

**A NOBLE MANSION FOR ALL?:
THE PRODUCTION OF DIFFERENCE IN SELECTED WORKS BY MAHESH
DATTANI AND R. RAJ RAO**

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Abstract

This dissertation reads selected works of two queer Indian writers, Mahesh Dattani and R. Raj Rao, as sites of the production of difference in contemporary, *fin-de-millénaire* India. The literary analysis in this project tracks the particular texture of the selected primary texts. It follows the particular weave of *what* stories are being told, and *how* they are being told, which creates unique patterns of difference, providing the means for critical readings of diversity and difference in contemporary India. Close readings of the primary texts reveal artful, significant interventions in two intersecting discursive fields: namely, nationalism and sexualities. Moreover, the art-work of the texts reveals how the “idea of India” as a model of “unity-in-diversity” is by no means politically or ideologically neutral; specifically, the texts show how it is conceptually inadequate for understanding, let alone accommodating, any radical approaches to difference, especially the kind manifested in queerness. While the ramifications of Indian national identity animate one line of enquiry, those of dissident sexualities and gender energize the other, drawing into both lines region-specific questions and enquiries into identity- and subject-formation at large. The “queer India” crystallizing in the works of Dattani and Rao comes to signal a heterogeneity, complicating stabilized notions of identity (the self-same) and difference (extraneous other/s), all the while interrogating the ground on which that same term rests. Both writers’ works defer stable assumptions of what it means to be “queer” *and* what it means to be “Indian.” This project examines these forms of deferral as productions of differences in which the irreducibility of, but also radical unsettled interconnections between, difference is theorized.

Dedication

Dedicated To The Interested Reader

Acknowledgements

This dissertation signals a key milestone in an extended traversal, arduous, thrilling, and wholly-satisfying. I have carried it, from the time it was a mere germ of an idea, across a span of time and space. On its part, this dissertation has carried me, has indeed been the making of me. Holding with the common experience of all those I esteem as peers, I am also very conscious of the many and varied sources of inspiration that have nourished the following pages.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“We have to build the noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell”

Jawaharlal Nehru, 14-15 August, 1947

This dissertation reads selected works of two queer Indian writers, Mahesh Dattani and R. Raj Rao, as sites of the production of difference in contemporary *fin-de-millénaire* India.¹ The literary analysis in this project tracks the particular texture of the selected primary texts. This method enriches the particular insights offered by the form and content of these texts. The critical insights offered by this method follow, therefore, the particular weave of *what* stories are being told, and *how* they are being told. The various patterns of this weave signpost the variegated artwork in the respective texts. This dissertation offers to the reader an in-depth examination of a range of literary narratives. These narratives emerge out of, and engage with, two intersecting discursive fields: namely, nationalism and sexualities. Dattani and Rao are at the vanguard of contemporary queer Indian literature (and by extension, the larger queer Indian socio-cultural movement). Their literary productions are publicized as queer writing by the Indian publishing industry, and are studied as such in the Academy.² The descriptors, “queer”

¹ The term “*fin-de-millénaire*,” as a temporal marker denoting the turn of the millennium suggested itself through its particular use by Ingram et al. in the critical volume *Queers in Space* (1997). Other insights provided by that collection will be discussed below in this Introduction, in the section “Space and ‘Queer India’.” In the genealogy of Euro-American queer theory, the turn-of-millennium is an important temporal marker. In “Go West,” scholar Joseph Boone uses the term “fin-de-millennium” to mark the stage of a particular flourishing of queer theory. For Boone, the “fin-de-millennium” marks a “volatile political climate” (3). The political character of the period combines well with the volatility in the conceptual contours of queer theory itself (in Boone’s words, the “destabilizations of any givens inherent in the very concept of queerness” [3]).

² Speaking of R. Raj Rao’s 2003 novel, *The Boyfriend*, Ana Garcia-Arroyo refers to the publicity surrounding its release. The novel, she observes, “is praised and counted as the first genuinely gay novel written in India” (141).

and “Indian,” provide a convenient entry-point for the readings in subsequent chapters. In this dissertation, the ramifications of Indian national identity animate one line of enquiry, and those of dissident sexualities and genders the other.

The analytical work of this project is set against the backdrop of scholarly conversations generated by region-specific questions—what it means to be Indian, and what it means to be sexed and gendered in India—as well as enquiries into identity- and subject-formation at large. The relationship between dissident queerness and a national identity built on heterosexual “respectability” can be read as polarized.³ The antagonists thus arrayed appear homogeneously contained in their respective categories or identities, easily distinguished in their oppositional relationship. Yet, the “queer India” crystallizing in the works of Dattani and Rao comes to signal a heterogeneity, complicating stabilized notions of identity (the self-same) and difference

She goes on to quote from reviews from Indian dailies and speaks of its publication intersecting with deepening mainstream media attention on sexuality, in particular the anti-sodomy legislation included, then as it is at present, in the Indian Penal Code (for her overview of the reception of the novel, see Garcia-Arroyo 141-142).

The book reviews for Rao’s earlier collection of short stories, *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City* (1995), also foreground the varied representations of non-normative sexualities and gender practices. In her review of the volume included as a publicity-blurb for a second edition of the collection, writer and poet Gauri Deshpande speaks pointedly and self-reflexively of how the “thieves and homosexuals” of Rao’s stories remind her of “the streets I walk on everyday, and people I have learnt not to see in order to survive” (Rao, *One Day* n. pag.)

³ The relationship between nationalism, sexuality, and sexual respectability is best articulated in the work of George L. Mosse. His *Nationalism and Sexuality* remains a valuable resource, even if his attentions are focused on the continent of Europe. A variegated and growing corpus of scholarship provides an ample scope to “the reasons why discourses of nation and nationalism are gendered and sexualised” (Vijayan 365). Mosse is the springboard for subsequent scholarship, notably collections such as *Nationalisms and Sexualities* in which the editors (Parker et. al.) directly acknowledge the influence of Mosse. In the Indian context, the complexities between discourses of nationalism, particularly framed by the context of developmentalism or nation-building, are increasingly well-represented in scholarship. Joseph S. Alter and Sanjay Srivastava respectively attend to significant discourses of celibacy and asceticism in the development of male Indian nationalist subjects during and after the struggle for decolonization. P.K. Vijayan’s work on Indian hegemonic masculinities in an era of *fin-de-millénaire* chauvinistic Hindu nationalism—a good starting point is his “Developing Powers”—examines the particular relations between Gramscian theories of hegemony, patriarchal formations, and the management of political, socio-cultural, and economic resources within the Indian national domain. A range of scholars has also examined the relations between nationalism and femininity. Mrinalini Sinha’s *Specters of Mother India* (2006) tracks how 20th-century Indian feminist movements both contested but were eventually co-opted by the patriarchal structures of Indian national elites. See, for instance, her chapter, “Ambiguous Aftermath,” in that volume.

(extraneous other/s)⁴. In the literature studied here, the representations gathering under this compound-term, “queer India,” paradoxically interrogate the ground on which that same term rests. On one level, these works fit somewhere within the larger categories of “sex/gender” and “nation.” On another, they also unsettle those categories, shaping instead a plenitude of characters, inter-subjective relationships, and scenarios which defer stable assumptions, both of what it means to be “queer,” *and* what it means to be “Indian”.⁵ This project examines these forms of deferral as productions of differences in which the irreducibility of, but also radical unsettled interconnections between, difference is foregrounded. This production of difference becomes a representational pattern, threading its way through the different primary texts, thus providing the means for critical readings of diversity and difference in contemporary India.

The following sections in this chapter demarcate those areas of interest upon which this project rests. The sections observe how Indian nationalism—particularly, in its dominant secular Nehruvian form—enfolds the issue of diversity into its approach to ways of being “Indian”: in doing so, this chapter throws light on the ways in which difference is used to buttress the issue of

⁴ The self/other dyad has preoccupied scholars in postcolonial studies. In that domain, the normative colonial relationship between colonizer and colonized is rendered as the encounter between the European “self” and the native “other.” All three of the most commonly associated scholars in the field—Homi K. Bhabha; Edward Said; and, Gayatri C. Spivak—have approached otherness in their respective fashion. The colonized “other” as an object of *pouvoir-savoir* forms the core thesis of Said’s *Orientalism*. Multiple chapters in Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*—for example, the chapter titled “Of Mimicry and Man”—dwell on the curious, often unsettling, intimacy between these supposedly distinct entities. In her work on the “subaltern”—to be found in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (in the chapter, “History”), for example—Spivak combines gender, feminist enquiry, class-analysis, and deconstruction to inform about the complexities of subject-formation and epistemological challenges in both colonial and postcolonial contexts. In the standard entry-point to postcolonial studies—*The Empire Writes Back*—authors Ashcroft et al. refers to Spivak as using the term, “othering,” as a signifier of “persistent Western practices crucial to colonialism and imperialism” (96). Arun P. Mukherjee has provided a valuable critical intervention to what she argues are increasingly overdetermined hermeneutic categories of postcolonial theory—of which the colonizer-self is one—in numerous articles. See, for instance, her chapter, “Interrogating Postcolonialism,” in her collection, *Postcolonialism: My Living*.

⁵ Ashwini Sukthankar has written about how writing as an Indian lesbian on Indian lesbianism throws down a set of challenges to coherent categories, of national and sex/gender identifications, in a context where each category does not easily dovetail the other but in which nevertheless the implications of both are felt and lived. Her work invites the reader to consider that what “[Indian lesbian] ‘writing’ signifies [is] the gritty imperfect media through which the body, with its yearning and suffering [speaks] out” (“Introduction” xxi).

a national identity. The implications of a nationalist approach to difference, especially in the domain of queer movements and culture in India are then surveyed. The ideologically motivated domestication of difference in Indian nationalism represents a limited, instrumental use of diversity; the growing queer movement in Indian throws these limits into relief. Contrasting the domesticating reductive approaches of Indian nationalism, queer interrogations mobilize elliptical approaches to the question of difference in productive ways. These queer critical moves participate within a wider interrogation of essentialized thinking around any kind of identity and any kind of difference.

Over two decades the anti-essentialist mode has directed the general approach queer studies takes on identity and difference. One form this mode of enquiry has taken is in a consideration of space, with spatialized thought as one more productive way of studying, or mapping, difference, heterogeneity, diversity: the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling* (2003) is at the vanguard. Of particular interest is how Sedgwick's work on spatial thinking provides fresh insight into mapping relationships between subjects of different and/or multiple identities. Specific collections of scholarship, such as *Queers in Space* (1997), draw attention to the importance of thinking (sex/gender) difference in the light of discontinuous experiences of space. Increasingly, the connections between muddy, inequality-ridden realities of contemporary lives and the kinds of inhabitable (or alienating) spaces made (un)available to individuals and groups in different social strata are being thrown into relief.

Connecting anti-essentialist queer thinking and spatial thinking on identity and difference has particular contrapuntal significance in the Indian context too. Indian nationalism makes extensive use of space in its theories of the Indian nation, Indian diversity, and the manner in which Indians from diverse backgrounds ought to relate to one another. Keeping in mind anti-

essentialist spatial thinking sharpens the insight into the normative management—indeed, mapping—of diversity in India with ramifications on notions of time (history), space (geography), and subjectivities in the subcontinent. This added insight reinforces the interpretive framework for the readings of Dattani and Rao to follow in the next chapters. The production of difference in the works of both authors indicates, then, a reappraisal of Indian space as much as that of Indian subjectivities.

The epigraph to this chapter—from Jawaharlal Nehru’s famous speech marking Indian decolonization—forms a locus for the issues discussed in this project. Nehru’s “noble mansion” signposts the nationalist approach to settling the question of a variegated nation. The production of difference by Dattani and Rao works in contrast, foregrounding instead an unsettled heterogeneity. It enables an examination of how mainstream Indian nationalism accumulates for its own ideological deployment the *materiel* of diversity in the subcontinental region, re-mapped as a nation. In the works of both writers, the production of difference resists the normative discourse on difference that shapes the narrative of Indian nationalism. This resistance has an impact on how both writers deal with the issue of not only a normative national identity but also, on the other end, a dissident sexual identity. This dissertation highlights the question of difference as critically important to analyzing both national identity (“Indian”) and sexual/-ized identity (“queer”) in textual representations. The primary texts in this project are studied in the light of important discourses running between the two poles of nationalism and sexualities. This reflects also the larger arc of scholarship along which this dissertation travels.

Much scholarship has investigated how words—written, received, circulated—contribute to the formation and consolidation of ideas about particular ways of being in the world. “Discourse analysis” is one term to denote studies of how strategic deployments of words

crystallize into immutable ideas.⁶ The Indian nation is imagined and represented through a discursive system which allows, even privileges, specific articulations of difference. This system elaborates a vision that is commonly termed, the “idea of India.” Important scholarship has focused on the shape and implications of this vision, most recently by Perry Anderson, in a series of essays for the *London Review of Books* later collected in the volume *The Indian Ideology* (2012).⁷ One of India’s most distinguished historians, Romila Thapar, has long examined the manner by which nationalist ideology shapes Indian historiography, and the ways in which this nationalist mode defines the relations between different communities in the country. The “idea of India” reflects therefore the ideological transplanting of the demography, geography, and history of a vast territory into a national dominion. Through this, peoples, spaces, and times come to be reoriented to nationalist goals.

⁶ In postcolonial studies, “colonial discourse analysis” is a central mode of enquiry into European colonial-imperial encounters with non-European communities. Key scholars in the field, like Edward Said, have shown how studies of colonial discourse builds a representational system geared towards understanding difference in the world in terms of categories that, once produced, are circulated and reproduced as the basis of colonial knowledge (such categories might include: the European/colonizing “self,” distinguished from/contrasted with the colonized “other”). A good starting-point for Said’s theories will be found in the chapter, “The Scope of Orientalism,” in his pioneering monograph, *Orientalism*. Said observes, “Orientalism is the generic term that I have been employing to describe the Western approach to the Orient ... and is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice” (*Orientalism* 73). For Said, Orientalism is about discourses and texts. Colonial texts produce and enable colonial authority by collecting, as in a receptacle, all of those “approaches” or ways of knowing that characterize the encounter between self and other. Texts, according to Said, have an ability to create and sustain notions of “expertise,” and, eventually, an entire structure: “a text purporting to contain knowledge about something actual ... can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe” (94). Texts are inherent to discourse, the latter being built on textual evidence, experience, and knowledge-enhancing resources: in making such an observation, Said references the theoretical position of Foucault. The links between Said and Michel Foucault are strong: Foucault’s own theories of discourse relate to the ways in which power and knowledge-systems are mutually constitutive, and the role of discourses with their “material presence” (Said, *Orientalism* 94) in the interrelated network of power and knowledge within the Foucauldian world operates.

⁷ *The Indian Ideology* opens with a synopsis of the meaning and application of the “idea of India,” as well as a short survey of the writers and historians who have made use of it. Terming it a “now consecrated phrase,” Anderson argues that the “idea of India” is now a core element in the “rhetoric of the state.” He identifies four major “tropes” framing the “idea”: “antiquity-continuity”; “diversity-unity”; “massivity-democracy”; multi-confessionality-secularity” (P. Anderson 9). All these facets of the idea consolidate the image of India as a unified nation-state with ancient origins, the substance of which has carried forward in an unbroken historical arc into the present and future, in which the accrual of different communities, particularly religious ones, has been tempered by the development of an accommodating rational secular-democratic structure.

Nation-making/Nation-shaping: “India”

The central political figure involved in the process of reconciling the Indian nation to its diverse parts and its diverse history is Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru’s imagined “noble mansion of India” ties in with scholar Benjamin Zachariah's observation that “Indian nationalism as articulated by Jawaharlal Nehru and circles close to him is apparently as appealing as it can get: tolerant, secular, inclusive, egalitarian and non-discriminatory” (205). The doctrine of Nehruvian inclusivity dominates the decades following Indian independence. It becomes the pre-requisite for prosperity and social welfare of *all* Indian peoples, and refers to the Nehruvian socialist belief in a “state-led developmentalism,” benefitting the whole population of the new country. The economic orientation of Nehru and his followers can be contrasted with the narrow sectarianism of a “cultural nationalism,” with its belief in a particular “ethnic belonging and its concomitant exclusions” (Zachariah 208). Yet, as scholars like Zachariah argue, the Nehruvian doctrine on its part also requires certain kinds of “cultural” buttresses for the working of its vision of inclusive unity. The cultural dimension enables the nation to be imagined as a particular kind of unit. This not only keeps ethnocentric nationalism (in the case of India, Hindu majoritarian ethno-nationalism) at bay, so the thinking goes, but also consolidates developmentalism in the country and the Nehruvian power-structure in the administration of all India (see Zachariah 208-209; 213; 220-223).⁸

⁸ The present-day crystallization of a “Hindu” identity, part of a process which enables the imagining of distinct religious identities, of which a monolithic Hinduism is seen as dominant by a numerical logic, is well analyzed by Romila Thapar in her chapter from *Cultural Pasts*, “The Politics of Religious Communities” (1096-1107). Thapar uses the term “Syndicated Hinduism” to define the increasingly homogenized sense of what “Hinduism” and a “Hindu” signifies (see her chapter, “Syndicated Hinduism” from *Cultural Pasts* 1025-1054). See the discussion in the following paragraphs of how even “Syndicated Hinduism” is perfectly willing to deploy a discourse of diversity, if only to consolidate its own hegemony.

The cultural basis sought by Nehruvian nationalism depends on a particular approach to history, especially with regard to a specifically Indian antiquity. Thapar has written about how modern Indian historiography has been ideologically inflected by the particular concerns of Indian nationalism to consolidate a particular historical vision of “India.” As she observes, “[n]ationalism seeks legitimacy from the past and history therefore becomes a sensitive subject” (*Early India* 19; see also 15-29 from the same volume). For Nehruvians, the “noble mansion of India” has its cultural foundations on accrued layers of diversity:

Historically, India was “like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously.” Each layer had enriched Indian culture and had a place in a new national consciousness; the great rulers of India were the synthesizers who looked beyond sectional interests to bring together different layers. (Zachariah, quoting Nehru, 220)

“To bring together different [cultural] layers” becomes one more strategy to bring to fruition the development of a country. The effect of a Nehruvian treatment of difference allows for a national vision of “a shared and somewhat mystic common culture” of different strands, bringing Indians together *only* so that a unified programme of modernization and development might be effected: “[w]hat was needed was to bring modernism to the masses” (Zachariah 221).

The influence of such nationalist thinking on diversity remains strong. Despite the decline of Nehruvian socialism and the rise of neoliberalism in India—a process that begins in the 1990s—the influence of a Nehruvian articulation of national unity as the binding agent for a so-called Indian diversity predominates. Perry Anderson remarks that even right-wing Hindu nationalists—opponents of Nehruvian politics—have used secularism instrumentally to further

their own xenophobic, ideological-identitarian aims in the period (from the 1990s on) of their own ascendancy. For Anderson, this seeming paradox sheds light on the uncomfortable fact that “Indian secularism of the post-Independence period had never sharply separated state and religion, let alone developed any systematic critique of Hinduism” (P. Anderson 149). So, right-wing “discourse [is able to embellish] Hinduism as preeminently a faith of tolerant pluralism and peaceable harmony, its teeming multiplicity of different deities, beliefs and rituals a veritable template for a modern multi-culturalism” (P. Anderson 150).⁹

Given the context in which particular imaginings of diversity have been invested with an important role in ideological (re)productions, whatever the political stripe, of the Indian nation, a scholar like Ananya Vajpeyi (in her *Righteous Republic* [2012], published by Harvard University Press, no mean platform) is able to use difference in entirely instrumental ways to reinforce and reinscribe a modern “Indian” subjectivity, constituted by diverse strands, but ultimately

⁹ With regard to a modern multiculturalism in India: Suparna Bhaskaran, in her monograph *Made in India* (2004), tracks a shifting social, cultural, and economic landscape in a liberalizing *fin-de-millénaire* India. Among a range of valuable observations, she draws attention to an updated visioning of Indian femininity, balancing unified “Indian” cultural norms with an eagerness to engage profitably with the dictates of a globalized as opposed to nationalized economy. Yet, as she points out, the move away from a socialist, state-led economic model has not attenuated the utility of a national unity model. Rather, the vision of a unified, yet diverse, nation has been recoded to fit this altered landscape. According to Bhaskaran, an arena in which these changing circumstances were contested was in the 1996 *Miss World* beauty pageant, hosted by the Indian city of Bangalore. Reading Bhaskaran, we can see that the organizers’ response to the protests that a beauty pageant did not reflect “Indian values” reinvokes a narrative of national unity that has not departed from the older Nehruvian tropes:

Bollywood had a key role in the programming [of the 1996 *Miss World Pageant*]. The theme, as directed by filmmaker Priyadarshan was “From Kanyakumari to Kashmir” to demonstrate the kaleidoscope of *Indian culture*. Interestingly, Priyadarshan was a member of the Karnataka Hindu right wing but said that his party members understood not to interfere with his job or his creative potential. He said, “[M]y aim is to showcase all that is good in Indian tradition. If the protestors watch how I do India proud with a traditional extravaganza, they might change their viewpoint ...” Furthermore, the artistic emblem of the pageant consisted of the bust of an *apsara* from the Ajanta caves, “where the dusky Indian beauty is adorned with a bejeweled crown offset by a feather of the peacock, India’s national bird ... The discourse of tourism, à la Bollywood, constructed a mythical-traditional India ripe for problem-free investment ... (Bhaskaran 50)

If Nehru has his “ancient palimpsest,” then Priyadarshan and the *Miss World* organizers have their “kaleidoscope” of a hybrid but ultimately “traditional” India, where the Ajanta caves are montaged with the peacock, and with the overarching theme binding the nation from northernmost (Kashmir) to southernmost (Kanyakumari) geographical extremes.

cohesive. The principle acknowledges the historical diversity of the Indian region, and its continuing significance to India. Nevertheless, it only allows modern Indian diversity to function under the terms and conditions of the Indian nation. Difference, on these terms, can be nurtured, but only once it is subordinated to similitude or national unity: in other words, a national identity. As diversity is written into the national narrative, what gets erased is the mark of irreducibility that lies at the heart of difference as a concept. A difference repeatedly articulated as a valuable national characteristic, but simultaneously reduced to serve the greater cause of national unity marks the vanishing point of this normative discourse. The so-called “territorial integrity” of the diverse nation cannot be the subject of critique within this discourse.¹⁰ Dattani and Rao, on the other hand, use irreducibility as a tool to re-approach the issue of diversity in India. This allows for a further analysis of the relationship between identity and otherness, the dynamic between similitude and difference.

In this project, the narratives from Dattani and Rao are distinguished from the Indian national narrative vis-à-vis the issue of difference. Scholarship on Indian nationalism has explored how this vast political movement made functional use of narrative.¹¹ In “The Imaginary Institution of India,” historian Sudipta Kaviraj attends to concepts of discourse and narrative in the Indian nationalist project. He examines the narrative as a particular discursive device operating within the historical processes out of which ideas of a modern “India” emerge. The

¹⁰ The term, as Perry Anderson notes, is used by Meghnad Desai (author of *Rediscovery of India*). For Anderson’s interrogation of this sharply-articulated thesis of “territorial integrity,” see his chapter “Republic” from *The Indian Ideology*, especially pp.173-180.

¹¹ In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said explores the link between the narrative-form of key canonical novels from the 19th century, and imperialist/colonialist discourse. Narratives used in seemingly domestic cultural practices, such as Anglo-European (later, American) novel-writing, become imbued in Said’s reading with the greater ideological function of justifying the munificence and civilizing mission of Empire building, especially in the British context. As he observes, of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, “the right to colonial possessions helps directly to establish social order and moral priorities at home” (Said *Culture and Imperialism* 62). For further discussions, see the section in *Culture and Imperialism* titled “Narrative and Social Space” (62-80).

nation of India, observes Kaviraj, is “not an object of discovery but of invention ... historically instituted by the nationalist imagination of the nineteenth century” (167). Reading Kaviraj, we understand that the building blocks of this exercise of the imagination are, words. Taken as a system, these words crystallize into a particular discourse. Kaviraj’s own pithy description of discourse is, the “general name for a number of possible types of functions or operations with words” (169). The narrative, specifically, is defined by him as “one particular element, or figuration, of discourse” (169).

Following Kaviraj, narrative can be understood as a shaping device for discourse, organizing the words and ideas generated by discourse. In literature, narratives tell a story. Kaviraj points out that narratives “construct fictive entities and fictive connections,” observing, however, that the storytelling aspect of narrative “cannot perform the functions expected of history as an academic discipline, whose justification is in being true in the strong sense” (206). He then expands on the concept of the narrative so as to clarify its particular function in nationalist discourse as it mediates the content, or stuff, of Indian history. Constructing historical “truth” through historical narratives is predicated on the connections and transitions made between the component parts of the narrative. The telling of the so-called true story of Indian nationalism relies, therefore, on the joining together *in* narrative-form of “the material of history”: Kaviraj uses the term “colligatory” to describe this process (206). Narratives colligate, or produce a sequence, and therefore give shape or direction to what is told in them. Nehru’s “ancient palimpsest,” with its accumulated layers of an evermore syncretic culture, is as much a

literary-minded figuration of Indian history as it is a strategic narrative telling how a collective Indian past might be mobilized to travel *en masse* towards the national present.¹²

In *Nationalism and the Imagination*, Gayatri C. Spivak points out, in a similar vein, that “the main thing about narrative is sequence” (21). Spivak brings together literature, imagination, and nationalism in her observation:

That literature and the arts can support an advanced nationalism is no secret. They join in the task of a massive rememoration project, saying “we all suffered this way, you remember, this is what happened, you remember,” so that history is turned into cultural memory. Literature takes it further by suggesting that we have all passed through the same glorious past, the same grand national liberation struggle, the same religious tolerance and so on. (20)¹³

In literary mode, Jawaharlal Nehru’s “noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell” can be read as a unifying metaphor. The phrase is also a part of the colligating compound

¹² The issue of a strategic writing of Indian history, and the colligating narrative being pressed into national service presented by Kaviraj in this instance has wider links with a long-standing, many-faceted investigation into the relationship between “history and language,” as scholars like Mark Currie have outlined (Currie “Introduction” 14). Currie reminds us that “it is no longer possible to discuss history without heeding its linguistic representational condition, just as it is no longer possible to discuss language without contextualizing the discussion in social and historical frameworks” (14). Outlining the contributions of Michel Foucault in the large field of historiography (specifically, its relation with power), Currie observes that, “[f]or Foucault, in his ‘archaeological’ phase, the writing of history involved the reduction of the irreducibly complex discursive formation of a period or epoch to a simple, unified essence *which could take its place in a continuous narrative*...[and] this process was a ‘structure of exclusion,’...which bespoke the values of the historian and gave the impression that *one thing lead to another in a causal chain*” (“Introduction” 12, emphases added).

¹³ In her study of Indian Anglophone writing, Meenakshi Mukherjee argues that, especially in the decades clustering around Independence, Indian Anglophone writers were complicit in homogenized representations of India. For Mukherjee, this reflects an “anxiety” in mid-20th-century Anglophone writing as to its status as an Indian language. In an effort to consolidate their credentials as “authentic” Indian writers, figures such as R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao ended up with works overemphasizing unitary views of the country, flattening out the field in the process. These representational practices folded in with Indian nationalism and its totalizations; this corresponds to Spivak’s point about how “literature and the arts can support an advanced nationalism” (*Nationalism* 20). However, in the aftermath of the political excesses of Indira Gandhi during the Emergency Period of the mid- to late-seventies, a scepticism towards Indian nationalism is reflected in a darkening of the genre, as Mukherjee observes, in newer works by young Indian Anglophone writers like Amitav Ghosh. Dattani and Rao, both of whom start writing in this latter period, are influenced by the shift away from the unities of the Indian national narrative.

within the national narrative. While Kaviraj enables an understanding of how a narrative orders events across time-periods, Spivak reminds us that narratives involve human subjects as well: the collective “we” she refers to also indicates a process of interpellation and subject-formation. Narratives, in this light, can be seen as ordering identities, by producing those sequences which tell us who we are and, by extension, how to be. “The noble mansion of free India where all her children may dwell”—Nehruvian metaphor—clarifies for the people of India a vision of national unity, and a primer for an ideal national subjectivity.

Studying the course of “Indian nationalist thought” in the Nehruvian era, Partha Chatterjee locates the dominant discursive strand of the time within a “Moment of Arrival” (*Nationalist Thought* 131-170). At this point, all constituents of the Nation are enjoined to speak in unison, in one voice, *for* national unity. Like Zachariah, Chatterjee argues that the overriding emphasis in Nehruvian India was on national unity (*Nationalist Thought* 133; 146). Both scholars remind us that the creation of the sovereign national state was the central political aim, without which the necessary economic changes in post-colonial Indian society could not be effected. Economic change, with the aim of greater redistribution of wealth, was widely seen as the necessary precursor to the general wellbeing of Indian society. Social happiness experienced by all would enable the wellbeing of different Indian communities and ensure better communal relations. Wide-ranging consent for the unity and sovereignty of the nation-state was manufactured, as it were, by the programmatic chain of links in the Nehruvian narrative: the fusing of national ideology to political unity enables national institutions to spearhead an

enlightened and equitable economic redistribution, so that the wealth thus generated might be spread across the polity, nurturing in turn social happiness and stability.¹⁴

As noted above, Sudipta Kaviraj, in his study of narratives in Indian national discourse, argues that these narratives not only describe a mass of historical events, but also produce a sequence between events, all in order to orient history towards the *telos* of the nation. He draws attention, therefore, to the “colligatory function” of narratives, by which, as he explains, “historical accounts *join* incidents ... or processes in a sequence: *a-b-c-d*, and so on” (206, emphasis added). The “colligatory” binds—the joinings, in other words—in the Nehruvian narrative have been interrogated. This reexamination results also in a rethinking of the relationship between the human subjects (Indians) and the nation (India). In their works, Dattani and Rao invite questions around how well, in fact, are Indians settled within the nation. A queer thinker like Nivedita Menon critiques the causal link establishing a sequential link where economic wellbeing must precede, and is only ever followed by, social happiness. Menon’s observations draw attention to the implications of privileging the redistribution of wealth as *the* primary national objective in the Nehruvian imagining of the modern Indian nation. Menon reads a nationalist alibi in the reiterated claim that any movement geared towards the critique of Indian heteronormativity must await the resolution of more pressing issues:

Anyone who has ever tried to raise sexual preference as a political issue in India would be familiar with the stern admonition—there are many more serious issues

¹⁴ The overwhelmingly positive value attached to national unity in the Indian context as the precondition to stability and diversity is evident in Ananya Vajpeyi’s online article, “Retrieving a History,” which responds critically to the same work by Perry Anderson discussed here. For her, despite the “numerous shortfalls of Indian democracy,” the nation might “understandably celebrate the achievement of a democratic order in one of the world’s most diverse and hierarchical cultures” (Vajpeyi “Retrieving” *caravanmagazine.in*). The implication here seems to be that, barring the “democratic order” provided by the nation, Indian difference would somehow be threatened, or threatening. In terms of the “idea of India,” this point of view corresponds to the “massivity-democracy” aspect.

we have to deal with first: poverty and class conflict, caste and communalism....
 Until the huge radical transformations have taken place, let us not disturb the status quo. This kind of argument sets up a hierarchy of oppressions along a scale decided by one set of opinions. What if your opinions don't tally...? Then you are engaging in "identity politics" and breaking up the possibilities of a broader unity. ("How Natural" 33)¹⁵

Tracked this way, Indian nationalist thought is shown to engender the belief that only the unified, sovereign nation can effect the necessary institutional changes so that a "serious issue"—of poverty, for instance—might be resolved. Therefore, the nation must mediate on any changes which are large-scale and countrywide—those "huge radical transformations," to use Menon's phrasing.

Chatterjee, Kaviraj, Menon, and Zachariah—all of whom are invested in detranscendentalizing the Indian nation—enable us to consider the underbelly of nation-oriented arguments. We are able to see that consenting to the Indian nation as sole agent of reform always already implies that the unity of the nation cannot be interrogated. The Nehruvian narrative and its programmatic chain equates the nation, syllogistically, with social stability. National unity, as

¹⁵ The hierarchy of "problems" thus established also throws into relief the troubled yet hegemonic legacy of Eurocentric thought on the development of modernity in the colonies, as Dipesh Chakravarty's work in *Provincializing Europe* argues. In this context, modernity is strongly allied with notions of progress and advancement. As noted above, furthermore, progress and advancement become coopted into Indian nationalism, especially in the decades after Independence, dominated by Nehruvian socialism. For Chakravarty, the influence of state-led developmentalism in the Indian post-Independence era demonstrates that decolonization in India was not accompanied by a complete undoing of colonial epistemological structures, especially of "historicism." In Chakravarty's opinion: "European historicist thought ... remains alive and strong today in all the developmentalist practices and imaginings of the Indian state (10)." For Chakravarty, "historicism," despite its claims to examining particular phenomena within specific historical contexts, does privilege a temporal-teleological framework of an "internally unified" (Chakravarty 23) phenomenon developing over time towards an ideal. Concepts of modernity travelling this arc become subject to a colonialist logic that some (i.e. the colonizers) are further ahead than others (colonized). Postcolonial India remains caught up in the colonialist logic of a hierarchized experience of modernity in which the now ex-colonized is still lagging behind; compensating for this in the great race for a fully-developed experience of modernity becomes tied into postcolonial hierarchies of important and less-important "problems."

Perry Anderson argues at the start of *The Indian Ideology*, is one of the features of the “idea of India.” Anderson’s work ends up articulating the full ramifications of this foundational nationalist idea: he concludes that “to question [therefore] the territorial integrity of the [Indian] Union is a crime punishable by law” (177). While Anderson, here, is referring to the particularly vexed issue of sovereignty for Kashmir, the implications of this national *interdict* are wide-ranging. Any examination of Indian society, for instance, runs the risk of trapping itself within the normative national narrative of a unified “idea of India,” with its sequences and stratifications, *if* it hierarchizes the “serious issues” over the less-serious or frivolous issues.

Gender and sexuality debates in 20th-century India have been marked by the erasures implicit in this hierarchy of national priorities, as we have seen in Menon’s observation. One critical ramification of this discourse of national priorities has been the internal division between Indian feminism and the queer movement, especially around the question of female queer desire. Garcia-Arroyo, Menon, and Sukhthankar are among the many who have described this co-optation of feminism by national patriarchy. As Menon observes, “If not being actively homophobic, our movement’s best response [to queerness] seems to be long the lines of, ‘not now, this is not the time’” (“How Natural” 34). Garcia-Arroyo echoes this silencing of queer women: “As far as feminist movements are concerned, their relationship with identified lesbians has always been tense. Women have for long refused to include lesbian issues in their agenda on the grounds that there are other women’s priorities to attend to” (96).

Examining the discourse which produces a hierarchy of “serious” and “non-serious” issues in India must reflect on the emergence of national norms. A so-called serious issue, of top priority, must have the characteristic of being somehow more “Indian” than others. This, in turn, leads to questions of definitions: what *is* Indian, and what is not? To define an entity (like,

“Indian”) must mean a corresponding intuition of a difference understood as foreign or somehow non-Indian. Yet, while an emphatic claim of a quintessential and unified Indian-ness dominates the “idea of India,” it is nevertheless conjoined with a particular imagining of difference *within* the country. The normative Indian national approach to difference is often termed, “unity-in-diversity.” As Perry Anderson observes, one of the tropes through which the “idea of India” is figured is that of “unity-diversity” (9). The interrelation between the one nation and its many peoples is expressed in Nehru’s words: the express function of the “noble mansion of India” is to form the site “where *all* her children may dwell” (2, emphasis added). Nehru’s national collective “all” might be likened to that “community” of “deep horizontal comradeship” that Benedict Anderson sees as a defining characteristic of the “imagined community” marked by the signifier, “nation” (B. Anderson 6-7). Yet, this camaraderie between national subjects in the case of India must negotiate the pluralism also signified in that collective. On its part, the queer movement in India has articulated its presence in the country through an engagement with how difference is understood in the country. In paying attention to the multiple forms of oppression practiced on non-normative sexualities and gender practices, queer voices—scholarly, cultural, and political—inevitably respond to the fault-lines running through the national narrative of Indian difference. Menon’s critique outlined above is just one of these responses to a national identity that does not necessarily disavow difference as much as it tries to domesticate it to the “status quo”:

The term “identity politics” is used as a term of abuse by those who see themselves as occupying some unmarked identity such as “Indian citizen”, rather than an “identity” such as “woman” or “muslim” or “dalit” or “homosexual”—but believe me, you have to be pretty damned privileged if you can afford the

luxury of that unmarked designer label of “citizen.” (Menon, “How Natural” 33-34)

Menon argues that a national identity has engineered for itself a transcendental place and role; in this process, it has gained the capacity to detach itself from critique, while retaining a power to determine the (lower) place and value of other identities. Those human subjects capable of inhabiting that transcendental identity, “Indian citizen,” detached of any frame of reference but the national, come to represent that power, reflecting in the process the inequities of this hierarchical structure.

For nations in general, the relationship between unity and diversity is a complicated one, if we keep in mind Benedict Anderson’s observations about how the nation emerges, especially in Continental Europe, as the unifying form in a social context in which other systems representing social stability, continuity, and uniformity are superseded. For Anderson, the rise of the nation in eighteenth-century Europe follows the decline of “divinely ordained” dynastic certitudes (the so-called divine right of kings), as well as the pluralization of the very notion of the “divine” itself. On the one hand, as Anderson points out, Christianity no longer represented the divine in the single language of Latin, but in European vernaculars. On the other hand, Christians themselves begin encountering different religions and many gods, as a result of increasingly wide-ranging travels outside Europe (B. Anderson 7; see also, B. Anderson 12-19). The “centripetal” force of religion is therefore diffused in these varied ways, losing its potency. Its claim as a central authority on matters of life and existence weakens. Anderson argues that Christianity in Europe during the “rationalist secularism” of the Enlightenment could no longer provide its earlier doctrinal solace to people and communities at moments of crisis and uncertainty; for instance, on the issue of human mortality, the vagaries of death being a principal

source of worried speculation amongst people about the inherent “contingency” of human life.

The nation, with its claims of representing a sovereign, cohesive identity for its peoples, not least by acting as the carrier into the present and future of all of the accrued social and cultural links of that same community, seeks to represent itself as the stable point in a shifting world.

Anderson’s theorizations show that the nation emerges as a unifying model against deep challenges to structures once (but now no longer) sufficient to enclose and buttress certain notions: of the self, or of life and death, or of a cohering society, or of matters of faith. These challenges, Anderson argues, are brought on by the intuition of other worlds with its manifold pluralities now writ large. Plurality, in this context, is a difference that, once apprehended, can only be viewed as being on the outside, somehow irreducible to the observer, or the observing subject. For Anderson, this crystallizing sensing of an “us” and “them” (one more way of looking at this relationship between the inside and the outside) is expressed in an impulse he terms “territorialization” (see B. Anderson pp. 16-18). In the secular realm, this territorialization translates to the foundational importance of borders to nations. Anderson’s arguments remind us that the nation is “imagined as limited”:

[E]ven the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human being, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet. (B. Anderson 7)

A specific nation may not, therefore, aim for global dominion, but it is interested in organizing the space and the community/-ies within its particular territory. As observed in the opening

section of this chapter, the discourse of nationalism—which dictates the kind of conversations that can be engaged with when speaking of the nation—allows for particular narratives, which in turn organize historical events in a colligating sequence towards a national *telos*, while also crystallizing that “massive rememoration project” of which Spivak speaks. The national narrative with its sequencing is allied with the territorial impulse for demarcating, and shaping the space within, the borders of this particular sovereign unit.

But what about the difference *within* the sovereign unit of the nation? Nehru’s “ancient palimpsest” is strategic in its nationalist re-ordering of time, using a layering-effect to imagine diverse epochs nevertheless bound together in hybridity. It orients, as we have seen, an understanding of Indian pasts as a succession of such layers. This kind of understanding parallels Perry Anderson’s observation that one other aspect of the “idea of India” is that of an antique land with an antique history progressing in an unbroken series (“antiquity-continuity” is his phrase for it [see P. Anderson 9]), all the while adding different elements along the way (recalling us back to the thesis of “unity-diversity,” so crucial to the “idea of India”). The metaphor of the palimpsest captures well the manner in which the dominant Nehruvian strand of secular Indian nationalism accounts for diversity-across-time. The palimpsest, in this case, functions as a temporal device.

The approach to this issue of accretion of internal difference can also be mapped in spatial terms. A nationalist cartography, mapping heterogeneity within a unified concept of the nation, is strongly in evidence in the textual matter of two iconic songs whose composition and reception have been intertwined with the Indian nationalist movement. One of these songs is India’s official national anthem, “*Jana Gana Mana*,” written by Rabindranath Tagore. The other, “*Vande Mataram*” (also known as “*Bande Mataram*,” or, “I revere the Mother”), written by

Tagore's mentor, Bankimchandra Chatterji, has been equally influential as a rallying cry in the history of Indian nationalism. The content of both songs lend themselves well to a cartography allowing the subcontinent to be "read" as a nation. These mapping strategies, especially in the modified form favoured by Tagore, resonate with the post-Independence Nehruvian secular nationalist imagining of a nation united in diversity. The ordering of a national space in the Indian context animates the significance of territorialization in nationalism. The spatial imaginings of Indian nationalism work in tandem with the interpellation of human subjects as respectable and obedient citizens, working towards the national good. The endeavour to nationalize spaces and subjects means that difference within the nation must be held away from the tipping-point of dispersal. In the process, Indian nationalist thought becomes preoccupied with ways to plot the subcontinent—places and peoples—within the national narrative. Mapping the nation, by naming key physical landmarks, region-names, and cities as "Indian," remains a central ideological feature of nationalism, leading to what commentators have called a "map fetish" in the national government of India.¹⁶

In the 19th-century novel widely considered to be the ur-text of Indian nationalism, *Anandamath (The Sacred Brotherhood)* (1882), the novelist Bankimchandra Chatterji famously imagines a richly contoured "land of grace," and then embodies it as the Mother.¹⁷ The "land of

¹⁶ The term, "map fetish," is used by the Indian lawyer, scholar, and historian, A.G. Noorani as the title of his timely contribution to *Frontline Magazine* (2012) about the fantasies of territorial integrity running through successive Indian governments, from the time of Nehru. This normative political attitude about the exact cartographical lineaments of India relies on a disavowal of the realities of the country's ongoing border disputes, on two flanks, with the neighbouring nation-states of Pakistan and China.

¹⁷ The embodiment of the Indian nation as a mother-figure has been a rich site of scholarship, especially in the works of Indian feminist scholars. The focus in these studies have centred especially on the importance of normative heteropatriarchal expectations on Indian femininity. A very influential strand of scholarship has followed Partha Chatterjee's claim that Indian nationalist thought increasingly relegated women to the inner private sphere (the *ghar*, or "home"), as carriers of a cultural tradition unsullied by colonial contact and the affairs of the public sphere (the *bahir*, or "world"; see Chatterjee's "The Woman's Question in Nationalism" in *Nation and its Fragments* 119-121).

grace” nurtures its inhabitants—those who are born on it and live off of it—as a mother would her children. The novel clearly names the circle of devotees to this Mother/Nation combine as the “Children.” One of the enduring textual strands in the novel concerns “*Vande Mataram*.” By the turn of the 20th century, the song becomes part of the larger nationalist “text” as a patriotic song.¹⁸ It focuses on spatial representation with a strong human element: the phrase used above, “land of grace,” is taken from the song itself. This “land,” which is to be “revered” is the “Mother/Rich in waters, rich in fruit,/Cooled by the southern airs,/Verdant with the harvest fair.” “She” is, furthermore, “radiant with foliage and flowers in bloom,/Smiling sweetly, speaking gently/ ... Darkly green and also true ...”¹⁹

The enumeration of all this plenitude and variety—waters, fruits, harvests, foliage, flowers—all operates to crystallize a vision of the motherland. In many ways, however, Chatterji’s strategies point to a fledgling programme of imagining the nation. According to Julius J. Lipner, the concrete mapping out of Indian territory as “Mother India” was not clearly outlined in *Anandamath* (“Introduction” 100-101). The novel and the song are more allusive than precise about geographical specificities or markers across the entire nation; in fact, the geographical locus of the novel is Bengal region in the eastern part of the country, and the specific historical context is the devastating Bengal Famine of 1770 (Lipner, “Introduction” 28; 37-38). Nevertheless, the novel is oriented towards some kind of a unified model. Its general thesis rests on the merging of geographical space with the human subject and identities framed by the

The gender politics within Indian nationalism in regard to the status and function of women in the national sphere has been examined by scholars such as Tanika Sarkar and in collections such as *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*.

¹⁸ Lipner reminds us that even after “*Vande Mataram*” is supplanted by Rabindranath Tagore’s “*Jana Gana Mana*,” the latter chosen over the former as national anthem of Independent India, its presence in the Indian national imaginary and polity remains strong. As he points out, “*Vande Mataram*” “is officially not India’s national anthem but India’s ‘national song’ ... [with] a verse or two ... regularly sung or played at local or national occasions, especially those of an official nature” (Lipner “Introduction” 71).

¹⁹ See Lipner, “Introduction” 84-85 for a complete translation of the song.

political context of early national self-determination. This relationship between space and subject is apparent in the figure of the Nation-as-Mother; it is also thrown into relief in the devotions of the mendicant freedom-fighters to the Mother/Nation. As Lipner observes, Chatterji draws on Hindu imaginings of a “sacralised motherland,” and consolidates it into “an iconised Mother India awaiting emancipation and glorification in a political context” (“Introduction” 100). Unity functions to concentrate the energies of a dissipated populace, so that agency and self-rule—the bases for properly national subject-formation—might be established after centuries of oppression and the more immediate life-threatening Famine. As one of the “Children” of the novel, Bhabhananda asserts, “we’ve lost our religious way of life, our caste status, our self-respect, our family connections—and now we’re about to lose our lives!” (147)

Yet, while the revivification of a nation by the single-minded devotions of its people, or “children,” is the point of *Anandamath*, the less-palatable counterpoint is the clearly Hindu slant to Chatterji’s national imagining. In the novel, it is not so much the British Company-men colonials of the 18th and 19th century who are the “enemy,” but rather the Muslim kings and landowners in Bengal, vassals of the British East India Company. Muslims in India are represented as exploitative and repressive. Bhabhananda exclaims: “Everywhere else there’s a pact with the king for protection, but does our Muslim king protect us?... If we don’t get rid of these bearded degenerates will anything be left of our Hindu identity” (147).²⁰ In the novel, a reformed Hindu identity sits uncomfortably with Islam. The political component of that resurgent identity is indelibly tintured by the stereotyping of Muslim rule in India, indeed, Muslim presence in India, as oppressive and corrupt. Chatterji’s “neo-Hindu” (Lipner,

²⁰ For a further exploration of Hindu-Muslim relations in the writings of Bankimchandra Chatterji, see Tanika Sarkar’s chapter, “Imagining Hindu Rashtra: The Hindu and the Muslim in Bankimchandra’s writings,” in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*. J.J. Lipner’s extensive scholarly introduction to his translation of *Anandamath, or The Sacred Brotherhood* is another invaluable source.

“Introduction” 100) ideations are exclusionary; his vision of the Motherland, however unspecific its actual borders, has a fraught legacy, particularly pliable to different appropriations.

Keen to draw a cohesive and unified model through which the nation might be imagined, the secular strand of Indian nationalist thought directs Chatterji’s message one way, to craft out of the “Mother” a more communally inclusive vision of the Motherland. Lipner describes the secular nationalist’s quandary over the song in the events of the late 1930s when the song, already used widely in the national movement, was interrogated for its overly Hindu slant (“Introduction” 79 ff). The later stanzas of the song, in particular, makes a nationalist ritual out of practices that are specifically Hindu expressions of devotion: the nationalist subject genuflects before the Mother (“To the Mother I bow low” [84]), a figure used interchangeably with the recognizably Hindu goddess, Durga, in succeeding lines (“For you are Durga, bearer of the tenfold power”[85]), and the more generic “Goddess Fair” (“I bow to the Goddess Fair” [85]). As Lipner points out, all such references were unacceptable to the growing power bloc of the Muslim League, and its leader, M.A. Jinnah:

Muhammad Ali Jinnah ... in October 1937 condemned “the attitude of the [Indian National] Congress in foisting *Bande Mataram* as the national anthem upon the country as callous, positively anti-Islamic, idolatrous in its inspirations and ideas, and definitely subversive of the growth of genuine nationalism in India.”

(“Introduction” 79)

Jinnah’s “genuine nationalism” needs to be contextualized within the religious and political landscape of early 20th-century anti-colonial movement. The decades are characterized by divergences in Hindu and Muslim political programmes in the Indian national movement, as the prospect of self-rule becomes increasingly apparent. The fissure emerges around a disagreement

as to the future shape of independent India and the distribution of power between the different religious communities. As Jinnah's observations make apparent, the lyrical content of "*Vande Mataram*" maps out an ethnocentric vision of a united land that does not meet with universal consent in the late-colonial period. With the transition to Independence, and the subsequent predominance of the Nehruvian image of secular India in which the protection of difference fenced the route towards "genuine" nationalism, the song has continued to divide opinion. The more fundamentalist Hindu right-wing element, especially dominant in turn-of-the-millennium India, has found in *Anandamath* and "*Vande Mataram*" a readymade, unabashedly Hindu, identity for the modern Indian nation. Much of the debate on "*Vande Mataram*" over the last century has therefore centred around its appropriateness as a free-standing national anthem for a national community of "all" Indians, traversing across differences in origins, especially ethno-religious ones.

These mid-century controversies about the Hindu-centric composition leads Nehruvian nationalists to prefer poet Rabindranath Tagore's song, "*Jana Gana Mana*," as a more inclusive national anthem instead (the song was written in 1911, a quarter-century or so after "*Vande Mataram*," and was formally adopted as the nation's anthem in 1950 [see Nussbaum 12-13]). Tagore's work is an exposition of unity-in-diversity, generally expressed, in expansive spatial terms, and without specific references to exclusionary religious practices. The anthem is an apostrophe to an unspecified monolithic entity—"Thou"—in whom the nation and the nation's people depend. Avoiding Chatterji's Hindu vision for India, Tagore orients his own work to subcontinental geography even more than Chatterji does, mapping out the land in yet more

explicit ways.²¹ Now, regions are named, as are the two significant rivers in the North, mountain ranges including the Himalayas, while the vast southern peninsular coastline of India is traced when the lyrics describe how the presiding force behind India's destiny is hailed, "chanted by the waves of the Indian Ocean."

Correspondingly, on the political front, Nehru reiterated his vision of a "noble mansion" in geographical terms as well. In 1952, two years after the Constitution of India was formally promulgated and five years after Independence, Nehru broadcasts, over All India Radio, his nationalist impression of the country's geography. To his audience, the Prime Minister twines in significant ways the space of the country and the lives of the people who live in it. His thesis is clearly stated: "[b]ehind India's unity, there is an enormous and magnificent variety." He then positions himself as travelling representative for his radio audience, itself a stand-in for the entire national people:

If you had travelled with me, you would have gone, say to Kashmir, right on the northern tip of India and would have crossed the high Himalayas, the glaciers, and the snows. Now, all that is India. You would have gone to Ladakh right between Kashmir and Tibet, the vast stretch of land with no trees, nothing but magnificent high mountains, terribly cold. Some people imagine that India is a hot country, but it is frightfully cold too. You go to the southern tip of India, say Travancore.

²¹ A full text of the national anthem, in the English translation, is provided by Martha Nussbaum in her volume *The Clash Within* (13). The distinction between Chatterji and Tagore symbolized by the content of their respective songs, and posited by scholars like Nussbaum, should not belie the early influence of "*Vande Mataram*" on the younger writer. As Lipner points out, the rising "political profile" of "*Vande Mataram*" among the Bengali middle-classes in the late-19th century and early 20th century "was reinforced on the national stage at the convention of the twelfth session of the Indian National Congress in Calcutta in 1896...[when] Rabindranath Tagore, a rising star at the time ... sang the hymn" (Lipner "Introduction" 75).

You will find a tropical climate, so completely different from Ladakh's. (Nehru, *Selected Works* 6)

We find in the exuberant prose the cartographical impulse at work: the “country,” interchangeable with “nation” in freshly-minted form as a Republic, is charted, even more explicitly than in the national anthem, from “northern tip” to southern, combining a political geography of place-names, with a physical geography of the “snows” of the North including, inevitably, the “high Himalayas.” Nehru also expresses those characteristics of nationalism isolated by Benedict Anderson. Here, we have the “imagined political community,” of which Anderson speaks (6). By acting as the travelling representative for all Indians, interpellated in that emphatic and repeated use of the second-person singular, Nehru also implies that the nation is made up of people who have not journeyed the length and breadth of the entire country: the nation “is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Nehru takes on the role of the one who will make Indians “hear of” one another. As an imaginative act grounded in a making of sorts, Nehru’s description of India points to that aspect of imagination Anderson seeks to emphasize: imagination as a creative impulse (6). Reference to the map of India is involved with an active making-up of the nation, a nation made or created. Space on the subcontinent must now be understood with reference to national landmarks, all contributing to the image of national “communion.”

The map of India imaginatively constructed by public figures like Nehru, Tagore, and Chatterji, shows the ways in which space becomes a strategy for national unity. The ideal nation is imagined as a settled, wholesome human entity: the Mother. This space thus unified is associated also with embodying strategies, as we have seen: Chatterji’s use of the Hindu goddess

Kali/Durga transfigured as the female gender-ideal of the “Mother” is the prefiguration of the nationalist image of “Mother India,” appropriately secularized by Nehruvian thought. The unified, therefore ideal, Indian nation is treated as a settled spatial entity with borders and landmarks. Nehru, in the passage above, is careful to specify that Kashmir is “right at the northern tip of India.” The paradoxical, if telling, aspect of this is that Kashmir, in the northern extremity of India, is oriented right back to the rest of the nation south of it. This is the bind which produces the ground on which the national community is supposed to form in India: that “deep horizontal comradeship” of all different Indians (7). The significance of having diverse people inhabiting this variegated space is made clear in the same text, when Nehru goes on to say:

Naturally if the climate is different, the people living there are also different in many ways. I have just come from Madras, a very big city, a very gracious city, a fine city, very different from the cities in the north. Should I, because I happen to live now in Delhi want to make Madras or Bombay like Delhi or like Allahabad, where I was born, or like Kashmir, where my family came from? I cannot do it and I do not want to do it, I like the variety of India. (Nehru, *Selected Works* 6)

The nationalist narrative in which difference is domesticated to the totality of the nation is thrown into relief here. The bookends in the passage above are telling: Nehru starts with difference, mentioned twice in the same sentence; he ends with a return to the national unit when he refers to the “variety of India.” The different places, the different climates, and the different people take on the function of characterizing the nation. “Variety,” in Nehru’s phrasing, might act as a modifier on his “idea of India,” but it does not exceed it.

