

May 2023

Another Appalachia: Neema Avashia in Conversation with Puspa Damai

Neema B. Avashia

Puspa Damai

Marshall University, Huntington, WV

Follow this and additional works at: <https://mds.marshall.edu/criticalhumanities>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Avashia, Neema B., and Puspa Damai. "Another Appalachia: Neema Avashia in Conversation with Puspa Damai." *Critical Humanities* 1, 2 (2023). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33470/2836-3140.1023>

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by Marshall Digital Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Critical Humanities* by an authorized editor of Marshall Digital Scholar. For more information, please contact beachgr@marshall.edu.

Another Appalachia: Neema Avashia in Conversation with Puspa Damai

Introduction

Neema Avashia is the author of a critically acclaimed memoir, *Another Appalachia: Coming Up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place* (West Virginia University Press, 2022). Avashia was born and raised in the Kanawha Valley in West Virginia, where her parents arrived in the early 1970s from India. Her father worked as a physician for the chemical company Union Carbide in South Charleston. Avashia has been teaching in the Boston Public Schools in Dorchester Massachusetts, since 2002.

Though Avashia admits that she has lived out of the state more, her answer to the question “Where are you from?” is invariably “*from West Virginia.*” In the Spring of 2023, she visited Marshall University (where her memoir had been selected as required reading for Spring 2023 by the Higher Learning Commission’s Quality Initiative) to deliver the AE Stringer Visiting Writers lecture.

In this interview, Neema Avashia talked with Puspa Damai on a range of topics, including her childhood in West Virginia, her identity as a queer Indolachian writer, and her memoir *Another Appalachia*.

Could you share with us the story behind your new memoir *Another Appalachia: Coming up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place*? What inspired you to write this book? What made you publish it? What kind of challenges did you face in the process of bringing it out?

For a long time, I thought my experience of growing up in Appalachia was simply an anomaly—something I would always have to explain about myself when people asked me where I was from. But after watching the way in which people gravitated towards *Hillbilly Elegy* after its publication, and used it as a kind of “explainer” for Appalachia, I realized that there is power in telling the anomalous story. That anomalies disrupt stereotypes. That my anomalous existence laid on the page might inject nuance into a discourse that otherwise rendered Appalachia and its people flat. The challenge is that many mainstream media sources are deeply invested in stereotyped renderings of Appalachia (Netflix and Harper both profited tremendously off Vance’s story, as did Vance himself), so it was hard to find a big publisher interested in my stereotype-busting story. I got a lot of responses that were something to the effect of, “This is beautifully written, but we can’t sell

it.” In effect saying, stereotype sells; nuance doesn’t. I ultimately realized that the press best suited to publish my story was the press that didn’t buy Vance’s narrative from the outset. That press was West Virginia University Press, which published *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elegy* shortly after Vance’s book came out. And their steadfast support of the book has only served to bear out my belief that publishing at home was the best way to get this story into the world.

There is a long history of women and minority authors writing autobiographical narratives. Another Appalachia joins that illustrious group of texts such as Simone de Beauvoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Angela Davis’ *An Autobiography*, Lillian Hellman’s *An Unfinished Woman*, Maya Angelou’s *I know Why the Cage Bird Sings*, and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. To what extent is the genre a conscious choice on your part to continue this legacy of women telling their own stories, writing themselves into history?

I grew up reading voraciously—I read every book in the children’s section at the Cross Lanes Library, most more than once. But I never saw myself reflected in any of the books that I read. I would see glimmers of self sometimes, in Jo March or Anne Shirley or Encyclopedia Brown, but the fullness of myself, with all of my intersecting identities, never showed up on the pages of a book. I was in my late 30s before I read a book that even got close. Mira Jacob’s graphic memoir, *Good Talk*, reflected back to both my Desi-ness and my queerness, as well as the complexities of

being in an interracial relationship, but even that book did not hold my Appalachian identity. And in my life, I often felt like I could find spaces where one or two parts of my identity would be reflected, but never all of the parts. So for me, writing was a way of not just writing myself into history, but actually writing myself into myself. Before I wrote my book, there was no space where the queer, Desi, and Appalachian parts of me were all held at the same time. In writing the book, I created that space, both for myself, and for the queer, Desi, and Appalachian readers who will come after me. And I had to do that in non-fiction, because I wanted it to be *real* to readers in a way that couldn’t be dismissed as invention. Like the authors you mentioned above, it is an incontrovertible assertion of our existence.

Appalachia is sometimes characterized as “the other America.” How does your book complement, complicate and contest this depiction? How should one approach otherness within Appalachia?

