

ON LIFE AND WORDS:

AN INTERVIEW WITH VEENA DAS

Interviewed by: Ash Zengin

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Veena Das is a professor of Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University. She has written a lot on the relationship between violence and everyday life, and provided remarkable ethnographic and theoretical insights concerning the analysis of this relationship. Especially focusing on the exercise of state violence in everyday lives of particular populations, she analyzes how subjectivities are constructed and shaped. In Veena Das's works, violence is not just a means of power; violence is, at the same time, a productive force that constructs and shapes specific life forms, communities and subjectivities. Yet for Das, to conceptualize violent acts does not necessarily mean to write just about witnessing or remembering violence. In other words, Veena Das's anthropology is not only dealing with what is representable through words. On the contrary, her focus is on moments, bodies, conditions and voices that cannot be translated into words and that go beyond representation. That is to say, the realms of mundane and ordinary lie at the very heart of her anthropology and she traces how the violent events attach themselves to "the recesses of the ordinary." To think in Veena Das's terms is also to see the strong link between anthropology and the political, as well as understand the ordinary as politically charged by violence.

You are going to read an interview that is exactly about both a theory and a possibility of anthropology as such. The interview questions are prepared with regard to Veena Das's latest book, *Life and Words*, which also gives us important clues about her general anthropological framework since the book is a collection of her works on different violence forms (sexual, ethnic, communal and state violence etc.). *Life and Words* owes its content to two catastrophically violent events, and their aftermath effects on social and cultural lives: first, the partition of India in 1947 and its consequences in the Punjabi families' lives, who needed to migrate to India following the riots in the aftermath of the partition; second, the assassination of Indra Ghandi in 1984 and its subsequent violent acts that targeted the Sikh population in Delhi, and that are still shaping their lives.

This interview was made possible when Veena Das visited Toronto for a lecture at York University on September 24, 2009. While reading the interview, in some parts you will also come across another name, Deepa Rajkumar. She joined our meeting as a guest listener and contributed to some discussions. She completed her Ph.D. in Political Science at York University in 2009.

Ash: In contemporary anthropological theory, your works are mostly acknowledged for understanding the social and cultural force of violence in constructing subjectivities and everyday life. You provide new ways of interpreting violence that focus on violence as a productive force that changes the ordinary rather than conceptualizing violence as a force that

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interrupts ordinary. In other words, you are talking about violence as it “descends into the ordinary”. What is the significance of approaching violence in this way?

Veena: Most of the writings on the notion of the event through which massive violence is often figured have the notion that an event comes from nowhere. You know the event is seen as something, which is completely incomprehensible and disrupts the ordinary. While there is some truth to this talk this it is also, I realize, a very masculinist reading of both the issue of violence and the way in which we might want to think about the event. It has that kind of looking towards a certain kind of an orgasmic moment so to say. So it is very interesting to think about a different kind of temporality for the event so to think both in terms of what the after-life of the event is and how it is contained within the everyday. For what we are talking about it is not an after-life only; it is not that the event gets over and then life gets reproduced. It is also to come to terms with the fact that events of violence are woven into the fabric of everyday life. I think it is quite possible that I might have arrived somewhat late but I arrived at this understanding because so many of the people I worked with or I was very close to, were women. So their preoccupations were somewhat different than the preoccupations of men. There were concerned not so much with how the event was going to be represented in the public domain, but: “what are the forms of expression in the everyday life, in which both kind of ideas about injustice or violation could be communicated, and the ways in which what I have called the repair of relationships could take place?”. So I do want to say that these are completely opposite preoccupations. In my book, when women actually stage a spectacular event, they do it as if it were a certain kind of register drawn from the grammar of everyday life rather than simply something set apart from everyday life.

Asli: In relation to what you say, I want to ask the question about the relation between the ordinary and the exceptional. Since this very ordinary is within the exceptional, and vice versa, especially in relation to the question of death, suffering and pain, it always has the potential to unfold itself into the exceptionality, by the eventfulness of the ordinary as far as I understand. Could you talk a little bit about this line between the ordinary and the exceptional that is always blurred, and also about their relation to one another?