Mapping “Queer India”

The previous section has examined how a secular nationalist pronouncement on Indian diversity guides the post-Independence trajectory of the country. As part of a nationalist “idea of India,” unity-in-diversity influences attitudes in multiple domains. We have seen its effect on history (time) and geography (space). We understand its strong links with a programme of post-colonial economic restructuring, and can follow how these normative pronouncements on difference come to occupy a valorized place within visions of social transformation in a country breaking with colonial legacies of injustice and inequality. Yet, tracing the motive force behind what Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, editors of a path-forming anthology of scholarly essays and life-narratives, *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (2005), have termed the “queer movement” in India, enables also tracing the limits to Nehru’s secular pronouncement: “I like the variety of India.” For, this queer movement in India continues to grapple with the socio-political realities of existing homophobic laws criminalizing “carnal acts against the order of nature” in the Indian Penal Code. Queerness is, as far as the legal structure is concerned, is difference taken too far, a “variety” that exceeds the boundaries of the nation.

The following paragraphs chart a route down the social, cultural, and political environment through which turn-of-millennium queer Indian activism, and, by extension, queer Indian writing travels. Ana Garcia-Arroyo has already made a persuasive case for dating the period from the 1980s onwards as the time of growing queer activism in India, during which period a critical mass forms within Indian social and cultural discourse around queer issues, coinciding with the nation’s liberalization policies.²² A convenient term for what follows is “context”: in scholar Sibaji Bandopadhyay’s understanding, context refers to the activity of

²² See, for example, Garcia-Arroyo 89 about some of the changes in urban queer experiences during the 1980s and 1990s. For a broader overview, see the section 63-98 in her monograph.

“setting a stage,” an “exercise in construing an *ambiance*, a suitable *mis en scene* [*sic*]” for the study of particular issues raised by “text” (in his case, Deepa Mehta’s queer film, *Fire*, of which more later) (18). I have found Bandopadhyay a salutary example of a scholar engaging with the dyad, “text”/“context,” in non-binaristic, non-reifying ways. “Context,” for Bandopadhyay, is not privileged as an overarching social-cultural-political canvas against whose stable (back)ground “text” might be pinned. “Since,” as he observes, “no context is a simple thing-out-there, but a thing that needs fashioning, there is no setting which is complete by itself” (18).

As far as the legal environment in contemporary India is concerned, queers, especially men, are shadowed by the overwhelming admonitory presence of the anti-sodomy law: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, instituted in colonial India in 1860, and transplanted into the law codes of independent India.²³ Section 377 is one instance of the limits to variety and difference in the country. Indians may be of all kinds of backgrounds, but are expressly forbidden to engage in sexual acts, “against the order of nature.” The movement to repeal Section 377, thus decriminalizing homosexuality, is a key focal point for the convergence of a manifold set of public-sphere engagements and activism that have shaped, and continue to shape, the queer movement in India. The call for the change in the Penal Code can be traced back to the late

²³ Arvind Narrain and Alok Gupta provide a helpful summary of the legislative history of the law in their Editors’ Introduction to the critical volume of essays *Law Like Love* (2011). As Narrain and Gupta observe, the anti-sodomy legislation coincides with a slew of discriminatory legal practices in colonial India, “prohibitions, under the broad guise of nuisance, obscenity and public morality, all colonial codifications, which seek to enforce a conservative hetero-normative sexual order” (Narrain and Gupta, “Introduction” xv). Narrain and Gupta remind their readers that one of the most well-known of these other legislative injunctions is the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which was amended in 1897 to include proscriptions on “Eunuchs” (see, for example, Narrain and Gupta, “Introduction” xvi-xvii); while the Criminal Tribes Act has been repealed in post-Independence India, Narrain and Gupta inform readers that the marginalized societal status of eunuchs (often signified under the broad term, *hijra*) has meant the “repeal had no positive impact” (xvii). Narrain and Gupta, among others, read the continuing discrimination against *hijras* to be a reflection of the influence of social mores in the country, where normative (read, “traditional”) codes on sexual behaviour trumps any kind of change in the legal codes of the country (see, for instance, Narrain and Gupta, “Introduction” xviii-xix). The efforts of the queer movement in India to foster social and cultural changes with regard to the viability of queerness in the Indian context can be read within this context of an imbricated socio-legal domain, as well.

1980s. Throughout the *fin-de-millénaire* period in India, the momentum for legal and legislative change gathers momentum, with multiple organizations—those like the Naz Foundation—at the vanguard of this interrogation of the limits on the rights and liberties on certain citizens in a country avowedly committed to a secular constitution. In discursive terms, the queer movement in India has enabled an increased visibility of Indian homosexuals, so that the movement is as much about legibility as it is about legitimacy. In response to the activism of various groups like the Naz Foundation, the Delhi High Court made a landmark decision to decriminalize homosexuality in 2009; however, the Supreme Court of India, in response to appeals against the High Court decision, subsequently overruled that decision in 2013, judging any changes to the Penal Code to be the responsibility of the executive and legislative branches of government, not the judicial branch.

For men, activism against the anti-sodomy law has been geared towards ending regimes of hyper-vigilance and harassment from institutions such as the police, which drive men further into the closet, into a precarious life of inevitable (self-)deception and a lack of psychic and material well-being. As far as men are concerned, therefore, the activism around legal change of status (from criminal to citizen, as it were) has followed the line that existing attitudes to male same-sex desire be re-coded so that such desire is no longer pathologized as “abnormal.” Especially in the legal sphere, it can be said that male homosexuals in India have been made visible by the queer movement as part of an unfairly disciplined, still-criminal group, representing sexual and gendered orientations that do not plot seamlessly along the sex-gender domain of Indian power elites: that is, the domain of reproductive heteronormativity. A writer like R. Raj Rao, who has consciously and reflexively interwoven his creative work in queer politics, has used a number of platforms to represent challenges faced by homosexual men in

contemporary India: in his novels, short stories, poetry; in his work as an editor; and, in his university teaching.²⁴ Mahesh Dattani, on his part, has remained equally committed to queer male literary representations in his dramatic works, like the texts to be studied in Chapter One. While his extensive literary corpus may be found to range over other social and cultural fields in contemporary India—from classical dance and music to female infanticide—issues pertaining to sex and gender dissidence are broadly apparent throughout his work as a playwright, stage director, and film-making.²⁵

At this juncture, it is worthwhile to recall that the premise of this dissertation is that, while the works of Dattani and Rao should be read in the context of a coalescence that is signified as a single entity, *a* or *the* “queer movement,” these works do not reify a single “type” of recuperated “gay” or “queer” Indian. This characteristic, which this project likens to a textual production of difference, corresponds to the way queer movements work, or would like to work: away, that is, from reified entities and identities, and towards an application of anti-essentialist analyses on society and culture. The play of difference/s that the writings of Dattani and Rao enter into disallows any neat conclusions about, for instance, who is a(n ideal) “queer Indian,” or, the characteristics of the identity-category, “queer,” being represented in contemporary Indian society and culture. As the most current iteration of the movement against national heteronormativity, this conceptual signifier, “queer,” pushes the movement for sexual and gender

²⁴ A good place to gain a broad overview of Rao’s views on queerness in art and politics is his Introduction to *Whistling in the Dark*, a collection of queer interviews from different strata in contemporary Indian society, edited by Rao and Dibyajyoti Sarma. In that piece, Rao covers his pedagogical experiences with instituting queer courses in his University (Pune) while also articulating his views on gay or queer writing. He observes: “To be a gay writer, art and activism are (or should be) two sides of the same coin [and] [o]ne cannot write from the point of view of a gay protagonist, and then shy away from, or feel squeamish about, responding to helpline calls from homosexuals in distress” (Rao “Introduction” *Whistling* xviii).

²⁵ Dattani’s early play *Dance Like A Man* uses Classical Indian dance to enact a subversion of gender roles and “national respectability” in post-Independence India. A work like *Tara* speaks of how the female child is always already expendable in its telling of the story of conjoined twins, who are eventually separated, resulting in the death of the girl-child, sacrificed for the continued well-being of the boy.

difference to map heterogeneity outside the limits of easy identity-categories. As discussed in the coming pages, the constellation of scholarly voices like Bhan, Narrain, and Nivedita Menon, inhabit these queer frontiers.

In the social and cultural *mis-en-scène* of turn-of-millennium India, queer women, as much as queer men, have interwoven lines of activism with the movement to decriminalize sodomy in the penal code. Nevertheless, queer women's activism illustrates important sex- and gender-specific contrasts. The move to make visible the Indian lesbian subject, for instance, has to negotiate also the normative obscuring of the very fact of female desire and sexual agency. Where gay men have been over-determined as criminals, lesbian desire is erased altogether. It is a telling irony, as Ashwini Sukthankar reminds us, that the “Indian penal code . . . does not have lesbianism in the purview, since the legal definition of intercourse requires penetration” (“Introduction” xiv). Despite being the silent counterpart of the male homosexual as per Section 377, female subjects are nevertheless disciplined by the code, especially when they need to be hurriedly coerced out of same-sex relationships (see, for example, Sukthankar, “Introduction” xiv) only to be promptly transported into the respectable, obscured realm of the marital-reproductive bedroom.²⁶

Sukthankar's path-breaking lesbian anthology *Facing the Mirror* starts the textual filling-out of hitherto hollowed-out spaces of lesbian and/or queer female subjectivities and

²⁶ There has been a good deal of recent scholarly attention on the specifics of Indian lesbian relationships in the contemporary period. *Facing the Mirror* is by now one of the vanguard collections, including in its scope personal narratives of female same-sex relationships. Maya Sharma's *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Unprivileged India* is an anthology of narratives collected from extensive fieldwork among women from (as the title indicates) less privileged, often non-Anglophone, social spheres in the country. Sharma's Introduction is one good entry-point to the field. While outlining a whole range of issues, Sharma reminds her readers of the challenges of tracing a representative form for relationships which defy the parameters for the signifier, “lesbian,” relationships for which, indeed, there are often no easy signifiers; see, for example, pp. 32-40 from her Introduction in *Loving Women*. For the societal pressures on lesbian/female same-sex relationships in late-twentieth-century India which often result in suicide, see also Ana Garcia-Arroyo 73-76.

identities. The anthology invites readers to consider that Indian heteronormativity enables a discursive domain in which lesbian/queer women are not only clubbed together with gay/queer male criminals, but are absented from any kind of sexual script itself. Women, in this light, are disallowed any kind of sexuality at all, lesbian or heterosexual, criminal or legal. They are, rather, significant/signified as only-ever/always-already reproductive entities. As Maya Sharma observes, “Indian culture and society have generally viewed the female body as a site for all kinds of action and reaction, but not as a legitimate site for sexual autonomy or personal agency [so that] women’s sexual experiences are generally understood solely within the established parameters of reproduction” (Sharma, “Introduction” 1).

Arguably, the most significant cultural event which leads to greater mainstream Indian attention on non-normative sexuality and gendering is the release of Deepa Mehta’s motion picture, *Fire* (1998), which depicts a lesbian relationship developing within the larger framework of a heteronormative Indian family. The responses to the film have generated a plethora of scholarly responses.²⁷ *Fire*—a cultural product produced within that intersectional space formed by nation (the plot concerns an Indian family) and diaspora (the director is Indo-Canadian)—becomes a busy node of accumulating forces. The film becomes a repository for all of the social and cultural practices anathema to a rampant Hindu right-wing. *Fire* was released in India at a time when right-wing Hindu fundamentalist politics was at its post-Independence peak, both in the central government in New Delhi (in Canadian terms, the federal government) and in important states like Maharashtra (the Canadian provincial equivalent would be Ontario; Maharashtra’s capital Mumbai is as much a financial powerhouse in India as Toronto is in Canada). In Mumbai, the dominant right-wing political party, Shiv Sena, orchestrated a series of

²⁷ See, for instance, Sibaji Bandopadhyay’s article just cited; Gayatri Gopinath’s chapter, “Local Sites/Global Contexts” from her monograph, *Impossible Desires* (131-160); Geeta Patel’s “On Fire.”

violent protests against the screening of the film, arguing that the motion picture ran counter to traditional Indian values. Such views were paralleled by key cabinet ministers in the central government of India. L. K. Advani, then Home Minister in the Central Government, commented: Why are such films made here? They can be made in the US or other Western countries. A theme like lesbianism does not fit in the Indian atmosphere (qtd. in Sharma, “Introduction” 11). Advani’s cabinet counterpart, Sushma Swaraj, then Minister for Information and Broadcasting, confidently asserted that “there can be no argument that lesbianism is unnatural and is regarded as such the world over” (qtd. in Sharma, “Introduction” 11). If Advani aims his wounding thrust against Indian same-sex desire (lesbianism belongs outside India), Swaraj proffers her *coup de grace* (lesbianism is actually unnatural not only in India but “the world over”). Official rhetoric was invested—Advani and Swaraj’s pincer movement are but two instances of this homophobic rhetoric—in silencing queerness.

Yet, the controversy around the reception of *Fire* produced the contrary effect of a galvanized counter-movement from the queer movement. The response from activists is best encapsulated in the slogan, “Indian and Lesbian,” which self-consciously inscribed same-sex desire within the cultural vocabulary, and which the Hindu Right was seeking to co-opt. The slogan also serves as an admonishment to the blindspots of the secular middle-ground of Indian politics which had so dominated the political sphere of mid- and late-twentieth century India. While the homophobia of the Hindu right-wing is rightly exposed in these turn-of-millennium debates around Indian sexuality, it is worth recalling that the Nehruvian status quo also played and plays its role in national heteronormativity and respectability, not least by deferring the decriminalization of same-sex behaviour in its developmentalist narrative.

Sukthankar, Sharma, and Garcia-Arroyo all write extensively of the protests against the

right-wing reception (or lack thereof) of *Fire*, as well as of the concrete shape of the activism that forms. The activist group Caleri (Campaign for Lesbian Rights)—Sharma defines it as “a Delhi-based, non-funded autonomous group of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and heterosexuals” (“Introduction” 10)—made important contributions to the shape of post-*Fire* activism. The group formed as a result of the response to the film, producing an important report in 1999, and articulated a broad objective of making “lesbian issues visible in the public domain of human rights in India and consciously strategize towards this goal, within the larger framework of the women’s movement” (Sharma, “Introduction,” 14). Caleri is but one of many groups that formed in the 1980s and 1990s on, a genealogy traced well by Garcia-Arroyo. If *Fire* can be sited as one gathering point for queer activism, the AIDS crisis is another such site. Organizations like ABVA (AIDS *Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan*) engage with AIDS activism in India, but also in the calls for changes to the socio-legal climate: the intersections between public health and sexual behaviour is tied up with the impact of legal structures on (sexual) behaviour.

The queer movement in India has formed and consolidated discursive as well as material sites of contestation in relation to the development of heteronormative subjectivities and collective identities. These sites interrogate the extent to which non-normative sexual and gendered modes of being and identification can be settled with a national mode, of being (the self), and being grouped as (the collective) “Indian.” The queer movement in India has described and analyzed the entrenched homophobia in echelons of India’s executive, legislative, and judicial branches of power, as well as in other institutions (“disciplines”) such as the medical profession. Insights closely related to Michel Foucault’s theory about the efflorescence of discourses about the specificity of “the homosexual” by the late nineteenth century in Europe (Foucault *History* 43), the queer movement in India speaks of how the medical profession in

India, through the last century, has also been invested in producing, and then consolidating, a discourse on “perverse” Indian homosexuals, the “causes” of such perversions, and the “treatment” necessary (for a detailed discussion on this as-yet under-explored field of medical discourse on queerness and “perversion,” see Arvind Narrain and Vinay Chandran’s chapter in *Because I Have a Voice*).

The *oeuvre* of Dattani and Rao show that the contemporary queer movement in India is involved in the cultural domain as well. Numerous print-sources document queer cultural practices and their social ramifications in the country. Magazines like *Bombay Dost*; anthologies including *A Lotus of Another Colour*, edited by Rakesh Ratti (1993); *Sakhiyani*, edited by Giti Thadani (1996), *Facing the Mirror* edited by Sukhthankar (1999), *Yaraana* edited by Merchant (1999), and *Same-Sex Love in India* edited by Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (2000); single- and multiple-author collections of critical work (among them, *Queering India*, edited by Ruth Vanita [2002]; *Because I Have a Voice*, edited by Narrain and Bhan; *The Phobic and the Erotic*, edited by Brinda Bose and Subhabrata Bhattacharya [2007]; *Sexualities*, edited by Nivedita Menon [2007]; and, *Forbidden Sex, Forbidden Texts: New India's Gay Poets*, by Hoshang Merchant [2009]); non-fiction/life-narrative collections like *Whistling in the Dark*, edited by R. Raj Rao and Dibyajyoti Sarma (2009), and *Loving Women*, edited by Maya Sharma (2006); anthropological work such as Suparna Bhaskaran’s *Made in India* (2004)—all these texts contribute to the growing corpus of queer writing from the period. The expanding local influence of the movement can be demonstrated in the place of publication. Ratti’s anthology—the very first to document South Asian queerness—was published in the US. From the late nineties onwards, and especially in the new millennium, queer collections have largely been published in India itself.

The cumulative effect of all this social action and cultural activity relating to the state of (same-)sexuality in contemporary India is the emergence of a growing consensus. Scholars and activists have shed light on the fact that heteronormative discourse others queerness in India, and chooses to deploy history (queerness is not consistent with either ancient Indian history and traditions or the direction to be taken by the modern, developed nation) and/or geo-politics (queerness has been introduced by so-called foreigners, from outside India) to craft an Indian national subjectivity that is avowedly heterosexual and respectable (see Bhaskaran 71-109; Garcia-Arroyo; Vanita and Kidwai xxiii-xxiv) In response, as previous sections show, the queer movement in India has found itself in a frank engagement with the vocabulary of Nehruvian secular inclusivity, and its ellipses. The movement does so to effect political-legal change in the criminal status of queer Indians, and to engage with socio-cultural critique of mainstream heteronormativity in the country.²⁸ Secularism, tolerance, and freedoms guaranteed to citizens by the Constitution of India (drafted in the Nehruvian era) are key reference-points in the arguments made to decriminalize homosexuality in the Penal Code. And yet, the queer movement in India, especially in its latest phase, also points the way beyond even the discourse of the inclusive nation. In doing so, the movement demands deeper engagements with the ways (sex and gender) difference and diversity unsettle structures of self- and community-formation, straight or queer.

In the cultural sphere of *fin de millénaire* India, a Nehruvian imagining of Indian difference has been used to account for non-heteronormative Indians, harking back to notions of palimpsestic plenitude as a cherished Indian characteristic. For instance, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, editors of *Same-Sex Love in India*, a first-of-its-kind anthology of homoerotic writings across historical epochs in the subcontinent (from BCE to CE), observe:

²⁸ For a discussion of the interrelationship between legal and social spheres in the queer Indian context, see Narrain and Gupta, "Introduction" xviii-xix.

We hope this book will help homoerotically inclined Indians that large numbers of their ancestors throughout history and in all parts of the country shared their inclinations and were honored and successful members of society who contributed in major ways to thought, literature, and the general good.... We hope that people who are not homoerotically inclined will also profit from this book, by learning to acknowledge that some of their members were so inclined, that their writings and writings about them constitute an important part of our common Indian heritage as well as world heritage, and that such acknowledgment is crucial to building a more tolerant, better-informed, less conflict-ridden society that is accepting of all its members and encourages all to explore their full potential for life, love, and creativity (xxiv).

The idealism in these lines responds to those collectivities left outside the Nehruvian “all.” Vanita and Kidwai attempt to negotiate a path between sexual diversity and a secular vision for a “common Indian heritage.” While examining the genealogy of homophobia in the contemporary Indian nation (an inheritance of the anti-sodomy legislation and worldview of British colonialism, they argue), Vanita and Kidwai contend that national unity remains a crucial factor for continuing project of improvement, or modernity: the “building of a more tolerant, better-informed, less conflict-ridden society.”

The secular vision of a more “tolerant” India, less divided and more diverse, is salutary, even strategic, but pitfalls remain. The call for accommodating sexual and gender diversity in the name of an “Indian” tradition flies close to the Indian nationalist narrative of accruing difference. In doing so, such an approach to sex and gender differences is always already circumscribed by the ideological and discursive boundaries of the “idea of India.” The “idea of India,” as has been

pointed out, domesticates difference as part of a colligating sequence oriented to the *telos* of the nation. The nationalist teleology, however, implies that there is such a thing as too much difference, that which threatens national property and propriety. The focus of such a totalized vision of an Indian national “palimpsest” (using Nehru’s signifier) is only sharpened by a particular hierarchization of difference. If national unity is necessary for Indian diversity, then unified togetherness is valorized as a touchstone for positive change and development:

Chakravarty, Chatterjee, Menon, and Zachariah all observe this in their individual works.

Menon, in particular, connects this nationalist vision with a “hierarchy of oppressions.” This structure, as shown, engenders the belief that that some articulations of difference are less worthy than others. Of course, this has ramifications also on how difference is read: if socio-political movements and analytical practices are different to the point of undermining the status quo, then a whole discursive machinery of devaluation and elision comes into operation. Menon’s reminder of the derogation of “identity politics” by Indian power elites is a case in point.

In this context, sexual and gender difference inserted into the secular narrative of a diverse Indian nation is a vexed project because of the elision of irreducible difference in that narrative as it looks back (the nation’s “massive remembrance project,” recalling Spivak’s phrasing) and as it looks ahead (Nehruvian developmentalism, and, more recently, the unifying cultural politics of Indian neo-liberalism). The secularized union—bringing different Indians together—prioritized by Vanita and Kidwai inflect their analysis of Indian sexualities and gender-practices so that difference is nurtured but is ultimately enfolded within larger cohesive structures. Their work is, on one level, an extensive survey of textual material over an impressive span of successive historical epochs. The material comprises of those works which represent a “history of ideas in Indian written traditions about love between women and love between men

who are not biologically related” (Vanita and Kidwai xiii). Yet, the delineation of these “ideas” in the anthology produces some conundrums. For instance, the issue of difference—sexual, gendered, erotic—is here qualified by a focus on positive affect: at the start of the volume, the editors write, “[w]e are not concerned in this book with sexual behaviors that are devoid of emotional or erotic content” (xiv). This is why, as they point out, “behaviors [which] may develop in the context of loveless or exploitative social arrangements or of violence” (xiv) are not represented in the collection. Amongst such behaviour, they specify sexual encounters which are violent and non-consensual, and suggest that these are more appropriate for a study tracing rape than love. The argument is plausible, but, having drawn the anthology parameters in this way, the editors can only provide a limited analysis of those “exploitative social arrangements” prominent in the Indian contemporary: for instance, those in which sex and gender relations are conditioned by the unevenness within class, caste, and communal structures.

Arguing, for instance, that the Hindu treatment of death and rebirth signifies a critique of “socially constructed categories such as caste, class and gender,” Vanita and Kidwai observe that relationships across caste divides and gender divides are often sanctioned in early or ancient Indian texts with the justification that the persons were actually of the same caste and/or different sex in a previous birth: “[a]n attachment that appears inexplicable for its intensity, its suddenness or its unconventional object can be understood both by the participants and by those around them if placed in the frame of former births” (Vanita and Kidwai 29). It is arguable, however, that Hindu thought here does not so much deconstruct “socially constructed categories” by processes of anti-essentialist deferral but merely refers “sudden” or “unconventional” attachments back to an existing order which harmonizes those differences. In other words, the play of differences and the fluidity of categories are nevertheless subsumed under a transcendental, coherent system or

structure within which the editors' "India" is imagined. A cohering, accruing pluralism in India is privileged throughout. Even in the case of the 1920s Hindi short story, "Chocolate," the creation, publication, and reception of which, as the editorial note describes the literary event, clearly throws into relief Hindu anxieties about homoerotic Muslim cultural influences in India (a particular object of phobic attention was the Urdu form of love-poetry [*ghazal*], in which the object of the male poet's love has traditionally been male), the editors carefully reiterate that, "the hybridity of Indian culture made it difficult for Hindus to simply identify the *ghazal* with Muslims, and then denounce it" (250). Again, the editorial tone strikes a positive, inclusive note.

The focus of the anthology, on strong currents of same-sex love in a pluralistic India conceived nevertheless as a "unit" (Vanita and Kidwai xv) leads the editors to an organizing impulse in which the issue of difference is enveloped within the idea of a transcendental order. "Love" as a positive enabling affect is seeded with a thesis of an accruing, continuing Indian tradition. In tracking the issue of difference this way, however, the editors are never quite able to dislodge the primacy of reproductive heteronormativity in the Indian "unit." The effect of such readings is a linear, flattened-out narrative of difference as the binding agent in the anthology, notwithstanding the editors' focus on sexual and gender diversity and their inclusion of an extensive corpus of writing. The linearity speaks to Vanita and Kidwai's mode of analysis, which corresponds to their editorial aim of gathering together a corpus of texts embodying tolerant sex and gender tradition/s in India, pointing the way for the nation and its subjects to a better way for the future. The emphasis in this anthology—especially when it comes to those relationships across caste and communal lines—is the idea of a greater cohesiveness between diverse parts, whether across different regions, or different historical periods.

This form of a "tracing" (xiii), or genealogy, of textual material from Indian antiquity to

the present in which same-sex love is represented in affirming ways might well be a case of “strategic essentialism.” And, if it is indeed strategic, it is all the more incumbent to read such essentialisms as such: necessary totalizations, arguably, but totalizations nevertheless. Certainly, other interrogative work by queer Indian scholars exceeds the categories and modes of analysis of “same-sex love” employed by Vanita and Kidwai. It is telling that, in *Same Sex Love in India*, Vanita and Kidwai are reticent to using the term, “queer.” While they defend their avoidance of the term, “queer,” as part of an editorial policy, their decision reflects some of the ontological and epistemological challenges thrown down by the word. For the term, “queer,” with its nomenclatural history tied up with the most nakedly injurious epistemic and “real” violence against homosexuality or sodomitical acts, involves an ongoing critical reflexivity—about supposedly fixed origins; stable categories of being; and symmetries of identitarian relations—in the very process through which it is recuperated as a signifier of radically altered modes of praxis in social and cultural analyses.

Having undone links with fixed binaries of (sexual and gendered) morality and health, “queer” thought and practice seeks to move beyond some of the discursive-structural fixities of homosexual/gay movements in the 20th century. It can be argued that “queer” carries the trace of an unpleasant other (a virulent homophobic structure) in more visible ways as a salutary reminder of the need for continued anti-essentialist thinking and practices. The discomfort with the term that this researcher detects in the work of Vanita and Kidwai can be understood as the general potential in the term, “queer,” to unsettle. Outlining their editorial policy with regard to the term, “queer,” they observe:

We have chosen not to use the term “queer,” favored by many scholars today because it is deemed wide enough to encompass any unconventional or strange

sexual behaviors and self-constructions. For one thing, many of the behaviors and people in the texts we are dealing with are not only not represented as strange or deviant but are upheld by the texts as admirable. Second, the term “queer” is almost too wide for our purposes as it could include all sorts of behaviors, from fetishism to exhibitionism, which are outside the scope of our inquiry (Vanita, “Preface” xxi)²⁹

The epistemic tension queerness foregrounds—on the one side, “wide enough” for some; on the counter-side, “almost too wide” for others—is explained away (“outside the scope of our inquiry”) rather than encountered. Instead, an ideal subject is “upheld” as a transcendental entity (“not strange or deviant”) with the function of enabling an edifying affect for readers (who are meant to read about “behaviors” and people who are “admirable”). This kind of reading buttresses a discourse of totalizing universals, only altering some of the codes: it is important to ask, how easily does this kind of reading enable a too-hasty attitude, that the queer Indian “fetishist” or “exhibitionist” is *and always will be* “beyond the scope of our inquiry”? Furthermore, it implicitly forms a hierarchy in which entities (the “admirable” as opposed to “all sorts” of others, for instance) are separated out in hermetic strata. As previously discussed, queer scholars like Menon are deeply sceptical about the efficacy of “hierarchy of oppressions” as an analytical basis for sex and gender studies.

The uncertainty about how to situate queerness in the larger field of sexuality and gender-studies, leave alone that of the nation, mirrors the kind of productive crisis about stable structures of meaning and subject-formation to which post-structuralist and deconstructive thought refers. Queer theories have deep links with the critique of essentialist categories developed by earlier

²⁹ In a 2014 interview, Vanita again repeated the decision made by Kidwai and herself not to use the word, “queer” in *Same Sex Love in India*, and offers no change of mind with regard to that decision. See Vanita, “On Literature”

iterations of gay and lesbian theories, but extend the ramifications of such anti-heteronormative thought by deconstructing the very notion of the “category” (or, the “identity,” or the “self/subject”). One key impulse in this deconstructive move lies in by-now commonplace queer dissatisfaction with politics of “toleration,” and the easy settling of gay/lesbian identities within a broader (always-already heteronormative) matrix. “Toleration” calls for the accommodation of a homosexual minority community within a heterosexual majority, an aim which queerness subverts. Michael Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet* is a key early text in this newer domain, as is Judith Butler’s chapter, “Critically Queer,” in *Bodies That Matter*. In the Editors’ Introduction to *Because I Have a Voice*, one of the first collections of queer thought applied to the Indian context, Narrain and Bhan observe:

To name, visibilise and counter the violence faced by queer people on a daily basis remains a critical part of the movement, but our understandings, both of the nature of violence itself ... and its institutional roots ... have changed [The queer movement,] rather than simply speaking for the right to make different choices ... argues that while hierarchies of desire are certainly not acceptable, neither are “us-and-them” or “separate/different-but-equal” assertions valid. *The point is to object to all hierarchies and power structures, not just the ones we happen to be on the wrong end of.* (“Introduction” 6, emphasis added)

For the reader looking trace a more contoured relation between scholars of sexuality like Vanita and Kidwai on the one hand, and Narrain and Bhan, on the other: the point the latter make about a scepticism of all hierarchies and not simply some of the more convenient, or readily apparent, ones captures a significant distinction between the two groups.

Narrain and Bhan go on to say: “Queer Resistance is, therefore, about questioning the fundamental assumptions of our society” (“Introduction” 4). They see “queer” as a movement towards a radical critique of “compulsory heterosexuality,” or what they also refer to as “the embedded nature of heterosexism” (“Introduction” 5). Rather than “remain a ‘minority’ within a larger heterosexual ‘majority’, the queer movement tries to challenge the idea of a ‘normal’ and ‘different’ sexuality in itself” (Narrain and Bhan “Introduction” 6). In reconsidering the term “queer” so that it might speak to Indian contexts, Narrain and Bhan build on the concept as it is understood in the West. They argue: “It captures and validates the identities and desires of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, *but also* represents, for many, an understanding of sexuality that goes beyond the categories of ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’” (“Introduction” 4, emphasis added). The use of those centrifugal qualifying words, “but also,” show again how Narrain and Bhan seek to avoid the identitarian enclosures that Kidwai and Vanita’s formulations do not quite avoid when they exclude, or explain away, that difficult term, “queer.” Narrain and Bhan argue:

In India, the word ‘queer’ is not as yet commonly used. *However*, the realities of ... non-normative experiences ... which contest the embedded nature of heterosexism in our society have traditionally existed and continue to exist in the contemporary context. (“Introduction” 5, emphasis added)

In their Editors’ Introduction to *The Phobic And The Erotic*, Bose and Bhattacharya outline some of the theoretical, critical and contextual paradigms that inform their understanding of “the politics of sexualities in contemporary India.” Like Narrain and Bhan, Bose and Bhattacharya “challenge any belief” that heteronormativity “is supreme, either in numbers or in perception” (Bose and Bhattacharya, “Introduction” xiii). They consciously “sideline” what they

describe as the “‘traditional’ heteronorm—the older, bread-winning protector husband, the younger, pliant, dependent wife, the missionary position and the two (male, if the gods are smiling, at least one if not both) children quickly conceived out of it, the proud compliance with conjugal-heterosexual morals that sees sex as sticky, icky bedroom business ratified by and in heterosexual marriage alone”—as a *constructed* universal, demonstrated, they argue, by a “sweeping glance at the steaming sexualities in/visible across contemporary Indian lives” (Bose and Bhattacharya, “Introduction” xiii-xiv). Queer writing plays a significant role, then, in this task of making non-heteronormativity visible:

It is almost a commonplace that a politics—an idea, an ideology, a belief, an understanding and an empathy—is often born out of a sense of wrong, of a consciousness of deprivation and a consequent necessity to assert “rights”. There should be no surprise, then, that contemporary sexual politics ... in India has in some senses built itself out of, and around, the counter-heteronormative. (Bose and Bhattacharya, “Introduction” xviii)

Queer theories interrogate the ways in which the idea of a so-called heterosexual majority comes to be constructed. Sexuality, as Nivedita Menon observes in her contribution to *Because I Have a Voice*, is a human construct and not something that happens “naturally.” She moves to undo the coupling of the hegemonic category of the “normal” (man-made) with the transcendental-universal, self-evident category of the “natural,” pointing out that if this were the case, then, surely heteronormativity would not “require such a vast network of controls to keep it in place” (“How Natural” 37). “Apparently,” she pointedly observes, “you need a law to ensure that people have sex the ‘natural’ way” (“How Natural” 37):

In other words, Section 377 does not refer to some queer people out there, whose unnatural sexual practices normal people can gaze upon like anthropologists at a bizarre tribe. *Section 377 is, on the contrary, about the painful creation of Mr. and Mrs. Normal – it is one of the nails holding in place the elaborate fiction that ‘normality’ springs from nature.*” (Menon, “How Natural” 38, emphasis added)

By attending to the construction of norms, these scholarly voices in the India of the first decade of the new century rethink the discourse of diversity in the country. Articulating a politics of “non-normative” practices, experiences and identities which include *and* also *exceed* the more usual categories of homosexual behaviour (“lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual”) is the route back to re-theorizing the relationship between general patterns of heterogeneity in the national communities and specific question of sexual and gender difference. In other words, what are the mixed, often messy, configurations between and across sexuality, gender, class, caste, ethnicity that are thrown into relief when wide-ranging explorations of Indian power hierarchies necessitate moving beyond politics of toleration and accommodation. For Narrain and Bhan, “queer” might be given a plausible shape in the form of “an open-ended register” (“Introduction” 5). This works well as a basis for the kind of broad diversity envisaged by queer Indian voice: not limited merely to the urban Anglophone spheres inhabited by the “gay” or “lesbian” from Mumbai or any of the larger metropolitan cities.

In this loosely formed list, Narrain and Bhan refer to the various intersectional subjectivities and collectivities of people who embody the “diverse practices that come under the political project of ‘queer’” (“Introduction” 5). Appendix A reproduces the “register” in full, to allow the general reader to note some of the country’s different manifestations of dissident sexualities and gender-practices in India, not all of which dovetail neatly. *Because I Have a*

Voice demonstrates that these queer practices in India are often contingent on regional, linguistic, class, and economic particularities or disparities that do not resolve into a coherent script. The qualifier, “open-ended,” enables a distinction between managed strata of diversity in a secular-pluralist nation-state, and more complex analyses of difference in which the unresolved and the irreducible qualities of difference foreground the challenges of domesticating difference. As a list, Narrain and Bhan’s “register” embraces a counter-intuitive sense of incompleteness. It references uncertainties about capturing all of India’s sexual diversity. The “register” thus articulated becomes a site of conceptual and analytical practices which necessarily subvert the totalizations of knowledge-production and subject-formation favoured by national imaginaries.

Having listed groupings of people in their “register,” Narrain and Bhan observe:

Beyond the framework of such communities are stories of people and spaces where same-sex desires exist in permutations and expressions that *we as yet do not have the language to describe or fully understand....* As the story of the queer movement itself unfolds, it is *necessary to remember* that our understanding of sexuality in itself is *ever changing* and that the realm of same-sex desire and love in our country extends far beyond those that embrace a certain identity.

(“Introduction” 6-7, emphases added)

The teleological meaning implied in “as yet” is deferred—or placed “under erasure” in a deconstructive mode—by the “ever changing” nature of the subject, forever eluding the very ideal, let alone the practicalities, of an attainable end. The dynamic of queer thinking here relies on something like a perpetual deferral of full meaning, which makes evident the porosity and/or mutability of the field itself. The ellipses that characterize the discourse of what “queer” is and/or who “queers” are can be traced back to Butler’s point in her chapter, “Critically Queer,”

from *Bodies That Matter*. There, Butler argues that the move away from stable entities, identities, and categories implied by the intellectual and historical context of queer thinking has further ramifications:

[I]f identity is a necessary error, then the assertion of “queer” will be necessary as a term of affiliation, *but it will not full describe those it purports to represent*. As a result, it will be necessary to *affirm the contingency of the term*: to let it be vanquished by those who are excluded by the term but who justifiably expect representation by it, to let it take on meanings that *cannot now* be anticipated by a younger generation whose political vocabulary may well carry a different set of investments. (Butler, *Bodies* 230)

The present- (“cannot now”) and future-time (“will not ... describe”) oriented “contingency” that Butler speaks of in one of the earliest instances of queer theory’s discursive emergence dovetails with how Narrain and Bhan encounter the movement in the Indian context. As Sedgwick notes in *Touching Feeling*, Butler’s (and Jacques Derrida’s) theories are often organized around particular approaches to temporality. Even as Sedgwick on her part adds a spatial dimension to the work of the other two—indeed, various applications of spatialized thought forms the analytical arc of *Touching Feeling*—it is clear that Narrain and Bhan’s observations have a spatial dimension that adds to an analysis of the queer Indian intervention in our understandings of diversity.

The (Queer) Subject of Space

When Narrain and Bhan speak of their “open-ended register,” as a signifier of a queer (and/or queered) heterogeneity in India, it is useful to consider that that key qualifier, “open-

ended,” invites also a particular spatial visibilisation of how different entities—individuals; communities; society—might be placed in relation to one another. Utilizing spatial theories of connection and relative contours is another entry-point to making visible the different kinds and levels of power hierarchies within an entire structure of privileges, sexual and otherwise, spoken of by these two queer Indian scholars and theorists. A spatialized dynamic of networks is as important as any kind of enumerative logic: the “register” is not merely a list, like a census, but comes to represent patterns of relationships which are not necessarily smooth nor easily decoded according to a universal set of values, but, nevertheless are present and visible. In the quotation used above, Narrain and Bhan refer to this “register” as a “framework.” This framework can also be likened to a field, or a gathering of plots on a larger domain. This domain, being “open-ended” amplifies the potential of porosity, the mobility that inheres to any notion of relations, relations that are, after all, the general characteristic of all kinds of setting-together of peoples and communities, let alone the daily practices—“permutations and expressions,” as it were—of their various libidinal existences.

Gordon Brett Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, in their Editors’ Introduction to *Queers in Space*, demonstrate the connection between spaces, habitation, community- and subject-formation in the contemporary period. Like Garcia-Arroyo, Ingram et al. pay attention to the particularities of queer lives in what the latter group term the period of the “*Fin-de-Millénaire*.” How queerness might be imagined in this present period of millennial turning points is linked with the experience of inequity engendered by contemporary globalization on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the unsettling destabilization of totalities in the broad intellectual movement of postmodernism/poststructuralism in which queer theories are located.

In this time of increasing displacement stemming from the globalization of capital and destruction of the biosphere, “queer space,” used for refuge, habitation and play, has expanded and *diversified*.... Queer space enables people with marginalized (homo)sexualities and identities to survive and to gradually expand their influence and opportunities to live fully. In the fragments of queer-friendly public spaces today, a basis for survival, contact, communality, and even community has begun. But the term *community* is problematic in the light of the “politics of difference.” To talk of the gay or lesbian “community” in 1997 is to beg the question “Which one?” Only analytical frameworks that can take in account the full range of spaces and marginalities across cities and landscapes can provide tools for encountering homophobia and chronic inequities in access to housing, security, and comfort, resources whose availability is still closely tied to gender, race, ethnicity, language, age and narrow notions of physical ability.

(Ingram et al, “Introduction” 3, first emphasis added, second emphasis in original)

Space and time are juxtaposed here. Globalization indicates both. As *Queer in Space* has it, globalization happens and is happening “in this time.” It has also particular spatial ramifications. Globalization is complicit in widespread “displacement,” even while “the rapid globalization of real estate markets [has] transformed queer space, pushing it beyond the bounds of the ghetto” (Ingram et al. “Introduction” 3). The “new” wealth and unbounded promise of globalization is simultaneously displaced by the “destruction” and segregated precarity it causes and enables. In this compromised-contradictory moment of globalization, an identity based on a common experience (“contact”) of sex/gender difference has to face the reality that the free movement of

capital will not make all queers alike, even when they are in “contact,” if only because “access” to supposedly common “resources” has remained as contested, if not more, than before.

The way in which globalization reanimates debates on difference coincides historically with greater moves to deepen analyses of difference in the particular domain of queer theory. In fact, the spatial theories foregrounded in *Queers in Space* build on the understanding that “gender, race, ethnicity, language, age and narrow notions of physical ability” function to complicate and contour received notions about what it means to have, or inhabit, a “queer” sexuality. Queer thought has to deal with the irreducibility of different differences. The question of how to theorize the relationship/s between different queers juxtaposed within or across other contexts (“gender, race, ethnicity...”) has to be reckoned with. Narrain and Bhan’s porous “register” is one such attempt. It maps out relations between different kinds of queer Indians while keeping discontinuities in the light. Just as Narrain and Bhan’s “register” tracks the uneven experiences of queer Indians depending on other variables, so *Queers in Space* reminds us the challenge of queer theory is to track some of its own, often-unacknowledged privileges. Writing in 1997, Ingram et al outline the need for rearticulated theorizations of otherness-in-queerness:

Much queer theory continues to be, at best, “thin” on gender and race. In recent years, some chronicles of gay and lesbian communities have appeared deceptively inclusive of people of colour; but the richness and the contradictions that characterize these communities have often been stifled through the overuse of generalizations in describing and interpreting them. *Queers in Space* revisits “difference” ... allowing paradoxes and unresolved differences to surface — instead of presenting a false front of unity when diversity is the dominant flavour (7).

The lessons in self-reflexivity produced internally by queer theory can be extended to other arenas, and this project itself seeks to do so in the particular context of queer encounters in the Indian nation. Indeed, the reference above to “unity” and “diversity” neatly parallels some of the issues around paradox and irresolution that emerge in the Indian national context, calling for analysis. As *Queers in Space* works with the experience of and access to spaces—however these might be imagined within larger social, cultural and political environments—it develops these insights on domains on the basis of specifically spatialized thinking. One of the most useful theoretical articulations of the wide-ranging applicability of spatial thinking is to be found in Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling*.

Sedgwick points the way to understanding the wide-ranging conceptual value of thinking about spatiality especially when dealing with the ways in which peoples and communities, from different “places” (literally and metaphorically), might relate (or not, given that antagonists or enemies are related or connected, as contrasting entities, as in a self/other dyad for example) to one another. The aim for Sedgwick is to develop tools furthering anti-essentialist intellectual projects, or, as she puts it right at the opening of her monograph, “to explore promising tools and techniques for nondualistic thought and pedagogy (Sedgwick 1). It can be said that “nondualism,” in this approach, does not erase diversity to present “false fronts of unity.” Rather, it explores other ways into reading multiplicities, without resorting to totalized dualities in which the “one” (however it is figured) is expressed always at the expense of the “other,” or “others.”

Thinking spatially involves thinking also about the possibilities in lateral, planar relationships. This is because spatiality is about considering the points and sometimes-contiguous, sometimes-crossed, sometimes-broken lines of relations between those large-scale social arenas which people must negotiate as part of everyday existence. Ingram et al. show us

how these relations work out for queer peoples. With regard to issues of difference—sexual, subjectival, spatial—Sedgwick’s work in *Touching Feeling* explores various iterations of “a maplike set of relations” (Sedgwick 5) plotting points of convergence and divergence, similitude and difference. This spreading (we are reminded again of the spatial impulse of laterality) between planes, places and people is Sedgwick’s theorization of heterogeneity. Rather than follow the strictly temporal logic of teleological thinking, her analysis focuses on the benefits of a sideways move. Stepping to the side of critical-analytical strategies that either seek to look “beneath” the status quo, or “beyond,” progressively that is, to an idealized future, Sedgwick prefers the “spatial agnosticism” of the “beside” (see Sedgwick 8-9):

[A]s its title suggests, the salient preposition of *Touching Feeling* is probably *beside*.... [T]he **irreducibly spatial positionality** of *beside* also seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos.

Beside is an interesting preposition also because there’s nothing very dualistic about it: a number of elements may lie alongside one another, though not an infinity of them.... It’s interest does not ... depend on a **fantasy of metonymically egalitarian or even pacific relations**, as any child knows who’s shared a bed with siblings. *Beside* comprises a **wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing, attracting, aggressing, warping, and other relations**. (Sedgwick 8, emphases in bold added; author’s original emphases in italics)

In this key conceptual delineation of a “positionality,” Sedgwick points the ways to rethinking difference without falling into the essentialist traps of original past (the “fantasy” of a deeper, truer meaning, beneath, and before, the surfaces of the present/status quo) or ideal future (better, more “egalitarian” and/or “pacific relations”). Sedgwick’s “beside” is a welcome subversion of the colligating narrative arc of a controlled trajectory of difference, accruing over time but always shaped into the confines of that arc leading from “narratives” of “origin” into the “telos.” This project juxtaposes Sedgwick’s “irreducible” and “wide-ranging” relationship of the “beside” with Nehruvian-nationalist narratives of difference made reducible to the national ideal.³⁰

The Space of the (Queer/Indian) Subject: The Place of Difference and Deferral

Judith Butler’s path-forming delineation of what gendering entails (those “differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being,” as she phrases it in her *Bodies That Matter* [7]) dialogues well with Sedgwick’s spatialized envisioning of a “maplike set of relations” between peoples in a heterogeneous context. The radical implications of Butler’s conceptual insights into the relative processes by which human subjects are embodied and engendered spread into this project’s interest in relations or networks of irreducible difference represented in queer Indian literature such as the works of Dattani and Rao. Gendering, in Butler’s point of view, is a process of becoming tied up with “speaking subjects” who are related

³⁰ Different, but not wholly unrelated, conceptions of proximity have had a place in the works of scholars of homosexuality and queerness like Jonathan Dollimore’s *Sexual Dissidence*. Dollimore speaks of how homosexuality invokes a deconstructive paradox whereby that which is supposed to be absolutely “alien” is actually much closer to home. This is because the etymology of “perversion” is actually rooted in exactly that which is supposedly being perverted. As he says, “the shattering effect of perversion is somehow related to the fact that its ‘error’ originates internally to just those things it threatens” (Dollimore 121; see also 120-121 ff.). The proximity of the pure and perverse renders any essentialized division, hierarchy, or category much less cohesive and definitive.

but also differentiated from other subjects. Certainly, this process which involves “speaking subjects” forming themselves, and, also forming themselves into a related group or identity, rings true to the kind of process by which national subjects, say, might also “come into being.” The importance, in Butler’s work for instance, of the qualifying attribute of subject-formation being tied up with “speaking” carries us into the conceptual field of performativity, much explored by gender-theorists like Butler and Sedgwick.

The concept of performativity—outlined by J. L. Austin—offers an insight into how the activity of doing impinges on the state of being. As Sedgwick observes, Austin defines performativity as an utterance in which, ““it seems clear that to utter the sentence ... is not to *describe* my doing [a thing] ... or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it”” (Austin qtd. in Sedgwick 4; see also Austin 3). Performativity furthermore enables an examination of the relation between similitude (subjectivity and identity: what one is as a subject and/or the issue of what one is being involved with the fact of being identical to/the same as someone or a group/“community”) and difference (being *because* I/we are different from someone) in terms of the relationship between a concept of *being* (I am thus and thus) and of *doing* (I act in a particular manner, and/or to a particular end).

In the field of linguistics, a performative utterance is contrasted with a constative utterance, which describes rather than enacts. As Sedgwick notes, Austin himself did not adhere to this distinction in clear-cut ways. This indeterminacy has allowed, she argues, deconstruction to take up the performative as “a property or aspect common to all utterances” (4). It is plausible to think of a performative base on which subject-formation rests, especially in the context of a national identity but also in the related context of sex and gender identities. According to Sedgwick, examples of performatives include “ ‘I promise,’ ‘I bequeath...,’ ‘I christen...,’ ‘I

apologize....,' 'I dare you,' 'I sentence you...'" (4). Both national and sexual identities would involve a performative utterance along the lines of: "I promise," or, "I swear" (promise or swear, that is, to be an Indian, or, to be a proper man, or woman). Yet, the apparently settled nature of the performative act within which subject- and identity-formations occur is riven with a paradox. For, confirming an allegiance to a nation-state and national ideology, or to a sexuality, and/or gender-role, must be actively done *and redone*, as per the dictates of the performative. The promissory act which establishes who a person is cannot be stated merely once and thus settled, because the act of "doing" to which performativity refers implies a continuous activity.³¹ And, this continual process of having to reiterate that which one has already reiterated is also the site or space of a post-structuralist undoing of stable meaning—indeed, stable being—integral to the anti-essentialist direction of queer thoughts (whether the queer critique rests specifically on the domain of the sex-gender system, or the domain of what Partha Chatterjee would term "nationalist thought").

An understanding of the relationship between being and doing shapes Judith Butler's analysis of performativity. Performativity comes to form a corrective to any imaginings of a permanence, or, more precisely, pre-eminence, of being, and, by extension, identity (being *with* those others of a similar disposition). Butler shows that being, signifying an entity she also refers to as an "agent," is not predetermined, but rather takes its shape out of a "matrix" of (re)iterated attributes making up the type of person one ends up as being (*Bodies* 7). Butler, of

³¹ According to Ernest Renan (in his "What is a nation?"), the "moral consciousness" created by a "large aggregate of men, healthy in mind and warm of heart," forms a nation. Interestingly, Renan reflects on the importance of *repeated* acts of allegiance to the nation to its consolidation and continuance. "So long," he says, "as this moral consciousness gives proof of its strength by the sacrifices which demand the abdication of the individual to the advantages of the community, it is legitimate and has the right to exist." (20). The "strength" of the nation, in other words, lies in its capacity to renew a particular performative utterance inherent to any kind of act of national "sacrifice." The nation exists through persuading the national subject ("individual") to *do* in order to *be*.

course, focuses on the gendered subject, and the shape of their identifications in a social and symbolic order dominated by the heterosexual norm. The type of person thus constituted, understood also as the expression of the “materiality” of bodies, is subjected to particular discourses, and the apparatus of performativity. Performativity, as Butler has argued, is “not the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names, but rather ... that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (*Bodies* 2). It is in the repeated, reiterated, doing of the performative utterance (an utterance that constitutes the act it names) that being (in other words, the subjectivity of the agent) is instituted and sustained.

The debates over performativity and the embodied (and engendered) agent out of which Butler’s ideas emerge reflect extended, latter-day philosophical concerns around the status of the human agent, or the self, in its relationship with its immediate social and cultural (or, symbolic) realm. This concern, as Butler observes, can take the shape of the question, “how can there be an activity, a constructing, without presupposing an agent who precedes and performs that activity?” (*Bodies* 7). She takes the view that any articulation in language of the self-as-agent has always already entered into a gendered interpellation, what might be referred to, in her own words, as a “matrix of gender relations” (*Bodies* 7). For Butler, the subject is therefore already gendered when it speaks of itself in the world; for her, the notion of a preceding, or transcendental, agent cannot sit well with the logic of constructivism on which her approach to the process of gendering (the “process of materialization” [*Bodies* 9] of and on the body) rests:

For if gender is constructed, it is not necessarily constructed by an “I” or a “we” who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of “before”.³²

³² What Butler is doing here is drawing attention to how essentialisms around the vexed issue of the active agent can be subject to critique. It is worthwhile to recapitulate the useful spatially-informed intervention of Sedgwick’s discussed in the previous section, in order to draw a further relation between the implications presented by the works

Indeed, it is unclear that there can be an “I” or “we” who has not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being (*Bodies 7*).

Butler's matrix can be understood as a discursive system concretizing what it means to be man or woman in society. Her argument against transcendentalizing the self can be plotted within the theoretical field of deconstruction. A consideration of Derridean erasure (*sous rature*) is arguably another entry-point into an analysis/critique of subject-formation. In the Preface to her translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Gayatri C. Spivak traces the concept of erasure in Derridean thought back to the philosophical conundrum about the very basis of philosophical enquiry. This conundrum has ramification on questions of Being and agency as well. Spivak looks to Heidegger's efforts to come to terms with the difficulty in question. She observes that Heidegger, while thinking about “definitions,” has to acknowledge that knowing anything in the world properly (in other words, the process of definition) has to consent *a priori* to a transcendentalism, outside the remit of philosophy. She notes:

In order for the nature of anything in particular to be defined as an entity the question of Being in general must *already* be approached *and* answered in the affirmative. That something *is* presupposes that *anything* can be.

of these respective scholars. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick observes that the legacy of the kind of critique enabled by Butler's work has been the development of strategies which seek “to expose residual forms of essentialisms lurking behind apparently nonessentialist forms of analysis”: these strategies Sedgwick likens to “dramas of exposure” (i.e., analyses concerned with exposing a “lurking” truth). Instead of Butler's term, “before,” Sedgwick uses “beneath” and “behind” to delineate the aims of such work. While, as she herself points out, Sedgwick does not “devalue such critical practices,” she seeks in *Touching Feeling* to push further the anti-essentialist/anti-teleological card by her use of the “beside” as a way of sidestepping the tempting but one-dimensional linearity of a too-simple looking back (“beneath” and “behind”), or a too-smug looking forward (the “beyond,” which she defines as “the bossy gesture of ‘calling for’ an immediately perfected critical or revolutionary practice that one can oneself only adumbrate”). The spatiality of “beside,” for Sedgwick, “seems to offer some useful resistance to the ease with which *beneath* and *beyond* [or, for that matter, “before”] turn from spatial descriptors into implicit narratives of, respectively, origin and telos” (for all quotations, see Sedgwick 8-9).

