 The Unsung Sing

What is the question here, as I have already said, is the ability to “hear” that which we have not heard before, and to transgress in situating the text or the “fragment” differently.

PANDEY, “VOICES FROM THE EDGE,” 285

At wedding festivities across rural and urban north India, just as the groom and members of the *barāt* (groom’s party) prepare to depart with the bride, the family of the bride, the “wife-givers,” belt out playfully abusive songs calculated to assault the ears of the “wife-takers.” Veiled animosity toward the extended family for taking away a beloved daughter pours forth in finely orchestrated ritual abuse. This genre, known as *gālī* or *gārī* (abusive songs), is but one of many types of songs that might be heard during a wedding ceremony. At numerous wedding rituals, blessings loaded with symbolism and advice are customarily sung.

Wedding songs, of course, constitute only a small proportion of song repertoires that range from congratulatory birth songs and those marking other rites of passage to songs associated with festivals and seasons. Such songs are quite distinct from the songs that punctuate women’s labor while grinding grain or transplanting rice, for ex-

ample. Dominant and recurring themes in folksongs are humor and subversion, especially at the spring festival of Holi, brother-sister affection, the separation and pathos of lovers, and the struggles of Sita, the heroine of the epic *Ramāyanā*. Easily recognized through their rhythms and melodies, women's song genres are vastly different in mood and style of performance from those of men. As the very hum of life, folksongs offer much more than just the right mood. In rural contexts, their appeal is comparable to the potent points of identification offered by Bollywood films. Just as urban Indians often narrate their lives in reference to Bollywood characters and heroes, rural Indians have long articulated the human condition by aligning with the messages and moods of folksongs, their own scripts of reference.

Making sense of the ubiquity of this song culture in all its bewildering variety, with a song for every occasion, is by far the most compelling and rewarding aspect of conducting anthropological fieldwork in the Purabiya and Bhojpuri-speaking countryside of northern India, namely, eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar. Since songs are also pedagogical, critical, and interrogative, they offer abundantly rich source material for anthropological inquiry.

This study focuses its investigation on the way songs, as a people's oral traditions, illuminate the social construction of gender through which overarching caste and gender ideologies are transmitted and reproduced. Because the kinds of relations that obtain between men and women are not merely determined by the biological givens but also are products of social and cultural processes (Ortner and Whitehead 1981, ix), songs make it possible for us to understand the organization of maleness and femaleness in relation to a particular society. As the same songs suggest how dominant ideologies are not merely complied with, accommodated, and reinforced but also resisted and interrogated, they also enable us to address the question of agency. Since songs are integral to people's lives in rural settings, the light they shed on caste, kinship and marriage, work cultures, gender, power, sexuality, family life, patriarchy, and the forms of agency and constraint operating within the same framework turns them into a resource for anthropological research.

Additionally, since songs "provide a medium for expressing emotions that are taboo topics in everyday conversations," (Narayan 1986, 56) subjecting these texts to close scrutiny allows us a glimpse of people's intimate

worlds. In cultures that do not openly discuss inner emotional states, songs are the shared tradition through which emotions are expressed, thus providing a medium for the expression of what might be taboo in everyday conversation (ibid). For instance, in the emotionally charged fragment below, about a visiting brother's dismay at his sister's unhappiness, we also learn that women are prone to conceal details about ill treatment in their marital homes, so as not to alarm their natal kin.

Sonvā t jarai bahinī sonarā dukaniyā
Bahinī jarthīn sasurariyā ho Ram
Loharā t jarai bahinī loharā dukaniyā
Bahinī jarthīn sasurariyā ho Ram
E dukh jani kahiya bhaiyā Bābā ke agvā
Sabhavā baithī pactaihen ho Ram
E dukh jani kahiya Maiyā ke agavā
Chatiyā pīti mari jaihen ho Ram.

Gold melts at the goldsmith's.
 Sister burns away at her in-laws.
 Iron smelts at the ironsmith's.
 Sister wastes away at her in-laws.
 Brother, don't speak of this grief to father.
 In the assembly, he'll be filled with remorse.
 Brother, don't speak of this to mother.
 Beating her breast, she'll die of grief.

URMILA MAURYA AND FRIENDS, CHACHAKPUR, JAUNPUR

In north India, from the nineteenth century onward, forms of women's entertainment attracted the attention of "social reformers, urban intellectuals, emerging middle classes and caste associations," each intending to initiate changes in the social and customary behavior of women and lower castes (Gupta 2001, 90). In response to the colonial state's attempts to place castes on a hierarchical grid, caste organizations aiming at upward mobility and keen to secure for themselves a high position in the census schedules were quick to crack down on women's practices that reformers had looked at with disfavor. They were eager to restrain women from the practice of singing abusive and obscene songs both at weddings and, for example, at the annual festival of Holi, where role reversals

are common. This eagerness to censor hints at the often provocative nature of women's songs. In the nineteenth century, the *gālī* genre, for instance, generated a great deal of embarrassment among social reformers. High on their list were several genres of folksongs that were considered unworthy of being sung by "chaste" Hindu women. The reformers argued that *gālīs* promoted women's confrontational behavior and aggression and prompted women to transgress boundaries and challenge familial relationships (Gupta 2001, 93). This reasoning completely overlooked the logic and place of people's oral traditions within the society.

Since the reformers' objectives were to be accomplished by targeting women's songs and patriarchy was to be refurbished by silencing women, forms of women's cultural expression, such as their folk and oral traditions, require urgent attention. This anxiety about folksongs went hand in hand with the alarm generated about women's use of public spaces and the need to restrict women's access to these spaces in the so-called interest of protecting women. The reformers' platform was dictated in part by their desire to efface the erotic from women's lives and to suppress women's sexuality in the interest of conjugal harmony.

This book addresses how conventional understandings of caste, gender, labor, agrarian relations, and the complex workings of power may be strengthened, questioned, and fine-tuned through the study of folksongs. The power of these songs also lies in their ability to hint at and suggest, rather than directly address, social themes. The aim here is to identify those areas of the social enterprise, including political-economic organizations, that directly impact cultural constructions of gender (Ortner and Whitehead 1981, 10). In foregrounding the songs and their significance to those who sing them, the book also seeks to refine our understandings of the interplay between caste, class, and gender.