Veena: It is quite useful to think about the ordinary and the everyday as concepts that bear a familial relationship but they are not identical. So in some ways, I come to think about the everyday as the space where the life of the other is engaged. But it is also the kind of space in which the ordinary and the extraordinary are, in some ways, woven into each other. So you know you can have very extraordinary moments in what looks like a very ordinary moment of life, and the extraordinary mass of violence. I think especially in the kind of context in which we are now. If you think about it, after continuing for twelve years, the civil war in Sri Lanka has just

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concluded; however, it has concluded with enormous violence. So in a certain sense you then have to think about how subjectivities have been formed through generations who did not know any ordinary life except ordinary life under war. Also you can think about things like the question of prisoners where the whole rhetorics of crime and political violence completely get woven into each other. So sometimes the state will make something into a crime, which might be quite ordinary: a very good example from Turkey is all the politics around the speaking of Kurdish language in public for example. We should see it as a very ordinary thing that people speak their own language. Yet think of the way in which this simple act gets embedded into the idea, on the part of the State, that this is a political project, that it is intended to destruct the state. Sometimes the roots of injustice lie in the simple denial of people's everyday lives. I think there are very complex relationships between the so-called ordinary and the extraordinary in how they are both woven into everyday life. So I think part of my dissatisfaction has been with the fact that in recent political theory there is a great revivalism in some ways of a certain kind of Schmittian genealogy, of friends and enemies, and the seduction of the idea that sovereignty is always about the exception—the idea that the sovereign is not bound by any law. And this is in one part of course of the state, but there is another part within which citizens can also work towards making the state something more than purely a bearer of force. So there is a tremendous closure if you begin to think that only the genealogy of sovereignty counts, in which the world is always divided between these are my friends and these are my enemies. Everyday life, in a certain sense, blurs these distinctions. It doesn't mean that everyday life is a place of great organic harmony. But there is a certain kind of stake, what I would call a certain kind of agonistic intimacy in even the divisions of everyday life. That is to say, not all intimacy has to be based on love and friendship. Intimacy can be based on distance, on suspicion, on the fact that you agree to engage with the life of the other even when that is imbued with tremendous tensions.

Aslı: I think this point brings us to the question of relations between different ordinaries. Which ordinary are we talking about in this case? How do we understand the ordinary in relation to different populations, who are inflicted with violence at various levels? For example, when I think of the Turkish context, the ordinary for a Kurdish mother and a Turkish mother, who have both lost their children in the civil war significantly differs. They differently experience the state violence even though we are referring to the same event, the armed conflict between the Kurdish guerilla and the Turkish military. Or as for transsexuals and conscientious objectors, we can talk about their very ordinary as under constant threat of state violence that can take sovereign forms. How can we understand the relations between different ordinaries? Or do you think relating ordinaries with one another provides us with new political questions on the operation of

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violence?

