Q & A
Queer in Asian America
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Recently I organized a panel for submission to the National Association for Ethnic Studies (NAES) 1996 conference, whose theme was “The Ethnic Experience in the United States: Changing Migrations, Changing Borders, and Changing Traditional Ethnic Communities.” Four papers exploring the relationships between migration and sexualities made up the panel, which was entitled “Transnational Sexualities: Narratives of Normativity.” My paper, which bore the same title as this chapter, elaborated on queer diasporas as political and academic interventions, by using examples from South Asian queer diasporic representations produced in the United States. Not long after my panel submission, the Executive Council of NAES responded, requesting clarification. They were, they explained, “unable to discern a clear relationship between the abstracts and the conference theme.” The correspondence referred specifically to my piece, the only paper examining queer issues. It stated, “We were especially challenged to establish such a relationship given the abstract for [this paper].”

Other more obvious, less interesting, and less tangible readings of the NAES response aside (the abstracts were simply bad, for example), a few thoughts occurred to me after the panel had been submitted to and accepted by two other conferences. Perhaps the paper’s suitability had been questioned for reasons that reflected my own for embarking on the project. NAES understood the concept of diaspora as having little to do with a discipline that has focused its efforts on elaborating constructions of ethnicity and race within the national borders of the United States. Moreover, it seems entirely plausible that a discipline that has privileged constructions of race and ethnicity often at the expense of gender and sexuality would find these issues of only “additive [ir]relevance.” The situation is not helped by the white, and otherwise fraught and exclusionary epistememes, of the term “queer.”

In any case, the confusion indicates the necessity for clarifying the linkages between ethnicity and sexuality and—in this essay specifically—the terms “queer” and “diaspora.” Envisioning and expanding on queer diasporas as a political and academic intervention not only speaks directly to the gaps around sexuality in ethnic studies, Asian American studies, and forms of postcolonial studies; it also points gay and lesbian studies, queer studies, and even women’s studies (which has considered gender more than sexual-
ity) toward the need to disrupt the disciplinary regimes that continually reinvent bodies of theory cohered by singular, modernist subjects.

Thinking through such interventions is no easy task, and it raises many questions. How could/should one " queer" the diaspora(s) or "diasporicize" the queer? How does inclusion/exclusion from diasporas affect queers of color who have relationships to nations other than the United States? How do diasporic subjects construct queer selves through experiences of displacement? What are the connections between diasporas, queers, and modernities? Obviously I cannot even attempt to answer all of these questions here. In this chapter, I turn my attention to South Asian queer diasporic cultural productions. Although these may involve "deterioratorializations" of the diasporic kind (Gupta and Ferguson 9)—in that they may reference a multiplicity of spaces of the nation and the state—I argue that they may also offer dynamics of reterritorialization, often in ways that reiterate nationalist terms through transnational paths. The spaces include, among others, Internet lists such as the co-gendered Khushnet and the South Asian Queer Women’s Network; organizations such as Trikone, SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association), and Shamakami; Bhangra and Hindi musical appropriations; queercentric festivals like Desh Pardesh and Utsav; work by such filmmakers as Pratibha Parmar and Shani Mootoo; and literature from Canada, Britain, the United States, and India.

To illustrate my concerns, I primarily cite a collection of queer South Asian writing edited by Rakesh Ratti, A Lotus of Another Color: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experience. My concerns are twofold. The first is that constructions of queer diasporas may inherently rest upon cultural nationalisms via quests for sexual roots and origins. In the case of A Lotus of Another Color, this dynamic produces intersections of nationalism and communalism, resulting in an unfragmented and uncontested version of Hindu India. The second concern is that queer diasporic discourses often resituate nationalist centerings of the West as the site of sexual liberation, freedom, and visibility. These diasporic discourses may actually function as recycled domestic perspectives that run the risk of becoming globalizing ones.

