



A Transnational Feminist Critique of Queer Tourism

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This article frames queer tourism through two lenses. First, I explore how queer tourism and queer spatiality occlude questions of gender and efface the varied modalities of travel, tourism, mobility, and space/place-making activities of women, especially with respect to queer women and lesbians. Second, I point out the neocolonial impulses of all queer travel by highlighting the colonial history of travel and tourism and the production of mobility through modernity, and vice versa. Following M Jacqui Alexander's (1997) claim that white gay capital follows the path of white heterosexual capital, how are queer women, queers of color, and postcolonial lesbian and gays also implicated in this process? Through these questions I propose to think about queer tourism and space through theories of intersectionality. In other words, how do we acknowledge and theorize "difference" in queer spaces? How do multiple identities, intersectionality, and social differences make the construction of queer space impossible?

Queer Patriarchies and Racisms: Tourism and Space

In May 2000, I put out a call for papers for a special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, titled *Queer Tourism: Geographies of Globalization* (8[1–2] 2002).¹ I was amazed and thrilled by the overwhelming response I got, especially from geographers doing work on political economy, urbanization, and sexuality. I was, however, rather dismayed at the complete absence of work on tourism dealing with women, lesbians, and/or gender,² and even more frustrated with the ways in which lesbian participation in queer globalization via tourism went unseen. Finally, I was discouraged by the celebratory tone of queer visibility politics that pervaded many, though not all, of the submissions. Apparently, queers were proud to be traveling and especially proud to be viable consumers in global, international travel.³

This focus on celebratory, transgressive narratives of queer travel is perhaps not surprising. Discussions on gay and lesbian tourism are not yet contextualized in terms of neocolonialism, in large part because venues traveled to and written about are still largely in North America and Europe. In this framework, gay venues in North America and Europe are understood to be producing primarily positive, liberatory disruptions of heterosexual space, unexamined in terms of racial, class, and gender displacements. The assumed inherent quality of space is that it is always heterosexual, waiting to be queered or waiting to be

disrupted through queering, positing a singular axis of identity which then reifies a heterosexual/homosexual split that effaces other kinds of identities—race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender.⁴ It is one thing to state that heterosexuality is assumed in space, and quite another to proclaim that space is heterosexual (see Pritchard, Morgan, and Sedgely 1998, for example). While it is predictable that the claiming of queer space is lauded as the disruption of heterosexual space, rarely is that disruption interrogated also as a disruption of racialized, gendered, and classed spaces. Nor are such disruptions understood in tandem with a claiming of class, gender, and racial privilege as well. The current usage of the term “gay ghetto,” most associated with white, upper- and middle-class gay male enclaves, is an awkward and troubling appropriation of a metaphor of urban space closely associated with isolated and racialized communities; the class and commodification practices of gay neighborhoods in no way resembles the impoverished and demonized spaces of poor ethnic enclaves.

In this regard, fleshing out the distinctions between heterosexuality and heteronormativity is absolutely critical. Cathy Cohen’s (1997) astute layout of heteronormativity as distinct from heterosexuality presents the question: what does it mean that even for heterosexuals, heterosexual privilege is not equally available to all?⁵ And how would this restructure the thinking about the presumed overarching heterosexual nature of space? There are two trajectories through which I am currently inspired to think about this problem. The first involves situating the claiming of space—any space, even the claiming of queer space—as a process informed by histories of colonization, these histories operating in tandem with the disruptive and potentially transgressive specifics at hand. Urban space is most often described through other signifiers besides sexuality—class and ethnicity being the main examples. It is not just a question of the metaphorical adoption of terms such as “ghetto”; it also involves understanding how ethnic neighborhoods have come to be understood as gay neighborhoods (for example, in New York City, Chelsea used to be a poor Latino neighborhood, and the African-American area of Harlem is currently being gentrified by white gay men). Secondly, I want to think about queer tourism and space through some kind of theory about intersectionality. In other words, how do we acknowledge and theorize “difference” in queer spaces? How do multiple identities, intersectionality, and social differences make the construction of queer space impossible?

