COMMONPLACE PODCAST

EPISODE 101

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Introduction

[music]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Hello and welcome to Episode 101 of Commonplace. I'm your host, Rachel Zucker. I recorded this episode remotely on April 2nd, 2022, with writer, professor, scholar, and author Prageeta Sharma. Prageeta was in her home in Claremont, California, and I was in mine in Washington Heights, New York.

Prageeta Sharma is the author of several amazing poetry collections: *Under Gloom*, *Infamous Landscapes*, *The Opening Question*, *Bliss to Fill*, and most recently, *Grief Sequence*, published in 2019 by Wave Books. She is also the founder of Thinking its Presence, an interdisciplinary conference on race, creative writing and artistic and aesthetic practices. I've known and admired Prageeta's work for years. And always enjoyed seeing and speaking with her at literary events in and near New York City.

Since moving away, we've kept in touch over Twitter and through mutual friends. But we haven't seen each other in person for years. In this conversation, Prageeta and I talk about the death of her husband Dale in 2014, and how she wrote in, during, and through that grief in her book, *Grief Sequence*. We talk about grief, dying, subsequent love, the incredible conference she started, surviving discrimination in academia, the abject lyric, the neutral lyric, what she's working on now. It was a joy to speak with Prageeta, and a pleasure listening and re-listening to this conversation. In addition to learning how to be a better poet, I think I learned how to be a better ex-wife.

For this episode, all Commonplace Patrons will get access to three prompts Prageeta created that mirror her writing process, as well as a recording of Prageeta reading "Glacier National Park the Elegy." all listeners will receive 15% off their purchase of grief sequence from Wave Books if they use the code BWLS. Aome member of the Commonplace Book Club will receive a copy of one of the following: *Grief Sequence* by Prageeta Sharma, courtesy of Wave Books; *Under Gloom, Infamous Landscapes*, and *The Opening Question*, all by Prageeta Sharma, courtesy of Fence Books; *Bliss to Fill* by Prageeta Sharma, courtesy of SubPress; Dorothy Wong's *Thinking Its Presence: On Asian American Subjectivity and Poetry*, courtesy of Stanford University Press; And Matthew Salesses's *Craft in the Real World, Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping*, courtesy of Catapult.

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Before I share this fabulous conversation with Prageeta, I want to let you know about Talk Easy. Here on Commonplace, I love talking to creative people about their lives. Talk Easy is also a podcast about who we are and who we become. Driven by curiosity, compassion, and research, Talk Easy is a place where people sound like people. Each Sunday, Sam Fragoso invites actors, writers, activists, and

musicians to come to the table and speak from the heart in ways you probably haven't heard from them before.

[5:05]

Sam has episodes with Ocean Vuong, David Byrne, Nikki Giovanni, and most recently, Rupi Kaur. Rupi shares with Sam how she evolved from girl to woman in writing her best selling collection, *Milk and Honey,* and how the pressures of success caused writing to go from something safe to something triggering for her and how she found her way back to the page. Stay tuned until the end of this episode to hear a special preview of Sam's conversation with Rupi. You can listen to the full episode of Talk Easy, and more from Talk Easy, wherever you get your podcasts.

After this conversation with Prageeta, you'll also hear another listener testimonial. This one comes to us from Noah, a person I dated before I met my newly beloved.

Okay, here's Prageeta Sharma.

Interview

RACHEL ZUCKER: But maybe we could start in the present and, and hear like where you are physically and emotionally and cognitively?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Oh, Rachel, it's so nice to be chatting with you in the present right now and it feels like a conversation of just catching up that I've wanted to do with you for the last 10 years! So yeah, I guess starting in the present, um, I just wanted to acknowledge, um, just how happy I am to, that, that you, you and I were able to find the time to do this.

Um, I'm, I live in Claremont now, Claremont, California. I'm just six blocks from Pomona College. I moved here in 2019 from University of Montana, Missoula, and I… Mike and I, Mike my partner, and I live here. We sometimes try to be in Seattle where he's a part time resident. We just, um, you know, as I think I've told you and I'm, I'm more public about it, I've been public about it, um, because he's given me

permission, but, um, you know, we're, we're negotiating, um, a stage four diagnosis of bile duct cancer, which is an aggressive rare cancer, um, that, um, you know, that, that has changed… I mean, it's exactly a year, um, today that we got, uh, well, we got a more, we, we got a confirmed diagnosis, maybe, um, you know, a week, just a week from now, last year.

But we were wrestling with it this weekend, and we did, we knew he had a mass in his liver. But, but so, so, it's very confusing to be returning to cancer again, but I've, um, I'm grateful that we've, we've looked at a year now. So presently, I'm just, I'm just full of gratitude, uh, to be able to, uh, caregive, um, but also have a, a functional, uh, partnership right now with, with a terminal illness.

So that's where I am right now and I'm writing poems and I feel like I've just, you know, I turned 50 and I just feel like I'm more candid and more, like I just want to be in the present moment, um, being myself as much as possible and not feeling bad about it [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh Prageeta, I love that so much. You know, before we even go further, I want to thank you so much for taking the time, you know, between teaching and Mike's illness and writing and all of the other roles that you have, which I, you know, want to hear more about. It's been difficult. It's been difficult for both of us, but, but particularly for you to, to, to even make the kind of mental space, I think for this.

And I love what you're saying about... congratulations on turning 50. I turned 50 and at the end of December. Um, and, and really, um, um, I think that's so beautifully said about like, I feel like I don't have the time to beat around the bush to, you know, to get the recording just right. Um, and I, I just have to be myself.

[9:41]

And, and I was thinking, even as, as you were talking about being in the present about how many times you and I have met in the present, but not… but like almost asynchronously in the present. And I was thinking in particular, you know, it used

to be, I don't even know how long ago we saw each other last in physical form, but we used to see each other sometimes at poetry readings.

We would see each other, you know, at Kady Lederer's place. Like I have a memory of seeing you at Katie's, um, and then we didn't see each other for a while. And. And maybe we'd see each other at AWP or we would communicate online. And then I remember this experience of quote unquote seeing you when *Grief Sequence* came out and and reading the book and I have a very strong memory actually, for some reason of reading the book in the bathtub [laughs].

And underlining things and, and, and, and, and like sort of consuming it or inhaling it, but also feeling a feeling… and I can talk about this later, uh, of resistance to the book, uh, both to the contents of the book and in some ways to the, to the feeling… not so much to the death and the grief, but to the love.

Um, and that was very difficult for me at that time. I was in still, I was still married and very unhappy. And, uh, it, so it was, it was sort of like a complicated seeing, um, and, and also feeling in a way seen by you, even though… which I think is such a magic thing about poetry and about about reading or that kind of deep reading, like I almost felt like you've had this experience that I have not had, but I almost felt seen by you like, *okay, okay, Rachel, in your bathtub, in your apartment on the Upper West Side, you know, in your not very happy marriage, like, this is what I see*.

Um, I felt seen by the book. I felt seen, I felt seen, um, by you, you, you and I also communicated when I was having my cancer scare and I didn't know if it was going to be cancer or cancer scare. We communicated a little bit um, on Twitter.

And then when I heard, you know, this terrifying news, um, about a second, you know, terminal, potentially terminal cancer in your life, um, with your partner, you know, it was sort of like, are we going to do the recording? At this moment, at this moment, at this moment, at this moment? And then I reread your book last week, uh, and I'll say more about this, but I, I have fallen madly in love, um, and I, I, I just, I had a completely different experience of *Grief Sequence* and I, I, I really, I, I

started just like crying and talking out loud and reading the book out loud to my partner.

And, um, that's the first time I've ever called him my partner, but I, I'm doing that. Um, uh, he is my partner. So it's, it's so fascinating that had we recorded at any of those previous present moments, the recording would be different. And yet I feel like this moment contains all of those past encounters in some way.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Wow. Yeah. Oh, that's beautiful. I mean, it's beautiful that you've fallen in love. Because I have to say, I don't know if *Grief Sequence* would have been written if I didn't fall in love. Because I think I would have been, uh, trapped in one narrative of review. And I think that the, the way I learned, uh, to think about my grief as an opening changed, I mean, changed the trajectory of, of my own perspective.

