



Interview

“Learning to Belong Here in an Altogether Different Way”: An Interview with Julietta Singh

JULIETTA SINGH
University of Richmond, USA

JESSE ARSENEAULT
Concordia University, Canada

LINZEY CORRIDON
McMaster University, Canada

Introduction

Julietta Singh is the Stephanie Bennett-Smith Professor of Women, Gender & Sexuality and Professor of English at the University of Richmond. The author of several essays and three books – *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (2018b), *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018c), and *The Breaks* (2021) – Singh has been a crucial interlocutor bringing post- and de-colonial perspectives to cultural criticism. Her writing deploys an interdisciplinary breadth that extends these fields’ most urgent questions to analyses of gender and sexuality, race, animality, and ecology. It also oscillates deftly between autotheoretical reflection, scholarly inquiry, and ruminations on everyday life. As the various contributors to this issue and we in the collective reckon together with the crises that mark our disparate locations, Singh’s writing and her responses in the interview that follows offer models for attending to times and places that can feel apocalyptic or damaged beyond repair. Like Shyam Patel’s (2024) contribution to this issue, the conversation below follows a world “on fire” but “dream[s] of a time in which the agonizing state of the world is not so brutal and deadly” (p. 901). What emerges below is not only a sense of mounting urgency for the troubled worlds we live in, but an orientation toward the worlds that might yet be, whose conditions of possibility are germinating in the scorched earth.

Correspondence Address: Jesse Arseneault, Department of English, Concordia University, 1455 de Miasonneuve Blvd. W., Montreal, QC, H3G 1M8; email: jesse.arseneault@concordia.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788



For Singh, this other world is not a transcendent beyond, but a happening in the here and now. Against forces rendering the planet uninhabitable and seeking escape from the earth, Singh’s *The Breaks* writes, “I do not want to leave this planet. What I want is another world. And when I say *another world*, I mean this one, toppled and reborn” (p. 10). This book-length essay, which is also an extended letter to her daughter, emphasizes that “the shape of our entwinement will need to be radically reformed as we fight global patriarchy, extractive capitalism, and indiscriminate planetary destruction” (p. 17). This comment occurring in the context of a kin relation emphasizes the vast scales implicated in our social worlds, as broad structural forces come to be felt in the intimate domain of familial ties. Such ties compel us to think about inheritance as well: that reworlding is not about the erasure of a prior world that would replicate colonial erasures but reckons with the world we have inherited and what will be inherited from us. It also emphasizes the latent potentiality embedded in our ties, with reworlding occurring in the context of radically altered relations themselves. Not a term for acting on the world *out there*, reworlding – read in dialogue with Singh – is a term for grappling with the forms that our relations might take, and understanding relations themselves are the stuff of the world around us.

Against the at-times atomizing effects of scholarship in a neoliberal world, those addressed in this issue by Haileselassie et al. (2024) and Levesque (2024), the interview that follows is a place where we have tried to stage the possibilities of relation by learning from each other. Our conversation therefore extends the impetus of convivial collaboration begun by others in this issue who embrace conversation as a route toward reworlding as they reckon with complicity and envision ways of enacting care from within colonial and neoliberal ways of knowing rather than seeking to escape them. Resonating with Girvan and Pérez Piñán’s (2024) walking and talking pedagogies and Gingras, Aphframor, and Dark’s (2024) kitchen table pedagogies, the dialogue found here is an effort to enact praxis together and with gratitude toward each other for engaging in conversation.

Our editorial collective first met Singh when she gave the keynote address to the 2022 conference of the Canadian Association for Postcolonial Studies (CAPS) on *Architectural Kinships* – a concept explored in the interview below in relation to her forthcoming documentary film collaboration with Chase Joynt, *The Nest* (Joynt & Singh, 2025). As our collective was finding its bearings, emerging out of the pandemic and beginning to see the shape that our collaborations might take, Singh’s work offered generative companionship to us as we ruminated on our three guiding terms: reckoning, repairing, and reworlding. The interview discusses the potentialities and risks of these terms and, among other things, offers a vision for expanding pedagogy beyond the university, considers the relationship between hospitality and survival, and discusses the relationship between autobiography, the everyday, and scholarly writing. We are delighted to include the following conversation that emerged following the keynote and offer our thanks to Singh for speaking with us.