I struggle with that characterization of Appalachia, as it pushes the region to the margins. I’d argue that Appalachia is, in fact, the core of America. Which is to say, if you want to understand what is happening in America—its pain, its struggles, its complexities, and also, its potential for liberation—look at Appalachia. In writing my book, my goal was to make it so that a non-Appalachian reader would not be able to “other” Appalachia and its people again. Because I had taken them by the hand, made them drive on our roads, made them sit on porches with my neighbors, forced them to sit inside my relationships

with people and place, they would be too proximate to participate in marginalizing Appalachia. They would know that Appalachian people are full of the same complexity as people anywhere else, and deserving of the same level of nuance. And while the sheer numbers might be smaller, every community that exists in America also exists in Appalachia, be it Black folks, LGBTQ+ folks, or immigrants from all over the world. Which is to say, people in Appalachia also have to be vocal in rejecting the homogeneity narrative being applied to them.

Your memoir reads like a long love letter to Appalachia – to its kind and proud people, to its ‘wild and wonderful’ landscape. Of all the emotional and cultural ties that bind you to Appalachia, which ones make you feel you are, to recall your formulation, of this place?

The answer to this question has really shifted over time. When I was younger, coming back to Appalachia for Navratri, to be immersed in my Indolachian community, really felt like my strongest tie to home. But as I’ve gotten older, and many of the members of that community have moved away to be closer to their children, I’ve felt that tie become more tenuous. And there was a period of time during which I really felt like my relationship with Appalachia had become more a construct in my mind that something physically manifested in the place. But since I began writing, I’ve found a really incredible home with Appalachian writers at the Hindman Settlement School in eastern Kentucky, and with Appalachian activists in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky. The welcome I’ve found in these

spaces, the way in which the people in these spaces reflect back parts of myself to me, has created a whole new sense of belonging for me.

One of the surprising entryways to Appalachia that your book has discovered is transnationalism illustrated primarily by your family’s intertwined history with Union Carbide Corporation – your father was an employee of the Corporation and was sent to Bhopal as “the Company man” after the 1984 gas leak disaster that claimed thousands of lives – but also by your discussion of immigrants and a few scattered references to settler colonialism in the region. What political and intellectual gains would we make by combining coal and chemicals, corporate capitalism and colonialism, and regionalism and transnationalism in our analysis and understanding of Appalachia?

I think any opportunities we have to add layers of complexity to how we understand Appalachia, we should take. Coal and chemicals are deeply connected in the history of Appalachia. The plants along the Kanawha River were fired by coal mined further south. Many times, the children of miners became chemical plant employees when they grew up. And the children of folks who worked in both industries carry a profound understanding of what it means to live in a place where the work putting food on your table, and a roof over your head, is also poisoning the air and land and water. If we were to apply lenses of colonialism and capitalism to extractive industries in Appalachia, how would that help us to build solidarity between Appalachia and other parts of the world where the same has

been done? How might that solidarity also lead us to different solutions to our region's challenges?

The West Virginia Senate has recently reintroduced the so-called Anti-Racism Bill, which would ban discussions of race in public schools. In your memoir, you fearlessly assert the necessity to combat and contest racism without failing to express your love for Appalachia. In these fraught legal and political circumstances, how do you think we should approach and engage productively and effectively with the subject of race and ethnic identity both in the classroom and outside?

I'm a teacher, so I think about this question from my position as an educator. In that role, my responsibility is to do three things: 1) Affirm students' identities 2) Teach them relevant skills and content, and 3) Prepare them to live and work in the world. Each of those aims requires me to make learning about race and ethnicity a central part of what we do in our classrooms. Because I teach students who come from a range of backgrounds. Because we need to learn the full range of history. And because our young people are going to live in a world with people who come from a range of backgrounds, and need to build authentic and meaningful relationships with one another. When we avoid these discussions, what we ultimately are doing is failing to prepare children for the world we live in. And to be clear: when I was attending West Virginia schools, there was no discussion of race or ethnicity. The only book I ever read for class by an author of color was one I chose during my senior year of high school, and that was

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. We didn't learn about the history of interracial solidarity in the Battle of Blair Mountain. We didn't study the histories of indigenous groups in West Virginia. We didn't learn about Black West Virginians. And we didn't talk about West Virginia's long history of immigration. This ignorance did not serve me when I left West Virginia; it failed me. It made me feel uneducated and unprepared to navigate diverse contexts, and to speak with knowledge about the place that I was from. When adults bury their heads in the sand, and demand that young people do the same, they aren't doing it in the service of young people; they are doing it to assuage their own discomfort. And as long as we keep avoiding these conversations, we are going to turn out generations of adults who are unprepared to navigate our changing country.