Um, so I, you know, one thing I was, I think a, a question, um, that we would be grappling with together is, you know, what, what allows one to be open to new experiences? And one thing that I found with a lot of widowed people is because they hadn't been planning on losing their spouse, they believed in love in a kind of way.

Um, I mean, as we can get into with *Grief Sequence*, Dale was super complicated and how I see him now, seven years out, versus how I saw him um, you know, the first three months, six months, one year, two years, um, I had to do a lot of therapy to really process the trauma of, of who he was and what I enabled. Um, so there was grief of losing him, but there was grief of losing who I thought he was.

[15:09]

And so I became receptive to somebody who could be entirely different who could teach me how to, you know, who could, who could teach me how to love the way I didn't get to, the way I thought I was, but wasn't actually the reality.

RACHEL ZUCKER: [Gasps]. This is, this is very, very, very profound.

I was hoping that maybe you could read a few poems from the very beginning of the book. Because I think it's going to be helpful for people to just hear the tone and then we can talk about sort of the story of the book and what was happening to you when you started writing it.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Sure, sure. I'll read a few of these and we can see how that goes.

And this poem is after Alice Notley who, I mean, I, I I studied her poems, um, while I was grieving, um, and I always, I always refer to her as a double widow, you know, and there's a way in which she just teaches me so much in her poems. Um, I don't know if it's fair to phrase it that way, but it was what stuck with me. Just being widowed twice is a whole thing, um, I think.

[Reads "On seclusion and Looking Out"]

I think I'll read, I'll just read the "Complicated Spiritual Grief, Part 1" and "Part 2" because they kind of, they go to, they go together.

[Reads Complicated Spiritual Grief, Part 1 and Part 2]

[19:50]

RACHEL ZUCKER: I mean, it's really, it's such a, powerful opening to the book. I, I want to, it's so funny cause I was listening to some interviews and reading some interviews with you, um, and one of the things that I noticed was that interviewers tend to go back and forth with this book between the content and the form, almost as if it's too much for them to handle the content, you know, to talk about the death part, the love part, the, the, the, the anger. The, you know, the grief, um, and so then they're like, *well, how did you, you know, decide to write in prose?*

Um, and here I, here I am again, about to say, I want to sort of give the listener a sense that, that, uh, the book opens, uh, with the poems that you just heard, and they're very beautifully, kind of small in a certain way on the page, in a prose form,

the book does not stay entirely in prose, but, and, and, you know, I want to talk about… well, what was happening when you were writing those initial poems?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah, I think I, I was writing in prose, which was new for me to do. Um, it, I think at first I was writing a kind of a, epistolary to, to Dale. So there was an address to a you, but I slowly started to remove that address because I, some of them were, were fraught with my being so hurt by the address itself, um, that I had to work through trying to figure out what I was trying to claim for myself um, in the, in the prose.

But you know, for, for, for people listening, you know, Dale was diagnosed in November of 2014 with stage four, late stage four esophageal cancer. Um, and he died two months later, and there were so many complications and he was trying, he would really, he wouldn't let me into the doctor's office. Uh, he wouldn't let me talk to our oncologist. And I think it was out of shame, and out of a disbelief himself that he was dying. Even though he knew he was dying, I didn't realize he was dying.

I was in denial about what dying looked like. Which, you know, most people are when they're trying to save somebody. So, we only rec… we can often just recognize the state of dying after somebody dies sometimes, and not everybody. But so I was intent on keeping him alive. And so I there I thought we had a lot longer time to have real conversations about what was happening.

Um, and so some of the processing of the poems is a state of shock in trying to, you know, one day he was here and the next day he wasn't. One day I, you know, so I think that the first three months, I couldn't remember my marriage at all before the cancer. So there was just a shock and that, that, that prose allowed me to process without… poems in lyric form or in form felt a little too extravagant at, you know, the first year.

RACHEL ZUCKER: You know, I'm interested if you feel comfortable talking about this… I mean, we all know we're going to die, but we don't know when, and we don't know how long we have. And it's interesting to me that over the course of time, there have been sort of different conventions about telling someone's wife,

but not the patient or in this case, the opposite, right? Like you weren't, you weren't let into the prognosis.

And then there are some doctors who refuse, refuse, refuse to give a prognosis in terms of a timeline, either to the patient or to the family. And this question feels relevant, right? Because your experience, it was not knowing that it's going to be two months, but knowing he was really sick. And this question of like, are you supposed to be trying to save him? Are you supposed to be trying to have these conversations? Are you supposed to be, you know, focused on yourself? Are you like…

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah, I mean, well, I've learned a lot since then. So what I realized is there's like a kind of a chasm of what I just didn't understand and what was going on. Like I got a lot of information when he started to lose consciousness and we, you know, we were working with a palliative care doctor.

[24:45]

Um, and in, because we're working with a palliative care doctor, um, they're putting things in place for me so that I, I, even if I'm not processing it, it's happening. I think, you know, we had to do the, um, oh, the form. What is the form… that do not resuscitate form. So that was the first, I mean, and, and, and, and Dale signed it.

And when you, you know, if, if people have done this, I, you might have done this with, you know, I, you know, I know what you've gone through with, with passing and, and your mother and, um, but so, so that was the, the first indication that we were starting to work and live there with that conversation, but I, I really thought we had at least six months, but it was just naive.

It's naive when you're dealing with late stage four. Yeah. It was just naive. And I, you know, I was 42 years old. I, you know, I, I just hadn't expected, um, I hadn't expected to lose my partner. Um, I think when people are dealing with other family members, they give longer, they give a timeline. But I think that, um, I, you know, they might have given Dale a timeline, um, and it scared him so much that he went

into a frenzy to do the things he needed to do for himself. And I think he assumed I would, I, in some ways, part of my resentment of him, is that he just assumed I would be fine or I would do what I needed to do to take care of everything without communicating to me enough.

I mean, when he got the diagnosis, I don't think I've said this in an, I might have said this somewhere, but I was in the room with him at the hospital and he said there, there, uh, now I'm not even remembering the thing, but he said something like, *I've lied to you and I've done some terrible things and I'm so sorry.*

And so that was, um, that was the first thing he said after we got the diagnosis. I think, you know, that was like, that was like maybe November 15th, 2014. And so there was so much I felt was impenetrable and hard that I, I think maybe I was afraid to even have conversations with him. I just, you know, it was too, it was a lot to have those two in this, you know, right after each other.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And so, talk to me about where the poems were, or where the writing process, it seems like maybe you didn't even know if they were going to be poems. They, they started as letters. Um, were they like, I'm, I'm picturing you and Dale in a complicated togetherness getting this diagnosis and sort of one of, you with denial and one of you and, and him sort of with a more active, like kind of pushing away that, that actually the intimacy or the possible intimacy of accompanying someone to the door of death or, you know, however one can be, or can't be accompanied.

That was, that wasn't exactly, I mean, I'm thinking about the Inanna myth, um, and she goes into the underworld and each step along the way, she's told, *take off your headdress, take off your chest plate, take off each piece of what makes you a goddess, what makes you powerful, what makes you alive,* essentially.

And, you know, it's the her sister, who's queen of the underworld says, *you know, if you're going to enter the underworld, you must enter naked and bowed low.* And alone, um, in, in that sense. So I, I'm thinking of, of Dale sort of kind of from the diagnosis and you being pushed apart a little bit. Um, and I'm wondering whether, where, were the poems a way, were, were they keeping you company? Were, were

they initially intended, as you say, with the address to be... shared with him and bring him closer?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: You know, I thought we were closer than we were, but he had so much unfinished business that I gave him a lot of room for it. You know, we were, we were very, very close in lots of ways, but the more I realize when you're, when you're close with an alcoholic, you're never as close as you think.