What is this question of Being that is necessarily precomprehended in order that thinking itself occur? Since it is always anterior to thinking, it can never be formulated as an answer to the question, “what is.”... This possibility of Being must be granted (or rather it is of itself granted) for the human being to say “I am,” not to mention “you are,” “she is.” (“Preface” xiv, first emphasis added)³³

An assertion that is above and/or beyond enquiry, foreclosed, that is, *before* any kind of enquiry can take place is the unavoidable blind spot in any kind of epistemological or empirical process. Therefore, empirical fact and article of faith (necessarily outside the logic of empiricism) cannot be disentangled. The specificities of the particular (that which is the object of enquiry) cannot be separated from the absence (“blind” faith) always already *there*, without which a process of enquiry into an object cannot begin, or present itself. Ultimately, for Heidegger, the question of Being is irrevocably foreclosed for philosophy. Heidegger represents this breach by crossing out of the term “Being,” but allowing “both deletion and word stand” (Spivak, Preface xv).

Brought “under erasure” in this way, the concept remains imprinted, but erased, to signify the unverifiable but necessary origin, a pre-ordained status: “[W]hen Heidegger sets Being before all concepts, he is attempting to free language from the fallacy of a fixed origin, which is also a fixed end” (Spivak, Preface xvi). Yet, while Heidegger acknowledges the difficulty outlined above, it is clear, reading Spivak, that he nevertheless hankers for an originating and originary figure (lingual or literal) of Being:

³³ Readers might recall here the classical Greek concept of “first principles,” outlined in Plato’s “Phaedrus,” in which Socrates observes, “a first principle cannot come into being, for anything that comes to be must come to be from a first principle, the latter itself cannot come to be from anything whatsoever; if it did, it would cease any longer to be a first principle” (492). Taken from Socrates’ famous speech on love, these lines arguably refer to that same preoccupation with being (the so-called “first principle” being the key to understanding the immortality of the soul) that exercises Heidegger.

But, *in a certain way*, [Heidegger] also sets up Being as what Derrida calls the “transcendental signified.” For whatever a concept might “mean,” anything that is conceived of in its being-present must lead us to the already-answered question of Being. In that sense, the sense of the final reference, Being is indeed the final signified to which all signifiers refer. But Heidegger makes it clear that Being cannot be contained by, is always prior to, indeed transcends signification. It is therefore a situation where the signified commands, and yet is free of, all signifiers—a recognizably theological situation. The end of philosophy, according to Heidegger is to restore the memory of that free and commanding signified, to discover *Unwörter* (originary words) in the languages of the world by learning to waylay the limiting logic of signification, a project that Derrida describes as “the other side of nostalgia, which I will call Heideggerian *hope* ... namely the quest for the proper word and the unique name.” (Spivak, “Preface” xvi)

When Derrida approaches the strategy of the erasure that remains on the page, he is arguably less interested in the concept, or the “proper word,” or “the unique name” that, in philosophy, must yet stand under deletion. Rather, his attentions seem drawn to the ramifications of the very activity of erasure. Spivak observes that Derrida’s “master word” (which might therefore be interpreted as his principal concern) is “trace,” not “Being”. Countering “Heideggerian hope,”

Derrida seems to show no nostalgia for a lost presence. He sees in the traditional concept of the sign a heterogeneity.... [T]he sign is the place where “the completely other is announced as such—without any simplicity, any identity, any resemblance or continuity—in that which is not it.” ... Derrida suggests that what

opens the possibility of thought is not merely the question of being, but also the never-annulled difference from “the completely other.” Such is the strange “being” of the sign: half of it is always “not there” and the other half always “not that.”

The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent. This other is of course never to be found in its full being. (Spivak, “Preface” xvi-xvii)

The legacy of deconstructive thought is, therefore, in its examination of the grounds on which human agent, that entity which animates the “possibility of thought” possible, rests. As theorists like Butler, Derrida, and Spivak have demonstrated, this agent cannot exist (“I am”) previous to the process of signification by means of which it articulates its presence in the world, and by which also the world recognizes its agential presence as a particular kind of subject (“thinking,” “sexed,” “gendered,” “raced”, and so on). This deconstructive theoretical model is keenly aware, therefore, that there is something “other” involved with the workings of the apparently autonomous human agent-subject, whether it is a pre-existing and pre-emptive symbolic order (Butler), or the “trace” of the “never-annulled difference” that Spivak observes in Derridean thought.

Conceptualized in this way, “difference” becomes a means of problematizing binaristic thinking which posits absolute categories, for instance of the self-same subject contrasted with a neatly “othered” entity. The lessons from theorists like Butler, Derrida, and Spivak are concerned with demonstrating that difference cannot be separated out from the self or the subject, and, therefore, that difference cannot be domesticated in other words, confined to, or colonized within a finite boundary. The ramifications of such intuitions of a “never-annulled difference” on any kind of identity — national, sexual, gendered — are profound. If an identity

forms out of knowing the self, it must also contend with an irreducible, “never-annuled,” or, never-entirely-annexed, reminder of difference, or other.

This difference might take the shape of a pre-existing, or past, discourse without which the self cannot “materialize”—perform as an agent, in a manner of speaking—in the present: as Butler observes, performativity implies that “discourse has a history ... and that this history effectively decenters the presentist view of the subject as the exclusive origin or owner of what is being said” (*Bodies* 227). Alternatively, it might take the shape of an understanding of how the assertion, “I am,” contains within itself that (person, entity, community, nationality) which “I am not.” An assertion of the self, its subjectivity, at any given moment occurs paradoxically. That assertion, taking the shape of a performative or signifying act, occurs in but also at a remove from both the present-time and place or site of the entity/agent thus formed. The decentering of the subject—always-also subject to something or someone else—enables a critique of performativity, where the seeming authority of the speech act which is supposed to perform/produce the self definitively cannot be sustained in one iteration alone, but is subject to a perpetual re-iteration, or re-citation (as Butler points out, the power of the law is in the citing of the law, a process that cannot escape repetition; the authority and agency of the subject-position, “judge,” for example, does not precede the citation of law during the moment of judgment, but is in, and renewed by, performative (re)citation(s) [*Bodies* 225]).

A properly decentered theory of the subject must also attend to a pluralization that opens up, as it were, the activity of performative, subjectivizing utterances. Any iteration of a self or an identity is indeed a recitation of a discursive order which pre-dates the subject; yet, it is also the case that the de-transcendentalizing of the subject is accompanied by the understanding that discourse, while powerful as a subjecting authority on the human agent, is also unsettled, *re-*

cited. Discourse exists not of its own accord, as a transcendental entity, but as subject to ongoing processes of re-iteration by individuals articulating their presence in the world or interpellated as particular individuals by those around them. Any discursive structure is also a structure of signs, while the displacement caused by *différance* in the sign—the lack of a “transcendental signified,” in other words—means also that the signification on which discourse rests has no origin or *telos*, and can exist only in repeated utterances, the Derridean re-citation.

Both the “individual” subject, and the environment in and out of which s/he forms (the latter might be imagined textually, as a “matrix” of human subjects and communities intersected with the discourses of laws and regulations) come to be thought of as unsettled or pluralized by the operation of “never-annulled difference,” the workings of *différance*. Sedgwick articulates this disruption when she speaks of the need for “nondualistic thought and pedagogy” (1) in her introductory preamble to *Touching Feeling*. Her work critiquing and expanding our understanding of performativity uses elements of spatial thinking as a mode to approaching how subjects come to be, but in a diversified world of relations impinging on those very individual performative acts already negotiating discursive matrices within which agents find themselves located.

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Thinking further about the way difference unsettles stable narratives of the self, or, of a group bound in a common identity, the work of two scholars—one in the field of queer studies (David Halperin), the other in social theories of redistribution and equity (Nancy Fraser)—allows for further insight into the matter. Halperin, in *What Do Gay Men Want* (2007), argues that the politics of gender and sexual difference has been enacted in the public sphere by “foregrounding ... identity and backgrounding ... subjectivity” (3). He articulates this distinction by describing

the close interrelationship, certainly over the last century, between dominant discourses of (homo)sexual subjectivity (the question of what a gay man “wants” is about a gay man’s subjectivity) and the field of psychology, the latter discipline (to use a Foucauldian referent) having represented any form of sexual or gendered difference as an abnormal deviation from the norm. For Halperin, the stigma of abnormality that has accrued to any notions of what a gay man, for instance, might be/want/feel/desire/do has led to a strategic detour in gay and lesbian activist politics away from a focus on the inner life or subjectivity of, say, an individual gay subject to clear articulations of a public identity, with commonly-held ties that bind. A focus on a group-identity, Halperin goes on to argue, has strategic value because it can channel calls for an end to gender and sexual discrimination in society.

In the wake of more than a century of medical and forensic treatment of homosexuals as a psychiatric pathology or aberration, lesbians and gay men of the post-Stonewall era directed much political effort to undoing the presumption that there was something fundamentally wrong with us.... [I]t seemed necessary to close off the entire topic of gay subjectivity to respectable inquiry, so as to prevent gayness from ever again being understood as a sickness.

In pursuit of that goal, the lesbian and gay movement has produced a remarkably plausible and persuasive new definition of homosexuality in political rather than psychological terms. To be gay, according to this new definition is not to exhibit a queer subjectivity, but to belong to a social group. Homosexuality refers not to an individual abnormality but to a collective *identity*. (1-2)

The “aim,” as Halperin goes on to observe, “was to distract straight people from everything about gay culture that might them feel uncomfortable with it, suspicious of it,

excluded from it, and get them to sympathize instead with our political (and therefore less viscerally upsetting) demand for equal treatment” (5). The foregrounding of gay identity, seen this way, moves away from too much attention to the individual gay, to deflect a focus from “uncomfortable” matters, mostly connected up with the question of the kind of sex individual gays (lesbians, queers) might be having in private.³⁴ Halperin, however, does seek to return attention to some of those more “uncomfortable” personal choices made by desiring gay subjects.

Halperin makes a very important observation about how sex and gender dissidence has been framed, articulated, and posited in the public realm, within the particular historical context of mid-to-late-twentieth-century Euro-American social and political activism. Without reifying identity-categories, he points out the importance of imbricating the sense of a gay collective with issues of individual subjectivity. Halperin dialogues with Michael Warner’s earlier writings on risk, gay sex, and the AIDS crisis in the US. The aim for him is to rethink the analytical framework studying relations between gay men. Using Warner as a springboard, Halperin re-positions the question of who gay men are, and/or what they do (or don’t do) into a dynamic social realm, in which “social conditions” (contextualized carefully, such as the era examined by

³⁴ Andrew Pinto has discussed the particular tension queer activism generates in the legal framing of how subjects might negotiate between so-called “public” and “private” realms. In the context of the political movement to repeal Section 377, one of the cornerstones of the argument presented to the Delhi High Court, as Pinto observes, has been the argument that all citizens of India are endowed with a right to privacy, extending to those acts they may (or may not) engage in as consenting adults in private. Pinto also argues that this right to privacy extends even to public spaces, and, certainly, such a conceptualization presents a radical threat to any heteronormative anxieties about sex and exposure, and the messy materialization of queer sex in particular. However, Naisargi Dave presents a very timely critique of the class- and gender-politics of the “Right to Privacy” argument presented to the High Court. As she reminds her readers, those Indians most likely to have a private space where they might be left alone are middle- and upper-class men, while housing shortages for working-class Indians and the gender-policing of the daily lives of women grants both of these other groups far less daily access to any kind of private space at all. Any kind of theoretical-intellectual extension of privacy into the public realm makes little material difference to those men who “habitually or recreationally have sex in public parks,” according to Dave (30; see also Dave 29-32). In this debate about spaces, it is clear that the space of the ideal queer Indian is also subject to productive deferrals that shed a brighter light on the many facets of inequality in the country.

Halperin and Warner, the period following the emergence of HIV/AIDS) inflect the tenor or contour of both the individual- and the grouped-life of gay men. While the immediate context for *What Do* is risk and sexual behaviour in gay men at a particular time, the insights are more wide-ranging. Who a gay person is, and what he might desire, mourn, or celebrate in the course of his individual existence is in dialogue with a range of public articulations of discrimination and “epistemic violence” against gays, crossed with a concomitantly wide-ranging LGBTQ socio-political, cultural, and sexual fightback. The unitary, “monadic”³⁵ individual enters into particular relationships with other gays or queers. Halperin is one scholar who invites an analysis of gayness or queerness, and the human relations it engenders, asking us to rely less on ossified psychological models of (“the gay man”) or socio-political models (“the gay movement”) and think more of ethical, viable lives lived on a moving (or, using another spatialized term, contoured), insistently relational, social terrain.

In her observations on identity, Nancy Fraser also references something akin to this admixture between different spaces—the private and the public—through which the currents of human relations run. In “Rethinking Recognition,” Fraser traces the model of identity politics back to what she refers to the “Hegelian idea that identity is constructed dialogically.” Yet, as she also goes on to argue, the radiating networks of “mutual recognition” so critical to any kind of identity-formation also has ramifications on an individual subjectivity:

According to Hegel, recognition designates an ideal reciprocal relation between subjects, in which each sees the other both as its equal and also as separate from it. *This relation is constitutive for subjectivity: one becomes an individual subject*

³⁵ The term, used in a specific context by Lauren Berlant in her article, “Slow Death,” a spatially-grounded, anti-teleological rethinking of individual agency and subjectivity (she prefers lateral spreading to teleological linearity), is cited by Halperin as he, in turn, thinks about the agency and subjectivity of gay men who do not necessarily behave according to a model.

only by virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by, another subject.

Recognition from others is thus essential to the development of a sense of self.

Proponents of the identity model transpose the Hegelian recognition schema onto the cultural and political terrain. They contend that to belong to a group that is devalued by the dominant culture is to be misrecognized, to suffer a distortion in one relation to one's self.... In this perspective, the politics of recognition aim to repair *internal self-dislocation* by contesting the dominant culture's demeaning picture of the group. (109-110, emphases added)

As we see here, the individual cannot easily be uncoupled from the group. Fraser draws for us a line of relation between the one and the many that returns us to the question raised by Halperin: what does a gay man want deep inside? Both Halperin and Fraser invite considerations of the dyadic relationship between the individual and the group; between private desires and public claims; between the diffused and obscure, messy and muddy nature of what the subject wants (Halperin), and the cohesive clarity of what the group with an articulate/d identity needs (Fraser).

In different ways, both Halperin and Fraser also enable us to think more carefully about the variegated impact of identity-politics or the "politics of recognition" on the particularities of subjectivities. As shown, one of the exercises in which Halperin engages is a historicization of the dominant movement towards a gay identity: the movement is a product/effect of its time. Fraser, on her part, cautions against the tendencies of identity politics in the late-capitalist period to, one, decouple from a politics of redistributive justice; and, two, engage in practices of reification that stress individual conformity to essentialist imaginings of an "authentic" culture. Halperin's point of view on a desiring gay subjectivity works away from any reified *telos* of identitarian politics, but foregrounds the significance of a "collective" in his analysis of the

particular relations into which gay men enter. What a reader can take from this is the idea that what might be strategically expedient in any one particular socio-political climate or environment should not, by an excess of extrapolation from part to whole, be (mis)read as having an unqualified universal value, detachedly transcendent.

Ultimately, Halperin's and Fraser's ideas complicate the relationality between self and community. Reading this relationality in the avenues suggested by both thinkers—an interest in the “messiness” of particularities as opposed to universalized narratives—also means that, ultimately, neither the self nor the group can be granted transcendental status. This is particularly apt in our contemporary period, in which both the self and the group comes to form a site through which many strands or vectors pass. Neither sexuality nor gender can be seen in isolation from one another, or from class, race, ethnic, or caste (the last, in the specific case of India) considerations. These vectors mean that both the individual and the group have to reckon with unsettling questions of difference (the “other,” or others within an articulated group, or others in the vicinity of an articulated group) in more intensive ways.

For Fraser, the way out of what she sees as the twin extremes of reductive economism (akin to Nehruvian socialism, in which redistribution of wealth would be the panacea for all existing socio-cultural disparities between peoples and groups) and a reified but dematerialized culturalism (in which identity-politics alone holds the key to improving the quality of life for “the oppressed”), is to re-conceive human relations based on what she calls a “status model,” one which seeks out a fuller, more integrated understanding of “what is impeding... parity in any particular instance” of human interaction (13). While she herself uses the term “model” in her work, it is arguable that she points her audience towards the particularities of “instances” rather than the rule of any *universalized* model.

Fraser's interest in "status" testifies to her commitment to the paradoxical dynamic in which social parity and evenness must perpetually negotiate the uneven shifting ground on which "any particular instance" of human interactions is sited. What is most relevant for this dissertation is how the work of scholars like Fraser and Halperin make possible intellectual encounters with difference through which change in the socio-cultural realm (within which site we might locate issues of justice, redistribution, and ethical lives) might be imagined outside the agency of reified enclosures: either of totalized collectivities (the "working class," for instance, or "gay Indians") or of a transcendental/universal Subject-as-Agent (the "progressive Socialist" or the "out-and-proud" gay/Indian). Ways of reading difference, then, need not be funnelled into enclosures, these kinds of scholarship suggest. Such strategies combine with deconstruction to offer insights into how plurality might be mobilized to critique rigid structures.

Towards Readings of Difference...

In developing non-essentialized ways of *reading* difference in selected literary texts, this project has also been helped by certain conceptualizations of the relationship the artwork of literature engenders between writing, reading, and interpretation. What follows here is a brief exposition of what it has meant for this researcher to "read" Dattani's and Rao's works. The following delineates some further conceptual means to engage these readings to the texture of differences represented in the literature. Certain means present themselves when "literature" and "reading literature" are focalized through particular pluralistic ideas of reading "Text." Might readings of difference (differences found in various iterations by this reader-researcher) in the respective *oeuvres* of Dattani and Rao be further meaningful when plotted along that domain of radical reading marked by Roland Barthes as "Text"? In "From Work to Text," Barthes

explicates on the “irreducible plurality” of the “Text,” as opposed to what he terms, “work.” According to Barthes, the “work” is an entity quite distinct from what he understands as the “Text.”

The analytical way of Barthes necessitates attention to those activities of writing and reading so inherent even to commonsensical notions of what “literature” signifies. The Barthesian entry-point to understanding “Text” involves a reflexive, anti-essentialist approach to what has been written along with what is being read and how. The relationship between these elements as traced by Barthes is not necessarily sequential, programmatic, linear. It is not, for instance, necessarily the case that meaning of the written material flows *from* author *to* reader. Rather, he sees the scenario as a complex network, characteristic of the contemporary period, a period in which admixtures challenge traditional ways of creating and circulating knowledge.

Barthes calls for a method that will “relativize the relations of *scriptor*, reader, and observer (critic)” (“From Work” 57). On the one side, the domain of the *scriptor*, i.e., writing—in the case of this dissertation, literary writing—engenders something akin to a tangible entity. This entity, Barthes terms the “work.” As he points out, “the work is a fragment of substance, it occupies a portion of the spaces of books (for example, in a library)...; the work is seen (in bookstores, in card catalogues, on examination syllabuses)...; the work is held in the hand (“From Work” 57-58). The “work” is connected with notions of finitude, as Barthes points out at various points in his article. It has definite parameters (a “fragment of substance” which can be “held in the hand” [“From Work” 57]). It indicates the promise of a final meaning (the “work closes upon a signified...; either it is claimed to be apparent...or else this signified is said to be secret and final, and must be sought for, and then the work depends upon a hermeneutics, an interpretation” [“From Work” 58-59]). It is the product of the author, as child to parent (the

“work is caught up in a process of filiation...[; t]he author is reputed to be the father of the work; literary science thus teaches us to *respect* the manuscript and the author’s declared intentions”[“From Work” 61]).

These characteristics of the “work” are akin to the form of knowledge-production that Edward Said characterizes as “Orientalist.” The kind of focused, final meaning that characterizes the Barthesian “work” might be likened to the Orientalist writing and disciplinary tradition investigated by Said in *Orientalism* (see especially *Orientalism* 92-110). What Said refers to as the “textual attitude” of Orientalist disciplines (*Orientalism* 93) is actualized in the closed-off, hermetic form of Barthes’s “work.” Indeed, Barthes does at times use small-t “text” in comparable ways to “work.” The Orientalist text, or Barthesian “work,” is focused more teleologically towards a final interpretation; it seeks out to be that “fragment of substance” through which the Orient can be known, or, literally and figuratively, captured. The transcendental omniscience which undergirds the epistemological practices of the Orientalist textual tradition, accumulating in a plethora of books knowledge and particular “truths” about the “East,” contrasts with the deferrals of meaning operating in Barthesian Text. For Barthes, the hermetic “work” is subjected to the activity of reading, or, more properly, the activities of readers. This latter process—necessarily tricky to capture, since for Barthes it defies any kind of final meaning—happens in the baggy, porous “field” of “Text.”

“The Text is a methodological field,” Barthes observes (57). For him, this suggests that text involves readers in certain practices (or methods) of reading, “experienced only in an activity, in a production” (“From Work” 58). He understands Text in spatial terms; obviously, we are reminded of space when we encounter the term, “field.” And, furthermore, Barthes’s opinion—that “the Text cannot stop (for example, at a library shelf) ... it’s constitutive moment

is *traversal* (notably, it can traverse the work, several works)” (58)—invokes other ideations of space/s made palpable in the activity of “production” through “traversal” (at a very basic level, imagining movement across a library shelf, across several works, is to also imagine the particular spaces and planes involved). For Barthes, “traversal” points to networks, relations, and “play,” so that meaning in Text does not crystallize in a final “interpretation” (59). Rather, by speaking of “play,” Barthes indicates the deferral of meaning in “Text,” what he explains as “the infinite postponement of the signified” (59).

There are particular, spatially-informed, relations invoked when Barthes speaks of the travelling “activity of associations, contiguities, cross-references” through which Text deflects “comprehensive” meaning. Much of this spatialized “activity” is clarified when we understand the especial role of the reader of the “Text.” The “Text,” as Barthes has it, “solicits from the reader a practical collaboration” (63). Indeed, it is readerly activity that destabilizes, deflects, or defers the imposition of a final or essential meaning to what is being read (it is worthwhile to remember that Barthes reads this kind imposition in terms of a heteronormative rule: “[t]he author is reputed to be the father and the owner of his work” [61]).

The reader of the “Text” is a travelling reader. The “subject strolls” through the terrain of the Text: “what he perceives is multiple, irreducible, issuing from heterogeneous, detached substances and levels” (“From Work” 60). Reading in the method of “Text” is to traverse along, but also out and around, the particular thing being read. For, what is being read is “half identifiable [issuing] from known codes, but their combinative approach is unique” (“From Work” 60). Here we can perceive that networked activity, or production, in which the reader’s “associations, contiguities, cross-references” play a part: reading on the basis of what Barthes calls the “already read” (60). How else would the reader “perceive”?

Barthes provides a considerable agency, then, on the part of the reader in a process grounded not only in the production of “work,” but also in the ever-moving productions of meaning. He describes the texture of “Text” through the particular dynamism offered by the reader “playing” (Barthes, “From Work” 62-63) with the text. This is part of that “practical collaboration” the “Text” invites from the reader, as Barthes understands it. The role of an active reader is more significant to Barthes than what he signifies as the professional “interpreter” (63) of the work. The latter provides the “bourgeois audience” an easily digested, decoded script for that passive audience to make the “object of consumption” (63). Practices of decoding for palatable consumption are reductive for Barthes’s way of thinking. They trap literature, to take just one mode of writing, within the line, or rule, or codebook of the transcendental signified.

The following chapters aim less at packaging works for easy consumption, then, and more at describing on paper my own readings within an irreducibly pluralized, porous domain within which “Text” happens. These other chapters contain my own diverse encounters with texts themselves representing diversities in India, which content offers much scope for pluralized readings removed from any rigid law of Meaning, Authority, or Ownership. In relating textual production to readers and readings, these chapters are invested not in making passive consumers of literary works but in involving and consolidating networks of interested readers, of literature, yes, but also of “Text.”

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The Introduction has explored the conditions in which the primary texts of this dissertation emerge. It also provides a conceptual roadmap, delineating the broad form taken by the analyses of these texts. Engagements with diversity are a key element to the following chapters. The body of literature in this project, made up of works by Dattani and Rao, emerge in

a time and space in which plurality and difference are put to ideological use by the narrative of Indian nationalism. Queer representations of sexual, gendered, and/or libidinal difference in the primary texts call for analyses and readings which keep in mind the normative domestication of difference in the Indian contemporary. A scepticism with normative co-optations of difference in the keystone-works of queer theory, including some of the latest work in Indian queer studies, guides the analytical readings of texts in the following chapters. Literary productions of difference resist—in multifarious, spreading ways—the national essentialization of diversity. Understood spatially, this scepticism traces the contours of the domain superficially understood “queer India.” As this dissertation demonstrates, the term, “queer India,” as represented in the primary texts amplifies rather than modulates our understanding of heterogeneity.

The theoretical signposts delineated in the previous sections broaden the scope of queer difference, particularly within contemporary Indian contexts. Broadening the scope—as the phrase itself suggests—traces a set of relations to spatialized thinking: particular insights of a spatially-engaged analytical mode allow fresh approaches to literary writings whose form and content both reflect more radical exercises in reframing heterogeneity in India. Spatial thought encourages lateral modes of critical thinking. Laterality—Sedgwick’s “beside” is one effective conceptual figuration of it—enables an approach to networking differences without settling or reducing them to a uniform, unified, mechanically reproduced, code. The Nehruvian metaphor of a “noble mansion,” housing Indian unity-in-diversity, is one such code which queer difference must subvert if it is to be queer at all.

The metaphor of the “noble mansion” is the figure of speech used to plot out the space of the nation. It is a construct in which time and space have a particular accretive function, lending ever greater weight to a hegemonic structure within which the nation’s different peoples are

settled as a national community. Such a holding-structure for difference depends on enclosures. In spatial terms, such a “noble” enclosure is expressed in a clearly imagined territorial span. In human terms, enclosures are performatively shaped by those stabilizing forms by which national subjects live and interrelate in a common identity. The textual production of queer difference which connects Dattani and Rao manifests in the way stable enclosures are rendered porous and/or unsettled. This has implications not only on how the space of the nation is settled but also on how queerness is imagined in the texts. The latter imagining has several points of connection with the destabilizing anti-essentialism of deconstruction and queer theory.

Both Dattani and Rao employ various strategies to represent the dis/continuities of contoured spaces where different queer Indian characters are plotted. “Dis/continuity” signifies a stepped pattern of convergence and dispersal in which neither emerges as completely predominant, so that both contribute in networked ways to a radical pluralization of spaces denoted by difference. Networking suggests laterality, the traversal of entities placed “beside” each other. This kind of networked reimagining of (queer) space responds to the conceptual insight of spatialized thought. Along the pluralized spaces of the primary texts, the network of relations these characters enter into do not resolve along one line or plane, but are placed and/or spread in complex patterns. These patterns do not frame hermetic enclosures, nor do they resolve into a representation of an ideal queer Indian. In indicating these complexities, the texts reflect on the play of *différance* that makes any kind of performative gesture irreducible to its intended end.

Dattani’s and Rao’s writings respond well to deepened textual analyses in which the deconstructive ramifications of heterogeneity is a key element. Dattani’s use of theatrical spaces, as discussed in Chapter Two, takes readers along a multi-levelled traversal of difference

perpetually produced, never reduced, nor resolved. The characters in *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, for instance, encounter one another in a series of connected, but stepped, spaces on-stage, which stage, understood heterogeneously, becomes the shifting ground mobilizing the diversity of subject-positions, identifications, and interrelationships forming between a group of urban Indians negotiating not only the heteronormativity of the world around, but the dis/continuities in what they see projected by one another. In Chapter Three, we see how Rao's prose narratives make use of heterogeneity, in a series of nuanced relationships between characters richly marked by difference: their queerness is supplemented by hierarchies of class, caste and communal (religious) experiences, while, in turn, those latter, national hierarchies are unsettled in the kinds of cross-penetrating relations between characters nominally inhabiting them.

Chapter Two: Mahesh Dattani

“I like to examine an idea from different angles”

Mahesh Dattani, in conversation with Tutun Mukherjee (2004)

One of India’s premier contemporary playwrights, Mahesh Dattani, has for the last three decades written and produced a series of plays which have challenged social norms in India. In particular, Dattani has challenged Indian heteronormativity by revisiting gender and sexual normativity and difference, so that different plays across his *oeuvre* revisit the issue “from different angles.” Dattani’s personal genealogy parallels arguably the sense of mobility and porosity of subject-positions and identities enacted in his work. Born in 1958, in the South Indian city of Bangalore, but to Gujarati parents who had migrated south, Dattani was brought up in a *milieu* more connected to conventional occupations and gendered expectations, from which he has in turn migrated into a very different environment: beginning with active theatre-going, Dattani has moved on to theatre-production, finally turning in the latter part of the 1980s to the writing of original work for production on stage.³⁶

Dattani’s biography, as much as his work, travels along intersecting networks, tracing relations of comparison and contrast between different fields. If his personal foray into theatre appears to set him apart from the direction taken by the social circles which frame his childhood and youth, it is nevertheless significant that some of his earliest experience of the theatre were in

³⁶ Asha Kuthari Chaudhuri observes that “Dattani was neither student of literature (graduating in History, Economics and Political Science, acquiring a master’s in Marketing and Advertising Management), nor did he show any signs of a literary imagination, expecting to spend a ‘normal’ life, helping run his father’s business” (16).

Gujarati stage productions mounted in Bangalore for migrant Gujarati families like his in that city. As he recalls, in a conversation with Tutun Mukherjee for the Indian daily *The Hindu*:

I watched a play whenever I could. Every time there was a group from Bombay or Ahmedabad staging a play in Bangalore, it became a community event that we would all attend. I remember a play I saw as a child at Ravindra Kalakshetra that fascinated me. It used the “play within the play” concept that I'd never seen before and a dramatic finale that took place in the auditorium. (qtd. in T. Mukherjee *thehindu.com*)

In a recent essay charting a genealogy of his creative life, “Me and My Plays,” Dattani refers also to the particular effect of Gujarati theatre on members of the community in Bangalore. In the case of his own family, he writes:

My father used to talk fondly of his days in Bombay ... when he would visit the theatres of Bhangwadi to see Gujarati musical drama near the city’s notorious opium bazaars... Performances would go on for hours longer than scheduled because of the cries of “once more!” which led to popular song routines being replayed, sometimes almost a dozen times! (Dattani, “Me and My Plays” 4)

This love of theatrical entertainment, the *frisson* of disrepute signified by the nearby “opium bazaar,” and the irresistible force of staged performances acting on audiences content to delay normal schedules for the theatrical experience of “once more!” sits curiously beside the worldly, conservative aspirations of communities like Dattani’s. The various ways in which theatre might interrupt those conventions that appear to disregard the subversive, even intrusive, force of on-stage performances—ways explored in all of Dattani’s various works—show themselves to Dattani as a young audience member. Thinking back to that first play he sees staged in

Bangalore, Dattani recalls the dynamic between art and commerce, theatrical subversion and normative convention. During the pre-show gathering:

I remember the Gujarati community well turned out in their safari suits and American georgette saris. My mother was probably the most excited of all of us, meeting old friends from her home town. The banter was invariably about weddings, wedding plans, and prospective brides and grooms. The men talked only about business and the Africa-returned traders always lorded it over the desis. The shrill bell announcing the start of the play could just be heard over the loud voices in the foyer, and it did little to cut short the chatter. When even the third bell could not succeed in getting the people to move from the foyer into the hall, the local sponsors resorted to desperate pleas imploring people to go inside so that they could start the play.

Inside the decibel levels did not diminish.... Class divides were clearly drawn with the local sponsors getting the front-row seats, while the rest of us got whatever came to us, scurrying for seats near the fans.... And then the play began ...

It was only once the house lights came on again as the curtain fell that I became aware once again that I was in a hall with a thousand people! There was a palpable silence in the hall before the murmurs picked up again. *Only, this time they were talking about the play*, especially the twist before the interval. They were keen to know what would happen next. *I was fascinated not only by the plot but also the effect the play had on its audience*. If something like this could shut the mouths of a thousand Gujaratis, I had to be a part of this magic! This was

indeed the beginning of a beautiful relationship. (Dattani, “Me and My Plays” 5-7, emphasis added)

As Dattani observes, through the double agency of text and performance, the overall “effect” of theatre is to reorient the discursive horizon of the watching audience. No longer interested in the vocabulary and conventions of an aspirational middle-class, the Gujarati audience is now invested in those of the play itself. Read another way, what the play does is form relations between different worlds. These relations are not seamless, nor do they necessarily resolve the difference between, say, art and commerce, or the fringe and the mainstream, but, rather, these relations are made visible, so that different worlds are involved in and with one another, leading to odd, but telling (and textured) admixtures, like the contradictory accumulated “palpable silence” that Dattani remembers.

Early childhood experiences with productions of vernacular Gujarati plays for the Gujarati diaspora settled in Bangalore prove to be the entry-point for Dattani to theatre and the writing and production of plays. Yet, in his own work, Dattani shifts his (and our) attentions to yet other planes. As an Indian playwright, he has forged the path of a vanguard by choosing to write entirely in English. Those links with a familial identity in Gujarati theatrical traditions is therefore also already the site of the playwright’s move away from the received notion that modern Indian dramatic traditions can only ever be communicated in the “authentic” non-English vernacular languages. For, Dattani has emerged as one of the first Indian playwrights to dramatize Indian social spheres in English, refusing to see the language as an inauthentic, colonizing force. In doing so, he has thrown into relief the significant scholarly debates around the politics of language in the development of contemporary Indian theatre. As scholars like Christopher Blame and Nandi Bhatia have observed, Indian drama in English has not enjoyed a

position of privilege in the national cultural scene because of the “rejection of English as the language of the elite and a colonial import that [is] therefore not ‘Indian’ enough” (Bhatia, “Introduction” xxix). Theatrical productions in English have, therefore, largely been either translations of Indian plays written in Hindi or other national vernaculars (“Introduction” xxix).

Dattani has emphatically rejected the dogma of “authenticity.” As far as his choice of language (always English) is concerned, he is clear: “I have lived all my life in India, and I have learned the English language in India, and I have learned it from Indians, so the way I speak the English language is Indian” (qtd. in Mee 24). The traversals back and forth between spaces, environments, and worlds (between the personal life of Dattani’s familial experiences of theatre and the more public, textual “life” of his corpus of works; between a respectable familial tradition of commerce and the thick critical strand of those very concepts of “respectability” and “family” running in the art he chooses as his own; between the binaries of the vernacular and English languages in contemporary Indian cultural spheres) form the thread-work which juxtaposes and connects different worlds while keeping the seams visible.

This chapter focuses on three works. Two shorter works bookend a long play. The first is the play, *Night Queen* relatively little-known and one of the few published works by Dattani never produced to date. Nevertheless, its significance within a queer Indian cultural movement is reflected in its inclusion in the important anthology of gay writing from India, *Yaraana*, edited by queer Indian activist, poet, and educator, Hoshang Merchant.³⁷ The long middle-section of this chapter is taken up with the play which develops out of *Night Queen*, now titled *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* (hereafter, *Muggy Night*). Finally, this chapter turns to one of the latest works by Dattani, and a remarkable departure from his usual genre of choice. “The Reading” is a short

³⁷ *Yaraana* works well as the companion-volume to the Ashwini Sukhthankar-edited anthology of lesbian writing from India, *Facing the Mirror*, published in the same year by the same publisher, Penguin India.

story from 2013, Dattani's only foray into prose-fiction thus far. All three works foreground queer male relationships, and the negotiations between men along an often-tortuous psychic and social landscape in which sexuality crosses repeatedly with the variables of class, caste, and privilege.

Muggy Night is considered to be “the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal” (McRae, qtd. in Dattani *Muggy Night* 45), though it is noteworthy that one of the most important contemporary Indian playwrights, Vijay Tendulkar (writing in Marathi) had, by the time of *Night Queen* and *Muggy Night*, engaged with lesbian desire and identity in his play *Mitrachi Goshta* (1982; translated as *A Friend's Story*). Nevertheless, *Muggy Night* is the first (if taken together with *Night Queen*) Anglophone play in India to deal with gay male subjectivity, desires, and the complexities of same-sex relationships. Recalling the circumstances and initial reception of *Muggy Night*, Dattani mentions that the play was not as popular with audiences as his other plays, and remains one of the least-produced of his works (Dattani, “Me and My Plays” 35-38). Both the conventional heteronormative audience *and* gay and lesbian audiences seem to have been hostile to the play. According to Dattani, gay and lesbian audiences slated him for “showing gay men to be stereotypical [and] even to this date, they refuse to acknowledge it as the first Indian play with gay love as its central theme” (Dattani, “Me and My Plays” 37).

One reason why *Muggy Night* might have elicited a suspicious response from gay and lesbian groups in India might be because the explorations of difference in *Muggy Night*, as well as the two other works in this chapter, exceed even those “gay themes” to which McRae and Dattani refer. The following sections of this chapter examine this excess in terms of the multifarious networks, of relationships and across spaces, built into these works. These networks

are strands that do not tie or rest neatly, but animate the issue of variegated difference in significant ways. These networks can be likened to those productions of difference through which the texts interrogate ideas and identities. The formation, or production, of these networks of difference represents a particular approach to the issue of heterogeneity in the kind of Indian society represented by Dattani. As shown in the following parts of this chapter, this approach highlights the irreducibility of difference and diversity in ways that complicate notions of identity: i.e., being “gay,” being “queer,” being “Indian.”

To think of a gay character in *Muggy Night*, like Sharad for example, as “stereotypical” is, as I show in the following sections, complicated by the fact that his “flaming” behaviour is supplemented by repeated flashes of insight that expose the limits of identitarian politics of any kind: national and/or sexual. And, juxtaposing Sharad with a character like his ex-lover, Kamlesh, who wants to craft a more cohesive gay identity and subjectivity for himself raises more questions than answers. For, Kamlesh is in turn implicated in forms of exploitative behaviour while he is in the process of being/becoming a contemporary, modern gay Indian. These individual contradictions and differences refuse to settle the question of (sexual) diversity, and reflect the larger impulse in the playwright to dramatize difference through a strategic use of irreducibility, a refusal to let difference settle (down).

In his conversation with Mukherjee in *The Hindu*, Dattani refers to a principal motive for his creative activity as playwright: “social issues move me,” he asserts, “and I like to examine an idea from different angles” (T. Mukherjee, *thehindu.com*) This affect-rich encounter with society—the playwright being “moved” by “social issues”—is given material weight by the theatrical strategies with which these “different angles” are dramatized. These strategies involve the juxtaposition side-by-side of different and very contrasting spaces in Dattani’s text and, by

extension, his stage. The theatrical alignment of different spaces so that the seams still show is one other way of thinking about those “different angles” of society rendered in a way that difference is not disappeared. In *Muggy Night*, for instance, the playwright makes use of split-level spaces. The staging of *Night Queen* occurs on an “in-between” living space, placed between a public street and the private domain of the home. In the short story, “The Reading,” Dattani cleverly uses social media and messaging to represent the “different angles” of a variegated, heterogeneous cyberspace. These spatial representations of “different angles” are connected with multiplying projections of characters and communities in the works: identities are left open to another or many other ways of being.

***Night Queen* (Anthologized 1999)**

Mahesh Dattani’s particular engagement with diversity and difference, outlined above, is my entry-point as well into the analysis of *Night Queen*, the shorter precursor to *Muggy Night*. *Night Queen*, which contains the germ of the idea for the longer play, is a relatively under-appreciated work in Dattani’s repertoire. It is one of the only works for the stage by the playwright not produced. According to Dattani, *Night Queen* was first written for the *Telegraph Literary Supplement* for a Calcutta newspaper in the early 1990s (“Me and My Plays” 36). Following this, the play was re-published in Merchant’s anthology in 1999.³⁸ While on the surface a slight work barely a few pages long, *Night Queen* nevertheless gives the attentive reader enough material to be situated alongside the more ambitiously-conceived *Muggy Night*. This section examines *Night Queen* within the theoretical framework offered by Michel Foucault’s views of “heterogeneous space,” developed in the article, “Of Other Spaces.” Like the

³⁸ All references to *Night Queen* in this project are from the volume *Yaraana*.

other two texts in this chapter, *Night Queen* focalizes issues of sex and gender dissidence in a queer domain of male same-sex desire.

As in the other works discussed in this chapter, *Night Queen* is alive to the Foucauldian notion that heterogeneity can be read as a network of “sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (“Other Spaces” 23). This imagining of space as irreducible is related also to the particular orientation of the playwright’s attitude to individuals, communities, and identities in India, shedding light, in his own words, on the “issues and challenges in urban Indian society.” Let us think of space broadly: in theatre, staging possibilities become immediately involved in any discussion of space; at the same time, we have the space of the script, the dialogue and the stage directions. Dattani’s work—at once literary *and* theatrical—is tied up with the production of a particular kind of space and simultaneously the production of irreducible difference, so that space here might adequately represent those “issues and challenges in urban Indian society” that remain the driving force behind the plays.

The production of difference is tied up with the production of heterogeneous space, and this is the lens through which I approach a work like *Night Queen*, having been struck by the emphatic manner in which this work foregrounds space, and human relationships within that space, as permeable, heterogeneous, oblique, unresolved. All these terms point towards that irreducibility. This heterogeneity, which might be understood also as a fleshing out of interpretive possibilities, conditions the kind of relationship that emerges between the two characters in the play: Raghu and his night’s “pickup,” Ash. The production of difference in *Night Queen* permeates, and makes porous the notion of a stable self, subjectivity and/or identity in the play.

Night Queen takes the form of an extended dialogue between the two characters in Raghu's bedroom. The space of Raghu's bedroom is closely linked to the interpersonal dynamic that develops, a dynamic that is the engine of the plot. The opening stage directions describe the central space of the action, Raghu the protagonist's bedroom, as an annex, liminally situated between the public space of the road and the private domain of the larger family dwelling. This is the relevant section: "A tiny room with two doors. The side door leads directly to the street. The other door leads to the rest of the house. It is the sort of room which would be built for a paying guest who may need to come and go without disturbing the rest of the household" (Dattani, *Night Queen* 57). This tripartite structure will be carried forward into the longer *Muggy Night*. In *Night Queen*, the spatial structure is remarkably detailed if we consider that this is a relatively short work. Dattani may already have been thinking of the future renditions and expanded versions of this work; it is, indeed, the case that the use of space in *Muggy Night* is even more complex, as the following section of this chapter will show.³⁹ The division of space suggested by the stage directions in *Night Queen* suggest immediately the juxtaposition of realms, which might well be those sites forming out of those "sets of relations" Foucault mentions. Raghu's bedroom is cheek-by-jowl with the street on one side, and the home on the other. The street, more precisely, the park, is where he has met Ash, both characters cruising for men. The space of the room is clearly (homo)eroticized with a "huge poster of the muscleman" dominating it (Dattani, *Night Queen* 57). The rest of the home is inhabited by Raghu's senile mother and his sister, Gayatri.

³⁹ In *Muggy Night*, the staging is much more busily spread, over multiple planes, so that a linear unidirectional sequential mode of approach is thoroughly subverted. Thinking further about Dattani's spatial strategies in *Muggy Night*, one can argue that complicating the linear, temporal, progressive, teleological narrative is tied up with spatial thinking around simultaneity and juxtapositions of the near and far. If the "past," "present," and "future" are deliberately mangled up to expose the constructed narrative of sequential progress, the strategies involved are those of different kinds of "juxtaposition," where the "near and far" (temporally speaking, the past, present and future) are brought "side to side."

While these various sites are juxtaposed against one another, they cannot be superimposed, or arranged neatly into a particular order to service a general or generalizable model. The same goes for the particular interpersonal relations that occur in them. The spaces developed here are highly permeable, so that they are not easily sealed off or made available as an “easy packages”—different characters, voices, issues, emotions, bleed across the ground of this work. I should mention here that I read permeability into the various ways in which *Night Queen* ends up being a very mobile work: Raghu and Ash restlessly move around this small bedroom during the action; the window with the scented flower-bush outside is opened and shut up to six times; the dialogue between the characters is punctuated repeatedly by the voice of the mother, off-stage; there are sudden bursts of anger, including a violent tussle with the night-blooming jasmine plant after which the play is titled, interspersed with moments of quiet intimacy.

Raghu’s bedroom is a compressed space, an effective spatial metaphor for what is after all a very short play. However, as discussed here, the bedroom is not a hermetic zone. Obviously, the dimensions of the room reflect the space within which Raghu might express a particular sexual identity—the spatial strategy employed, therefore, bears a direct relationship to the representation of Raghu’s homosexual subjectivity in a heteronormative world. But, if this space reflects Raghu’s identity as a gay Indian, then this identity has simultaneously to negotiate the heteronormative family on the one hand, and the particular challenge posed by another kind of gay Indian represented here: the deeply closeted, Ash, or Ashwin Kothari, deeply invested through much of the play in heteronormativity. It is interesting that Ash, who is in many ways a character who does not inspire sympathy, is given a few of the most insightful lines in the play, just after Raghu states that Ash is pitiable (the wider context of this exchange is the revelation

that Ash is actually known to Raghu's family as a prospective suitor for his sister, Gayatri, an element in the plot that carries through into *Muggy Night*). This is Ash:

ASH: Who are you to feel superior? You think you have it easy? Just because you have this – (*gesturing to the room and bed*) this arrangement, this set-up. Just because you are smart enough and strong enough to defend yourself, you have a sister who understands you, you have a secure job and all that, it doesn't make you an ... (*stopping*) Yes. It does make you superior somehow. You can tell the world to fuck off.

RAGHU: (*sincerely*) I am sorry. (Dattani, *Night Queen* 67-68)

The ellipsis in Ash's stream of protest can be read to mark a turning point in this particular exchange, because there is some kind of acknowledgement here from Ash that Raghu has agency—he has made an “arrangement” for himself. Yet, both Ash's larger comments about some of the privileges Raghu has also enjoyed (“a sister who understands” [to clarify: Raghu has stated earlier that Gayatri is his confidante] demonstrate that “being” gay in the Indian social universe crafted by Dattani is not simply about assuming the mantle and cultural codes of an identity, but conditioned by other enabling factors. Likewise, Ash's denial of his own sexual identity with other queer Indians cannot but be examined in the light of larger disabling contexts. Yet, between the points of view of its principal characters, *Night Queen* remains suspended. The play shows us the advantages Raghu enjoys, not all of which he has necessarily earned. Yet, the play also floods its gaze on the dishonesty and cruelty in the many daily hypocrisies of the closeted man, personified here in the character of Ash. This suspension—juxtaposing two viewpoints—I liken to the production of difference that I see happening in this work. Just a page

after the exchange above, Raghu tears into Ash for still desperately believing that marriage to Gayatri can cure him, make him less “ugly.”

RAGHU: ... And you will be uglier. Pretending to love her –

ASH: I do

RAGHU: (*ignoring him*) Pretending that she turns you on. That you are in love with her. That everything will be alright after marriage. Such pretence! And when you sleep with her, you will be groaning extra loud with pleasure, shutting your eyes.... And in case you can't make those wonderful fountains erupt, she will look at you, questioning you. And you will be ugly enough to lead her to believe that she isn't good enough. That she doesn't satisfy you. You will watch her being filled with self-doubt. And you will give your ugly sympathy to her. You will say to her it's alright, you still love her. And she will be grateful to you! That's ugly! (Dattani, *Night Queen* 69)

This is explosive stuff, and, juxtaposed, both segments referred to hold these two characters accountable, in different ways, for who they are, or who they choose to be. The normative family structure is also made to account for itself, as an instrument of disparity. *Night Queen* shows the family and family relationships to be “different” from any ideal model. The normative, supposedly natural, family is shown to be a social construct, bound by a variety of dicta that foster dishonest or delusional behaviour. Ironically, however, the critique of the normative family—a critique that signals the production of queer difference—emerges as a result of a particular familial relationship, the very product of that model: the strong sibling bond between Raghu and Gayatri. Of course, this sibling relationship is differently inflected, so that Raghu can see the enormous trap being laid for Gayatri, precisely because he has made that

“arrangement” in his life to see through reproductive heteronormativity; in effect, he is a different kind of brother. *Night Queen* produces for its audience a family that does not fall into an expected pattern.

With all the unexpected pathways in this play, it is perhaps appropriate that both characters acknowledge at the end of the play that they each need the other’s “help”. Nevertheless, the ending of *Night Queen* does not strike a definitive note. In that sense, it does not quite help them out:

RAGHU: We should give each other the chance to bloom - at least at night
(They sit cross-legged on the bed, facing one another, just looking at each other, too excited now to do anything, Slow fade-out...) (Dattani, *Night Queen* 70-71)

The conclusion seems to suggest that *something* has happened, but matters are not resolved. As to the future, *Night Queen* favours obliquity, again. That the characters are said to be “too excited now to do anything” may be read as stasis, but, if we read further, we might consider that to be “too excited *now* to do anything” does not say anything about what might or might not transpire at a later point. It is, however, the case that a work like *Night Queen* reminds audiences and readers that difference may not be reduced quite so easily into resolution, or a “final solution,” to paraphrase from the title of another of Dattani’s plays.

On a Muggy Night in Mumbai (1998)

Mahesh Dattani’s *Muggy Night*, first performed on stage in a 1998 Mumbai production directed by longtime Dattani-associate, Lillette Dubey (who also played the part of Kiran in the play), is developed from *Night Queen*.⁴⁰ The longer play itself was further adapted for the

⁴⁰ The same cast, directed by Dubey, performed the play in the summer of 2000 at the Tribeca Performing Arts Center, New York City, organized by the Indo-American Arts Council (<http://www.iaac.us/theatre.htm>).

cinema, and eventually released as a motion picture directed by Dattani himself, titled *Mango Soufflé* (2002). *Muggy Night* has been heralded as a landmark work in Indian drama, being the first Anglophone play from India dealing with homosexuality in the country. However bright a sidelight the play sheds on queer issues in contemporary India, *Muggy Night* resists the narration or enactment of events along conventional structures of time and space. Therefore, a brief summation of the multi-faceted plot (and plotting) is useful. The principal scenes in all three Acts take place over one evening in one setting: a Mumbai apartment belonging to one of the central characters, Kamlesh. He has invited a number of his close queer friends (Bunny, Ranjit, and Deepali) and a former lover (the unabashedly camp character, Sharad, who self-identifies as a “Bombay queen” [Dattani, *Muggy Night* 73]). Sharad once shared the apartment with Kamlesh, indeed designed its interiors, but has since moved out. Early on, Kamlesh states that he has an announcement to make to his friends. As it turns out, this concerns his difficult, failed romance with the closeted Ed (known to Kamlesh’s friends by his middle name, Prakash). This relationship has ramifications in Kamlesh’s subsequent failure to sustain a relationship with Sharad. For much of the play, Kamlesh is still profoundly attached to Ed, and the fantasy of the relationship that might have been.

Matters are complicated with the sudden arrival of Kamlesh’s sister, Kiran, from Bangalore. Kiran is about to be married for a second time, to Ed. She is unaware of Ed’s sexuality and previous relationship with her brother. None of Kamlesh’s circle know that Ed and Prakash are one and the same character till this point. It is a deception, which Kamlesh has fostered, owing to a misplaced sense that Ed holds the key to his sister’s future contentment, especially given that her abusive first marriage has ended in divorce. This is the convulsed core of the play, around and about the vicinity of which erupt different heterogeneous strands of

relationships, desires, and intentions: the production of difference. This core signifies also the interstitiality of different-but-juxtaposed worlds and people. It is held literally and symbolically by the intersecting domains of “straight” and “queer.” Events reach a head when Ed also follows Kiran into Kamlesh’s apartment, with the final outcome being a revelation of all of the complicated relations, followed by a dispersal of the characters from the apartment. Punctuating the scenes in the apartment are three complex scenes staged in a dramatic area termed, “shoonya.” Here, conventions of time and space are thoroughly abandoned, interrupting the arc of the plot and action. Throughout the play, also, characters on-stage are also subject to noisy off-stage marriage celebrations, taking place in a property adjacent to Kamlesh’s building. The overlap suggests in another way the imbrications between different sex-gender domains.

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John McRae, introducing the work in a collected edition of Dattani’s plays, observes that the characters in the play are not “stereotypical,” but that the work functions nevertheless as a collective response to societal homophobia in India. McRae observes, “it is a play about how society creates patterns of behaviour and how easy it is for individuals to fall victim to the expectation society creates” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 45). McRae’s observation on the play (referenced earlier in this chapter) informs readers that, for him, *Muggy Night* is “the first play in Indian theatre to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal.” That “gay themes” lend concrete shape to what are, after all, abstractions—“love, partnership, trust and betrayal”—shows how critical appraisals of the play have reflected on the relations of a similar identity between the various characters: sexual and gender dissidence in the face of a strong heteronormative mainstream being the common factor. It is the starting-point for all of the as-yet slim scholarship on the play (see, for instance, Parmar; Paul; Ray; Saini; Singh).

Within the parameters of Kamlesh's apartment, almost all of the principal characters do indeed represent themselves as gay (with Deepali identifying as lesbian). The space is clearly coded as removed from the heterosexual norm. Highlighting the discontinuities between normative "society" and the dissident sexuality of Kamlesh and his friends, Dattani's opening stage directions describe the apartment as "almost too perfect to be real," which nevertheless "speaks a lot of its occupant, Kamlesh, and his attempt at creating a world where he can belong" (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 49). A simple fact of ownership and occupancy of space is translated to signify more wide-ranging, if precarious, claims to a viable life based on an articulated identity and a settled sense of self outside the purview of reproductive heteronormativity.

However, representations in *Muggy Night* of counter-normative relations between subjects, ranging across identities, have wider ramifications. The representation of difference in the play exposes, as McRae's reading indicates, the limited sexual and gendered modalities of a normatively Indian existence. Yet, *Muggy Night* does not merely rest on an oppositional dynamic between "gay" and "straight" India. In fact, the space of Kamlesh's apartment comes to represent far more spreading fissures and inconsistencies—different differences—in the lives of the characters traversing interrelated but unsettled domains. So, Ranjit and Bunny, for instance, can be "gay Indians" in Kamlesh's apartment, but they queer the consistency of the category "gay Indian." Bunny, a famous television-star, is in a sham marriage, and is held as a paragon of respectable masculinity by his adoring public. Ranjit, who often targets national hypocrisy in his lines, has expatriated himself to settle down in a long-term gay relationship with an Englishman. Their respective decisions are both familiar and alienating to the larger group of friends. They all know of Bunny's sham marriage, and Ranjit's inability or unwillingness to live in India, but these are points of repeated contention too (Bunny is often on the defensive about his decision to

lead a double-life, and is compelled to reflect on his unsavoury duplicity in the final Act of the play, while Ranjit chafes at being called a “coconut” by the others). Deepali, represented as unambiguously out of the closet, is also not idealized.

