

Q & A
Queer in Asian America
Edited by David L. Eng
and Alice Y. Hom

Q & A



Temple University Press
Philadelphia





26. Transnational Sexualities

South Asian (Trans)nation(alism)s and Queer Diasporas

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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: Narrations 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 epistemologies, 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 "deterritorializations" 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 Khushnet¹ 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 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*.² 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.³ Similarly, the question of what exactly constitutes a diaspora has also been discussed at length.⁴ 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 "diasporics" 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).⁵ 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 Tölölyan reminds us that although diasporas may be "exemplary communities of the transnational moment," they may also be "the source of ideological, financial, and political support for national movements that aim at a renewal of the homeland" (5). Citing the work of Gabriel Sheffer, Tölölyan 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 positionings 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 Hindutava 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" (42). 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 post-modern 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,⁶ *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 in-

tersection with the nation, thus effacing multiple axes of identity, oppression, and privilege. These attempts at “recovery work” are connected to the politics of reterritorialization by conventionally unhailed queer bodies. The emotional and political imperative to claim India seems linked to a desire to explode the myth of homosexuality as a Western construct, as a white disease, and as a foreign import. This expulsion of queer brown bodies from nation as well as culture renders complex reterritorializations, precipitated, in some part, by the desire to be reframed within rejected spheres. Ratti mobilizes this tactic to offer “scientific evidence that same-gender attraction is present in all cultures” to disbelieving South Asian communities: “There are images of same-gender individuals in intimate positions on temples in Khajuraho and Konarek in India. Most of these temples were built more than a thousand years ago. There are also references to homosexuality as an alternative expression of sexuality in the Kama Sutra, the ancient Indian text on the diversities of sex. Babar, the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India, is said to have been gay, as was Abu Nawas, a famous Islamic poet. Homosexuality is as native to the Indian subcontinent as heterosexuality and cannot be dismissed as a Western import” (“Introduction” 13).

In *Lotus* there is an implicit understanding of South Asian as reducible to Indian and Indian as equivalent to a Hindu cultural and religious identity. Hindu mythology is labeled as Indian mythology, and Hindu gods and goddesses are named as Indian gods and goddesses. In the introduction, an image of Ardhanarishwara is accompanied by the following description: “Indian mythology not only recognizes the existence of male and female principals within the human body, but honors and defies it in this representation of Lord Shiva as half man, half woman” (“Introduction” 10). Hindu mythology, through its apparent emphasis of unity of the feminine and masculine, is used to justify contemporary South Asian gay and lesbian identities. For example, a bronze statue depicts “two torsos, one female, one male, arising from the same pelvis, emphasizing the unity rather than the dichotomy of the feminine and the masculine” (295), and another photo shows a “painting of a hermaphroditic figure” (133). Pictures of Hindu temple statues of same-sex erotica “prove” that homosexuality is indigenous to Indian culture. The section entitled “Uncovering our Past/Inventing our Present” opens with a photo of a temple carving from the city of Khajuraho, India, with the caption “Two women sharing an intimate touch” (19). Later, the book presents another temple carving from the same city, captioned “Four women engaged in sexual play” (165).

The *Lotus* chapter entitled "Homosexuality in India: Culture and Heritage" was compiled by AIDS Bhedhav 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 inflects 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. Fleshing 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 Sakhi and Bombay Dost in India" (123). 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," JeeYeun 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