Veena: One of the difficulties of this very concept, ordinary which looks very simple on the surface, is that it is so familiar that it should be easy to define it. A lot of political theory and social theory has been, I think, seduced by this idea that ordinary is basically a place of habit or a space of repetition and banality. We know that the ordinary is much more complex than that. But in some ways, when you say there are different kinds of ordinaries, it is not as if the idea of the ordinary is some kind of space that we inhabit, you know, which has this boundary, this wall, this door and this window. We all live within a texture of relationships in which there is both a trust, that we might inhabit the world in a certain unquestioning “taken for granted” spirit, and in some ways it is also the world which can be threatened by skepticism. Let’s say I have never faced any violence. I can still be overcome in certain moments by skeptical doubts. Let’s say in ordinary life, there is a couple, who constantly demand from each other to prove at every moment that they really love each other. It can be a very violent situation. I mean there is no overt violence here but it can be a very violent situation because in a certain sense you are refusing to accept the flesh-and-bloodedness of this other. And this flesh-and-bloodedness would include forgetfulness towards you/the other. The question is when is it that it becomes fatal, right? And the answer is that way out of this kind of skepticism is not the capacity to provide constant proof. So if you have reached the situation, which is asking for constant proof of something, then you inhabit a violent world even if there is no physical violence. As an example, if the State is constantly asking me to prove my citizenship, for example, as right now there is a proliferation of documents, then I can never trust myself as a citizen. The state is constantly putting my trust in myself into jeopardy, because the very documents, which show me that I am a citizen, can also be the grounds on which I can be questioned. Let’s say in India, there is this constant kind of suspicion of illegal migrants. In India there is a very high refugee population. So they have various rights as refugees who came right after the partition, or after the Tibetan Crisis, the Afghan crisis; you can see refugees of various ethnicities etc. They are not European refugees although many Germans did come for escaping the Nazi regime. The point is that, let’s suppose the State says, in order for me to control this, influx of refugees, I have to constantly monitor who is a citizen and who is not. A policeman goes to slum area and he asks a Bengali looking Muslim to say, “Prove to me you are an Indian citizen”. Let’s say the guy, by some circumstances has a passport because maybe he was just trying to migrate somewhere else, but he has the passport. That should be the proof of his identity but the policeman looks at him and says, “This is very suspicious. How come living in a slum, you have a passport? This must be because you are an illegal immigrant and you have bribed somebody to give you this passport”. It

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is impossible to prove or disprove this! There was this case in France, for example, somebody who had been born there and lived over there for 25 years or something. When he had to have his registration renewed they found out that though he thought he was French because his father was French, he was not. His mother had migrated and for some reason the mother's migration had never been registered. So it turned out to be a complicated process and his identity papers were wrong. So none of those things can be taken as a guarantee of being able to inhabit your citizenship in, let's say, an ordinary way. I think the point you raised, mothers who lost her children in the civil war; you are raising the question of memory. You are posing of course a very strong divide between whose is the victim and who is the perpetrator.

Aslı: I am comparing a Kurdish mother and a Turkish mother who both lost their children in the civil war. So their ordinary becomes something else compared to the ordinary just before they lost their children...

Veena: Yes. But you are assuming in a certain sense that there is something called the ordinary of absolute habitude, and then some terrible event happens, and then this ordinariness gets lost. What I am trying to say is that in a certain sense the notion of the ordinary assumes the possibilities of violence. I gave you the example that ordinary events that can happen in the life of the State or in the life of a citizen. This, of course, gets punctuated in much more dramatic ways when there is war, you know when there is death and terrible violence of what is called traumatic event in psychoanalytic literature. And I am not denying that there are the questions of significance in relation to traumatic events. But I think that we are so mesmerized by this that we actually don't look at the fact that the ordinary is the site from which this event can be produced and it is also the answer to it. So yes, the mother is never going to be the same kind of a person, who she was before let's say her children died. But we know how mothers inhabit this loss can be varied. I mean it is not as if there is some purity to women victims because there are many number of examples in which women have actually participated in the whole idea of the glory of the nation and giving their children to the nation as martyrs and so on. We have to be more careful in thinking how these events can be interwoven in terms of the fact that the ordinary and the extraordinary are very close cousins in the life of the everyday.

Aslı: But still I am wondering about the relation between the ordinaries of different populations. For example, what would it mean again to relate the Turkish mother's ordinary to the Kurdish mother's ordinary and to make them speak to each other? Would there be any political possibility in that very interaction?

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Deepa: I think Asl? is talking about them as separate but more as people who also know one another in a particular intimate sense. But once they both are losing their children, there is something also ordinary in that extraordinariness, that sort of happens. They have a space of Turkishness or Kurdishness which are not separate but that they have accepted for granted, mediated by the state, and which separates them as well. And based on that separation, a particular violence takes place, which sort of gets them in a very intimate conflict as well.

