writers and how those experiences influenced our paths toward becoming artists.

Sharanpal Ruprai: The literature that I first read that pointed me in the direction of art/creative writing was *Shakti's Words: An Anthology of South Asian Canadian Women's Poetry*, edited by Diane McGifford and Judith Kearns. The South Asian women in that collection opened the door for me to start thinking about writing and seeing myself as an artist. Himani Bannerji's

“Paki Go Home”—I remember reading it and thinking, you could create art out of this hate and use the hateful words against themselves. Recently, I reread Lakshmi Gill’s “Immigrant Always,” a tiny poem that is for me loaded with meaning. I’m sure that both these works are subconsciously at work in my own creative practice. At the time—that is, in the 1990s—it seemed that there were many South Asian writers across the Prairies but really it was one or two people in each province; this was my starting point into South Asian Canadian literature written in English. It was not until I saw and heard Kuldip Gill read from her collection, *Dharma Rasa*, that I started thinking of myself as a writer. I needed to see and hear her reading and I think that is why representation at readings/panels/institutions is critical. I’m not sure I would have been a writer if I had not seen Kuldip Gill read that day; I was in a writing group by then and I was lucky enough to have a writing group that made sure I knew about the writing scene in Winnipeg. Shout out to Tanis MacDonald!

Sheniz Janmohamed: The pivotal texts for me were the following: *The Body of My Garden* by Rishma Dunlop, *Women Dancing on Rooftops* by Yasmin Ladha, *Oppositional Aesthetics* by Arun Mukherjee, *Father Tongue* by Danielle Lagah, and poems by Kamala Surayya (formerly Kamala Das). These South Asian women’s voices coaxed me into understanding my own location as a South Asian writer on Turtle Island, and they were my first unofficial mentors. I had managed to find the late Rishma Dunlop’s email address while I was reading her work in my undergrad, and she was kind enough to oblige me in meeting for a coffee. She was the first South Asian woman who helped me familiarize myself with the literary scene in Toronto. She also wrote a reference letter for my Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing at

University of Guelph application. I ended up getting into the program, and was later mentored by the late Kuldip Gill.

Ruprai: Conversation between women of colour is transformative in terms of mentorship. Here I am thinking about written conversation between Louise Saldanha and Aruna Srivastava in *Rungh: A South Asian Quarterly of Culture, Comment and Criticism* in the *Antiracism* issue, which dates to the mid-nineties, and the conversation between Sharron Proulx-Turner and Sanhita Brahmacharie, “A Braided Silken Cord: Aboriginal Women and Women of Colour Working Together,” in the same issue. These conversations have been ways of mentorship that happen, and in a way that is what you and I are doing right now. These women of colour model for us how to engage with each other by having conversations and supporting each other. These intergenerational discussions fuel mentorship. Aruna Srivastava, Louise Saldanha, and Sharron Proulx-Turner are all women who in one way or another have fuelled my academic career and my creative work, but more importantly, have shown me how to be a mentor and how to be mentored. I remember sending Aruna Srivastava an email, it would have been maybe 2002, telling her that I enjoyed her work in *Returning the Gaze: Essays on Racism, Feminism and Politics*, and if I was ever in Calgary I would love to meet her. At the time, this seemed like a bold move and I am glad I did it because Aruna has been a wonderful mentor within the academic setting. One of the first articles of mentorship I read was from *Returning the Gaze*, edited by Himani Bannerji. The essays in that collection grounded not only my creative work but also my reading and thinking about women of colour writers within Canada. In the article “A Jewel in the Frown: Striking Accord Between India/n Feminists,” Anita Sheth and Amita Handa have a conversation

about mentorship and friendship, and they address how connections between women of colour can be tense because of unconscious “Otherness.” What is striking about this particular conversation is the way both Sheth and Handa are honest about how they have come to consciousness about their personal frameworks of identity and the ways in which they learn together. This collection of personal critical/creative narratives and essays is the foundation for South Asian mentorship within Canadian literature. When we begin to speak to each other directly with a sense of understanding and how we understand our locations, we begin to piece together how structural impediments, such as racism, have impacted and affected our understanding of each other, our creative/academic work.

