

Anthropology Book Forum

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LATA MANI, 2022, *Myriad Intimacies*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 104 pp, ISBN: 978-1-4780-1827-8.

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In a recent essay, Tanya Luhmann (2023) described ethnography as a spiritual practice. Spiritual practices, writes Luhmann, are “practices that are meant to transform your life.” *Myriad Intimacies* holds this potential: it does not merely describe but embodies and enacts what a spiritually-driven intellectual and activist practice can be.

Myriad Intimacies is Lata Mani’s eighth book (not counting the four children’s books she has also authored) in a long and storied journey as a feminist theorist, scholar, and filmmaker. A graduate of the History of Consciousness program at UC Santa Cruz, Mani studied alongside Ruth Frankenberg, Chela Sandoval, Lisa Lowe, bell hooks, and others who would become, along with Mani herself, leading figures in postcolonial and women of color feminism. In 1993, Mani’s life irrevocably changed after a traumatic head injury. As she describes in *Interleaves* (2011), her disability simultaneously opened a new meaning, purpose and promise of life, what she came to describe as a tantrically-attuned path.¹ Mani’s body of work not only questions Euro-American

¹ The word tantra is derived from the Sanskrit root *tan*, which means to expand, spread, or stretch; the word *tantra* is also translated as ‘loom’ or ‘weaving,’ suggesting the interconnectedness of all things. Tantra is an ancient, heterogeneous Indian tradition of knowledge and practice that seeks to ‘divinize’ the human person by harnessing mental and physical energies as well as the ‘magical’ properties of language and sacred visual imagery, among other things. In Tantra, the universe is alive, a manifestation of divine consciousness. Tantra is thus a world- and body-affirming tradition that cuts across popular and elite expressions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other religions.

epistemologies, but theorizes from tantric principles, which offer radically different ethical, epistemological, and ontological starting point. Although she does not herself use the term ‘decolonial,’ *Myriad Intimacies* is a profound experience of decolonial feminist methodology.

Myriad Intimacies is not a book that can be consumed or read in any straightforward sense. You must immerse or even submerge yourself in it. For that reason, it might be challenging to those who are unwilling to radically undiscipline themselves. But letting go of normative expectations of what a scholarly book *is* and what arguments *are* will yield bountiful rewards. *Myriad Intimacies* undoes staid hierarchies and binaries that structure scholarly and activist thought—between the spiritual/intellectual, mind/matter, observation/theory, art/science—and instead celebrates the radical interconnectedness with all persons and things as a precondition of creativity. In so doing, Mani reminds us that intellectual and activist work express, at their heart, aspects of our creativity.

This creativity is also embodied in the book’s composition. As she describes at the beginning of *Myriad Intimacies*, Mani’s dis/ability shifted her away from the methods of close reading and textual analysis in which she had been trained as a historian, to new mediums—the visual, poetic, mnemonic, intuitive, and contemplative. The book consists of 8 poems, 13 short essays, and 5 multimedia/video pieces (collaborations with the Argentinian filmmaker Nicolás Grandi), ranging from 1 to 38 minutes in length. Though a slim work (104 pages), *Myriad Intimacies* is playful, enthralling, and kaleidoscopic (the word *myriad* comes from the Greek stem *mýriás*, which means, “ten thousand”), honoring the natural world with which it frequently conspires. Its dreamy movements, from poem to video to essay, are intentional, allowing readers to find the path most suited to them.

Borrowing from Gloria Anzaldúa (2000: 38, 178), *Myriad Intimacies* is a work of “spiritual activism.” Although “spiritual” implies an inward-looking, intellectual focus, and “activism” implies outward-directed, material action, for Mani, as for Anzaldúa, these facets of being are inseparable; they must come together in any project to transform oneself and one’s worlds. If this sounds “New Age-y,” it is not. Unlike the navel-gazing tendencies of New Age spirituality, spiritual activism demands a transformation of existing social structures and ways of thinking, and Mani draws from a deep well of meditative practice. This is at its core a deeply inter-*active* work,

in not just exhorting us to see or analyze the world differently but giving us tools to do so. The sense of co-creating along with Mani, that which lends *Myriad Intimacies* its brimming vibrancy, is facilitated by the ingenious design of including QR codes that link directly to the multimedia pieces, so readers can watch them on their phones or computers while reading (hopefully, more publishers will follow this elegant design). The resulting experience is a profoundly meditative one, where theoretical, political, and philosophical insights flow uninterrupted, like water sliding over glassy rocks.