Asli: Also following up on what Deepa says, they are also so much intimately connected to one another through this motherhood even though they have different claims in this public or political arena through their motherhood. This very ordinariness about, let's say, motherhood—though I am not sure if I am using the right term—connects those two ordinaries, which are in a constant relation to one another. This interaction, I think, is so important.

Veena: Are you saying that there is a similarity of experience that binds them?

Asli: There is a similar experience of loss but its reflections, at the same time, might take different political claims on the basis of national investments. But still this loss creates this intimate link between one another.

Veena: It could... there is no guarantee of that.

Asli: That is the question. I mean is there a political possibility in that very interaction? How would you interpret that very interaction? Could we imagine a possible political condition out this?

Veena: Well, people have argued about this idea that, you know, that the experience of loss can bind people to create collective action. Of course there are evidences of this in, you know, making public something like gay sexuality and contesting on the basis of that: contesting the state, claiming public spaces, and contesting the scientific establishment. I mean there are very good studies which tend to show that yes that can happen just as there are very good studies which tend to show that the very fact of loss can divide people. So there is nothing given in advance! We know that experience is no guarantee of the fact that people will draw that experience and create political solidarity. So the question is what kind of work would have to be done to create in a sense a political solidarity; even what kind of images of the good and the moral that come to animate experience. So you could have very competing claims over what is good and what is moral. Gandhi is a very good example of that. How much work does it actually take both on the self and on the question of creating political alliances in order for a movement to take place? Or, the indigenous movements in a place like Mexico, the Zapatista movement for example, uses new technologies to bring people together. So there is no guarantee of any thought which is

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pregiven. You cannot theorize from that guarantee. You know what you need to think about what kind of work is entailed in being able to think about something like the possibility of collective action. So I am much more interested in the conditions of the possibility rather than on predicates of some of these things. There is a lot of hard work, for example, women had to perform because the initial assumption of the feminist movement in many places was that somehow there would be a natural solidarity between women. And it was very clear that this could be broken not only because there were other fault lines in society but because experience can escape us. Let's say it is that race or class or nationality that could bind us. But at other times, it was very clear that this would really require not a presupposition of commonality but really trying to work towards what kind of collective action can become possible. It is a political project.

Ash: Yes, definitely! In your book, *Life and Words*, there is a strong emphasis on the women's ordinary, especially when you talk about Asha and Manjit. Please tell us more about a gender-focused analysis of the ordinary that can be, at the same time, understood as a suggestion for new feminist ways of writing about violence.

Veena: You know I am not a very prescriptive kind of person. I think that writing is something that is formed because of the collective in which you are. But also expression is very deep, a kind of personal relationship to what you are working on. I can tell you about my own case. Everyone discovers what his or her own life is: it is not something that can be given by anybody whether you admire the person or you hate the person. You just cannot generalize from academic production. Because usually there is such a corporatization of the university nobody wants to spend twenty years, thinking about something and doing work with the same families and same groups, which I did in different ways. With some I spent over twenty years, if there was urgency it had to be done in a couple of years etc. The point that I tried to emphasize was a certain kind of stance of political patience and this is not a highly regarded virtue I think in academic life or in political life. People say we will be dead in the long run so why do we want to wait for so long? But my concern in some ways was to think of a certain kind of anthropology which was very inspired by the women's experiences, which was to say what does it mean to make yourself a kind of receiving body for the experiences of the other, which means it is very hard for me to go and ask people "tell me what happened!" There were times when I worked on the Sikh community after the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. And that was such an immediate event, and my work was not related to academic project at all at that time. It was closely related to a certain kind of political project but out of a certain necessity at that time. But the thing is I could not withdraw. I couldn't say now this part has been done, I have collected the evidence I need, and I

