



HYPOCRITE READER

[ABOUT](#) [CONTRIBUTE](#) [ARCHIVES](#)

Michael Kinnucan

An Interview with Yasmin Nair, Part Two: The Ideal Neoliberal Subject is the Subject of Trauma

ISSUE 43 | BAR | AUG 2014



Yasmin Nair is a writer and activist based in Chicago. Her work addresses neoliberalism and inequality, sex, gender and queer issues, the immigration crisis, sex trafficking and state violence. She is a cofounder, along with Ryan Conrad, of the editorial collective Against Equality. She has published widely, and a great deal of her writing is collected on her website. Below is the second part of a two-part interview; you can read the first part [here](#).

Michael Kinnucan: You've been quite critical of the anti-sex-trafficking movement. Why is that?

Yasmin Nair: Well, one of the biggest problems is: we know that there is sexual exploitation of people; we know that there are many instances of forced prostitution, there are many instances of child sex labor, for instance, we know this. We know this exists. For me, and for many other people—Laura Agustin, for instance, and others who write about this—the issue has been the ways in which the specter of sex trafficking, which is enabled by people like Mira Sorvino, say, and all these other celebrity spokespeople who take on this cause. And as you know, we've seen recent exposes of famous supposed sex-trafficking victims, like Somali Mam. But the spectre of sex-trafficking erases the reality of migration and the complicated ways in which sex plays a role in migration.

I've always been struck by the rhetoric around—and this is where I think I differ from even my comrades on the left—I've always been struck by the rhetoric around "border rape." And the idea that it's women and children who are always being brutalized. And I'm fairly certain that there are many instances of men using sex in order to gain entry, or of men being brutalized. Sex plays a role in migration, sometimes a voluntary role, sometimes an involuntary role, and sometimes a very complicated mixture. So the sex trafficking hysteria is entirely about a profitable industry, including a nonprofit industrial complex that gets millions in funding to fuel the hysteria, and it is a way in which—for instance, in North America—the US government and the Canadian government are able to deploy very particular neoliberal policies around migration which have to do primarily with keeping out certain populations from certain countries; it has to do with engendering certain kinds of labor practices, making certain kinds of exploitation more available, under the guise of preventing women and children in particular from being raped. This is

what sex trafficking hysteria does for you. And on the domestic front, there's a way in which sex trafficking hysteria buys into a very liberal-feminist agenda of rescuing poor sad brown women from themselves and their horrible brown oppressors.

So what sex trafficking hysteria does is that it enables some really terrible labor practices, it enables very particular neoliberal agendas of exploitation, and it erases people's ability to think about *labor*: why are people moving? Why would someone sleep with someone to get a visa, for instance? Under the law, in order to gain shelter as a sex trafficking victim, you have to name someone as your trafficker—even if this is someone you've actually voluntarily asked for help, with whom you might have a certain kind of relationship, who has got you a passport, you have to name yourself as a sex-trafficking victim. If you don't do that, you don't get any help. You just get deported right back. So there's a way in which these policies pump up the numbers, consequently, that's one thing that they do, but they also erase the material realities of how people migrate, and of course most importantly they allow us to completely ignore the brutality of capitalism, the brutality of what happens to people who are forced to move across borders. Why are people moving across borders under such conditions? We forget about all of that.

And so for me, of course, on the level of the family, the level of feminism and all of that, it allows people to conceive of brown women in particular... I mean, to call it racist is almost simplistic, but it is, and it really allows white women in particular to reenact themselves as feminist saviors of brown women. I can't be any more blunt than that. It allows white women to feel a degree of comfort: that they've actually achieved a position of superiority, a position of safety, as opposed to "these sad brown women..." So sex trafficking operates on these multiple levels, which I think is why the hysteria around it has been so powerful. And then of course, as I know from my work here in Chicago, having watched how authorities deal with it, it operates to shut down, imprison, and make all kinds of claims on behalf of law and order. I've been to sex trafficking conferences where authorities have showed up and said "we just cracked a sex prostitution ring, where 16 innocent children, our children, were all corralled and kept in a house," and you're not allowed to talk to *anyone* who was supposedly trafficked, you're not allowed to ask any questions, the press is not allowed to ask any questions. It's kind of like when you try to report on anti-porn actions, on child pornography, you're not allowed to actually view the porn. You're just told well, there was child porn, but you're not allowed to actually view it, because the minute you actually view the porn you become implicated.