I offer this preliminary exploration on space and tourism primarily as a think piece, an opportunity to map out some of these conundrums as well as to examine the splits and overlaps between feminist theory and queer spatiality. My project is two-sided. First, I want to explore how queer tourism and queer spatiality occlude questions of gender and efface the varied modalities of travel, tourism, mobility, and

space/place-making activities of women, especially with respect to queer women and lesbians. Second, I want to tease out the neocolonial impulses of all queer travel by highlighting the colonial history of travel and tourism and the production of mobility through modernity and vice versa. Following M. Jacqui Alexander's (1997) claim that white gay capital follows the path of white heterosexual capital, how are queer women, queers of color, and postcolonial lesbian and gays implicated in this process?

Through this exploration, I hope not only to extend analyses of queer tourism to include lesbian tourism (which then remedies the absence of women by creating lesbians as an additive aside) but also to ask: what is gendered about the ways in which queer space, mobility, and tourism are lived and conceptualized? How can one gender the emerging literature on queer tourism and query the presumed boundaries between gay men's travel and lesbian travel? Do conventional narratives of (queer) tourism reinscribe lesbian invisibility? Does queer tourism itself—as an industry, a practice, and a spatial understanding of capitalism and identity—reinscribe lesbian invisibility? How do lesbians travel, and which ones do so? Do lesbians travel differently than gay men? Does it matter?

What Is Lesbian Tourism? And Why/How Is It In/Visible?

You were always wondering where the girls were at ... STOP WONDERING.

We link lesbians around the world.

(advertisement for LesbianNation.com, www.lesbianation.com)

The gay and lesbian travel industry is vast and increasing in scope every year. Recent statistics from Community Marketing, a gay and lesbian communications and marketing firm based in San Francisco, suggest that the gay and lesbian travel market constitutes 10% or more of the US travel industry, generating US\$54.1 billion a year. Their 2001 survey confirms the high discretionary income of gay and lesbian tourists, attributed to the absence of children and attendant financial responsibilities, stating that 50% of the survey group were people with dual incomes and no kids (DINKS). The report claims that gay and lesbian travelers travel more frequently and further and spend more money per trip as compared to the national average. Furthermore, gay and lesbian travelers have revitalized a flagging cruise industry: 20% took a cruise, as compared to the national average of 2%. (In the post 9/11 travel climate, cruises are being marketed as a safer alternative to vacations involving airline flights.) The report paints a profile of cosmopolitan gay and lesbian tourists with higher-than-average access

to education, money, and leisure time and a market increasingly geared towards international travel and sophisticated, exotic locations.

Much more could be said about the kinds of statistical evidence being generated by marketing organizations that are part of the gay and lesbian tourism industry. In the process of representing the industry, this evidence manages to misrepresent gay and lesbian populations. Lee Badgett (1996) has written about how these statistics are skewed towards gay magazine readers, who have higher educational levels and tend to earn more money than most gay people. In actuality, lesbians earn less than their straight counterparts. Gay male couples may well have more disposable income than do heterosexual couples only because of gender discrimination in the market, not because gay men earn more (ie because of gender discrimination in the market, two men together will have higher combined income than will a man and woman). Thus, the figures must be said to largely represent privileged gay men.

Where are women in Community Marketing's (2001) figures? The statistics on gender are buried on page 16 of Community Marketing's report: a "Snapshot of Survey Participants" suggests that 94% of gay and lesbian travelers are "gay"—a euphemism for gay men—while only 6% are lesbian. No statistics were gathered on ethnicity or "race." As an article on the website of the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association plaintively asks, "Where's the L in IGLTA?"