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am finished. Because people had put a lot of trust and it became for me too hard to come out of it, to terminate it. From that, resulted a certain kind of way of thinking about these things. And that way of thinking methodologically was first to take critical patience, second to think about the question of how events do reveal themselves to you and what it means to be present with people. I did not have my questions as somehow given but I am sure that what I observed must have been formed by strong disciplinary orientations. I guess part of the question is whether in the new conceptions of the university there would be room for scholarship of this kind. For example, I always insisted that my students must do fieldwork for two years or something like that. That means some pressure because they get funding for four years or five years. And there is a huge pressure—fortunately not in our university so much—but there is a huge pressure on funding, applying to get jobs, or of saying why they should be taking so long to finish etc. I think we have to think about the temporality of research. I can see that in some subjects maybe there is a way in which the subject has so come to be defined that we can produce things quickly. I think there is a room for also thinking about what is a long time project, and what it means for society to invest into that. Similar to political project, you know one of the things that interest me very much is what happens when life seems to be sterile on the surface but movement is happening underneath of things. You can think of somebody like a bug holding onto something over still waters and just registering very small changes that are happening which are not immediately evident to the eye. I think these very slow shifts in subjectivity are very important for understanding what is happening to politics today. For example, I find it quite amazing how something which seems very obvious today came into being; people have just come to accept that you must have these security measures today against terrorist, right? And if there is some unfairness or injustice or wrongful confinement, then that is just like side effects that have to be tolerated. So I don't know how our subjectivities will be formed—will we pretext. I mean fortunately for us there are enough voices from other parts of the world to say no, or even critical apparatus from, let's say, within the US or Canada or wherever that is forcing us to think. There is really room for being much more circumspect of thinking, on how we use language, what everyday practices we accept as just part of the game. And I am not saying this from the kind of position that would say there is nothing called terrorism. I don't believe that. I do believe though that there are questions about certain kind of violence that has become available to all kinds of groups, not only terrorists. But terrorism is also produced and not just by one ideology like Islamic fundamentalism or Al Qaeda but also by other social actors such as those who sell weapons to them, those financing of these groups, those who treated these events as proxy Global Wars etc. Like the Cold War that could be played in the theater of other countries. And these have formed subjectivities over a period of time. So I am quite interested in thinking that

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something as simple as universal health care can lead to such opposition from people in the USA? How is it that people can be so opposed to the idea that everybody should have healthcare? You are not going to lose anything if someone else has healthcare. Nobody is taking away your rights to do what you want to do. So what is it that makes these things so full of intensities? This is not just a matter of structures; it is also a matter of the way in which subjectivities slowly come to be formed. So that the very slow shift in subjectivities allows us then to say “oh yes, this is obvious”, which is not otherwise obvious at all. It raises the other question, too: I mean, how is political work to be done? It is not just a matter of getting people and protesting over this one particular thing and dissolving again, but really what consistent work needs to be done politically in order for people to be mindful of what kinds of slow shifts are happening in which they might be become involved without even knowing that.

Asli: Another point that you are also talking about in your book is it is not only about thinking, perhaps I would say it is also about feeling, in the very academic and political project. For example, in reference to Wittgenstein, you are talking about lending your body for the other’s pain. Perhaps we can talk about this responsibility of the political or academic actor as also making her or his own body part of the very research in terms of feeling.

Veena: I don’t want to make a very big distinction between feeling and thinking because in my view thinking is a highly affective force. So it is not like, “I am this completely rational person who is completely emotionally detached from my thoughts”. So what I am doing then, I think, expresses my emotional attachment to some project. It is a question in a certain sense of thinking about affect, which in one way is both deeply personal and deeply impersonal. It is a very interesting question: if I am kind of wounded by, let’s say, the violence that I might see or even read about or see in a film. What does it mean in relationship to the fact that this person is not in my immediate world? You know it is a very old question: if a person is being tortured in China, is this your concern? And many ethicists have had to write on this because your concern doesn’t just mean that you will write a letter to the editor, though that is important. The question is of how I bring distant events into my world; what is that openness, to be able to engage with that event? It is also the case that there must be many things happening in the world that our divisions into disciplines and subjects don’t allow us to be aware of. I am a pretty moral person, right? I am against slavery, I am against child labor, and I am against any kind of male violence at home. There are sorts of questions of what the meaning of male violence is. Does it mean just that I am against physical violence? But if I am against all psychological violence, am I also against all intimacy? Because intimacy also involves tremendous ability to put up with pain. I mean it is not the kind of utopic textbook relationship because otherwise it is not intimacy. If we