So there are three things here: there are all these horrible policies around migration, there's a way in which it allows a certain kind of white feminism to flourish, and there's a way in which it also allows law and order to exert its priority over citizens—without question. Because all you have to do is say "Children were being trafficked!" and there's no questioning. Reporters don't even question that.

MK: So it's a convergence of interests, I guess. A convergence of liberal feminist interests, law and order interests, etc.

YN: Yes, exactly. And we really have to examine the corruption of the media in all this. I don't mean a monetary, economic corruption – although I suspect there is some of that – but a corruption which stems from reporters using these hysteria narratives to build up their own careers.

MK: So it seems as though the image of the woman suffering or the child suffering, and the way that sort of grabs the media, seems to really often operate that way. So an example would be—hm—well, what's your attitude toward feminist anti-rape-culture politics? Is that analogous?

YN: Well, hm... What is so troubling for me about all this discourse around rape culture is that it's not just, you know, liberal feminists taking it up, but also, I think what's most bothersome to me is how it's also being used especially in radical queer circles. So it's not only liberals who are doing this but people who I'd hoped would think better of it.

It just reduces everything to a set of circumstances completely beyond our control and understanding. And I think it also insists that everyone identify as a trauma

victim in order to be considered, really, nowadays, a legitimate subject. I'm sure it's linked in some ways to this proliferation of identities one can carve on the Web, but I think also in some ways the perfect neoliberal subject is becoming the traumatized subject, the subject of trauma. So despite excellent critiques by people like Ruth Leys—discussing the idea of trauma as a defining feature of the ideal neoliberal subject, including even those who might not actually identify as neoliberal subjects, like the queer radicals with whom I work—It just seems like trauma has become a requirement. I've been writing recently about how I am sick of being on panels where everybody starts to confess to their rape, or to their sexual trauma, and I just want to walk out on them! I just want to say, if you cannot think about critiquing policies and the state without having to assert how and why you have been a victim, then let's end this conversation. Does everybody have to be a victim in order to gain sympathy, first of all? And what does it mean to have to constantly reconstitute yourself as a subject of trauma? What happens to people who don't do it? Are they to be seen as traitors?

There's this weird kind of culture of confession which is also something I write about: this constant imperative to confess, and this imperative to reveal oneself as the wounded subject, that I find very disturbing. Because I think it *pretends* to be a systemic analysis, because what it's *pretending* to do is to say "Look, this matters because so many of us who work on this matter are in fact also traumatized." That's the rationale. But I want to say: is that only way to understand trauma in neoliberalism? Is it possible that only those who have experienced it are allowed to talk about it? There's a kind of demand for authenticity in all of this that I find particularly vexing. And I know for a fact that many people who have a critique of trauma and of violence and of the state may well have been sexually abused, but just don't talk about it. And does that make them less authentic?

It just all devolves. These discussions all devolve into these constant *narratives*, this kind of personalized narrativizing about the state. And I can see that as having emerged as a response to a time and a discourse where all of that was actually erased. I get that! I get the historical reasons why people have been encouraged to reveal their trauma, I totally get it. In the US, for instance, until recently, women in marriages could not be raped, legally speaking. So I get the historical reasons why all of this is important, but it makes for shitty organizing, and it makes for really shitty analysis. And it makes for a very insufficient and haphazard critique of capitalism.

MK: Because it's grounded in personal experience and in personal feelings and so on...

YN: Yes, and on a kind of confessional subject; it requires a subject to authenticate herself, and more often than not it is *herself*. It's like you have to have this passport, now, to enter into this kind of critique.