Long-time lesbian tourism options, which emerged as correctives to gay-male-dominated markets, include Olivia Cruises,⁶ begun in 1990, which was once Olivia Records, a company that supported and distributed what they considered to be "alternative" women's music. Club Skirts organizes circuit parties in California and more recently, Puerto Vallarta, Mexico. Mariah Adventures, Robin Tyler Tours, and other adventure-travel tour groups offer whitewater rafting and other outdoor group activities. Lesbian tourists travel heavily to places such as Provincetown, the Greek island of Lesbos, and Isla de Mujeres in Mexico. Exchange programs allow one to live with a lesbian couple while learning Spanish and participating in Mexico City's gay pride. The Internet is an additional source of lesbian sociality. LesbiaNation.com connects lesbians globally, and Lesbianexplorer.com has been launched as an offshoot of Gayexplorer.com, a gay travel source. But these sites and services hardly encompass all lesbian travel and tourism, especially those forms that are not quite as financially lucrative or do not fit neatly into the marketing strategies of the gay and lesbian tourism industry, such as women's music festivals, local circuit parties, international lesbian activist organizing networks, or even lesbian adoptions of children from overseas. Moreover, what histories of lesbian travel have not been told, such as those of women

who cross-dressed in order to travel, or Mexican women deported after crossing the US-Mexican border because they were deemed lesbian?⁷

In gay and lesbian tourist literature in general, women are signified primarily as white consumers and—through their absence—as colored, nativized, “third world” service providers. I would argue that the relative invisibility of lesbians in the mainstream gay and lesbian tourism industry can be linked to differences in gendered relations to globalization, tourism, and mobility. Furthermore, according to Mariah Hanson of Club Skirts Parties for Women and Gina Gatta of *Damron* travel guides, in the last five years the lesbian tourism industry has been increasingly defined by the rapid rise of the number of lesbians having children and the growth of lesbian families.⁸ To tease out the differential mobilities of varied queer subjects, it is necessary to consider the complex relationship of tourism and travel to constructions of home. What does the growth of lesbian tourism say about lesbian homes?⁹ “Home” is an ambivalent site for many queers; especially if it is not a space of refuge, home needs to be escaped. Alternatively, diasporic queers seeking connections to more than one national space foster narratives of multiple homes in both the diaspora and the homeland.¹⁰ This is an instance where home continues to be a place of resistance and refuge, especially in relation to racist, classist, and xenophobic state practices. For women, especially those immigrating, leaving home is a process far more vexed than it is for men.

Lesbian creations of “home” requires utilizing leisure time in a way that may domesticate sexuality and sexual practices, dovetailing uneasily with family-values rhetoric, nationalist diasporic configurations, problematic adoptions, and normative familial setups. Some upper- and middle-class lesbians invest time and money into adopting children from poor and often foreign women as one response to globalization, in essence creating some kind of fundamentalist but actually transnational home in opposition to tourist sites abroad (see Nast this issue). Is the push towards establishing gay families, normative marriages, and homes—moves to retrench within home—a counterpart to the internationalization of travel or resistance to globalization? Finally, what does the absence of tourism indicate—what and who creates it, and who and what does it create?

One could also map lesbian travel and tourism through interesting transnational linkages occupied by queer and feminist global activist networks—that is, women’s workspaces. Lesbian tourist projects often evolved from activist-oriented projects, such as Olivia Cruises, and foster global organizing networks as outcomes. Naari guesthouse in New Delhi is one example of women’s transnational linkages.