The significance of the texts analyzed here is heightened by the fact that they embody the voices of the marginalized, those who rarely have been the focus of systematic analytical inquiry. Indeed, the search for women's agency in biographies, diaries, poems, and other forms of written expression by individual women, largely of the elite or middle-classes, has obscured the value to be found in the voices of unlettered women, who comprise the vast majority. Drawn from laboring castes and classes, peasant milieus, or groups otherwise marginalized, these songs, like the one below, largely reflect women's "subaltern consciousness."

Kahiyā bidāyi dihalā
Buxar me dhāhi dihalā
Gaiyā niyare pagahā dharavalā, ho Bābuji
Pahilā me budhā baravā
Dūsar garīb ho gharavā
Tīsar me jadūgaravā khojalā, ho Bābuji

Why did you get me married?
 Dumped me here in Buxar.
 Handed me like a cow, to be tied up, why did you, O Father?
 First, a groom so aged.
 Then, a home impoverished.
 Third, a magician you found for me, why did you, O Father?

DALIT STREET MUSICIANS, BUXAR FAIR, 14 JANUARY 2000

The concerns and worlds of Dalit and subaltern women have largely remained obscure, not only because of upper-caste men and women's distance from Dalit struggles but also because of the latter's lack of integration into mainstream knowledge, academic disciplines, and even the middle-class women's movement. While, like the rural and urban worlds, the worlds of marginalized or Dalit women and those of women of the upper castes remain distinct, hints at how these worlds have been sometimes bridged can be found in the songs.

If women's early literary expressions were aimed at greater visibility, the opposite tendency of anonymity emerges as the dominant feature here. Songs have allowed women (and men) through the ages to articulate, acknowledge, and affirm shared impressions. Hence their validity for large collectivities, especially those of women, offering precisely the kind of anonymity that facilitated the fleshing-out and articulation of shared experiences.

Songs constitute the spaces wherein the collective voice of women may be said to have evolved. Since repertoires largely associated with agricultural tasks are being steadily eclipsed with the mechanization of farming, the urgent need to document them cannot be overstated. Further, Indians' simultaneous distancing of themselves from folksongs as representative of the "old" ways or their modifications and reworkings of these songs to address contemporary concerns offer other compelling rationales for this investigation.

Indeed how folksongs respond to social change, including urbanization and mechanization, is a promising area of research (Blackburn and Ramanujan 1986; Narayan 1993, 177–204). Narayan suggests that we must think of the material as a dynamic making and remaking of folklore in response to changing conditions, rather than, as has been the tendency since colonial times, to equate folklore with “bounded, authentic and unchanging materials” (Narayan 1993, 197). Hence the utility of viewing songs in situated contexts to gauge their relevance for the individuals who perform and interpret them (*ibid.*). Today, for instance, the young and upwardly mobile residents of north Indian villages strive to distance themselves from these traditions. This distancing also derives from the association between these songs and certain kinds of labor and, along with the general devaluation of manual labor, this labor has served to indicate a lower status in the caste system (Jassal 2001, 46–48).

Women’s repertoires, in particular, are eclipsed and modified partly as a result of the wider appeal and reach of the Bollywood music industry and partly due to a thriving industry of musical cassette production, themes I discuss in chapter 6. While classical musical traditions have drawn heavily on women’s field songs, this incorporation of women’s genres into the world of classical music has invariably eclipsed the association of these songs in public consciousness with “women’s voice,” a dimension I return to in chapter 2.

Despite the richly layered possibilities women’s songs offer, it is not true that only women’s articulations are worthy of attention. Masculine song traditions are both rich and vibrant and, while they represent distinct worlds and social concerns, they offer equally significant insights into gender relations. Unlike women’s song traditions, male *gāthā* (ballad) traditions retain their vitality not only because they are largely performative and remembered by village bards but also because they are periodically renewed through all-night celebrations and festivities. In contrast, women’s songs, while also integral to ceremonies and rites of passage, tend to accompany agricultural work or other forms of productive activity. However, it is useful to remember that, in addition to classical musicians, folk singers and bards received the patronage of upper-caste elites and landlords, thereby reproducing the existing inequities of caste and class.

UNEARTHING GENDER

Songs as Forms of Communication

What can the songs tell us about caste, gender, and class that cannot be learned in other ways? What do the songs convey that might otherwise be obscured by merely observing social interaction in the field or by deploying more conventional anthropological tools such as participant observation? Elucidating their special quality, Paul Friedrich argues that through poetry and songs, “one is often given the gist of the culture in a way that would be difficult or impossible to infer. These insights and intuitions are of singular value because they characteristically deal with and involve the emotions, the cultural experience as felt in addition to as understood—that is, in psychological terms, the phenomena of intention, identification, motivation, and affect that are often neglected in cultural analysis, including much of the recent research that combines an ideology of emotionality with practices that feature analytical instruments and objectivized data” (Friedrich 1996, 39).

What Friedrich claims for poetry, we can claim for the texts of songs: “Poetry is a constituent as well as a vehicle of the culture. . . . Poetry in this sense is at once ‘data’ for analysis and itself a body of generalizations about life that are at least as subtle as what the social scientist normally comes up with” (39).

Significantly, like good poems, folksongs exist in the memories and voices of living individuals (see Rao and Shulman 1998). They are primarily a means of social communication among those who share common bodies of knowledge, value systems, and ideologies. Constituting people’s oral traditions, the remembrance and recollection of songs in particular contexts also invoke a variety of interconnections with other contexts. They are therefore loaded with meaning precisely because of the interplay of intertextual resonances wherein each seemingly isolated song may in fact be related to others, which often represent competing viewpoints and voices within the given folksong tradition. These strong intertextual connections and interactive relationships between the songs of a region are what make them so effective as forms of social communication. The fact that folksongs are sung again and again and passed down through generations also indicates the high degree of acceptability of the ideas, moods, and messages they contain.

Gender as Socially Constructed

Songs can be regarded as a reserve pool of folk resources and wisdom that people may draw upon to reflect on, and understand and struggle with, their own realities. A central concern of this book is to investigate how women's work songs become vehicles for the construction and reproduction of gender identity. While interviews with individual women and participant observation offer anthropologists and ethnographers one, often conventional, sort of fieldwork data, songs, as existing cultural codes of approved behavior and norms, provide another window into women's shared insights. These codes appear to equip women to maneuver and negotiate conditions that are often inherently disempowering. If the act of singing imparts psychological strength to individual women and to women's collectivities, then the underlying messages these songs transmit should offer us a range of clues about how the feminine gender is constructed.