Jesse Arseneault: The three terms (reckoning, repairing, reworlding) centred by our issue come with some risks and critiques, including the notion that settler states' *reckoning* with colonial violence too easily slips into placatory rhetorics of *reconciliation* without much material (especially land-based) change; that reparative reading, as troubled by Patricia Stuelke's *The Ruse of Repair* (2021), might naively swap out critique's insistence on structural and social change for good feelings; and that reworlding is haunted by and must contend with colonial and extractive practices already remaking the world in ongoing, destructive ways. Despite these risks, our collective has been animated by the potential of these terms, looking to imagine otherwise in ways that do not simply accede to or reinforce the world that settler colonialism, racial violence, climate change, and capital have created. Your work has inspired many of our conversations on these terms, and I wonder if you could begin by offering us your thoughts on them. How do we approach the tasks of reckoning, repairing, and reworlding as modes of imagining otherwise without reinforcing the various structural and relational violences that mark our present?

Julietta Singh: I appreciate the critiques you cite here about the ways in which good feelings can so easily become a substitute for concrete decolonial action. The language of decolonization is floating everywhere now – often and distressingly becoming a synonym for institutional diversity initiatives. The reality is that our lives in the university are deeply entrenched in colonial modes, since the university itself is a colonial enterprise. Far from shying away from this fact, I'm interested in the ways that all of us, within and well beyond the university, have from the outset been folded into the colonial regime. My excellent friend and collaborator, Nathan Snaza (2024), employs the term "tendings" to describe how in the settler colony we are always both tending to the colonial world and tending to its refusal. So when you ask how we approach these tasks as "modes of imagining without reinforcing the various structural and relational violences that mark our present," I think it's important to note that our work within the university cannot help but to reinforce colonial life, even while it sometimes seeks to unthink and undo it. We might liken this to the ways we are often complicit in extractive practices we're not even aware of through our everyday lives. I'm not at all afraid of this fact; I like to understand and explore complicity without succumbing to liberal paralysis.

I also understand your editorial collective's desire to abide by these interlocking terms – reckoning, repairing, reworlding – as ones that might be productively mobilized. One of the things that first compelled me toward post-colonial studies was its foundational questions: Who do we become after colonization? What were we before, and what do we desire to be after? I loved the political and intimate anticipation of those questions, the wide-open channel between the past and the future that made the post-colonial project such a pulsing and embodied quest. I still find these questions riveting, even while a post-colonial world has yet to be realized.

The settler colonies face a different but intimately linked series of questions and callings. Among those are how to think and form an anti-colonial “we” that was, by vast majority, not here before the colonial regime. The questions of the settler colony are fundamentally material ones, but they are also inherently pedagogical. We need both the world that was here before colonization, and the world that will come after it. The world before was one that the majority of us have little or no connection to, and the world we are calling decolonial is one that none of us have yet lived. We need to learn a willingness to abandon some of what we have come to see as rightfully ours. These are things that must be taught to us by those who know another way, that cannot be dreamed up within a colonial institution like the university. They are learned through land-based knowledge, through forms of intimacy with the earth, through worldviews that we won’t know until we are practicing them as lifelong students of decolonization. It means learning to belong here in an altogether different way.

Linzey Corridon: In *Unthinking Mastery* (2018), you write about “vulnerable reading” and “vulnerable writing” practices as an attempt to move closer to a different kind of relationality, as a “world-making practice through which we become other to ourselves” (p. 109). Your work’s ongoing autotheoretical mode generously offers a model for vulnerable reading and writing, with the self this work describes continually becoming in conversation with an expansive collective of others. Thinking about these practices in your work, I wonder about how they apply to collective efforts like the special issue of *Studies in Social Justice* we are compiling, which involves an editorial collective. There is a messiness which a politics of the vulnerable invites, as we navigate writing and editing collectively, with divergence and sometimes disagreement, but hopefully without judgment. How do we sit, write, and think with this messiness? What possibilities does it animate? Even as many of us are writing autobiographically, from an ever-unraveling “I,” how does the process of becoming other to ourselves participate in what we’re calling reworlding in this issue?

Julietta Singh: Collective work has and will always be messy, even in the most allied circumstances. This messiness is central to what collective action is and means, not a byproduct of it. If we begin with an embrace of the mess, the lack of total unanimity from the start, we can move in really interesting directions. As adrienne maree brown (2017) reminds us, a revolutionary collective does not need a single or unified voice; it needs an expansiveness into which a multiplicity can echo, sometimes in vital dissonance. A collective becomes so because individuals believe together in other possible worlds, but their movements might well take on a chaotic choreography. One might say that for decolonization to take shape, this chaos is absolutely critical.