[29:49]

And he had kept his daughter at such a distance that I thought the time was for them to really be together and to solve some problems that we had all been having for years. And in some ways, I found that I was like a weird maternal beard for their relationship. Like I was doing a lot of the parenting, uh, getting, receiving a lot of the resentment.

Um, and doing, and trying to solve problems that they were both on unable to emotionally do. So I tried to make room for for them to be close and to do the work they needed to do. And they did do some of it. I mean, I think I've recognized a lot. I seem like this bitter, anti-maternal person when I was so invested in that marriage and that family to my own detriment that i've now recognized that you can you… you might lose families in all sorts of different ways, and that it's it's not a failure. It's not a failure on you know, on my part for, you know, that's, so I was reflecting on a lot of, I, sorry I went into a little bit of a tangent, but I've, I've, I've reflected on like, um, those two months as I was hoping reparative work was doing, was being done for him and for Asia, but I don't think I got any of it [laughs].

And so the poems were a way for me to try to figure it out because I was very angry and I needed to figure out why anger was my first response when I don't actually think that's who I am.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Mm hmm. Yeah, I mean, I feel angry on your behalf often when, you know, rereading and reading the book, more about the ways in which I feel like you describe friends and sort of other support, uh, or so called support, not supporting you and Dale properly and, and, and not seeing you not seeing you as

the goddess you are, seeing you instead as like this, kind of, um, help me or, you know, uh, chore or task worker.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Or kick me [laughs]There is a, there's a kick me sign in there, but…

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, so do you feel like the poems have had a reparative effect on you and, and if so, was it in… in having access to writing them in the moment, because you've in some ways been training your whole life to have poetry available for you at this moment, was it in falling in love and being able to put both of those stories together in making the book and like, *is* poetry reparative?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: I absolutely think poetry is reparative. I mean, I think it's about having a having a way to speak about, you know, the things that are unspeakable, of having a voice when, you know, I I had been experiencing so much discrimination at University of Montana and Dale was really my ally in that. It was a deeply ambivalent relationship to have an ally who was this White man who, who was protective of his wife and, and the misogyny and discrimination she was feeling, um, with a, with a mob.

But then at the same time, I had no place to put my, my feelings about his misogyny and his inability to be more responsible to, to the kind of respect he imagined he was giving me, so but but you know, I've been vocal enough as as much as I can about the experience of being mobbed in my workplace. And it really it was it was super it was super demoralized, demoralizing and I, it was a period of time where I think lots of um, my fellow Asian American writers, um, and colleagues were afraid to talk about it happening to them too.

So I felt really isolated and I felt like a failure and I just, but I, but I couldn't be quiet anymore.

[34:44]

And so *Undergloom* right before *Grief Sequence* was a way for me to speak back and to, to start trying to figure out what, what a poetics of the abject and speaking

back would look like for me as a South Asian, you know, American poet, um, just like what, what a South Asian descent, an Asian American poet, uh, what could I write that was also, uh, could theorize the self a little bit, um, in ways that, uh, were not necessarily a narrative confession, even though I do have narrative poems, but something that I could experiment with the lyric and and figure out the politics of an abject lyric.

And so in *Grief Sequence*, because they, there were prose poems that disclose, I still wanted to keep, um, keep their ambivalence, um, their, their needs, their intimacies. I don't know. I don't know if I answered your question, but I've just been thinking about, um, I guess this is where this, your questions led me [laughs].

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, no, I think this is really important. Your, your answer, because I, I'm sort of asking about the possibility of poetry being reparative and you are really helpfully reminding me this may have been the first time that someone so close to you died but it certainly wasn't the first time anything bad had happened to you and it wasn't the first time that you needed poetry to give you a voice or, or, or act in this, uh, reparative or, or *possibly* act in this reparative way.

I'm wondering if you can say a little more about that, uh, phrase abject lyric.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah, I guess, you know, um, I started to think in earlier books about a romantic lyric hat could have a feminist discourse in it. And then the more and more I stayed in a, like an institution of poetry and craft, the more I found that the romantic lyric was too performative.

It almost, it almost gave me a kind of credibility around a White reader that I knew how to write a poem. And that started to bug me. And so I was like, *no, no, I think there's something that where I need to write to my community a little bit more about what we do if we decolonize* and, and I think about colonial poetry for South Asian poets, where the idea of prosody is so performative and colonial that I wanted to, to think about what's missing is the abject, the shame, the like, how do you, how do you reclaim such a, like a, a, a, a lyric that speaks to the world about abjection, um, and stays there and might live there and might be hard to look at.

I don't think I am… people would always say like, *Oh, it's not, you know, you say it's abject, but it, it's a little beautiful.* And I never know what to do about that because I'm like, *well, is it, if you, if you, you know, if you were, if you're recognizing it, you're not saying it's beautiful.*

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. Right. I mean, I've thought I... I feel like all the poets that I, that, you know, change my life are talking about this issue on some level, either, uh, you know, how do we decolonize the lyric, how do we decolonize the classroom, how do we decolonize the self, how do we decolonize the language, how do we survive, uh, knowing that there is no way to uh, decolonize these things fully, if we're still under capitalism, if we're still under patriarchy… these things all go together.

And, on top of all of it, you know, White supremacy is designed to keep everybody at odds with each other. Um, Doug Kearney was just talking to me about, you know, his very strong, uh, disavowal of purity and anything, you know, that's being marketed or pushed on us, uh, as purity. And, you know, you can substitute beauty for that.

You can substitute, you know, and I, I remember, this is in my lecture book that's that's coming out um, next year, but I remember being a graduate student at University of Iowa and Mark Strand came to visit and he was talking about painting, and these paintings of the crucifixion, and how they're so beautiful and you know, Jesus is bleeding all over the place and it's so beautiful and transcendent and basically says like art is always beautiful.

And so, you know, I'm like, I don't know, 22 years old. I raised my hand. I say, *but what if you want to write something that isn't beautiful because the world isn't beautiful because you want to write about ugliness. You want to write about pain or you want to write about something*

and and he basically said, *No.*

[40:02]

It all transforms, that's what art is.

And I just, you know, so that was the end of that, but, you know, I think I spent the next 28, 29 years trying to figure out, um, the problems around that and not necessarily the solutions, but the questions and how do you hold a space for the abject for the grotesque, for the, um… for pain for physical pain, emotional pain for, for, you know, and we, we now have so much more language and consciousness around the problems with mainstreaming with you know, only promoting or including or looking at the typical, the beautiful, you know, the, the White, um, but we still don't really…

I, I, I don't see enough talking about how all the beautiful, again, like it's so hard, right?

All of the forms, that can be used to hold the space for what is, um, for not a transformation into something more beautiful or more comfortable for, for the reader, for the audience, when that's a lie. Um, you know, so, so remind me what year was the first *Thinking its Presence* conference.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah, the first, so the, I don't know how much I can say, but I will say that I, I was able to, uh, settle a lawsuit, um, with University of Montana in 2013.

I will say this because, um, I, I just will say it. It wasn't very much, um, at all, I think I, I bought a hot tub. Uh, that's what I could afford, um, and the rest went to my lawyer, uh, and they said, *well, we'll give you $5,000 to bring a person of color or indigenous person to campus because it seems like you were complaining about diversity.*

So I said, *well, if that's the case, I'm going to use the $5,000 to, to run a conference and to bring as many innovative. BIPOC people together so that we can support each other and think about what we want as a, at a conference that is not trying to be AWP or institutional, but, but one where we're doing everything that we talk about in the hallways of some of these more established conferences.*

And so that's what we did and people were gracious enough to come and present and it was fabulous. So that was 2014. Dale was alive at that one and then he died, um, six weeks before the second one. Um, yeah, so, so lots of people helped me with that and I was so grateful. And you know, I, I, I think at the, at the time, um, you know, I, I just kind of, um, asked for money from little sources around the school.

And one thing that I did, uh, that I, that I feel really happy about doing was that before, um, or actually while I was filing that discrimination suit, I went around to all the people that seemed to be mishandled or peripheral or talked about or gossiped about or ignored, and asked them what their experiences were like at the university and to tell me the history of how they got there.

