ISIT 6.2 (2022) 225–229
https://doi.org/10.1558/isit.20127
Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology (print) ISSN 2397-3471
Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology (online) ISSN 2397-348X
Submitted: 12 May 2021 Accepted: 30 November 2022

See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love, by Valerie Kaur. London: One World, 2020. 416 pp. $15.99 ISBN: 0525509119

Reviewed by Jessica Spence Moss, MA, Doctoral Candidate, Cultural Studies, Claremont Graduate University
jessica.moss@cgu.edu

In *See No Stranger*, Valarie Kaur reflects on her life experiences as a woman, a mother, a Sikh American, and trained lawyer as these identities require her to respond to social issues in the age of the Trump administration. She makes clear that, much as in the aftermath of 9/11, the Trump administration did not cause the current unrest, violence, and hate but simply uncovered what had existed (47). *See No Stranger* offers a method of response that is grounded in love. Arguing that all aspects of social justice work are impacted by the choice to willfully love, Kaur organizes *See No Stranger* with the logic that "joy is the gift of love. Grief is the price of love. Anger protects that which is loved. And … wonder is the act that returns us to love" (xv, 278, 310).

Broken up into three categorical invitations to love others, to love our opponents, and to love ourselves, each section provides examples of specific "willful acts" that support the effort to "see no stranger.. For example, wonder is required to love others, rage is a common experience when confronted by opponents, and in order to love ourselves we have to take the time to breathe. Kaur presents a model for revolutions that do not have linear trajectories but require continuous returns to the enactment of wondering, grieving, fighting, raging, listening, reimagining, breathing, pushing, and transitioning, as we encounter strangers, opponents, and new parts of ourselves, over and over again.

The two largest contributions of *See No Stranger* are as follows. First, Kaur's unapologetic utilization of birth and mothering as a metaphor of societal change. Centering these experiences, which are biologically limited to a subset of women, grants them a shared emotional currency that creates space for everyone to participate in the pain and joy of labor. Second, *See No Stranger* is not a traditional academic text to be sure, and it does not purport to be. Nevertheless, the conversations that can be had with classic works by Gloria Anzaldua and Cherrie Moraga, highlighting radical women of color, as well as calls for organizing and action made by Angela Davis and Audre Lorde, along with the recent work of Judith Buter in *The Force of Nonviolence,* will be generative. As a trained lawyer, filmmaker, and activist, Kaur uses the method of memoir, like feminists before her, to invite us to respond with

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2023

revolutionary love. Kaur uses the feminist method to center herself and her personal experience to unpack larger social issues. In *Living a Feminist Life,* Sara Ahmed argues that "the personal is theoretical" (10). Thus, Kaur's work provides an opportunity to "bring theory back to life" (Ahmed 10). In this light, *See No Stranger* makes important contributions to feminist, religious, interfaith, and peace studies as well as social justice work, specifically prison abolition.

This book has two audiences in mind, though Kaur does not explicitly make a distinction between those who *feel like* strangers and those who *view others* as strangers. The revolution, for those who have been pushed to the margins, is to rage, reimagine, and fight for a different world. For those that hold any privileges, Kaur's call is to wonder about, listen to, and grieve with those labeled stranger. The revolution, for this second group, is reimagining a world that you are not the center of but have an opportunity to help transform.

See No Stranger is built on the premise that revolutionary love is an orientation, not a feeling but a willful act. Therefore, regardless of the "stranger" that we come up against, Kaur's orientation is not to "hope" but to wonder about, listen to, and breathe with them in order to love them. The failure to do so, she argues, is the "beginning of violence" (11), violence against others, and ultimately violence against ourselves. Ahmed suggests that there are multiple responses to violence; from withdrawal to holding fatalist mentalities. Kaur suggests another response in addressing the violence perpetuated by white and Christian supremacies. We have to rage in safe containers, then we can wonder and love. Kaur clarifies that these willful acts can only happen when one feels safe enough to rage and emphasizes the importance of self-care in the process. She reminds us that, as we reorient ourselves to revolutionary love, we are not required to have empathy or compassion for those who have injured us (139, 143, 313), nor be subjected to continued abuse. The willful act to love does not require us to legitimize our opponents, only to grant them humanity, allowing us to preserve our own (313). Kaur shares the process by which she came to this realization in multiple confrontations with white and Christian supremacies, as well as personal challenges with family and experiences of sexual abuse.

To rage also means to grieve, and the willful act to grieve with and for someone else is the process of building relationships with those once considered strangers. Kaur considers this willful act as a reorientation, acknowledging that we "don't need to know people in order to grieve with them. [We] grieve with them in order to know them" (59). Kaur offers support for this logic by calling on the beautiful examples of those who participated in the Maori Haka dance after the 2019 terrorist attacks at two Christchurch

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2023

equinoxonline

mosques (133), as well as the reflection of Balbir Sodhi's wife who felt loved by those "strangers" who mourned with her (55). But Kaur recognizes that these experiences are not the norm for marginalized peoples who continually feel a need to assert "Black Lives Matter" and "Me Too." Kaur's assessment is that these movements are the result of a nation that refuses to wonder about and grieve with those who are harmed by structural racism, sexism, and xenophobia. Kaur offers proof in the disparate responses from President Obama after two mass shootings: his physical presence in Aurora, Colorado compared to a mere statement made after the Oak Creek Gurdwara shooting that seemed to relegate the Sikh community to "distant relatives" (225). Summarizing these responses, Kaur concludes that until the nation chooses to grieve with and for black and brown bodies, we will never be able to know them enough to love them.