Chapter 2, for instance, investigates how songs as cultural codes can take us one step further toward understanding the daily negotiations of power within households. The ironic song below shows how women both internalize and question male control.

Nibi kaurī laharedār o balamūā
Jab nibi kaurī jāman lāge
Sasuru mero rakhvār, o bālumā
Nibi kaurī laharedār, o bālumā
Jab nibi kaurī pharan lāge
Bhasaru mero rakhvār, o bālumā
Jab nibi kaurī pākan lāge
Devaru mero rakhvār, o bālumā
Nibi kaurī laharedār o bālumā
Jab nibi kaurī jharan lāge
Balmā mero rakhvār o bālumā

This Neem seed was a spirited one, beloved.
 When the Neem seed began to grow,
 Father-in-law was my protector.
 When the Neem seed began to fruit,
 Senior brother-in-law became my caretaker.
 When the Neem seed began to ripen,

Younger brother-in-law took charge.
 When the Neem seed was ready to drop,
 Husband dear took control.

FIELD RECORDING, ROBERTSGANJ, 2002

The articulation and transmission of ideologies such that gender is socially constructed may, at first glance, suggest that women are simply victims of their society's customs and traditions. Numerous elaborations of alternative femininities, however, raise questions about the potential of songs to serve as spaces for the emergence of women's critical consciousness. The multilayered and varied texts, such as the song below, which offers a glimpse of a forceful femininity, encourage readings that refute unidimensional understandings.

Hamrā bālam eik diliyā ke naukar, diliya ke chākar
Diliyā se ākar cale jāye re sakhī re
Āye, cale jāye re sakhī re
Jab cala āve
Pahariyā mai dākalun
Dantava se katālun janjīr mor sakhī re

My lover is the servant of his will, heart's slave.
 At will he comes, then goes back, my friend.
 Comes and goes.
 But when he comes,
 I could jump across the highest mountains.
 With my teeth, I'd bite off the chains, my friend.

SITARA NISHAD AND MALLAH WOMEN, ALLAHABAD

Such songs offer startling commentary on women's lives in contexts that otherwise seem, in various ways, to have silenced women, or at least made them invisible, especially in public discourses. One drawback of feminist writings hitherto has been the unconscious privileging of the upper-caste point of view. In tracing the history of the women's question at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, we find that it is the upper caste woman, the "*bhadramahilā*," who is most written about and it is women from this class we come to know through their first literary expressions. The *bhadramahilā*, this new woman, was crafted through a series of dichotomies that differentiated her from the

“coarse,” “common,” or “peasant” woman devoid of refinement (Chatterjee 1990). The latter category is the subject of this book.

This book takes as its source material the oral articulations of generations of women who were not only traditionally deprived of access to the written word but who may also have internalized this exclusion as normative. In this sense the songs invoke the perspectives of women who have been silenced, perhaps simply because what they have to say was not of interest to the privileged. These perspectives of laboring women also largely predate the conscious or politically articulate viewpoints that are now emerging as a consequence of the Dalit women’s movement in several pockets of Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and other regions of India.

Songs as Cultural Capital

Taking oral narratives as our lens also allows us to unravel caste, as an ongoing system of inequality reproduced in current modernity, in its complex interaction with class and gender (Dirks 2001). While anthropology has examined how women are embedded in relations of production, relatively unexplored are the cultural dimensions of women’s work, the history of women’s entry into the work force, the hidden nature of women’s labor, women’s access to and control over productive resources, and the dimension of women’s consciousness, especially as it evolves during work processes. Mary Douglas’s understanding of the mix of subcultures that would ideally lead to “the joint production of meaning” through intercultural dialogue within constituent elements engaged in a continuous process of “contestation, coordination and collaboration” (Rao and Walton 2004, 21) could well describe the multiplicity of cultural codes embedded in the songs this book examines. Hence, the meaning that these narratives hold for their singers is both essentially variable and made more so as a function of context.

Therefore it should come as no surprise that when the social reformers of the nineteenth century sought to regulate and sanitize certain kinds of women’s songs, they also sought to urgently replace them with “proper” and “correct” alternatives. Songs considered corrupting and indecent were thus to be expunged from the repertoires of the new Hindu woman the social reformers hoped to shape. The emerging compilations and anthologies produced by men seeking to replace women’s so-called trivial

songs with inspiring *ādarsh gīt* (idealistic songs) in the service of the nation signaled this new trend:

*Dekho lajjā ke darpan me tum mukhrā
Pativrata kī orho cunariyā,
shīl ka nainon me ho kajrā*

See your face in the mirror of modesty,
Wear the veil of chastity,
Mark your eyes with the kohl of decency.

*Na nācnā uchit na nacvāna,
Na byāhon me gālī gānā.
Kabhī mat dekho sajnī rās,
Krishan sakhion kā vividh vilās.*

It is inappropriate to dance and get others dancing
Or to sing galis at weddings.
Girlfriends! Refrain from watching dramas
About the playful frolics of Krishna with the milkmaids.
GUPTA 2001, 95–96

Similar concerns to those Gupta points out in Uttar Pradesh were voiced in Bengal as early as 1855. By the turn of the twentieth century, a range of independent song forms practiced by women had disappeared, unable to withstand the multipronged attack by Christian missionaries, colonial administrators, and the Bengali *bhadralok* (Banerjee 1989, 160).

The new sense of morality the *bhadralok* represented rejected the Radha-Krishna motif in plays and dances, especially in terms of human passions, sensuality, and eroticism. Banerjee explores the impact of these new attitudes, which regarded all native customs and habits as obscene, including the form and content of performances, despite the fact that recitals by women Vaishnavite *kathākatās*, or storytellers, were an important source of religious knowledge for women (Banerjee 1989, 151). Krishna's erotic dalliances, metaphorically understood as the locking together in total involvement of the body and the mind, suddenly appeared, under colonial influence, to threaten domestic stability. Moreover, in this context, the erotic is envisioned entirely from the woman's perspective, and the excitement of erotic love unites with ideas about the

crossing of given sexual boundaries. It is this explosive mix that appears to have threatened caste patriarchies. Banerjee cites a bhadrakok writer who complained that it was impossible for uneducated young women to remain unexcited during the narration of the Krishna Lila. He therefore proposed: “Since it (kathakata) has become a source of so much evil, it is not advisable for bhadrakoks to encourage it. Those who allow their ladies to go to kathakata performances should be careful. . . . If, during kathakata performances women stay at home and are provided with opportunities to listen to good instructions, discussions on good books and to train themselves in artistic occupations, their religious sense will improve and their souls will become pure and they will be suitable for domestic work” (Somaprakash cited in Banerjee 1989, 151–52).