MK: Yeah, I mean it's interesting to think about the parallels... I mean everyone makes parallels between feminism and the gay rights movement and civil rights, but it's interesting to think about feminism as sort of a movement that won a whole bunch of things; in particular, the right to participate more or less "equally," in certain respects, in the capitalist system. But like the rape culture thing, it's the inheritor of what, of anti-porn feminism; it's a descendant of that, and a weird descendant... So you said the queer position, what you like about it is that it gives you a place from which to think about gender and sexuality structurally in terms of economics. Why not the feminist position, why doesn't that do it for you? I mean we're dealing right now with so many different legacies of feminism and ways of calling yourself feminist, from the NGO model we were talking about earlier, to rape culture politics, to sex-positive feminism, which is more on the sexual libertarian side of the spectrum.

YN: So you're asking why I don't primarily identify as a feminist?

MK: Right.

YN: Well, I do, I do often identify as a feminist, but not in a systematic, formal way. And a lot of that has to do, frankly, with my position as a *brown* feminist in this country, and my unwillingness to be allied with most white feminists. You know, I have a completely different view of abortion, I critique this sort of liberal trend

towards apologizing for abortion, for instance, but I'm also not completely congruent with what is often seen as a movement against that kind of feminism, this sort of POC-imbued critique of all of that. Let's just say that I'm not particularly taken with several different strands of feminism that I see operating in this country. And I am reluctant... I mean I'm not *reluctant*, I frequently identify as a feminist, but let's just say that as a radical queer brown woman, I don't find a place for myself within many feminist spaces. I find a place for myself within abolitionist spaces, within pro-abortion spaces, but... I don't know, it's a complicated question. I mean, pushed to identify or not, yes, absolutely, I would always identify as a feminist. But mostly I find it is so cringe-inducing frequently, the most well-intentioned white feminists are so cringe-inducing, for me, but so are many spaces that are identified as women of color feminist, where there's a strong materialist strand of work within women of color reproductive justice spaces, for instance, but I also find that people of color in this country especially are constantly being pushed towards identifying on some very essentialist grounds... On grounds of certain conceptions of womanhood, for instance, or conceptions of ancestry, with which I frankly have no patience. So it's all very complicated, issues around ethnicity. I find the thrust toward ancestor-worship, or this thrust towards finding elemental old generational modes of survival, indigeneity... I find all of that as problematic as the capitalist exploitative racist system that we are all fighting against. So I frequently find myself uncomfortable in all these spaces! I'm very critical of this whole "let's find out how our ancestors did this and recover our past," I'm like "Fuck that shit!" And that's a short blunt response to a long, complicated conversation we could have, but frequently I say "fuck that" to both sides, you know?

And there's this essentialism in it—for instance there's all this matriarchal, maternalist crap—and I come from a matriarchal-maternalist background, Nairs have been historically matrilineal. And so I come from that tradition, so I should be the one "celebrating" it... I just find the celebratory discourse around ethnicity and race as cringe-inducing as anything that white feminists might have to say. And again, I don't mean to paint everyone in broad strokes, but those are... I come across that shit too often to not think that it's a dominant strain in that politics. Which is to say that the resistance to white imperialist feminism becomes another kind of essentialism, becomes a kind of gynocentric ethnocentric maternalistic bullshit.

MK: It comes back to what you said earlier, the ideal neoliberal subject is in need of authentication.

YN: Right, authenticated by trauma.

MK: And why is that? How do you see that as fitting in with neoliberalism?

YN: Well, for one thing, it has something to do with funding—and this is where I keep bringing back issues about money. You don't get any kind of funding if you don't. For instance with sex trafficking, you don't get any kind of recourse from the state if you cannot claim trauma, and if you cannot claim to have been trafficked and brutalized by your trafficker. But I think that's also true on a more pervasive level, and in some ways it's in the DNA of neoliberalism to demand that you be a traumatized subject. And it comes back to funding, but it also comes back to how the state operates. So if you apply as a refugee or an asylum-seeker, you really have to prove how horribly mistreated you were, and you have to make all kinds of performative displays of your trauma. We've had cases where judges have said to asylees who were seeking asylum on the grounds of sexual orientation that "well, you just don't *seem* gay, I just don't see how you could be traumatized..." So there are real material ways in which subjects who are asking for help of any kind, assistance of any kind, have to perform their authentic trauma. There are material ways in which that happens.