And it, it really, and so when I built the conference, I tried to include as many people as I could from different spaces and to really think about community as an organic thing where it was also my job to reach out… if I expected people to reach out to me, and to see me, I needed to see other people. I don't know how well I did, but I did feel like the connection made a very, it made it very deep and meaningful for me to be in the space.

[44:48]

And I found that I had a lot of unexpected allies because I, I just, I, I've, I've started to connect in different ways. I didn't get to, I didn't feel defeated by, you know, not having my, you know, creative writing colleagues like me or anything [laughs], you know? So it felt, I mean, even, and I got closer with so many of my lit colleagues because I found that the literature that we were talking about, all the theory, that's that was, that was where we were bonding over seeing each other, seeing scholarship as integral to creative work, too.

I don't know, I guess so, that's why the conference came out of the desire to think about what interdisciplinary and innovative practices looked like in spaces where you don't see it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And a whole bunch of little questions. Yeah, because you know, I spoke to a few people who went either once or or or both times and they were just like moved beyond… their work changed their thinking their way of living changed. They they you know, they really… and I remember I I was not able to go and I remember sort of this this sense that *well, let's just all stop going to AWP and let's go to this. This is where we want to be and just listen, you know,* and, and, um, you know, so I guess I'm wondering, you, I, I, I, I, I shouldn't assume, do you feel the same need for this conference and space now than you did then, and like, where, where did it go?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Oh, okay. I'll tell you. Yeah. So we did a third one in Tucson and I, I put together kind of a informal board. We, we, I think we had a really beautiful conference and it, it felt successful on many levels, but I think I realized too many, too many, there were too many cooks in the kitchen and there was an idea for it, and I worried that it, that it was not really the original mission I had, although the labor that everybody did for it was astounding, and I'm so grateful to everybody.

It, it, it felt like it was getting outside of what it, I was very protective of the conference, because it was really shoestring and it was my labor of love, and it came from a lawsuit, and it came from, it was the only thing I felt I had from too much abjection.

So, so after that conference, I had to really reflect on, on what my desire and relationship is to collaboration, to. To, um, where it should be. Um, it felt too poetry heavy, and I actually, my, my mission was actually for poets to discover lots of other people. And I felt that, that too many people were missing out on, on the other things that, that were curated.

So, um, I took, I've taken some time. I got this new job at Pomona College, and when I I asked them if I could host the conference and they were excited about it. So we're actually having the conference here. I'm, I'm running it with the English department and I'll, wait, I'll tell you the name of it.

Yeah. Um…

RACHEL ZUCKER: Originally it was called *Thinking Its Presence: Race, Creative Writing, and Literary Studies*. And that, uh, *Thinking Its Presence* is the title of a book, correct?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yes. It's, it's the title of Dorothy Wong's book, um, on Asian American subjectivity and poetry. And Dorothy was our first keynote and she has been involved with the conference ever since.

I mean, she's, she, I would say is my core kind of board member unofficially because we, we grow it together. We talk about it. We think about it. I, I mean, I just, um, because I'm honoring her book every year. I just want to, you know, make it clear that intellectually and spiritually and collaboratively, she's always with me.

She's at Williams College, um, and she'll, you know, she'll be, she'll be involved this year. Um, so this, but I also, what I try to do is figure out what the conference is in its location. And so this year, it's called *Thinking Its Presence*, and the theme is Racial Vertigo - Black-Brown Feelings and Significantly Problematic Objects, and it will be March 30th to April 2nd, 2023.

One of our keynotes is James Lee, who wrote this book called *Pedagogies of Woundedness, Illness Memoir in the Ends of the Model Minority*. And so here I say, James Lee employs the condition of cruel optimism theorized by the late Lauren Berlant to scrutinize the ambivalent feelings Pauline Chen narrates in her memoir, *Final Exam, a surgeon's reflections on mortality*.

Lee further frames Berlant's point by saying that “cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object.

[50:24]

The fear is that the loss of the promising object seen itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything. At *Thinking Its Presence* conference this year, we have invited Dr. Lee to present his work and to turn his discussion to questions of how BIPOC scholars, writers, activists, historians, and artists manage both hope and its opposite affective feelings in their work, and how attachment to problematic

objects, systems, and institutions, produce and perpetuate difficult and violent conditions for the psyche and the body.

And then we go on further to utilize my colleague here, Dr. Valerie Thomas, who works on racial and diasporic vertigo, and is of particular importance in how she talks about how the body incorporates ideas of trauma, displacement, and dispersal that the African diaspora has experienced through the slave trade being uprooted and dislocated and culturally disrupted and traumatized, and that's like one version of vertigo.

So I'm, I'm, that's my mission and then I'm inviting the Claremont Colleges, their colleagues, and my community at large. I'm going to send this out to curate 11 panels… 11 to 12 panels, but that's what it's going to look like.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Amazing! And is it going to be open to the public or just to Claremont students?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: It's going to be open to the public. We'll probably have just a small registration fee for, for people who are not alumni, students, or faculty of the Claremont colleges, but it will be open to the public, it'll be much smaller so that people don't have to choose the events, they can go to everything and everyone can go to everything together to talk about it.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, that's a beautiful model. Yeah. Yeah. Sometimes less is more, all these choices. So I very hard to have community.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah, I wanted the last three to be big. So people could be involved. But now I think they know how to be involved with each other so they can come, and there's there's many more writers I've checked in with that I need to formally invite, so I know that I have friends who have gotten little notes from me and I'm gonna be incorporating them into this as well.

RACHEL ZUCKER: And what, if anything,do you need or would you want to ask for from, you know, so it's basically a year from now, do you need money?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: I, I mean, I am looking, I think I've maxed out my budget already without even figuring out my logistics [laughs]. Um, but I, what I will be doing is looking for partnerships. Um, I, you know, I will be… I will be working with different organizations in the Claremont Colleges. Um, I'm hoping to tap into some larger communities as I circulate the mission. So people will start getting a note from me with this mission. And I'll be asking for collaboration.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Beautiful. I want to go back to something that you said. Well, I'll go back… your description of the next conference, um, brought me back to a question I was going to ask earlier, the idea of attachment to a problematic object, um, makes me remember that I wanted to talk to you about heterosexuality [laughs].

And particularly, um, also, I mean, I myself find heterosexuality very bizarre. Um. It is my, it feels like, uh, mostly my sort of, uh, mostly my, uh, I don't know, I don't even know what you're you were to use. I was going to use the word natural. That doesn't really seem right. It seems to be my sexual orientation. Um, uh, but, but not, um, but also not.

Well, let me be more explicit. I can't, I can't be completely explicit because my love is, is, has children and they don't yet know about our relationship, uh, mine do, but, uh, even though I feel like this is the first person that I've fallen in love with, as opposed to the first man that I've fallen in love with, he is a cis man.

[55:06]

And it just seems bizarre. It just seems completely bizarre that, that heterosexuality makes any sense on a, on a level of like, how one could maintain, uh, could avoid the internalized misogyny and the directed misogyny while in a heterosexual relationship, not even if the partner is misogynist. And then on top of it, this is the first person that I've really fallen deeply, deeply in love with who's not Jewish.

Um, who's White, you know, I I'm thinking especially about how complicated it must have been for you to have a real protector, an ally, at a time when you were assaulted by this discrimination.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yes, it's complicated. Um, I mean, I think I, it's, it's complicated because I think also, you know, his daughter found him to have a lot of misogyny, as well as his ex-wife.

And so I think I was protecting him from them, but also at the end of the day, in their minds, they're, they've been right all along. Look at me. Look at me aligning with, you know, a misogynist. And through a lot of therapy, my therapist was like, *you know what? None of them were right. You get to have your, the integrity of your experience of believing somebody and, and, and valuing them the way they wanted you to because that is who you are*.

You know, like in some way, yeah, so I value, so I, I like protected Dale's wounds that were so deeply connected to misogyny and abuse where I, that was taken out on me, and do I have to feel worse now for giving him the benefit of the doubt for for seeing him the way he wanted to be seen until it took its toll?