Naari, New Delhi, India, December 2000

Many people may not think of India as a gay-friendly tourist destination. However, it is a fascinating and culturally rich country which may be perfect for adventurous gay and lesbian clients looking for a truly unique, non-Western experience. Thus, India can be a gay-friendly country if you work with a supplier who understands the culture. (Travel Alternatives Group Gay and Lesbian Travel Industry Directory 2000)

Gay culture in India is maturing from a sheltered innocence into a feisty adolescence. Its measured progress is due less to the lack of a nightclub scene than to the strong ties that bind families together, and a surprising lack of variance within India's multiple societies. (*Out and About* 2000:102)

A nearly bald, blonde-haired, blue-eyed dyke (whom I will refer to as K) picks me up at Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi after a 30-hour journey from New York City via Kuwait. Amidst the brown chaos in the lobby of taxi drivers seeking to lure passengers for inflated fares, I am relieved to see what feels like a familiar queer body. I am simultaneously aghast at how relieved I am and at how familiar K's queerness seems, despite my never having met her before, especially in contrast to my sense of alienation in relation to the streets of Delhi, a place I visited many times in my youth. K takes me to Naari, a lesbian guesthouse in the south part of New Delhi. K, who is British, and her Indian girlfriend, A, run the place. The interior reminds me of the numerous youth hostels I went to during my younger days in Europe, but with the requisite queer lesbian twists—rainbow flags and stickers, bookshelves with standard fare such as *1999's Best Lesbian Erotica* and *A Lotus of Another Color*, and lesbian activist literature everywhere.

Naari began in 1998 as an offshoot of Sangani, a lesbian nongovernmental organization (NGO) in New Delhi that runs a help-line and holds weekly support groups. A business enterprise and a political endeavor, it is situated at a complicated nexus of often contradictory local and global circuits that offers no neat political reconciliation. Naari's success is enabled within a capitalist system that encourages queer consumption, yet it is simultaneously vulnerable to critique for its participation in these forms of globalization. Naari exists because of the patronage of international networks of lesbian tourists, many of which have little or no investment in or knowledge of the local politics of sexuality in New Delhi. Naari semi-manages controlled advertising, producing and distributing an informational brochure at international gay and lesbian venues such as conferences. The front of the brochure reads: "Naari: Travel Alternatives for Women." Naari offers a "hassle-free stay" where one can "meet women on the move" and "be in the

company of women.” Lesbian sexuality per se is not mentioned in this brochure.

Nonetheless, Naari is claimed and presented as a lesbian guesthouse. For example, *Our World* (2000), the leading gay travel magazine, featured it prominently, as did the website JourneyWoman.com and the industry newsletter *Out and About* (2000:103). Naari has been reported on extensively by the gay and lesbian tourism industry and alternative lesbian presses in the United States, Britain, and Australia, yet it does not advertise in local or national papers, list itself in the phone book, or register itself as a guesthouse, because it might be suspected of being a brothel, not to mention a space for lesbian women. There is no sign, no indication that it exists, that it is anything besides a private apartment. Though, for similar security reasons, Naari does not have its own Web site, numerous pages on gay, lesbian, and women’s travel now list Naari’s phone and e-mail contact information.

Naari allows second-generation diasporic tourists such as myself (those born in the diaspora and with no enduring material connections to the “homeland”) to return, a queer return par excellence. When I first stayed at Naari, I had not visited India in 11 years—since 1989, just before the remains of my extended family in Punjab emigrated to the US (when political persecution of Sikhs by the Indian government in Punjabi farming areas had reached its plateau). Immigration opportunities, the Khalistan movement, and my parents’ capacity to sponsor relatives meant that I had no relatives living in India anymore; instead I had about 60 relatives within a 20-mile radius in New Jersey. My homeland now seemed to be in New Jersey, not India.

As such, I was not quite sure why I was in India. I laid out a queer diasporic return of some magnitude, the lesbian guesthouse being one aspect of my attempts to be both queer and Indian in India. I also planned to visit queer diasporic South Asian friends who were back in India to see family members, bring hand-carried gifts to the parents of queer friends in the US, meet up with gay and lesbian groups in Delhi and Mumbai, and visit queer South Asian academics who were doing fieldwork projects of various sorts. I had the local and the global covered, it seemed. Insofar as the guesthouse was the center point of my exposure to gay life in New Delhi, it became an easy substitute for other kinds of diasporic networking that I might have accessed. However, Naari also—and most importantly—offered me the means to go back to India, my parents’ natal homeland, where I no longer had any kin. This, perhaps, was a diasporic kinship family of my own mapping, of my own creation. I had reluctantly given up on thinking of myself as diasporic, because being authentically diasporic seemed to entail the kinds of mobility and cultural literacy I no longer had direct access to through visits to family back home.