But there are also discursive ways in which it happens. If you're a brown woman in particular, you're simply not allowed authenticity, you're not allowed entrance into many situations—and this has been my case, this is I think why people have found my work so hard to place, because my work refuses that kind of authenticity and that trauma narrative. It makes people deeply uncomfortable to hear a brown woman talk about capitalism rather than talk about how she personally was ravished by

capitalism. And I think this also affects men, male theorists of capitalism who might be men of color, this affects women of color who write about capitalism. Again, it's like this demand for a passport. You cannot speak about capitalism as a person of color if you are not willing to talk about yourself as a trauma subject, or at least as someone who's afflicted by capitalism, as opposed to someone who is an analyst of capitalism. And this is a very racial dynamic, this is one place where I would say that race and ethnicity really do play out. It's very difficult, especially in the US, to be a person of color *analyzing* capitalism. You're much better off if you simply talk about having *experienced* it. You see the difference? I mean my work would have been way more published by now if I had actually talked about trauma and coming out as X, Y and Z; I'd be in a very different position. But I don't. And I think that makes a lot of people extraordinarily uncomfortable.

MK: It's interesting, because there's a rhetoric of, like, "we white privileged people have to learn from being exposed to the recounting of the traumas experienced by brown people of color," but one thing that's flattening about trauma discourse is actually that no one ever learns. They feel *guilty*, maybe, and that's *analogous* to learning, but the unwillingness to learn from an analysis and the willingness to nod along with or sympathize with an experience seem to correspond to each other. And that's very troubling.

YN: But this is also why immigration reform in this country is so deeply troubling and problematic, and why it's never going to go anywhere. Because there is no fucking analysis of immigration! No one's analyzing immigration! Everyone is putting up these nice sad little brown bodies, I mean this is what has happened with the undocumented queer movement, what you have are people who are willing to proffer themselves as subjects of trauma, and subjects who are confessing, and who are talking about being torn apart from their families, and "all I really want to do is go to Harvard and become a law student," and "I'm such a good citizen!", and "aren't I sad?" And "oh look: aren't I intersectional? I am queer *and* feminine *and* undocumented..." This is my problem with intersectionality, it allows for the ultimate mobilization of neoliberalism by allowing one subject to claim various registers of suffering, rather than actually doing anything about fucking capitalism. And this is what I've written about over and over again with the undocumented queer movement, the undocumented movement in general. And it is an extraordinarily corrupt movement, because it enables neoliberalism—in fact, as we know from what happened in Chicago recently, it actually sets the state upon undocumented people in order to further its own agenda. We've seen instances where undocumented people who dare to have a different analysis of what is wrong with immigration have actually been arrested, have had the police set upon them.

And here's the problem: the fucking left media will not touch it with a bargepole. Because left journalists are implicated. Left journalists have gone so far along with the undocumented rhetoric that they can no longer start to critique them, because to critique them would actually implicate the left media's own role in this narrative. So the left media has been propounding and perpetuating this whole discourse around the sad traumatized intersectional undocumented queer, and these are all young queer people who are able to echo in the correct proportions, the appropriate radical discourses. They all quote Audre Lorde, they all have the same goddamned Audre Lorde quotation that they use over and over again. They're very slick, they're very good messengers, they all have the message down right. When required they'll of course also have a critique of neoliberalism, here it is—*however*, we're also going to arrest our fellow undocumented people. And you know the DREAM activist movement—I mean there are pockets of DREAM activism that are productive, I don't want to paint everyone with the same brush, but DREAM activism in general: again, it comes back to funding, it comes back to money. Who gets the money to do shit, and who doesn't? And who therefore then gains the right to be interviewed by the *Tribune* as opposed to say being interviewed by me? It all comes back to funding, who can hook up with an organization that has a media representative, and who can train young undocumented queers to, at one and the same time, parrot a critique of neoliberalism and be fucking neoliberal. And I think this is one reason why the left is such a fucking failure, because it cannot recognize the implications of funding priorities in all of this. It's completely wrapped up in this affective discourse that I constantly critique.