That's the question I have is, um, *isn't this what's possibly, I mean this I'm saying this to myself, like isn't this what's good about me is that I try to believe in people?*

I'm not saying I'm a chump [laughs], but I am trying to think about like I don't want to go into the world always seeing the cracks and seeing through people or judging and and, and, and not giving myself a full and rich experience.

I, I believed in Dale and that's the reason he attached to me is maybe he didn't, I don't know who did. And it was, you know, I'm not saying that sounds like martyrdom, but I, I think I do that with lots of people. I have to figure out what that boundary looks like now. Because it hurts too much and I'm older.

But I was 28, and I thought I was seeing a kind of truth of a person who wanted that truth to be real. I'm not, I mean now I, I mean I think about me too and I think about a, lots of you know, I think about toxic masculinity. Um, I think about the

love I have now and I do think, um, Mike has had a very rich exploration of, of, of, um, of thinking about relationships and he taught me so much, and there's ways in which the texture of who we know and what their life is about, um, can take on its own hidden space.

Um, I know that's like all veiled, but you and I will talk about it. Um, but I think what happened is, there's a beautiful vulnerability, I think, of people who live in the more widowed world of loss. And I think that, that, that doesn't talk about heteronormativity, but I, I am talking about ways in which you fall out of the gendered spaces, or caregiving or caretaking or loving are different, you know, exist in a different realm.

[59:46]

Um, but, but you know, in some ways that, learning what I could not endure anymore allowed me to be open and I, I'm sad for Dale because he died, and so I'm still living and that's really confusing and then I think, *well, we live the lives we create on some level, things happen to us too*, um, when it's full of toxic masculinity, addiction, abuse and a lot of pain… I did the best I could with somebody. I tried to love them the best I could. And I believe in love. Is that, I know that's really simple.

RACHEL ZUCKER: That is not simple at all. I, I, I, I, I mean, I'm just trying sort of not to break into tears. It's, it's, it's both, I think it's both the, the simplest, the hardest, the most profound, you know, I'm just, and I just kind of want to say it out loud again.

Like, I mean, I, I feel like no phrase better describes my feeling about choosing to leave my very long marriage than, *I did the best I could, and I believe in love.*

Um, what I was going to say is, is that also there's this very… I keep asking my love, like, *where is the story about us? Where is the story of a subsequent love? Uh, of a love that, you know, comes after, that, that isn't about marriage and children that isn't about, you know, youth, that isn't about these, all of these other*

things, but is a different kind of intimacy and attachment that, you know, I always believed in, even though I am not sure I really had any evidence of it anywhere?

Um, you know, I think about the line, I think it's in your… it's in the poem "I Look at your Handwriting," and this was one of the lines. I was reading it in his apartment and I just stopped. And it just says, "because then and suddenly I loved again, and it arose against sequential time. And this makes loving two persons, its own counsel. One followed the other, but there is still yet simultaneity. The other loved me, but had trouble loving, and I had to absorb this after death. There is loving without knowing and loving with so much knowing two bodies separate in the night after the coupling of evening time."

I mean, the, the poems, I always wonder how much of reading deeply and well is about just letting the things attach to you, wherever you are and how much of it is about like pushing that connection or, or, or or being like, *well, I should read this book as if, you know, I'm not just, you know, in this love,* but I, but I have to just say like these, these poems in particular, just like, I was so grateful to, for them. Um, because I, I don't really see them elsewhere.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Uh, you know, Mike saved my life and gave me, I, I, I just found that I, I didn't know how, how for so long I was so stagnant.

And just, just, you know, I'm, what, what you're going through, I imagine, what, what was so exciting and intoxicating is, is having all of those feelings stirred up in your body. Feeling like your youth is back because you're ha, you're, you're, you can't, you, you, you know, you, I sounded like a giddy, you know, school girl to everybody, you know, I would talk about just the silliest things and I was so grateful to have that lightness.

That lightness was like the most magical thing in the world. And, and to, to, to, yeah, just to, to find it again, or to find it for the first time. I mean, really, I do feel like loving Mike is loving for the first time. Um, I think that when you're younger, you can often just fall into, uh, ideas of yourself. You know, you get to a point in your life where you don't fall into things anymore.

[1:04:45]

Or you try not to you when you're falling into things you're like really upset that you've fallen into something. I think. Or this is how I feel. Um, so, so being conscious of my feelings and the excitement of what can happen next was just, I, I, I just, I, I've, you know, I mean, we're still crazy in love and it's seven years and we're facing this cancer, but the fact is, we just, the love is so… sacred.

And sacred, he would wince. he's just like, *could you, must you call it sacred?* But I know he, I know he agrees with me. So I do feel like I thought that I had a kind of love because it was endurance. But that's not, now when I've, there were just no, there were never any red flags at all. And I, I can wake up every day and be grateful for no red flags.

I mean, our big red flag is cancer, which there's nothing we can do about. And we, you know, um, but it makes us really hold on tight. Anyway, I'm just sort of, and that became so exquisite to just... the one beautiful thing about grieving is I gave up time for a while because I was so shell shocked.

But when we fell in love, it's like I had… I had figured out that I could have time, and then bringing our time together was, was gorgeous. So I'm just saying, like, it is, I'm so happy for you, because it's just, it's so hard won, you know?

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I, thank you for being happy for me. Um, I, I remember having a hard time being happy for other people who had found love when I felt so deprived and so in this scarcity economy. And, but I was in love with my family. I was in love with having made a family with Josh, and I was in love with the idea of Josh, and with the idea of, of, you know, and with who we were when we met, um, I, I, not necessarily in love with that, but just a lot of, um, sympathy for, for those people, but yeah.

I mean, I, you know, when I was lying in the hospital and, you know, waiting in the weeks that I was waiting to have the surgery that I didn't even end up having at the very last moment, I didn't end up needing it, but doing all of those tasks of changing who my health proxy was, of making sure my will was correct and, um,

making sure the divorce was final, and, you know, knowing that I was going to go in for this surgery and I was going to wake up and I was going to find out if it was ovarian cancer and or not, and what the treatment was going to be, um, was truly a gift for me because it clarified so many things, and it wiped away a lot of the shame and the guilt that I felt about disrupting my kids lives and not having been able to make the marriage work, and really my priorities were so clear and I don't think I could have entered into this love until I got there.

And you know, what a miracle for me that I did have more time after that. And I don't know what's going to happen. I don't have no idea, you know, how much time I have, or he has, or any of us has, um, which is very different from, you know, having a cancer diagnosis and not knowing how much time, but it's…

What a, what a miracle, like really, so thank you for, for, for being happy for me and, and, and it's so funny because like now, not only do I feel so grateful to have my love's love and to love, but I just feel like I love everybody.

[1:09:37]

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: I just want everybody to find their love or whether it's a person or a thing or an animal or, you know, just, yeah, I, I, I feel like it's kind of as simple as that.

And this is a, this is a very, as you said, conscious… grown up, sober part of my life and, and also so ridiculously like, I mean, I, I, in a way, I feel like this is the girlhood I never had.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Like you should have it!

RACHEL ZUCKER: Okay. Back to you. Back to you. If you'd want to read maybe one of the poems, uh, “Abide”?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Oh, sure. Yeah. I mean, I, I love “Abide,” because it, it's one of the first, uh, love poems I wrote for Mike.

[Reads “Abide”]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Ugh, I just love that so much. Um, how did you meet Mike?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Oh, so, it's funny, so, okay, so, just going back to 2009, you know, my, my, my dad had a really complicated situation where he lost his job as the president of a college. It was very much a discriminatory thing. And so we knew we were going to have to fight, uh, that and get, get a lawyer.

And so in 1996, I bought my condo in Brooklyn for $60,000. I mean, that's like, a Carroll Gardens apartment for $60,000. That was like the best thing I ever did in my life. Um, and so I borrowed the money from my mother's friend and we paid her back and, and then my father said he's gonna need the money, uh, for his lawsuit, so I needed to sell the condo.