One of the intriguing facets of your book is its intersectional discussion of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class. The narratives about your ethnic and sexual identity converge and coalesce in such a way that your critique of the dominant White culture of West Virginia also triggers a critique of compulsory heterosexuality. Why is it important to analyze the interconnectedness of race, gender, sexuality, and class, and what do we lose when we study these categories individually?

I think it is safe to say that no person alive is just one thing. All of us live at intersections, and those intersections shape both how we see the world, and how we are treated by the world. When we reduce people to just one category, we ignore how all of the other

intersections they are sitting at are informing their perspective and their choices. We trade nuance for simplicity, but in doing so, we end up with analysis that is flat and false.

All hyphenated identities in the United States experience some forms of double consciousness as they choose to or are forced to occupy simultaneously two subject positions. In the case of a second-generation, queer, Indolachian American, this split quadruples, thereby resulting in, as you call it in your book, a feeling of perpetual outsidersness. Could you elaborate on this sense of unhomeliness and describe for us the challenges of coming to terms with or navigating this alienation or fragmentation within your identity?

There are very few spaces where I see all of myself reflected back to me. In spaces that are queer, there are often few Desi folks. In spaces that are Desi, there are rarely Appalachian folks. So my experience is that of fragmentation—one part of me being seen/held, and the other parts feeling invisible. And more often than not, the parts that are unseen are the ones that require the most attention in those moments. At 44, this is no longer something that surprises me, but rather, something that I've come to expect and be prepared for. And as I mentioned earlier, it's why ultimately, I was the first audience that I wrote this book for. Because within its pages, all the parts of myself are held together. And when I hold it up, I can see all of me within it. And hopefully, that means the experience of fragmentation that I feel no longer exists for the group of people with whom I share multiple of these intersections in common.

You frame the narrative of your sexual identity in the book by invoking Goddess Durga, and the festival honoring her nine manifestations. Besides being a moving tribute to your mother and your West Virginian aunts, you imply that sexual self-awareness should be a form of celebration. What role does religion in general and Hinduism – which you memorably dub Hillbilly Hinduism – in particular play in your quest for belonging or spiritual space?

When I was younger, I think that the connection between faith and community was very strong for me. So much of our relationship with other Desi folks in Appalachia happened in the context of important rituals or holidays; it's impossible to separate religion from those early formative experiences and relationships. As I've gotten older, however, and particularly with the ugly rise of Hindu nationalism both in India and the U.S., I would say that while I find myself nostalgic for the hillbilly Hinduism of my youth, I am also clear that it no longer exists. If anything, the currently marriage between Hindutva and the government in India has made it harder and harder for me to feel any desire to go back to India or to engage with family members who espouse a xenophobia that feels eerily similar to that which I've heard directed at me in this country for my whole life. The targets in India are different, though queer people continue to be among them, the notion that faith is being used to exclude and oppress is one that makes it very difficult for me to engage with that space. If anything, I think religion impedes my sense of belonging at this point, rather than supporting it.

An unforgettable chapter in the book revolves around the concept of shame, an emotion that periodically engulfs and overwhelms the psyche of almost all South Asians. In your case, though, shame is not only applied selectively but it gets associated with language – you are being accused of bringing shame to the family by writing and publishing about them as opposed to your cousin’s revealing images on Instagram. How do you interpret this juxtaposition between the verbal and the visual? What does this attribution of shame to writing tell us about the politics and the future of writing and creativity in the age of Instagram and TikTok?

I think some of the differences in the response might have to do with the passage of time. Even in the last decade, the level of sharing/oversharing that exists because of social media is so much higher than it was when my family first started having negative reactions to my writing. But I also think that words belie opinions, and that, ultimately, what I’ve been told again and again by family members is that my opinions are not welcome. It’s fine to post revealing photos, as those only reveal the poster. But opinions indict, at times, and I think that indictment is what my family was hoping to quash. And in some ways, I think this is the exciting potential of social media: it has the ability to disrupt patriarchy, sexism, homophobia—the systems that seek to silence us in order to maintain the status quo.

Puspa Damai is Associate Professor of English at Marshall University, West Virginia, USA. He has published articles in journals including *CR: The Centennial Review*, *Discourse Postcolonial Text*, and *Postcolonial Interventions*. He is currently working on two research projects: a book-length study of hospitality in American multi-ethnic literature and a collection of essays on South Asian literature. Dr. Damai is also the founding editor of *Critical Humanities*.