Queering the Diaspora, Diasporicizing the Queer
To begin with, it may be useful to lay out the specific contours of the terms " queer" and "diaspora" and the concepts that their historicities, uses, and limits may impart to each other. In debates over the meanings of " queer," the term has been called too narrow, exclusionary, and white and, alternatively, too expansive, unspecific, and nomadic. Similarly, the question of what exactly constitutes a diaspora has also been discussed at length. However, it is not my purpose here to interrogate the meanings of these terms. Rather, I concur with David Halperin’s application of Foucault’s work in the context of lesbian and gay activism that it is more useful to pursue the political implications of the varied deployments of these terms. James Clifford also advocates examining not only the content of what constitutes a diaspora but in particular the boundaries of that content and what is at stake politically in the where, why, and how of the boundary demarcation (302–38).

As with other concepts that seek to function as concepts of resistance, it is obviously more enticing to discuss what is oppositional about queers and "diasporas" than what is not. Without minimizing the importance of theorizing resistances, however, theorizing complicities is perhaps equally vital in examining mechanisms of power and hegemonies. The genealogies of " queer" and " diaspora" share a particular absence: neither foregrounds complicities with concepts of the nation-state. The term " queer" has historically presumed that its subjects have a fixed relation of inclusion within the nation-state, one that is rarely interrogated. Constructs of diaspora have often been mobilized as a space of transcendence of nation-states, since diaspora allows for alliances across national boundaries and negotiations of multiple national sites.

It is precisely through noting these terms as relations, rather than entities, that the exposure of their limitations produces potentially illuminative interactions. This interfacing of " queerness" and " diaspora" critiques the very terms they seek to incorporate, and in which they are incorporated, forcing particular redefinitions of the original terms. The terms " Queer Nation" and " Lesbian Nation," for example, are indicative of what Gayatri Gopinath terms an " uninterrogated assumption of queer citizenship" (120). Whatever resistance to the state has currently been theorized vis-à-vis queer subjectivities has emerged through a presumed trajectory of named subjecthood—citizenship—within the state. This is a trajectory that diasporic queers trouble and complicate through their critique of the white episteme of queerness.

Similarly, constructions of diaspora that hinge upon masculinist constructions of home and travel are, for the most part, inattentive to gender and silent on sexuality. When queer subjects become visible within diasporic contexts, not only does sexuality become a topic of concern but the masculinist paradigms of diaspora are disrupted as well. Conversely, a critique of such paradigms might lead to an understanding of how certain notions of the nation, as Jacqui Alexander notes, " disallow the queer body" (6). Such constructions
of diaspora unwittingly recast essentialized notions of nation that they originally claim to destabilize. Paul Gilroy, for example, presents music of the black diasporas as counterhegemonic (to the state) and as critiques of capitalism while simultaneously constructing a masculinist nation-building project to include black in the Union Jack.

Clifford is also remarkably optimistic about diasporas as sites of resistance. He claims that "diasporic practices [are] defined and constrained by nation, but they also exceed and criticize them," distinguishing between an immigrant (who assimilates) and a diasporic figure (who "maintains important allegiances and practical connections to a homeland or dispersed community located elsewhere") (311). Clifford rests his diasporic terrain on two masculinist concepts of home (fixed, stable, inclusive, "back there") and travel (physical, direct, safe, and legal) (311). His diaspora privileges a masculine, mobile, middle- or upper-class subject. This subject has the resources to maintain substantial links—including financial investments—to a homeland, and as a postcolonial elite or cultural nationalist, (he) may have other reasons to invest in the "motherland."

Khachig Tololyan reminds us that although diasporas may be "exemplary communities of the transnational moment," they may also be "the source of ideologically, financial, and political support for national movements that aim at a renewal of the homeland" (5). Cit ing the work of Gabriel Sheffer, Tololyan asserts, "In such a context, transnational communities are sometimes the paradigmatic Other of the nation-state and at other times its ally, lobby, or even in the case of Israel, its precursor" (5). As such, participation in the nation-state "back home" (financial, political, and so on) does not automatically indicate progressive participation.