So I did, um, and then he ended up being okay. He, he was able to kind of rebuild his business. He ended up being okay, so he said, *Look, um, maybe you wanna invest a little bit of that money*. Um, and I found that I was so, um, just, I, I was really feeling... alienated in Missoula, and I kept fantasizing about how can we get away.

So, I told Dale, *let's get in the car and go to Seattle. And let's look and see if there's a condo there, and you can make your art, or maybe you can consult, or maybe you can have a business in, you know, in doing more, like, sound, you know, and producing there*. So I just kind of was developing an idea.

Anyway, I saw an advertisement of condos online. And there was like a very non traditional theater space that some guy had listed. So I wrote him and said, *Do you know of any non traditional spaces like the one you have listed here?* And it was Mike. And so, so he was our realtor. And he sold us this condo, um, in Belltown that was, um, um, that, that he, yeah, he even gave me his commission because I was ready to walk away, um, cause I wasn't sure. It was just, I felt confused about

the whole thing. Um, I mean, it was a privilege to be confused about it, but I thought I was making a good investment, but I was also nervous about it because… anyway, we stayed in touch with him, um, he sent newsletters.

I thought he was an odd, kind of solitary, sad guy. And Dale would always say he's very deeply sad. Um, but then after Dale died, I, I was in Seattle for the first time. Uh, I had, the last time I had been with Dale. Um, and I asked him if he wanted to have a drink because I wanted to meet with widowed people to talk about how they grieved. And he had reached out to talk about Marie, and Marie is a whole other story, um, but we had started talking a little bit about Marie and he wanted to share her story.

[1:14:43]

And so we had like a five hour drink where he just was just became my friend and we, um, we just fell into talking all the time and having like nine hour conversations a week. And he's very quiet so it was a strange occurrence that we would just you know, we were we were doing that like, you know 8 30 p.m. to 2 in the morning breathing on the phone together and not addressing what was going on between us.

We just became very attached to each other and finally I pursued him, maybe, you know, I, I, we started talking in May and I just, I just confronted him with my feelings in October of that year. And actually we had a commitment ceremony, October 2nd, cause that's the day that we, um, we kind of got together.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Beautiful!

PRAGEETA SHARMA: But he was going to just let us be, you know, he just thought the grief was talking all the time. So he just gave me space.

And he didn't know how he felt about me. I'm not really his type, um, and he's not my type, but we ended up being so perfectly each other's type.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Isn't that wild? And, and I know, you know, this, this is something that comes up a lot, um, in the book that you're not a religious person, and yet how do you explain these things?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: You know, it's complicated because I, you know, I, this new book I've, I've written that I, I gave Joshua, so we'll see what he says. It's called *Onement I*, um, which I've, I'm thinking of actually, I mean, Barnett Newman has a series from his *Onement* series. This is, this is, um, Onement, um, Six, but I, but *Onement I* was, was the one that I, I first looked at, um, and so my book title is *Won Min*t, instead of the number one, it's W O N, so Onement One.

And so in some ways, if we're thinking about religion, um, the concept of one mint, or oneness, um, is, is in Hinduism. Um, I think what happened is that my father is a Hindu priest and, and, you know, he cremated Dale. He married me to Dale. He did my commitment ceremony, uh, with Mike, um, it's just that I see it more philosophically, and I found that when I was addressing death, I don't think religion really helped me.

I think, I don't know if I believe in the afterlife. I did for a little while when I was doing some cremation rituals, but it felt a little manufactured or too, um, magical for me. So, atheism is where I settle into when I don't have answers, but, but my spirituality feels intact, and my ideas of philosophy feel intact, and my idea of one, of feeling whole and thinking about, um, what my, what are the rituals to feel whole feel spiritual.

So, you know, it's also that I love my parents so much and they're so religious, but they don't seem to and I love that... and I hope my dad… and they don't seem to have the answers. Um, they don't seem to necessarily have them for themselves through religion. So I'm just confused. My, the third thing I want to say about being a Hindu is that I am really disappointed at going back to what Doug Kearney said about purity.

I'm really disappointed with you know, like Hindu supremacy and Hindutva and um, and Casteism and so I, I'm not taking the same kind of pride in being a Hindu that that… it's too scary and too pure, you know, it's, it's reliant on too much purity,

and it feels too, and so I'm not quite sure what I've learned from Hinduism other than stories and myths… and, I do have a sense of ethics that I do know comes from Hinduism, but I'm still trying to sort it all out. And I think I want to think about it philosophically. So I, this new book is trying to map out like…

[pause]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh my gosh, I can't wait. So, you have a full draft of the book?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: I do, yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Do you want to read anything from it or?

[1:19:48]

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Oh yeah, I can read, I've read, I've been, I can read a poem, um, let me just find it, um, let's see here. Let's see if I can find it though. This is the… oh, you know what? I'm gonna find it on my phone like my students do I'm like, wait a second, I know how to find it another way now!

Yeah, I have a poem I have two poems in Harp & Altar, the recent um, the recent Harp & Altar, um, Winter 2022, um, and this poem, I think, um, speaks to both Barnett Newman and ideas of one mint and other things that we've talked about actually. Um, and I think the manuscript actually opens with this poem.

Uh, so the, the poem is A One Won. And so it's, it's, um, I write out the number one and then it's W O N, a one won.

[Reads "A One Won"]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Oh, so, what's going to happen to me? I need these poems right now! Well, that one's published, right? And, Okay. So that's good.

Um, oh, I'm, I'm, I'm just so excited. And tell me, are these. Poems in sequence, are they, are they separate?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: No, they're all separate. I mean, the other poem you'll see in Harp & Altar, like just is, is a tough one, which I'm not going to read, but we can talk about it is about White fragility and friendship.

So I do start talking more about race and feminism and disappointment and anger and false friends. Like, I think I go deeper into it in this new book. Um, and so I kind of try to, I try to look at being angry and racialized, but also trying to center myself in my anger. I think that I, I'm only speaking about my community, but I think with South Asian writing, I, I just want to try to figure out if I can be in company with the stuff that's not talked about.

And, and, and if we're thinking about model minority things, like I just have held it in for too long, and so I'm trying to, and also I think there's lateral violence to talk about, um, that, you know, BIPOC, um, have to, you know, figure out their relation to each other and be more intersectional rather than top down stuff, and with women too, you know?

So I'm just trying to, I'm writing about that stuff.

RACHEL ZUCKER:Yeah. I'm wondering, uh, a few questions.

Do you have other poets, books of poetry, or even artists who are also keeping company with these things that are not talked about, you know, Brenda Shaughnessy came to mind when I was thinking about the false friends, um, and some of the ways in which she writes about anger.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I, I, I, you know, uh, Sandra Lim who's coming next week, I love the way, um, she, she kind of dissects a relational moment or… teases out something harder about a moment. Um, Divya Victor is somebody I, you know, I love the new book. Um, I love *Curb.* I've loved *Kith.* Um, we're all, we're kind of talking about these things.

We talk about lateral violence. I, I think I'm finding like a really rich, South Asian community of people I, you know, I, I'm getting to know or known and we're, we're getting, we're, we're confessing more about those, um, harder feelings. I mean, I, you know, I talked with Kathy Park Hong in Minor Feelings about things that I experienced, you know, um, and, and that was really helpful.

[1:25:14]

I think she gave me a voice to stuff that I thought was hard. Uh, so I'm grateful to her. I'm grateful for the work she's doing. I think it's just trying to, you know, I, Dorothy Wong and I are talking about White fragility and I mean, something interesting, Rachel, that you and I should talk about is the neutrality of the lyric, the White lyric. Um, and the pro and, and, and how ultimately that beauty makes a violence, but it, it gets so rewarded.