These fissures tracking the different trajectories followed by individual characters through the course of the play burst out of a linked, but not uni-planar or linear, experience of sexual and gendered difference. The analysis in the sections below follows aspects of the textual/textural site of the play. This site is run through with strands of difference which project and disperse along different ways, much like the dispersal of the characters at the end of the play, when they leave the stage. This approach reads the plotline and narrative form of the play, in connection with the complex spatial aspects to the work.

The staging of the play—the space/s on which it is set—lends itself to the kind of dispersals and differences—of characters, points of view, (inter)relationships, subjectivities and identities—that this work exemplifies. An analytical approach combining staging and content fills out a critical appreciation of the texture of *Muggy Night*. It fleshes out an understanding of the ramifications of the overlaps, crossings, interruptions, and inconsistencies that present, recur, and are never completely resolved through the duration of the play’s action. The expanded reading of *Muggy Night* which follows builds on the growing scholarly recognition of Dattani’s particular strategy of enabling variegation to perform critical functions. As Namrata Pathak observes, Dattani’s plays are “sites” shaping “a shared domain of conversation and debate, of polyphonic voices, and of plural subjectivities” (1). Indeed, a play like *Muggy Night* reads plurality against the normative standards of what it means to “share” a “domain,” whether in the form of mutually responsive sex-gender identities between desiring subjects or that “imagined community” of the secular, modern Indian nation.

Tracing plurality and difference in this way draws out the play's complex approach to the fundamental question of how queerness and/or a national identity are to be imagined. *Muggy Night* does not idealize relations of similitude on which any identity stands. Nor does it crystallize any image or idea of entity of the "gay" or "queer" Indian. At the other end, it also does not approach the issue of difference in an ordered manner. Rather, the contours of *Muggy Night* take shape in the un/settling of similitude against an excess of difference. The play does, on the surface, represent characters seeking out identities in which sex, gender and nation-citizenship have significant demarcating/binding functions. But, it actually spills over into a more complicated critique of any concept of the self and of identity, which is the province of queer antiessentialist thinking. Representations of characters and scenarios in the play correspond to productions of difference rendered unresolved and irreducible.

Pathak's observation about "plurality" and "polyphonic voices" in Dattani's plays intersects with the playwright's self-avowed interest in approaching issues from "different angles." The more radical implications of "difference," when plurality and polyphony are supplemented with irresolution and irreducibility, draws *Muggy Night* into the conceptual domain of anti-essentialist queer thought where difference dovetails the deferral of unified—or, transcendently signified—objects of knowledge. Pathak's work (her focus is on another play from Dattani's corpus, *Bravely Fought The Queen*) has already begun the important work of reading his plays using the broad theoretical insights into the dis/unities of the self. On his part, scholar Somnath Paul has traced some of the insights of queer theory on readings of *Muggy Night*. Paul's criticism displaces the normative complacencies operating in the Indian status quo: as he observes, "[t]he conspicuous absence of queer readings of the plays of Mahesh Dattani perhaps consolidates the assumption that India is a tolerant nation and that the urban middle

class...is inclusive in nature though preferring heterosexuality within marriage” (1). This chapter develops detailed analyses of the production and enactment of queer difference and its implications especially for secularized norms of plurality and difference in India. It offers more-extended close readings than given by Paul. The aim here is to develop fuller ideas of how both the text and staging of *Muggy Night* mobilizes the potential of queer heterogeneity.

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Given the play of difference, the theatrical ground of *Muggy Night* invites further examination. The ground, or stage on which the play happens, as it were, is that dimension which allows the dramatized conversations and action between characters to be enacted/inhabited/projected/performed. Extended stage directions about the theatrical space come at the start of the play. Over three Acts, characters traverse three areas. Two of these areas are “realistic” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 49): rooms in Kamlesh’s apartment (the living area leading off to a kitchen; and the bedroom, leading to a bathroom). The other area, held between living room and bedroom, is a space of “non-realistic” suspension itself sub-divided into three further levels. This latter, “non-realistic” space is termed, “shoonya.” It forms the site of some of the most densely imagined scenes in the play. Spatial arrangements, therefore, follow different, uneven, and discontinuous lines and levels. All, however, are networked together. The overall effect is of a theatrical/textual space characterized by rising and falling contours, a form of relief-work. Scholars of Dattani’s work have already remarked on the repeated use of multiple levels on-stage (see, for example, Saini 200). The strategy is easily read as one in which multi-planar spatiality interrupts the sequential chronology of linear order.

In his introductory note to *Muggy Night*, McRae invites us to consider the ways in which the inner, private world of Kamlesh’s apartment is contrasted with the world outside, a dyad

which corresponds to the particular relationship in modern Indian society between reproductive heteronormativity and non-procreative homosexuality (45). Yet, this insight can be further fleshed out, expanding critical understanding of the patterns of spatial arrangements: particularly, the different kinds of relations enabled—drawn out, as it were—in different areas. For instance, Kamlesh’s apartment, which occupies one spatial plane, can be read in multiple ways. In its totality, the apartment is indeed a site of hermetic privacy juxtaposed with the public sphere: the “windows overlook the Mumbai skyline and act literally as a window to the city” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 49). It is also easy to contrast the apartment as a whole with the site of the marriage-celebrations off-stage.

However, even within the apartment, different areas strike different notes. For instance, the apartment also funnels the attentions of readers and audiences, from living areas that are more visibly open (that is, the drawing room in which Kamlesh’s friends circulate) to those intensely private areas much more sealed off. This latter area is comprised of Kamlesh’s bedroom and bathroom, in which some of the most striking scenes of intimacy occur, away from the living-area. It is indeed quite plausible to stage this sequence along a spatial decline—one way of producing a funnelling-effect on stage—from living room to bedroom. The stage directions in *Muggy Night* repeatedly refers to different levels, steps, and the bedroom is set “below” (49) the other two areas.

This telescoping of the domestic site from larger areas to smaller, more concentrated ones, speaks to a contemporary common-sense partitioning of living spaces in which the principal living-room, often combined with an eating-space, is generally of larger dimensions than the bedroom. Even the largest bedroom of a contemporary home does not customarily exceed the size of the living room. In *Muggy Night*, the bedroom as the innermost core of the

living space (a “secret, private space,” [Dattani, *Muggy Night* 49] as the opening stage directions define the room) is also a site into which is concentrated the attentions of readers and audiences, a key spatial base for the subjectivizing character to inhabit. The bedroom is *par excellence* the space in which the homeowner, Kamlesh, can *be*.

Yet, this sharply focused, funnelled, area of the bedroom is not just shut in. The outside world constantly intervenes into the space of Kamlesh’s apartment, as McRae has observed. Other kinds of interventions within the apartment itself are dramatized. The presence of a “gauze wall,” distinguishing the bedroom from the rest of the stage, evokes a threshold (a traversable “gauze”) as it does a barrier (un-impregnable “wall”) (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 49). The “wall” becomes counter-intuitively translucent. It is alive to the possibilities of porosity: that is, those interventions that complicate Kamlesh’s world and person(ality). His privacy is as much interrupted in the space of the bedroom as it is in the rest of the apartment. Different characters—Sharad, Kiran, and Ed, in particular—find reasons to enter the bedroom or bathroom at different points in the three Acts. These traversals into the bedroom are marked, as we shall see, by startling revelations. The bedroom, then, is only partially that inner sanctum for Kamlesh. It is actually set in close proximity to other spaces as much it is a room withdrawing hermetically from other rooms and spaces. If the sanctum of the bedroom offers a spatial dimension to the ideal, self-contained subject, the disruption of the spatial sequence from public to private by the juxtaposition of other spatial orders needs to be related to the play of differences on the identifying subject.

Set in a complex relationship to the two areas of Kamlesh’s apartment, the other principal acting-area—“shoonya”—is imagined as

a completely non-realistic set comprising of three levels. Characters in this area are immediately suspended into a ‘shoonya’ [literally, ‘zero’; figuratively, an empty space] where they are forced to confront their inner thoughts. (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 49)

The rendering of “shoonya,” as stepped spaces within spaces, clearly echoes the utilization of split levels to accommodate multiple arenas of action and more than one narrative strand of complex plots. “Shoonya” repeatedly interrupts the linear temporal structure of the main plot of *Muggy Night*—the drama being enacted over the course of one evening in Kamlesh’s apartment—by facilitating simultaneous action, flashbacks, and overlapping dialogue between characters who sometimes speak to one another across the orders of time and space on-stage. Interpreted another way, the multi-levelled, yet adjacent, spaces in the play problematize the “too perfect” world of Kamlesh. They act as a counter-balance to Kamlesh’s desire to control his environment (where he lives, “where he can belong”) as well as his subjectivity (who he is). The same interruptions in space and subjectivity impact on other characters and identities, across the sex/gender continuum, including closeted characters like Ed/Prakash as well as “those heterosexuals,” as Sharad describes the mainly off-stage straight characters.

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Kamlesh’s apartment suggests a matrix within which he attempts to domesticate and (re)shape his life in a particular way, shutting out the past of failed relationships, particularly with Ed. Yet, these attempts are subverted and/or deferred by the play, as the spatial contours of the play indicate. On the one hand, Sharad and his other friends note, Kamlesh seems to have become something of a “recluse in the heart of Bombay” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 64). He is almost too much at home in the interior space. He tells Deepali at the start of the play: “I do most

of my designing here ... I like it here ... it's cooler for one thing" (64). Kamlesh's apartment is located in one of Mumbai's most sought-after residential areas, but not, as the stage directions state, quite at the top-most end of the property ladder. Location corresponds with Kamlesh's own economic status: he is affluent, but not extravagantly wealthy. The apartment reflects his urbane, upper-middle-class existence, "beautifully done up in 'ethnic chic' fashion" (49). It also contains cultural artefacts that encode a gay sensibility: for example, the poster of legendary actress and gay icon, Meena Kumari, in her role from the Bollywood melodrama, *Pakeezah*. As gay poet and scholar Hoshang Merchant observes, Meena Kumari, known for her many performances of tragic heroines in Bollywood, represents for (some) gay men, "women martyred like themselves" (Merchant, "Introduction" xiii).

However, the role of a martyr-recluse is not the only, or even the most apposite, characterization of Kamlesh. In fact, the opening stage directions make it clear that Kamlesh, for all his love of privacy, is no retiring celibate: at any rate, he continues to act on his sexual desires for men. The articulation of a subject's sexuality is intimately threaded with the spatial setting, the directions imply. Beginning innocuously with the statement in the opening directions, "[t]here are two men in the bedroom," the play interrupts and unsettles the normative scene of home-life, in which the bedroom is most ideally the preserve of the heterosexual couple. What a particular space is, and what is done within or along that spatial domain can therefore be investigated in tandem. And, *Muggy Night* allows such investigations to follow multiple, different, even open-ended, tracks. Moreover, *Muggy Night* demonstrates a networking, or tracing, between different planes of subjectivity, identity, and sexuality from this point on. Kamlesh is represented as a libidinal subject in his bedroom. From the very beginning, he is mapped out with reference to a living space, which also happens to be the site of male

homosexual activity. In the bedroom—that “secret, private space”—a post-coital scene is in progress. To this, the reader and audience is privy. The attention to the sex that has obviously just happened, prior to the start of the play, is noteworthy. According to the opening directions, Kamlesh is in a dressing gown, smoking and gazing upon a man putting on his clothes, the uniform of a security guard.

The stage directions make it clear that, for both reader/audience and characters, this is a beginning *in media res*. In an ongoing scene where the central character is introduced (i.e., shown to be what he is) in the context of what he does, or has just done (as a homosexual), the reader/audience is allowed to reflect on some of the processes involved in the formation of Kamlesh’s self. The play invites readings of Kamlesh’s character from the perspective that who he *is* in the moment is also who he *has always been*, before, that is, the start of Act One. The question of his subjectivity and identity (that is, who he is, and who he might be identified as) is also inextricably linked up here with his sexual activity (what he does) with other men. The close interrelationship between Kamlesh’s persona and his sexuality drawn here can also be understood as a link the character aims to achieve between who he is and has (always) been, and what he does and has done as a homosexual.

Kamlesh is invested in making his sexual activity very much part of both an inwardly focused subjectivity and an outwardly projected identity.⁴¹ He feels the need to represent his ongoing sexual encounters with the security guard in order to make them significant in some larger way. Unexpectedly bending down to tie the guard’s shoelaces, Kamlesh and he exchange

⁴¹This relation is explored by Halperin in *What Do Gay Men Want*, as discussed in the Introduction. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick writes of the relationship between inward focus and outward projection, as characterizing the relationship between the two dominant applications of performativity (7). The two applications reflect the different ways in which speech-act theory and deconstruction on the one hand, and theories of theatricality on the other hand, imagine those articulations whereby one *is* and also whereby one is (or is not, as the case may be) *with* others in the world.

looks, deriving some tenderness out of an encounter between two men of very different class backgrounds (earlier, it is made clear that this is sex for which Kamlesh pays the guard). The detailed directions again make it quite clear that this is a moment of importance that needs to be staged carefully:

He looks up at him while he slowly ties his laces. The guard looks at him.

Kamlesh moves to the stereo. The guard is touched by this gesture and isn't quite sure whether he ought to leave. (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 51)

Something in the perceived mutuality of the look makes Kamlesh ask the guard whether he actually agrees to the sex for the money. In confusion, the guard disagrees, and then, “realizing the implication of what he said” (51), confirms that it is for the money that he has sex with Kamlesh. Of course, Kamlesh takes advantage of the uncertainty to say out loud: “You do enjoy it. What you do to me, what I do to you” (51). It is the moment of a shared identity being articulated.

Yet, the statement and the immediate circumstances of its utterance do not consolidate the relations of consonance being discursively imagined. There is, the text goes on to make clear, a language-divide between Kamlesh and the guard, in that the former can speak both English and Hindi, while the latter knows Hindi along with a mere scattering of English words. Consequently, the guard cannot and does not respond in any way to the point made; by this stage, the guard is in a hurry to leave, and shows no curiosity as to what Kamlesh means. He does not ask Kamlesh to translate, even though the two have been conversing in Hindi just prior to the moment. The symmetry and mutuality of a shared sexual identity evidenced through sexual practices—“what you do to me, what I do to you”—is arrested, therefore; the lines

reflecting this particular exchange read more like Kamlesh thinking aloud, about what *he* does or what *he* thinks *they* do, and are:

KAMLESH. You do enjoy it. What you do to me, what I do to you. Don't you?

GUARD (*a little nervously*). Ab main jaon? [May I go now?]

KAMLESH. But we will have to pretend you do it only for the money.

GUARD. Duty chalu hai, saab. Secretary daatenga mujhe. [I should be on duty now, sir. The secretary will scold me]

KAMLESH. Go do your duty. You are just like him. He is no different from you.... No. He was worse! (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 51)⁴²

While, on the one hand, Kamlesh's apartment functions as a space along which particular sexual subjects and identities are mapped out in the play, it also simultaneously functions as a space of rupture. In the exchange above, for example, the narrative is made up of two strands: that of Kamlesh and his words and opinions; and that of the Guard, with his own different, pressing concerns. Belying Kamlesh's attempts to draw a straightforward relation of identity between the two men and thereby consolidating his own sense of self, the strands do not blend. His frustration with the guard ("go do your duty"), coupled with the nervousness and the uncertainty in the guard's behaviour serves to contrast rather than complement the fleeting moment of post-coital intimacy represented just a few lines earlier in the text. Kamlesh and the guard might stand, literally, on the same ground, but they occupy the space in very different ways.

The space where Kamlesh can "belong" is therefore riven. These rifts, represented both textually and spatially in the play, have ramifications for individual characters in the play, as well as on the network of interrelationships represented. For, the networks of relationships trace

⁴² All translations from the Hindi mine.

those same paths made by the rifts. So, while Kamlesh and the guard's relationship is fragmentary, *something* like a relationship has also occurred. The challenges in delineating the exact nature of how the two have related extend even into the most tangible of bodily domains. When the guard returns to the apartment after some time has elapsed in Act One, along with the bottles of alcohol Kamlesh has ordered him to buy for the party, he is accosted by Sharad, who has by now entered the stage, as has Deepali. He notices a mark on the guard's neck:

SHARAD. Arre. Yeh kya? (*Looks at the guard's neck.*) [Oh. What's this?]

GUARD (*a little wary*). Thodasa lag gya. Salaam. [It's gotten hurt a little. Good day to you, sir.]

SHARAD. Kamlesh saab ke pas bahut se dawaiya hain aisi chot ke liye.

[Kamlesh *saab* has many medicines for wounds just like this]⁴³

GUARD. Ji-ji. Nahin. Main theek hoon. (*Exits quickly with a salaam*) [Yes-Yes. No. I am alright.]

SHARAD. Well Kamlabai has succeeded in breaking him in. Remember to congratulate him on that. (*Dattani, Muggy Night 60*)

The mark, recognized by Sharad as a “love-bite” from Kamlesh (63) also carries with it the connotations of something more sinister. Kamlesh supposedly “breaks in” men, which is either an over-the-top dig from the acid-tongued Sharad, or an accurate reference to Kamlesh's forcefulness and interest in sexual domination; the ambivalence is not resolved in the play. There is a strong possibility that this uncertainty around the mark made by Kamlesh represents a running line of rupture, which is also a line of relation between him and the guard. The network

⁴³ In this context “*saab*,” derived from “*sahib*” is a common suffix to denote a man of higher status like an employer. A term like this establishes the hierarchical relationship between Kamlesh and the guard in terms of a conventional social lexicon.

between lines of rupture and relation is the kind of paradoxical/counter-intuitive arrangement that contours the textual domain of the play. The same kind of arrangement is in play in the earlier private exchange between Kamlesh and the guard.

Sharad's acid references to Kamlesh's sexual activity quoted above seem to confirm the suspicions of those readers and audiences who slated the playwright for producing "stereotypical" gay characters. However, for all of his excesses (his feminization of Kamlesh's name to "Kamlabai" might well be seen as trafficking in typical inversions of masculine signifiers to the feminine in a sexist appropriation⁴⁴), it is clearly the same Sharad whose diagnosis of Kamlesh's character is precise and streamlined. Sharad sheds insight into Kamlesh's exploitative behaviour with the guard (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 63). He is clear that Kamlesh's self-involved obsession with the memory of Ed has had destructive ramifications. For Sharad, Kamlesh has selfishly attempted to enjoy best of both worlds, keeping alive a loving memory of Ed, while trying to love Sharad. As Sharad points out crisply, Kamlesh might have "tried" to love him, but just not enough: "Oh sure, [you loved me] in your own special way! I am like a brother you always wanted.... Or no, what's a better line? We can be true friends forever if you get out of my flat. That's it, isn't it? You threw me out" (56). When the extent to which Kamlesh's complicity in abetting Kiran's ignorance of Ed's sexuality becomes clear, it is Sharad who again directly accuses his ex-lover and friend of being a "selfish pig" for "ruining her life"

⁴⁴ "Kamla" or "Kamala" is a typical Hindi female name, while "bai" is used in Indian contexts (particularly in the Marathi vernacular of Maharashtra and the city of Mumbai) to address women, also functioning as a suffix to female names ("bai," in fact, has been entered into the American-English lexicon with an entry in the New Oxford American Dictionary).

(83).⁴⁵ As far as a diagnosis of some of the inconsistencies in Kamlesh's character is concerned, Sharad has a good selection of the most insightful lines of the play.

In *Muggy Night*, fissures like these correspond to, and gain a more tangible aspect from, the spatial imagining of areas of dramatic action. Kamlesh's apartment is not constructed as a contiguous area of habitation, but rather as one of multiple, disjointed levels. The spatial arrangement in the play is not a mere adjunct to the narrative, a platform for the plot. Spaces animate the very question of habitation *as* the story unfolds. The "habitus" of the text—its "constitution" (OED), in other words—is connected with the spatial dynamics of "habitation," a word signifying not only "a place of abode" but also as the "the action of dwelling in or inhabiting" (OED). The accumulating shape of the play, as the narrative/text progresses from Act to Act, is linked with that "action" of habitation, which might also be understood as a "state or process of living in a particular place" (if we can juxtapose Webster's interpretation of that second meaning of "habitation" to the OED's). The progress of the text can in this work in particular tied up with the process of negotiating (i.e., living in) space/s.

The process of living in a place as much as the process of belonging are fraught affairs in the play. As characters navigate a multi-levelled space on the stage, they negotiate as well the different parts to individual subjectivity and the complexities of inter-relationships. The issue of being a particular kind of person is lined up against performative discontinuities. Despite his best intentions, Kamlesh has to face the fact that who he is and/or who he thinks he is does not always level up with what he does. His ideal form of being and belonging, as a gay man in a mutually satisfying relationship with another gay man, is enjambed with the unbalanced sexual and social

⁴⁵ The line mirrors Raghu's point to Ash in "Night Queen." Both Kamlesh and Sharad have elements of Raghu developed in this longer work. That Sharad's character is developed out of the insightful central character from that earlier version of the play is another indication that Sharad has a significant function in this play.

practices he enters into. The encounter with the guard certainly demonstrates that he has easier access to an array of social privileges and feels an easier sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure. The symmetry of the construction, “what you do to me, what I do to you,” being stopped so soon after, might therefore also be read as Kamlesh’s alibi, an attempt to cover up the gaps.

Shoonya: One

Muggy Night critiques the notion that there can be a stable subject with a contained, fully articulated identity transcending all those operations of deferral, which mediates meaning and being in the world. The ideal national subject—reproductive; heterosexual—is steadily undone/unsettled/exceeded, just as any notion of an ideal queer Indian subject (say, Kamlesh) is also subjected to deferral. The instabilities thus foregrounded can be read as that engagement with difference which is a product of the principal subject matter in the work: what it means to be different in India in relation to a framework of sexual and gendered diversity. As already discussed, the arrangement and, indeed, deployment of spaces in the play are important elements in this larger engagement with difference. The space of “shoonya” is important in this respect. As noted above, the term, “shoonya,” denotes the mathematical figure of zero. In terms of the spatial dynamics of the play, the term would appear to demarcate an empty space. However, this interpretation can be further complicated.

As used in multiple sequences in Acts One and Two, the space of “shoonya” can, in fact, be read as a site in which *nothing* seems to happen in line with the time and space of the principal plot occurring during the evening-party in Kamlesh’s apartment, and yet also a space in which *everything* that happens, when read cumulatively, turns out to be pivotal to the development of a queer production of difference. It is arguably both empty (indeed, for large slices of time in the duration of the play, it remains darkened and invisible to the audience) and

full (on the one hand, teeming with dramatic activity at important junctures; and, on the other, packed with larger resonances for characters and plot). In this binding together of “nothing” and “everything,” the space of “shoonya” acts much like its numerical counterpart (“shoonya” as zero). The figure of zero functions both as a signifier of nothing (zero), and, as a recurring element in numerical compounds measuring multitudes (zeroes), of, practically, everything.

In Act One, “shoonya” is used to introduce the characters of Ed and Kiran, Kamlesh’s former lover and sister respectively. The newly engaged Ed and Kiran are the two principals in this first scene in “shoonya,” while Ed and Kamlesh, Kiran’s brother, will play the two parts in the second scene in “shoonya” at the start of Act Two (discussed below), and all the three converge in the third and final scene in “shoonya” at the end of Act Two. The triangular relationship between the three characters not only forms the core of the plot, but also reflects, at the individual level, the networked fields of national heteronormative respectability, and queerness. In the first scene in “shoonya,” the action and dialogue are less complicated, less multi-planar, than in later uses of the space. Ed and Kiran are on an airplane, settling in prior to take-off. They appear to be the model heterosexual couple, Ed being normatively masculine (confident, assertive), Kiran, the feminine opposite (hesitant, pliant).

The first scene in “shoonya” occurs just after the opening scene in Act One, the latter dealing with the interaction between Kamlesh and the guard as discussed above. The juxtaposition of these segments (Kamlesh and the guard; Ed and Kiran) suggest that they need to be read in networked ways even though the juncture of these two scenes signifies a dramatic shift in the order of time and space in the play. However, the two scenes might be related in particular ways if they are analyzed as they are placed: side-by-side, that is. If the ground of Kamlesh’s queer identity with the guard are first sited in the former’s bedroom, but only to be displaced by

the deferral of symmetrical relations between the two men, then a similar articulation of settled heterosexual relations occurs in the subsequent segment in “shoonya,” only for the stable truths implied in these relations to be undone in the scene (and progressively unsettled through the course of the play). In the airplane, Kiran is represented as “extremely attractive” but unsure of herself, lacking in self-confidence, and only too happy to be pleasing to Ed (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 51; cf. 51-53). As mentioned, Ed and Kiran are travelling; we come to realize that the pair has actually flown in “real-time” from Bangalore to Mumbai, arriving unexpectedly in Kamlesh’s apartment during his party (on entering Kamlesh’s apartment in Act One, Kiran notes that she could not wait till the next day to meet her brother, as planned [74]).

Handsome, more youthful than his age, and dressed in a “conservative business shirt” and a jacket slung over his arm, Ed’s seeming confidence is contrasted to Kiran’s reticence (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 51-52). Through the counter-intuitive logic of heteronormativity, where opposites are made symmetrical, the two contrasting characters appear as perfectly settled, properly coded within the gender order. Yet, these codes become over-determined, and the seeming order becomes the site of creeping discord. For, Ed’s role as the patriarch-husband (in-waiting) tips over into that of paternalistic bossiness, and Kiran finds herself unexpectedly burdened by her reticence and compliance. Ed has unilaterally assumed that Kiran will want a window seat and gets her the seat without consulting her; on the aircraft, Kiran mildly notes her preference for an aisle seat, suggesting the couple simply swap window and middle seats to avoid too much “fuss” (52). Ed’s concern for Kiran, which he reiterates in their conversation, gets him to find her an aisle seat. But, care immediately tips over into a bullying aggression, directed individually at Kiran and generally at the airline crew. In his insistence on getting Kiran what (he thinks) she really wants, Ed’s behaviour deteriorates. In the process, he deflects the responsibility for the

fuss he causes to Kiran. Her initial want, which she was willing to negotiate, has been re-signified by him as a need that cannot be ignored. As he starts shouting with the crew, throwing his weight around (“Don’t you understand English? I want an aisle seat for my fiancé and I don’t care if it is a full flight!” [52-53]), Kiran is the one now “embarrassed and self-conscious,” the focus of unwanted attention on the plane, made to play the role of the “fiancé” whose needs have become the source of commotion.

The overall effect of this scene is of a little vibration signalling a seismic shift. An intimate moment of convergence—the newly engaged couple travelling together for the first time—functions simultaneously as a site of disturbance and dispersal. Readers following my analysis of “The Reading,” will also note this curious but telling overlap. At this point in the play, Kiran is represented as poised between acceptance and rejection of gendered codes. She “recoils” at Ed’s loud, vulgar protestations, but “is comforted by the thought that he is doing it for her” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 53). In Acts Two and Three, Kiran will be made to confront in ever more painfully visible ways, the discontinuities between her “thoughts” (of Ed her fiancé) and reality (of Ed the lover of her brother). The space of the play is the space on which these discontinuous planes co-exist. The dramatic space is that diversified ground between the imagined and the real, the fantastic and the plausible, that Ed and Kamlesh also have to negotiate. Phrased otherwise, sites like “shoonya” are symbolically spaces on which symmetry is enjambed with asymmetry.

Shoonya: Two

The second scene in which the space of “shoonya” is put to use comes at the start of Act Two. In this scene the spatial strategies are more complicated compared to those in the scene from Act One. As observed already, “shoonya,” like the numerical figure of “zero,” can signify

both nothing *and* everything. The paradox is one other way of thinking about how conventions of linear time and contiguous space are subverted here, as a strategy to drive the different meanings that can be derived from the larger work. As the scene plays out, the connections with a “real” time and space are loosened while material continues to be added, especially to the dimensions of subjectivity and inter-subjective relations, as characters interact with one another and “confront their inner thoughts.”

The principal actors in the scene are Ed and Kamlesh. The scene is a composite. For the most part, it plays like a flashback to the first time the two men meet, on a park bench at a cruising spot (it is reminiscent also of the kind of cruising that brings Raghu and Ash together in “Night Queen,” although that shorter work does not develop the scene like this play). There are also, however, particular exchanges between the two that read more like a dream. For these latter exchanges, Kamlesh and Ed are in effect split over across time and space. The two of them stand behind/above the space of the bench observing themselves, imagined, according to the stage directions, as still-seated on the now-empty bench.

The divisions and subdivisions at play here reflect on the production of difference in the work. The scene interrupts the narrative and plot-sequence of the play, ostensibly to provide readers, in the form of a flashback, some context and further insight into characters like Ed and Kamlesh. Apparently, then, the scene is set to inform readers about how and why Ed and Kamlesh behave in the way they do. If “shoonya” is set up so that characters in the space are forced to “confront their inner thoughts,” then that space, as a zone of interiority, promises access to further inner cores. Yet, this entry-point to interiority (of who characters are, and, of how they might relate to one another) does not realize any accompanying access to a stabilized or settled state.

The scene is located at the juncture of Acts One and Two. The end of Act One explodes the heterosexual persona adopted so ostentatiously by Ed. No more just the fiancé of Kiran. Ed is now shown also to be Kamlesh's ex-lover. Ed's homosexuality is named, in more ways than one, in the disclosure of his double-life. Kamlesh's friends realize at the end of Act One that Ed (Kiran's fiancé) and Prakash (Kamlesh's lover) are one and the same. The man they had known only as Prakash is the same man Kiran calls Ed. The torturous domain between heterosexuality and homosexuality spans the character of Ed, much like the span between his first name (Ed for Edwin) and middle name (Prakash). The significance of his full name, "Edwin Prakash Matthew," should also be read against the narrative-framework of the secular Nehruvian nation. It is a hybrid name, its seeming contradiction ("Edwin" is a Christian name; "Prakash" is a Hindu name; "Matthew" is a Christian name used as surname as is often the case in certain Indian Christian naming practices) actually signifying a pluralistic composite. Ed, as Kiran points out at the end of Act One, is a Tamil Christian, and she is Hindu; their planned marriage will be a two-day, two-city, affair covering both Hindu and Christian ceremonies (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 77).

Leaving aside the secular ideal of Indian diversity being expressed in the planned inter-community marriage, Ed's name itself strives to signify that palimpsestic vision of manifold cultures layered into the modern Indian nation. Yet, that secular-pluralistic ideal, realized only when Ed's full name is uttered, almost invoked, in a linear sequence is immediately interrupted. The normative, progressive order within which Ed the subject is situated—within the secular nation, on the one hand, and the gendered structure of family names and the marital-reproductive structure, on the other—is cut through by the emergence of other spaces at the very moment his full name appears in the text. The *telos* represented the respectable Tamil Christian Indian young

man about to be married is countered with the planar emergence of Prakash's queer world, his past meeting and relationship with Kamlesh. It is telling that the queer interaction between the two men on this other plane is developed in the other space of "shoonya," immediately after the sequential narrative of national diversity is produced for readers and audiences. This is how Act One concludes:

SHARAD. Oh, Kiran. You must tell us more about Ed later.

KIRAN. Hasn't Kamlesh mentioned anything about Ed to you?

SHARAD (*looks around*). Has he?

KIRAN. Well, why should he? He has been under a lot of stress. You must tell them about Prakash. It will help you get out of your depression.

SHARAD. Who?

KIRAN (*to Sharad*). Ed. Edwin Prakash Matthew. We can all talk soon after I unpack (*Exits into bedroom, followed by the guard carrying the bag.*)

SHARAD. Are you mad? You must be mad!

DEEPALI. You must tell her!

KAMLESH. You promised! All of you! It doesn't exist.

SHARAD. You tricked us. You tricked us into it!

KAMLESH. No. (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 78-79)

The complexities of reading the second scene in "shoonya" are compounded by the fact that its two principals, Ed and Kamlesh, are not always plotted together, even when they meet for the very first time in a park, and even though the entire scene takes the form of a conversation between the two men. At the start of the scene, Ed is the only one highlighted on stage, sitting in "shoonya" on the park bench. Kamlesh does not yet enter the scene (he does only halfway

through the scene), but Ed has to hold a conversation with this absent-present figure of the other man, whom we then have to imagine sitting next to Ed on the bench. The stage directions and initial dialogue/monologue maps out the *mis-en-scene* as well as the structure of the dialogue between the two characters, both marked by splits and shifts:

The characters are in more or less the same positions as at the end of Act I, but now they are in silhouette.

The second level is lit. Ed is sitting on a park bench. He spots someone walking by. His eyes follow him. The person walking by, whom we don't see, turns around and walks past by Ed again. Ed smiles at him, again following him with his eyes as he walks by. Now the person walks by again and this time Ed gestures to him to sit next to him....

Silence. Ed looks around furtively to see if anyone is watching.

ED. Huh? Did you say something?

(Looks at his watch, as if in response to a question asked by the other person.)

8.30... What time do they close the park?

(Listens to an answer.) Oh. That doesn't give us much time. (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 80)

The action from the end of Act One, signifying the principal plot of the play, has been frozen, the figures now in silhouette signifying a pause in time and place. While not clearly stated in the directions, it is plausible to imagine the lighting in the rest of Kamlesh's apartment now more obscured, in order to place the other actors "in silhouette;" established patterns of time as well as space have now been interwoven with this other textual thread of the scene in "shoonya."

The time- and space-shift signalled in the scene reflect on the shape-shifting characters in the play, especially with regard to their negotiations of the closet. Readers are well reminded of Diana Fuss' point about sexuality and the continuing spatial traversal between the poles, "inside" and "outside" (1). In this play, as in this scene, shifts—in time, space, and the shape of who someone might want to be (subjectivity)/might want to be identified with (identity)—are endowed with a mobility. It is this continual mobility, this spreading-out, likened to a *production* of difference, which contours and *complicates* how different characters see themselves and others within larger matrices of national heteronormativity and a more surreptitious homosexuality.

Something of the nature of the shifting ground on which characters try to stand, in a manner of speaking, has already been discussed in the exchange between Kamlesh and the apartment-guard in the opening moments of the first Act. That first exchange demonstrates, in the kind of interrelationship drawn between Kamlesh and the guard, an inconsistency between Kamlesh's ideals of being (whether in the more private domain of an individual subjectivity or the more public practices of an identity) and his messier practices and privileges. This scene in "shoonya" shows something more of that restlessness in him, as well as, perhaps even more so, that of the closeted Ed split between two sexualities and between the "inside" and "outside" of Fuss.

This restlessness is also evidenced in the tracing and retracing of steps of the character Ed sees and follows with his eyes, soon to be revealed as Kamlesh. Readers and audiences of the play are in a position to understand that this is a scene in which a mutual attraction is being enacted, something that becomes clearer as the scene progresses, with additional dialogue and action. The potential for a (sexual) connection aside, it is also possible to read Kamlesh's steps to

and from the park bench as a reflection of an internal thought-process. This connection can lead us to consider the extent to which the act of cruising represented here is also wrapped up in a private, inwardly-oriented activity, returning readers to the domain of an individual's subjectivity: who or what he is/wants to be/desires/seek for himself.

The contrast of extroversion—an outwardly oriented activity such as walking along a set route—and introspection—the inner workings of an individual's mind—is noted, in quite another context, by the writer Petr Kral. In *Loving Venice*, Kral writes of the solitary devotee of that city whose love of tracing and retracing familiar pathways in Venice is connected up not just with the attractions of an external environment, but also with the subject's own inner self:

Venice ... casts such a spell over her devotees, among them myself, that they are driven to despair like hopeless lovers....

To wander here is to keep retracing our steps, heading down alleyways where the only sound is that of our own disarray, until with an abrupt rattling sound as the shops close their metal shutters at twilight, they empty of any sign of life except the relentless pounding of our own footsteps; in short we soon realise that we are going round in circles on the back roads of our minds. (7-9).

No less than Kral, Dattani links place and person in intimate, complicated ways. Kral's Venice is a place "her devotees" love in an absolute, even abject, way ("driven to despair like hopeless lovers"). Dattani's park is that twilight place in which another kind of "hopeless love" is being staged. It is also well worth remembering that Venice as much as the park figure as liminal spaces. Venice famously straddles the elements of land and water; the park tilts to and from heteronormative authority and a clandestine homosexuality. Both sites seek to unsettle the individual traversing it. In the act of crossing and recrossing the park bench on which Ed sits,

Kamlesh negotiates not just the seeking out of sex and/or love in another man, but also something more internally focussed, relating to that realm of an individual subjectivity that is so important to him, as yet unresolved, also restless.

The issue of what Kamlesh and Ed are looking for in the park, and who they are as individuals when they cruise in the park are in flux. It is this uncertainty that renders both characters as shape-shifting. In Ed's case, as readers and the audience trace his closeted character through the place, this shifting/shifty nature is more easily discerned. Even in Kamlesh's case, however, his intentions are never as clear as it would seem. The shadowy outlines of both characters, the ellipses that will in fact mark the whole of their unsuccessful, subsequent relationship, and the shifting quality outlined above are all, of course, dramatized cleverly in the exchanges on the park bench, during which the two characters rarely speak to one another in a direct, unmediated way. Either Ed speaks to an empty space next to him on the park bench, or Kamlesh speaks to Ed when he does enter the space of "shoonya" standing behind Ed above the bench, the two not making eye contact it would seem from the staging instructions.

Addressing that empty space next to him, as if Kamlesh were actually sitting there, Ed speaks:

No I don't come here very often. (*Looks at the other man closely.*) You seem to be a regular. No? ... (*Looks around.*) Why do you come here?... No. It can't be for the same reason I come here.... (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 80)

This part of the scene is a flashback to a time when Kamlesh lived in Bangalore, prior to his move to Mumbai and the apartment in which the remainder of the play occurs. In Act One, Kamlesh admits to cruising in Mumbai to forget about his failed relationship with Ed. It is not clear to what extent Kamlesh is a regular at parks in the past, when he meets with Ed. He denies

it in the passage quoted above, but, reading between the lines, it is arguable that Kamlesh is not an *ingenue* to cruising, whether in Bangalore in the past or in Mumbai in the present. He knows, for instance, when the park closes at night, something Ed does not. Furthermore, he knows the environs well enough to be able to walk along it in the dark. If it is the case that Kamlesh has been and continues to cruise for men, then his reasons for doing it in Mumbai in the present are contiguous with his reasons for going to the park when he first meets with Ed. In Act One, Kamlesh admits:

For the past week, I have been picking up strangers—bringing them over—hoping to connect. Strange men who will call me when they feel the same loneliness, when they grow tired of the pretense. Or when they need more money. (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 70).

So, to Ed's question, "Why do you come here?," to which we get only an evasion, we can plausibly transpose Kamlesh's observation from Act One that he cruises to pick up strangers—men—with whom he can "connect."

Kamlesh's motives for cruising remain within that moving-but-circular, irregular-but-familiar, spellbinding-but-hopeless realm represented by Kral. The exteriorized habit of walking the city (or park) is really about something far more interior (the mind, the self, the desiring subject). At this point, the duality noted by Sedgwick in *Touching Feeling* as being carried by the performative subject is worth recalling (7). Performativity, which so mediates individual subjectivity and collective identity, involves extroversion in the sense of the theatrical, but also introversion in the sense of the identifying subject. So, the extroverted activity of finding men for sex is bound up with Kamlesh's inner desires and need for a deeper "connection," the absence of which disables him. The dialoguing between the outside and the inside, the cruising amongst all

the gays in the park in search of the “one,” the need for the other man to fulfill the desires of the inner self are all rendered visible here. The flipside to the cruising Kamlesh’s need for another man is also, however, made visible. For, in the play, it also becomes clear that the people he comes into contact with—men like the guard, Sharad, Ed and women like his sister, Kiran—are faced with the burden of his subjectival fantasies: the dream/ideal he has for himself, and for the people around him.

The critique-through-unsettling of the central queer male subject in this play is tied up with the way in which the experience of (sexual) difference is represented. To make visible the networking between the outside and the inside, the core self of Kamlesh that still needs to renew its faith and belief in itself through an ongoing romantic relationship and/or sexual practice with the guard/Ed/ Sharad/strangers, does not lead to a levelling out of the different characters, subject-positions, and planes within which these characters and subjectivities are mapped. Rather like the searching devotee of Venice, roaming in “disarray” along a “wandering” route which always also leads back to the circular, non-sequential, journeys “on the back-roads of [his] mind,” Kamlesh’s cruising voyage towards other men leads back to certain circular problems in his mind: those discontinuities between who he is/who he wants to be/what he wants (to do)/what he ends up doing. These are fissures that have ramifications in the other principal characters as well, who are unsettled in turn.

So, the spatial and temporal traversals in the play—the move that both characters and audiences have to make to and from “shoonya” and the Acts dividing the play; the challenge of staging a flashback—follow the same track as followed by the fissures which unsettle connections. Seen in this light, the seemingly awkward staging of the park-scene between Ed and Kamlesh, in which the characters speak to one another at one remove, their dialogue mediated by

empty spaces, becomes suggestive of the capacity of *Muggy Night* to unsettle its principals—their “inner thoughts” and selves, for example—as well as its audience of viewers and readers. In the middle of the park-bench scene, after Ed’s long opening monologue, during which he outlines why he is in the park, his conflicted sexuality leading to suicidal thoughts, and his own desire for “anyone who will listen to my story” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 81):

ED (*Looks at him closely*). You did listen to everything I said, didn’t you?

Kamlesh enters and stands behind Ed. Ed continues to address Kamlesh as if he were sitting next to him on the bench.

KAMLESH. Every single word.

ED. Let me hear your story.

KAMLESH. No. Not tonight. Hold my hand.

Ed moves his hand so it could be holding Kamlesh’s hand.

Let’s not even think about sex. Just look at those trees out there.

ED. (*looking out*). They must look impressive in the daylight. Look at all those people on the road!

KAMLESH. They can’t see us.

ED. No. They can’t.

...

KAMLESH. If only they could see how beautiful we look together.

ED. Are we?

KAMLESH. What?

ED. Beautiful?

KAMLESH. Yes.

ED. I don't know. (*Points to the people on the road.*) They wouldn't think so.

KAMLESH. They don't really see us.

(*Silence*) Close your eyes. Go on close your eyes...Now I want you to imagine that you are standing behind us.

Ed gets up and stands behind the bench on the other side of where Kamlesh is.

Can you imagine you are standing behind us and watching us?

ED. I can.

KAMLESH. Now kiss me.

They stand and watch themselves supposedly kissing each other.

Can you see how beautiful we are?

Pause.

ED. Kamlesh?

KAMLESH. Hmm?

ED. You saved my life.

Fade out as music picks up. (Dattani, Muggy Night 81-82)

This is a moment of intimacy curiously enacted. Lines of convergence do not travel independently from lines of dispersal. Ed has to disperse, as it were, from the bench in order to see how convergence works. Kamlesh is already dispersed, given how the action is constructed in this scene. Ed must splice himself into a kind of ghostly double time-space, stand beside the already-spliced character of Kamlesh, in order to “see” (or, mime seeing). This is intimacy signified *and* deferred. A tricky but inescapable dynamic between evidence and uncertainty is foregrounded in that statement by Kamlesh, “if only they could see how beautiful we look

together.” The sentiment and statement will recur in the play, not least in the next scene in “shoonya,” to be enacted towards the end of Act Two.

The desire in Kamlesh to prove his (and Ed’s) subjectivity in some objective, reciprocated, recognized form is a contradiction that is never resolved in *Muggy Night*: like the meeting with the guard, this one can well be read as an instance of a radical queer heterogeneity, that “open-ended rubric” which serves as a salutary reminder that issues of difference can never be completely figured in evidentiary form: in this case, as a theatrical/textual exhibit. It is noteworthy, surely, that Kamlesh’s question—“[c]an you see how beautiful we are?”—is not answered or confirmed. The quest for evidence is deflected. Instead, readers/audiences witness Ed refer back to his own deeply troubled state of mind prior to cruising that evening (he had harboured thoughts of suicide prior to coming to the park, and tells Kamlesh earlier in this bench-conversation that he would have gone back and killed himself had he not met anyone that evening).

Thinking further about the convoluted issue of evidence as a means to confirming an individual’s subjectivity or a collective identity: the question in the text of the play—“[c]an you see how beautiful we are?”—is linked also with a theatrical property used to good effect. This is the one remaining photograph in Kamlesh’s private possession, of Ed and him together. The photograph is a part of a bunch Kamlesh had taken to show Ed “how good [they] looked together” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 83). The last photograph recurs as a bone of contention in all three Acts of the play. Kamlesh, in Act One, has not yet found it himself to destroy this last evidence of his romance with Ed. Kamlesh sees in this photograph apparent, unambiguous proof of homosexual “beauty”: more specifically, Ed’s own beauty. The photograph acts as a form of visual signifier, needed by Kamlesh to signify that what Ed (and he) do and are is “beautiful,” or,

in the line of sign-systems, meaningful. This attempt at signifying beauty goes unrecognized, however, by Ed. Instead, in the third and final scene in “shoonya,” he is angered by the lingering presence of the compromising photograph. And, in the final Act of the play, the same photograph becomes a visible threat to Ed.

If the photograph obscures more than it exposes, this contradiction is further drawn out by that fact that its existence has also been concealed from the wider public. On one level, Kamlesh’s discretion is a metaphor of the kind of self-contortion necessitated by national heteronormativity. From that vantage point, the evidentiary photograph, as a symbol of homosexual relations, invites a consideration of the full extent of homophobia in the lives of characters like Kamlesh and his friends. There is more to this property, however. Operating simultaneously as a symbol of a queerness, which exceeds even homosexual ideals of re-settled relations between men, the photograph takes on even more of a shape-shifting, transitory life of its own, beyond the full possession by any of the characters in the play. For, through much of the early part of *Muggy Night*, the continued existence of the photograph is met with disapproval from Kamlesh’s friends, not because they are closeted, but because the object blocks Kamlesh from future happiness *sans* Ed through its perpetual referencing of the past.

After Sharad finds the photograph hidden behind a mirror in Kamlesh’s bedroom, the others insist that Kamlesh tear up the photograph, in a ritual to rid himself of Ed’s memory. Before he can tear up the photograph, Kiran enters, and the explosive revelation of Ed’s double-life alters the significance of the photograph. Now, Kamlesh’s friends want to retain the photograph to show Kiran the “truth.” Kamlesh, deeply conflicted about revealing the truth of Ed to Kiran for fearing of preventing his sister’s happiness, does not want this. In a struggle for the object, it flutters out of the apartment window. Landing first on a ledge, visible to the characters,

but just out of reach, it finally blows away, only to land up in the house next door, where it is seen by many members of wedding-party. Brought back to the apartment by the harassed guard, near the end of the play, the photograph is revealed to Kiran and to the audience. The very last stage directions in the play call attention back to the photograph, with the final “fade out” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 111) focused on the photograph. Yet, far from mediating a recalibration of relationships to reflect the “beauty” of people as they really are and who they really desire, the photograph becomes a site through which the strands of irresolution remain very much visible, even at the very end of the play.

In spatial terms, the photograph is also notably a mobile property. Sharad, who penetrates the privacy of Kamlesh’s bedroom to find it at first, brings it to the living room (Act One). From there, it moves, almost of its own volition, and certainly outside of any human agency, to the space of the city outside (Act Two). Suspended on a ledge, it then travels to the wedding-party, found there, and brought back to the apartment by the harassed security guard (Act Three). The networked planar setting of the play is, therefore, paralleled in the traversals of this photograph. The various iterations, in the staging and use of property, in *Muggy Night* of networked, contoured, dis/continuous relationships which are porous, for better or worse, than stable complicates the heteronormative unities that come to be represented in the one other photograph, that of Ed and Kiran, which appears in Kamlesh’s apartment along with Kiran, in her luggage. This latter photograph has a less insistent, less multiplanar, less mobile life than the former. Yet, the two properties sit in some kind of proximate relationship to one another, just as the respective worlds of Ed and Kiran, and Ed and Kamlesh. The entangled worlds are staged appropriately in the third scene in “shoonya.”

Shoonya: Three

The third and final use of the space of *shoonya* occurs at the end of Act Two. The Act is bookended, then, by two scenes in “shoonya,” the function of both being that of enabling the kind of spatial, temporal, and subjectival shifts being discussed in these sections. Act Two is already particularly busy, with multiple segments made up of intensive dialogue, radiating out of the issues brought to the surface by the arrival of Kiran, between smaller sets of the characters gathered in the apartment. The confusion of temporal and spatial sequencing in the second scene in “shoonya” recurs in the third. The confusion echoes the “real-time” confusion caused by Kiran’s unexpected arrival on the scene of Kamlesh’s party at the end of Act One. Like the second scene in “shoonya,” we have a flashback-structure to the third, now involving all three characters, Ed, Kiran, and Kamlesh. The forms of spatial or temporal order are made even less sensible than in the second scene. Readers and audiences have to work to keep up with the disordered pattern. There are at least three different spaces and times referenced in this compressed four-page section, though the urban location is most probably Bangalore, alluded to as a “small town” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 93).

First: there is a dance at which all three characters are present, at the end of which Ed and Kiran will win a prize for the Best Couple. Second: there is a conversation between Kamlesh and Kiran, either in a different part of the dancehall or in a totally different time and space (or, even, multiple ones, as the stage directions do not measure any time-lapses, or name locations). The siblings talk about Kiran’s early impressions of Ed (passing as heterosexual, and interpellated by Kiran as one too), as well as the “special someone” Kamlesh is dating (Ed-as-Prakash, although Kiran of course does not know that the person she thinks is straight is Kamlesh’s lover), and her brother’s plans to move to Mumbai. Third: a conversation (again, possibly multiple ones at different times and places) between Kamlesh and Ed during which the pair argue, culminating in

Ed tearing up photographs of the two men shown to him by Kamlesh, breaking off with him. The dialogue between the three characters does not follow a consistent sequence, and the script reads like multiple, crossed connections. The spatial counterpart to these crossings and entanglements is to be found in the stage directions directed characters to move up and down the three sub-levels into which “shoonya” is divided. Similar to the second scene in “shoonya,” characters who might be speaking to one another are often not on the same level in the sub-divided space, adding to the sense of unevenness, contours, and disjuncture.

In this heterogeneously imagined scene, crossed-over with multiple axes of dialogue concerned with three different characters often working at cross-purposes to one another, it is noteworthy that there are moments of symmetry in the dialogue. There is a pattern of repetition, of words or an overall sentiment by characters in different segments of the scene. Arguably, this provides a semblance of order for readers/audiences otherwise hard at work keeping up with the different incidents being enacted on stage simultaneously. In the exchange below, for instance, Kiran and Ed are talking about Kiran’s divorce, her memory of spousal abuse, and her fear of gossip as the public see them dancing together, while Kamlesh and Ed are arguing about the state of their own relationship given Ed’s closeted behaviour, and Ed’s fears about the public knowing about him. To complicate the staging and dialogue further in the exchange below, Kiran is on another level in “shoonya.” Ed only “mimes dancing with Kiran,” according to the stage directions (90):

KIRAN. That man never touched me the same way. Oh, but I have to be so careful.

ED. Was it hard? The break-up?

KAMLESH. People will know anyway, sooner or later. If you are seen with me.

KIRAN. People talk. It is difficult for me. You are a man, I know you have it hard too, but it is easy for you to be...invisible.⁴⁶

KAMLESH. How long shall we continue to hide? We can't hide forever!

ED (*stops dancing*). Let them talk. If a man and woman want to dance together, what's their problem?...Let them see. (*Begins dancing again.*)

KAMLESH. Let them talk! If two men want to love one another, what's the harm? (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 90-91)

The symmetry here in the repeated phrases can be compared with the signficatory symmetries invoked in performative utterances, and implied in those practices underpinning identifications and identitarian modes (“I am like you [/all];” “I promise to be [your other half]”). These symmetries recall also the characteristics of nation-formation and national belonging, outlined well by Benedict Anderson (the “deep horizontal comradeship” of the nation is imagined as a uniformity). Symmetries serve as coordinates to the uniform settled ground on which “collective” sexual identities rest, as Halperin’s mapping suggests. Furthermore, an idealized symmetry of what can be formalized as a “call-and-response” underpins the recognition-model of identity-formation described by Fraser.

Furthermore, the repetition in the dialogue has interesting parallels with the exchange between Kamlesh and the guard at the start of the play, analyzed earlier. Yet, in this as well as that earlier passage, the line of symmetry projected cannot support the aimed-at camaraderie.

This returns the analysis to the trenchant dispersal of meaning connected to the play of

⁴⁶ It is unclear what Kiran is referring to when she speaks of Ed’s “invisibility” at this stage. She does not know about Ed’s homosexuality, or of his relationship with Kamlesh; in fact, a few lines earlier, in her conversation with Kamlesh, she laughingly disputes any claim that Ed might be gay, saying, “I mean, he doesn’t look gay” (her delusion is something readers know her brother encourages for much of the play) (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 90). It is possible she is referring generally to the scrutiny any young unmarried person would face in a society hyper-attuned to the rituals and practices of marital respectability. In any case, her words have an immediately ironic charge, to which the audience is party.

dis/identification in *Muggy Night*. As in other segments in “shoonya,” symmetry finds its supplement, is therefore added to and transformed, in the particular connection with asymmetry along a networked and multiplanar space. As discussed earlier, Kamlesh’s exchange with the guard at the start of the play aims at a linear identity between two men, a process closely tied up with the kind of sexual subjectivity Kamlesh seeks to effect. Yet, in that scene, the sense of a stable self is increasingly unsettled by the duality between being and doing. Generally too, Butler’s work reminds us that the articulated self (being someone) is actually rendered less stable in the imperative to repeat this articulation (to have to *do* [with someone else] repeatedly what one supposedly *is*). The play widens, or makes asymmetrical, the gap between the ideations of the self and its messier practices within which that self is always-already located. This gap, or space, is the location of the difference between Kamlesh and the guard as it plays out in Act One.

In the passage quoted above, Kamlesh and Ed aim respectively at articulated statements about a defined self. Their lines also make clear their intention to participate in a shared identity. Both characters are invested in making what Sedgwick terms an “explicit performative utterance” about who they are. These utterances are contingent on throwing public opinion to the wind (“let people see” and/or “let people talk”). While stating this, both characters also seek to draw a line of relation with another (in the case of Kamlesh, Ed; in the case of Ed, Kiran) with reference also to an ideal personal (sexual) subjectivity (Kamlesh wants to be properly gay; Ed properly straight), as well an ideal identity (Kamlesh wants to be properly gay with Ed; Ed wants to be properly straight with Kiran). It is quite clear that these utterances about Being are tied up with particular practices in which others are implicated (Kamlesh wants to tell the world about his relationship, and therefore make a statement about his gayness; Ed wants everyone to see him dancing with Kiran, and therefore make a statement about his straightness).