A heightened awareness of national boundaries, notions of belonging, and diasporic positioning does not preclude participation in nationalisms, fundamentalisms, and the like; in fact, such awareness may often facilitate them. For example, the quest for homeland in India is often strengthened in first- as well as subsequent U.S.-born generations in response to conflicted relations to the U.S. state; examples of this include the Khalistan and Hindutva movements, both of which receive substantial financial support from diasporic communities. Amit Rai, for instance, notes contradictory diasporic stances in his analysis of Internet participants' responses concerning various Indian cultural newsgroups: "This textual construction of the diaspora can at the same time enable these diasporics to be for 'affirmative action' in the U.S. and against 'reservations' [jobs for disadvantaged castes] in India, to lobby for a tolerant pluralism in the West, and also support a narrow sectarianism in the East" (43). Resistance to the U.S. state may appear obvious, with the collusion/complicity in the construction of Hindu India hidden/effaced through this positioning vis-à-vis "America."

These contradictions are strong reminders that not all diasporas are "good" (in Clifford's sense). Resistances to the U.S. state may be recast in liberalist rhetorics of multiculturalism and inclusion, as with "model minority" discourses. Other critiques have elaborated at length the conservative impulses of South Asian diasporic political and cultural productions, which in the U.S. range from a continued pursuit of model minority status through upward professional mobility to a lack of political organizing with other communities of color around affirmative action and Proposition 187. Particularly important in this regard is the post-1965 history of relatively privileged immigration of South Asian professionals to the United States in comparison with their migration to Canada and Britain.

As Foucault notes, states normalize domination, creating subjects who regulate themselves. This involves a distinction between power relations that operate through oppression and power relations that operate through productive incorporation. In the most pessimistic of political climates, a diaspora could simply be yet another multiculturalist version of a disciplinary incorporative moment of the state, signaling an absorption or containment of specific postmodern versions of community into establishment ideologies. This construction of diaspora may not effectively function as a transnational alternative to local/global binary thinking, in that it reconstitutes, rather than exposes, the nation. Presuming a singular trajectory of marginality to the state renders a totalizing narrative of homogenized oppositionality of diaspora. Instead, as Rai points out, constructions of a diasporic counterpublic sphere must be attentive to its "constitutive contradictions" (31) in order to constantly challenge the reification of a purely oppositional diaspora.

If, then, there is nothing inherently politically progressive or anti nation about the terms "queer" and "diaspora," one should not presume that the critiques that they bring to each other necessarily sustain a more perfect union or, in this case, a more perfect oppositionality. Does a queer inflection of diaspora render queer diasporic subjectivities more oppositional? One cannot assume that this combination heightens any particular oppositional potential in relationship to the state. My point here is simply that diasporic queers have not only various relationships to different states but indeed different relationships to common states, determined by highly diverse histories of ethnicity, migration, class, generation, gender, and reli-
gious identity. These multiple nation-states are, in fact, not randomly assembled but have specific paths that are quite predetermined through their histories. Though the two are linked, there is a distinction between transgressing ideologies of nationhood and transversing national boundaries; one does not inherently indicate the other. Furthermore, a vexed relationship to the state—meaning the disciplinary apparatus of the nation—neither automatically signals nor automatically produces a critique of essentialized notions of nation that construct “belonging” vis-à-vis unwelcome Others.

Queer diasporas are not immune from forms of cultural nationalism; in fact, they may even rely on them. As such, a queer diaspora must be vigilant of the tendency not only to colonize its nondiasporic referents but also to become in and of itself another complicitous “modern regime of sexuality” (Halperin 20). In the case of South Asian queer diasporas, this regime is a privileged signifier of not only North American and European geopolitical spaces but also class, caste, communal identity, and gender.

Lotus of What Color?