I mean, I don't, I mean, I'm not trying to, there, there's some, there's some older White women who have written a certain way and, and were expected to kind of follow in their footsteps, and some of them are really loved, but I've often found the lyric to, to be a little too neutral for me.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. Oh, I mean, this is the dumbest way to talk about it, but I have this weird thing where, so in my current state of wonderful love, he's not the first person to ever say anything nice to me, but it feels like that because he's the first person I believe. Um, and that's really interesting because you know, it, it makes it more, it makes me less… I I'm also responsible for, you know, for not feeling beautiful, for not, you know, for feeling too much, for feeling, you know, all of these things.

But one of the things I notice is that, um, you know, when we're together, it's amazing. Um, when we're not together, it's difficult. And the transitions are difficult. And before I see him, uh, when I know I'm going to see him, but before I see him, I have this like weird body dysmorphia thing where I'm like, *wow, it's been three days since I've seen him. How is it that I've become an old and ugly?* Like I, and I look in the mirror and that is what I see. Like I can't, I can't somehow get back to how he sees me or even a more realistic version of how I am. And

there's something that feels very connected to me about the way that the lyric… it's like a false, um… I don't know. It's I, it makes me also remember being in Jori Graham's office when she was my thesis advisor and she would say all of these wonderful things about my poems and I would be like, Yes. *Oh, they're so good. Oh my god,* and I'd leave her office, and it would just disappear.

Like there was… there was no substance. The poems themselves did not have it. It was almost like the, the poems only existed in this transformational state within her gaze, the lyric only had, you know, the, the, the, the male gaze, the White gaze is what is determining the beauty of the lyric, like the, and I think that's part of, I love your use of the word neutrality for it, because if it's neutral, it can be co opted so easily by these forces that are wanting me to like buy things and be afraid of other people and not love.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: You know, it was Dorothy's word neutrality, I just want to give her credit because in some ways everything you've just said is, is sort of what you get coaxed into, I mean, is that gaze, but I also think what you're saying that's, that's coming out in, in sort of sideways is the ambition to push for more, whether it's, you know, getting at more truth or feeling solid with your own gaze back at yourself.

But I do think that maybe we have kind of been duped with this neutrality into not being able to get further into some of the other topics or the needs or the desires or the sustaining, um, credibility of ourselves, you know?

[1:30:04]

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah. And I think this, this notion of like transforming the real or whatever it is, right? Like, uh. Was it Sianne Ngai's book? Um, *Ugly Feelings*? Yeah. Yeah. Right. Like how do we. I mean, we have them, I think, I think if we're alive, we have ugly feelings. Um, we, and, and particularly, you know, if you have been, um, you've spent your whole life, um, in a, in a system that is trying to kill you and defame you and demean you and belittle you and, you know, make things almost impossible.

Uh, how are you not going to have, uh, I mean, it, it would be bizarre if, if, if in that situation, you didn't have ugly feelings to say the least.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah, yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: But then to be pressured into turning them into something basically that a White audience can relate to enjoy, you know, uh, cry over, but just enough. Just enough is, is really, and this, these are deeply, deeply embedded in all of our creative writing programs in the gatekeeping mechanisms at the publishers and at the academy and, you know, all of these things, it's really hard to break out of them.

You know, we were all taught by people who were taught by people who were taught by basically White men. Do you feel like your own writing and your own kind of mental and emotional space… how has, how have those changed since you've been, since you have escaped, left, actively left, Montana?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: I mean, I, I, I really, really appreciate my colleagues and my environment and my community here. I feel like I was given a second chance to thrive.

Um, I would have stayed at Montana and did the best I could there, but, but Pomona's been a really good place. My, my colleagues are really brilliant, um, Valorie Thomas and Kylaa Tompkins, and, and we have two new poets, um, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson and Amaud Jamaul Johnson are here, um, so it's just really, it's really fun to think about poetry here and theory and we're a, we're, we're, we're a department that, um, and Jonathan Lethem is here and he's lovely and we're a department that has comfortably merged theory and, and creative writing. I, I, you know, there's some theory wars and there's some difficulty, um, like lots of institutions have.

Um, and so it, it has to do a lot more work for some of my colleagues, so I won't, you know, I came from one particular place to another, so I have a different experience of Pomona. Um, so there, you know, I think about, you know, Claudia's *Citizen* and I do think about the history of this place and and what it has done for

Black and brown bodies that has been really problematic. But I think for me, I've, I've, I've wanted to come in and, and try to support and hear and listen and have community.

And I've been, I've been met there and, and I feel seen and I feel supported and I try to do the same, and the students are wonderful. And I miss the mountains, um, of, of the West of that, of that West. But I, I do love… I love the resources too, so I have resources that I didn't, I didn't have at Montana. I mean, although what I'm thrilled about is that a professor who had been here, I think over 10 years ago, will now be the new provost next year at Montana, um, so I think things will change there.

RACHEL ZUCKER: What either books, resources, or practices would you recommend for, for people who are going through, um, the grieving and the mourning period, particularly people who consider themselves mostly secular or atheist?

But I also want to ask you, which resources or practices or books or pieces of art you might recommend for either someone who's teaching in an MFA program or in, in, in, in, in anywhere, or a student and who is basically being assaulted by discrimination and, and is maybe not able, doesn't have the means, um, to bring a lawsuit.

[1:35:04]

And, and not that a lawsuit is easy, but you know, is really stuck. Um, can't move out of that space, and I, and I, I will, I was just thinking about the epigraph to *Grief Sequence* by Roland Barthes, um, "not to suppress mourning, suffering, the stupid notion that time will do away with such a thing, but to change it, transform it, to shift it from a static stasis, obstruction, recurrences of the same thing, to a fluid state."

So I'm thinking of, okay, we can't solve these things. Certainly in the moment as individuals, we can't solve these things. We can't solve death. We can't solve institutional, um, and or individual, systemic racism, but what could.. what what

possibilities are there to change things into a fluid state so that at least there's movement, not the suppression, and not the, uh, not being flooded, I guess?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah, I mean, I think, I think there's so many different resources, I guess, what I, I want to say like a really important takeaway for me. Um, I found a lot of resources. There's like a, there's, there's books like *Presumed Incompetent*, which collects stories and testimonies. Um, there's, um, lots like Matt, Matthew Salesses talks about craft and his new fiction book on craft.

Uh, there's so many ways to think about decolonizing, you know, craft in the workshop and, and um, I think we can find a lot, but I, I will say, what ends up, I want to talk about the lateral violence that happens. So often, sometimes we'll, um, a person like us, another person of color, or if we think about, you know, another woman and they let us down, because there's still too many power alliances.

And so, so then you get kind of wounded again because you're trying to have a voice and you're trying to align. People don't talk about the lateral violence where you disappoint one another and so you don't take care of one another. So I would say, um, you know, align with people who understand both their privilege, understand the power, and are safe enough that they have nothing to lose when they try… that they want to help you. I think the people who helped me took themselves out of strategies of power and saw me for me, and I try to do that with people.

I also, I'm not going to just work to point out everything that's wrong for them. I want to try to help their career or their path. I think often people, they don't mean to, but they end up using each other for their own, you know problem, but then they don't… they could leave somebody out to dry, you know, and not, and not need them anymore. Yeah I've seen a lot of that people have alliances over fighting something but then are not there for each other to support the work of lifting that person up through their through their work, through who they what makes them vibrant, I believe.

So I know I sound really, you know, it's just like, sometimes we just stay in it to fight and then we don't support each other with vibrance, you know, I, if I'm doing

well, then I'm just going to try to help my friends do well and sometimes they need that rather than just like, you know, having like seven meetings where we're going to fight all the time and then, you know, and then we're just, you know, licking our wounds separately.

Yeah. I don't know if that made any sense, but -

RACHEL ZUCKER: Right. Or one person gets the job, you know, because, because you know, there's been a good fight to make sure that one person gets a job, but it's, you know, it's yeah. Supporting each other with vibrancy. That's gorgeous.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: And, you know, recognizing that it's precarious.

So like, you know, I have friends and I, you know, like I, I, this is a longer conversation and we can, this is like, you and I need a cocktail. But it's like, I sometimes feel like I've supported people and then they've gotten to where they've needed to go and they've just kicked me to the curb. And I see it all in relation to power.