The book's thirteen short essays connect and apply tantric philosophical insights about interconnectedness and the sacredness of embodiment to the political crises of our contemporary moment. Covid-19, structural racism, caste oppression, anti-authoritarian protests in India, contemporary feminist activism, identity politics, and #MeToo, are among its many subjects. Writing in prose, Mani implores us to explore what counts as action or efficacy in activism; why leftist politics sometimes replicate the violence they stand against; and why progressive social movements seem so brittle today. No ordinary cultural critic, Mani's aim is not to merely diagnose, but to heal.

In *The Masked Philosopher*, Michel Foucault writes that “what we are suffering is not a void but inadequate means for thinking about everything that is happening” (1998: 325). Some of the most profound costs of Covid-19 virus, political polarization, and perpetual war, argues Mani, are how they have eroded our sense of connectedness and wholeness. And our response to these crises, on both the political left and right, reinforce our separateness, depleting us politically and spiritually. This is because we have come to see politics as “tactical moves against an external enemy.” Instead, Mani leads us to a different meaning of politics, as an “imaginative discipline of living together artfully (65).” She implores us to (re)imagine politics, activism, and scholarship not as a battlefield, but as a space of unimaginable diversity and heterogeneous complexity. As she puts it, “There is no outside. There is no other. There is only intimacy” (53).

In the gorgeous and moving essay, “A Glorious Thing Made Up of Stardust: What Pat Parker and Rohith Vemula Ask Us to Consider” (the title of which is taken from Rohith Vemula's suicide

note²), Mani relates Vemula's life to the contradictions inherent to social justice movements. Born into a Dalit family, Vemula experienced violence and exclusion throughout his life. The affirmative action measures that granted him access to institutions of higher education in India simultaneously marked him as *only* Dalit, a constraint of agency so severe that it eventually led to him ending his life. In his suicide note, Vemula pleads for recognition of his humanity beyond social categories, as 'a glorious thing made of stardust.' Attending to Vemula's demands—Mani argues, putting into conversation with the words of Black feminist poet Pat Parker—means recognizing a key dilemma in social justice activism: that it replicates and reifies the very categories it seeks to dismantle. To advocate for the rights of caste-oppressed people, *Dalitness* is codified in law and social movements. Rather than lead to caste abolition, then, we proliferate social categories that cannot "adequately express the rich actuality or fullness of who one is" (45).

Sensuous, illuminating, enchanting, and endlessly generative, *Myriad Intimacies* is a political necessity that feels like an indulgence because of its generosity of spirit. It is rare to meet a book that is both so intellectually precise *and* loving. Its insights will deeply resonate with anthropologists interested in decolonial, feminist, and queer theory and methods because it offers a powerful—and hopeful—example beyond critique. The book also holds valuable insights for environmental anthropologists, scholars of social movements, anthropologists of religion, and South Asianists. It is the perfect gift for a friend or colleague struggling with imposter syndrome, writer's block, or just plain old *ennui*. After all, theorizing and meditating on our relatedness, wrote Anzaldúa, can lead to "less-structured thoughts, less-rigid categorizations, and thinner boundaries," allowing us to picture – "via reverie, dreaming, and artistic creativity – similarities instead of solid divisions" (2002: 568).

You think you already know these truths, or you might not be ready for this kind of adventure, but the beauty of *Myriad Intimacies* is that you can start anywhere and still be awed. After all, as Mani reminds us, our task as anthropologists to represent and interpret the world is infinitely "playful, mysterious, and magical" (4).

² Vemula was a PhD student at the University of Hyderabad when he died in 2016. His death sparked student-led protests across India.

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