In this text Kaur provides commentary on previous documentary film work, claiming her objective is to move the audience to *do* something, not just *feel* something. Kaur discusses her efforts in making *The Worst of the Worst*, a film that attempts to create awareness of the harm caused by, and the need to abolish, supermax prisons like Northern Correctional Institution in Connecticut (197). In presenting *Divided We Fall,* Kaur focuses on the experiences of Muslim and Sikh Americans in the aftermath of 9/11 who were asking the audience to have empathy and build solidarity with them. Kaur concedes that she was often more concerned with a "feel-good moment" (147) than challenging the systems of oppression. Part of this desire to "steer clear of discomfort" (147) might be explained by the difficulty of trying to convince others that inequalities and injustices exist. Kaur came to the realization that until she named and confronted white and Christian supremacies, solidarity was never a possibility.

Kaur rarely mentions interfaith work in this project, although I would argue that it is an exercise in interfaith engagement. Kaur weaves her Sikh tradition with her legal training. As a Sikh, Kaur is called to fight and love as a warrior-sage. As a lawyer she invokes the United States Constitution that promotes "justice, freedom, equality, the guarantee of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" (177). With these two traditions in hand, Kaur sees a world that can use religion in the projects of social justice. Arguing that faith leaders have always been on the front lines of social justice movements, Kaur does not see religion as necessary but as a space to "imagine the world we want" (185). For Kaur, her religious tradition focuses on "oneness" (23) and therefore persuades her to work for justice rather than retribution (270). For her, this is a process of willful acts that lead us to confront our opponents, forgive them, and reconcile with them. To be clear, Kaur points out that "forgiveness is not forgetting ... [but] freedom from hate" (296). Being

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2023

equinoxonline

free from hate, we can work toward reconciliation. This is another willful act by both parties: "Reconciliation rests on accountability" (264). For Kaur, this means that, above all, those who have committed harm must be held accountable. But the determined willful act of healing from trauma does not depend on your opponent's accountability, nor does your opponent's healing depend on your forgiveness (268).

Throughout, Kaur argues for a reorientation that will allow us to reimagine our families, communities, and societies as places that are rooted in joy (xvi), liberated by reconciliation, and maintained through solidarity. In each reflection, Kaur asks us to question what we know and reimagine the world through "ecstatic wonder" (16). While Kaur holds that revolutionary love is an ethic and not a prescription, she shares a mantra throughout the text that can be taken as such. When faced with an "other," an opponent, or a new part of ourselves, we are invited to consciously repeat: "You are a part of me I do not yet know." Kaur offers an example of what this has looked like for her. In a coffee shop, Kaur overheard a group of men making racist remarks. In recognizing rage, she also felt safe enough to wonder. She then looked at these men and repeated: "These men are your uncles" until the word "uncle" replaced "bigot" (152). In this attempt to orient herself to revolutionary love, Kaur recognized that someone had to listen to these "uncles" and try to understand them. Still, she concedes: "I'm just not sure it had to be me" (158). As the reader, I found a moment of introspection and wondered: Could it have been me? The next time we are witness to racism, sexism, homophobia, or Islamophobia: Could it be us?

Arguing that we cannot love those we do not wonder about, listen to, grieve with, or breathe with, Kaur suggests that we can start by wondering "about our effect on the world, [and] which of our actions create the world we want, and which destroy it" (27). Therefore, I came away from this text wondering: What if we strive for a solidarity that is built on mutual liberation rather than exchange (82)? What if America as a nation entered the work of accountability and apology? And what if, in the process of reconciliation, those in privileged positions stepped back (120) and let "those who have been most harmed … lead us through the transition" (270)? What if we reimagine a world that abolishes "Guantanamos" and we no longer see prisons as a normal solution for safety (194)? What "if we poured the resources used to punish people into housing, healthcare, education, art, and job creation. Or if we directed the resources spent on militarized borders and detention centers on border governance, welcoming refugees instead of incarcerating them" (202)? What if the world was no longer divided into "good" and "bad" but built on a belief in the capacity of each of us to be transformed (137)? Not just our opponents, but us as well.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2023

equinoxonline

As an invitation to shift our orientation and to practice an ethic of love, *See No Stranger* is an embodiment of feminist and interfaith methods that offers a powerful example of what is possible. It is grounded in experience and offers a model to gain knowledge about ourselves, our communities, and our opponents as we willfully wonder, rage, listen, and love. Kaur readily admits that this work is aspirational, but so is the work of feminist, interfaith, and peace studies. In *See No Stranger*, Kaur has provided an opportunity to bring theory back to life for all of these fields.

© Equinox Publishing Ltd. 2023

equinoxonline