How to ignite this and live through it is another question, and one that every collective – from special issue makers to decolonial land activists – needs to

reckon with! We commit to the mess, to the non-uniformity, the gaps and fissures that separate us as much as they keep us alongside one another. I'm always interested in finding the most basic element of a common ground, the place from which each member of a collective can agree. This might be as simple as: the world we are living in now is not right. Many years ago, I sat on a panel with Fred Moten (Singh et al., 2017), who said to the audience something akin to, "I agree with 98% of what you think, but that 2% really gets in my way!" I've continued to resonate with this notion, especially as an intellectual who has been trained to argue for my own "unique" intervention when in reality the vast majority of what I know and how I think is built from what was already here. This fraction – a mere 2%! – is so interesting to me... such a small element, but one that can ultimately block the capacity for concrete change if we are not careful with our projects and with each other.

One of the myths of vulnerability is that it demands autobiographical engagement. In the main, I don't think this is true, even while it's often true of my own work. For me, the autobiographical is one mode, often critically insufficient, in the cultivation of anti-colonial space and action. It's true that my work has tended toward a kind of curated life writing, because as an intellectual and writer my mind filters politics and conceptual thought through everyday life. One doesn't have to be expressly autobiographical to work against the colonial lessons of mastery that have been handed down to us. We are and have always been vulnerable. There is a world of possibility in how we ignite the recognition and embrace of that vulnerability. And in the "ever-unraveling 'I'" there is also something rising, something growing in and through it...

Jesse Arseneault: One of my favorite things about your writing is how it relentlessly pushes me toward an errant pedagogy. This might be because much of my most valued time is spent in the classroom, a place where I'm frustrated by the shape of the pedagogy we inherit from the university, and even more frustrated with myself for often succumbing to these pedagogies for the way they promise a kind of habitual safety, even when in practice they usually fail me and those who are called my students. One thing I'm thinking about here is your discussions of pedagogy alongside your graduate cohort in *The Breaks* (2021). But I'm also thinking about how pedagogy infuses many of your works; for example, the mother-daughter pedagogies in *The Breaks* that involve not only what the child might inherit from the parent, but also the inverted direction of that inheritance as the child remakes the parent; the way pedagogy infuses not just the classroom but everyday spaces from the pub to the family home to the public space of the street; your framework for becoming "errant-erranders" in your work on wildness (Singh, 2018a, p. 571); and the way becoming otherwise emerges in conversation with others, often outside official educational spaces. How do you see pedagogy as part of reworlding practices, and how might reworlding reckon with exhausted or inadequate pedagogical forms?

Julietta Singh: It’s true that I’m obsessed with pedagogy – with how we learn, where, from whom, and toward what past and emergent realities. As someone who did not fare well in traditional academic environments (from dropping out of high school, to initially failing out of university, to faking my way through parts of graduate school), practices of teaching and learning have been something that happens most often and most generatively for me beyond proscribed learning environments. But I love study! And I love how study has been for me as much a process of un-learning what we’ve been taught through colonial culture as it is coming to understand other ways of living. That kind of learning – the unlearning that is so vital to igniting something else – needs to be kindled from the very start of the learning process. As is true on any post-colonial horizon, this is a learning that must at once draw from the past as it invents the world to come. We are in motion, learning by gathering what was as much as from creating new pathways.

Many of my teachers over the years made no connection between their theoretical commitments and their everyday lives. As though what happened in the classroom through the work of theory spoke to an abstracted society, yet somehow never to the individual. There seemed often to be a gulf between what was espoused in the classroom and what happened in life beyond it. I’ve always been interested in that gulf, in learning from the gulf as much as from what lies on either side of it.

To your point on feeling frustrated by the preordained shapes of institutional pedagogy: I used to say that teaching was always an act of learning, but the truth was I wasn’t learning much, and certainly not what I felt was most urgently needed. These days, I’m most invested in leaving the university as the space of learning. I just finished a course where we made a practice of leaving the university grounds, where our mission was to learn from other actors and environments – Black community orchards, landfills, thrift markets... The more time I’ve spent at the “head” of a classroom, the more I’ve realized my knowledge is all too limited. What is needed in the here and now is less my expertise than my willingness toward co-learning through alternative economies and systems beyond the university. I’ve committed myself, in other words, to teaching as a student. Part of that commitment is treating every course as a question of collective learning, wherein my own learning is as central as that of my students.