MK: And the funding flows, and the state assistance flows, to problems for which rescue could be a solution. Like "oh, she just wants to get a college education, and she has the background and education and money to do that, she's in a position to do that, we just need to make this small individual change so that she can rise, personally, from her problem."

YN: Exactly. And I mean it's not even a matter of having money, sometimes it's a matter of "oh, he's poor, but he's so *good*, he's such a good citizen-in-waiting. And if you could just give him this one gateway toward citizenship he'd be fabulous, he'd be our next president." Or maybe not president, because of the birth requirement, but he can be the successful citizen and do so much for us.

But I'd like to go back to rape culture for a minute. I think one of my problems with that concept is that it makes rape into, not a systemic issue, not an issue that's specifically contextualized. Rapes are so different, it's so circumstantial, in other words. The rape that occurs in a country that is being occupied by invaders, for instance, is rather different from the rape that occurs when a woman is walking alone at night. Those are very different instances of rape. It's not that one is less traumatic than the other, just that they're very different. And there are very different systemic issues at play. When we talk about rape culture, we erase all those differences, and we make it very difficult, we make it impossible, to really think about what engenders rape. The rape that is a pure and blatant expression of political power, in countries and at times when rape is actually a tool for exerting power and coercion and creating mass terror, rape is a tool of terror, a political tool. That's a rather different situation than the one in which women are raped because they are vulnerable at night. And when we talk about rape culture it turns it into—it's almost as if we are all living under this geodesic dome where rape just permeates our DNA and our consciousness in a rather diffuse and undifferentiated way. And I find that really troubling. Because I want us to think about the politics, the geopolitics of rape. I want us to be able to think about rape as political terror. And I want us *also* to think about rape as individual terror. I want us to think about rape as it happens situationally, not as "rape culture." Which to me is useless and counterproductive, and actually counters the kinds of effects that many feminists claim that they want, which is to engender a greater discussion of rape. I think it does the opposite, it creates an undifferentiated, apolitical attitude towards rape.

MK: Right... The word "culture" has been put to so many evil uses, and maybe this is just the latest of them. Because the idea is like, individual rapes, talked about as individual rapes, aren't essentially political, so then we tack on the word "culture" and it seems like you're about to have a political critique, but "culture" here just sort of seems to mean that rapes happen, sort of a sum of individual rapes, there isn't really a situational analysis there.

YN: Exactly, right.

MK: So a last question: You talked a lot about the mess that the left is in. And I think a big part of that is that the desire for hope makes people on the left really want to approve of things like gay marriage, or things like the way the DREAM Act is sold, right? And I've seen you get into arguments and discussions with people where they're like "Oh, but we can't just call for the revolution all the time, we have to think realistically and pragmatically, we need to accept these little wins." And I think your work has offered a really powerful critique of that kind of reformist politics. But I guess what I'm wondering is: what is "realism" to you? And, like, how do you keep doing this, year after year?

YN: Well, I can answer the first question, anyway, about hope. Because I am actually, surprisingly, deeply optimistic. And I can give you historical examples. I'll give you an example: when people talk about queer history, we tend to forget that there was a time, just to take the most recent history, there was a time in the 30s and 40s when to be outed as gay was the end of your life. And it was completely unrealistic to ever imagine a world where you could actually be out. And if that has changed today, to a degree, it is because we had relentless hope! [Laughter.] There's this crazy optimism that we had. But if you fast-forward just a few decades, think about the '80s, and you think about the fact that the reason why we ever got anything