Given the dynamics of the South Asian diasporic spaces in the United States sketched herein and the lack of a coherent body of South Asian queer literature, A Lotus of Another Color has been understandably popularized as the “first book of its kind.” The collection includes poetry, short stories, and coming-out testimonials, the majority by writers—some of whom use pseudonyms—living in the United States.

The main goal of the collection, it appears, is to challenge white, mainstream gay and lesbian communities and South Asian communities to acknowledge that the terms “queer” and “South Asian” are not mutually exclusive. Ratti writes, “We stand with one foot in South Asian society, the other in the gay and lesbian world” (“Introduction” 14). As such, the book is already a response to the need to represent queer diasporic spaces. Any discussion of Lotus must acknowledge the difficulties in critiquing a volume that is itself a coming out of sorts and that has been used by many South Asian queers to educate parents and other family members. It becomes important, then, to note for which South Asians this is an effective strategy and for which it is an impossible one.

A reading of Lotus might take note of the continuous attempt at “recovery work” and the desire for inclusion in a culturally nationalist version of an Indian nation that remains an unquestioned origin, a reclaimed home, and a “motherland.” This static construction of India then becomes the center of a homogenizing, global, South Asian queer identity. Sexual identity is fixed at a singular inter-
The Lotus chapter entitled "Homosexuality in India: Culture and Heritage" was compiled by AIDS Bhedav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA), a nonprofit organization focusing on AIDS awareness in India. The essay does an archeological sexual excavation of sorts, attempting to show cultural tendencies of (mostly male) homosexuality in the Kama Sutra, Hindu mythology, tantric rituals, religious mysticism (Hindu), and Muslim culture. Referred to often in Lotus, the Kama Sutra, which is hailed as the ancient Indian classic on "matters of sex" (22–23), contains references to gay sex, lesbian activity, and eunuchs. The essay reiterates the focus on Hindu mythology through a discussion of "sexual dualism" (24–25), linking this to "universal bisexuality" and the "tantric rite of anal penetration" (26–27). These examples, among others, present a static notion of "Indian" heritage, with a supposed relevance to a collective "we" of South Asian queers, regardless of diversity.

A critique of Lotus is actually offered within the pages of the collection itself. And Nayan Shah, in Chapter 9 (this volume), notes the contingency involved in history building, marking the tensions that need to remain between present and past. Shah notes that much of this excavation "presumes that sexuality is a definable and universal activity, ignoring the variety of cultural patterns and meaning." One of the effects of such sexual excavation is that a sectarian version of Hindu India, where religion infects nationalism, is constructed and reinforced. "India" as an ideological construct and as a nation-state apparatus is contested from "within." Maintaining it as a stable, unchallenged category is the equivalent of keeping notions of white America intact. The conflation of India with Hindu identity and Hinduism "Otherizes" Sikhs and Muslims, and, given the situation of contemporary politics in India today, this is not merely a question of semantics.

Here is an example: when a contingent of Trikone members marched in the annual India Day parade in Fremont, California, in August 1994 (which celebrates India’s independence from the British), once again part of a dynamic of desired visibility and inclusion, they ran into a booing, hissing crowd of Khalistani Sikhs protesting the march—despite the fact that Trikone’s group was carrying a Khalistani flag. Were the Khalistani Sikhs displeased because of the presence of queers or the presence of Indian Nationalists? Or perhaps they were displeased because the supposedly progressive queers were also Indian Nationalists? Reading this response as a wholly homophobic one, which many who marched did, misses the complexities of colonial and postcolonial production of sexualities and sexual practices and how they link to the politics of nationalism and religious identities in the diasporas. Flesching out the links between colonialism, capitalism, communalism, and normative heterosexuality, which is critical, occurs less than analyses dealing with gender and class. Thus it must be asked: which sexual subjectivities are more easily mobilized, available, accessible, and visible in this queer diaspora than others and why?

