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AMS Department Chair Dr. Randolph Lewis Interviews UT Alum Dr. Natassja Gunasena



We are excited to share this interview with recent UT PhD Natassja Gunasena, who I met when she was an AADS graduate student in the process of making her second intellectual home in American Studies. I had the honor of supervising Natassja's dissertation, and I was profoundly impressed by her work. Using a careful blend of literary criticism, Ethnic Studies methodologies, and personal narrative, "All the Places Your Heart Lives: Afro/Asian Women and the Poetics of Diaspora" aims to chart South Asian trajectories of migration, displacement, and travel in provocative new ways. If you read her interview below, I think you'll understand why she is a young scholar with a fantastic reputation for brilliant, innovative work on South Asian postcolonial diasporic formations, Afro/Asian diasporas, and queer diasporas, and how she has embarked on such a stellar career. – Randy Lewis, Chair, Dept of American Studies

1. Tell us about your current position!

I am currently Patricia C. and Charles H. McGill III '63 Visiting Assistant Professor of International Studies at Trinity College in Hartford, CT. Begun in 2002, the McGill Fellowship has brought not only scholars but poets, artists, and journalists to Trinity's campus, so it's quite a rich legacy, one I'm very excited and humbled to join. I was already teaching at Trinity in the International Studies Program when I applied for and was offered

this position, and I was thrilled at the chance to continue working with all the incredible scholar-teachers here.

I attended a small liberal arts college for undergrad, so being at Trinity feels like a wonderful “return to my roots” as far as academia goes. The small classroom sizes and student-centric culture, as well as strong faculty governance, makes it a great place for junior scholars to get a feel for this profession in a supportive environment. Working here has reminded me how much I love teaching, and given me a better sense of what type of permanent position I want to aim for when I go on the market again.

2. What are you teaching?

I’m teaching a few classes, all of which I’m excited about for various reasons. “Global South,” is an introductory course for the International Studies major here which I’ve taught twice now; we read a combination of political texts, poetry, novels, and essays about the burgeoning independence movements and anti-colonial uprisings in the Third World that came to a head in the 1950s/60s/70s but were, of course, fomenting much longer. It’s a lot to cover in one semester, so I try to focus on a few specific voices from different regions of the global south, which is where the novels and poetry come in and give students as much context and background as possible so they can begin interpreting how and why those voices are declaring themselves a certain way, and what these texts tell us not only about history but the present political moment.

I’m an interdisciplinary literary and cultural studies scholar - I think for many of us queer, diasporic scholars of color this is the only way to even begin capturing the full breadth of our experiences in an academic setting - and I’m indebted to a rich history of Black and Third World women’s scholarship which insists on art and literature as counter-archives and counter-histories. It’s really wonderful seeing students make connections between the global north and south as the class unfolds, which is my main goal for the course: that students see how all these places are interconnected.

The other class I’m teaching is “War and the Asian Diaspora.” This is a class that I dreamed of teaching for many years. My program chair and colleagues at Trinity were incredibly supportive when I pitched it last year, and now I’m about to teach it for the second time. The first time I taught it was the most number of Asian diasporic students I’ve ever had in a single

class - from various parts of the diaspora. It was exciting and wonderful and really humbling; together we co-created a rich and dynamic and enlightening classroom space, even though we were on Zoom. The course is concerned with how war and its many faces - militarism, gendered violence, ethno-nationalism, homophobia - disrupt the lives of women and children across the Asian diaspora, including here in the United States where hyper-militarism continues to devastate Black/Latinx/immigrant communities and erode everyone's civil liberties. It's structured around five texts - Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy*, Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do*, Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*, Vaddey Ratner's *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, and this year I've added Kao Kalia Yang's *The Latehomecomer* - that cover Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Korea, Cambodia and Laos.

Each of these countries could easily be the focus of a single class, but as a transnational scholar and someone who's lived in now three different parts of the world, it's impossible for me to focus on a singular place without also drawing attention to that interconnectedness I mentioned earlier. I want students to understand that Asian peoples have been diasporic even within what we understand as "Asia" - the Korean diaspora in Japan for example, and the Hmong in Laos, and Tamil people in Sri Lanka, Southern India, and Singapore, to name a few - and that the formation of "Asian-America" is directly tied to U.S military interventions in Southeast Asia. "Diaspora" as a term has a tendency to become quite romanticized and even apolitical in popular discourse at times, so this class is also about helping students understand the hard realities, the "blood, sweat, and tears" of Asian diasporic formations, as well as of course their joy and beauty and resilience.

Naturally, you can't discuss U.S militarism today without discussing 9/11 and the "War on Terror" which has also touched the Asian diaspora, both in the U.S and in places like Pakistan and Afghanistan. So, in that way, the class is also a bit like a survey course-we cover a lot of ground in a short time - aimed at giving students a framework or a heuristic technique they can take with them and continue sharpening throughout their academic careers.