Another aim of this book is to understand women’s emotions, which are best approached through the language of the songs discussed in chapter 3. In this sense the songs are “inescapably and fundamentally social” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990, 10). Trawick, through the analysis of a hymn sung by an untouchable woman about caste pollution, reveals the singer’s concern with problems of inclusion and exclusion. Abu-Lughod and Lutz argue that “the singer’s artistic technique, which involves deviating from the code of grammar as well as the social code, is a strategy for challenging that which has cast her out” (10). Close readings of some of the songs indeed point to similar strategies.

Folk genres exist in the public domain and have always constituted the common heritage of the rural communities in particular regions. The innumerable variations in content that the same song can undergo in different regions, and sometimes even from one village to the next, testifies to the prevalence of several versions of the songs. This variation also explains why there is no such thing as an “authentic” version of these songs. The masculine ballad, Lorikāyan, also known as Chandaini in the Chhattisgarhi region, is a case in point. The Lorikāyan of the Bhojpuri region, which is the subject of chapter 5, is a masculine ballad claimed by the Yadava caste. Yet its enormous appeal for a range of middle and lower castes makes it equally a part of the socialization processes of these caste groups.

What kinds of messages do these songs transmit, and how do notions of inequality, including gender inequality, become internalized? I seek answers to such questions, which are begged by the song’s narratives

themselves, at several points in this book. For instance, while certain well-known Sita songs, the subject of chapter 4, may be claimed by all castes, the plurality of voices they represent embody a range of meanings and divergent viewpoints. Their singular appeal to the women who sing them appears to derive from the fact that Sita songs mirror peasant women's own existential struggles with their socially constructed roles.

Jab re Sita dei Tulsi hāthe lihalī, Tulsi gailī sukhāi ai
Aisen purukhvā ke muh nahin dekhābī
Jini Ram dehlen banvās ai
Phātī jāiti dbartī alop hoi jāiti re, ab na dekhābī sansār ai

When Sita Devi touched the Tulsi, it dried up.
 “Such a being I never wish to set eyes on again.
 That Rama who exiled me to the forest,
 Let the earth part, let me disappear in it.”

UPADHYAYA 1990B, 169

Agency in Women's Songs

Many of the songs presented in this book articulate particular interests and agendas that are clearly inimical to those of women. Saba Mahmood broadens the notion of agency beyond that of Judith Butler, who defines it as the capacity to subvert norms (Mahmood 2005). Mahmood's arguments against reducing the heterogeneity of life to a flat narrative of either succumbing to or resisting relations of domination are useful in the context of women's songs. She cautions against equating values such as humility, shyness, or modesty with passivity and inaction simply because they do not “buttress the autonomy of the individual” (206–22). Again, limiting the notion of agency to the actions taken by individuals obscures how structures of gender, class, caste, and race shape or affect the possibilities for agency.

Limited views of agency in western feminist discourses fail to account for the lives of women shaped by nonliberal traditions. Such discourses seldom problematize women's desire to resist. Moreover, their assumption that women's actions emerge from their own free will, rather than from the dictates of custom, tradition, or direct coercion, is one that has been naturalized in the scholarship on gender (208). Instead of simply taking this for granted, it might be more useful to determine differ-

ent situations wherein women would want freedom from subordination and structures of male domination. In their efforts to achieve greater piety, women in Egypt's mosque movement, for instance, strive to become more shy, modest, persevering, and humble—attributes that have hitherto also secured their subordination. While men control and produce Islam, women's practices may be understood as spaces for subordinate discourse that cultivates women's consciousness. Women's insistence on their dynamic complementarity with men may be identified through their various women-only ceremonies and practices. Since women's ritual practices are separate from those of, and exclude, men, they serve in themselves as a "means of resisting and setting limits to domination" (206).

Thus, where social protest and economic necessity are hegemonized, other motivations, like divinity, virtue, morality, female modesty, or piety, receive scant attention. Clearly, since the binary terms "resistance" and "subordination" cannot capture the range of goals women have, attending to different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience, in addition to inquiring about those spaces that are free from the influence of men and their coercive presence, might be a more productive approach.

Abu-Lughod has also cautioned against the tendency both to romanticize resistance and to treat agency as a synonym for resistance. As women always play active parts in accepting, accommodating, ignoring, resisting, or protesting—sometimes all at the same time (Abu-Lughod 1990a, 41–55)—one might take for granted that "resistances, of whatever form, signal sites of struggle" (47). Instead, she suggests that we learn more about the types of power women are up against. Further, in assuming that some types of power are more significant than others, we may be hampered from exploring how these forms operate simultaneously, either in concert or at cross-purposes (48). For instance, in the case of the songs I discuss in chapter 2, the same lighthearted ones that offer humorous lessons on how to negotiate visits to natal homes (a euphemism for a "break" from chores), underlining the need for such cajoling and negotiation in the first place, also reveal the extent of the power and control husbands exercise over their wives and their labor. Broadly, these songs also indicate women's contribution to their peasant "household" economy, as well as the uncompensated and unrecognized nature of this contribution.

Focusing on the terms that people use to organize their lives and that might be “constitutive of different forms of personhood, knowledge and experience” (16) allows for conceptualizing agency “not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that specific relations of *subordination* create and enable” (18). The songs suggest not only that women are influenced by the larger social and political structures but also that their actions, in turn, impact these structures. As Sherry Ortner has argued, “human beings make society just as society makes them.” Yet if, in the process of reproducing society, society is also transformed, a notion of agency that is socially, linguistically, and culturally constrained is a more effective one when trying to understand how women are sometimes complicit with, while also making accommodations for or reinforcing, the status quo—often all at the same time (Ahearn 2000, 12–15).