**Diasporic Globalizing**

Lotus clearly reflects margin/center dynamics in South Asian diasporic geopolitical locations. Gopinath comments that Lotus "maps the lines of exchange and influence between various global South Asian queer organizations, from (among others) Trikone, Shamakami, and SALGA in the U.S., to Khush in Toronto, to Shakti in London, to Sakh and Bombay Dost in India" (219). Yet note the uneven materiality of these transnational flows: these networks are dominated by "global" cities, elite populations, and urban centers. Writing about Lotus’s "near invisibility of working class and lower caste South Asians," Jee Hyun Lee pinpoints the implications of such invisibility in her review of the book: "This class imbalance seems to reflect the membership in queer South Asian groups in general, which has a significant effect on the development of this emerging global queer South Asian identity" (101).

This concern is particularly relevant, given that South Asians in the United States are historically, as well as currently, in situations of relative privilege compared with those in other Western diasporic locations. This has led to the marginalization, if not the elimination, of literature and other work from locations such as Canada and Britain generated prior to the publication of Lotus. In noting the cultural landscapes of these different locales, one sees the varied mechanisms that are disciplining difference. For example, the context of the United States, where (predominantly middle-class) South Asians have been positioned as producers of acceptable and containable difference, is quite different from the context of Britain, where rhetorics of nation(alism) and the language of citizenship clearly exclude (predominantly working-class) Asians.

Such variations in the domestic locales of the South Asian diaspora demand caution. Sau-Ling C. Wong warns that in shifting from the domestic to the diasporic, one must take care that the domestic does not pose as diasporic or even become the diasporic (9). My own concern about how one represents location extends this to question when and how the diasporic becomes a globalizing discourse. An important illustration of the difficulties of theorizing diasporic cultural productions in diverse locations is the concept of...
coming out or being out. In another review of *Lotus*, editor Rakesh Ratti summarizes the purpose of the collection, stating, "This is really an opportunity to make ourselves more visible, and to define ourselves on our own terms" (Sengupta E3). Who is the "ourselves"? Who gets to be visible? The terms of this inclusion are not, contrary to Ratti's statement, "our own terms." (For example, the term "lotus" conjures up all sorts of Orientalist images for me. I am not at all sure, and neither are others I have asked, what the actual significance of "lotus" is in this context.)

This concern with visibility is perhaps reflected by the numerous coming-out narratives in *Lotus*. I do not want to minimize the importance of the narratives; however, I am concerned that the significance and celebration attached to coming out appears to be understood as a conclusion to the linear teleology of a modernist, rational subject emerging unpressed and therefore as empowered as any white queer. This teleology is dependent, once again, on India as origin but, more significantly, on the West as a place of sexual freedom and liberation.7

For example, in the *Lotus* essay "Toward a Global Network of Asian Lesbians," Sharmeen Islam speaks of lesbian invisibility in Asia and the need for "visible and powerful lesbian and gay organizations in Asian countries" (44). In this globalizing discourse, "Asian" becomes a stable category that transcends differences between diasporic and nondiasporic (or differently diasporic) subjects. Islam does emphasize, however, that whereas the "average lesbian in Asia" faces a lack of community, "a dearth of native literature on gay and lesbian lifestyles, few "out" role models, and little in the way of organizations," Asian women who live in the West face a set of "unique and important daily issues: racism, exile, immigration and deportation threats, cultural isolation, and Western hybridization" (45). But in attempting to clarify the differences between "us and our Asian sisters," Islam sets up a totalizing First World/Third World Binary, which can only be rectified through the globalization of Western privilege: "It is necessary that we collaborate in the liberation of gays and lesbians in Asia; we must take in hand the reins of our destiny and determine our sexuality and politics in our own cultural context. We must pull together a global community that empowers Asian lesbian and gays everywhere" (43).