resembling healthcare for queer people, the reason we got even just one motherfucking AIDS drug, ever, was that a whole ton of people—with many of whom I have many differences over marriage, since their radicalism turned out to be bound to a time and place—but a whole lot of very angry queers fucked up the system, and said "You can't even *conceive* of the idea that I could die peacefully in a hospital, but I'm going to tell you that it has to be possible. You can't even conceive of me as a person who deserves life, but I'm going to tell you that you need to work on pharmaceuticals for me." I mean queer history has always been about demanding the impossible. And, you know, call it optimism, call it brashness, call it just a refusal to take no for an answer... So when people come to me and say, oh, you're not being realistic, I want to ask, well, what motherfucking revolution has *not* been unrealistic? Your own marriage agenda was considered really unrealistic in 1994 around the Hawaii trial. So your own mainstream agenda was once considered utopian. It was once considered utopian for anyone to be given the right to live as a person with AIDS. I think it's easy for us to forget that the most basic rights that we have today, things like AIDS funding, which are considered very basic now, were once completely unrealistic. Getting medication for a chronic disease, getting healthcare for that—those were all unrealistic utopian demands at one time, and so was marriage.

I think it is deeply disingenuous to look at people like me and say "oh, well, you're being unrealistic," because *every* demand is unrealistic. It was unrealistic to think in 1993 that gay people could get married. I don't support it, I never supported it even in 1993, I was like "what the fuck?", but it was unrealistic. In the 1980s it was unrealistic to demand medication, something as simple as that. And I think it's deeply disingenuous to talk about what is unrealistic and to say that what we want, which is a society where people are allowed to flourish without being required to live by prescriptions of what counts as a healthy relationship, or without being required to adhere to the norms of a certain marital status, those things are very basic. So it's disingenuous on the one hand to ignore history, but also, what the fuck is unrealistic about a society where no one is judged as worthy of life or death based on their marital status? How the fuck is that unrealistic? That's what I want to say to people. And how is it unrealistic, especially, when you see it happening all the time in the Netherlands, or in Canada? How is that unrealistic when it's actually *happening* in other places. I mean everyone talks about how Sweden has gay marriage, Canada has gay marriage—yes, but Canadians were very determined that they would first get universal healthcare before they tended to everything else, because they realized how important that was. That is a fundamental right of every human being, the right to live or die with dignity, and with care. That's as fundamental as the right to have food freely available, to have water available. And of course even those things are being shunted aside, but that's another story. But it's a question of fundamental human dignity.

So none of our expectations are unrealistic. And I think people who say that—they're disingenuous, they forget history, and they're liars. And it just furthers their own agenda to say that this is unrealistic, when in fact their own agendas were deeply unrealistic. Who the hell thought, even if you look at the history of DADT, written by people like Nathaniel Frank, with whom of course I have very little in common politically—but if you look at the history they write, and you look at how DADT came up through the ranks as an issue: no one was fighting for that stuff, no one thought that was at all realistic.

So I think... [laughter], well, I think they lie, they're disingenuous and wrong!

MK: Right, yes. I remember you said very beautifully somewhere that when people tell us that universal healthcare will never be achieved in the US, we just repeat once again that universal healthcare is necessary, and explain why. And when people say "oh, I agree with you, but it will never happen"—this thing that has happened in so many other places, this thing which is such a basic right—I mean that's not realism. There's so much hopelessness in that.

YN: Right. 

3 Comments

Sort by Oldest

Add a comment...



Eileen Walsh Thomas

Rachel Moir, this is the article. Her sight is worth having a look at, thought provoking.

Like · Reply · 5y



Carolyn Studer

Super. Love the whole interview, and especially the part about being "unrealistic."

Like · Reply · 4y



Rosa Luxembagh

Good critique of rape culture and it's vacuosity.

Like · Reply · 2y

[Facebook Comments Plugin](#)

The Hypocrite Reader publishes hard hitting navel gazing, qt shit, deductions, inductions, and abductions. **Get us in your inbox once a month.**

Email address

Subscribe

Like 1.6K people like this. [Sign Up](#) to see what your friends like.

Tweet

Copyright © 2018 Hypocrite Reader. All Rights Reserved.