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live only according to the rules, whatever else we may be, we are not intimate. So that raises one set of questions. The other set of questions arises when I begin to be attuned to the fact that though I might not intend to hurt anyone here; “is this person wounded by my actions?”. Take this example: meat eating. I know it looks very odd to say “why are you bringing this question to animals?”. But there are people who are really wounded by the idea that the animals, who they can think of as their companions, are killed and eaten by others. I have no simple answer to this quandary because I might say, “ok, I am against industrial meat production”. But that doesn’t answer the fact that I wouldn’t just say “oh as long as slaves are treated well, that is fine! I am against slavery!” So similarly for someone, it may be “I am against meat eating because I think these are sentimental beings that are capable of experiencing pain.” They would have to answer other questions, like is it all animals that one must not kill? Is it animals with a face? I think right now in this entire complicated issue of animality of the post-human, there are very interesting questions being raised to which a humanist project does not have yet very good answers. So it seems to me that one very interesting question is how we relate to emergent questions, not just settled questions. Here some really very challenging set of questions arises. That means the capacity to be able to listen to the other; it means that we don’t have clear resolutions to this problem. Moral projects are not completely clear. So how am I going to think of the claim of a scientist who says it is necessary to kill laboratory rats so that somebody’s disease might be cured? Or someone who says, “I am against industrial production of meat but I still might think that eating meat is a pleasure”. They might not appear to us, if we are not of the same sensibility, with the same kind of force as questions like ‘what does domestic violence mean?’. I don’t want you to jump to the conclusion that I am saying that to think of women is the same as to think of animals, or women and animals are the same, or slaves and animals are the same. These are problems just as during the industrial revolution: many people took it for granted that the poor never feel the pain of their children dying; it is only the elite, the bourgeoisie who feel that. Those are the areas that seem to me to be really very interesting and troubling. And they have an impact on how we look at people who today say, “of course it is right to do water-boarding—these are terrorists”. What allows them to make statements like that? What allows someone to look at the photographs of Abu Ghraib and say, “oh these are just a few bad apples!” or “have you thought about what those guys might have done if they were released from prison now?” It is forming a moral disposition in relation to a political disposition. It is a constant work on the self as it is a constant work on politics.

Asli: You point out that people who experience violence can become voiceless—words become frozen, numb, or without life. You also explain how some people tell their stories but it is as if

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someone else is speaking when they choose to be mute or withdraw their voices to be protected. On the other hand, you suggest the ordinary as a project of recovering the human voice. Could you elaborate some more about the relationship between the ordinary and voice?