As we discuss the structural impediments of mentorship, what occurs to me is that as South Asian women of colour within CanLit we still have a long way to go. What is needed is not only mentorship but also clearer pathways towards each other and some leadership skills/training along the way.

Janmohamed: I was mentored by Kuldip Gill in the first summer of my MFA program at the University of Guelph-Humber for a short manuscript project that consisted of me writing English ghazals. We only met once because of the nature of the mentorship program and the fact we lived in different provinces. The initial meeting we had, over lunch, was one of the most memorable and transformative experiences in my writing career. Kuldip was practical and embodied in her approach, pulling out a piece of paper and brainstorming refrains with me. She demonstrated techniques for me to use in writing my collection of ghazals, and also insisted I researched and wrote an academic paper on the ghazal form. I feel that this was her way of protecting me—ensuring that I understood the tradition I was writing in so I could

respectfully and skilfully break the rules when the work required me to.

Ruprai: Shenz, is mentorship within academia more or less valuable to your practice now?

Janmohamed: Less so. I operate outside of academia, and therefore I no longer have access to the kind of mentors I used to when I was in my early twenties. It is more challenging to find literary mentors outside of academia, particularly for women of colour. While I feel that there are more WOC writing and publishing, there are only a few established women writers of colour who have the time, resources, and funds to support and nurture emerging WOC writers. While there are mentorship programs available, they often require participants to pay, and thereby create economic barriers for women of colour writers who don't have the financial means to access those spaces. I also find that while there are spaces being developed for new generation WOC writers, there are not as many for mid-career writers or writers who are new to the craft but are in higher age brackets than new generation writers. The question is, where do they go? Who do they look to? It's just as vital for mid-career writers to have mentors, particularly when there are more expectations being placed on them to mentor and nurture upcoming generations of writers.

Ruprai: Yes, this is a common issue that has been brought up not just at conferences but at readings events, CanLit gatherings. Those rare moments when we do gather at events, such as the Canadian Writers' Summit this past June (2018) or at various writers' festivals across the country, we rarely get a chance to sit with each other and discuss our work, discuss support, or even talk about the ways in which we can build a network together. The intergenerational aspect of this is important because there has been a

lot of anti-racism work done within CanLit but new people coming into CanLit may not know of the past work that has been done. Yes, technology and social media are great things, but we need time and a way to build up trust, honesty, and connections with each other. It is difficult to do this under the gaze of white CanLit structures. There is a lot of emotional healing and learning that happens behind closed doors, over the phone, or even on Twitter. But something happens at these gatherings. We need to slow down the process and really talk to each other about what we need.

Janmohamed: Exactly. In listening to the younger women of colour writers speak at our roundtable at the Canadian Writers' Summit, some of them had expressed how their peers would've liked to have attended but were unable to due to economic barriers—something that was expressed amongst the older, mid-career WOC writers as well. It's important for programming to be accessible otherwise we are having these conversations in silos. In truth, some of us have the challenge of operating in two spaces: the CanLit space and the community space. How do we effect meaningful change in both spaces, while at the same time having the time and resources to write, and write well?

Ruprai: Recently, at two different events, I have been calling upon women of colour writers to support younger WOC writers. Not just by reading each other's work or connecting with each other via social media but by asking women of colour writers to be present on panels or meet with writers face to face. When people are in the same room with each other magic happens; people begin to see each other and know each other in a professional and personal manner. In October 2017, I asked Hiromi Goto to be on a plenary panel with Rosanna Deerchild, Gwen Benaway, and moderated

by Jenny Heijun Wills, as part of the "Call to Conversation: Two Spirit & Queer People of Colour Call to Conversation with LGBT & Allies" conference held at the University of Winnipeg. Goto said one way she claimed her identity was by "writing back," and we need those literary representations of ourselves and our lives as a way of mentorship and as a way of leadership. We need more roundtable events or workshops rather than panels for mentoring and leadership building. The idea that Goto brought up, that idea of "writing back," brings up for me notions of postcoloniality and the famous phrase by Salman Rushdie, "the Empire writes back to the Centre." But in this context Goto was saying, as a queer writer of colour, she was taking back her voice and her representation of her experience and herself.