Whatever Ed and Kamlesh, inhabiting separate-but-related spaces in “shoonya,” might want, their respective interlocutors are not the ideals both men need for identitarian and subjectival reasons. It is harder, in *Muggy Night*, to pin down that “ideal reciprocal relation between subjects” premised in the Hegelian “identity model” defined by Fraser. Rather, difference comes to preoccupy readers and audiences.⁴⁷ The deferral of connections is marked in this scene with the continual movements of the three characters up and down the three levels of “shoonya” so there is never a constancy of location in which even two, let alone all three, characters are on the same plane. In light of these dispersed, but yet networked, relations, Ed and Kamlesh fall apart spectacularly, the former failing to participate in, and therefore “recognize,” the performative enactments which the latter claims is the only way forward. “I am not happy with being who I am,” Ed tells Kamlesh, before proceeding to tear up the photographs of the two men Kamlesh has brought along with him (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 92).

On the other end, Kiran’s attitude to Ed is marked by a hesitancy, even though she has a desire to reciprocate Ed’s call for mutual (heterosexual) identification (“if a man and woman want to dance together...”). Her response to Ed reminds readers that, while she does and does not occupy the same space as Ed (literally, the dance floor), hers is a very different status to his. The shifting positions of the characters during this scene again drives home this indeterminacy. This uncertainty persists, notwithstanding Ed’s belief in the symmetry that connects them. As she says to him: “It is difficult for me ... but it is easy for you.” Later in the scene, when she and Kamlesh are talking, her hesitation recurs in her doubts about entering into a new relationship with a man, especially after the taint of a failed first marriage. She says to her brother: “Ed

⁴⁷ It should be mentioned here that a concept of difference is important in the Hegelian model too, but only, it seems, insofar as it sets up the relationship between two subjects who “recognize” each other as equals but distinct entities

doesn't seem to care about what people think or say. He is so open! I am not so sure whether I want to be seen with him. The last thing I want is a label" (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 91).

One other way to approach the dis/joints proffered here by the text is to distinguish symmetry from parity. Fraser's thinking allows for the insight that any move in social and cultural practices to have different parties relate to one another in more fair ways—what she terms "participatory parity" (Fraser 119)—is not through a top-down imposition of an imagined symmetry between subjects sharing an identity, but via understanding that parity relies on its opposite: the knowledge and foregrounding of the asymmetry and disparity, that is to say, difference, between subjects. While Fraser's ideas reflect her concerns of more macro-level issues of social redress and justice, and are arguably oriented away from the micro-level or individuals, her insight about the need for "non-identitarian politics" (120) finds an echo in the way *Muggy Night*, for one, handles individual characters and their relationships.

Non-identitarianism, in Fraser's thinking, enables a grounding of "misrecognition" (how different groups or people are not seen by other more powerful entities in a proper way, or at all) through a connection (again, a spatialized imagining of networks and juxtapositions "beside" will be of use) with "redistribution" (how social, cultural, and economic resources might be better apportioned so that people are more secure in their daily lives). A non-identitarian approach *can* be used to show the grounding of people in particular, materialized, setting or context: for example, in the disjointed, disordered, heterogeneous scene in "shoonya." That this materiality, this grounding, this texture of lives, happens in ways that unsettle, displace, make *différance* visible takes us back to the idea that performativity is, after all, materialized in the irreducibly unsettled nature of making significatory-significant claims about oneself. The

different “other” is after all always-already present in any kind of statement made about the “self.”

Misguided and harmful Ed’s closeted nature undoubtedly is, both to himself and the people around him; however, Kamlesh’s point, made with *brio*, combining affect (“love”) with sexuality (“two men loving each other”) against the backdrop of a shared culture that others (“people”) must recognize, is not sufficient to cancel the many social, cultural, and economic privileges that Ed associates with heteronormativity. That norm is weighty enough to be an ideal to strive for: “I want to *try* to be like the rest,” he argues. For all of the attractions of symmetry—reflected in the heteronormative but also counter-heteronormative ideals of Ed and Kamlesh, respectively—the text does not allow such simplistic seamless joints, preferring the seamy juxtaposition of difference and deferral. So, just as Kamlesh is frustrated by his inability to connect in the way he wants with Ed, Ed will be frustrated in his attempts to create the heteronormative symmetries of “man-and-wife.” The vague hesitation that Kiran feels for Ed in this scene in “shoonya” turns out to have been incipient hesitation once she faces the full-scale revelations in Act Three: the details of Ed’s homosexuality, and his relationship with Kamlesh.

All of the three characters involved at various points in the three scenes in “shoonya”—Kamlesh, Ed/Prakash, and Kiran—have to face the personal implications of the stepped, uneven connections dramatized in the split-levels of the very space of “shoonya.” Kamlesh’s observation that Ed/Prakash is wrenching apart two complementary aspects of the self (“your soul from your body”) is juxtaposed with Kiran’s observation that Ed is a “wonderful dancer”:

KAMLESH. He first needs to understand how beautiful we look together.

KIRAN. The best couple on the floor!

KIRAN. Ed, you deserve it. You are such a wonderful dancer.

KAMLESH. Prakash...! Please! Don't turn your back on yourself. You are wrenching your soul from your body!

KIRAN. ...No, I can't go on the stage with you! Please don't force me... Really, I am very frightened of this kind of attention.

...

KAMLESH. Prakash! Don't leave me now!...

KAMLESH. Prakash! Please!

KIRAN (*overlapping Kamlesh's plea*). Ed, no please...

... *Blackout*... [End of Act Two]. (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 93-94)⁴⁸

The two scenes combined at this point involve simultaneous enactments of integration (the dancing couple, Ed and Kiran, who win the award for “best couple on the floor,” with Ed as the “beautiful dancer” who becomes for the adoring Kiran an ideal of synthesis, integrating “body” and “soul”) and disintegration (the male lovers whose relationship is at an end). The simultaneity of the contrast here, when juxtaposed with the dis/continuities between Ed and Kamlesh, and Ed and Kiran seen above, becomes a related instance of the play of *différance*, by which the irreducibility of difference becomes the staging-ground for an unsettled and supplemented plurality, added and changed into being deconstructive rather than domesticated. That the Act ends with the action in “shoonya” left in a state of suspension, where both Kamlesh and Kiran plead with Ed to do something he does not want (Kamlesh wants Ed to stay; Kiran wants Ed to

⁴⁸ Dattani's use of dance in his plays has been the subject of scholarly analysis (see, for instance, Sen); the principal work in his oeuvre that deals with dance is *Dance Like a Man*, which deals with a family of three classical Indian dancers. Studies analyzing the function of dance in that play have focused on the links between the practice of dance with the re-enactments of a cultural memory within whose matrix classical Indian dance can be sited. For further insight into concepts of “collective culture,” readers are well served by the work of Stuart Hall, like his “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms.”

go by himself and collect the prize for “best couple on the floor”), adds to elliptical-perpetual, unresolved play.

The third use of “shoonya” ends with the conclusion of Act Two. The plurality dramatized in that space—in which differences are networked—draws into the rest of the play. Towards the very end of “shoonya,” the lights come back on in the living-room, a segue back into the other drama being enacted in Kamlesh’s apartment. As Ed moves into that space from “shoonya,” Kamlesh and Kiran still play out their last lines in “shoonya,” ending the Act. So, this is a segue in which lines, literally speaking, from “shoonya” extend into the rest of the play. In fact, the rest of the play—Act Three—traces a relation between the three scenes in “shoonya” and the action in Kamlesh’s apartment. All of the discontinuities expressed in “shoonya,” about the precise relationship between Kamlesh, Ed, and Kiran, are now situated in Kamlesh’s apartment. Yet, that apartment itself is contoured and stepped. So, the revelations of the triangulated relationship between the characters are not expressed only for a prompt resolution. That “polyphony” Pathak has identified continues to amplify the networked relations between characters, as well as the staging of these relations in Act Three.

Ed’s disruptive presence in Kamlesh’s apartment, with which Act Three opens, crosses with the sense of claustrophobia and heat in the space. Ranjit observes that he is sweating, and realizes it is because Kamlesh’s air-conditioning has malfunctioned as a result of the wedding-party drawing power from Kamlesh’s apartment-building (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 95). The sounds of wedding-band music seep into the space, and the apartment’s window has to be shut. Even then, as the stage directions suggest, the sounds from next door can be heard: the “music is faint,” and not shut out completely, while the “occasional whistle or yell” can still be clearly heard (95). The juxtaposition of an apartment which is both closed-off *and* open to off-stage noises is of

course suggestive of the dualities engendered by the networking of norms with counter-norms in the play. However, here again, we have proximate planes rather than absolutely sequestered enclosures. Like the instances from earlier parts of *Muggy Night*, the play of difference enabled by proximate planes and entities in this Act means that the assumed stability, even power, of an enclosed, identical group (or modality) is open to the destabilizing tracery of others.

The proximity of Kamlesh and his queer friends draws uneasy but networked relations with Ed, the latter keeping up a hearty, heteronormative facade when greeting the company at the start of the Act. His projected identity with heterosexuality—calling Kiran, “sweetheart,” multiple times in the Act; shaking hands in a crushing, hyper-masculine way—overlaps with the radiating sounds from the adjacent celebrations. Both aspects of heteronormativity recall the explicit performatives by which norms are (re)produced. The realm of the performative is, of course, also the site of instability. Acts of reiteration inhering to a performative utterance negates any kind of pre-determined, transcendental, or settled authority any subject or identity might claim. The marriage-ceremony itself is by no means a secure space. Sharad, who has exit the stage previously, returns to the apartment and claims that, the “dulha [bridegroom] is cute ... [and that he] could swear [he] has seen him at Voodoo’s” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 96). The queer gaze is the track-trace of an/other relation which undercuts the performative production of the (heterosexual) self, whether or not Sharad has seen the groom in a gay bar. This insistent, destabilizing trace personified by Sharad is again expressed when, on being sidelined while Ed and Kamlesh exchange an awkward greeting, he lingers and states: “Oh don’t mind me. I am just pretending to be visible” (97).

The “visible” queer intervention, which is another way of describing Sharad’s sharp words in the play, is that reiterated irreducibility of difference framing the concept of *différance*.

The persistently different challenge of queerness manifests not only in the performative domain of queerness, but also when queerness involves itself in the domain of heteronormativity. When, at the start of Act Three, Sharad—unable to tolerate anymore the deceptions running between the group, Kamlesh, Kiran, and Ed—provocatively claims he has ended his relationship with Kamlesh in order to turn straight, he launches into an theatrically hypermasculine performance of gendered behaviour. Unsurprisingly, this collapses under the weight of the sheer excess in Sharad’s language and action, and his own admission that while he remains “gay as a goose,” he wants to play straight in order to gain power and acceptance (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 100). The particular kind of anti-essentialism that is signposted in the performance-performativity network dovetails with Sharad’s campy love of artifice and excess, the latter fitting in also with Susan Sontag’s observation that Camp is the “love ... of artifice and exaggeration” (259).

Queer theory, building on gender theory, shows that the practice of campy artifice need not necessarily remain as “depoliticised,” or “apolitical” as Sontag understands Camp (Sontag 260). In *Muggy Night*, Sharad’s different and thoroughly artificial rehearsal-repetition of how a heterosexual man should behave projects the kind of destabilizing irreducible gap (or difference) produced in the performative repetition of norms which can only defer what the essentialized-naturalized norm *is* to consecutive instances of when the norms again need to be *done*. In spatial terms, Sharad’s actions seep into Ed’s heteronormative plane of existence, overlapping the two characters but in a way that only serves to shed further light on contrasting relations: the text produces difference. While Ed is initially duped into thinking that Sharad is trying to turn into the kind of man he himself wants to be, that seamless overlap is immediately ridged when the dupe cannot be sustained. Kamlesh, overwhelmed at Sharad’s outrageous act, bursts out

laughing, saying: “Sharad, you are wonderful. I don’t know why I didn’t see it before. I love you” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 101).

The dispersal Sharad effects between his conceptualization of heteronormativity and that of Ed’s just when the two are tantalizingly close appears to resolve in a convergence between Kamlesh and Sharad. However, the dynamic of difference plays into this relationship too, for Sharad replies to Kamlesh with a flippancy—“[d]on’t be silly, my dear” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 101) is his response—that belies a settled association between the two. Where Kamlesh seeks to simplify the channel through which a relationship theoretically premised on a shared experience of difference, Sharad is more circumspect. Kamlesh observes that he loves Sharad because Sharad is who he is, and, looking at Ed as per the directions, states: “perhaps the man I loved does not exist” (102). Sharad, already aware of Kamlesh’s self-focused attitude, clarifies his difference of opinion to match the indeterminacy in Kamlesh’s use of the still-vacillating “perhaps.” He says: “[j]ust because you find me good-looking, witty, charming, bold and truly wonderful doesn’t mean you love me” (102). The insertion of the different point of view here unsettles the ground between Kamlesh and Sharad, but a particular relationship still exists between the two, even if the one holds the other to account and refuses simple, settled relations of so-called love.

The other significant relationship now brought into the temporal and spatial realms of the evening-party in Kamlesh’s apartment is, of course, the much-convoluted one between Kamlesh and Ed. A private scene between the two men occurs not in “shoonya” but in Kamlesh’s bedroom. That hermetic space is clearly perforated now, as the action calls for overlapping dialogue between characters in the living room and the two men in the bedroom. A busy series of dialogue and action juxtaposes the multiple planes in a closer network. Yet, the strands of

heterogeneity continue to traverse the domain of the play. Retiring to bedroom/bathroom, in search of a pill for a headache, Ed tells Kamlesh, who has followed him in there, that the two men can still clandestinely meet after his marriage to Kiran. This narrative of duplicity is enjambed with the conversations in the living-room about Kiran's marriage, with her making all of the normative declarations being simultaneously undone by the queer dialogue in the bedroom.

Kiran, in this scene, piles on the clichés about romantic fulfillment, as she has in previous sections of the play: "I feel like a complete woman with him," she says of Ed. The settled, contained, complete vision is, of course, deferred in this work. Even the cliché about the "complete woman" requires an other; for Kiran, Ed is, appropriately, "so ... male" (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 104). Yet, of course, the signifier, "male," here carries the deconstructive trace-track of the queer male. So, Deepali echoes Kiran's words immediately after they are first uttered, and in the process of repetition enters into the destabilizing dynamic of deferring what it means to be "so ... male." Supplementing this conversation is an exchange between Kamlesh and Ed, in which maleness is projected on a queer scene: "You don't really love Sharad. You love me" (104). Ed's "male" desire for Sharad forms another track of difference denying completion to the heteronormative fantasy.

Ed's own fantasy of a simplified channel of relations between himself and Kamlesh is, however, denied in turn. When Ed suggests his ideal sequence of relations, Kamlesh refuses. In a lines that read like, but actually subvert-by-parody, the narration of an ordered *telos*, Ed tells Kamlesh that they can be lovers once they are brothers-in-law: "I'll take care of Kiran. And you take care of me" (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 105). The subversion of this uni-linearity is effected by a spreading network that returns the focus on the complex, networked weave of different relations.

The subversion illustrates the duplicitous alibi that underpins the simple one-on-one connection symbolized by heteronormative marital respectability. Adding to, and transforming in the process, the complementarity imagined by Ed, the scene in Kamlesh's apartment is further opened up to porosity, when the guard enters, "quite agitated" according to the directions (104).

The entity which connects the spreading network is carried in by the guard: the photograph of Ed and Kamlesh, that has floated down to the marriage-party. The property, as discussed earlier, is invested with a mobility with spatial ramifications. If spatiality enables differences to connect in complex, unidealized ways, which unsettle any so-called simple unilinearity, then the photograph mediates that network. The guard is at once outraged at the brazenness of Kamlesh's circle and harangues them repeatedly about exposing their activities to the whole world (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 105). He is also concerned at the consequences they might have to face, as Kamlesh's neighbours threaten to complain to the managers of Kamlesh's apartment-building (105). The photograph invites, indeed collects, heterogeneous responses. According to the guard, the younger boys and girls in the marriage-celebrations have laughed at the photographs (it is unclear whether the reaction is mocking or innocent, or both), while the elders are outraged (105).

The photograph, mediating networked relations between different spaces and groups of people, also functions as a site of convergence and dispersal. When Sharad and Deepali agree to show Kiran the photograph, while Ed and Kamlesh are still away, the truth revealed by the photograph brings all of Kamlesh's friends and Kiran together. At the same time, Kamlesh, finally horrified at the extent to which Ed will go to remain closeted, physically fights off the other man. The relations between all three parties in this triangle are further unsettled. Far from signifying any kind of linear evidentiary narrative of the complete, resolved truth, the photograph

becomes invested in relations of difference in which essentialisms can no longer be sustained. Just as the photograph has not previously stabilized Kamlesh's aims as a desiring subject looking for a perfected identity with another man by foregrounding the fact that there are two different characters in question, now Kiran is prompted to pose a different challenge to the normative fantasies both she and Ed aimed for. Her question—"What did you want from me so badly that you couldn't care how much you hurt me for it" (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 107)—subverts the all-giving, but at the same time always self-contained hypermasculine ideal Ed and Kiran herself have valorized.

Ed's imagined relationship with Kiran, if represented in spatial terms, is of a larger domain enveloping a smaller one. This kind of plotting can be found in the airplane-scene (in the first scene on "shoonya"), for example, when Ed tells Kiran that he "can take care" of her (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 52). By the end of the play, however, Kiran's words effect a different mapping of relations. Asking Ed what he wanted "so badly" from her suggests that the two entities are placed in that unidealized "beside" conceptualized by Sedgwick. Placed beside Kiran, Ed's domain is now not self-contained. The trace-track of the other mobilized by Kiran's words articulates an unequal relationship of sex-gender exploitation ("what did *you want*"; "you couldn't *care* how much *you hurt me*"). By re-articulating their relationship as one in which a one-sided dependency (Ed's on Kiran, in order for him to "be" straight) has been in constant play, Kiran's line does not merely represent herself as a wronged entity but takes a radically different position on Ed's persona, showing it to be porously contingent, not transcendent. Whoever Ed is, or wants to be, or cannot be, is supplemented by other relations, always-already different(iated). Difference, as in the case with other characters like Kamlesh, insists on holding Ed to account.

The redrawn relations between Ed and Kiran is, of course, cannot resolve into a heterosexual arrangement, because the revelations of the evening have locked the heterosexual plane of relations with the queer relations. When Ed, in a last attempt, insists to Kiran that he “will love [her] in whatever way [she] wants” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 108), she refuses, and insists that he leave. Different kinds of leave-taking do, in fact, coincide in these final sections of the play. Ed, by now very distressed and paranoid about the possibilities of future disclosures of his queerness, tries to kill himself by jumping out of the apartment-window, while the others restrain him. Finally, Deepali stuns him by hitting him on the head with a bottle and he is brought back away from the window, into the apartment with its complex, differently networked set of relations. If Ed feels that his suicide will be decisive, clearly that kind of dispersal is not allowed in the play. Acts of dispersal, which now follow all, bear a relation to continued negotiations with different acts of living. Yet, no one character is invested with any particular kind of agency towards an idealized kind of life, queer or straight. Deepali leaves to go back to her lesbian partner, only stopping to pat Kiran on the cheek, a sympathetic but also vague gesture (111). Ranjit and Bunny both seem equally non-committal. Bunny, who earlier in the Act appears to be increasingly disenchanted with his duplicitous life and sham marriage, does state, as he leaves, that he “should come out” (111). Yet, the full line reads: “Maybe I should come out in the nine hundredth episode....” By deferring to the market-laws of the popular, long-running TV-drama he stars in, Bunny is, on one level, still invested in cultivating his person as a commodified, televisual persona. On another level, by not denying outright but rather deferring the possibilities of an articulated public self/identity based on difference, Bunny’s statement reflects on the challenges of domesticating in a coherent articulation any kind of difference. The fact that, formally speaking, Bunny’s line ends with an ellipsis and not a terminal punctuation

demonstrates further the textual production of difference in which enclosures—whether closeted (in) or nurtured (out)—cannot simply *be*.

The porosity whereby tracks of difference run between spaces and subjects in *Muggy Night* challenges unambiguous narratives, of queer dissidence or national respectability. When Ed, about to exit the stage at the end of the drama, asks Kamlesh, “How do I begin to live,” Kamlesh can only reply, “I don’t know” (Dattani, *Muggy Night* 111). The absence here of a direct line, plotting a life from beginning to end, reflects the particular workings of a spreading network of difference. Against the easy linearity of an ordered sequence, we have Sedgwick’s “maplike relations,” or Lauren’s Berlant’s “lateral” dynamic (“lateral agency,” is the predominating term in her work, “Slow Death”). For Berlant, a lateral, sideways, spreading dynamic—used by her to analyze the relationship between the life of the modern subject under the *diktat* of capitalism, biopolitics, and processes of consumption—interrupts the straight-line discourse of what constitutes a healthy life of the so-called sovereign agent under capitalism. This ties in with the anti-essentializing dynamic found in the queer interrogation in *Muggy Night* of a settled, collectively inhabited plane of diversity. Indeed, the promise of contentment overlaps in an unsettled way with the near-homophonous sense of containment. The latter spreads laterally into the domain of the former. The scepticism about heteronormativity in the play deploys such a lateral dynamic (Bunny’s wife is “content” despite her sham marriage; Kamlesh wants the same for his sister with such disastrous consequences). Yet, the same kind of scepticism with settled enclosures of being attend also to the queer domain, so that the production of unsettled, therefore irreducible, difference becomes a site for salutary, anti-essentialized reflexivity on the matter of queerness in a group of Indians.

“The Reading” (2013)

“The Reading” is a new short story by Mahesh Dattani, published in *The Indian Quarterly*. It is a departure from his usual literary *oeuvre* as dramatist, but upon reading the narrative, it is clear that Dattani has carried forward much of his theatre-based interest in spatial strategies, especially his recurrent use of multiple levels to reflect on the complexities of individual subjectivities and the contours of interpersonal relationships. The text reveals also the innovations Dattani has brought to dialogue, adding the now-commonplace vocabulary of internet social media to shape the exchanges between principal characters.

The short story centres around two men in contemporary Mumbai—Abhishek and Venugopal—and the developing relationship between them mediated by a series of primarily online encounters in social networking sites such as Facebook and over emails. Dattani’s sub-heading to the title is suggestive: “The Reading” is “a rom.com in cyberspace.” Apparently straightforward, the phrase is actually more densely meaningful. On one hand, the phrase “rom.com” refers to the motion-picture sub-genre: the so-called romantic comedy, or, “rom com.” On the other hand, the sub-title signposts an increasingly familiar technological vocabulary, given the immense ramifications of the internet in contemporary society. This is, after all, also a story about the “.com” phenomenon, where “.com” is metonymic for the World Wide Web. Thinking of the relationship of the part to the whole, “rom.com” links also the particular narrative concerning the two principals and their individual subjectivities with larger networks of inter-subjective relationships.

Furthermore, the sub-title indicates that the linkages between part and whole in the story that follows are constituted in cyberspace. Having read the narrative in its entirety, it becomes clear that this space is represented not in the simple utopian terms of a flattened-out field, where

an increasingly accessible technology mediates increasingly democratic relationships (“Technology will set you free”). Rather, the interactions between Abhishek and Venugopal reveal worlds of light and shade, of multiple online identities, of paradox, contrasting world-views, and lingering prejudice. The pattern of relationships developed at the micro-level of individuals and pairs have wider ramifications. Small-scale relationships, in this narrative, allow also a reappraisal of how both the national community in the country and the burgeoning queer community in the city are constituted. The important third character in this story—Kapil Mirdhas or “Kapital Das”—connects micro and macro levels because individual responses to him are also symptomatic of larger discontinuities in the country/nation. The problematization of identity in the story—what it means to be “queer,” “Indian,” or both—operates at both levels. This problematization of ideal ways of being can be linked with the darkening of utopian spaces, in which relationships disperse as much as they cohere. The displacement of ideals in relationships mediated by cyberspace intersects with a scholarly point of view such as Chandra S. Balachandran, who, in his case-study of emerging gay spaces in turn-of-millennium Bangalore speaks of cyberspace as “a *uniquely dislocated* medium” (169).⁴⁹

While analyzing cyberspace in the story, it is also possible to consider this displacement, an impulse away from utopia, in relation to Michel Foucault’s distinction between “utopia” and “heterotopia” on space. Foucault’s spatial theory, analyzing contemporary society and human relationships, argues that contemporary society is formally organized into sites: “The site is

⁴⁹ Balachandran considers the development of the internet as a growing medium for Indian men variously located on the continuum inside and outside the closet. As he observes: “To those who are already publicly self-identified as gay, this is a medium for pooling activist energies across space and time. To those who are not sure, or are afraid of going public, this medium offers a degree of anonymity while still allowing contact with others” (170). His chapter, “A Preliminary Report on Emerging Gay Geographies in Bangalore, India” in the critical collection *Sexual Sites, Seminal Attitudes* (2004), delineates different kinds of contemporary spaces traversed by Indian men, spreading between a larger pool of heteronormative space, through homosocial space, to more nascent and exclusively gay spaces, a spatial relationship he terms a “nested hierarchy of cultural spaces” (167). See esp. pp. 166-170 from the above volume.

defined by relations of proximity between points or elements” (Foucault, “Other Spaces” 23). He uses the metaphor of a networked, electronic technology to speak of the kind of circulating relations within particular sites. Humans interact in and through these “relations of proximity” as and human society should be similarly understood: “The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves ... is ... a heterogeneous space [and] we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another” (Foucault, “Other Spaces” 23).

Both “utopia” and “heterotopia” have the function of mirroring the sited relations making up society, but in different ways, and with different implications. According to Foucault, utopias are sites which do not occupy a real space, but whose existence is suggestive: utopias “present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces” (“Other Spaces” 24). Following this approach, it might be said that utopia is a no-place which suggests ways in which “society” might improve, by taking more of the best from a good world or nothing of the worst from a bad one: “they are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society” (Foucault, “Other Spaces” 24).

Cyberspace, if understood as utopia, would have no material presence. It would be made up of sites in which users interacted as if in an ideal world, the internet-as-leveller having untangled subjects from those unequal, imperfect conditions which complicate relationships in “reality” (or, “real-time” society). However, Dattani’s treatment of cyberspace is better understood in relation to what Foucault terms “heterotopia.” The application of the Foucauldian spatial theory of heterotopia on a social medium like Facebook is already gaining traction, with recently published work Robin Rymarczuk, writing for the April/May 2015 issue of the magazine *Philosophy Now*, as an example. Heterotopia are sites occupying tangible places in

society, while, at the same time, mirroring other sites within that same society. Unlike the mirror-effect of utopia, that of heterotopia is a good deal more complex. Heterotopia are “something like counter-sites ... in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, “Other Spaces”²⁴). Heterotopia does more to plot the admixtures and variety of the heterogenous, networked, and sited spaces which is, for Foucault, the spatial ground on which the contemporary world rests. An entire culture mediated by the technological world of Facebook, online chatting, and emails is thrown into relief in this heterotopian cyberspace of Dattani’s.

The kind of Facebook exchanges between characters (or, more properly, users) in “The Reading” serves to illustrate how Dattani’s representation of cyberspace counters any utopian social promise. The distinction between utopia and heterotopia builds cumulatively in the narrative. As the world and culture of Dattani’s characters are steadily delineated, readers find themselves removed from an ideal realm of perfection to a more concrete one of contestation. Facebook becomes the locus of this shift. Online status updates, like the one with which the narrative opens, seem to be designed to allow individual users to describe for their social circles the kind of day they have had/are having. These updates, easily composed and published, enable anyone and everyone to talk of themselves and give insight into the quality of their respective lives, through references to daily activities, interests, opinions and experiences. This is indeed what Venugopal and Abhishek do, right from the start of the story. The ease of this “user-generated content” is a characteristic of the internet in the present: the so-called “Web 2.0.” As commonplace understandings of Web 2.0 go, cyberspace is no longer characterized by “static web pages” in specific websites, but by more dynamic “content.” This content, produced easily,

is also circulated easily on fora like Facebook, which encourages heightened interactivity and communication between user and recipients.⁵⁰

The connection between Web 2.0 and latter-day queer subjectivities, identities, interpersonal and/or libidinous relationships is the focus of recent scholarship such as Shaka McGlotten's. In *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality*, McGlotten attends to the technological-sociological phenomena whereby queer men turn increasingly to digital networks in order to effect encounters. With regard to the specific issue of sexuality and the promise of new technology, McGlotten states that "[n]ew digital media technologies, including but not limited to the Internet, have facilitated a new era of casual or anonymous hookups ... CGI safe sex alternatives and role playing ... and, of course, the proliferation of masturbatory aids" (2). Yet, the enabling, epoch-making, potential of the Internet is supplemented, in McGlotten's reading, with proliferating questions about what exactly the technology signifies, and, furthermore, how technology would transform the manner in which queerness, or the queer subject, or a queer community, would henceforth be signified:

But these new freedoms and possibilities picked up anxieties like Velcro. Virtual intimacies singled new possibilities even as they foregrounded the perceived failures of intimate belonging. Virtual intimacies were failures before the fact. If you had to get online to get it, it couldn't be the real thing (McGlotten 2).

New networks signal a particular crisis, then, as much as they "facilitate" queerness. Like the supplement in deconstruction, the network has the potential to add to and transform queerness, and the latter in ways even unanticipated or, for that matter, undesired. Ontological or

⁵⁰ The OED defines Web 2.0 as, "the second stage of development of the World Wide Web, characterized especially by the change from static web pages to dynamic or user-generated content and the growth of social media." The term itself was said to have been the millionth word added to the English language, although the claim has been disputed.

identitarian questions—of how to be queer and/or how to be with or desire other queers—are posited, or repositioned, but not resolved in and by this new medium and this new virtual space for queer meetings. In McGlotten’s words, “[r]ather than a smooth space that flows, digital virtuality amplifies the inconstant stutter of desire” (2).

A democratizing ideal of online conversations reflecting the contributions of multiple people all of whom are, in a manner of speaking, on the same page appears to be foregrounded at the start of the narrative of “The Reading.” Venugopal’s opening status update describes his impressions of a book-reading event in which a popular Indian writer—Nandana Jhaveri—has introduced her latest work, cleverly titled *Other Wise*, which “takes the sting out of being single.” (Dattani, “The Reading” 144). The update is “liked” 17 times on his social networks, and spawn multiple comments, between Venugopal, his sister Mala, and Abhishek, the last not yet a Facebook friend of Venugopal’s but a part of his social circle (the pair share 36 mutual Facebook friends between them, the text informs us). In this early section of the story, the network of relations is smooth, with all three parties sharing their observations and opinions. As Abhishek points out in his comment, both Venugopal and he were at the same reading, while Venugopal confirms that he had already noticed the other man at the event, and has now connected person with user because of the same “maroon kurta” worn by Abhishek during the reading, and in his profile picture (144). This initial conversation represents, overall, impressions of friendliness and sociability. Cyberspace appears to allow for deepening human relationships, with a network of communication transforming a fleeting public encounter into a friendship.

Abhishek observes that Venugopal must be “very friendly” as he has his Facebook privacy settings turned down so that “friends of friends” are allowed to read and comment on his updates (Dattani, “The Reading” 144). The one character draws a link of continuity between the

other's online behaviour and his general attributes as a person, assuming a direct and single correlation. Venugopal's Facebook settings show him to be a friendly person to a new acquaintance like Abhishek. If this online social community were idealized as utopia, a "no-place" which mirrors society at its best, this linear continuity would have been maintained. The story would have made the case that, with its many technological tools, Facebook enables people to represent themselves as they really are, and be acknowledged as such by others on the network. It would be represented in the text as an improving agent.

However, the developing relationship between the two men is marked by the paradoxical, threatening effect of dispersal, an instability that runs through the plotline. Differences of opinion—vigorously, often angrily expressed—between the two men become the feature of their private online conversations on the Facebook chat line. From the difference in their assessment of Jhaveri's writing, the two men clash on deeper fissures in the way they live, in both "real" and online worlds. If the earlier three-way conversation (Venugopal, Mala, and Abhishek) runs along networks on stable ground, the subsequent dialogue between the two men have to negotiate the sudden appearance of contours on the ground: the two sets of conversation are separated by a half-hour, barely. The sudden shifts in the tone of exchanges between the two men—part of the recurring pattern of instability—also ties with the discontinuities actively fostered by technology. In "The Reading," online interactions get progressively removed from any kind of surety about the authenticity of people or indeed about any kind of society in perfected form.⁵¹

⁵¹ For a further reading of the complex involvement of virtuality, public sex, and ethical (and/or "authentic") ways of being queer and/or having lasting queer relationships, see McGlotten's "The Virtual Life of Sex in Public" in *Virtual Intimacies* (17-38). His reflections on blackness, queerness, and gay social apps in the chapter "Feeling Black and Blue" (61-77) from the same volume is another timely interrogation of cyberutopias. His reading "confirms that rather than permit the transcendence of racial, gendered, or sexual difference promised by early cybertheorists, online spaces reproduce and perhaps even heighten forms of racial injury, including ordinary microaggressions as well as overt or structural forms of racism" (McGlotten 63)

VENUGOPAL: So, did you enjoy the book reading?

ABHISHEK: Not really.

VENUGOPAL: I really like her writing. She's so honest. Why don't you like it?

ABHISHEK: She's boring.

VENUGOPAL: Because she writes on human relationships, you find that boring
:)

ABHISHEK: No, because she is trying to be populist but isn't really representing
the ordinary woman. Anyway, enough of her. Tell me about yourself.

VENUGOPAL: Why?

ABHISHEK: What do you mean? I just want to get to know you better.

VENUGOPAL: Why are we having this conversation if you don't like Nandana
Jhaveri's writing?

ABHISHEK: Don't pretend.

VENUGOPAL: What do you mean?

ABHISHEK: ;-)

VENUGOPAL: What's the wink for?

ABHISHEK: You have another account. We communicated on that. You see, by
mistake, you sent a mass mail to all in your account. Even the ones you
downloaded from the other account. So I know you are man2man@yahoo.com

VENUGOPAL: And you are?

ABHISHEK: LuvUlickme@yahoo.com

Venugopal is typing...

ABHISHEK: Are you still there? Sorry, didn't mean to corner you.

Venugopal is no longer available online. (Dattani, “The Reading” 145)

The growing awkwardness between the men suggests not so much the stiltedness that causes a conventional split or breaking-off of a relationship, but more so one reflecting confusion. The confused exchanges dramatize the mutual realization that both characters have taken advantage of a user-friendly technology to craft multiple personae with parallel existences. This discontinuity is not the point at which wires are cut so much as the point at which wires are crossed. These crossings, which serve to illustrate contradictions and contraindications, dismantle the symmetries that might feature in ideal, or utopian, scenarios. The two characters—with the same background, interests, and friends—have now to relate and respond to each other along a space that is contoured, so that the world and identities they inhabit are unsettled, and difference rather than symmetry is foregrounded.

While it is cyberspace on which heterotopian representations of difference are mapped in “The Reading,” it is noteworthy that the text also makes use of the mirror to reflect on difference in the world. Foucault himself uses the mirror to distinguish between utopia and heterotopia. A utopian reading of the reflected image of the self is one which would see the image in a place “where I am not,” the no-place of utopia. The mirror, seen this way, represents an “unreal, virtual space” (Foucault, “Other Spaces” 24). Virtuality and reality, while in dialogue, are seen in discrete terms, occupying distinct spaces. Yet, once read as heterotopian, the reflected image of the self complicates these discrete categories. The mirror does, after all, “exist in reality,” and the virtuality it is supposed to represent crosses over into tangible reality, and destabilizes the world, figured in the self-contained omniscient subject who stands before the mirror, watching and identifying. Foucault writes:

From the standpoint of the mirror, I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from the gaze that is, as it were, directed towards me from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back towards myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am.... The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes the place I occupy ... at once absolutely real ... and absolutely unreal (“Other Spaces” 24).

The mirror-as-heterotopia reflects (on) heterogeneous space. Space—“at once absolutely real ... and absolutely unreal”—is “reconstituted” from networks of a gaze relayed back and forth. The subject, looking at the reflection staring back from a virtual space, is fragmented and rebuilt within the operations of a network. A Foucauldian heterotopia complicates, therefore, the subject’s idea of where s/he stands. Spatial uncertainty disturbs an easy sense of exactly *who* the subject actually is; the “I” standing before the mirror has to leave itself (“my absence from the place where I am”) before it can truly see itself (“I begin to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am”).

The relays or crossings of the gaze characterizing the heterotopian mirror affects the stability both of space and subjectivity. Heterotopia is a space of spaces, arguably. It is equipped to house difference playing against or beside one another (virtuality and reality, for instance). This play of difference gives heterotopia a porosity that unsettles the individual subject and its identity, as well as the materiality of the ground upon which s/he stands. This ground and those who inhabit might be a metonym for society itself, arguably. This returns us to the Foucauldian idea of contemporary society as heterogeneously networked, made up of sites within, through, and across which inter-subjective relationships travel while remaining, as Foucault says,

“irreducible.” When Abhishek refers to the big mirror in the book-reading event, through which he has seen Venugopal looking at him (even though the latter does not know he has been thus caught out), he points to the heterogeneous space of contemporary society, in which the stability of space and subjectivity come to be queried. In the scene, the mirror mediates the crossings through which the interrelationship between characters develop, which transform, in turn, how individual characters see themselves.

The earnest environment of the book reading is changed, via the heterotopian mirror into a space in which other things—in this case, gay cruising—happen. As Abhishek observes:

At the reading, there was a mirror behind Nandana through which I could see you. You thought I was immersed in the reading, but I saw you looking at me. I knew you were interested. But when we were at the shelf, you deliberately turned away. What’s his problem? I wondered. Don’t tell me he wants people to think he’s straight! (Dattani, “The Reading” 146)

It is in the virtual space of the mirror that Abhishek and Venugopal first meet, as it were; this space is linked with the cyber-spatial domain that predominates in the narrative. In the coming-together on heterotopian space (a spatial characteristic in all of the meetings between the two in the story), Venugopal’s self—and more precisely, his sexual identity manifested in a desiring if coy gaze—is fleshed out for readers through the agency of the mirror, and in a way to exceed the defined lines of Venugopal’s own self-projection. Readers, following the mirror and along the track of Abhishek’s knowing gaze, see more of Venugopal than he seems willing to disclose. A more complicated image of who Venugopal is what the heterotopian landscape enables.

Through instances such as this, it becomes apparent that Venugopal, while out, tries nevertheless to rein in his sexual desires, as exemplified in his multiple online profiles (one

respectable, the other the “slutty profile” [Dattani, “The Reading” 148]). In the extract quoted above, the tension between the two strata is symbolized in his sidelong desiring gaze at Abhishek. The indirectness is not so much about sexual repression as in the measure of control Venugopal seeks to exert over how he represents his sexuality. The issue of interrelationships in “The Reading” is therefore tied in with the kind of selfhood or identity being fashioned by a queer Indian character like Venugopal. As an identity emerges, with the subject projecting a particular kind of (sexualized) self, it is also undercut. In a narrative like “The Reading,” the queer Indian self is made to engage with issues of difference in a way that foregrounds a heterogeneity that filters into self-contained categories or ways of being.

The indirectness, or indirection, in how Venugopal and Abhishek see each other should remind readers that points of communion or communication in the story are immediately also points of dispersal. This paradox remains a principal feature as the narrative builds and the relationships traced further. The exchanges between the two characters derive a curious momentum out of the many arguments and points of difference that might ordinarily be seen as punctuating an end-point. The two quarrel and bicker over matters but they cannot seem to stay away from messaging each other, or “re-friending” on Facebook after a (brief) period of “un-friendship.”

The two characters never seem to be closer than when they are furthest apart. Abhishek’s message to Venugopal about catching his gaze in the mirror comes after he realizes that Venugopal is not just offline but has removed him as a friend after their other online profiles have been outed. Far from being embarrassed about being thus shunned for having a “slutty account” (Dattani, “The Reading” 146), Abhishek points readers to Venugopal’s own double standards instead. We know from the exchange that Venugopal himself has his other “gay dating

profile.” So, while Venugopal might want to compartmentalize sexual activities, Abhishek’s point of view is more knowing:

The question you asked Nandana gave me the impression you are intelligent — I know I’m not wrong. Okay, I admit I have sex on my mind. Anonymity excites me so I sent that message to your gay dating profile from my slutty account. But that didn’t work and that’s fine by me. There are plenty of fish in the Arabian Sea and by the great wall of Apollo Bunder. That may not be your scene. Who am I to judge? (Dattani, “The Reading” 146)

By turning Venugopal’s censorious attitude on its head, Abhishek inserts a corrective strand into Venugopal’s easy sense of self, his subjectivity, and the discourses in which he seeks to position himself. Venugopal seeks, as we have seen, to represent himself as a respectable queer Indian, not ashamed to desire men *per se* but intent on separating sex from the mind. In contrast, Abhishek, who ostensibly comes from the same background as Venugopal, introduces a point of difference. Not only does he represent himself as having, instead, “sex on [his] mind” (Dattani, “Reading” 146), he has also made clear right from the start of the story that he and Venugopal exchanged messages on their dating/“slutty” profiles (presumably a correspondence in which Venugopal, as “man2man,” was happy to be as sexual as Abhishek/“LuvUlickme”).

So, just as the mirror-as-heterotopia contributes to a splitting of the stable category of self, so also does cyberspace-as-heterotopia. If the mirror at the reading does not reflect a simple image of Venugopal, then online exchanges in the story do not simply reflect who or what the subject in question is. Venugopal is, as we have seen, happy to portray himself as respectable, interested in striking a friendship and potentially romantic connections with Abhishek but disapproving of his “trolling” (as he points out, “[y]es, I admit I was interested in striking up a

conversation but I'm glad I didn't [Dattani, "The Reading" 146]). Yet, just as the narrative problematizes Venugopal's self-image by having Abhishek reflect a subtle light on Venugopal's sleight-of-hand, it also suggests that Abhishek is not simply the hyper-sexual counterpoint to the other more self-reflexive man. This becomes steadily clearer, most sharply with the introduction of the third significant character, "Kapital Das" or Kapil Mirdhas, friend of Abhishek.

Mirdhas first appears as a series of badly written posts to one of Abhishek's Facebook status update (the update in question is a banal quotation from Nandana Jhaveri's book: "Men come out of women. They instinctively know how a vagina feels"). Responses to this update come from three users: one being Venugopal; another an obvious alias (one "VS Naipaul"); Abhishek himself but responding to "VS Naipaul" as "LuvUlickme;" and, most striking of all, "Kapital Das." Das makes a series of misogynistic and homophobic remarks to Jhaveri's quote. The content of Das' posts—in which he rails on about the Americanization of the country in which women and homosexual "perverts" can read works like Jhaveri's—and his writing style immediately alienate him from characters like Venugopal, and, as becomes clear, from the larger queer community within which Venugopal and Abhishek belong:

VENUGOPAL K: @Kapital Das, could you stop making homophobic remarks? I don't see how sexual expression has anything to do with globalisation.

KAPITAL DAS: You must b a perwert...y r u allowed in our cuntry? U r hetrofobic...

VENUGOPAL K: Excuse me? Your attitude is as appalling as your spelling.

Losers like you have no business to throw your opinions arounds. Why don't you go back to the shithole you came from. @Abhishek what's your response to this?

(Dattani, "The Reading" 148)

Jhaveri's book comes to figure again at a critical point of dispersal in the narrative of "The Reading." And, as earlier, it is in cyberspace that relations are muddled, wires crossed. Abhishek goes quiet online, leading to a furious message from Venugopal, in which he accuses Abhishek of being disingenuous, a "split personality" with numerous online profiles, and, even, of taking on the persona of the homophobic "Kapital Das" as a screen for his own sexual self-loathing.

The turbulence caused by Kapil's messages, read another way, shows how the technology of cyberspace is closely interrelated in the text to the heterogeneity and porosity of heterotopia. In this heterogeneous space, "Kapital Das" is sited as a user/character juxtaposed, related (however, antagonistically), very much *beside* the two principals. Venugopal's reaction to Das (and, by extension, Abhishek) is structured in accordance to the sexed-and-gendered subjectivity of someone who is well versed in particular identitarian discourses of queerness: note Venugopal's self-assured references to "homophobic remarks" and "sexual expression." While Venugopal might frame his response to Kapil within the parameters established by apparently well-made, successful queer networks, McGlotten reminds us that networks of queers are fraught, with impulses that might be inconstant in some way. Bringing together Alexander Galloway's observations on the network with his own, McGlotten makes the salutary point that "[a]s a web of ruin or a chain of triumph, networks tend to produce or reflect order or disorder" (6).

The scholarly workings of McGlotten's *Virtual Intimacies* as much as the literary workings of "The Reading" demonstrate the ways in which queer virtual networks do not necessarily resolve issues, either particular ones pertaining to intimacy and the sexual encounter, or more general ones about queer identity. A more persuasive conceptualization of these networks are as channels which record either (or *both*) successful or (and) failed connections.

Kapil's relationship to the other characters in the story animates these ideas of the network even as it simultaneously recalls Sedgwick's antiessentialist tool of the "beside." Networks, to use Sedgwick's terms, "comprise a wide range ... of relations" (8). Just as she allows for "desiring" relationships to sit beside "repelling" ones, or "identifying" ones to "rivaling" ones, so may we relate, or queerly network, the unsettling emergence of Kapil in this story.

So it is that just when Venugopal seems to be most secure in the narrative—both in terms of who he is, and in his assessments of what others are or are not—the story turns against his pre-conceptions, as before. Abhishek, whose ailing mother dies shortly after Venugopal's last message to him, takes a few days to reply back. When he does, the mystery of who exactly Das is becomes clear, though this clarity produces more strands of difference than an evened-out resolution. Kapital Das, or Kapil Mirdhas, turns out to be from an impoverished tribal family. The father, as Abhishek points out, is "a construction labourer, exploited in the name of progress." The son, Kapil, has migrated to the big city in search of employment and has supplemented his income as a rent boy from the age of fourteen, "used for five years by foreigners and locals (some of who are on our friends list)" (Dattani, "The Reading" 150). Abhishek also observes that Kapil is straight, "and hates doing it and the people he needs to satisfy for a few hundred rupees" (150). The narrative both confirms Kapil's heterosexist phobia of queers *and* cancels it by establishing a counter-intuitive context for Kapil's ill-mannered and illiterate rantings. Venugopal, struck by Abhishek's response, agrees to meet with the two of them to make amends: "I want to apologise.. show him that not all of us are monsters" (150).

The process of cancellation at play here may also be phrased as a process of deconstructive erasure, *sous rature*. If erasure is the assertion of *différance*, the trace/track of the other in the sign, then erasure is tied up with dispersals of meaning. *Différance*, being alive to the

notion of the other as an inescapable part of the signifying process, enables us to look elsewhere so as to get a more complex sense of the sign/entity/Being. Placing Kapil's homophobia under erasure articulates it, but simultaneously displaces it to other considerations: his experience of long-standing exploitation, on the personal as well as familial front. In the process, Kapil's subjectivity itself is made much more complex so that who Kapil actually is dispersed, outside, as it were, of the preconceptions of characters like Venugopal (uneducated homophobe crawled out of a "shithole," being one).

Kapil's entry into Dattani's text enables, in fact, dispersals and differences beyond the level of individual characters. He comes to signify a more wide-ranging critique of public/collective identity. The presence of Kapil raises questions around issues of national identity (being "Indian") and sex/gender-based identity (being part of a queer Indian community). While on the individual level, Kapil and his homophobia is reframed in more complicated ways, on the public level, the same homophobia, tied up as it is in the espousal on Kapil's part of a spurious national heteronormative ideal, is made to turn in on itself. While he bemoans the "Americanization of r [*sic*] great cuntry [*sic*]," it is salutary to observe, following Abhishek's biographical note to Venugopal about Kapil, that the same country, with its great culture, has in fact abandoned Mirdhas and his family to the vagaries of a vastly unequal economic structure.

It is suggestive, furthermore, that Kapil's father is exploited as a construction worker: if deconstructive reading tools might be employed to understand Kapil more fully, then this other information deconstructs the Nehruvian "noble mansion for all" in more directly structural terms. These various critiques, permeating individual relationships and larger identifications, are of course also weaved into the structural space of technology given that all of the revelations, twists

and turns in the narrative happen on the internet, along its networks. Kapil's story reveals different aspects of relationships, showing up irregularities in the individuals and the groups of people making up the milieu of the narrative: his presence, nevertheless, also enables Venugopal and Abhishek to reexamine, respectively, their own points of view. Venugopal, as observed above, is much chastened when he gets to know something more about Kapil.

On his part, Abhishek too is compelled to reassess his identity when he comes to befriend Kapil. As he tells Venugopal, Kapil and he meet first on one of his "trolls" for sex, but that Abhishek "paid him to talk" rather than have sex. From out of this prepaid arrangement, which problematizes the ideal "Hegelian recognition" (Fraser 110) out of which mutually affirmed identities and subjectivities form, the inequities which vastly favour Abhishek's and Venugopal's circle of friends become apparent. For, this is no conversation in which there is a simple mutually affirmative recognition of a common ground on which Abhishek and Kapil stand, even if they are in contact with the same people. Abhishek's queer friends are Kapil's exploiting clients: their sexual identities emerge, paradoxically, out of the same kind of relations that have fostered Kapil's homophobia. As the latter's dislike of queers is displaced or placed under erasure by his increasingly focused resentment of socio-economic injustices (one of the unintended consequences of Kapil's conversations with Abhishek is his discovery of Marxian thought, and his "reinvent[ion]," as Abhishek puts it, "as Kapital Das" [Dattani, "The Reading" 150]),⁵² so also are the sureties and self-confidence of the emerging queer community in

⁵² "Kapital Das" is obviously an inversion of Marx's famous work; "Das" is also a common Indian surname, which can denote a member from a lower-caste. It is perhaps telling that Kapil has conversations about Marx with the Bengali character, Abhishek; the state of West Bengal in India has long traditions of left-wing political thought and movements, voting and returning the Communist Party into state government for three continuous decades from the late 1970s.

Mumbai. Like Venugopal, Abhishek finds Kapil's presence a chastening one, and this third character is the site of anxious reflexivity on the part of the two men.

In a variety of ways, therefore, "The Reading" complicates the terrain along which people are settled in the country. Terrain might be understood in spatial terms: the heterotopian complexities introduced into an imagining of "cyberspace" is perhaps the most obvious instance. But, the dispersal of identity—national or sex/gender—might also be read as an unsettling of the terrain within which an individual's being, or subjectivity, is sited. Just as erasure works to represent Kapil in less than straightforward ways, so also does it work to unsettle the ways in which characters like Venugopal situate themselves. The pattern of siting-and-displacing as the porous form given to individuals and interrelationships in the narrative extends right to the end. Kapil, for all his homophobia, turns out to be quite interested in getting Abhishek and Venugopal together. His motives can be read in multiple ways. On the one hand, it reflects an endearing but also saccharine ideal of monogamy (Kapil engineers a date between the two other men at a screening of a Bollywood film called "*Ishq Ishq Ishq Dobarra*" [roughly translated, "Love, Love, Love, Again"]). On the other hand, he is perceptive enough to decipher the loneliness of both men. As Abhishek later tells Venugopal: "Asked him why he thought we would make a *khubsurat jodi* [beautiful pair]. He said we're both unhappy and don't know it" (Dattani, "The Reading" 153).

So, Kapil's homophobia is displaced by his desire to see Abhishek and Venugopal enter into a relationship (and, arguably, vice versa). However, the final scene in "The Reading" makes more of this unsettled situation, in its treatment of the most intimate moment yet shared by both characters. It is New Year's Day, just after Midnight, and it soon becomes clear the pair have just had sex; a few months have passed since the movie date engineered by Kapil (September). In

October, the pair have exchanged follow-up emails discussing Kapil's motives and the potential for a relationship between two men who, as Abhishek observes, "are 'other' wise" (Dattani, "The Reading" 153). They agree, in Venugopal words, to "give it a shot [, f]or Kapil, of course" (154). Getting to the beginning of the New Year's Day conversation, readers are plausibly led to thinking that the pair *have* in the meantime made the first steps to coming together properly. Like the rest of the story, the conversation takes the shape of online conversations, beginning with a mutual New Year's greeting (the conversation is time-stamped 2 minutes past midnight on the 1st of January).

All seems well, but, as always in the story, points of convergence also present a contrary effect. In this case, Abhishek comes up with the startling observation, "[t]hat was really bad sex, wasn't it?" (Dattani, "The Reading" 154), to which Venugopal agrees. Readers are now faced with a situation that is run through with proliferating interpretations. How to decipher the frank exchange about bad sex running along with the immediately preceding lines of greetings for the New Year? Do the pair mean it, or are they jesting (it is clear from earlier exchanges that encounters between the two can be bruising affairs)? If it *is* the case that the sex was bad, is it then to be the basis for (yet another) time of separation between the two, or is it cynical resignation from both that relationships are most often built on an imperfect structure? Certainly, Venugopal's comment would seem to suggest the latter: "Bad sex is fine. At least we're together on New Year's Day. In the same bed" (154). Searching for a symbolic confirmation of a relationship between the two men, it seems promising that both are actually occupying the same site/plane: the bed. This same site is immediately displaced when Venugopal continues that it is indeed "fine" that the two are sharing a bed at the start of the New Year, "[w]ith our respective laptops, chatting with each other after bad sex ;-)" (154). A heterotopian cyberspace quickly

intervenes in this (homo)normative site (the bed) on which the two subjects are meant to settle. Instead of conveying a harmonious resolution, then, this scene leading up to the end of the narrative continues to produce irresolution. If individual subjectivity or a larger identity is tied up in stable formations (either in Austinite “explicit performative utterances,” or in a model of mutual “recognition”), it does seem to be the case that stability continues to be deferred or displaced along less settled, more complicated, networks.

Alternating patterns of smoothening-out and ruffling-up make up the form of this final interchange between the two men. In the process, there is an accruing materialization of queerness, but without an easy normative visioning of what a queer future might look like. Kapil’s moves to bring the two men together works, but not in the way of a Bollywood ending. Resolving the question of what kind of queer Indians Abhishek and Venugopal are, individually or together, is forever poised, almost but not quite articulated. In the heterogeneous, networked space of the bed, in which the two characters are “talking” to one another in a highly mediated, digitally fragmented way (through laptops, chat apps, and music videos on YouTube), the two characters do not explicitly enunciate or affirm their relations to one another:

ABHISHEK: Playing Auld Lang Syne on YouTube...Hey why did you stop that?