Veena: That is a very perceptive question that you ask and a very difficult one. I make a distinction between voice and speech. And I have always been concerned with the fact that whenever violence may happen, you are going to get this production of conflict: “Oh, we’ve recovered these women’s voices: here is a reference of who said this, and here is a reference of who said this”. That project is very troubling to me because in some kind of ways I am not quite sure that, that is a question of finding their voice. I might even be saying, “Well, you know maybe that does a certain kind of political work”. But it also produces highly stylized kinds of victim position narratives. So part of my concern is to say that to have one’s voice is not the same as to be able to produce speech. We should be respectful of those for whom the voice may even be withdrawn. Very interestingly I find a lot of the time people might need to wait to be able to speak because in some ways they might find that their speaking at this particular moment is not going to be heard. For example, I find it sometimes very painful that many Muslim scholars say that in the present context they are not able to be critical of Muslim societies. Because they feel that if they speak in that way, it will immediately be appropriated by those who say, “Ah you see, we always said Islam was violent, or oppressive to women or intolerant”. Scared that their voices might be appropriated by the intolerant right, many Muslim scholars begin to speak in very pious voices, which are very boring and which are not particularly educative. Like for instance to say that all religions have their good points and the Qur’an propagates peace, which allows people like Tony Blair to give a certificate to Islam and say, “I’ve read the Qur’an and it is a good book.” So why should I want to speak if this is the arrogant way in which my words are going to be taken up? I want to resist this form of speaking and so I withdraw my words. But what does this silence really mean? On the other hand, the question of recovery of voice in the context of the ordinary wants to be able to say that “yes there is a way in which I might make my own project in my life”. In a certain sense, the ordinary might be the space that gives me voice. It may not just be that I can go and make a political speech as indication of the fact that I have recovered my voice. But it is my capacity to think of, or my capacity to be able to have a future with whatever it is that I have. I define it in one place, talking of healing as the capacity to be able to establish a relationship with death. So this other with whom I converse might even be death. And that, it seems to me, points to the very difficult ways in which the project of having a voice in your own history might be realized. It is the set of complicated questions of the relationship between speech and voice that I am drawn. For me this is a question of life! So I don’t go along

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with scholars such as Agamben, who thinks life is now primarily a question of managing biological life. The example that I gave you was that words could be lifeless. So in some ways it is a question of being able to mobilize affect to a kind of awakening in which life might be affirmed—but without the naive optimism about psychiatry and trauma and recovery.

Asli: My next question is about agency. You emphasize that we often think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than as a descent into it. Especially attractive to me is the idea of agency as a capacity “to pick up pieces and to live on in the very place of devastation”.

Veena: You picked up the best phrase, that I like the most in my writing.

Asli: Ya, I also love it. It can also be understood as healing as you said. As a kind of relationship with death. I would like to hear more about the forms that this healing can take. And what kinds of lives are parts of that?

Veena: I think it is a certain way of moving outside completely frozen positions. To me healing doesn't mean “oh I am perfectly fine now”. It is a question of being able to move out of a completely frozen lifeless position. It is some relationship, to be able to recover the course of life and the idea that I can make some life for myself. Not just for myself, but what other relationships are and what work I can begin to do towards that.

Asli: Again in your book, you talk about violence's becoming non-narrative, its being shown rather than spoken. When it comes to writing or representing those unsayables within the forms of everyday life, what would be the limits of our experience with the language? What would authorship entail?

Veena: So the distinction between saying and showing is often taken to be the distinction between saying which is representational and this is picture making. It is not just a question of the visual. Words can be pictures, too. So I think Proust is a very good example, his writing is clearly very visual. Foucault is a very good example. His writing is intensely visual. So the chapter that you took as an example is the chapter on Manjit. Manjit, as I said throughout, actually never talks about what happened to her during the partition. This doesn't mean that it is repressed memory, but it is something that she is able to show through her words, through her gestures. So there is a question of gesture, not as just something which accompanies spoken language but which the body performs. You know knowledge is always gained on the condition that we can accept limits. We cannot entertain a fantasy as such: we can say everything or see everything in life and in ethnography. But the formula that I try to use was to show how sometimes these events of violence could be like seeds, which are scattered all over. You can give a little bit of nourishment to that seed. You can show where these seeds are without having to

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dwell on saying that I am representing that event! So there are many crucial distinctions for me; one is representation and expression, which is worked out throughout the book. And the other, is the question of what gives something life, and what is it that makes one withdraw from life? So you know, when I talk about rumor—although these are events full of intensity—I said words are imbued with death, not imbued with life. So this opposition of what is life and what is not life outside of the biological works for rumors. And the third, is that fact that there is a circulation of the impersonal, which is very important in some ways because social structures are not everything. They are important but they are not everything. That is why I try to say that there is also something like our notion of how we inhabit life. By that I don't mean some kind of given organic, vitalist philosophy. Really I am wary of all this new writing—Nicolas Rose, Paul Rabinow, all the people whose work I like very much. But they assume that if you want to talk about life the root is always biological life. I think biological life is important, but it is beautiful to say that there is a natural history of life because we have these intuitions also about what life is. What is it that might be given in something like our ideas about nature? It doesn't mean that nature is completely constructed. So it is the way in which the idea of the social absorbs the natural, and the natural absorbs the social. It is that register of life that I am talking about, which could be shown in language, which could be shown in pictures, which could be also be shown in bodies.