Janmohamed: Agreed. We also need to understand that there are numerous conversations happening among us, and that it is vital to hold spaces for experiences and narratives of women of colour who don't reflect our own narratives. While wider conversations are necessary to understand how we can be allies within CanLit, we also have to know when to step out of conversations and give space and respect by listening. For example, Toronto-based writer and educator Whitney French runs Writing While Black, a space for writers who identify as Black. Sakinah Hasib and Timaj Garad have established a writing series for Muslimah women in the GTA. These spaces are *necessary*, and we need to, as South Asian WOC, support these spaces as allies.

Ruprai: Yes! I know of spaces on the page rather than in person. In an odd way I feel like I am back at the beginning of my career in Winnipeg. I am still having to create community here for writing; I had a ray of hope that the community might have blossomed but it seems we are still organizing and gathering.

Janmohamed: Through my training as an Artist-Mentor through the Royal Conservatory's Learning Through the Arts program, I was able to work with mentors in the field of arts education. One of the things they encouraged us to remember is to call upon the right person for the task. If you know you're not the right fit for a mentee, don't take up that space. Find the right person for them. Most of the models of mentorship I have learned have come from firsthand experience—observing and witnessing how I have been mentored, and how my peers have been mentored. For me, it's less so about reading articles and more so about lived experience and listening for what people need.

Ruprai: We have talked about various mentorships at various stages in an artist's career. There seems to be a lot out there for writers without books or emerging writers with one to four books. It occurred to me that communities might want to address how to define youth or emerging writers, or even established writers or writers who have been within the writing community for years. When younger South Asian women of colour writers ask to be read by or mentored by South Asian WOC writers, what are the chances of finding someone who has the capacity to mentor?

Janmohamed: I think it's important to ask some foundational questions here: What makes a mentorship meaningful? What makes one a good mentor? A suitable mentor? What is an appropriate area to mentor someone in? We talk about mentorship but also what we need to address is *how* to mentor, and perhaps we need spaces for women of colour mentors-to-be in and outside of CanLit to learn how to be effective mentors, editors, and educators so we're not unintentionally creating a carbon copy version of our literary work in someone else.

I am currently mentoring a young South Asian poet whom I met through a workshop

I facilitated in one of her undergrad classes. We met again at the Festival of Literary Diversity, and then she tapped my shoulder through an email to ask if I'd be willing to mentor her. I think it is important to make it known to younger writers that you are willing to mentor and adaptable to their needs as mentees. We discussed reasonable rates for both of us. On one hand, I want to make sure that she has access to the mentorship she needs within a budget that suits her, and on the other hand, I have to value my time. It's a tough balance especially when women of colour are constantly giving away our time, energy, and resources to ensuring that the writers we are mentoring have the support that we needed when we were starting out. It's important, however, to also know our worth so we don't continue the cycle of being underpaid and overworked—thereby ensuring our mentees are paid well in the future.

Ruprai: I have a few mentors in academic circles, for example, Dr. Aruna Srivastava at the University of Calgary, but within the arts communities on the prairies it has been difficult to find South Asian or other women of colour mentors. Clarise Foster asked me to be on the board for *CV2* in Winnipeg in the early 2000s and I have worked on and off at the journal for the last few years. What strikes me is that I was learning what it meant to be on an arts board. I was, I think, the youngest person on the *CV2* board at the time and I had a lot of energy to take on that learning, but she also provided me with mentorship and showed me how to navigate the creative writing scene. For me I always think back to the fact that I learned about Canadian literature through academic classes but also by going to reading events and reading journals and poetry magazines; but I learned about the people, mostly women, doing the work on the ground and not getting paid.