Kenyan-born British South Asian lesbian filmmaker Pratibha Parmar unwittingly resurrects a similar telos in the *Lotus* interview "Fighting Back: An Interview with Pratibha Parmar." Parmar is clear that homophobia in England is "given expression through actual physical abuse of lesbians and gays on the streets" (Khush 36). As Parmar recounts her childhood experiences of Paki-bashing in England (35), claiming that Indians in India “know that racism [in England] exists, but they don’t really know the extent of it” (39), she constructs an India where everyone “belongs,” where questions of race are supposedly not in operation. Yet later she comments that she would not want to live in India, explaining, “As a woman and an out lesbian, I’d find it very difficult. That is the sad reality, especially having talked to lesbians in India and hearing of the ways in which their lives are circumscribed. It is bad enough in England” (40).

It may be that some lesbians’ lives are circumscribed in India, but nowhere does Parmar question her own power to define what circumscribing is or seem aware of her own imposition of a metanarrative of outness. When she states, "It is bad enough in England," it appears that she is talking solely about being out, when in reality it is "bad" for all sorts of intersecting reasons, some of which—racism, classism, homophobia, and so on—Parmar actually acknowledges earlier in the interview. It is here that Parmar abandons her earlier proclamations about racism in Britain and forgets that India, for some, is a place of ethnic (as well as class and caste) belonging. This privileging of being out sets forth sexual identity as separate from other identities, or at least as primary and uninflected by other subject positionings. This narrative posits a domestic perspective as a diasporic perspective that becomes a globalizing tendency.

Whereas Islam and Parmar may globalize through their specific modernist desires for liberation and visibility, Gopinath attempts to negotiate diasporic specificities: "What, then, are the implications of privileging sexuality as a primary 'identity' throughout the diaspora? What possible alternative narratives of sexuality may we be shutting down in such a move? How do we allow for the fact that same-sex eroticism exists and signifies very differently in different diasporic contexts, while simultaneously recognizing the common forms of violence that we face everyday because of our sexuality?" (122).

On one hand, Gopinath posits a diasporic rubric that foregrounds the (homo)sexual and a "sexual identity," presuming that "we" face common forms of violence and effacing the forms of violence that "we" face with each other. On the other hand, she is compelled, in an attempt to contest these homogenizing impulses, to grant or "allow" others same-sex eroticism that may signify "differently." This question, then, must be asked: differently from what? In contrast to Parmar’s up-front sentiments (I’m here, I’m queer, and I wouldn’t want it any other way, racism or not), the acknowledgment and incorporation of difference with which Gopinath is grappling is fraught with difficulties. While the naming of differ-
ence cannot be avoided, the desire to “allow” it without posing questions of power differentials unwittingly levels out the sexual-signification playing field.8

What must queer diasporic cultural productions attend to in order to comprehend fully their political viability? Theorizing transnational queer diasporas requires both a politics of location and a politics of placelessness. (R. Lee), which must be attentive to colonial mobilizations of sexuality and postcolonial histories of immigration that create and sustain space/place/time. It is critical to note who or what is crossing which “border” in which direction, as well as when and for what purposes. Together, the examples of Islam, Parmar, and Gopinath strongly suggest the necessity of historicizing the demand for desiring a queer diaspora.

The problems of representing location become even clearer when we consider the work of Shani Mootoo, a queer filmmaker and writer of Indian descent, born in Ireland, raised in Trinidad, and now living in Canada. Richard Fung, a Chinese Trinidadian queer filmmaker and writer, notes the dissymmetries in Mootoo’s displaced/replaced/displaced subjectivities: “Mootoo doesn’t fit in to essential(ist) constructions of what it means to be Irish, West Indian, Canadian, or Indian. She doesn’t either look, sound, or act ‘right.’ Race, language, and culture are the obvious culprits; the ‘typical’ Canadian woman is white, just as the ‘typical’ West Indian is black” (162).