In defining agency as the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act, Laura Ahearn suggests that instead of passively taking in the songs, we might also fruitfully look for how the kinds of meanings that might emerge are constrained, that is, how these meanings are socially mediated and “intertextually situated within a bounded universe of discourse” (Ahearn 2001, 111). Since singing communities have their own beliefs, values, ways of talking, and even power relations that emerge over the course of their mutual endeavors, the term “communities of practice” as “aggregates of people who come together around mutual engagement,” a processual yet structural unit may be identified, one that is both constitutive of and constituted by its participants. The extent, then, to which the following songs broaden our understanding of women’s agency remains a core question of this inquiry.

FIELDWORK

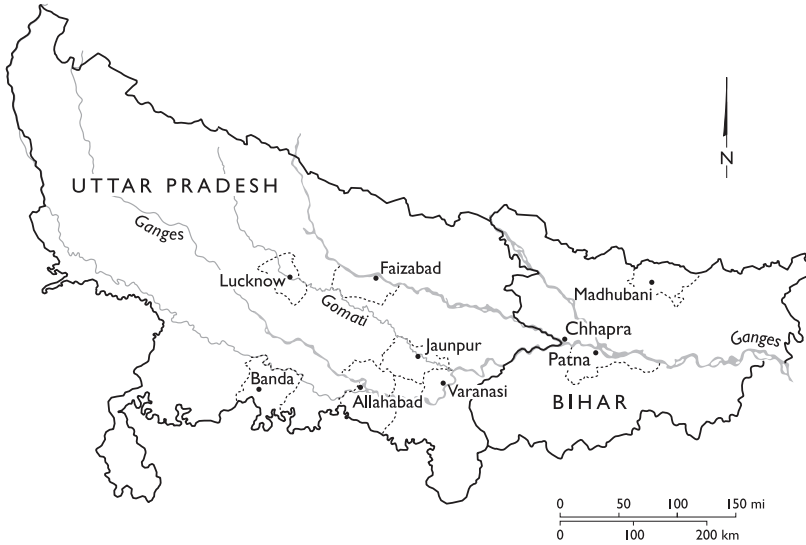
I collected the songs on which this book is based intermittently during innumerable field visits stretched out over a five-year period. I carried out my intensive fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh in the Atara, Barsara and Sauraiyan villages in the Badlapur block of Jaunpur district; Chachakpur village near Jaunpur city; the rural neighborhoods around the city of Varanasi and in village Sadiapur near Allahabad. My collections were greatly enriched in village Misraulia in Bihar’s Chhapra district during



1 Map of India with highlighted areas in which fieldwork was conducted

my research for a documentary film on the song traditions of the Bhojpuri-speaking region. During this period, I also attended the Buxar *melā* (fair) where I met itinerant singers, whose songs have enriched this collection.

Along with my fieldwork villages in Chhapra district of Bihar, the Jaunpur and Benaras districts in Uttar Pradesh constitute a large chunk of the hinterland that, since the days of the East India Company, provided the workforce for the growing port city of Calcutta and, subsequently, migrant labor to the sugar colonies of the Caribbean, Fiji, and Mauritius. Folksongs provide a rich source for understanding how migration shaped the consciousness of the region. As my song collection grew, the links



2 Fieldwork districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar

between the agrarian structure, patriarchal ideology, social control, and women's lack of power were thrown into sharp relief.

Today Jaunpur is one of the most prosperous districts in eastern Uttar Pradesh. In recent years, this prosperity has accompanied a growing commercial agriculture, with the increased mechanization of farm activities, including the replacement of labor-intensive irrigation with motor-driven tube wells, tractors for ploughing, electrical threshers for harvesting, and flour mills for milling. As a result of these processes, a number of song genres that accompany women's labor, particularly songs of the millstone, are on the decline.

Here, medium-sized holdings predominate as a result of the post-Independence emphasis on the Zamindari Abolition, the breakup of large landed estates and the power of the landed gentry, the *zamin-dars*. Since the 1950s, a strong and resourceful middle peasantry has emerged and small-scale intensive agriculture has become the norm. The pre-Independence landlords of Jaunpur district, predominantly of the Thakur and Rajput caste of warrior nobility, are today petty commodity producers, relying largely on family supervision and agricultural labor. Further, owing to the intergenerational partition of lands, many of the large holdings have decreased in size, with each landlord owning an

average of five acres of land, worked both by family and hired labor. The financial stability of this class of former landholders has enabled substantial investment in threshers, tube wells, and tractor rentals. The small-scale nature of agriculture has produced a corresponding decrease in the dependence on hired labor. Benefiting from the break-up of large landholdings were the former sharecroppers and tenants belonging to the middle caste of Yadavas, who thereby secured ownership and control over land and today constitute the majority of small landholders. Women from intermediate castes are skillful and industrious agriculturists, and their economic contributions have, in no small measure, contributed to the recent prosperity of castes such as the Yadavas, Kurmis, and Koeris. Chamars, the Dalit (downtrodden) caste in the region who occupy the bottom rungs of caste and class hierarchies, remain landless.

Women's Land Rights

My initial impetus for recording songs grew from my research on women's land rights. During my fieldwork on this subject, my discussions with groups of women usually ended in extended and enthusiastic song sessions, where women's problematic relationship to land ownership emerged with striking clarity. I recorded many of the texts included in this book, as in them I observed the nature of the relationships between women and their employers in the field. Sometimes women who were otherwise reluctant informants proved eager participants in the song sessions and were even transformed by them. In fact, as singing is so much a part of the voice of women in the countryside here, it would be hard to imagine conducting any insightful fieldwork on women's issues without referencing these song sessions. Both the rich narrative content of the songs and the willingness of female informants from the entire range of caste and class backgrounds to share these songs with outsiders made this discourse an accessible point of entry during fieldwork.

Between 1997 and 2000, I regularly participated in grass-roots workshops organized by the "U.P. Bhūmi Sudhār aur Shyam Adhikāri Abhiyān Samitī," the Movement for Uttar Pradesh Land Reforms and Labor Rights, a loose coalition of approximately thirty NGOs that came together in 1997 to work on agrarian issues in several districts of Uttar Pradesh. The discussions generated at these village- and district-level meetings,

where participants ranged from activists, administrators, academics, and legal experts to small and marginal farmers, tenants, and agricultural laborers, sharpened my research questions. These song collections owe a tremendous amount to the monthly sessions of the Abhiyān Samitī.