VENUGOPAL: Let me play something else

ABHISHEK: What could be better than Auld Lang Syne?

ABHISHEK: OMG! You really are crazy!

VENUGOPAL: Now, please don’t hum the song to me. I’m not listening.

ABHISHEK: Neither did my dad. But that didn’t stop my mom from singing it to him. If I was dying and I sang this song to you, would you listen?

VENUGOPAL: Yes, but you're not dying.

ABHISHEK: And you're not my husband. (Dattani, "The Reading" 154)

The song in question—yet another Bollywood love song sung by Abhishek's dying mother to her husband, an event alluded to earlier in the story—carries a particular symbolic weight of romantic, monogamous love. Yet, the song (and its symbolic value) does not transmit, in an uninterrupted arc, over from a heteronormative world into this one. The representation of undying love between a married couple—that ideal already displaced by our knowledge that Abhishek's father may or may not have lived up to the standards of an ideal (listener of romantic songs, at least)⁵³—is thoroughly de-transcendentalized in the exchange above. Tellingly, the two disputatious men finally converge on a shared detachment from conventional narratives or signifiers of normative love.

On the surface, "The Reading" deals with the possibilities of love between two men; the potential for love is tied up with the potential of meetings on a common ground of queerness, on a shared sense of difference from sex- and gender-normativity. Yet, this text grounds itself in difference in more complex ways, by demonstrating the unsettled, unresolved form of heterogeneity. Like *Night Queen* and *Muggy Night*, "The Reading" disrupts the queer camaraderie on which the works—as, specifically, queer Indian writing—supposedly rest. As in the earlier works, this occurs almost from the start. The story begins with Abhishek and Venugopal adding each other as Facebook "friends." The narrative is structured as online exchanges. The dialogue takes the form of chats and emails; these conversations also provide readers with all of the events extraneous to this online world of the two. Being privy to these

⁵³ Earlier in "The Reading," all Abhishek does is sketch roughly the deathbed-scene between his mother and father. He observes: "Mum went looking very happy, singing my dad a song: yeh raaten, yeh mausam nadi ka kinara" (150).

messages, readers get to hear of meetings between the pair, form images of the respective life-stories of both, and gain some insight into the minutiae of their daily lives and those near to them.

However, this online narrative is also characterized by frequent arguments between the pair. We find both characters profoundly distrustful of one another, their insecurities a reflection of the way in which communications technology blur distinctions between the self and the other, the authentic user(name) and the alias, truth and lies, the authentic and the fake. These double-edged ramifications of social interactions online enable a reflexivity about hierarchies, levels, and structures within which the matter of life happens. As Rymarkczuk points out, Facebook “disrupts” and “exhibits many paradoxes” (7). Observing the online dispersals in “The Reading,” which give a particular spatialized form to the production of difference, we are offered insights into the various, variable, interrupted, resumed networks running through the social domain on which characters, selves, subjectivities, identities are plotted.

In Facebook, and cyberspace at large, “[y]ou exit the normal world when you log in; but still you are involved in representing a version of normal life” (Rymarkczuk 7). The irruption of Kapil into the “normal life” of Abhishek and Venugopal and their like-minded queer friends demonstrates, furthermore, that the representations of “normal life” and even the representations of a self-contained, well-realized, rounded-off subjectivity and/or online user-persona need to be placed under erasure, so that the erased lines of separation between selves and others are rendered visible again, as dense material figurations of how heterogeneity (in queer/India, for instance) has formed.

Chapter Three: R. Raj Rao

“So what I’m saying is that you look around and write about things that you see, that move you deeply, that affect you, that pain you, and that you know from first hand and feel qualified to write about; that’s how it is for any writer”

R. Raj Rao, in conversation with Ana Garcia-Arroyo

R. Raj Rao is a writer, poet, and activist-academic, whose work is contemporary to Mahesh Dattani’s. From the period of the 1980s to the present, Rao’s attentions have moved from more canonical areas of Indian writing in English (one of his early works is a scholarly-biographical study of poet, Nissim Ezekiel) to less-valorized sectors of gay, trans, and queer Indian writing. Currently based in the University of Pune as a Professor of English Literature, Rao has been an important facilitator of queer studies at the post-secondary level. As noted in the Introduction, Rao outlines his experiences of introducing queer writing into university curricula in *Whistling in the Dark* (Rao, “Introduction” ix-xiv). He connects the early stages of his own queer-focused teaching to initial, informal discussion-groups: the “Queer Studies Circle” (QSC), for instance, made up of Rao and some of his interested students, which starts meeting in his university-office in 1999 (Rao, “Introduction” ix). The Circle was “a support group that was concerned with the intellectual, cultural, social and political aspects of being gay in India,” through which “we encouraged people to talk” (Rao, “Introduction” ix). The forum thus created leads, as Rao observes, not only to the publication of a work of queer interviews like *Whistling in the Dark*, but also in his multi-year endeavour to get his Department’s support for a queer module at the Graduate level.

Rao's predecessor in the as-yet brief history of queer studies in Indian post-secondary institutions, is, as he himself notes, Hoshang Merchant. Merchant, like Rao, combines university teaching with creative and publishing endeavours which foreground homosexuality in India (he is a poet and, as already noted in the Introduction to this dissertation, the editor of one of the earliest anthologies of gay writing, *Yaraana*). Rao's experiences with the departmental administration in the University rehearses some of the epistemic contestations in the field of teaching in postcolonial India. These contestations metonymically refer to all of those normative discontinuities between queerness and Indian-ness discussed earlier in this dissertation. The objections raised by the University administration reflected the imbricated relationship between teaching, canon-formation, and postcolonial/national identity. Queer writing, the Administration argued, was not in keeping with national identity:

Soon after the formation of QSC, I formulated a course on gay and lesbian literature to be taught to fourth semester M.A. students. The Board of Studies in English (BSE), an academic body made up of politically rather than academically minded individuals, promptly singled it out and rejected it, *remarking that Indian students did not need such a course!*...In questioning the need for such a course to be taught in an Indian university, the BSE was really reinforcing the stereotype of gayness and lesbianism *as corrupt Western imports, alien to the sanitised culture of India.* (Rao, "Introduction" xi, emphases added).

The space between the two acronyms, BSE and QSC, develops into a particular socio-cultural and politicized site through which run lines of relations between straight and queer parties. These relationships also reflect on the connections between the specific and the general; text and

context; the teaching of literature (arguably, specific texts) vis-à-vis the national *mis-en-scène* (another term for general context); certain ideal forms of being (Indian) and certain less easily classifiable messy content of queerness in India.

If we were to return to a narrative of nation, expressed teleologically, the three letters making up the BSE comes to figure as well a linear connection between power and culture. The “Board” is arguably the bureaucratic face of what Foucault would term “governmentality” (see his *Society Must Be Defended*), which in turn seeks to determine the correct, national, lineaments of the “study” of the culture represented in and through particular usages of English language and literature.⁵⁴ As Rao himself discerns, when he speaks of how the BSE positions itself as the arbiter of a “culture of India” always already “sanitised.” Following the line taken by the BSE, QSC and any kind of (teaching of) queer texts need to be excised, the kind of necessary exclusion long understood to characterize the signifying practices of heteronormativity. However, as deconstruction/poststructuralist analyses demonstrate, any such act of exclusion is subject to an opposite effect, where the obscuring agent is itself placed under erasure. Theorists like Diana Fuss have articulated this effect in foundational theories of queerness. Following Fuss, we are able to see that in the case of an exclusionary heteronormative order, the homosexual returns, even if as that quantity which needs to be repeatedly disavowed in order for the transcendental-universal heterosexual subject to *be*. Being (straight/Indian) is therefore not granted the security of being given. The requirement of an-other exposes the tracks perpetually retraced by heteronormativity in order that it might lay claim to being authentic. Phrased another way: it could be said that the deconstructive approach of erasure means that neither BSE nor

⁵⁴ The particular role and function of English language- and literature-education in the development of a colonial Indian culture has been the object of much study, most famously in the work of Gauri Vishwanathan. More recently, Alok Mukherjee’s *A Gift of English* has extended and reappraised the reception of the English language and English literature in various communities in the colonial and postcolonial subcontinent

QSC are allowed to disappear, the one is prevented from ascending to transcendence, the other from descending into a shameful oblivion.

This understanding of a dual presence—so important to a deconstructive approach to signification, to selving and othering, to identifying and excluding—carries forward well into imagining the relationship between BSE and QSC, or the straight and the queer, in spatialized ways. In planar terms, the two groupings identified by Rao, can be seen as sitting/situated beside each other, a spatial relationship of heterogeneity marked by those lines of attraction and repulsion identified, for instance, by Sedgwick in her formulation of the “beside.” Eventually, Rao is allowed his course on queer studies, after a 2007 Indo-Canadian conference on queer literature, held at the University under Rao’s direction along with that of friend and colleague, Thomas Waugh, from Montreal’s Concordia University (Rao, “Introduction” xii). Even so, Rao has to rename his course, from the initial working-title, “Lesbian and Gay Literature in India,” to “Alternative Literature II: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Writing in India” (Rao “Introduction” xiii). While the modification reflects the politics of canon-formation (the “Alternative” tags behind the implicit priority of the “Authentic,” arguably), Rao remarks that, “[w]e offer a course called Alternative Literature I: Dalit Writing in India, and by calling our course Alternative Literature II, we were emphasizing the underlying connection between both these forms of marginal literature ... suggesting that coalitions of oppressed groups was the need of the hour” (Rao, “Introduction xiii).

Between “sanitised Indian culture” and the “marginals,” there emerge, therefore, a set of heterogeneous relations. The relational processes by which established curricula, queer writing, and Dalit writing are shaped and re-shaped within the domain of the University reflect also a siting based on lines of convergence and dispersal that are not unidirectional as much as they

represent more fluid ebbs and flows. The now-repelling, now-attracting, now-qualifying set of relations between the BSE and QSC is already apparent in the eventual acceptance of Rao's queer writing course. The "coalition" between queer and Dalit writing establishes other kinds of networks between subjects and communities, the variable permutations of which relations are developed in Rao's fiction, most notably in his novel, *The Boyfriend*. The analyses of the texts in the following sections of this chapter will examine and extend understandings of the shape of "the underlying connection" between sexuality and caste/class privilege. The readings will emphasize that the play of difference brought to the fore by the primary texts exceed any simplified notion of equality between oppressed groups, or individuals, even if the difference as a dynamic impulse might travel along lines of connection between peoples, sites, planes juxtaposed with one another. In varied, and not necessarily coterminous ways, Rao's activism, teaching, and creative endeavours represent effects of decentred ways of thinking about sets of individuals and groups, of subjectivities and identities.

The decentred or anti-essentialist direction of Rao's work needs to be analyzed in tandem with his formal interests in connections and heterogeneities that do not simply blend. On one level, this interest tallies with the kind of realism that characterizes Rao's work. Realism here is a creative strategy related to content, well encapsulated in the quote from the author used as epigraph to this chapter. On another level, however, Rao is also alive to elements of postmodernism that enable the play of differences central to the manner in which his texts might reflect reality in diverse India. As he says: "[t]here are kinds and kinds of postmodernism, but one thing that appeals to me is the whole distinction that postmodernism makes between high and low culture *and the breaking down of their grounds* ... [and] the whole process of deconstruction, of decentring has got rid of these distinctions so that one can write freely." (Rao,

“Interview,” emphasis added). If spatialized thinking is planar thinking, as Sedgwick leads us to consider, and networked thinking, as both Sedgwick and Foucault have understood it, then the relationship between apparently non-contiguous planes (realism and postmodernism, or the upper-caste and the Dalit, as examples) can be highlighted in spatialized approaches to Rao’s work.

Stories from *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City* (1995)

In terms of literary content, R. Raj Rao’s collection of short stories, *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City* (hereafter, *One Day*), traverses a range of representations, relationships, subjectivities, identities, gender-normativity, gender-dissidence and, the continuum between the twin poles of homosexuality and heterosexuality. Not all of the stories in the collection reflect on gay or queer issues, though some of the most compelling narratives do. Certainly, the stories discussed in this section deal with sexual and gender dissidence. Some characters overtly identify with gayness; others are less easily encoded, even if their sexual practices are not confined to heterosexual desire. With regard to questions of literary form, Rao speaks of this collection as one of many indicators of his facility across literary forms. Speaking with Ana Garcia Arroyo, he observes that:

I’m very proud that the very fact that I’ve tried out so many different forms of writing makes it clear how important form is to me. I remain one of the few writers in English who’s written and published short stories, plays, a novel, a biography; different genres of writing. And even within that, for example, if you look at my collection of short stories, *One Day I Locked My Flat in Soul City*,

every story tries to be different from the other in the mode of its telling (Rao, qtd. in Garcia Arroyo 174).

Rao's traversing "mode[s] of telling" parallel, therefore, the wide-spectrum narratives in this collection. The analyses of a selection of stories in the following sections will return to the dyadic relationship of form and content. In a story like, "Confessions of a Boy Lover" (hereafter, "Confessions"), for instance, the use of a roughly epistolary form—part of the narrative in that story follows an exchange of letters between the sometimes-lovers, Siddharth and Sudhir—reflects the contrasting threads of intimacy and alienation that weaves the story of the two men.⁵⁵ The story of "Landya Ko Maro" (hereafter "Landya")⁵⁶ splits between a frame-narrative and the account itself; furthermore, a particular spatial dynamic also mediates the "mode of telling" here, as will be discussed below. In "Wish It Were a Nightmare" (hereafter "Wish), the greater part of the narrative takes the shape of a transcript of a recorded conversation in a police station.⁵⁷

These formal innovations necessitate an active engagement with heterogeneity operating in the text. Furthermore, the particular analytical direction of this project attends to the spatial dimension of heterogeneity and the networks between peoples as much as spaces and planes. Certainly, observations of proliferating relationships between people located in a particular

⁵⁵ Arguably, the *frisson* evoked in the title also establishes an intertextual relationship between Rao's scandalous queer narrative and Thomas De Quincey's ever-popular *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*. A De Quincean trafficking in the thrills of the illicit is reiterated in the author's prefatory note to *One Day* in which "R.R.R." confesses, as it were, that "[t]he characters—and even narrators—in these stories are often politically incorrect" (Rao, *One Day* n. pag). By then going on to "apologise on their behalf" (Rao, *One Day* n. pag), the author enters into a dialogue with normativity: the culpable, sometimes criminal, characters and narrators might be exposed in their "incorrectness" but are not erased. Indeed, these characters are valorized, if anything, in their function as the principal subjects in *One Day*.

⁵⁶ A translation from the Hindi would read, "Kill the circumcised" ("*landya*" is a very offensive Hindi term for Muslim men, i.e., the circumcised.)

⁵⁷ The kind of relationship between form and content is also reflected in stories not examined in detail here. For instance, the narrator of "Obsessed, Obsessing" undergoes a sex-change in the process of "telling" his/her story, that transformation affecting the shape and direction of the story. In doing so, the narrative critiques the normative, symmetry of "proper" stories, with perfect endings and stabilized, properly embodied characters. Another instance is the title story of the collection, which takes the form of a "stream-of-consciousness" narrative, reflecting the content, which represents the activity of navigating crowded streets in Mumbai.

multi-planar space seem to coincide with a particular appreciation of paradox in the following personal communication from the author to this researcher, about what “Soul City” in the title of the collection might signify:

The term Soul City is open to reader interpretation. However, Soul City to me is Bombay. What I probably had in mind I guess when I wrote the title story of the collection in 1994 was an affinity between Bombay and me in terms of a cosmopolitan, pluralist and secular value system, to be found nowhere else in India, and now not even in Mumbai (as opposed to Bombay). It's the idea of a soul mate or the Afro-American soul brother/sister extended to a city, thereby personifying it. “Soul” city may also be contrasted with “body,” and that typifies my relationship to Bombay: it's a city that shapes me and is a part of my unconscious, but, paradoxically, I can't stand it physically because of its ever-humid climate, it's multitudes that deny you the idea of personal space, it's [*sic*] vast distances that take you forever to get from one place to another, and so on.

(Rao, “Re: Soul City”)

As difference and heterogeneity remain key to the readings of Rao's work here, it worth thinking about the heterogeneity that attaches to the paradox. The paradox has, after all, the heterogeneous potential to represent one thing *and* another, or, many things at once. Rao's work is such that networks of associations cross similarities with disparities, closeness with distances. These juxtapositions refuse the sureties of a settled space, whether geographical or textual or that of the subject. The sprawl of Bombay, or Mumbai as it is now known, is enjambed with—that is, carries forward into, and is therefore overlapped—the claustrophobia of its “multitudes that deny you the idea of personal space.” In addition, the sense of a teeming demographic space is

imbricated with a sense of constriction in the city, “because of its ever-humid climate.” And, yet, there is an “affinity” in the relationship between different characters in the stories and the imperfect space in which they are located. All three stories discussed below have central characters who express the attraction-repulsion dynamic described by Rao above. Any “idea” of the text of *One Day* then—that is to say, any kind of critical response to its various stories with its different characters—has to account for odd, different, contradictory overlaps. If it is possible to see *One Day* as signifying a diversified text, then this collection of different stories (in which differing content is placed beside different formal strategies) signifies the antiessentialist potential of heterogeneity, tapped by that literary production of difference that literally makes the text.

“Confessions of a Boy Lover”

The opening story of *One Day*, “Confessions,” is one of the longest works in that collection. In form and content, the narrative traverses multiple spaces and times, while also employing strategies of metafiction to complicate the meanings being produced out of that same narrative. Reading the text allows an appreciation of a particular production of difference across a contoured dis/continuous terrain within which sexual and social relationships are contained. In formal terms, “Confessions” is split over four sections and straddles multiple forms of literary prose. In one sense, this variegated structure holds the story from end to end, but the metafictional elements disperse rather than contain meaning. Rao later develops “Confessions” to a full-length novel (his second after *The Boyfriend*), *Hostel Room 131* (2010). The extended analysis of this densely imagined short story prepares the way for a forthcoming analysis of that later novel.

“Confessions” begins in a small town in 1981 (Dharwar, near Mumbai), and ends in a hospital room in the big metropolis (Mumbai itself) in 1985. It concerns two men, Siddharth and Sudhir, and the variable nature of their relationship, sometimes as lovers, sometimes as friends, sometimes as bitterly fractious entities. The line of relation between the two men, mapped along a variable terrain, bends and weaves its way over different planes, just as the narrative itself moves across spaces: on the one hand, large and small urban and semi-urban spaces related to one another in ways that reflect the strata of national hierarchy; on the other hand, the literary “spaces” denoted by the different formal elements used in the story (bookends of a first-person narrative hold between them a roughly epistolary segment of two middle sections, while forays into metafiction further complicate the “integrity” of the larger narrative structure holding these separate formal planes).⁵⁸ If these traversals are seen as iterations of mobility, helping move the story along, as it were, they also contribute to an unsettling of any idea of a stable text, internally coherent and straightforwardly meaningful. This mobility contributes, as in a text like Dattani’s *Muggy Night*, to a porous, dynamic, but also often-difficult, scene of diversity that needs to be negotiated as much by the reader as by the characters in the story itself.

“Confessions” begins *in media res*. Yet, there is a deceptive sense of a formal beginning. The story begins with a date: “May of 1981” (1). This strategy appears to formalize a temporal structure, a definite beginning, as might be found in a diary. Yet, this day and month do not denote a strict starting-point: rather, they point to a watershed. For, Siddharth and Sudhir already know one another and, more pertinently, they have grown intimate with each other prior to this date. Also, the present-time of the narrative is four years after 1981, as readers soon find out.

⁵⁸ The middle sections are predominantly a series of letters between the two men with brief, recurring interjections from the first-person narrative. Hence, I refer to these parts of the story as “roughly” epistolary.

Events from the greater part of the story can be dated four years later, at different points in the year 1985.⁵⁹ Therefore, while a temporal order is signified, any stabilized agency of sequential order to that structure is deferred.⁶⁰ Readers are tempted to believe that events begin from the date given at the start. However, these events-as-watershed are only the product of other events prior to May 1981. These events are located in a non-represented past; readers do not have access to them.

Juxtaposed with this spectral sense of an earlier, unknown past, disrupting a straightforward sequential structure by its presence-in-absence, is the sense also of the future making its presence felt during the present-time of the narrative. Both the reader in the act of reading (textual reception) and the narrator in the act of telling (representation) are engaged in travelling from the future back to the multiple temporal signposts (1981; 1985) referenced in “Confessions.” Yet, any retrospective agency that might attach to a conventional sense of the future (the future being invested with enabling powers of hindsight, for example) is curtailed; this is because there is a past previous to the past being represented here, at which the future cannot get.

Arguably, this is a heterogeneous temporal structure, with different parts between which no single line of relation dominates. If such a time-structure is disorienting, the same goes for the

⁵⁹ The final part of the story is narrated, and ends, on Christmas Day in 1985, while the narrator is convalescing in a hospital bed. In a story whose genealogy is caught up in an irregular, non-linear temporal structure, it is possible, at least, to say that Christmas Day, 1985 is something akin to an end-point.

⁶⁰ A similar kind of unsettling arbitrariness as to beginnings can be discerned in other texts which make use of heterogeneity to complicate stable hermeneutics or interpretation. In Henry James’s ghost story, “Sir Edmund Orme” (1891), for example, the instabilities in the plot/content itself—it is a “tale” of an apparition that might be construed as “too extravagant to have had a demonstrable origin” or to have been a “real occurrence” at all (James, “Sir Edmund” 851)—is interwoven with a ghosted formal structure. There is not only the use of a retrospective frame-narrative placing readers at one more remove from the time of the (supposed) “occurrence,” but also a struggle to pinpoint a definite origin in the ghost-story itself. It is a struggle arbitrarily resolved—the main-narrative begins with the sentence, “[i]f there’s a story in the matter I recognise the exact moment at which it began” (851)—but such certitude is displaced when it becomes clear later that the ghostly subject has had a life and significance long before the “exact moment” at which the story is said to have begun.

spatial structure in the text. Temporality and spatiality are closely twined in the very first sentence: “May of 1981: I was Sudhir’s guest in Dharwar” (Rao, “Confessions” 1). With regard to the spatial structure, a heterogeneity is again very much in play. Displacement overlaps with emplacement right from the start. A visitor to Sudhir’s “immense ancestral dwelling,” Siddharth is unceremoniously thrown out of doors by the other’s parents, “on discovering [he] had an unnatural passion for their son” (1), possibly by coming across the two men being intimate with each other (the details are not provided to the reader, but “discovery” suggests the presence of some kind of material evidence). Ejected from a space richly symbolic of reproductive heteronormativity (“ancestral” dwelling being the site of reproduction, both of an ideology and the species) networked with national respectability, Siddharth is not so much cast out by the narrative as he is made into a moving-point tracing a contoured, sometimes-discontinuous, sometimes-circular path. As he observes, after he is thrown out with his luggage: “[u]nsettled, I began walking down the road” (1).

The next two nights in the narrative are busy ones for the character, in which the passage of time is linked up with the character’s traversals along multiple sites or planes. Siddharth spends the time enlisting the help of a couple of friends, and, then, the police, so that he and Sudhir can stay together. He travels in and around the region of Dharwar during this point, returning to Sudhir’s family; but, he remains unsuccessful in his plan to be reunited with Sudhir. The fabric of the backdrop to these traversals is one which national norms are woven in with sexuality. Siddharth’s relationship with Sudhir is a running thread between the poles of respectability and sexual dissidence framing this backdrop. Siddharth asserts there is a mutual sexual desire at play, and tips over in his narrative into the conventions of romance as he wonders about whether Sudhir will want to “elope” with him (Rao, “Confessions” 2). Such a

non-normative signification of relations between men is countered by the interpellative force of heteronormative structure made up of agents who cannot read the two men in the same way as Siddharth. These agents inhabit, and can be placed within, social units like the family (what, in Althusserian thought might be termed the Ideological State Apparatus or ISA, or those institutions invested with the function of reproducing the dominant ideology), or those institutions of authority and power like the police (an institution more in line with a Repressive State Apparatus or RSA, in that the police, as indeed is the case in this narrative, is invested with the normative authority to repress dissent).

The line, “I began walking down the road,” can be read not just as a temporal node, the point at which something “begins,” but also as a site, on which a particular kind of spatialized networking between peoples is concentrated so that space and subjectivity (or, subjectival relations) are once more foregrounded. Siddharth notices how, “[t]he neighbours whose houses lined the narrow street like a row of parked lorries, stared at me [with] ... this peculiar loyalty that neighbours in small towns have to each other, that we in the city are unaccustomed to” (Rao, “Confessions” 2). There are many kinds of relations expressed here, of which the alienation between the “small town” and the “city” is only the most apparent. Other relations complicate simple uni-planar relations, between the man walking the street along which also live the neighbours. For, surveillance and hostility felt by Siddharth, already “unsettled,” changes also the planar relations. It is plausible to think of, indeed imagine and visualize, the neighbours actually looking *down* on Siddharth (indeed, they may well be, if the houses are multi-storeyed; the narrative does not clarify either way).

Indeed, networks in various iterations come to shape the following days Siddharth spends in and around Dharwar, attempting to extricate Sudhir from the latter’s family (literally, from the

family home, in which Sudhir has remained in the interim). Being removed from the family home of his friend, under surveillance and displaced, Siddharth walks to a bicycle shop run by “R,” a local, and mutual friend of both men. An uncomfortable night follows, the form of which is also shaped by a keenly-felt spatiality:

It was the worst night of my life. Amid rows of cycles, discarded tyres, rusty air-pumps, broken spokes, swabs of cotton waste and cans of machine oil, room was made for me and several garage hands who slept there every night. We lay on bare mats, a delightful treat to the mosquitoes. The heat in that dungeon was lethal; I couldn't get so much as a wink of sleep. Throughout the night I thought of Su. Were his folks spanking him? Was he willing to elope with me? (Rao, “Confessions” 1-2)

Bicycling impedimenta represented above—frames, spokes, pumps, oil, and waste—are the elements lending a particular structure to the space. The space is one in which Siddharth and the more usual occupants (“garage hands” *and* mosquitoes) are to spend the night. Here, we have that spatial “beside” of Sedgwick’s, a juxtaposition of relations without any idealized equality of relations. For, as much as Siddharth has found himself the object of a particular kind of surveillance that puts him on a lower plane (and place, given that he has to move from an “ancestral dwelling” to a bicycle shop in a matter of hours), in the shop, he represents himself as on a very different symbolic plane even while he is made to share space with, and lie literally beside, other men on the floor. The close network between him and the other men is just as “unsettled” as the one developed on the road from Sudhir’s home. Only it is the narrator who is now at a remove, curiously detached while firmly sited on that uncomfortable space.

For, Siddharth does not readily identify with the kinds of relations brought into play between the various people in the space. He feels the environment and the inhospitability of the “dungeon” keenly. Yet, for all the realism (dare it be called naturalism?) employed by the narrative in its description of space (the room) and time (the sleepless night), we find no reference to how the other men in the room fare over the night, nor do we have any reflection on the part of the narrator on the general discomfort which seem to be the lot of his bedfellows. It is worth recalling the dynamic in Dattani’s “The Reading,” if we are to consider that in this kind of narrative, the point at which networks of connection gather is also that from which connections are simultaneously dispersed.

It is noteworthy that Siddharth, while firmly located within a space (he has, after all, no where else to go in Dharwar) thinks predominantly of departure, of whether Sudhir will indeed “elope” with him. Furthermore, for all of his connections—intended (with Sudhir) and unintended (the garage hands)—with the locals and locality of Dharwar, Siddharth’s attitudes closely twine with certain kinds of the social privileges attaching differently to the vastly different strata within the national domain. Dharwar is ultimately too different for a unified perspective on the part of the narrator. Even at the beginning of the story, Siddharth points out the “*peculiar* loyalty that neighbours in small towns have that *we* in the cities are unaccustomed to” (1). On the other hand, Siddharth is also too different from Dharwar for the locals to accept him into the space. Yet, the relations between the two worlds are not severed. They remain, are (re)produced, but are not idealized or settled, in the way that the relationship between the two men are also represented in this and following parts of the story.

Even as the narrator attempts to homogenize Dharwar as a “small town,” and even if the narrative represents a certain provincial normativity that binds the locals together (the common

attitude to homosexual relations in Dharwar seems to be either in the realm of unintelligibility or in the realm of an open hostility⁶¹), there is then a sense of “unsettled” heterogeneity in the multi-planar traversals of Siddharth, and the relationality between connection and dispersal. The simple plotting in these early pages of the story—its focus being the common-enough theme of forbidden love—is arguably but the facade for a more complex rendition of spaces in Dharwar. The way of Siddharth’s travels on just one night traces also another way, through which various different subjects inhabiting a space are mapped or networked, being spaced together *and* apart. The heterogeneous impulse here carries forward into Siddharth’s richly imagined relation of identity between himself and Sudhir. After spending a sleepless night alongside other men (with whom he seems to have nothing in common), during which he interpellates an idealized and monogamous relationship, by expressing his willingness to “elope” with Sudhir, Siddharth finds himself doubting the future of the relationship the morning after, a point in the narrative tellingly juxtaposed with the point at which he catches sight of other desirable locals:

At sunrise I cycled to a nearby tank. Young, muscular men were diving into the water, causing it to vigorously swash. I watched their dark bodies, their robust thighs. Some ghostly voice at the base of my mind was saying it was all over; I silenced it quickly. (Rao, “Confessions” 2)

Again, Siddharth travels, and the action signifies other kinds of traversals; for instance, from a uniform certainty (of the relationship) to doubts which disperse such certainty (just when the

⁶¹ The characters “R.” and Peter are the only locals sympathetic to Siddharth, but they do not read the desire Siddharth has to take Sudhir away with him as sexualized. Speaking of Peter soon after in the narrative, Siddharth says: “And he, like R, was too uninitiated to understand that [Siddharth’s gay desires], mistaking it for brotherly feeling.” (Rao, “Confessions” 2). As for the hostile parties, mainly Su’s family: “Su’s folks believed that I had developed occult powers by means of which I had hypnotized him.” (3). Regardless of Siddharth’s predicament evident in his words, an underlying tone of a city-boy superiority is also noteworthy. The manner in which the larger narrative critiques this assumed super-agency of a more-advanced, autonomous observer-narrator will be explored further down in the section proper.

other desirable male bodies displace the image of Sudhir, we can argue), and back again to a hasty (over-hasty, even, it can be argued) reaffirmation of a settled relation of identity between the two men. The semi-colon in the last sentence of the quoted passage functions, in this reading, not merely as a grammatical device, but one which unsettles by juxtaposing difference, within the space of a sentence or the space of the narrator's "mind."

The displacing of what has, for Siddharth, seemed to be an ideal relationship between two men becomes, in fact, the driving factor in the larger story. For, over the span of the years covered in "Confessions," Siddharth and Sudhir never "elope," nor yet do they sever their connection. Their lives maintain a tenuous overlap. Theirs is a sometimes-pleasant, sometimes-fractious relation to one another. The enclosures making up the subjectival space of these two individuals seem porous, set as they are beside one another in this curiously related way all the way through the story. Their relationship is located on a curious plane, therefore, an uncertainty which also traces a line of relation back to the difficulty locals have in decoding exactly why Siddharth should be so keen to extricate Sudhir from the latter's family-home. So, when Siddharth takes recourse to the police, asking them to intervene in the case, the police inspector is doubtful and obstructive. As the narrative has it: the inspector "twirled his bristly moustache, refused to jot down my complaint. It was a family affair, he argued, so who was I to interfere? I begged him to understand that I was Su's confidant" (Rao, "Confessions" 3).

So, this relationship, difficult to represent in the first place, is not to be confirmed, or settled in an uncomplicated way. When the police search for Su, he is not at home; later, he is brought to the police station to deny Siddharth's allegations of family discord, but not apparently under duress. For, according to the story, during the time Siddharth was pleading with the police inspector, "incarceration be damned, he was at that moment revelling in a cinema hall" (Rao,

“Confessions” 3). As the narrator finds himself with no option but to leave the area, family members (two uncles referred to as the “carnivores” or “hyenas”) give him a note from Su: “‘see you after three years,’ he savagely said, ‘by which time I’d have finished my studies’” (4). If the note strikes yet another uncertain note—for, Sudhir does not want to cut off relations with the other man, a recurring trait in the character for the remainder of the story—it speaks once more to the way in which a stable identity is deferred and displaced in the narrative. What Siddharth is (a gay man) and wants to do (be a gay man with Sudhir) is not satisfactorily held in place (or, recalling Fraser’s work, held in place through mutual “recognition”), but deferred and made uncertain, so that Siddharth’s subjectivity—tied up as it is with difference (in sexuality)—cannot rest. Indeed, even after he leaves Dharwar, Siddharth is restless, travelling back and forth between Mumbai, Dharwar, and Pune over the next months, trying to convince Su to confirm a mutual identity. In July, two months after the initial fracas in Dharwar:

I was in Pune, absorbed in my efforts to locate Su. I searched his college canteen, his hostel, the railway station. It was here that I bumped into him suddenly, as he was about to board a train. One minute I read poetry in his eyes; the next minute it vanished. We walked a bit (hand in hand, I think); had tea; but altogether it mattered little... [H]e sprang onto a train, flashed his teeth and said, “Goodbye, we’ll meet again after three years.” I stared at the train till it was a tiny speck.

I couldn’t believe I had flunked. Hence in two or three successive attempts I wilfully demeaned myself: I touched his feet; sobbed in public; took him sweets to evoke sympathy; wrote him agonizing letters. He, in desperation, slashed my wrists with a shaving razor; spat on my face; flung my sweets into a roadside gutter; returned all my letters.

The truth dawned on me. I had lost Su. I withdrew. Became
engrossed in work. Buried my sorrow in promiscuity. Allowed time to pass. I felt
better. (Rao, “Confessions” 6)

This is the end of the first section of the story. Indeed, on the surface, these paragraphs read like a linear progression, towards a final dissolution of the relationship. Yet, these brief passages also signify a more spreading, spatially rich domain. Even linear time is problematized here, as the passages actually compress a spread of time even as it speaks of Siddharth’s “successive attempts” to win back Sudhir. Furthermore, the relationship itself does not move in a linear fashion to its conclusion. And, narrative situation of the passage—which reads as conclusive and, indeed, is the end of one section—is only the pre-cursor to the remaining parts of the story, not the end.

As Siddharth deflects his strong desire for a monogamous gay relationship with Sudhir in “promiscuity,” paralleling the kind of spreading deferrals to and from an individuated love and the amorous potential in other men examined above, Sudhir too repeats his chosen form of deferral: “we’ll meet again after three years.” A deferral lodged explicitly in time is juxtaposed and networked, however, with the shifting spaces of narrative form *and* content. There is a break between sections in the story at this point, which is also the location of a shift to the roughly epistolary format of the next two sections. The formal innovation here shifts the attentions of the reader from one formal space to another while also juxtaposing the epistolary sections of the narrative with the earlier section. The exchange of letters between Siddharth and Sudhir spreads out the form of their relationship, dissolving any notion of a homogeneous arc. For, Sudhir, three years after the events of the earlier section and despite all of the violence of the break-up described by Siddharth, *does* get back in contact with the other man.

Sections Two and Three of “Confessions” are made up, then, of the exchange of letters sparked off by Sudhir’s unexpected renewal of contact with Siddharth. Both characters are now based in Mumbai, Sudhir as a young professional fresh out of college, Siddharth as a writer and college professor of English. Their letters date from the beginning to the latter part of one year (1985) but reflect generally on the complexities characterizing the entirety of the relationship between the two men. The form and content in these epistolary sections amplify the heterogeneous and porous domain shared by the two characters. Supposedly a form of connection and communication, the letter-form here is used rather to represent discontinuities and irregularities between the two characters, the norms that shape the arc of their lives, and larger destabilizations of identity and narrative authority.

Sudhir’s first three letters (3rd of January; 1st of February; 15th of March) go unanswered by Siddharth. In the first letter, Sudhir’s tone is light-hearted and alludes to the closeness of their past relationship but also in a way that make quite clear Sudhir thinks of their homosexual desire as nothing more than youthful exercises, merely appending a teleological sexual narrative, the code for which is: “screw[ing] the normal way” (Rao, “Confessions” 13). So, in January, Sudhir finds it important to ask Siddharth: “How have you been? Are you married? Or still up to your dirty old game?” (7). That these lines clearly establishing the hierarchy of heteronormativity come immediately after a line in which Sudhir re-invokes his earlier promise to Siddharth is telling, however. That earlier line uses terminology that is in the realm of Sedgwick’s “explicit performative utterance”: there Sudhir writes, “[t]hree years are over—and I’ve kept my promise by *hereby* corresponding with you” (7, emphasis added). The act of stating an intention and doing it (“hereby corresponding with you”) are intertwined, and

alludes to all of the forthrightness, direction, and inviolability that ideally attaches to the performative. The “promise” invests the same-sex desire with a seriousness.

Apparently, a relation of identity is being (re)drawn here; it is worth remembering here Sedgwick’s observation that the performative is clearly demonstrated in the script of the marriage-ceremony (70-71). Yet, this reiteration of the promise is juxtaposed uncertainly with the generally light-hearted tone of this first letter. Furthermore, the kind of same-sex permanence that appears to be performatively expressed here is contradicted by Sudhir’s enquiry about whether Siddharth is married yet or up to the “dirty old games,” same-sex love or queerness made always-already impermanent and unimportant by such a definition.

Arguably, then, the sequential order of form (one sentence leading to another, the motive force for the narrative) is problematized by the confusing, contradictory content of these sentences. In this light, it is perhaps worthwhile recalling that binaristic, sequential, teleological thinking (say, the one buttressing national norms of unity-in-diversity; or the one which Sudhir’s heteronormativity tacitly references) is made less ordered and settled by a spreading, more spatially imagined, heterogeneous networking. Such a view of networks imagines a relationality in which differences might lie beside one another, but never in simplistic or idealized ways. Relations thought of in spatialized ways—a network rich in lateral spreading across porous entities and identities—is one effective way of indexing the ambivalence/s in Sudhir’s attitude to Siddharth and vice versa.

It is interesting, in this context, to note also that Sudhir’s letters return multiple times to the trajectory of his own professional and personal life, which sits in an odd relationship to the shape of the relationship that has developed between the two men. Sudhir’s profession, at the time of his first letter, is that of a well-paid civil engineer: as he describes it, “[w]e build houses

and bridges” (Rao, “Confessions” 7). At one level, this dovetails with the nationalist ideology of making a “noble mansion” out of, and/or for, the country’s people. Certainly, his profession sits well with the dominant norms, if material rewards are any indication of the same: Sudhir points out that his firm pays well, “three grand for starters” (7).⁶² Later, Sudhir will write of his profession making clear he thinks of engineering work teleologically, analogizing what he does with the crafting of idealized structures: “Look buddy, I build houses, bridges. Houses that provide shelter and bridges that connect people.... Aint I too a harbinger of peace” (10). Yet, this normative plane Sudhir wishes to inhabit, made up of structurally sound and unambiguously well-made “connections,” happens also to sit beside the more unsettled plane of unsettled but continuing relations between the two men.

For all of Sudhir’s investment in building connections between people, it is unclear what he wants from Siddharth. His first three letters are pleading and affectionate towards Siddharth, re-articulating aspects of their past relationship as the grounds for renewed contact. In the very first lines of the first letter, Sudhir begins: “Can you guess from my handwriting who I am? Of course you can. After all (ha ha) isn’t every aspect of my being stamped on your mind?” (Rao, “Confessions” 7). He flatters Siddharth: “Well here I am, in your megapolis (a word I learnt from you remember?) working for a construction firm” (7). In his second letter, written after a month, during which time Siddharth has chosen not to reply to the first, Sudhir acknowledges the validity and relative importance of their past relationship in considered and considerate prose: “I don’t mind coming to your place—but only after you write to me. You see, I’m not sure of your feelings for me after all these years. I do have your phone number, yes, but frankly I’ll be happy

⁶² Three thousand rupees in the India of the 1980s was a handsome starting salary. In this researcher’s experience, in the 1980s and early 1990s, an executive managerial position, earned only after several decades of steady promotion, would be worth approximately ten thousand rupees a month.

if you get in touch with me first” (8). After the second letter meets with no reply again, Sudhir’s tone in the third letter is even more urgent, the text reading like a lover’s entreaty:

No response from you so far. That means you’re still bitter. Come on, man, why don’t you forgive? A small-towner like me feels utterly lost in this loveless city. I need the help of friends like you...

But I think I’ve been telling you too much about myself. I know you suffered and all because of me. So *here’s your beloved Su imploring you to write him a detailed letter letting him know how cruel he’s been.* (8, emphasis added)

An idealized, spatially charged relationship is being imagined here. The small-towner needing the help of the more experienced city-boy connects with the ideations of a national relationship between different parts that is bound up even more tightly with the affective charge of love. Yet, just as the positive connotations of love in this instance has to be contextualized with instances of cruelty (whether, in the representation of the “loveless city,” Mumbai, or the bitterness engendered by Sudhir’s past behaviour), so too the signification of an ideal spatial relationship (two people on adjoining planes settling seamlessly with one another) must carry the trace (come under deconstructive erasure, that is) of all of the discontinuities experienced by Siddharth in his traversals along the different parts and places of Sudhir’s “small-town.”

The dis/continuities in the relationship parallels the sequence of letters after Siddharth finally sends his response after the third letter from Sudhir. He tells Sudhir of how he has turned his hand to writing (his professional training is in the field of English literature); as a demonstration, he attaches drafts of a story asking for a response from the other man. It turns out to be part of the story of “Confessions” itself, a fictionalized account of the earlier parts of the

relationship between the two men. The emergence of this other text is an exercise in metafiction that further unsettles the form of the linear, sequential narrative arc for which the *telos* is an unambiguous settling of all of the questions produced by the content (i.e., plot) of that same narrative. The metafictional device, then, is yet another way in which the process of signification (getting at the “right” meaning, another term for “truth”) is critiqued. As Patricia Waugh observes, in her foundational work, metafiction is a form of literary production, or, as she calls it, “fictional writing,” which:

self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text (40).

When Siddharth sends Sudhir the draft of the story the readers of “Confessions” are, in fact, reading, the metafictional element makes it harder to distinguish between “reality and fiction.” This is especially the case as far as the relationship between the two men is concerned. This reflects back on the earlier difficulties in pinning down exactly Sudhir’s motives for getting back in touch with Siddharth (what does he *really* want?). If the sudden presentation in the narrative of the narrative being written “draws attention to its status as an artefact,” what it enables in the subsequent letter exchange between the two men, is exactly the kind of contestation around interpretation and authority which contributes to the production of an irreducible difference (of opinion, in this case, about the shape and ramifications of the past queer relationship between the men).

Siddharth's decision to send Sudhir his version of events (a narrative corresponding to the kind of first-person narrative with which "Confessions" begins). Sudhir's reception of Siddharth's narrative represents yet another instance of the traversal-dispersal dynamic that recurs in the story. The difficulties of interpretation—the heightened production of difference, in other words—thrown into relief by the exchange of letters is compounded by the divergent readings of Siddharth story, our metafictional text-within-the-text.⁶³ In his first reply to Sudhir, Siddharth asks the other man to respond to the draft of the story "[f]rom an engineer's point of view" (Rao, "Confessions" 9). It is telling that Sudhir's response to the story is in correspondence with the kind of normative values attached to his profession. As a builder of idealized structure for ideal human communities, Sudhir does not find the text, all about disconnection and failure, an edifying one. Yet, in keeping with the unsettled form of the larger story, he does not at the same time reject the story, or the earlier relationship, outright: "How brutish you make me out to be. Tell me, isn't your account overdrawn? But I'm not going to defend myself, for I want to hear more. Send me the next part soon...Luv, Su." (9).

Further exchanges of letters, as well as further parts of Siddharth's story, follow the fraught network of communication—where connections and dispersals are intertwined—already commonplace in the history of their relationship. Sudhir's response to Siddharth's story continues to challenge the authority of the author. Sudhir's reading of the text and interpretation of Siddharth's (the character being written about by the author, Siddharth, who is in turn the

⁶³ In other literary texts too, the epistolary form has contributed to dispersals of meaning, by accommodating a range of sources and voices. Daniel Mendelsohn, in his Introduction to John Williams's acclaimed historical novel, *Augustus* (1972), writes of the way the epistolary form in that text "refracts" the "portrait," or content of the work in a varied succession of missives and documents, so that the product is "satisfyingly complex and appropriately impressionistic, subjective" (Mendelsohn, "Introduction" xii). "Refraction," "complexity," "impressions," and the privileging of the "subjective" over the "objective"—textual characteristics ably guided by the particular form employed—are all concepts that find a place in an analysis of contested meaning in "Confessions," too.

character of Rao's story) motives introduces a different perspective. It contests any authorial claim to the stability of meaning in a story which claims to be (a fictionalized account of) the "truth." Siddharth's agency is undercut, with ramifications on the stable formations not only of subjectivity but also of any identitarian claims he may make on Sudhir as the "beloved:"

Dear Siddharth,

Your writing is self-indulgent. Like a tragic hero you portray yourself as larger than life with one unmistakable flaw that becomes the cause of your ruin — your passionate nature focussed on me. But let me tell you it's phoney. Four years ago I was not as independent as I am now. I had my studies to think of, and also the wishes of my parents. Moreover I was not enjoying what we were doing. Was doing it only to please you. So I had to act the way I did. (Rao, "Confessions" 10)

There is an ambivalence when it comes to Sudhir's feelings apparent in his writing (Siddharth later will go so far as to admit that the other man might be bisexual, reflecting, on one level, the kind of duality that attaches to the character). In earlier letters (all of which he has signed off with the endearment, "luv"), Sudhir has been happy to exploit the mutual obligation that a fully-fledged relationship enjoys. Even in this letter, he gives the impression that external circumstances played a part in his desire to break off with Siddharth (studies; parents). But, that point is immediately contradicted (or, contrasted; or, juxtaposed) by his flat denial of the mutuality imagined by Siddharth ("was doing it only to please you").

So, while Sudhir's "reading" of events places Siddharth's authority under scrutiny (as the "other" voice in the signified relationship, the former character is that "trace" or track of the other, on which the scrutiny of deconstruction hinges), Siddharth's text also acts on Sudhir in a way to cast doubt on the veracity of his version of events too. So, on one side, readers can

consider whether indeed there *was* any kind of shared identity between the two men, as represented by Siddharth: it is worthwhile to recall here that his roving eye on the men bathing in the open in Dharwar already makes elliptical the extent of his monocular devotion to Sudhir. On the other side, readers have to contextualize Sudhir's denial of any mutually recognized past relationship against the kinds of phrasing (again, a form of representation) he himself has just used in his letters to Siddharth. As the larger narrative of "Confessions" moves from section to section, the dynamic is one in which convergence *and* dispersal form an intertwined thread taken up by both men.

The curious juxtaposition of success and failure, located in the text(ual space) of these letters, develops also in the plotting. Literally, then, the connections flow in and through the occasional hiccup in the delivery of letters. Sometimes, letters cross; on one occasion, a letter is mislaid; we have already dealt with Sudhir's letters going unanswered, but later it is Sudhir who will choose not to answer Siddharth's letters as the dynamic between the two men shifts and reshapes itself. When, for instance, Sudhir writes and tells Siddharth not to send any more sections of the drafted story, it reaches Siddharth too late. Like the unruly travelling photograph in Dattani's *Muggy Night* (a particular use of a theatrical property analyzed in the chapter on the playwright), the draft of the story already reaches Sudhir, reminding him arguably of the responsibilities of reading that exceeds the whimsies of individual likes and dislikes. Once entered into the realm of reading text—in that open-ended practice outlined by Barthes, in which the reader is granted the right of making their own interpretation of writing—Sudhir finds that he cannot so easily close, metaphorically speaking, the covers of a text that makes for uncomfortable reading. He cannot sustain the practice (or, phrased another way, the textual domain) he has entered, and can only say: "Our letters crossed in the post. That is why I had to

suffer the ‘most harrowing’ part of the story which doesn’t say a thing I don’t already know. Anyway, suit yourself—we all need our outlets, and writing seems to be yours” (Rao, “Confessions” 11).

Despite not wanting to read Siddharth’s story any further, Sudhir does still want to meet with Siddharth: again, the ambivalence corresponds to the kind of production of difference in which dispersals and convergences play off against each other, producing the particular dynamic of the story. In the same letter from which the preceding quote is derived, Sudhir says: “As far as I am concerned, the best part of your letter was the last paragraph. Yes, I do want to come to your place” (Rao, “Confessions” 12). Yet, there is a condition harking back to the ambivalences surrounding Sudhir’s motives for renewing contact with the other man: “you’ll not rake up the past and you’ll not ask for sex,” he insists (12). And, in an intervening first-person interjection, Siddharth informs readers that he (Siddharth, that is) asks for just that: “He left in a huff. After that I didn’t hear from Su from some time. I wrote him several postcards which were not answered” (12).

When Siddharth does hear again from Sudhir, five month afterwards, his letter appears to be in stark contrast to his first ones. No more endearing (he now signs off with a formal, “yours, Sudhir”), Sudhir sets an altered tone, befitting the further transitions he has experienced in the interim. Readers have also segued in the meantime into the penultimate section of “Confessions,” and the exchange of letters here follows an inverse pattern to the one before. In the earlier sequence, an assertiveness in Sudhir leads him to re-establish contact with Siddharth, and even to him interrogating the self-contained enclosure from which Siddharth derives the (authorial) agency to represent their past relationship. In this sequence, it is Siddharth who grows

more insistent about reasserting his point of view, and interrogating Sudhir's agency as one who seeks ever more to assert performatively a heteronormative subjectivity.

Heteronormativity, already well represented in the narrative, is reinvoked when Sudhir lets Siddharth know that he is engaged. Sudhir's marriage represents a interwoven "arrangement," in which Indian sexual normativity traverses the lines of hierarchized economic relations and social privileges. As a young engineer, Sudhir informs Siddharth, he is an eligible bachelor whose cachet he frames within the caste-codes still prevalent in Indian society: "The deal was struck. I'm gonna bag a fabulous dowry, probably hundred grand. After all, we engineers are twice born, like the Brahmins, aren't we?" (Rao, "Confessions" 13). A case of the small-towner making good, the line of identity is drawn to the uppermost echelons of contemporary Indian society which in turn reflect the deep-rooted inequities perpetuated through successive historical cycles in the region. In her Introduction to Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan*, Arun P. Mukherjee describes the accretion of values and privileges on those upper-castes who were allowed the "*upanaya*, the sacred thread ceremony ... [giving] them the status of *dwija*, or twice born ... [a] ritual symbolizing a second birth ... [after which] they may study the Vedas" ("Introduction" xvi).

Dalit writers like Valmiki argue that the privileges of the upper-castes are not restricted to the confessional realm, but have material ramifications on rural and urban economies in modern Indian, regardless of the abolition of caste in the Indian Constitution. Upper-caste privilege relegates demeaning, often-unpaid labour to Dalits and lower-caste Indians, practices still alive through the late-colonial and decolonized epochs in modern Indian history (as *Joothan*, for

example, amply demonstrates).⁶⁴ In the intimate sphere of marriage, unsurprisingly, the hierarchical privileges apply, with intercaste marriages (especially between upper-castes and Dalits) proving to be an invariable tinderbox. In buttressing his economic status in the India of the 1980s with traditional values, Sudhir travels, or so he thinks, into secure territory. About to be married to Maya (“settled” is another familiar term in the context), Sudhir adopts the tone of paternalistic authority in the letter he sends Siddharth after the long interval from the last exchange: “Take my advice—get married and screw the normal way.... Mend your ways, man, or I’ll have to put the embargo on you all over again” (Rao, “Confessions” 13).

Yet, that same letter crosses the language of heteronormativity with the language of ambiguity and anxiety. The trace of the homosexual other remains in Sudhir’s fear of the consequences of even having a “friend” like Siddharth, far less discreet than he. The proximity is too close for comfort, it appears. In the same letter, just before the lines quoted above, Sudhir writes of how one of his uncles discovers letters from Siddharth, in Sudhir’s possession, when the latter visits his family home to meet his fiancé: “Said he always knew you were ‘that way’ and would tell Maya (yeah, that’s her name) if I didn’t break off instantly. God, that would be terrible” (Rao, “Confessions” 13). With the many juxtapositions and traversals already in play here, it is notable that when Maya is first named, it is in a particular, if contrasting, relationship with homosexuality. For, Siddharth exists within the space of the same sentence as Maya.

This uncomfortable proximity echoes the curious juxtaposition between homosexuality and heterosexuality pointed out by scholars like Diana Fuss (and also Nivedita Menon). Fuss, for

⁶⁴ In latter-day political movements for social, cultural, and economic equality (dated in the *fin-de-millénaire* period, the time also of the queer Indian movement’s challenge to other forms of Indian normativity) Dalits have been derided by upper-caste-identified Indians. Reservations of government jobs to “Scheduled Castes” are decried by upper-castes as “favouritism, unequal treatment, vote-bank politics, and [the] giving of educational and employment opportunities to people lacking in merit and qualifications” (A. P. Mukherjee, “Introduction” xxiii).

instance, argues that “[t]he difference between hetero and homo ... is that the homo becomes identified with the very mechanism necessary to define and to defend any sexual border” (3). The “exclusion and exteriorization” of the homosexual, Fuss continues, is problematized by the paradox that heteronormativity, “nonetheless constructs that *exclusion* by prominently *including* the contaminated other in its oppositional logic” (3, emphases added). The implication for heteronormativity is detranscendentalization: “[A]ny outside is formulated as a consequence of a lack *internal* to the system it supplements. The greater the lack on the inside, the greater the need for an outside to contain and to defuse it” (Fuss 3). We could also add “displace” to “contain” and “defuse” to further clarify Fuss’ observations on how heterosexuality exposes itself when trying to exclude the homosexual. It is worth also recalling Menon’s argument, discussed in the Introduction, that anti-homosexual laws in the Indian Penal Code “does not refer to some queer people out there ... [but] ... on the contrary, about the painful creation of Mr. and Mrs. Normal—it is one of the nails holding in place the elaborate fiction that ‘normality’ springs from nature” (Menon, “How Natural” 38).