Fung goes on to note that, despite the fact that Indians are now the largest ethnic group in Trinidad, their claim to Caribbeanness is “still a matter of contestation. . . . The resulting generalized West Indian identity is inevitably narrated solely in terms of its African heritage” (162). What Fung alludes to, but does not elaborate on, here is that this contested Indian claim to Caribbeanness is ironically mirrored by a Caribbean claim to Indianness. This claim is contested in a North American context, for here Mootoo isn’t the ‘typical’ Indian either. Not only does she not “look, sound, or act ‘right,’” but the genealogies of ethnicity, class, and origin inflect sharply against dominant South Asian spaces as well. Commenting on Desh Pardesh, the annual queercentric, South Asian left conference in Toronto, Mootoo states, “Here at the discussion on racism in the gay and lesbian community, I was struck by how everybody kept talking about when they were in India. Today I found myself desperately trying to imagine India so I would not be excluded from the discussion. . . . The truth is, a gay Trinidadian, say, of Chinese origin . . . probably has more in common with me than most South Asian dykes outside of Trinidad . . . It is totally against my politics to suggest any kind of pan-South Asian representation” (Ghosh 6).

Here Mootoo points to the difficulties of a politics of diasporic inclusivity, and yet any specificity in naming also has important consequences. Calling her Indo-Trinidadian Canadian or even Indo-Canadian situates her work very differently from calling her South Asian or South Asian Canadian. The terms “South Asian” and “South Asian Canadian” may elide rifts between Indo-Caribbean communities and South Asian communities in Vancouver (where Mootoo lives), Toronto, New York, and Miami. Indo-Caribbeans cannot simply be absorbed or “included” in South Asian diasporic spaces. It must also be acknowledged that Mootoo’s positionality vis-à-vis queer politics in South Asian diasporic spaces may have more currency and connection to India than to “back home” in Trinidad, where her work does not circulate widely. Thus, the fact of her “being from” Trinidad does not automatically signal an “inclusion” of Trinidad in the South Asian global queer network, at least not in any material sense, though the imaginary connections can be foregrounded.

Conclusion

As Tölopyan notes, "Diasporas are the emblems of transnationalism because they embody the question of borders" (6). Pursuing this idea, one must remain vigilantly attentive to how, where, when, and by whom or by what those borders are traversed. Given the masculinist, culturally nationalist queer diasporas laid out herein, it is worth asking certain questions. What are the traveling transnational elements that constitute a particular diaspora? What would these transnational linkages look like if women were the subjects? How do women make/make up transnational linkages?

Wong foregrounds the problems of privileging some transnational links in a diaspora over others. In her critique of Lisa Lowe’s theorization of hybridity, Wong asks "to what extent a class bias is coded into the privileging of travel and transnational mobility in Lowe’s model" (15). She continues, “Lowe’s model of identity and cultural formation celebrating is, at least in part, extrapolated from the wide range of options available to a particular socio-economic class, yet the class element is typically rendered invisible” (15). Wong’s comments remind us of the irony of constructing a diaspora that forgets that the transnational act of migration for queers, especially those of color, is quite a corporally and viscerally conflicted experience, perhaps more difficult (for those who have access) than logging onto a queer e-mail network in India. Although Wong makes a compelling argument against those who have hailed the end of the era of the nation-state, a return to “America” as a local site may rearticulate a cultural nationalist version of Asian American. In this sense, the political potential of the term "South Asian American” seems even more limited.
After reading my essay, one may wonder why bother theorizing queer diasporas at all. In this initial exploration of transnational sexualities, my critically pessimistic approach has functioned to counter what I have perceived as an overabundance of celebratory discourses on queer subjectivities. This is not to suggest that coalitional politics is not possible or to demean the modes of pleasure and desire that these spaces enable. It is, however, to note that praxis of pleasure and desire are sometimes constructed through problematic politics and that what one might conceive of as oppositional and contestatory in one location may well be complicit and oppressive in another.