During my years of fieldwork I have found that women, despite being silenced in other spheres and contexts and reluctant to volunteer information on contested issues such as the nature of rights and entitlements to land or to share their points of view even when coaxed to do so, nevertheless participate in song sessions with great enthusiasm and lack of inhibition. On many occasions, asking women to sing individually or collectively was infinitely more rewarding than asking them to elaborate on a particular theme through a series of questions or in focus-group discussions. Over time, as the collections and genres evolved and revealed their treasures, it became clear that many issues on which women were otherwise reluctant or unable to voice an opinion were in fact explored in the various song genres. Rarely, for instance, did I elicit responses on the theme of women's rights to land, largely because this theme constituted a different discourse for them. Women were often unable to connect the culture of disinheritance with the immediate marginality they were experiencing. The political explosiveness of the subject also hindered frank expression. In this setting, marked by the systematic denial of women's rights to land, marriage songs wherein brides claim their shares from fathers spoke volumes. The song below is a stunning example, spelling out the sleight of hand by which women are denied rights in natal properties. We hear both smugness and relief in the father's tone as he evokes the bride's vermilion, the symbol of matrimony that will eliminate the threat to the property of the patrilineage that unmarried daughters pose.

Je kuch arajihe e bābā, adhiyā hamār

Adhiyā adhiyā jini kara betī

Sabhe dhan tohār

Cutki bhar sindurvā e betī

Tu ta jayebu kaunā pār

In all you earn, Father, I stake a claim for half.

“Insist not on half your share, daughter,

This entire wealth is yours, after all.

Just a pinch of vermilion,¹ daughter,
 Before long, far and away you'll be gone.”

JASSAL 2001, DEDICATION

Because of my status as an outsider, women's sexuality was another theme that was not easily broached. However, the singing of *kajlī* (a song genre associated with the rainy season and women's work in the fields), the subject of chapter 2, and other songs of intimacy that are light-hearted, ironic, and humorous often provided points of entry into discussions on otherwise taboo subjects. I found myself returning to the singers for clarifications sometimes months and even years after the initial recording was made. The very informality of the process of song recordings thus offered me the richest insights into the culture and allowed me to resume and maintain contact with the most interesting singers. Though the songs themselves were not initially the subject of my research but only the vehicle for comprehending cultural complexities, they ultimately helped me to remain connected with the field well beyond the specific research questions I was investigating at the time.

A feature of my fieldwork was that I was seldom left alone with a single woman for any length of time, unless I specifically requested it for the purposes of the study. When not attending to immediate household chores, women were invariably surrounded by other kinswomen, neighbors, friends, or caste women. This community proved a most fertile ground for facilitating wide-ranging discussion and debates. Women's collective participation in my interview sessions and informal singing sessions created the ideal atmosphere for sharing ideas. Women were most relaxed during song sessions and therefore most likely to respond thoughtfully to my questions. I soon adopted the singing of folksongs as a research strategy for putting my informants at ease.

When Women's Songs Pack a Punch

It was a common practice for upper caste village women to invite a few agricultural laboring women to their homes to entertain them with their songs. During these afternoon sessions, songs that explored tensions between the conjugal and natal homes were hot favorites, both in terms of listeners' requests and singers' repertoires. During a particular pre-arranged recording session in 2003, of women's laboring songs with six

Dalit women, I soon had misgivings about the recording session's location, a spacious hall in one of three sprawling dwellings belonging to the Brahmin landlord and his extended family for whom the women worked as daily wage laborers. The setting was far from neutral, even if it did provide soothing shelter from the oppressive noonday sun. This lack of neutrality became apparent as soon as the Dalit women, some of them veiled, arrived and seated themselves on the floor.

As I had commonly experienced during fieldwork, recording invariably attracted inquisitive youngsters. On this occasion, too, sundry adolescent youths from the extended Brahmin household entered and sprawled themselves on a divan at the far end of the large room. Middle-aged Brahmin women and girls stood outside, peeping in through the windows. Led by a senior Dalit woman in her sixties, the singers began the session, while one among them, sat sideways and heavily veiled, her singing barely audible. At first it appeared that, despite the unequal social relations the context underlined, a mood of cozy familiarity was building, with easy banter exchanged between the youths and the senior singer. The singers sang:

Dhīre re dhīre devā baris gailen
Ab anganā me lāgal bāre kārī re, man dhīre re dhīre
Anganā me chalalī ho bahinī
Ab tangvā gailen bichhlāī re man dhīre re dhīre
Dhāval dhūpal, alien unke bhaiyā
Godiyā me lihālī bator re man dhīre.
“Are bahinā kaunā gatar lāgal chot re man” . . .
“Ānjar choro bhaiyā, pānjar choro
Ab sirvā me lāgal bāre cot re man dhīre re dhīre
Ab undā davaiyā batlāva re man dhīre” . . .
“Lal mirīciyā re, olvā ke tusvā re
Ghasi ke lagāva ohi thaiyān re man dhīre re dhīre.

Pitter-patter fell the rain.
 Now the courtyard is slippery, pitter-patter.
 Into the courtyard stepped that girl.
 Then her foot slipped, pitter-patter.
 Panting and puffing, arrived her brother.
 Took her in his arms, pitter-patter.

“O sister, where are you hurt?”

“It’s not my sides and hips, brother.

It’s my head that’s hurt.

Give me a potent curative concoction.”

“Take some red hot chillies, the fruit of the oel.

Grind them well and apply on that very spot, pitter-patter.”

DALIT SINGERS, MISRAULIA CHHAPRA

The song’s mischievous punch is packed in the last two lines where, in response to his sister’s request for a “cooling” ointment for her bruise, the brother playfully suggests a “hot” remedy—a concoction of chilies and *oel* fruit. As the singers completed the song, women of the surrounding Brahmin households had taken positions around the hall and were even encouraging the singers with song suggestions. By then the singers were looking increasingly uncomfortable with the overwhelming male presence in the room. The source of their discomfort was the male gaze from the exclusively male, though youthful, audience sprawled on the divan, a setting that evoked traditional gender and caste hierarchies. Just as I was about to interrupt the session and exercise my researcher’s privilege to request the impromptu audience to leave, the women sang a lewd version of the same song!