3. What are you working on in terms of research these days?

I'm working on my monograph, which is partially drawn from my dissertation work and for which the working title is "*Cobra Women: Race, Sexuality and Afro/Asian Diasporic Formations*" and is a study of how visual and performance cultures from the late 1800's to the mid-to-late 1900's articulated "Brown" femininity as a racial category that shores up anti-Blackness and coloniality and functions as a liminal zone between "Yellow" Asia and "Black" Africa. Rather than celebrating the "hybridity" of Brownness as a category, I'm investigating

the specific modes and discourses that helped constitute this “exotic” image, who it served, who it curtailed, and why. As per the title, I’m tracing how film and popular culture has tied cobras to this racial imagery, and how those images circulated among Southeast Asian, West African, and North American sites. Each chapter focuses on a single artist and the ways in which their performance furthers or intervenes in these racial discourses. Chapter 1 looks at the late, great Bollywood diva Sridevi, who was most famous for her role as a shape-shifting cobra in the pulp film *Nagina*, Chapter 2 looks at Debra Paget, a white Hollywood actress infamous for playing “Indian girls,” and the provocative “cobra dance” scene in a film called *The Indian Tomb*, Chapter 3 is focused on Marlene Clark, the Blaxploitation-era actress who played a number of horror/pulp roles, including a Filipina priestess in *Night of the Cobra Woman*, and finally Chapter 4 is about Lola Lestrage, a cabaret performer who creatively re-interprets the giant snake from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, Nagini, for the stage. Lola is based in Austin with the performance group Fat Bottom Cabaret, and I’ve had the privilege of not only seeing her perform but interviewing her for the book; I highly recommend catching one of her shows if you’re in Austin and able to!

4. *What advice do you have for students in grad school?*

Writing your dissertation is invariably a solitary and even alienating process, but other parts of your life don’t have to be! Make time for your friends and family, regularly. Go on roadtrips, have small gatherings - all of this is of course infinitely more complicated in the era of COVID, but it’s vital to cultivate a small group of folks you regularly socialize with. Even better if not all of them are in grad school - in fact, it’s essential to cultivate a circle outside of academia.

While you obviously want to produce a dissertation you’re proud of, ultimately “the best dissertation is a done dissertation.” I’ve seen too many people punish themselves and delay defending trying to write the perfect dissertation when such a feat is impossible. Your dissertation is a draft of something - or many things - you will continue to work on long after you graduate, so approach it accordingly. It’s an audition for your eventual book, odd as that might sound.

Cultivate faith, whether it’s faith in a higher power, faith in community, or simply faith in your own abilities and the dreams that brought you to academia. For many of us first-generation scholars of color, academia can loom larger than life. It’s easy to put all our faith in institutional support and validation and forget what inspired us to pursue teaching and scholarship in the first place. Academia is your career, it’s a job like any other (of course with

the significant benefits of flexibility and long-term security), and shouldn't become the center of your universe. Practice and maintain healthy work-life boundaries. Flex your teaching and research skills in fun ways that have nothing to do with academia. In the last few years of grad school I did a lot of creative writing for fun, with no intention of publishing any of it. I also read novels that had nothing to do with my research, simply for the joy of reading. It may seem insignificant, but nurturing my intellectual curiosity in these ways kept me sane and reminded me that academia, which can be excessively gruelling and demanding, doesn't own every facet of my creativity.

Focus on the heart of your project. It's really easy to feel swept up by what's "in" and "fashionable" and to try and tailor ourselves to what the ever-fickle "market" seemingly wants, but don't let it sway you from the work you're truly passionate about. I don't think there's any "one size fits all" list of tips for navigating the academic job market in its present state, so I won't try, except to say: know, and stay true, to yourself, and that includes knowing and staying true to your limits and capacities.

5. What projects are you excited about working on in the future?

My second project is one I've been nursing for several years now and working on in small parts, but it's not ready to be publicized yet. It's quite different from any of my current work, mainly in that I envision it being rooted in oral history, which would require extensive ethnographic research on my part. It's concerned with the impact of climate change on Black and Asian women both in the United States and globally, and continuing to develop those ideas of interconnection between the global north and south that all of my work is in some way preoccupied with. Admittedly, the scope of the project is quite expansive and ambitious, and I'm not sure how the ethnographic part is going to work out now that travel - especially international travel - is so fraught, but I'm optimistic about finding time and resources in the near future. I also want this project to have its own visual art component; my current book project is also very concerned with visual cultures, but it's primarily me reading and theorizing visual art produced by others, whereas for this second project I'm challenging myself to also intervene in the visual archive, using overlapping images and simple collages to highlight the simultaneity of racialized violence, gendered labor, and climate change. I have a number of visual artists in my circle of friends and family, and I'm hoping to collaborate with them on some of the technical aspects. Essentially, this second project is one I hope arises from a series of collaborations with scholars, artists, family, and survivors of climate disaster.

On a larger scale, I want to help establish programs of Asian diasporic study that draw and support scholars working in those areas which may not always get as much attention here in the U.S; scholars studying the Asian diaspora in the Middle-east and Africa, for example, or intra-Asian diasporas. Diasporas can be fraught and divisive at times, especially in this neo-liberal age where we scholars of color might feel like we have to fight each other for scarce resources that, really, aren't very scarce at all. But I think if we formed spaces to support the histories and epistemologies of Asian and Asian diasporic peoples, no matter where those peoples are located or displaced from, we would have something really strong and beautiful.

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