Linzey Corridon: You open *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018c) with an anecdote about strange hospitality, theft, and thinking about the ways in which our lives wind up, down, around, and across each other. The anecdote involves a thief who had entered your residential building and you anticipating their return by leaving a post-it note welcoming the intruder. I want to focus on the question of strange hospitality and how the ethic of care embedded in that anecdote might show up in efforts to repair what we might consider an irreparable world, a world literally on fire. Dionne Brand penned a piece early in the most recent pandemic reminding us that the time for reckoning with our

failing world is now. “Everything is up in the air, all narratives for the moment have been blown open – the statues are falling – all the metrics are off, if only briefly,” Brand (2020) writes, indicating that these moments when the ruse of normalcy seems most inaccessible might be catalysts for change. The feeling of impending danger, for example when you anticipate the return of the thief or Brand’s calls for reckoning amid ruptured times, seems like a vital condition for generating strange hospitalities or care. Can you say a little bit more about this strangeness and its possibilities for shifting how we relate to one another?

Julietta Singh: I really love this connection you’re making between a solitary scene of potential burglary in *No Archive* and Brand’s (2021) insistence that the pandemic exposed “the endoskeleton of the world,” the antiblack racism that for generations has been its own global pandemic. Perhaps masses of white people during the pandemic suddenly reckoning with the racism at the core of all our lives was a moment of possibility, or restructuring, or something like reparation. But I suspect Brand knew even then that while holding out the possibility, the moment would pass and that a return to “normal” was more comfortable after all. I sound more pessimistic here than I am... Yet it’s true that many of us felt a profound disappointment by the emergence of a movement – the “two pandemics” political revelation – that so quickly became a refusal to think about either, much less about their entwinements.

For me, the fear of foreign intrusion at the start of *No Archive* was a moment of reckoning with what I deemed to be “mine” (as a PhD student, a newly arrived immigrant to the United States, a brown woman) and under what circumstances all these things that were mine had come to be so. I was young then and trying to wrestle with a kind of politics that would not entrench an ownership model, that took seriously my vulnerability and also my intruder’s, and that began to think toward what we both might need. The political fault of that scene is, of course, that I offer him something that I didn’t actually want (a can of Red Bull!), with no grounded sense of who he was or what he might have needed. And this marked a limit I was keen to signal and explore.

If we widen the frame again and return to a ruptured world, the question of hospitality – who comes inside, who is at home and how and why, who is sacrificed to colonial economies and taxonomies – are questions akin to food and water in terms of survival. Remembering here through Derrida (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000) that hospitality is not a one-way relation, but a dynamic interchange wherein the host is wide open to being transformed by the experience of her guest. I wrote about this in an essay on hospitality many years ago (Singh, 2017), that pushed the limits of how we have been taught to understand and enact hospitality. I’m interested in how the one who appears as guest might become so fully at home, so integrated into the landscape by and through the hospitality of her host, that it becomes possible for her to become the host of her host, where the distinction between them blurs, and where hospitality becomes the entire and ever-transforming surround.

Jesse Arseneault: A recent talk you gave on architectural kinships (Singh, 2022) emphasized the dynamic relationships between us and the architectures that frame our world. If I am not misunderstanding your ideas, this includes literal structures, statues, and buildings, as well as structuralisms that shape our lives. As we think about reworlding, I wonder how this recent turn in your work resonates with our concerns in this special issue. For example, your analysis has exciting possibilities for reworlding, especially to rethink those approaches to it grounded in mastery, those that centre (human) actors molding an inert and inagential material world into a desired shape. Your work on architectural kinships opens us up to the complex relationships that exist between humans, other forms of life, and the shifting materialities that house us; it is attentive to how these materialities shape us as much as we shape them. This adds complexity to the project of reworlding, I think, since it doesn't allow us to objectify a world “out there” that can be remade through collective action. How do we think about the *world* in reworlding, not as a static material surround in which human agents are rooted, but as something that participates in reworlding?

Julietta Singh: In the throes of escalating climate catastrophe, it's quite clear that the earth is busy reworlding in ways that are well beyond us and certainly out of our control. And in this sense, what we are calling here a kind of decolonial reworlding needs not only to be guided by global elders whose knowledge bases have been preserved and rekindled against colonial force, but also by what the earth itself is generatively articulating.

The concept of architectural kinships emerged through a feature-film I'm finishing, a hybrid-form documentary called *The Nest* (2025) that I've written and co-directed with my friend and collaborator, Chase Joynt. The film is an exploration of a single domestic dwelling in Winnipeg, where my 86-year-old mother has lived for 44 years. Our aim was to displace the house's colonial legacy and repopulate the space with the forgotten women who lived there across 140 years. It's a collaboration with the Manitoba Métis Federation, the Manitoba School for the Deaf, and the Japanese Cultural Association of Manitoba, all communities whose histories are unexpectedly tied to the house. In this sense, we look to architecture as a frame through which to tell an alternative story of the nation, putting front and center those displaced by the whiteness and patriarchy of colonial history.