In the second version, the women substituted the names of the sister and brother with the names of two young siblings from the Brahmin household, thus casting the most offensive youth on the divan as the incestuous brother of the song. The sister was first named and then referred to throughout the remainder of the song as the “slut.” In place of the medical remedy suggested, the women made up and sang out an improbably funny concoction, detailing various anatomical parts of donkeys and pigs, to be rubbed on the sister’s forehead. The allusion to sibling incest and the obvious vulgarity and derision worked as a signal for upper caste males to leave or to be prepared for further insults and name-calling. The youths wisely chose the former. The women had succeeded in forcing the youths sprawled on the divan to leave the hall in embarrassment.

Where the honor of women is the real indicator of status, playfully insulting the women of the Brahmin household, through the otherwise nonthreatening medium of song, proved effective, evoking for me the genre of *galīs* (insulting wedding songs). The incident powerfully brought

home the fact that songs have constituted one of the few spaces for resistance traditionally available to lower caste women. As soon as the men left, the tension lifted, the young Dalit woman revealed her beautiful face, and as her veil slipped away wonderful full-throated singing emerged from the room and hovered over the village all afternoon.

Abu-Lughod's notion of "resistance as a diagnostic of power" offers one way to understand the Dalit women's response to the unequal power relations. While many of the songs indeed reflect a reality, they also create that reality with important socio-cultural implications, thereby demonstrating the intertwining of language and power as well as the importance of both text and context.

Masculine Song Traditions

My fieldwork in masculine musical traditions always required a great deal of planning, and contacts in the cities, especially in Benaras and Jaunpur, have been essential for tracking upcoming performances and artists. Perhaps because of these performances' very inaccessibility to women—women are not routinely accepted into these well-defined and guarded male spaces—my memories of these performances are either of being debarred from attending them or of never enjoying them fully. I always had to insist that I be included and frequently faced polite but firm denial couched in concerns for my safety. The over-protective and shielding environment created by my relatives, friends, and informants in the field, was, alas, sometimes the greatest hindrance to my getting to know masculine traditions as I would have liked. For a long time I regarded the songs as only a secondary interest in my fieldwork, and I regret that, as a result, I was not forceful enough in gaining access, which has led to a rather uneven collection. However, the experience did teach me a great deal about the concrete ways in which the cultural worlds of men and women remain separated and, as such, how the gender of the researcher determines the kinds of data accessed.

The nature of the masculine singing traditions, from which women are excluded, hit home in a stark and striking way. Despite my participation and involvement in the festivities associated with a wedding in a village near Chhapra, western Bihar, I was discouraged from attending the all-night entertainment for the groom's party that the bride's family had arranged. My hosts' rationale was that proceedings could become

rowdy or violent and women may be unsafe, but I suspect that since women are not to be seen at such events, they were being protective. Reluctantly, I was forced to hear the entire performance throughout the night, as it was broadcast on loudspeakers, and could only watch the proceedings captured on video the next day. Accordingly, I am unable to record my impression of the audience and its response.

The stirring *Launda-nāch*² performance was given by a rural Dalit traveling theatre and musical company consisting of eight seasoned actors, impersonators, singers, and musicians who held the packed rural audience spellbound until dawn. The show that began with bawdy and humorous singing around midnight had, within the space of a few hours, transformed into something elevated and profound. The tenor of the singing in the wee hours—at once melodious, inspired, and haunting—was interspersed with appeals to social justice. As in the best traditions of such rural performances, the most compelling feature of this performance was the artful and skillful assumption of female personae by an all-male cast (see Hansen 1992). I later found out that the actors and musicians in the company were landless laborers and marginal farmers who adopted this performance as a supplementary source of livelihood during the wedding season. Indeed, when traveling through the rural countryside during the festive season of Dusshera in October and during the wedding season in May and June, I saw numerous makeshift colorful tents erected for all-night performances. The more remote the villages, and the further their locations from towns, the larger the number of makeshift performance tents, testifying to the persistence of this form of entertainment in remote areas.

Not all masculine musical communities are purely performative, however, in the sense of a clear relationship between the performers and their audiences. Folk singers also often converge at temples, village shrines, or to commemorate folk bards. Where singers and musicians meet for the sheer pleasure of it, an easy informality and by the blurring of caste distinctions characterize the sessions. At village Misraulia, Chhapra district, a community of folk singers has emerged around the memory of the nineteenth century bard, Mahender Misir, whose compositions are popular across the countryside. In this village, Thursday and Sunday afternoons are set aside for folk singers and accompanists to meet informally for impromptu musical sessions outside the village goddess temple.



1 Mixed caste devotional singing in Misraulia.



2 Sādhu (holy man) sings in Misraulia. Ajay Mishra accompanies on harmonium.



3 Preparing for a singing session at the goddess temple in Misraulia, Chhapra.



4 Dalit singer, second from left, sings songs of the bard Bikhari Thakur in Misraulia, Chhapra.



5 Ajay Mishra sings songs of the bard Mahender Misir, his ancestor, in Misraulia.



6 Ecstatic devotional singing in Misraulia, Chhapra.



7 A singer of the Sorthi genre, Misraulia, Chhapra.

The atmosphere at these gatherings is suffused with spirituality, but the unique caste-inclusive male camaraderie, with the *chillum* (pipe) passed around and shared, was even more surprising in a setting here, where caste distinctions can be otherwise restrictive. The repertoire usually includes songs that are not overtly *bhajans* (spiritual songs), though they may explore *nirgūn* themes, wherein the idea of the divine is formless. Many of the *sagūn* songs, in which the divine takes a form, were about Radha's agony of separation when Krishna left the idyllic Brindavan of his youth and childhood with its lovely *gopīs* (cowherdesses) to become king in the city of Dwarka. Conveyed through their messenger Udho, the songs detail the yearnings of the *gopīs*, which serve as a metaphor for the human soul's craving for union with Krishna. The feminization of the masculine in relation to the Divine was a recurrent motif at these "masculine" gatherings, as in this Kabir song heard in the bard Mahender Misir's household, though here it is death's inevitability in the midst of joy that is highlighted.

Kaun thagavā nagariyā lūtal ho
Chandan kāth ke banan khatolnā
Tāpar dūlahin sūtal ho

Utho re sakhī mor māng sanvāro³
Dulahā mo se rūsāl ho
Āye jamrāj palang carhī baithe
Nainan ānsū tūtal ho
Cāri jane mīli khāt utbāin
Carhūn dis dhū dhū uthal ho.