Janmohamed: I see more mentorships that focus on craft than mentorships that focus on navigating the industry, understanding our role and privilege as writers in the political/geographical context in addition to craft. We need to expand our responsibilities beyond the page if we truly want to nurture and also prevent our mentees from appropriating or making assumptions in their work.

Ruprai: Agreed. How do we protect our mentees if we have our own blinders on? It is something that we have to actively work at. It takes a lot of time and energy to do this work.

Janmohamed: This is why we need mentors and peers to call us out. I think we have to better prepare our mentees to understand the consequences of their writing, not just the craft of it. In order to do that, we have to address it within our own writing practice. Are we calling out our internalized racism? Are we addressing anti-Black racism within our communities? Are we acknowledging how we occupy spaces of privilege in CanLit? Are we addressing how we break or uphold traditions or confirmation bias in our writing?

Ruprai: Addressing our own internalized racism takes a lot of patience and at some point, you almost need a mentor/teacher to unpack this not just in your own writing but also in daily life. As you and I both know, a lot of South Asian communities have embedded culturally-specific racism within language, for example, which often means anti-Black and anti-Indigenous. As someone who has not attended creative writing classes but has led workshops and classes, I try to create an atmosphere of collaboration and learning together, and work through a decolonizing lens.

Janmohamed: Mentorships that are short-lived for the purpose of a course, class, or manuscript residency are valuable, but they do not foster long-term relationships

with mentors and mentees. The evolution of the writing process is lost or stagnated because there is no guidance after publication or completion of a manuscript. This is something I want to actively change. It also speaks to the need to have more mentors across generations.

Ruprai: That is a great point. I think it's been difficult to find people who can mentor not just on the page but also through the process of getting published and putting together a manuscript. It seems to me that creative writing classes have allowed for mentorship though not necessarily with the class instructor but with peers within the class. In terms of addressing systemic change I think we did some of that work with the roundtable discussion at the Canadian Writers' Summit this past summer. I am focused on BIPOC and 2S writers but again these spaces need to be created and maintained until they become engrained in the writing communities. I am starting creative writing workshops for BIPOC emerging writers in order to develop a network on the prairies.

Janmohamed: I think there are a handful of things we can do as South Asian women mentoring in CanLit.

One: Be better allies, and that means addressing racism and bias in our own work and the work of our peers, acknowledging who is missing from our conversations, and asking how we can continue to build meaningful dialogue and relationships.

Two: Find ways of doubling mentorship opportunities for ourselves and others—whether it is through traditional models (i.e. institutions or expanding existing programs) or looking at non-traditional models of funding, like crowdfunding. This might also require more conversations with allies and stakeholders in CanLit, to start to shake off the systemic issues that create barriers of access.

Three: Perhaps develop our own collectives within the cities we live and create in, so that we can have these conversations across disciplines.

Four: Be more willing to commit to non-traditional models of mentorship that require more than advice on craft, but advice on how to live, work, and navigate the world as South Asian writers in and on occupied land.

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We recognize and acknowledge our privilege in having this conversation as two women of South Asian heritage, and that our perspectives are our own. This paper is the beginnings of deeper work that needs to be done within our communities and in collaboration with South Asian writers living and working on Turtle Island. In order for these changes to truly take effect, we cannot do this in a silo and it requires systemic change to take place within CanLit communities. It's been exciting to research the shared texts and people we have in common but when we look around at CanLit events there is still a lack of diversity, inclusivity, and mentorship.¹ One way to address this is to start the conversation and do what our unofficial mentors did, which was to listen, reflect, and share in the un/learning.

NOTE

- 1 We wrote this paper in a response to the call for papers for a special issue of *Canadian Literature* on diversity and inclusivity. We understand that the editors did not receive enough submissions to make an issue; this of course is part of the discussion about CanLit and diversity.

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