[1:39:50]

And then I'm like, you know what, it's not fair for me to diminish myself because I'm seeing the gaze, the power gaze through somebody else's eyes. So I don't want to do that to people. You know, I want to keep my ego in check.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, which, which we're really not trained to do and we're not rewarded for and, you know, and, and I, I think one of the ways that I've kind of overcome White, white fragility to the, to the extent that I have, I still have a lot of White fragility, is to, is to be angry about some things. And I've been so sort of, um, no one likes an angry woman.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: I know. Yeah.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Um, you know, it's that but that anger, at least for me has been necessary in figuring out how to be more loving and supportive in a long standing, long term committed way to my peers, to my colleagues, to my students, to, to, to strangers even, you know…

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I, I think just, you know, recognizing it's precarious.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Yeah, and yeah. Anything that I didn't ask you that you were really hoping I would, or anything you want to ask me before the, the, you know, the recording goes off? I mean, this has been, I feel like I got so so much. But anything?

PRAGEETA SHARMA: No, this seems this is just lovely.

I'm looking forward to just continuing our conversations and, um, I'm just grateful for this time. I really think we covered so much that I, I want to just savor it and reflect on it. Wonderful.

RACHEL ZUCKER: All right. Well, let's talk soon. And you really, I just want to thank you just one more time for your time, but also for the book, which just came to me at this really, really meaningful time. Um, and. Yeah, I'm justreally grateful. Thank you.

PRAGEETA SHARMA: Thank you, Rachel. Thank you so much, Rachel. I can't wait to, to talk about all the wonderful things that we've covered.

RACHEL ZUCKER: Wonderful. Okay. Bye!

[music]

Conclusion

You've been listening to Episode 101 of Commonplace. with Prageeta Sharma. The fourth *Thinking Its Presence Conference, Racial Vertigo, Black Brown Feelings,*

and Significantly Problematic Objects, will take place March 30th through April 2nd, 2023, at Pomona College. After this outro, you'll hear a clip of Talk Easy with Sam Fragoso Speaking with poet Rupi Kaur. After that, stay tuned for a short testimonial about how Commonplace has impacted one of our listeners.

If you have a favorite Commonplace moment or something you'd like to share, please record an audio message and email it to us or reach out to us via Google Voice or Speakpipe, both of which you can find on our website. If you'd like to contribute financially to the collaborative undertaking that is commonpodcast.com.

This episode was produced by me, Valentine Conaty, Christine Larusso, and Lenga Chinyoka. Many thanks to Wave Books, Fence Books, SubPress, Stanford University Press, Catapult, and all the presses who give us their wonderful books. The music you're listening to was composed and performed by Judah Darwin Zucker Gorin.

Thank you to all the patrons who support Commonplace. And thank you, listener. Thank you for listening.

[music]

Special excerpt of Talk Easy with Sam Fragoso and Rupi Kaur

[1:44:49

RUPI KAUR: As I was writing *Milk and Honey*, I went from girl to woman through that book. Then writing became a very scary and triggering thing. Like, I couldn't walk into bookstores. I didn't want to hear the word “poetry.” I didn't even want to hear the word “book.” Like, people would say that and my entire body would just, like, because it was... so many things, like, when, when is the next one coming, and like, how do I recreate the success of the first one again?

Like, that ate at me and just made me so sick. People expect you to do that. Two months, I was given to write the second book, and of course, I did not meet that

deadline. But then, all of a sudden, everyone's like, well, you know… if you don't hurry up, if you take a break, you're just here today, gone tomorrow.

And *Homebody*, the third one, is about me trying to actually be like, let me write the book that I need to write. Because *The Sun and Her Flowers* was the book that I thought the world wanted me to write.

SAM FRAGOSO: You said, "With the first book, I kept thinking, is this all a mistake? Am I just a one hit wonder? Then the second book happened, and I realized that I can do this a third, fourth and fifth time. I just want to give it time. I just want to create the best thing going forward. When I'm 89 years old, lying in my bed somewhere, I want to feel good about what I've done." Do you think you're on your way to being that 89 year old now?

RUPI KAUR: Yeah, I do. I promised myself I'm never going to sign another book contract. That has freed my creativity. They get the book when I tell them they're getting the book, and they will be happy with the book that they get. That's the rule. And um, it's allowed me to become creative again. I don't tense up when I hear the word "poetry," and I'm falling back in love with the thing that people say they love me for.

And so, it's so funny because it took so long to get there. But um, I mean, I already wrote a fourth book, but only because I had to free myself from the ability to do so. You know, learn to get off the train and then like hop back on with a nice coffee, get off in a couple stops, smell the flowers and then get back on sort of thing.

SAM FRAGOSO: Well, I wish that for you.

RUPI KAUR: Thank you. I really appreciate it.

SAM FRAGOSO: Rupi Kaur, thank you for the time.

RUPI KAUR: Thank you so much.

[music]

Listener Testimonial

My name is Noah. I live in New York City in the United States. I was a stranger on a dating app who met Rachel on a dating app and we proceeded to date for a hot minute.

Before I met her, she let me know that she had a podcast, and when she sent me the link that I saw was about poetry, my first reaction was, *Yep, I'm probably never gonna meet her.* Um, and I really don't want to listen to anything about poetry. Um, but she was cute in her photos and I do kind of have a fetish for, uh, Terry Gross.

And between listening to the first five minutes of the podcast, and seeing her pictures where she looked like a sexy Terry Gross, I was like, o*kay, don't be closed minded.* And after listening to the first episode, I had to, uh, question my, uh, my opinions and beliefs about poetry. Because like many other people who, uh, reject things unthinkingly, um, I thought poetry is one of these artsy fartsy arts of people who can't get at anything else and kind of have this opinion of poets as people who are narcissists, who don't really uh, contribute to society.

But after listening to it, it clicked… it's like, *oh, poetry is actually synonymous with philosophy and psychology, and emotional well being, and mental health, and people, and art, and artists who actually like to live and experience things.* And it kind of flipped a switch. Um, which made me automatically want to meet Rachel.

[1:49:53]

Um, so much so that, uh, I, uh, wanted to make a good impression on her, and I made her dessert even before I met her. Um, I, my main hobby is, I'm a distance cyclist, and I like to listen to podcasts and books and music on, uh, my headphones while I go out for an entire day. And, uh, Commonplace is now one of the regular podcasts I listen to.

Now, why I listen... part of it began with getting to know this woman, Rachel. Um, then it began, then as we were dating and after, it was, *oh, uh, I'm actually interested in the content and hearing how the minds of the people she's*

interviewing are. And lately, uh, as my relationship with Rachel changed, I kind of want to hear more about her and her life.

Because she hinted at, uh, issuing something personal about what's going on with her, which I have an idea of, but don't have the details, but, um, I really want to hear it.

I mean, as already mentioned, I've gotten, regardless of my personal relationship with Rachel, um, I found the podcast to actually expand my mind in a way that is in league and in good timing and rhyming with other factors in my life. One is the pandemic of, as with a lot of people have caused us to look inwards because it is dangerous to go outside.

And the other side of it is a very big shift in my perspective, uh, of taking things in. And Commonplace is a really good source to, uh, kind of shape that new elasticity that my brain has come to have… my brain, my mind has come to have over the last year or two. I wish it'd come out on a regular schedule, even if it was like once a month or something.

And, when Rachel hints at personal things, I wish she'd get more personal. She doesn't have to spend a whole podcast talking about herself. But when she interviews people, it's good to know more about her own angle and perspective. And, you know, um, I think that'll just bring more to the podcast and make people, uh, understand why she questions what she questions and, um, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

I'm hoping to sit down with her in person and just have the kind of conversation we had before, during, and slightly after we dated. Um, I miss that. Because, I think, Rachel is now a good friend of mine, but, you know, it's a little bit touch and go because she's quickly entered a new romantic relationship and she's kind of had rethought her approach to dating.

While I have a more of a stable, fixed view and I'm not changing that fast, but I want to keep her in my life. I just enjoy talking to her and I enjoy listening to her.