In this light, it is certainly worth examining how constructions of diaspora may suggest new formations for queer politics. Though that has not been the focus of this work, some instances come immediately to mind. Asian American lesbian Trinity Ordona, for example, elaborates on the need to understand immigration as a queer issue: “Prop K was a good thing in that it recognizes domestic partners; on the other hand if you are an immigrant and register your relationship, the INS has documented proof that you are an ‘undesirable alien.’ Was there any discussion about this in the gay community? The only time immigration is seen as a ‘Gay community’ problem is when HIV-status persons can’t get into the country to attend a conference” (Chung et al. 93).

Another case in point might be Queer Nation’s “production of a queer counterpublic out of traditional [American] national icons,” described by Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman (214). What would these traditional national icons be for “diasporics,” not to mention the questions of which public and for which queers? Berlant and Freeman assert that “disidentification with U.S. nationality is not, at this moment, even a theoretical option for Queer citizens” (197). Are the rhetorical parodic strategies of Queer Nation, “simul[ating] ‘the national’ with a camp inflection” (196), possibly transformed through the politics of queer diasporas? Imagine Esta Noche, a gay bar in the Latino/Chicano district of San Francisco, where, on Labor Day, a drag queen performance used the American flag in its parody. This “drag with the flag” and other such performative suggest complex diasporic counterpublic spheres and the impossibility of belonging to the nation, yet the impossibility of rejecting it.

The demand for evidence as posited through any public strategies of visibility lies at the heart of the paradox that theories of transnational sexualities must negotiate. For some queer immigrants, as Martin Manalansan points out, visibility is not only undesirable but also dangerous (434). For others who are able to par-
limitations of the institutionalization of disciplines and the packaging of knowledge. The difficulties of compiling such a bibliography reflect particular historical moments in terms of South Asian queer identities.

The ambiguities around the term “South Asian” are notable. Understanding the term as recently political in contemporary Western diasporic locations, I expected to find literature on diasporic populations. But because “South Asian” also has roots in an International Monetary Fund development vocabulary, the term, when used in the search process, revealed mostly economic research on the countries geographically located in South Asia. The fact that the term “South Asian” brought up Southeast Asian studies as well indicates a common confusion between these area studies categories. Also not revealed by the search was the large body of British titles, in which “Asian” is more commonly used (as is the term “black”). Much literature on South Asians in the United States has also historically been umbrellaed under “Asian” and “Asian American.” The term “Indian” brought up “Native American” work from various dates, reflecting different circulations and rejections of this term.

In the process of claiming a canon of sorts, what gets grouped into a body of literature out of necessity of naming becomes rather ambigious and arbitrary. This process parallels the simultaneous process of (re)claiming and constructing identity by searching for “roots” and “origins.” For example, I found John Irving’s *Son of the Circus* listed on several South Asian queer reading/resource lists, because the story takes place in India and features one gay Indian man as a minor character. The other side of the picture is the work of Urvashi Vaid, former director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. Very visible in mainstream gay and lesbian movements for at least a decade, she rarely—until very recently—talked about being South Asian or espoused a particular brand of cultural identity politics. There have been debates about her status as a role model and about whether she “represents” South Asian queers or not. Aside from whether or not she “belongs” to the “community” (two notions she deconstructs through her own obscure subject positionings), I think these debates point to the shifting definitions and possibilities for certain strands of identity politics. I should also note that I found the majority of the bibliographic information through the Internet.

7. “They Aren’t That Primitive Back Home” is the only essay in *Lotus* that details the diverse sexual practices in India, noting how sexual identity in and of itself can be an imperializing privileged category (Kim 92–97).

8. Gopinath mobilizes this diasporic globalizing in what she admits is a “utopic strain.” She writes, “There is a profoundly affective quality to the experience of walking into a roomful of queer brown folks lip-synching along to Choli Ke Piche, a phenomenally popular Hindi film song that, as one gay man playfully commented, has done more for the South Asian queer community than any conference or parade ever has” (123).