These conceptual cues prompt the analytical point of view for which the emergence of homosexuality is also the instance when heteronormativity is made to present itself for scrutiny. Such an emergence deconstructs the ahistorical essence of “true” or “natural” heterosexuality, showing up instead the artifice through which the social construction of sexual and gendered norms occurs. For, of course, heterosexuality does not exist by itself but is part of a signifying chain with homosexuality as the necessary, perverse other. In this sense, homosexuality is that trace which is the mark of deconstructive erasure. Or, “[h]eterosexuality can never fully ignore the close psychological proximity of its terrifying (homo)sexual other” (Fuss 3). In the case of “Confessions,” of course, it is not only psychological, but a spatialized kind of proximity that is

represented. The narrative places Sudhir, Siddharth, and Maya in the kind of “beside” that Sedgwick imagines, in which the relations are not idealized, not necessarily (em)placed on par.⁶⁵ Nor do the relations between the three characters qualified by the spatiality of the “beside” resolve into the dualities that Sedgwick (and Fuss, and Menon) work against, of the heterosexual “inside,” and the homosexual “outside.” For all of Sudhir’s attempts to straighten himself (and his relationship with Siddharth) out, that ground is not settled. Certainly, Siddharth’s volley of letters in which he vociferously tries to dissuade Sudhir from marrying a girl, does not allow it. Readers may also wonder why it is that Sudhir takes Siddharth’s letter with him from his new home in the big city back to the family home in Dharwar, if he is so willing to make a new start.

Spaced beside one another, the relationality that emerges between the three characters in “Confessions” do not settle in other ways either. Rather, the emergence of Maya sets off that “wide range,” as Sedgwick puts it, of relations networked in and across space/s. This “range,” as she represents it, is constituted by “desiring,” “repelling,” “leaning,” “twisting,” “aggressing,” and “warping,” and other forms of juxtaposition which frame the particular spatialized situation of different, heterogeneous human subjects. The “desiring” Siddharth, questing for that sexually- and romantically-fulfilling one-on-one relationship with Sudhir, becomes juxtaposed with the “aggressing” Siddharth, increasingly hostile and sexist towards Maya, a character he has not met and will not ever meet. These interwoven aspects of Siddharth’s persona are drawn out in the five last letters in “Confessions.”

These letters are sent from the time he first hears of Sudhir’s engagement (September) to the near-end of the year, November. This time around, it is Sudhir who does not answer the

⁶⁵ It is worth recalling Foucault on “emplacement” (“Of Other Spaces” 23) as one of the earlier forms of spatial imaginings of man’s place in the world, against which contemporaneity expresses a different, more heterogeneous, vision of heterotopia.

letters, and Siddharth fails to contact him generally. As his desperation accumulates (the inverse of Sudhir's earlier desperation to reconnect with Siddharth), Siddharth's evocations of the same-sex desire between the two men are counterposed with dismissive and, eventually, outright hateful references to Maya. In these letters, an idealized homosexual love is juxtaposed with a loathing towards Maya, which becomes increasingly troubling as it takes a definite shape. He asks in one letter: "Don't you remember how you and I as we lay in our hostel room, legs interlocked, decided to forget women?" (Rao, "Confessions" 13-14); in another, he writes Sudhir from Pune, "the city where we met, and I keep remembering the night I first seduced you" (15). Thinking of Maya and Sudhir's impending wedding, he writes in one letter: "Forget the hundred grand dowry" (14). In a another one: "Make me your sex partner, instead of Maya" (15). And, in a further note: "I'm beginning to enjoy my masturbation fantasies of you and Maya" (16).

These accumulating references to Maya finally breaks out in a long piece of doggerel, sent Siddharth notes, in a first-person aside, "under a crushing spell of defeat" (Rao, "Confessions" 16). The entire letter is "in the form of a pop-song," its vicious content married with an uninspired, plodding form of rhyming couplets (16-17). This "song" weaves acute misogyny with class-snobbery, interpellating Maya as an expendable, labouring nurse or "ayah" ("Forget Maya/ Make her your ayah"); a "vamp"; like "ice," "cold/ Spent and old"; a "fake" (16-17). Throughout the epistolary sections of "Confessions," Siddharth's letters strike a cultivated tone, in which he is happy to write about his writing, his academic work, and lines of poetry that have struck him particularly. In contrast, then, the letter containing the "song," which turns out to be his last in the narrative, marks a decided shift in tone.

As already discussed, spaces and traversals have very significant functions in "Confessions." In the foregrounding of spatiality and particular instances of traversal,

“Confessions” dialogues with issues of difference in order to destabilize authority. Indeed, the narrative-structure and content of “Confessions” is involved in a production of difference, it can be said. This has ramifications in the realm of subject- and identity-formation, as also already discussed. The two central characters in the narrative are implicated in this textual production of difference and more difference. Along with the variable and yet inexorable movement of the narrative—from section to section, and from one literary form to another—the characters themselves negotiate a fraught relationship equally contoured by variations. In the process of this negotiation, their respective subjectivities become less homogeneously coherent and more heterogeneously ambiguous, irreducible, less easily codified or indexed. Their subjectivities are subject to the porosity effected (and affected) by their networked placement beside each other. Just as the homosexual, brought into discursive existence by the heteronorm, recursively then pens in heterosexuality within the domain of social construction, within, that is, a process of signification which deconstructs any notion of the transcendental or the universal, so also the emergence of the heterosexual woman in this narrative introduces a particular deconstructive strain in the homosexual subject. As with the case of a character like Kapil Mirdhas (Kapital Das) in “The Reading,” so also the case with the character of Maya. If the sign must carry with it the “trace” or “track” of the other, which marks the play of *differance* on the signifying process, then the signifying self also carries the track of an/other, which places its autonomy and authority in a deferred, different state to any idealized aim of (en)closure.

More and more in the penultimate part of the story, Siddharth’s sense of a (gay) self and the identity (with Sudhir) within which he seeks to locate himself are warped by the effects of proximal relations. Firstly, he has to contend with Sudhir’s differing, ambiguous sense of self and the different kinds of identifications he (Sudhir) wishes to effect. Second, Siddharth is

brought into a kind of connection with the character of Maya, the textual emergence of whom exposes Siddharth's willingness to make others expendable to his particular libidinal, subjectival, and identitarian needs. Far from being a character mapped within stable coordinates, Siddharth's persona becomes as compromised and ambiguous as Sudhir's, though of course in a different way.

As noted above, one instance of the kind of ambiguity represented in Sudhir emerges when, during their correspondence, Siddharth tries to account for Sudhir's desire to get married to Maya as an instance of his bisexuality. Yet, this ambiguity tailing Sudhir also affects Siddharth's agency. The particular line in question—"[a]greed you like women, *but* you're also turned on by men ... [y]ou're bisexual, Su" (Rao, "Confessions" 14, emphasis added)—comes in a letter in which Siddharth also makes some of the most unambiguous references to an exclusively same-sex identity between the two men. Just before the above-quoted line, he writes, "[o]ur souls, our bodies, they're one, Su, even our sweat smells the *same*" (14, emphasis added). In formal terms, here is one more instance of uncomfortable proximities, the networking of difference with deferral, in which clarity and a uniform distillation of certainties slip away exactly at the point at which they are stated, enacted, or represented. An explicit production of difference sets these two sentences in a particular relationship in a richly spatialized textual domain. The trace of one is in the other: the sense of the "same" is run through by the qualifier/signifier of difference, "but."⁶⁶

⁶⁶ It is pertinent to recall, here, Homi K. Bhabha's influential work on mimicry in the post/colonial encounter, and the kinds of erasures that practice engenders: for, Bhabha uses the phrase, "almost the same but not quite," ("Of Mimicry" 127) to good use in his work. In "Of Mimicry and Man," for instance, Bhabha speaks about the kinds of erasures in colonialist authority that spins off of particular networks between the metropolitan self and the mimicking colonial other (Bhabha plays on the earlier phrase to describe this other as, "almost but not white"). The unnerving effect of colonial mimicry on European colonialist authority is because the encounter "rearticulates the whole notion of *identity* and alienates it from essence." (Bhabha, "Of Mimicry" 127).

The spaces characters inhabit in “Confessions” is unsettled along these various textual routes. Neither the nationalist discourse of a pluralistic coming-together within “noble” structural constructions, nor the settling of a counter-nationalist “queer Indian” collectivity is privileged. Sudhir, for one, cannot build the ideal “bridges” he wants to. For, *his* “imagined community”—a network with Maya as wife, and Siddharth as friend—must bear the trace-track of sexual ambivalence. His inability to let go of some kind of connection with Siddharth is clearly mapped out in the text. Arguably, this is one instance (or, symptom) of how homosexuality queerly presents itself just at the moment it is to be excised, returning the analytical viewpoint back to the presence of the other in any production of subjectivity or identitarian categories. Siddharth’s ideation of a same-sex relationship with Sudhir must also bear the trace of an unsettling heterogeneity. His authority is undermined at several points in the text, most thoroughly at the instant in which Maya emerges as yet another entity placed in particular relation to the two men.

The employment of a disruptive female entity in Siddharth’s subjectival domain recurs. In the final section of the story, in which the narrative returns to the first-person voice of Siddharth, readers find the character in a hospital room, having been the victim of an attack. The perpetrators, according to the narrative, were sent by Sudhir’s side, to warn Siddharth off of harassment, not of Sudhir but that of one of his sisters (!): as Siddharth observes, “[d]ear God, forgive them for they know not what they say” (Rao, “Confessions” 18). Even in this instance of connection, albeit an unwelcome one in which Siddharth literally meets with blows, disconnection is very much (re)presented. Not only do the hired goons not know of Siddharth’s relations with Sudhir, they thrust in his hands a bunch of letters written to Sudhir, as proof of Siddharth’s alleged harassment of the sister. It is clear that the thugs are not Anglophone since

on one of the letter-flaps, Sudhir has written: “Congrats on discovering I’m bisexual, you punk” (18).

On one level, the incident can and should be read as an instance of heteronormative logic. Homosexuality cannot figure in the kind of ideal heteropatriarchal arrangement Sudhir (and his family) desire. The female subject is therefore pressed into the service of the institution. The lack of any specifically personal agency granted to Sudhir’s sister is made clear by the fact that she never actually enters the *mis-en-scène* as a character. Invoking Sudhir’s sister ensures the disavowal of same-sexuality in her brother, a strategy sharing a correspondence with the disavowals psychoanalytical readings detect (and represent as “foreclosure”) in processes of (heteronormative) subject-formation and identifications.⁶⁷ On the other hand, the irony involved in Siddharth paying a hard price for allegedly rampant heterosexual behaviour when the reverse has been the case all along, connects to the way Siddharth’s own selfhood and identity as a queer Indian has been subject to a critique. As discussed above, it is out of the particular emergence of difference (a different character, like Maya, for example) that the complacent, essentialist notion of a stable, homogeneous self is opened up, made heterogeneous, made to engage with irreducible difference, made more queer and less perfected. Siddharth’s attitude to Maya earlier in the story has exposed (another side to) him. For readers, his shifting character has enabled irresolution rather than closure: his ideal of queerness is laced with unrepentant misogyny and chauvinism. If the thugs mis/read Siddharth as a chauvinist subsequently, they are both wrong and right about who he is.

⁶⁷ Judith Butler’s work regarding mourning and melancholia outlines the general thrust of this conceptualization. See, for instance, her chapter, “Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification” in *The Psychic Life of Power* (pp. 132-150). Slavoj Žižek presents his response to Butler’s theories in the chapter “Passionate (Dis)Attachments, or, Judith Butler, as a Reader of Freud” in his *The Ticklish Subject* (291-373; see especially 320-325).

So, this networked variety of dis/connection and dis/continuities implicates the stable self by throwing the trace of its other relationship/s into relief. The signifying, performative self is not allowed an absolute enclosure (Fuss's "inside") holding in a settled, firmly emplaced relationship the absolute(ly excluded) other. After all, the "beside," as Sedgwick reminds us is not also about a "fantasy" of "pacific relations" ("Introduction" 8); the (space of) the self cannot pacify, settle, or formalize in rigidly dualistic ways, differences any more than it can settle itself. Sudhir's ideals of a respectable life are made as open to irresolution as Siddharth's. In his hospital bed, both his left and right limbs out of commission, Siddharth's prospects are as fragmented as Sudhir's is uncertain. Siddharth writes of himself, in the final lines of the story: "[a]gain, I must frequent the urinals . . . and go back to blow-jobs. Again I must mark time" (Rao, "Confessions" 19). Sexual difference and successive, different sexual encounters are both represented here, while connections (sex) is once again lined up with dispersals (cruising the urinals for sex which comes and goes).

As for Sudhir, who disappears from the narrative again, readers of "Confessions" are not made certain that the character has in fact disappeared for good. Siddharth, writing of the other man, observes that, while he might "mark time," Sudhir might reappear: "Then maybe a couple of years later the son of a bitch shall write to say that he's lonely, rejected on grounds of impotence, and he'll be mine again" (19). The "grounds" for a future reconnection between the two men are not entirely removed, but also not made clear. The production of unresolved differences as engine of the narrative, or the textual production of different selves and identities representing the heterogeneous domain between queerness and (respectable) Indian-ness, finds a particular expression too. In the penultimate sentence of the story, Siddharth characterizes the imagined future queer reconnection between the two men in textual terms which only "mark"

further deferrals: “[a]nd then, needless to add, there’ll be more letters, more confessions on odd bits of paper.” (19).

“Wish It Were a Nightmare”

This short story, also from *One Day*, extends some of the analytical observations afforded by “Confessions.” Certainly, this narrative, like the earlier one discussed above, has a heterogeneous formal structure. The structure draws attention again to the messy imbrication of fact with fiction, veracity with falsity. Metafictional by virtue of drawing attention to its construction, “Wish” challenges the stable form taken by universalized meaning-making, with particular ramifications on the normative structures operating in the narrative. These features of formal innovation factor into the particular challenges the central character—the young theatre critic, Neville Darashaw—faces while attempting to make a case for himself within the bizarre scenario in which he finds himself, being detained by the police for a crime that did not occur and, indeed, could not have occurred. Like the story to be discussed in the following section (“Landya”), “Wish” also hinges on a scene in which a homosexual act is crossed with brutality and an abuse of power. In both stories, as also is the case in “Confessions,” the representation of a sexuality and/or sexual acts different from heteronormativity forms also a site mapped by other vectors. The space thus shaped reflects a wide-ranging engagement with difference and the diversity of the nation. In this kind of engagement, the text refuses resolution, pointing instead to how irresolution and open-ended ambivalence attend to any kind of production, representation, or articulation of difference.

The bulk of the narrative takes the shape of a transcript of a conversation between two characters—interviewee Neville Darashaw, and interviewer Sarah Williams, reporter for a

foreign magazine, *Newswatch*—in which the dialogue is structured as in the text of a work of drama. The relation between the Indian and the “foreigner” (Rao, “Wish” 106) is an added vector running through the heterogeneous domain represented. As will be discussed below, this domain acts upon any kind of settlement of diversity and difference, particularly in an imagined national space. The textual space of “Wish” is porous. It is impinged, firstly, by frames of short third-person narratives, bracketing but also providing a wider context to the conversation; and, secondly, by frequent editorial interjections, sometimes describing Neville’s emotional state, sometimes clarifying local terms (for, presumably, a global audience).

Different levels of mediation are also expressed in the opening frame-narrative, just prior to the start of the transcript: “So impressed is Ms. Williams with *the young man’s story*, that *she* has decided to publish it on *these* pages as an independent piece” (Rao, “Wish” 100, emphases added). Therefore, Neville’s story is already formally constituted in ways that foreground the intervention of an/other: namely, Sarah Williams and/or other unknown intermediaries who transform the text from recorded transcript to an “independent piece” by Williams for *Newswatch*. Indeed, the entire story is represented as if it were a piece of journalism for the magazine. The multi-layered artifice undergirding the text of “Wish”—represented as being the product of many known and unknown sources—brings into question the secured, hermetic-hermeneutic authority of the “real” author of the story. While Rao is putatively the writer of Neville’s story, his agency is muddied by the relative presence of these other sources, also said to be the writers of Neville’s story. Certainly, the significance of metafiction lies in the critique and contestation of any such transcendental agent, ironically exactly at the point in which that author/ity is signified as such. Undoing, by exposing (the trace of the other in the sign of) authority plays a role in terms of content too. The narrative of “Wish” does not allow figures of

authority to gain a transcendental agency; rather, it brings these figures into uncomfortably proximate relations with others. These kinds of destabilizing critiques dovetail with the practices of deferral which attach to the story as well.

Williams, the frame-narrative informs readers, is working as a reporter on human rights abuses “all over Asia” (Rao, “Wish” 100). In general terms, if it is the case that human-rights issues of abuse can be expressed in terms of awaiting change, while held by the forces of an abusive power-structure, then Neville is indeed involved in that process. At the start of the story, Neville is in the process of waiting for yet another interview with the police inspector, in order to sort through the procedure involved in gaining his release. At the end, he is still waiting. These acts of waiting can also be read as a particular kind of interruption of sequential time. In spatial terms, also, Neville does not appear to traverse as many planes and places as does a character like Siddharth in “Confessions.” The conversation between him and Williams takes place entirely in one location.

Yet, the stasis involved in not moving, or being able to move, can be placed beside, or seen in the light of, a particular kind of dynamism. One instance is the dynamism offered by the concept of deferral. Superficially, deferral suggests a way of not moving (forward or towards something). Yet, in the light of the observations already made in this project about deferral and *différance*, what appears to be stasis (the seeming inability to get to (signifying) the final meaning of anything) also arguably bears the charge of different sorts of movement (deferrals being constantly repeated is one such iteration of motion). If there is a dynamism to deferral, that impulse might be counter-intuitively felt in the perpetual, constant “Eveready” acts of refusing to move to a stable place or *telos*. And, this dynamic involves in its fields all manner of heterogeneous traversals, with the capacity to unsettle easy linear trajectories.

In the light of such considerations, the question arises, how to relate Neville to the apparent limbo of police procedure? For, he too has traversed spaces and networks of relationships to find himself in the police station. Literally, as will be discussed, Neville gets to the station only because of his usual train-commute in Mumbai. It is this journey, already heterogeneous in nature, that puts Neville into a network of relationships that disrupts the settled order, even in a place as symbolically linked with stability, order, and hermetic seals (or, rather, cells), as the police station. For, Neville's predicament is linked with events that defer and not determine the question of who he is. Furthermore, the kind of subjectivity and identity claimed by Neville focalizes issues of irreducible difference in a contoured *mis-en-scène* where relations present themselves but are left unresolved.

As mentioned earlier, Neville gets to the police station not because of what he has done, or who he is, but precisely the opposite. During a crowded train-journey, Neville, on his way to review a production of *Death of a Salesman*,⁶⁸ is accosted by a group (two men and a woman) who allege that Neville has sexually assaulted the woman: "just as I was about to get off at Churchgate (downtown), two men and a woman who were also in the compartment came up to me. Prompted by the woman, the men grappled with me and held me by the collar ... [while the woman claimed I was a bottom-pincher]" (Rao, "Wish" 101-102). The group, as Neville observes, are extorters, who are happy to humiliate him and take his money (102). The twist in the story, however, is that Neville is "queer" (103), so absurdity piles on untruth here. The discordant note echoes Siddharth's experiences at the end of "Confessions," and the network established here interweaves connections and dispersals as it does in the other short story. Ironically for a situation in which forces of repulsion are dominant (Neville is accused of an

⁶⁸ The story, in fact, ends with Neville quoting an extended passage from Act One of the play.

unwanted act of sexualized contact), the trio must also assume an imagined heterosexual identity between all four of them in order for the ruse to work. This cannot be sustained. Neville refuses to pay the trio. Once at the police station, he admits quite openly to the inspector that he is innocent because it is “not in my nature” (104), clarifying, when pressed by the officer, that he is indeed innocent because he is homosexual (105). It should be remembered that, both in the narrative as in the contemporary socio-legal history of India, such an admission to the police is fraught with risk as evidence of homosexual relations is a criminal offence under the Indian Penal Code (as discussed in the Introduction).

If the meeting-ground between different kinds of Indians is thus already compromised, made too unstable (in other words, too different) because Neville’s claim of innocence cannot be read or reduced to the established codes of heteronormativity, then in other ways too this connection is juxtaposed with unresolved difference and fragmentation. In the process, the discursive domains of nation and sexuality are brought into a particular relation. For, during the *fracas*, Neville, hemmed in by the trio as well as a gathering swell of onlookers, attempts to extricate himself from his troubles by communicating his innocence and larger point of view about the state of nation. In doing so, however, his words come to symbolize what scholars like Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakravarty, and Benjamin Zachariah would term a “developmentalist” national narrative of progress, always-already a marker of unequal social relations in the post-Independence Indian context. Faced with growing public outrage at his alleged behaviour, Neville makes a hasty decision: “in desperation I began lecturing at them on civilized behaviour and so forth, and said that India was backward because of dogs like them, and it would take us ages to become like the West” (Rao, “Wish” 102).

All his protestations and “lecturing” fall on deaf ears. In practical terms, this is caused by a “language barrier” (Rao, “Wish” 102). The trio, as Neville recounts to Williams, are not Anglophone, while his own Hindi skills are poor and, as readers find out later in the narrative, his Marathi non-existent.⁶⁹ In combination with the “language barrier,” however, there is also the class hierarchy that further interrupts an idealized national narrative of progress. A complex dynamic is in play here. Neville, on the back foot when first accosted by the trio, attempts to defend himself. He can only do so through English, one of the national languages but also a marker of a certain kind of unequal privilege, which only gets the pair “provoked further” (102). Their ensuing verbal and physical abuse outrages Neville so that he, in turn, entrenches himself in a class-position. All this dynamic to-ing and fro-ing crosses up rather than clarifies lines of communication between different Indians; while signposting certain collective national values of decency and “civilized behaviour,” Neville ends up abusing the others, only to have the effect ricochet at him. As he puts it: “[t]his angered them so much, especially the word ‘dog,’ that they beat me up again and pushed me into a cab, and abusing me all the way, brought me here.” (102).

This exchange establishes contrasting relations with the settled discourse of national diversity. Here, language exacerbates differences rather than mediating them, highlighting the trace/track of unresolved difference on the supposedly settled sign of a national identity. Neville’s attempts to discourse on national values actual throws into relief instead the track of national divides, placing those values under erasure. His unfortunate choice of words are discriminatory (“dogs like them”), compromising his attempts to enjoin “civilized behaviour” for the benefit not merely of himself but for *all* Indians. On the other end, the trio who have accused

⁶⁹ As discussed below, and as readers of “Wish” ultimately discern, Marathi, the local Maharashtrian vernacular, is the preferred language of the trio.

Neville have no grounds to do so, are corrupt, violent, and adept at extortion. The scene in the police station, as later described by Neville, again network relations of connection with less easy relations of discord. The police emerge not as arbiters of an ideal order or justice, but, instead, rather more partial to the trio. Yet, even in the case of a clear partiality against Neville, the ground is not immediately settled. For, the police inspector, while berating Neville (guilty until proven innocent that he is) also interpellates him as “a boy from a ‘decent’ family” and asks rhetorically, that if *he* does “such things, what could we expect of ‘low caste’ people” (Rao, “Wish” 103). It appears that the inspector identifies with the same hierarchical national structure with which Neville has connected himself earlier, even as he sees the young man as different from him, as offending rather than upholding social norms.

While the relationship between the inspector and Neville traces an ambivalence between (and across) sameness and difference, yet further uncertainties emerge when the police inspector realizes that there are different points of contact, but this time with the trio who have hauled Neville into the station. If language was a barrier to concord between different parties earlier in the narrative, now a link is established between the inspector and the trio, when they discover that all four speak Marathi. The point of ethno-linguistic connection establishes a regional identity, which punctures in another way that secure national structure which should ideally hold different Indians together. On his side, Neville is not a Marathi. He is in fact “born and raised in Gujarat” (Rao, “Wish” 107). Observing the emerging relationship between the police and the trio, he says: “And then they spoke to him in their own language (Marathi) which made all the difference” (103). This kind of “difference” which unifies the police with the trio works increasingly against Neville, however.

Both groups—the trio on the one side, Neville on the other—make their cases. Neville, with his Anglophone, “decent” background, claims his innocence, but on the basis of an identification with sexual difference: i.e., his gayness. He insists that he could “never touch a woman in a crowd,” and while writing out a statement, claims “that what was alleged wasn’t true, because it simply wasn’t in [his] nature” (Rao, “Wish” 104); he claims to be “gay by birth” (105). On the other side, the trio, having established a different, ethno-linguistic linkage with the policeman, make their statement, the details of which are left out in the narrative, presumably signifying Neville’s incomprehension, in linguistic terms, of what they say exactly: all he discerns, was that the inspector “from his gestures ... was assuring them that action would be taken against [him]” (104). Having made their complaint and with assurances from the authorities, the trio leave Neville in the hands of the police. The “action” promised by the police forms the brutally sexualized core of the story. Neville, having confirmed his homosexuality to the police, finds himself enmeshed in a particular set of relations, with other fellow Indians; such relations thus represented criss-cross states of contact, attraction, and, repulsion.

In “Wish,” instances of contact are also instances which shed light on discord. As discussed above, Neville’s contact with the trio in the train illustrates the kind of juxtaposition suggested. The shock of contact is represented also in the scenes in the station following the trio’s departure from the station. Frequent exchanges with the inspector follow, in which the bureaucratic process of surveillance is highlighted. The inspector asks Neville to clarify his sexuality, after which he asks for the young man’s address, “his face ... full of contempt” (Rao, “Wish” 105).⁷⁰ Following these exchanges:

⁷⁰ Neville supplies the police with an “invented” address, citing a customary discretion: he tells Sarah, “I’m always cautious about revealing personal information of any kind” (Rao, “Wish” 105).

I suddenly developed the courage to stand up and [re]assert my innocence. But would you believe it, even before I finished talking, the inspector's coarse hand crashed on my cheek. "Shut up and be seated," he said. I've never been slapped like that ...

Still the worst was yet to come ...

Two constables came up to me and asked me to follow them. I was reluctant but they poked me with their lathis and led me to a room. Bolting the door from within, they began to rag me. They used the word "chakha" innumerable times which means eunuch. They pierced the ends of my fingernails and laughed... And then suddenly (*voice rises*) they asked me to undress and screwed me. They threatened to beat me up severely if I did not give in (*Breaks down*). (105)

The editorial inserts in the passage above, which serve to dramatize Neville's narrative, point not only to the operation of a heterogeneous, porous formal structure, as discussed earlier, but also to the kind of unsettling heterogeneity that accompanies the representation of counter-normative sex- (and gender-) difference. The contact implied in the sexual act in this case is networked beside a "breaking down" of relations: between Neville and the representatives of national law to which he stakes his unsuccessful claim. In more ways than one, then, a different kind of sex happens, as represented—or, produced—in these lines.

As in the earlier scene between Neville and the trio, when sex and extortion combine in a particular way, here too Neville finds himself the victim. Not only is he raped by the constables, he has to suffer the further indignity of paying them money, having to beg to retain just enough so that he might travel home from the station. In this scene of dispersed relations, desire (sexual gratification) and repulsion (violence and homophobia) are made to lie in an uneasy "beside,"

much like the persons of Neville and the police constables. The curious relations further destabilize any kind of privilege Neville's background may have afforded him. Unlike before, he is no longer in a position even to hector unheeding fellow nationals about norms. Yet, clearly, this change in Neville's circumstances does not lead to a pacifying of unequal relations between different Indians. For, of course, the abominable actions of the police negate any "fantasy," as Sedgwick terms it, of different entities finding a stable, common ground. The dis/continuities represented here echo other experiences from Neville's earlier life.

Nudged by Williams to flesh out his early life, Neville "reluctantly" (Rao, "Wish" 107) describes his childhood and youth. Born into a middle-class family in Gujarat, his early life as an only child is represented in the text as idyllic (107-108). In other ways, too, Neville's background corresponds with a Nehruvian imagining of an ideal, pluralized, prospering nation. For, his parents are from different ethnic backgrounds, neither belonging to the dominant Hindu community. His father is a Parsi bank manager, while his mother is an Anglo-Indian school teacher (107). And, they do well enough to bring up Neville in what he terms "great luxury—sent to the best schools, given the best clothes" (108). The easy sequential narrative—middle-class parents inculcating the best values and opportunities to their child—is interrupted by Neville's sexuality. In this case, too, the privilege claimed by Indians improving their lot in a young nation cannot be sustained for "all." At one point in the narrative, it is the trio which stops up a developmentalist ideal of a better life for all Indians by representing an excessive difference. At this other point in the text, it is Neville who is too different, for his family as much as for the pluralist nation. On telling his parents of his gayness, the teenage Neville finds himself increasingly alienated from his family, to the point where he has to leave home by nineteen, make the move to Mumbai, where he has been eking out a living as a theatre reviewer.

In this way, something of an unsettled heterogeneity is represented in Neville's life leading up to the events at the station. As noted above, he has travelled, in more ways than one, to get to the station. In a text like "Confessions," the idea of traversing different spaces is imbricated with the heterogeneity implicit in representing difference in people—characters with a different sexuality, for example. Here, too, there is movement. Neville's (sexual) subjectivity—who he wants (to be)—traverses the poles of "inside" and "outside." As seen, Neville's candour about his sexual orientation results in him having to leave his family and home; he is also entirely clear to the police about his homosexuality. Yet, he is discreet, "cautious" (Rao, "Wish" 105), and vigilant. Also, despite living outside the confines of his family, he is by his own admission not "well-acquainted" (107) with the gay scene in Mumbai. There is also no indication in "Wish" that he is, or ever has been, in a relationship with another man. He is represented both as a visible gay or queer Indian man *and* as rather an isolated figure. He is obscured: certainly by the circumstances of having to dodge heteronormative surveillance, but, arguably, also by some degree of personal choice. At no point in the narrative does he make any references to friends (who might help him out with the police, for instance), nor does he describe the nature of his work-relations other than he has "enough clout with editors" (107) to report the incident in his newspaper. Thought another way, while Neville establishes himself as "queer" in performative statements, the picture of what he *does* as this different, queer man in Mumbai is largely unfilled, unresolved, deferred for readers.

Despite all of the real, or materially grounded, contact Neville experiences with other Indians through the narrative, something of the nebulosity about his person is also represented, then. In his conversations with Williams, the point about whether he is, in fact, better off leaving India is raised. Yet, Neville's response to Williams reflects something of an

indeterminacy. To Williams's question, "Do you think India isn't the place for you?" Neville answers with a question of his own: "Do you think it is?" (109). As phrased, Williams's question appears skewed to the negative: the contraction, "isn't," is preferred to "is," pointing to a particular kind of disidentification. Indeed, Neville's response, at one level, is very plausibly a rhetorical question. This reading suggests that the isolated, unattached character is, indeed, not at home in the country.

Looked at another way, though, Neville's refusal to provide Williams with an easy answer to a loaded question also defers the matter. Furthermore, it defers any certitude of her own authority and privilege (Williams is, after all, a "foreigner," unmolested by the police, and invested with the agency as an interviewer to make Neville answer her questions about his experiences, which she can then use for her own story). So, even in a scenario where Neville's alienation from his surroundings is indisputable, there are strands that are unresolved. Asked by Williams when he thinks the police matter will be solved, he replies: "That's a nasty question. I don't wish to think about it at all. I wish I could run away. Or disappear. I wish it were a nightmare so I could wake up screaming" (Rao, "Wish" 109). By holding Williams to account for her detached, privileged status in the circumstances (given that she does not feel any compunction to ask "nasty" questions), Neville does not simply transfer an identification from an alienated home to the space/s she represents (the "West"). At the same time, he also imagines another space, to "run away" to, a space juxtaposed in a relation of contrast to the present one, from which he wishes to "disappear."

However, exactly where this other space is is left unmapped in the story, leaving open the possibility that Neville is not represented as a character wishing to migrate, to the West, for example. In leaving open the irresolution about where Neville wants to be, "Wish" does not

readily participate in a narrative of progress where the West (specifically, America) is seen as the beacon of queer rights. Nor is that other space signified, or mapped in any way, as a more-progressive Indian national space. Neville's traversal is not teleological in any easy sense. Rather, his journey, such as it is, moves spatially in a way that brings him into contact with other, and/or places him beside, irreducibly different planes and peoples.

Thinking further about the dis/continuities in the relationship between Neville and William, it is interesting to note the ways that particular relationship (also one which echoes a relationship with the West) is echoed when Neville, in the very last lines of the story, quotes an unreferenced section of what turns out to be a passage from Act One of *Death of a Salesman*. The intertextual moment illustrates, on the surface, the kind of exhaustion Neville feels; the passage from the play is spoken by Willy Loman, the "salesman," to Linda, his wife, about his extreme tiredness from driving, and how he constantly keeps "going off the road!" on his interminable work-related journeys (Rao, "Wish" 110). Yet, any kind of identification with a canonical American text is as unfulfilled as Neville's own ambiguous relationship with the West discussed above. For, "Wish" does not name or contextualize in any way the reference to the play, other than placing under quotation marks. Any inference about the significance of the intertext remains the work of the reader, necessarily open-ended, and therefore subject to the kind of deferrals so much in play in the larger narrative. It appears abruptly; just after Neville speaks of his desire to disappear, he quotes the lines, prefacing it with an oblique indicator to Williams: "listen to this" (109). Neville's transcript ends with the quote from the play, the terminal point marked by a telling ellipsis. The point of supposed contact disperses as suddenly as it appears. The contrasting dynamic (coming-together, falling-apart) defers full meaning, and it is possible to trace a line of relation also with the obscurity, already discussed, in the

characterization of the central character. No further conversation between Neville and Williams is represented after this. The two characters move apart without any kind of resolution, and the narrative closes, with a bracketed editorial insertion more elliptical than conclusive: “Shortly after this the interview ended. Mr. Darashaw had still not been summoned by the inspector” (110).

“Landya Ko Maro”

The plot of “Landya” queers an incident of communal violence during the Mumbai riots of 1992-1993. Like “Wish,” “Landya” combines sex and violence. It employs a stepped formal structure, in which bookending frame-narratives network with a centre main-narrative. This structure—connected different planes of storytelling, if thought spatially—directs an overall plotting of different stories which do not relay along one continuous line, as it were, but across a contoured textual-textured domain. Overall, the contoured shapes taken by form and content in “Landya” throw into sharper relief networked vectors of difference in contemporary India. Where a short story like “Wish” speaks of differences along lines of (class-) privilege and regional/ethno-lingual belonging, “Landya” deals largely with difference in the context of Hindu-Muslim relations in India (though it is made clear that all the principal characters of the core narrative are also working-class Indians). With regard to terminology, Romila Thapar explains that “[c]ommunal[ism] ... in the Indian context has a specific meaning and primarily perceives Indian society as constituted of a number of religious communities ... [and] ... is therefore a consciousness which draws on a supposed religious identity and uses this as a basis for a political and social ideology” (*Cultural Pasts* 967).

There are a number of cross-communal relations that emerge in the text which undercut the enclosures of religious identity. In the main narrative, the principal heterosexual pair in “Landya” is a Muslim man, Salim Makki, married to a Hindu woman, Rashmi Dalvi. The principal queer coupling is between Salim and a Hindu man. The narrative in “Landya” draws on the obsessive fixation on the penis—circumcised or uncircumcised—in the history of Hindu-Muslim relations in the South Asian region. Rao makes explicit the homoerotic undertones of this fixation on the penis and crafts a brief queer sexual encounter, during the riots, between Salim and a Hindu would-be assailant, identified only as “Hairy Mole.” For a fleeting moment, “hatred had been replaced by love,” and Salim’s life is spared after mutual oral sex between the two strangers in the small space of a kitchen, behind locked doors (Rao, “Landya” 185). This space is imagined curiously, both entirely enclosed and porous, as much a space of familiar heteronormative domesticity as one of queerness, difference, and deferral.

Thinking further on matters of space: the formal structure of “Landya” echoes the kind of spatially-dense arrangements found in other stories by Rao, like “Confessions.” There is a conventional frame-narrative, in a train-compartment, in this story. The first-person narrator of the bookending sections of “Landya” is a Public Relations executive with a steel company, while his interlocutor, Mr. Ansari, is a journalist. It is Ansari’s astonishing story—picked up, he says, from one of many sources who provided him personal accounts of their experiences during the riots—that comprises the main-narrative, with its queer core. The different levels, or planes, in the formal structure of “Landya” invite, as in the cases of Rao’s other stories discussed here, a reflexivity around issues of representation. Here, a constructed “fiction” overlaps with lived, spontaneous “reality,” while the empirical parameters of the verifiable is related to the ephemera of the imagined. The question that remains for the narrator at the end of the story is, to what

extent can Mr. Ansari's tale be believed as fact. In the concluding part of the story, the narrator says: "Was it probable? I wondered whether he made it up on the spur of the moment ..." (Rao, "Landya" 188). The relays back and forth between these considerations enriches a narrative with productive iterations of irresolution. Such textual production draws attention to a dense site of diversity in contemporary India: i.e., the socio-cultural, political, and ideological space across which two principal vectors of ethno-religious identity in the country—Hindu and Muslim—run. The narrative poses the question of (un)verifiability to engage the larger complexities of identification and difference playing out in the encounter between different (sets of) Indians supposedly inhabited the same "noble mansion" of the nation.

In "Landya," certain spaces become nodes of those inter-communal relations and encounters driving the tale. It is particularly noteworthy that the frame-narrative takes place in a railway compartment. The relative ease of the first-class *coupé* in which Ansari and the narrator travel, the pair enjoying the compartment even more since two of the four spaces are unoccupied, belies the historical trauma associated with the train in post-Independence India, and Pakistan. Trains have become sites of the most appalling communal violence in different periods of middle- and late-twentieth-century India. Arun P. Mukherjee observes that, "trains are that part of the public sphere in India where minorities are most vulnerable during times of religious violence" (A. P. Mukherjee, "Human Rights" 171). This has certainly been the case throughout post-Independence/-Partition India, even in the relatively recent 2002 Gujarat communal violence, which was sparked off by an incident of fire in a train carrying Hindus.⁷¹

⁷¹ The fire was later found to have been the result of a malfunction. In the immediate aftermath of the incident, however, the fire in the train was used as the grounds for retaliatory Hindu violence against Muslims because of rumours that the Hindu passengers were deliberately targeted by Muslims. The events of 2002 has been much discussed. For a genealogy of communal violence and the rise of the Hindu Right in India and the Indian diaspora, a useful volume is Martha Nussbaum's *The Clash Within*. While Nussbaum's thesis is carefully articulated, it is,

The literature of Partition and post-Partition communal violence has echoed this phenomenon. Gruesome cases of violence on trains during Partition in 1947 are explicitly represented in the narrative of Khushwant Singh's 1956 novel, *Train to Pakistan*, for instance. In that novel, so-called "ghost trains" crawl into the small frontier-town, Mano Majra, with the refugees on-board slaughtered, having been intercepted on their way across the new border. Much of Shama Futehally's *Reaching Bombay Central* (2002) takes place in a train-compartment similar to the one in which Ansari and the frame-narrator of "Landya" travel. In that novel, the female Indian Muslim protagonist is thrown into close contact with other Indians, from whom she is nevertheless othered, owing principally to her religious identity. In the specific context of post-Partition history, then, the train is one more site in which points of contact between different subcontinentals double simultaneously, ironically, and irrevocably, as points of dispersal.

On a general level, this curious dynamic mobilizes one significant narrative framing Partition-trauma: that which captures the realization, by victims on all sides, of being made the object of hatred by those with whom they had shared proximal relations. Khushwant Singh deploys the vocabulary of this narrative while representing the events of Partition: "In a couple of months, a million were slaughtered in cold blood. Almost overnight, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, who had co-existed amicably over centuries, became sworn enemies" (Singh, *Train* xvii). In symbolic terms, the train (specifically, the train-compartment) might be re-imagined as a discontinuous, contoured, or multi-planar, space which unsettles the level-ground of supposed, "amicable" subcontinental diversity, of the many being brought together in one space. In ideal

however, invested in a model of (pluralized and secular) unity as an ideal *telos* for a diversified and democratic India. The poet and writer Dom Moraes (along with his late-career collaborator, Sarayu Srivastava) was prompted to visit Gujarat in the immediate aftermath of the riots, despite being seriously ill with terminal cancer at the time. His assessment of the riots, along with a range of prose pieces describing his and Srivastava's impressions of travelling to various parts of an increasingly inequitable and divided India, can be found in *Out of God's Oven* (2002).

terms, the train as a spatial entity is an instrument of free communication, travelling a one-dimensional line, easily taking its many passengers from point to point to point (prior to Partition, Mano Majra is the place where passenger-trains between Lahore and Delhi have a scheduled stop, for example [Singh, 7]). In terms of the communal history of contemporary India, however, trains become spaces of alienation, of irreducible difference where the many are *not* of one kind, of the intimacy of close proximity crossed over with violent, murderous contact.

In representations of this curious contradictory weaves of intimacy and violence, or contact and dispersal, the train traverses contrasting domains of openness and claustrophobia. In “Landya,” the train-compartment of the frame-narrative is juxtaposed with the enclosed kitchen of the main-narrative, both sites in which contact and dispersal form the dynamic to the interpersonal relationships that emerge (and, no sooner, dissolve). Furthermore, in these relationships, the lines of difference are thrown into sharp relief. The frame-narrative establishes the relationship between Ansari and the first-person narrator as one which must negotiate a meeting-ground between different parties. The first twenty-four hours of their journey prior to the start of the narrative has in fact been marked by silence mostly—there is no immediate affinity represented in the first part of the story, and the narrator, coldly and “closely” watching Ansari making elaborate preparations for a whisky-and-snacks hour, wonders whether or not to be a “killjoy, and let him know that his drinking bothered me” (Rao, “Landya” 176). In fact, this very point in the narrative, when it seems that the two men are furthest from any common ground, is also the point at which Ansari invites the narrator to share from his bottle. To this the latter agrees, almost surprising himself: “‘Okay,’ I found myself responding” (177).

Two different, travelling Indians meet at this node which is also the springboard for the rest of the narrative/s. The relations between the two develop out of a curious (“queer,” in that

other sense of the term) attraction-alienation dynamic, then. The narrator finds Ansari to be “civilized” (a signification-characterization that invites the reader to consider exactly what feelings the narrator might have had for Ansari in the twenty-four hours prior to drinks, so that the “trace” of an/other [feeling] remains), but is still hesitant about a long conversation with the other man. He bemoans the quick succession of drinks, or what he describes as, “social drinking at its worst” (Rao, “Landya” 177). A sidebar to the narrator’s general reticence is his own potential queerness. While his sexuality is never clarified, he is certainly at odds with certain national norms of respectability, highlighted in what he calls “mandatory personal questions that Indians put to each other when they meet in trains,” (177). The “mandatory” list as the narrator enumerates it, is framed by reproductive heteronormativity on the one hand, and Hindu identity on the other: marital status; number of children; caste (Rao, “Landya” 177).⁷² It captures the two vectors (sexuality; religious identity) that predominates in the story. For all his continuing reserve about Ansari, the narrator is relieved the man has not followed this script of interrogation-interpellation. So, a queerness already attaches to the kind of odd discursive realms forming around the two. They do not have the kind of expected, normative discourse on a train. Instead, on being asked by the narrator about the most “hair-raising” (178) story he has covered in his ten-year career as a journalist, Ansari launches into the story of Salim, Rashmi, and Hairy Mole: the main-narrative.

That other story is also mobilized by that unexpected, counter-intuitive dynamic of contact-repulsion. Even in the frame-narrative, it is not clear that Ansari is overly eager to retell the story. There is a pause after the frame-narrator asks the other man for a story: “He didn’t

⁷² Expected questions about the caste-background of a fellow traveller sheds light on upper-caste Hindu normativity operating in the general social realms within which the narrator is situated: the assumption behind such a question is that any fellow traveller is always-already, Hindu (caste is exclusive to Hinduism), and, a non-Dalit (as “untouchables,” Dalits are excluded from the four major *varnas* of the caste system).

answer at once, but fixed his eyes on the golden liquid in his glass. When he spoke, his words came slowly..." (Rao, "Landya" 178). It is the frame-narrator who is now "eager that he should go on" (178), "eager," that is, for contact (with Ansari and with his story). He does, and the structure of the story shifts a level from the frame- to the main-narrative. Again, the meeting-ground of difference (the two different Indians; the frame-narrative overlapping the main-narrative) is also the ground of dispersal (the reluctance of Ansari contrasted with the eagerness of the narrator; the different narratives actually breaking up the frame-section and the main-section). The plot of the main narrative itself pivots around that destabilizing dynamic of difference and dispersal. The heterosexual couple, Salim and Rashmi, who have known each other since childhood as inhabitants of the same slum, are from different religious communities; their marriage is a taboo. As Rashmi declares her intention to marry her "childhood sweetheart" (Rao, "Landya" 179), her outraged family disown her; attraction couples with repulsion, and contact is woven in with dispersal. The narrative observes: "She knew she could live without her parents, but not without Salim" (179).

Nivedita Menon makes the salutary point that, in the Indian context, the imperative for purity along caste and communal lines in the institution of heteronormative marriage is pressing. Marriage as the conductor of reproductive heteronormativity lines up the biological reproduction of the species with the ideological production of "caste, race and community identity through birth" (Menon, "How Natural" 35). Cross-communal relations do not reproduce this notion of purity and the short story indicates that the burden is borne by women. The crossing of contact and dispersal is another way of highlighting the effects of that other crossing between communal identities. It reflects also on the curious nature of this dynamic, given that the spaces in which Salim and Rashmi live—slums in Mumbai—are inhabited by both Muslims and Hindus. Closely

proximal relations between different elements on this spatial field will, in the time of the riots, be dissolved, in the same way that Khushwant Singh describes Partition-era communal violence. However, the queer encounter will suture in another point of relation, this time between two men from different religions, when other points are disconnected.

Particular relationships to space add dimensions to the lived, social experiences of characters like Salim and Rashmi. The curiously constructed proximal relations between Hindus and Muslims in the couple's immediate environs have a clear spatial dimension. While all of the couple's neighbours, being of a similar class, are cheek-by-jowl in the slum, or "chawl" (Rao, "Landya" 179), Salim and Rashmi (along with Salim's widowed mother) call home, it is significant that even before the riots different communities cluster in different houses in the chawl. For instance, "[t]he building in which [Salim and Rashmi] lived had a few Muslim tenants, but all the surrounding houses were predominantly Hindu" (179). Another way of conceiving these relations of proximity and difference, is to think again of Sedgwick's "beside" which relate entities in grounded but unidealized forms. Even if Hindus and Muslims strain to stay apart, the narrative brings them together in uncomfortable ways. At the individual level, the decision by Salim and Rashmi to couple crosses the lines of separation; on a larger, "structural" scale, the class-background of the communities mean they do not have the luxury of sprawl.

Yet the narrative does not engage in fantasies of "unity-in-diversity" when placing these different people beside one another. There is no fantasy either of, in Sedgwick's terms, "egalitarian" or "pacific" relations. The issue of communal difference swells to rupture during the rioting. Rashmi carries the burden of repressive structures of purity. When their front door is marked with the sign of the *trishul* (Rao, "Landya" 180)—the figure of the trident much used in Hindu iconography to signify a violent or retributive agency—the pregnant Rashmi goes to the

police station for help. Far from guaranteeing the secular rights of all Indians, the police inspector represents a case *against* Rashmi, utilizing a discourse of exclusion that is at once hotly emotional and coldly rational:

Rashmi ... went to the police station ... to register a complaint and ask for police protection. She felt that as a Hindu she was safe; no one would hassle her. She was wrong. The inspector at the police station, one Ganesh Patil, openly refused to come to her aid. He said to her, "You, bitch, why did you marry a Muslim? Now pay for your misdeeds. Let your husband be killed. Don't you see, if a Muslim dies, there will be one Muslim less." (179)

The policeman's statement articulates an economy of communal violence (one dead Muslim equals one less Muslim) and demonstrates a deep-set rationalism, however bizarre the calculations and equations may be, buttressing an increasingly sophisticated, if no less venal, ideology of the Hindu Right, resurgent in the Indian social and political climate of the *fin-de-millénaire*.

The rationale for communal violence is crossed in the kind of encounters Rashmi has with particular iterations of sexuality and gender normativity. Rashmi, as one of a mixed couple, is understood to have failed a communally oriented sex-gender system, in which the heterosexual woman is expected to represent and reproduce a communal social identity as well as her normative gender role. The policeman's words are obviously oriented to this system, as it interpellates Rashmi as a woman who has desired too differently in her choice of husband. She is also subjected to the abuse of Hindu mobs: "We'll take your life and your baby's too, along with your husband's. You have brought shame on us Maharashtrians by marrying a landya. A

circumcised arse-fucker, that's what he is" (Rao, "Landya" 181).⁷³ Salim too is interpellated within a particular, sexualized, code. He is the "circumcised." The disgust at Salim and his kind is supplemented, however, by a hypertrophied sexuality attributed to Muslims. For all its attempts to excise the Muslim, the ideology of the mob is obsessed with, therefore keeps returning to, Muslim sexuality. Salim is *both* the loathed "landya" who must be removed, *and* the embodiment of something desirable. Stepping out of her home in the days after the police incident, Rashmi is taunted by Hindus: "Her husband has a big dick. He gives her a good fuck. After killing we'll fuck her by turn" (Rao, "Landya" 180). There is a sexual economy articulated here, in which (male) heterosexual gratification is coded within an ideological structure.

However, "Landya" does not lose sight of the queer potential in the hyper-sexualization of the Muslim. Queerness forms the literal and spatial core of the central narrative. The scene is the cramped two-room apartment in which the couple and Salim's mother live. The queer encounter is set within a spatial domain in which proximal relations between different Indians are again thrown into relief. The cramped space is already such that, in the normal daily lives of the three characters, the default mode of life is cheek-by-jowl. The working-class accommodation is at once a space in which articles are tightly packed in, suggesting an apartment closing in on itself. Yet, it is also one in which the lack of sprawl or free space makes for a multi-purposed, porous lived experience:

⁷³ Notably, a regional identity ("Maharashtrian") is co-related in the discourse of the mob with the communal identity, "Hindu." The confessional is made contiguous with the territorial, the relation expressing an exclusionary settling opposed to a secular plurality. The mobs Rashmi encounters are referred to as "Shiv Sainiks" (Rao, "Landya" 181). The "Sainiks" are members of the powerful Maharashtra-based political party, Shiv Sena, whose right-wing Hindu ideology dovetails with the central (in Canadian terms, federal) political party at the vanguard of the Hindu Right in India, the BJP (or Bharatiya Janata Party). The present central government in India is helmed by the BJP.

Rashmi's home was made up of two small rooms, an outer one that served as a living-cum-bedroom, and an inner one that was the kitchen. The furniture in the living room included a box bed on which the couple slept; a few chairs; a wooden cabinet that contained ... a photograph of the two of them, taken on their wedding.... The kitchen had shelves on the wall lined with stainless steel utensils.... Although the place teemed with rats, Salim's mother spread out a mattress and slept here at night...

Unlike large flats or bungalows, there were no hiding places in a measly chawl. (Rao, "Landya" 180-181)

The mapping out of rooms is similar to Dattani's *Night Queen* in that there are two distinct-but-related living spaces making up the domestic home. The multiple uses to which the spaces allow for a porosity less immediately apparent than in the case of Raghu's liminal room in that other work. For all the furniture and kitchen utensils, both living room and kitchen double as bedrooms. The box-bed, in which "discarded clothes" (Rao, "Landya" 181) are usually stored, becomes a closet of another kind, as Rashmi decides to hide Salim in it when a mob forces their way in. The contrasting dynamics of the narrative—of closure and porosity, inside and outside, identity and difference, attraction and repulsion—are further heightened with the arrival of the mob in the space. Searching for Salim, the men push through the outer room, repelling by smashing any furniture or item that gets in their way. They find the kitchen locked and get Rashmi to open it up, unsealing the space to reveal Salim's terrified mother. Salim is hidden in plain sight in the living room with Rashmi sitting on the box-bed strewn with clothes to deceive the men. His inside is on the outside.

The events in the flat mark, therefore, a proliferation of difference. This proliferation ties in the spreading dynamics, in which there isn't an easy settling of the matter in hand. Ostensibly, the mob wants to excise Salim (Muslims, in general) outright. Yet, precisely when the mob is in their murderous search for Salim, one of them, "who had a hairy mole on his cheek, picked up the wedding photograph ... [and] looked intently at it for a whole minute" (Rao, "Landya" 182). What happens immediately after reads like a gesture of repulsion: after staring at the picture, the man lets it drop to the floor, smashing the glass on the frame. The man disperses too, leaving the scene. A complex set of spatial re-arrangements occur, following the contrasting dynamics in the narrative: "Hairy Mole" and the mob leave; the living space is once more sealed off; within a properly locked apartment, Salim can free himself from the sealed enclosure into which he was hidden, and can breathe properly again (182-183). The arrangements are soon in flux though, engined by the networked relations between characters (and communities). Rashmi answers the door to a concerned Hindu neighbour, who makes grandiose claims of protecting the inter-communal trio, should the mob return. She says to Rashmi: "Let me see who does anything to Salimbhai as long as my husband and I are alive" (183). In the newly re-opened space, this is a momentary point of connection echoing the ideal pluralism of the secular country; Rashmi "put[s] her head on the woman's shoulder and start[s] to weep" (183).

Overlapping this moment of connection, however, is a re-occurrent point of dispersal. In the neighbourly crush, "Hairy Mole" slips back into the apartment, and, demands to see Salim (Salim, in turn, has locked himself in the kitchen in the rapid course of events). The contrasting threads between the settled and secularized plurality and an unsettling difference are once again foregrounded. The plurality, it seems at first, collapses outright. Immediately after "Hairy Mole" re-enters the home, the Hindu neighbour vanishes, "disappear[ing] into the cosy safety of her

home” (Rao, “Landya” 184). Any kind of openness now seems as threatening as it was in the previous scene with the mob, for “Hairy Mole” detects that Salim is hiding in the kitchen, behind a “sealed door” (183) he intends to break down. In fact, it is Salim who opens the door and comes out to confront the man. The sealing-unsealing shifts corresponds to the contrasting dynamics producing the substance of differential relations. To Rashmi’s desperate pleas that Salim is a Hindu, “Hairy Mole” demands a further threatening unsealing:

“Please, please, she cried ... “He’s a Hindu.”

“Yes?” the man mocked her. “That’s what I’ve come to find out. On behalf of my whole gang.... Let’s see if your love for him can make miracles happen. Let’s see if his foreskin has re-grown.”

... “Come into that room and strip. If you don’t, this knife will slice your balls in two.”...

The man shoved Salim towards the kitchen with one hand; in the other he held the open knife...

The door slammed shut and bolted from within. Rashmi went into a fit wondering what the man would do to her husband... The seconds ticked away. No sounds came from inside the kitchen; this intrigued and baffled the women all the more.