Which deceiver looted the city?
 Of sandalwood, the bedpost,
 On that lies the bride.
 “Rise, my friend, arrange my coiffeur
 For the bridegroom remains estranged.”
 Comes the lord of death, seating himself on the bed.
 Tears break from the eyes.
 Four people assemble to lift the hearse.
 In all four directions, wails and cries arise.

AJAY MISRA AND COMPANIONS, MISRAULIA, CHHPARA

As Joyce Burkhalter Fleuckiger found in Chhattisgarh, men would often “appropriate a particular female genre to displace its defiant voice,” thus confounding gender roles in much the same way as women sometimes challenged or defied upper caste, masculine expectations of gender (Fleuckiger 1996, 3). One such example is to be found among a branch of Ramanandi sadhus of Ayodhya, the *rasiks*, who by dressing as females “attempt to bring about a radical transformation of their masculinity in the ritual theatre of temple worship” (Van der Veer 1987, 691). Cross-dressing by male performers who portrayed women in the all-night dramas, the *laundā-nāch* and *nautanki*, often with sensitivity and aplomb, suggested this masculine world’s desire to understand the feminine psyche and to connect with it.

Among the villages in which I conducted my fieldwork, Misraulia is a favorite for its enthralling music, performed by teams of singers and percussionists. On one occasion, an upper caste *sādhū* (religious ascetic) concluded a particularly stirring session with a philosophical song about river-crossings, “*naiyā tū lagaibo kaune pār re sanvaliyā*,” which likens life to a boat buffeted on a stormy sea with no shore in sight. The powerful rendition, accompanied by at least five percussionists playing different kinds of *dhols* (single oblong shaped drum played with both hands),

pakhawaj (a variety of drum), and a range of *majīrās* (cymbals), displayed the sort of virtuosity and abandon that is rare even for the most sought after musical venues in the country. At the end of this most satisfying of musical treats, which concluded with the stanza below, it appeared that half the village had gathered and as the sun set people only reluctantly dispersed.

Ab naiyā tū lagaibo kaune pār re sanvaliyā

Bīch bhavar me

Ek nadī duī ghatiyā re bālam

Kaun ghatiya, kahi jaiha

Ho bālam

Ek gali duī rahiyā re bālam

Kaun rahiyā, kahi jaiha ho bālam

Naiyā bahut purāni hai

Purje purje alag hūe hai

Barā jor ka pāni hai

Mālum dela sab dhokhe ke ghāt ho sanvaliyā

Ab naiyā tū lagaibā kaune ghāt o sanvaliyā

Now, at which bank will the boat come to rest, my love?

It's the middle of the stream.

One river two banks, my love.

Which bank is it going to be?

One river, two banks, which bank?

One road, two paths, my love.

Which path will you take, my love?

The boat is very old,

Weather beaten and coming apart,

While the water gushes with force.

Now the shores seem deceptively false, beloved.

At which shore will the boat come to rest, beloved?

AT TEMPLE IN MISRAULIA, CHHAPRA

The following morning while passing through the neighboring town, I saw one of the *pakhawaj* players from the previous evening mending shoes by the wayside. Still bubbling with enthusiasm about the night before, our research team could hardly keep from complimenting him on

his mastery of the instrument. Pointing to his tools and anvil by the roadside and his makeshift cobbler's post, he quietly said, "It is this which is my art."

Throughout India, drums have traditionally been played by leather workers, since it was only through their expertise that the tonal qualities of skins, so essential in the crafting of highly evolved percussion instruments, was discovered. While the scene evoked the poet saints of the Bhakti era, such as Raidas who was himself a leather-worker, reconciling this drummer's virtuosity with the profession of shoemaking, considered among the lowliest in the caste hierarchy, was nevertheless a challenge. So ingrained are these categories that even experienced anthropologists, who know that music is usually but a secondary occupation of agricultural laborers or specialists of various kinds, are likely to be ill-prepared for actually confronting such everyday contradictions. This moment is merely one example of the myriad subtle and everyday realizations that I encountered in the field and that enriched my understanding of caste as a form of social inequality and of its ramifications in the countryside, which for me were further brought home through my own positioning in the caste and class hierarchies.

On Translation

For every song cited in this book, I reluctantly had to leave out several others from every occasion that were equally illuminating or illustrative. A major determining factor in my choice of songs became my ability to adequately translate the rich local idiom into modern English. Capturing the flavor of the local idiom was both challenging and rewarding. Transcriptions of the original songs, as I recorded them, are also available for Hindi and Bhojpuri and Purabiya speakers. I have retained these original texts along with their translations, since they allow us to see the material not just as texts to be analyzed, but as songs with a unique structure, flow, rhythmic quality, prefixes and suffixes, and extraordinary lyricism. In translating them, I attempt, not always successfully, to capture the rhythm I heard in the original sung versions along with the element of surprise and emotion that often accompanied the listening. On rare occasions, and particularly when my own recordings were garbled or inadequate, I have resorted to few existing authoritative anthologies of

Bhojpuri folksongs, but owing to this book's grounding in fieldwork, I have kept such selections to a minimum.

The process of translating the songs also proved to be an invaluable exercise in translating an entire culture and way of thinking into a language that may lack corresponding categories. In addition to Bhojpuri, I represent in these selections other dialects spoken in the villages where I conducted my fieldwork, such as Awadhi and Purabiya. As songs form the core of my research, my analysis of the culture and society is pegged entirely upon these articulations. Hence, each song provides an anchor for the interpretative exercise that follows, including the associations and cultural interconnections each inspires. As songs are cultural discourses on emotion, my challenge often lay in translating the meanings as they related to emotions. I have attempted to convey something of the meaning-and-feeling system under study, since the cultural meaning systems are socially and publicly produced through song. In the words of Lutz and White, this effort also entailed a "translation of emotion concepts and the social processes surrounding their use" (Lutz and White 1986, 407–8).

This book is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 is concerned with songs of the millstone, the long ballads that women sing while grinding grain and spices. In chapter 2, our attention shifts from the courtyard to the field, exploring songs women sing when involved in productive labor in the fields. Chapter 3 takes as its subject songs associated with marriage as a rite of passage, and chapter 4 songs about the chaste Sita, the mythical heroine from the epic *Ramāyanā*. Chapter 5 investigates gender dimensions in a masculine ballad, the *Lorikāyan*, and chapter 6 addresses cassette recordings and the impact of technology on folksongs sung at the festival of Holi. The conclusion highlights some of the significant issues this book raises and the themes it explores.