What happens, though, when a place like Naari becomes a primary space of “lesbian visibility” in a large urban center like New Delhi, especially for diasporic queers and lesbian tourists? Naari is run by Indian lesbians and fosters a large local lesbian community, many of whom participate in palpable processes of globalization, superceding locality, at least momentarily. This space of urban Indian lesbian visibility is generated by accessing queer internet chatrooms, Web sites, and listservs, attending international conferences, joining diasporic organizations and NGOs, and securing globally distributed newsletters, films, and journals. Multiple localities with less access to these arenas then compete with this localized space of global visibility—in other words, different scales of locality in the same place are reflective and constitutive of different levels of access to global, local, national, and regional communities. As the most visible space of Indian lesbian visibility in New Delhi, enabled not solely but heavily by lesbian tourists, Naari contributes to the formation of a dominant history that suggests that lesbian and gay activism started in India in the 1990s with the so-called advent of globalization (see Bacchetta this issue). Naari therefore opens up new possibilities for global identities and organizing, in that it enables contact between local activists, diasporic queers, and lesbian tourists. It does not resurrect the local in response to the global, or the local as absorbed by the global. Rather, multiple scales of locality (city, body, community) intersect with these tourist networks in different ways, or maybe not at all. For the tourist gaze, however, it may displace other expressions of sexuality that cannot enter so easily into commodified global forms of recognition.

Performing Mobilities

As a result of fears that labor will be able to traverse international boundaries as easily as capital does, globalization is increasingly responded to through heightened national border policings of various kinds (Alexander 1997). Within this context, gay and lesbian tourism is an ironic marker of an elitist cosmopolitan mobility, a group momentarily decriminalized through its purchasing power while immigrants are increasingly criminalized and contained. So, for example, California’s Proposition 187, restricting access to social services for immigrants, and the 1990 Immigration Act eliminating sexual deviancy as a cause of being denied entry to the US thus rest uneasily side by side. The increased mobility of gay and lesbian tourists must be considered in relation to the distinctions between those who can travel for leisure and those who must travel for work. Economic access that is increasingly available to gay and lesbian consumers—often mistaken for “progress” and social acceptance—comes at the cost of more insidious gatekeeping of those who

cannot/do not fit into the “good homosexual” image, something made very clear by advertisements from national tourist boards targeting wealthy, white, and predominantly male queer consumers. What falls out of these advertisements are queer women of color and other excluded queer others, who are then constructed outside the national “good homosexual” body politic, one driven predominantly by consumer privilege.

In considering the different mobilities of traveling subjects, especially queer women, queers of color, and poor working women who are employed in the service sectors that sustain global tourism, the question then is: who benefits the most and least from gay and lesbian tourism? Both Jacqui Alexander's (1997) succinct appraisal of tourism as one means by which the state enables neocolonialism through the labor of poor women of color and the work of Cynthia Enloe (1989) highlight these relations of capital. As such, one could say that the positive effects of increased gay and lesbian tourism can be most appreciated by those who are already rewarded through current capitalist enterprise, while those who benefit least from newly emerging forms of queer mobility and the boom in the gay and lesbian tourism industry are those continually disenfranchised by the rapid growth of the global tourist economy.

Endnotes

¹ See this issue for articles on gay and lesbian tourism to Cuba, Madrid, Mexico, Rome, and Hawaii, as well as analyses of the gay and lesbian tourism industry and the consumption of queer spaces by heterosexuals. An article by Venetia Kantsa titled “Certain Places Have Different Energy: Spatial Transformation in Eresos, Lesbos” focuses specifically on lesbian tourism to Lesbos. (*GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*. 8(1–2) Winter 2002).