What you call here a “project of reworlding” is within the film a way of reckoning with and refusing the fact we've grown up in a society that has siloed our minoritized histories, that has taught us to ignore our deeply interlinked political struggles. In the world of *The Nest*, bodies across time become brick and mortar kin, bound to each other not only through the resonances of our political battles but through our intimate domestic lives. This offers another way to understand our attachment to each other: that our kin can be trans-temporal, can be place-based, can be forgotten figures we come to know in queer ways. So too is the house an actor in this film, a body that unites all our

bodies. And the trees, too, that tower above like aunties offering witness, shelter, life.

Linzey Corridon: Returning to *No Archive Will Restore You* makes clear the ways in which we have been restricted in our ability to conjure, to relate to multiple forms of the archive and archival practices. You mention how, for many in the academy, the archive is an enabling fiction. It is an intangible source of assurance and direction that inevitably materializes through the will of the individual who succumbs to these fictions. At a time when it feels like academic life is more limiting than it has ever been, I wonder what the allure and fictions of the archive can mean for non-academic spaces? Does the power or influence of these fictions begin and end in the space of academia? What uses do these fictions serve in our attempt to overhaul not just academic spaces but society at large?

Julietta Singh: I should begin by saying that I don't think the notion of enabling fictions is always a bad thing! After all, we need to invent the worlds we want to live toward. But in academia, it's true, you *must* have a kind of archive to justify your belonging. In *No Archive*, I turned to one of the least archivally appropriate subjects I could find – my own racialized, queer, injured, female body – to reclaim the archive from its capture as academic legitimacy. And in *The Nest*, the scant traces and absences of a host of minoritized women connected by a single domestic space become the locus for an unexpected cross-community collaboration. My own research into state archives became gateways for intimacy-building across Métis, Deaf, Japanese, and South Asian Canadians whose communities are connected through the sharing of a single place. Saidiya Hartman's practice of "critical fabulation" (2019) – which for her is tied specifically to the Black girls and women written entirely out or troublingly captured by the colonial archive – is expanded here to become the grounds for intimate cross-community collaboration. Once we find the traces of forgotten women, how do we invite them home in ways that not only remember them, but that change our sense of the past and the course of our intertwined futures?

How, alongside us as experimental creators, does her community use the archive to set the stage for her return? How do we creatively and politically engage what we find in the archive as part of a wider frame that includes oral stories, community traditions, and personal artifacts? What role does the archive play as a single story becomes a shared story, as we begin to understand our struggles as always and invariably sutured even across critical differences? So here, the archive is less a restriction or an academic orientation than it is the fodder for creation and collective, non-linear, transcultural forms of anti-colonial home-making.

References

- Brand, D. (2020, July 4). On narrative, reckoning, and the calculus of living and dying. *Toronto Star*. https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/dionne-brand-on-narrative-reckoning-and-the-calculus-of-living-and-dying/article_47884274-07ad-561a-973b-027ef2cbc8fb.html
- brown, a. m. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.
- Derrida, J., & Dufourmantelle, A. (2000). *Of hospitality*. Stanford University Press.
- Hartman, S. (2019). *Wayward lives, beautiful experiments: Intimate histories riotous Black girls, troublesome women, and queer radicals*. W. W. Norton.
- Joynt, C., & Singh, J. (Directors). (2025) [forthcoming]. *The nest* [film]. National Film Board of Canada.
- Singh, J., Halberstam, J., Moten, F., Ahuja, N., Eng-Beng, L., & Nyong’o Tavia. (2017, Nov. 10). *Decolonial bewilderment* [Conference session]. American Studies Association 2017 Conference, Hyatt Regency Chicago, Chicago, IL, United States.
- Singh, J. (2017). Future hospitalities. *Cultural Critique*, 95, 197-215. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2017.a663848>
- Singh, J. (2018a). Errands for the wild. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117(3), 567-580. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942159>
- Singh, J. (2018b). *Unthinking mastery: Dehumanism and decolonial entanglements*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372363>
- Singh, J. (2018c). *No archive will restore you*. punctum books.
- Singh, J. (2021). *The breaks*. Coach House Books.
- Singh, J. (2022, June 15). *Architectural kinships* [virtual keynote address]. Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies 2022 Zoom Conference.
- Snaza, N. (2024). *Tendings: Feminist esoterisms and the abolition of man*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478059103>
- Stuelke, P. (2021). *The ruse of repair: US neoliberal empire and the turn from critique*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478021575>