Asli: Do you want to add something about authorship?

Veena: Again the point was a lot of times what we produce. Authorship is not an easy matter; authorship is tied up in some ways with the idea of signature where you take the Derridian intuition that signature is constantly dispersed. I might say, it is the discourse that speaks to me; I do not speak through discourse. There is the question of responsibility that I do take for my words. And it is that interaction at which level it seems to me the problem of authorship lies.

Deepa: I was also thinking how the ordinary is rendered extraordinary by certain kind of academic authorship—that now one has to speak of it and makes a space to be able to speak of it, even if in all its complexities without putting it in a neat box. Even one story—that whole project, the critical project or one of critical patience, has this price. And now we have to sort of claim that criticalness because people's mission has been given outside.

Veena: I wouldn't say that it is just academic.

Deepa: No, it is not.

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Veena: The ordinary has always been a subject of tremendous, mysterious kind of reflections.

Deepa: Absolutely, but now ... like the language you say, we need to write in English. Now having to make an effort to be able to write this, right?

Veena: But you always have to make an effort to write anything. So there is a question that you cannot get this massive rhetoric of words that can be alienating. That is always a balance. Because, you know, in any kind of world in which one thinks of this range of things there are always questions, it seems to me, of the fact that readership is not a very simple matter. It is a question of who I feel as spiritual. Even reading Levinas or Derrida, it looks at one level like “oh, there is this heavy writing”. But there is something very interesting in being able to determine when this proliferation of language is something for you which has meaning and when it is not.

Asli: I will ask my last question. Again while portraying the everyday and voice, you talk about trying to find the right distance and scale. How can we think of this distance and scale in both ethical and political positioning of the researcher? How would self-reflexivity play into this? What does this mean for a feminist responsibility?

Veena: It is not a small question because we have so much written on reflexivity in anthropological literature. The importance in some ways of something like the concept of reflexivity is also that the anthropological text—also a political project—is not one in which one can say that the person describing or the person involved in it is completely a neutral observer. I am thinking of the Marxist kind of project in which the engine of history is basically the proletariat; you have certain teleology, there is an engine of history. I think there is no engine of history. That in a certain sense means that you have to begin to think about how particular positioning has to be articulated. Just as an anthropological project the question that my subjectivity is not irrelevant to what I produce. But then it is not only my subjectivity, the world also speaks. I am also very interested in how the world speaks. I often engage in what would appear like positivist type of work. In one of my chapters I have this description of neighbourhood by neighbourhood—how many people came in the crowd, where did they come from etc. You might say “What is the point of this? People have suffered in this kind of experience and you are counting like a bureaucrat!” But there was a need, even at that moment, for the world to speak. It was not enough for me to say, “Oh yes, some terrible people came and did it!” I really wanted to know: was it the next-door neighbour? Which were the neighbours who were there? Who were the other people involved in the crowd? To my mind, you know, it is not that the world is just completely out there and we are out here, but it is also what something I put in the world and the world answers back. And not only as obstacles in the positivist idea, like

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there is a table and I hit against the table and the table hits back to me. But the world in much more complex ways speaks back. And that listening, to me, is intriguingly tied up with questions of subjectivity. I am not free to just say what I can also show you how my world, how this world speaks. It is not the same world but there is a question of how the world speaks.

Ash: Thank you very much. It was a great pleasure to have this conversation with you

Veena: Thank you both for your patience and your thoughtful questions.

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