² Much work discusses gay and lesbian tourism without thoroughly analyzing different gender dimensions. See, for example, Ryan and Hall (2002) and Clift and Carter (2000). Other works focusing on gender and sexuality and tourism include Kinnaid and Hall (1994), a special issue of the *Annals of Tourism Research* (1995), Sinclair (1997), Apostolopoulos, Sonmez, and Timothy (2001), and Bishop and Robinson (1998).

³ I use the term “queer” to signal a methodological approach to the subject of tourism. In an effort to maintain consistency with the language of the industry, I use “gay and lesbian” when writing of tourist practices. The terms “bisexual,” “transgender,” and “queer” do not appear to be circulating in industry literature or rhetoric, though this obviously does not foreclose the participation of these subjects in gay and lesbian tourist circuits.

⁴ Most of the studies of gay and lesbian tourism continue to emerge from British scholars through a convergence of interests in cultural geography and queer theory and utilize discussions regarding the heterosexism of public space generated by volumes such as Bell and Valentine (1995), Ingram, Bouthillette, and Retter (1997), and Duncan (1996). Much of the literature is concerned that the “touristification” of gay spaces is producing a degaying effect that reestablishes heterosexual dominance. See Pritchard, Morgan, and Sedgely (1998).

⁵ Cohen's (1997) article maps out a terrain for queer theory and queer politics that is driven by an opposition, not to heterosexuality, but rather to heteronormativity,

acknowledging that heterosexuality is a privilege not only of sexual orientation but also of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Her framework serves as a reminder that the progressive potential of queerness is absolutely contingent upon the intersectional theorization of race, ethnicity, class, and gender with and through queernesses. Heidi Nast (1998) similarly argues for the theorization of differences that the grid of heterosexuality articulates.

⁶ Olivia Cruises for Women charters out its ships with the crew intact, thereby setting up the usual differentials between labor/production and consumption not only in terms of race and class but most probably also in terms of sexual orientation. There is a performative aspect to this work, since crewmembers are usually paid only nominal wages in addition to room and board and rely on tips to subsidize their incomes. Cruises in general are not regulated or accountable to one particular location, aside from the legislative body of the site where they depart from. The cruise thus provides an interesting possibility of rewriting questions of multinational sites and location. Notable recent incidents on cruises include sexual harassment complaints, a gay-bashing incident, and complaints about inadequate health-care provisions. Cruises for men, such as RSVP and Atlantis, are basically understood to be cruising cruises, while Olivia Cruises tends to market its material more towards couples. While Olivia and other cruises have been criticized for being elitist, expensive ventures, most travel experts consider them some of the best travel values (room, board, and entertainment for one, often relatively inexpensive, fixed price).

⁷ On Isabelle Eberhardt's travels in men's clothing in North Africa, see Kaplan (1997); on border crossings, see Luibheid (1998).

⁸ These points were raised at the "Lesbian and Gay Family Market" panel at the Third Annual Gay and Lesbian Tourism Conference, Los Angeles, March 4–6, 2001. This demographic shift has significantly affected the lesbian market in two related ways. First, the market needs to rethink itself in relation to the entrance of children and to cater to family vacations. Second, transnational lesbian adoptions involve tourist circuits that also define the market.

⁹ For a discussion on lesbian identities and relationships to "home" and home spaces, see Johnston and Valentine (1995).

¹⁰ Often the desire to situate queerness within the homeland is realized through a claiming of same-sex sexual practices which is evidenced historically as indigenous. The recent rapid proliferation of gay and lesbian consumer culture, public spaces, and organizing in postcolonial locations also enables queerness to be intelligible in the homeland. For a sampling of theorizations on queer diasporas, i.e. queers in diasporic communities which have ties to other national spaces of homeland, see Patton and Sanchez-Eppler (2000), Lee (1998), Manalansan (1995), Puar (1998), and Munoz (2000).

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