(Rao, “Landya” 184-185)⁷⁴

In a further shift in the spatial dynamics, the one safe sealed kitchen appears to be a thoroughly unsafe cell, paralleling the kind of enclosure in which a character like Neville Darashaw in “Wish” is abused. There, too, the constables “bolt the door from within” before raping Neville (Rao, “Wish” 105). With Rashmi “in a fit,” and her mother-in-law collapsed, the scene shifts

⁷⁴ The claustrophobic confines of a closed-off space recurs as a site of anxiety and menace in other texts on communal differences in India. See, for example, Noor Zaheer’s short story, “A Life in Transit.”

into the kitchen. And, this spatial shift also corresponds to a particular kind of hermeneutic shift between planes. While the earlier scenes are all ones which plant the reader within a domain in which events are readily verifiable, the scene between “Hairy Mole” and Salim takes place in a completely private, sealed space in which what happens is never known to other characters in the story, and cannot be verified.

So, it appears that the scene between Salim and “Hairy Mole” is imagined and set very differently from other encounters in “Landya.” The narrative appears to revert to a conventional opposition between a hermetic, indeed cloistered, space and an open one. Rashmi’s previous encounters with the police inspector and the groups of Hindu fundamentalists represent overt projections of violence, in open or porously bound domains. Voices are raised in clearly expressed and clearly received taunts and abuse; the sheer physicality of a rampaging mob leaves “hard” evidence of communal hatred of the Muslim other in shattered glass and broken furniture. With the scene between the two men, there appears to be no such correspondence between occurrence and evidence. Yet, what is denied to the other characters in the narrative is not denied to the readers. The narrative, in defiance of regular spatial and physical laws, takes readers “on the other side of the wall,” where “the man ma[kes] Salim unbutton his trousers and take them off” (Rao, “Landya” 185).

A different, queerly oriented sex scene is staged in a space that subverts the usual spatial laws and straddles the literary forms of hard realism and fantasy. The readers are allowed into the queered space of the kitchen in which various vectors converge and disperse. The representation trades on varying iterations of irreducible difference and irresolution in determining what happens and what it means. The repulsion implicit in “Hairy Mole” and his “bloodshot eyes” when he confirms that Salim has indeed “flunked” the “acid taste of [his]

religion” (Rao, “Landya” 185), while confirmed by the wild “hacking gestures” he makes *near* Salim’s testicles with a penknife, overlaps with a sudden flowering of sexual desire. Repulsion is proximate to desire; the hands that hold the penknife become desiring hands, fondling Salim’s penis, “giving him a solid erection in the process” (185). The phobia of the communal other is deferred as “both men st[and] there naked, aroused” (185). Ideal symmetries of a desirable secularism are finally represented, but in the most unsettling of times and spaces. Given the play or production of difference, in which irresolution or porosity have particular functions and ramifications, the narrative of diversity between a Hindu man and a Muslim man is at once suspended *and* grounded. Salim and “Hairy Mole” are in a totally private space where no other character can see, or verify, how they relate to one another. Yet, the language of pluralism and an ideal coming-together of difference is coded according to an explicit grammar of tangible, bodily desires, sharply- and substantially-defined. Acts and expressions of sexual desire are *not* suspended in this scene.

Of course, the dense material of symmetrical male-male sex converging in on this scene disrupts the idealized symmetry of national communal relations.⁷⁵ Salim and “Hairy Mole” are not engaged in behaviour sanctioned in the legal and moral codes shaping the respectable “noble mansion.” Furthermore, there is the threat of violence underpinning the sexual dimensions of this scene, making the apparently symmetrical pairing of Salim and “Hairy Mole” simultaneously asymmetrical. Yet, the narrative describes a sexual act in which mutuality is foregrounded. Both Salim and “Hairy Mole” give and receive oral sex in turn. Indeed, the text makes clear

⁷⁵ Joseph Boone’s point about the threatening nature of all-male scenes is worth recalling at this point. Analyzing the gay or queer aesthetic of the Pet Shop Boys’ music video for the song, *Go West*, Boone describes the scenes of all-male “ubiquity” in that video comprised almost exclusively of similar-looking (symmetrical, that is) men as “the most taboo because the most threatening visual representation of sexual difference for patriarchy” (7-8). The asymmetrical (male-female) is counter-intuitively symmetrical for reproductive heteronormativity, as implied in Boone’s analysis above.

furthermore that the Hindu fundamentalist actually receives Salim's semen into his mouth (Rao, "Landya" 185). In the most intimate bodily terms, then, the Muslim man is involved in with the Hindu. And, according to the text, Salim "did not feel violated" when it was his turn to "suck" the other (185).

The indeterminacy surrounding what is, after all, an unexpected act of convergence is expressed in the way the text makes sense of the implications of what has happened. In contrast to the clear, direct, unambiguous description of the sexual act itself, there is a spreading haziness about what to extrapolate from it. The uncertainty is expressed in sentences in which qualifiers have a certain role: "*To the extent* this was love, hatred had been replaced by love. It was a triumph *of sorts*" (Rao, "Landya" 185, emphasis added). Key nouns—"love"; "triumph"—are not granted an unqualified status, just as, in terms of content, the narrative defers any answer to the underlying question of whether "love" is indeed the predominating affect structuring the convergence between the different men. *Something* clearly has materialized in the site of the kitchen, but the narrative avoids any definitive statement about what it means when these two men from different backgrounds meet. The qualifications—phrased alternatively, deferrals—becomes an uncertain route between differences placed beside one another in a seamy encounter. As is the recurrent pattern, the converging relations between the two men cross into a dispersal. This dispersal is marked first by both men "spit[ing] out the stuff in their mouths" (Rao, "Landya" 185). Then, with the door unlocked, Salim consoles his wife, but does not tell her anything, while the other man "sneak[s] out of the house without a fuss, and disappear[s] into the street" (186).

This marks the end of the core narrative of "Landya." The transition back to the frame-narrative on the train marks not only a formal traversal (across literary spaces) but other kinds

too. On the train, the narrator cannot quite believe the story and wonders how Ansari, who supposedly only had meetings with Rashmi, could have known about the encounter. If spatialized planes gain particular importance in this story, the relations between the planes of fact and fiction are foregrounded, thrown into relief, but never settled. The doubt—in other words, irreducible difference—remains. As is the case of those relations depicted in the photograph in Dattani's *Muggy Night*, the apparent is not necessarily the definitive in the case of what happens in the kitchen in "Landya." The stepped relations between communal identities are also not re-defined in a newly settled way. The marriage between Salim and Rashmi—symbol of cross-communal harmony—does not, as Ansari tells the narrator, endure, but nor does it break off completely. Salim marries a second time, keeping both wives "under the same roof" (Rao, "Landya 186), in the cause of reproductive heteronormativity: Rashmi, according to Ansari, has only ever borne daughters, no sons. So, while a queer scene animates cross-cultural convergence, the imperatives of heteronormativity displace another kind of cross-communal convergence across a wider network of different relations, but without breaking them off. It is no surprise, given this kind of structure of connected-but-unsettled difference, that, according to Ansari, all of Salim's family end up living "under the same roof" (186).

***The Boyfriend* (2003)**

Rao's debut novel, *The Boyfriend*, follows the interwoven lives of Yudi and Milind (alias, Kishore)⁷⁶ in 1990s Mumbai. The first is an upper-caste, middle-class, middle-aged journalist living in Mumbai; the second is a Dalit, working-class man, significantly younger than Yudi.

⁷⁶ Milind introduces himself as "Kishore" the first time he encounters Yudi. He later admits to this subterfuge, when the two are more intimate. Until he admits the subterfuge (at the end of the first third of the novel), the narrative refers to him as "Kishore." Throughout this chapter and dissertation, however, I have referred to the character by the name "Milind," except in those quotations from the novel in which he is named "Kishore."

Like “Confessions,” relations between the two men follow a network of rising and falling contours. They meet and disperse at multiple junctures in the novel, a pattern which interrupts any kind of linear fantasy of relationships crystallizing into settled monogamy. In fact, Yudi and Milind’s queer “marriage”—a private ceremony between the two men, held in Yudi’s apartment at the half-way point of the novel—is overlapped with Milind’s subsequent marriage to a woman, Leela, arranged by his family in the latter parts of the narrative. And, yet, the novel does not sever these fraught relations between the two. The narrative ends, in fact, with the married Milind reappearing in Yudi’s life after a gap of three years, the event starting a fresh association between the two men. A textual pattern of rising and falling contours works helps to guide a critical reading of the relations represented in the novel, which do not settle along a linear trajectory. If contours invite challenging (non-linear, spreading, uncertain, and/or unresolved) traversals, then contours are an appropriate way of approaching the destabilizing form of convergence and divergence negotiated by the two principals across the narrative. This kind of a spatialized approach also echoes the whole textual-textured treatment of diversity in a particular, richly-embodied, domain: the city of Mumbai, through which various forms of unidealized and unsettled queer relations run, especially that between Yudi and Milind.

Existing scholarship on *The Boyfriend* follows two predominant lines. One kind of reading argues that the work radically egalitarian or redistributive in its treatment of queer relations cutting across Indian class- and caste-borders, often subverting class- and caste-privileges in the process: Parmesh Shahani, Ruth Vanita and Ana Garcia-Arroyo are among scholars who deal with the novel in this fashion. An opposite set of readings argue that the novel indicates multiple fissures in postcolonial India: Pramod Nayyar and Sandip Bakshi are among those who have read the novel in this way, the latter having devoted an entire academic article on

the novel alone (titled, “Fractured Resistance”).⁷⁷ Nayyar’s and Bakshi’s analyses point to top-down, class- and caste-based exploitation, especially in the character of Yudi. Bakshi’s work also suggests that the other principal character in the work—Yudi’s “boyfriend,” Milind—is also (but differently) compromised through his own internalizations of hegemonic sex and gender norms, despite having to inhabit the margins on account of his status as a working-class, Dalit male. These latter scholarly trajectories make a strong case so that succeeding readings of the novel cannot simply assert that the text is one in which fully reciprocal relations between queer men are represented.

Critical work on the novel, then, broadly understands the narrative as either signifying happy convergence—showing a queer way to a utopian society—or, unhappy divergence—where existing divisions and hierarchies in national society preclude any fully-fledged queer alliances against heteronormativity. For Bakshi, while the work represents only a “fractured resistance” to any heteronormative status quo given that Yudi and Milind themselves have a deeply flawed relationship, it nevertheless effects a broad, critical intervention into the social as well as sexual state of postcolonial India (Bakshi 2). *The Boyfriend* exposes the unedifying cross-section of a country divided by class and caste hierarchies. The novel, according to Bakshi, critiques the failures of the postcolonial nation in its redistributive role and sheds a sidelight on the “binary divisions” in the nation (3). In examining the state of postcolonialism as an evolving intellectual domain, Gayatri Spivak makes the salutary argument that, “postcolonialism is too deeply tied to the idea of a national liberation” (*Other Asias* 98). Striking a related tone in its specifically queer intervention, *The Boyfriend* echoes Spivak’s call to de-transcendentalize the nation, not least those like India emerging out from processes of decolonization which promised

⁷⁷ See Shahani 197; Vanita, *Love’s Rite* 244; Garcia-Arroyo 141; 154-155. See Nayyar 141.

the economic and social “liberation” (national developmentalism, in other words) of all of the previously colonized.

My reading of *The Boyfriend* shares some of Bakshi’s overview, but differs with the ultimate direction of his analysis. The point of divergence has, in fact, to do with how this project analyses the workings of difference in the texts read. Bakshi is accurate when he says that *The Boyfriend* “captures a distinct Indian context of queerness where intersections of class, caste, language, religion, gender and sexuality figure within a matrix of the state of the postcolonial nation” (3). These “intersections,” of course, only serve to demonstrate the ruffled domain of the principal relationship. Yudi and Milind are not simply two men who desire one another. Yudi is of a different caste and class background to Milind. These other differences affect in key ways the dynamic of their relationship. As Milind tells Yudi, when they first meet: “I belong to the working class, and you to the talking class” (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 17). The inequitable postcolonial nation plots the two characters in different places on the national “matrix,” so that the on-off relationship between the two men in the novel represents the “(im-)possibility of cross-caste and same-sex love” (Bakshi 3).

Bakshi’s reading, while alive to a deconstructive deferral of totalizations and rejection of essentialized, binaristic reliance on discrete categories, reverts to an analytical structure whereby Yudi and Milind come to inhabit discrete sites of being, on either end of an ever-widening chasm. The kind of radical—unsettled but overlapping—connections which enable the deconstruction of settled relationships, subject-positions, and/or identities cannot be sustained in Bakshi’s reading. Surprisingly, his analysis becomes reliant on some of the same stabilized national binaries and hierarchies the novel is supposed to, and does in fact, critique.

Bakshi reads the respective difference in attitudes of Yudi and Milind as illustrating the larger divisions in the nation with its “longstanding histories of segregation” (Bakshi 17). He argues: “Milind’s contempt for Yudi, his class and his homosexuality cannot endorse the idea of a ‘perfect arrangement’ as Yudi would like to believe at the end of the novel” (Bakshi 16). He follows the train of thought further in the same paragraph: “by extension, the feeling of disdain that Milind reserves for Yudi through the last portions of the narrative appears as the dominant characteristic of their romantic union” (Bakshi 16). In such lines, and indeed in the larger paper, it becomes troublingly apparent however that the lower-class and Dalit character is made to carry a disproportionate share of blame for the failure of the same-sex relationship. This undermines the antiessentialist, non-normative reading Bakshi aims for, the kind which the narrative of the novel itself enables in its particular production of difference. Those readers of Bakshi unfamiliar with *The Boyfriend*, may well think that Milind’s “contempt” and “disdain” of Yudi (or, for that matter, Milind’s “derision” of the other, which the scholar characterizes as “the dominant” feature of the “union”) is excessive and unbalanced. His feelings towards Yudi might well appear prejudiced, as it is not adequately tempered, in the passage quoted above for instance, by any kind of causality. Yudi might easily be seen as not warranting such a harsh assessment, his fault extending only to a kind of misplaced “romantic” yearning for a “perfect arrangement.”

A filtering-off of the difference between the two men cannot but happen if Milind is seen as somehow a little too angry and Yudi as somehow a little bit more wronged than wronging. An analysis of Yudi and Milind in which one character is more burdened with the negative cannot ultimately investigate the patterns of inequality investigated in and through the queerness of the novel. Bakshi’s readings of Yudi and Milind’s relationship—which should sustain focus on the novel as an anti-romantic, queer, unevenly contoured site made up of odd ruptures *and* sutures—

finds a way back, rather, to all of those hierarchical social and cultural privileges the novel sets as its critical target. Yudi “shares a complex relationship with the nation that is most apparent in his subject-position as an upper-class, urban-educated, homosexual Indian” (Bakshi 6). Milind, too, is a product of the personal crossed with the political. But, it becomes curiously apparent that the same connection between the personal and the political has a very different emphasis in Bakshi’s study of Milind.

In “Fractured Resistance,” Yudi, while viewed critically as a member of the privileged national elite, is nevertheless granted an agency; according to Bakshi, he engages in a “disavowal” of that same nation which has fostered unequal privilege and consequently made cross-class/-caste relationships unworkable (Bakshi 6). Furthermore, Yudi’s personal actions are displaced to the more impersonal realm of national hierarchies and stereotypes. The more egregious aspects of his behaviour towards those more disenfranchised sections of the population *are* described, but read as symptomatic of his privileged background (“Yudi’s understanding of his own homosexual identity is definitely inflected by his class privilege” [Bakshi 14]). Orienting the analysis on this general macro-level means the ways in which the narrative holds Yudi’s character to account for his personal actions is under-examined. Indeed, *The Boyfriend* does not grant Yudi the free-floating agency, or even the desire, to engage in a thoroughgoing “disavowal” of the nation.

Furthermore, in Bakshi’s reading, the privilege of “disavowal” is not afforded to Milind. If Yudi can disavow the nation, Milind sets “an example of internalized homophobia” (Bakshi 15). Bakshi draws attention to Milind’s identification with an essentialized sex-gender system, where an ideal of manliness trumps the queering of sexual and gendered forms, and where the penetrating male is not seen as any less manly than a heterosexual male. Milind’s fear of

effeminate passivity, “of being labelled a *chakka*, a homosexual,” dooms the relationship (Bakshi 15). Consequently, Milind’s “sexuality is a reminder to the reader of how sexual acts differ from an individual’s sexual identity,” particularly in the nation-specific context of India (Bakshi 15).

Unlike Yudi, who is read as being able to cut out and somehow transcend (move up and/or move beyond) the nation by disavowing it, Milind “internalizes” the nation(al heteronormativity). His “identity remains” heteronormative, and there is a strong suggestion that he himself is something of a remainder, a left-over: remaining behind, even. Furthermore, Milind’s internalized heteronormativity appears to function both as a remainder *and* a “reminder to the reader” of the acute need to deconstruct (the ability to play with sexual acts and identities, and distinguish constructs from essences), a need all the more urgent *because* of Milind’s inability to uncouple (sexual) acts from the essentialized logic of a heteronormative sex-gender system operating in India: “his sexuality remains defined in terms of the sexual act” (Bakshi 16). Milind, internally and essentially homophobic, is unable to couple properly with Yudi; he ends up hating the other. Sidestepping the aim to analyze deconstructed national caste- and class-hierarchies in *The Boyfriend*, Bakshi’s reading ends up reifying them. Such a reading unwittingly grants Yudi’s subject-position a priority the novel actually undercuts, and blunts the radical function performed in the narrative by Milind.

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This response to Bakshi tracks some of the complexities involved in reading difference in the contoured terrain formed by such a queer Indian text. A way to re-approach the textual production of difference would be to follow the patterns of convergence and divergence in the seamy juxtaposition of irreducible *but* interconnected diversities in *The Boyfriend*. Terry Goldie cautions against “acclaiming” the novel as “a major ‘coming out’ for gay India” (Goldie 9). For

him, the term “gay India” fails to distinguish between Euro-American gayness and the Indian male homosexuality described in *The Boyfriend*, “an urban male sexuality that has a limited relationship to the western gay ideal” (Goldie 9). This reading does not adequately approach the multi-faceted and indeterminate character of Yudi’s sexual subject-position born out of the relations he enters into with other men. Yudi *is* closely involved in aspects of a “western gay ideal,” not least in his desire for an exclusive relationship with another man: the titular boyfriend, in other words. However, this aspect of Yudi’s character does overlap with a contrasting thread of promiscuity directed towards primarily working-class, and younger Indian males. This pluralization in Yudi echoes the significance of intersections and interrelationships in which difference is networked so that binary divisions between categories (such as, “Western” and “Indian”; or, “upper-caste” and “Dalit”) are not sealed-off. Representations of Yudi’s encounters across a “register” (recalling Narrain and Bhan) of different men, especially Milind, defers privileging the subject-position of any particular “type” of queer person, least of all Yudi.

My reading is shaped by the insight of emerging scholarship in the field of Indian masculinity studies, such as Sanjay Srivastava’s, which dismantles the notion of a single “‘Indian’ sexuality” or “masculinity” (Srivastava 390). While it may indeed be hasty to hail *The Boyfriend* as a marker of “gay India,” the novel is a “coming out” for “queer India,” with all of the deferrals and porosity that latter term signifies. So, queerness should not be seen as a collapsing of all existing national hierarchies—a coming-together of difference—enabled by a radically altered set practices oriented to a transcendentalized queerness. As already discussed, there is a very persuasive case to be made that the novel is not a utopian text. As the following readings from particular sections of the novel demonstrate, the transgressive cross-caste, cross-class relationship between Yudi and Milind does not resolve into an ideal, symmetrical

formation; however, a relationship between them—following unsettled, contoured lines—*does* materialize across the textual field.⁷⁸

The novel opens with a third-person narrative following Yudi's point of view. The scene is set in and around the men's toilets of Churchgate railway station in Mumbai on Sunday, the day he meets Milind for the first time. The toilets are a popular space and time for anonymous sexual encounters between men, a point these first pages hasten to make. Indeed, the city of Mumbai undergirds this novel so that readers encounter not simply a story about sexual and emotional relations between men, but a story that also engages with a spatial (re)imagining of the city. So, while "Churchgate station is a tranquil place on a Sunday morning", the "gents' toilet at Churchgate provided a twenty-four hour supply of men" for Yudi (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 1-2).

Details relating to same-sex activity abound in these early pages of the novel:

The Churchgate loo has two sections. By convention one of them is the gay wing, the other the straight. The hetero wing of course has a better supply of mainstream men, but one dare not cruise in that area for fear of being bashed up. The gay wing gets nice guys only intermittently. As a college student, Yudi often felt like spending the whole day inside the loo to see what it yielded. But that was possible

⁷⁸ In other respects too, the novel does not follow utopian lines. Despite emerging in a context in which valuable lessons of feminist inquiry has enriched queer thinking, *The Boyfriend* as a queer text arguably does not do justice to the single principal female character in the plot. Gauri, represented as a garrulous, middle-class painter and faux-feminist, is fixed-in-place as unambiguously desirous of Yudi, all the while unconcerned by his equally unambiguous queerness. For much of the novel, she is depicted as little else than a perpetual irritant to Yudi. In the very last page of the novel, when the two are reconciled to friendship, Gauri suddenly confesses to experiencing new lesbian desires; this is a revelation that the novel does not develop. Her character remains in suspended animation, and presents particular challenges to the critical reader.

It is easily argued that this is a troubling, misogynistic representation. However, the issue of Gauri also needs also to be explored in the light of the discontinuities in India between the queer movement and the mainstream of the feminist movement, as discussed in the Introduction. Hoshang Merchant remembers something of this. He writes, "My women colleagues fighting for her rights instead of respecting me for identifying with women even to the extent of referring to myself in Hindi in the feminine gender mocks me because she herself identifies with the male establishment which patronizes her ("Introduction" xiv). It may be more productive, therefore, to read the representation of Gauri censoriously, *but also in juxtaposition with* the knowledge of the fraught relationship between queer and feminist movements in the country.

only in theory. There were loo attendants who knew what went on inside; some of them were on the payroll of the cops...

The boy [Milind] found a stall at the far end of the gay wing and unzipped ... he [Yudi] had an unrestricted view of the lad's member which was stiff all right. He was disappointed, though, by its size. Where he wanted to bite into a cucumber, what was on display was a mere chili (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 6-7).

For Garcia-Arroyo, the descriptions of cruising-sites such as the station-toilet ties the formal grammar of realism with a “radical” language of explicit queer sexual descriptions, “linguistically reveal[ing] those words and actions that some might want to conceal” (Garcia-Arroyo 158). The realist narrative describing the “loo” carries, more specifically, the tone of instruction, pedagogy. These lines foreshadow Yudi's fondness for lecturing increasingly bored and unhearing characters, especially Milind, on topics ranging from gay life and its sub-culture in Mumbai, to the fine marble-topped tables in Irani restaurants.

Yudi's schoolmasterish loquacity concretizes same-sex experiences in the city. According to Garcia-Arroyo, his attention on toilet-sex parallels the kind of attention Jean Genet placed on queer underbelly of Europe in works like *A Thief's Journal* (Garcia-Arroyo 159). But, this materialization does not represent any kind of easily encapsulated, generalizable queer modality. For, sexual experiences are queerly sited along multiple planes characterized by an overlap between mobile and permanent spaces. Even if the sexual encounters in the toilets at Churchgate are fleeting, the “gay section” of the loo remains a fixed location for queers, who keep returning to the locale. This kind of contrasting overlap allows for setting two different aspects of Yudi's queerness. What he does—transient sexual encounters for physical gratification—is related, but in an unsettled contrasting way, to who he is: a permanently

identified and identifying gay man in India, increasingly dissatisfied (or so he believes) with cruising, yearning for “someone to care and share his life with” (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 39).

As previous studies of *The Boyfriend* have shown, Yudi’s sexual desires range across caste- and class-divides. His queerness is a compound of a sexuality differing from the heteronormativity as well as his interest in men from a diversity of backgrounds. Bakshi has argued that *The Boyfriend* is critical of the ways in which Yudi, for all the crossings-over enacted in his relations with different men, is nevertheless “distanced” from the deprivations of the poor and lower-caste Indians he encounters (Bakshi, “Fractured Resistance” 6). The contrasting planes of Yudi’s personal life—indeed, personality—echoes this telling irony. If *The Boyfriend* reflects the telling nature of India’s hierarchized and unequal society in Yudi’s actions, the significance of his relative proximity to difference in the novel is still under-explored. For, this networking of different relations acts deconstructively in unsettling Yudi’s privileged subject-position further. In the narrative, this networking is amplified in the kinds of exchanges between Yudi and the other men he meets. In these exchanges, Yudi’s authority is undercut in ways that open the domain of his self to the trace-track left by different proximal relations.

From the very beginning of the novel, Yudi’s point of view is curiously situated within the third-person narrative-structure. It focalizes large tracts of the story, and is thereby invested with a significant function. The mapping-out of queer spaces and queer experiences follows Yudi’s perspective, right from the start of the novel. His capacity for observation and analysis makes him something of a queer informant for readers, which accounts for the kind of privileged status he enjoys in Bakshi’s reading as one who diagnoses the postcolonial state. Yet, the novel regularly undercuts the same authority that attaches to Yudi’s character. The authority conferred on the character disperses almost simultaneously, mirroring the kind of connection-dispersal

dynamic Yudi sees in casual sex, where “you met someone, became intimate with him for a few hours, or even minutes, and then bid him goodbye—perhaps forever” (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 20).

The convergence-dispersal of Yudi’s authority in the narrative-structure is networked in those moments when the character encounters different men. In the opening scenes in the Churchgate toilets, Yudi navigates the queer section as a regular, employing all the sub-cultural queer codes:

[a]s soon as Yudi stepped in, everyone straightened up and returned to their respective stalls. They wanted to determine if he was a cat or pigeon. Yudi gave them the Indian nod to indicate it was okay; he was a pigeon. Activity resumed instantly, with Yudi joining in as a member of the audience. In no time, the blown came in the blower’s mouth. (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 3)

For the reader, Yudi appears entirely adept with the conventions; the narrative instructs the audience about “cats” and “pigeons” through Yudi’s action, adding to his relative importance in the scene. It is not only Yudi who is “a member of the audience,” but also the readers who focalize the scene through him. As the man orgasms in the mouth of the other, Yudi is surprised to see that “the fellow swallowed it” (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 3). With a blustering authority, he speaks: “‘Idiot, haven’t you heard of HIV?’ he said to the man who was still on his knees” (3). Instead of making an impression, Yudi is rebuffed: “‘[N]othing will happen,’ the chap replied, *waving him away* (3, emphasis added). That Yudi is waved aside by the other man, otherwise a fleeting presence in the work, without even a name, corresponds to the contoured fabric of meeting and dispersal against which unsettling differences are pinned in the novel. Indeed, the dispersal of Yudi’s assumed authority parallels his own temporary removal from the scene: “He came out of the loo, and hung around by the showcases that displayed men’s apparel” (4).

If the anticlimactic, disheartening rebuff can be likened to a falling contour, this does not preclude any further connections, for the narrative favours a dynamic of repeating rising and falling pattern. Yudi leaves the toilet, loiters, returns to the toilet, only to be dissatisfied with the men remaining, comes back out, when he finally runs into Milind, with whom he re-enters the toilet, before taking him home. Yudi's novel-long connection with Milind, developing out of these other scenes of fleeting connections and dispersals, is itself supplemented throughout by particular threads of difference. When he first spots Milind, Yudi is struck by his slim looks, and skin "the colour of Cadbury's chocolate" (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 6).⁷⁹

Yet, relations of proximity, appearing so promising to Yudi, also unsettle him, in the process complicating, while at the same time materializing, difference:

Yudi ... drew closer. The odour of sweat from the young working-class body made his head spin, but then he noticed the lad's feet. The fellow was wearing slippers. The feet were as shapeless as a leper's, like the feet of most men who came to Churchgate. The uncut toenails were pallid. There were cracks on the soles, especially visible around the heels. Yuk, Yudi burped. The boy abruptly moved away. Yudi noticed that he entered the loo ... [and] followed him inside.
(Rao, *The Boyfriend* 7)

Placed beside one another, Yudi and Milind do not relate in a way that immediately places them on par (no fantasy of egalitarian relations here). Yudi recoils from those aspects of Milind's character that clearly define the vastly different status between the two men. Any kind of detached authority claimed by the observing subject—Yudi, that is—is deferred in the kind of

⁷⁹ The language of eroticism follows a structure of consumption here. A noteworthy precedent of such a representational code is to be found in Arundhati Roy's celebrated *The God of Small Things* (1997), in which Velutha, the Dalit object of attraction, has an enviable abdominal musculature described as, "divisions on a slab of chocolate" (Roy, *Small Things* 205).

close juxtaposition of the two men. Yudi cannot but react to Milind's as different; in clearly representing this, the narrative makes him complicit in the hierarchies and inequities he observes. His burp cannot represent any kind of ejecting "disavowal" of the status quo. *His* disgust here does not transcend the values attaching to national hierarchies.

The relations between Yudi and Milind, which already say so much about the particular dynamic of difference animating their networked situation in the novel, also has a distinctly spatial element. Despite his revulsion at Milind's appearance and poor hygiene, Yudi follows him back into the toilet, and later takes him to his mother's temporarily vacant apartment in an upscale part of Mumbai. Location is readily associated with privilege. The "first time he [initiates] a conversation on his own," Milind remarks to Yudi that it is a "posh area" (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 9). Immediately, Yudi grows "apprehensive" (9), worried the other might turn out to be an extortionist, and assures Milind that he himself lives in a downscale suburb "in faraway Nalla Sopara," in much more humble environs (10). The relation drawn between the spaces of the two apartments reflect the kind of connected but rising and falling contours dominating in the novel; they are represented as being closely tied (the mother lives in one, the son in the other; Yudi contrasts the one with the other) and also worlds apart (their respective locations being one such iteration of great distance). Navigating between these spaces is complex, therefore, but it is materialized. Indeed, Milind finds himself in both spaces at different points in the novel.

The connected, contoured diversity represented in the two apartments most closely tied to Yudi's domestic life becomes synonymous with the developing complexities in his relationship with Milind. If rising and falling contours represent the arduous ground of diversity, then this laborious traversal is well reflected in the relationship between the two men. In order to be discreet, and avoid any risk of "blackmail," Yudi blindfolds Milind on this first occasion when

he takes him to the apartment (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 11). The awkwardness of the occasion, in which one man has to hold the other's hand to navigate a way, certainly reflect the difficulties in tracing different relations along a domain that is not levelled-out (11).

Because *The Boyfriend* is a text in which difference is produced and sustained, the blindfold takes on quite a different function than the means of separation and exclusion. Even if, Yudi initially just wants to "ejaculate and give [Milind] the slip" (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 11), the blindfold becomes woven into a different kind of tie between the two men. The initial tie of the blindfold comes to overlap the tie between the sari Yudi wears and Milind's shirt, when, in the middle of the novel, the pair, reunited, have a queered version of a Hindu marriage (107). While it would be easier to reflect the change in relations between the two men by representing one tie morphing into another, this kind of easy transformation to an ideal state of relations is not how the novel imagines the relations between the two men. The diversity reflected in the contoured text means that a ghosted overlap between tie (Milind's blindfold) and tie (Yudi's sari) is the more appropriate conceptual form here. The two lie in the spatialized "beside" imagined by Sedgwick.

On its own terms, Yudi's blindfold functions as a safeguard against exploitation. It also reflects the opposite, of course. For, Yudi is relatively far wealthier and from a more privileged caste-background than a character like Milind. Even before he meets Milind, a keen sense of socio-cultural hierarchies inflects Yudi's entertainment of men: the novel describes the different kinds of music he plays to the different kinds of men he has sex with (Indian classical for "English-speaking professionals"; Western pop music for college students; Bollywood music for the working-classes) (Rao, *Boyfriend* 26-27). This indicates Yudi's close involvement with national hierarchies, not a simple disavowal of them.

If Yudi falls back into a hierarchized attitude to the different Indian men he meets, it is also true that he rises, at times, to a reflexivity about his own privileged status: “Wasn’t he too an exploiter of all the young men he slept with, even if it was they who screwed him,” he wonders (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 59). Indeed, one of the reasons why he feels he is “about to fall in love with” Milind is because “it wasn’t for money that [Milind] did it” (39). And yet, this edification of a romantic relationship in which economic inequality (and, by extension, *any* kind of inequality) seems not to matter, is immediately followed with a hard calculation of difference. Nursing a drink in his apartment, alone, Yudi thinks about a future with Milind:

Could Yudi make Kishore his mate? He weighed the pros and cons. Pros: he was attracted to the boy. Cons: he was semi-literate; was only half his age. The semi-literate bit didn’t worry him...He would locate Kishore, take him out for a beer, and put to him his proposal: would he be his steady? If he refused, he would take him out to a swanky shopping mall, and ask him to choose what he wanted: shirt, trouser, bicycle, pen, shoes, goggles, wristwatch. And then he would repeat his proposal. (39-40)

The narrative makes it clear that Yudi is an avowed agent of the socio-economic order, even if he can be reflexive about it at other times. Yudi can pay, whenever he chooses to. The narrative might blur, or overlap, the divide between exploiter and exploited here (but, which of the two, readers are led to ask, is paying more, and for what?), but the relationship between the two men articulates nevertheless the contoured domain both will have to negotiate throughout the narrative. Yudi’s love—one aspect to his sexual subjectivity—has to traverse a space of signified difference whose settling is always unresolved, deferred.

The indeterminacy written into the relations between the two men is, furthermore, set against the difficulties Yudi then faces in tracking down Milind. A period of time having elapsed since the first and as yet only time he has met Milind, Yudi follows the imprecise address given him to a “Transit Camp” (the signifier contrasts obviously with the built-up, even “posh,” apartments of Yudi and his mother), but cannot find the other man; no-one in the area claims to know Milind (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 40-42). That the area has, in the period since Yudi and Milind first met, suffered some of the worst ravages of the same communal riots that figure in “Landya,” reinforces the gritty material of difference. The clearly-depicted dispersals of the riots—we read of “windows ... like craters on the soot-blackened walls” in an area just cleared of corpses (Rao, *Boyfriend* 41)—are interwoven with the grounded representation of (social and economic) difference between the two men. The connection between the two men drops, just as the notion of an idealized romance. Tellingly, the chapter in which the difficulties Yudi faces in getting to Milind is titled, “Lost...” The ellipsis suggests a falling thread picked up in the next chapter, in which Yudi and Milind meet up and deepen their relations, appropriately titled, “... And Found.”

Yet, what is “found” is, of course, the realm of difference already crafted as the meeting-ground for the two. Even bounded sites throw the difference between Yudi and Milind into relief. Once the two men have reunited in the narrative, Yudi arranges to spend a whole week with Milind. On the day they are to meet, Yudi takes Milind to the Taj hotel where he has to run an unexpected family errand. The scene in the hotel is instructive as it rehearses the contoured dynamic discussed above, while also holding Yudi’s actions to the glare of the unequal network of privilege developing even as the two men develop their relationship. Yudi finds himself with no choice but to take Milind to the hotel. To go alone, Yudi fears, would delay his pre-arranged meeting-time with Milind, cause Milind to abandon plans, leave their meeting-place, and all in

all result in “Yudi’s week [being] ruined” (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 96). Tellingly Yudi’s easy sense of entitlement is reflected in a line in which a weeklong lovers’ rendezvous is described as “Yudi’s week.” Despite Milind’s “frayed” clothing, Yudi leaves him in the hotel lobby with few concerns (97). For one represented in the novel as a keen observer, experienced in the hierarchies operating in the country, Yudi seems oblivious to any possible repercussions of settling a lone, shabbily-dressed person in the lobby of one of Mumbai’s grandest hotels. The meeting with Yudi’s expatriated (NRI, or Non-Resident Indian) relative takes longer, and even though he wonders after Milind almost exclusively during this time, he is largely filled with fantasies of *noblesse oblige*. Taking some of the sandwiches from the hotel room to feed his lover, or “hungry mate,” he asks himself rhetorically: “When, otherwise, would [Milind] ... get to savour Taj food?” (97).

Predictably, Milind has, in the interim, been ejected from the hotel lobby. The ironies of unequal national development is clear when the hotel guard tells him sarcastically that the Taj is “not a refuge for the city’s urchins,” and he’d be better off by the Gateway of India (a colonial-turned-national public monument built on Mumbai’s coastline, and situated just opposite the hotel), where Milind should find “many of [his] kind” (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 98). Clearly, not all Indians may enter any and every Indian gateway. Yudi, as an individual character, is also brought under scrutiny, despite his attempts to distance himself from the event. While he is shocked by the event, and later comforts Milind by buying him a shirt, the narrative is quick to assert that Yudi does so “to assuage his own guilt by making it up to his wretched friend,” and he knows it (98). More subtly, Yudi’s self-assured, self-contained, subject-position is displaced even at the very moment he realizes Milind is no longer in the lobby. At this point, the narrative situates Milind on the other side of the road, silent and unmoving, a departure from the many

traversals in the narrative. Spotting him, Yudi tries to wave him back over, but “[a]lthough Milind notice[s] him, he [does not] budge” (97-98). Ultimately, Yudi has to cross the road to reach the other man.

Milind’s steadfast refusal to move contrasts with Yudi’s feeling that Milind is more apt to slip away than remain in his company. Indeed, his first reaction to finding Milind absent from the lobby is that Milind has left because “he didn’t really want to go to Nalla Sopara” (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 97). In this case, Milind’s refusal to move is a foil to Yudi’s assessment of the other man, exposing furthermore Yudi’s self-centredness. More significantly, however, Milind’s defiant presence in this scene is exactly that proximate, but unsettled, presence of the other, the contoured link with which entity destabilizes Yudi’s subject-position, adding to the deconstruction of any fantasies of idealized, egalitarian relations. It is no wonder that this contoured relation is marked spatially in the narrative by the “busy street” Yudi has to cross “much against his will,” to reach Milind and his “horror story” of being grabbed “grabbed by the collars and hurled out the glass doors” (98).

Even in describing the temporarily unmoved Milind in this scene, the narrative deploys difficult traversals, with a decidedly spatial dimension, to delineate the network of relations between two very different men. For all Yudi’s attempts to make a definite connection with Milind, including a queered version of an Indian marriage ceremony held in private in the Nalla Sopara apartment, the narrative frustrates and defers any such settlement. Any link between the two men is simultaneously a faultline. The more the two men are in each other’s company, the sharper the contrast between their respective backgrounds (of privilege and poverty). Yudi, who earlier claims to himself that Milind’s “semi-literate” outlook on life does not trouble him, is in fact only too keen to bore facts and history-lessons into Milind. Literally and symbolically, the

terrain the two traverse is fraught with unsettled contours. This is so on the trip they make to Shravanabelagola, the site of a famous Jain statue, rich in historical and cultural details (as far as Yudi is concerned). During the train-ride, Yudi disturbs Milind's sleep to show him different sights in an effort to educate him, largely oblivious to Milind's tired "protests," the latter having spent a restless night exacerbated by Yudi's insistence on leaving open a window letting in cold air that Milind repeatedly tries to shut out (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 120-121). Throughout the trip, Yudi, in the mode of the nationalist elite, attempts to instruct Milind in the historical contexts of the site, particularly Jainism. A clearly developmentalist hierarchy—Yudi the upper-caste, -class instructor; Milind the "Dalit," working-class yokel—is represented, implicating Yudi, but also simultaneously brought under erasure, in Milind's resisting persona. While Milind makes it clear he is not interested in a national history lesson from Yudi, he is also quick to tick Yudi off when the latter trying to "say something lighter," makes "provocative statements" about the glories of male nudity represented in the statue (126). However awed Milind's might be to elements of high-culture and sacral traditions he does not care to be instructed in, he interrupts Yudi's agency and tells him to stop talking "rubbish" (126). In response, Yudi falls back into national stereotypes; "not accustomed to being snubbed," he snaps back at Milind: "I talk rubbish because I'm educated [while] ... you illiterates are slaves" (126).

For all his theory about how a shared sexual identity erases caste- and class-hierarchies (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 81-82), Yudi cannot outpace, nor disavow, his desire to instruct and improve Milind, a desire entirely framed by the national privileges that have attached to his kind. In the hotel room, later, "driven to desperation by Yudi's haranguing (lectures, lecture, more lectures), his ego shattered," Milind slams his fist down on Yudi's shoulders, but only after Yudi, never "the one to take heed of a warning," ignores Milind's call that he "shut up" (128-129). Yet,

this literally falling blow does not destroy the relationship; the two patch things up the day after, in fact. What it *does* achieve, however, is the deconstruction of Yudi's subject-position.

The narrative of *The Boyfriend* develops the relations between different men to destabilize different aspects of the national status quo. Certainly, the visibility of queer desire between the two men (for all their arguments, Yudi and Milind do have sex, hold hands, go to underground gay bars) undercuts the heteronormativity that Yudi, especially, labours under (having a mother who wants him to marry; being friends with Gauri, who wishes he would marry her despite her knowledge that he desires men). However, the visibility of queer difference simultaneously places any narrative of homologous relations (the symmetry of two men loving each other) under erasure by opening up all of the other differences between Yudi and Milind. To make visible—that is, to de-transcendentalize an entity into the processes of signification—is to deconstruct.

Indeed, Yudi's point of view gets undercut in practically all of the conversations between him and Milind represented—or, made visible—in the text. On their first meeting, Yudi plays on the incongruence between Milind's surname, "Mahadik," and his relatively small penis (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 16).⁸⁰ Milind, not quite as fluent with the sexual innuendo as Yudi, nevertheless knows enough to bring him down to size and challenge him, "with a hard, defiant look," about messing with his surname (16). Milind recalls this later (99); the trace-track of his critique remains in the narrative. At other times, he is bored of Yudi's lectures, yawning them off (126); as discussed, at other times he is moved to rage at the incessant re-articulation of Yudi's point of view, by his "lectures." His Dalit dare, challenging the upper-caste Yudi to eat off his plate as a

⁸⁰ "Maha," meaning "big" is often used as a prefix in Hindi to denote a superlative: for example, "Maharaja" is, literally, "great king". Yudi, mingling Hindi and English forms, applies the logic to Milind's surname.

test of the latter's caste-free vision of queer love (81), is undercut by the repeated revulsion Yudi feels at Milind's messy habit of chewing tobacco (105; 141).

The critical perspective offered by the narrative through Milind's character recurs, therefore, and echoes the multiple points in the plot at which he re-appears in Yudi's life (after about a year of relations, Milind leaves Yudi for six months, tired of Yudi's "machinations" and his own struggles to find work [Rao, *The Boyfriend* 184]; away from Yudi, he is engaged as a model and sex-worker, but the work, while lucrative, is exploitative and leaves Milind vulnerable to sexual abuse; he re-appears only to tell Yudi he is getting married [210]; after a period of three years, he re-appears in Yudi's life as a married man facing financial difficulties, willing to give favours for money [226]). The recurrent pattern is unsettling like a busy, rising-and-falling contour is to any domain. Milind's reappearances also carry with them the destabilizing quality of deferral that any kind of repetition entails. The more the presence of Milind, the less Yudi's chances of finding the kind of "steady" *he* desires. His own subject-position and his own terms cannot be sustained. Yet, this curiously paced and spaced relationship carries on in the narrative, and even beyond it. By placing Milind's plane of existence *beside* Yudi but in a dis/continuous way, the narrative subverts the stable dualisms inherent to those national hierarchies of privilege in which Yudi himself is implicated.

In the final section of the narrative, when Yudi speaks to Gauri ironically of the "perfect arrangement" (Rao, *The Boyfriend* 232) of relations, in which the presence of the boyfriend is not a stable constant, but rather an intermittent reoccurrence, the destabilized, contoured, networked domain of an *interrelationship* is foregrounded. Neither of the two men can fully dominate or escape the other. For all his subversion of Yudi, Milind is, by virtue of his continuing financial difficulties, connected up with those unequal circumstances Yudi embodies.

Any normative status he has gained as a man married to a woman has to contend with his recurrent relations to Yudi. In agreeing to Milind's terms, Yudi must also accept the extent to which his continuing identification with unequal social and economic privilege has not erased the differences between the two men. When Gauri reminds him that a certain pattern, however, imperfect, is repeating itself—"your boyfriend is back and you should rejoice [and] look forward to your next meeting...if you must" (231)—Yudi is led to an acceptance of a diversified scenario in which another man is connected, but not entirely bound, to him.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

“You know, somewhere between five million years ago and twenty million years ago, there [were] nice Sunday-morning churchgoing chimpanzees [who] went down the road and some little kid broke away.... I’m simplifying the story, but in essence it’s true, and they, by physique and temperament, did different things. Actually they faced a great crisis at that time.... That’s how they came to stand upright ... to use their hands rather than their mouths.... The ones among them who were clever at that were the ones who survived, and they are our ancestors.”

Jacob Bronowski, in conversation with Michael Parkinson (1974)

Jacob Bronowski’s pithy and humorous delineation of human evolution seems oddly situated in a dissertation project so steadfastly interested in shifting attention away from the linear logics of “origin” and “telos.” However, Bronowski’s application of “difference” signals also a radical indeterminacy about the sequential evolutionary lineage from beginning (“ancestors”) to end (“some little kid”). An element of spreading spatiality plays a role in the ruffling of order imagined by Bronowski. Stepping away from the “road” is a lateral mode of traversal and doing things differently cannot ultimately be reducible to where things began, nor does any such traversal appear to have had much of a pre-planned idea of, or direction to, where and how things have finally ended up.

Imagining indeterminacy as the engine of some kind of spreading change is very much in keeping with the spirit of the readings in the last two chapters of this dissertation. The open-ended possibilities of difference demonstrate one form of resisting narrow, firmly delineated channels in favour of a more spacious, pluralized network. The linear narrative of Indian

nationalism involves a well-articulated notion of the past (India's "*ancient* palimpsest") as well as a clearly defined notion of an Indian future in which the "territorial integrity" (and, by extension, demographic integrity) of the country is indivisible and transcends any critiques of how this national unity is signified and not simply pre-determined.

Yet, for Indian antiquity to remain relevant to the maintenance of a stable territorial-hegemonic national unit, the narrative of nationalism has had to articulate a densely-imagined vision of difference or diversity in Indian space and across Indian time: "unity-in-diversity," in other words. Caste, class, and communal identities are principal vectors of difference co-opted into this ideation of a secular unit. Difference here is used, paradoxically, to entrench a monocular standard of an ideal national subject-position, the basis of a national identity between different Indians living together. It follows that to be different, in the model, is *not* to be wayward, or in any way lateral-minded.

Queer movements foreground the issue of a wayward difference. They do so not merely by shedding light on the damaging historical and continuing deployment of homophobic discourse (in the Indian context, the legal agency granted to Section 377 represents just such a continuous deployment, straddling colonial and postcolonial eras), but also by extending their scope beyond the assimilation of sex- and gender-difference as subsets of any national category. This is clearly the direction taken by the scholars like Narrain and Bhan, and Nivedita Menon, among others, as they map out the queer Indian movement. As discussed in the Introduction, the queer Indian movement travels beyond the conceptual horizon of scholars, such as Vanita and Kidwai, who seek to fold sex- and gender-difference into the language of a settled, not too wayward, plurality. The former is, as we have seen, indelibly marked by nationalism as a domesticated model, appropriate for the "noble mansion" of India.

Yet, queer difference, especially in its manifestations in the Indian contemporary, does not dematerialize links with/in the heteronormative status quo. Some of the most persuasive conceptions of queer difference retrace rather a different kind of relation with the settled enclosures of (hetero)normative states of being and identification. This linkage is akin to the kind of relationship that deconstruction sees in the trace of difference in any signified entity within a hermeneutic context in which the final meaning of anything is no longer absolute, transcendently fixed, pre-ordained, or above scrutiny. It is this anti-essentialism that allows queerness to interrogate the superior status of the heterosexual “normal” (recalling Menon), by displacing, or deferring, the transcendentalized value of the norm into the contingent realm of social construction.

This anti-essentialism means, furthermore, that theoretical understandings of queerness do not settle for enclosures of queer identity, an idealized category of difference to replace the old identity produced by homophobic discourse. One set of binaries is not replaced by another. Such an impulse indicates an interest in the radical potential in plurality, which relates to an interest in foregrounding the irreducibility of difference. A difference pluralized supplements any queer destabilizations of norms and, by extension, the subjects and identities produced by those norms. To differ, by deferring any consent to the transcendental logic of norms, is to favour heterogeneity over a managed national diversity. This heterogeneity enables a porosity through which different relations travel and spread. It enables another kind of approach to how entities placed in proximity to one another—as national subject, for instance—might relate to one another without servicing the teleological/transcendental “noble mansion” (the qualifier, “noble,” quite easily suggests the rising-reaching qualities inherent to both *telos* and transcendence).

This kind of radical, spreading heterogeneity, which does not readily resolve itself, forms the substance of the primary texts produced out of the broad, still-emerging queer movement in India. Literary imaginings of queer Indian plurality, as shown in both preceding chapters, reward the critical reader interested in laterality over linearity by providing the material resources for queer readings of queer difference. In Dattani and Rao, the kinds of spaces and the variegated characters traversing and inhabiting them speak always of difference: not only queer difference (i.e., principally to do with sexuality and gender), but also those other differences in caste, class, and communal-background so firmly lodged in the land inherited by the Indian nation-state. If national categories of difference are penetrated by the as-yet unresolved (at least, as far as legal status is concerned) category of queerness, then the reverse is also the case in the kinds of scenarios represented in the literature. The domain becomes radically heterogeneous when the multiple networks of relations that travel in odd, non-linear, unresolved ways become subjects of reading exercises. The previous chapters have developed some pathways into these ways, the viable presence of which speaks to the textual production of difference underlying the novels, short stories, and plays analyzed.

The hegemonic sway of settled difference in the “idea of India” means that radical readings of heterogeneity must work against any potential future domestication or disciplining of queerness in India into a new Indian “homonormativity” (following Jasbir K. Puar’s terminology delineating the deployment of newly-normalized non-heterosexual identities by the American nation-state in a global arena of Northern/Western capitalist exploitation, and related wars of ideology and domination). In the Indian context, that potential homonormativity might well coalesce around the question of same-sex marriage, and the fantasies of settled, domesticated

relations it holds, not to mention the “egalitarian,” “pacific” (recalling Sedgwick) relations between people any idealization of marriage references by default.

It is telling that Ruth Vanita has devoted an entire monograph (*Love’s Rite* [2005]) on the potential for same-sex marriage within tradition Indian (largely, Hindu) rituals and practices. The gay writer, Sandip Roy—long expatriated but now back in India—speaks uncritically of a possible future in which India may not necessarily “grasp” gay or queer rights but may well have accepted same-sex marriage:

As same-sex marriage becomes more and more commonplace around the world, that old coming out line is going to inevitably feel out-of-date. India might be a conservative country but if it understands anything, it understands marriage. That might just extend even to same-sex marriage one day. At least he married someone, thank goodness. I imagine one day a classified ad in the Sunday paper or on one of the matrimonial websites like Shaadi.com will read:

Hindu very well-established Kolkata family invites professional match for son, 32, 5’9”, MBA, Senior Executive in Fortune 500 company. Prospective grooms encouraged to reply in confidence with complete bio-data and returnable photo. Must be professional, under 30, caste no bar.

Stay tuned for the first gay arranged marriage. And the modular kitchen salesman who will say with a knowing smile, “No madam? What about a sir then?” (S. Roy “Gay in Modern India” telegraph.co.uk)

Roy imagines Indian traditions (Indian antiquity, in other words) “extended” into a “commonplace,” globalized, homonormative Indian modernity, where the “modular kitchen” becomes synonymous with modular identities, capitalist enterprise (“Fortune 500 company”) and

consumer culture, all held together by a “conservative country,” where relations are still “arranged” by the subject’s biological (birth) and ideological (national) “family.” As a vision of the future, this is far removed from radical heterogeneity and the kind of representations of difference found in the primary texts. A model subject, like the gay groom in the utopian advertisement, would traffic, in an untrammelled way, in existing hierarchical privileges, without even acknowledging the presence of anyone who is not Hindu, urban, and rich. The search for a “sir,” then, becomes a like-for-like imagining, which has nothing of difference to it. But the gay man would definitively be *settled* by then. Roy’s model erases even lip-service to diversity, so little does sexual difference matter in this homonormative nightmare of consent.

Enfolding the issue of difference into a national model participates, then, in all of the elisions and exclusions of that model. The texts read in this dissertation spread difference across spaces, planes (*Muggy Night*), networks (“The Reading”), and even literary forms (“Confessions” and “Landya”). The plurality of spaces and network of relations imagined by Foucault in his theory of “heterotopia” has aided analyses of texts like “The Reading.” Networks suggests heterogeneity, Foucault argues, and the spatialized forms of queer thought enabled by Sedgwick and others enable the connection between heterogeneity (difference) and anti-essentialism (in deconstruction theory, *différance*). The complex dynamic of relations which move but not in a straightforward line to a straightforward end is the particular mobility of laterality away from steady dialectics of binary oppositions and encounters. Other well-known theoretical iterations of this kind of spread-work can be found in Deleuze and Guattari’s “rhizomatic” thinking. In different ways, all of these theories do not merely suggest a reorganization of our conceptions of spatial order, but also an alteration of how human existence on these spaces are ordered. “Rhizomatics” work away from the linear, binary logic, and do not

rely on a central spine, or what the pair call the “tap-root” (5) in order to function. If identities depend on a family of relations to a centre—origins and/or destination—then any kind of “recognition” (recalling Fraser) must resolve in accordance to it.

Fraser, among others, points the critical reader to some of the limits of “recognition” as a resolution of different human experiences. In the Indian context, the “recognition” of “all” Indians within an ideological-spatial structure (the “noble mansion” or the “tap-root”) is a theory with increasingly limited application. The making-visible of queer Indians by Dattani and Rao is one instance of variegation—spreading-out—or differentiation from a central structure that has no way of recognizing queerness. On the other hand, the making-visible of queer Indians signals a multiplicity of different relationships even between different queers that spreads even more resolutely to the side of any kind of centralized structure. There is, then, no settled domain for this pluralization, but there *is* a heterogeneous domain, contoured in the process of spreading out networks between different Indians. The latter domain is a mobile domain, but not the steady, developing one oriented to the needs of any centralized structure.

This kind of mobility in which nothing is settled—as is literally the case in all of the narratives represented in the primary texts—means that the domain of the identifying self, recognizing itself and (its relation to) others within a certain structure (whether the nation-state or a sexual category) is also made irreducibly heterogeneous when it enters into relations with others. This indeterminacy with regard to who and how one may *be* in relation with all of the others one lives with and/or desires relates to the multifarious ways difference is produced in the texts read here.

The readings in this dissertation seek to carry forward the work done by scholars working on queer diasporas. While diasporic texts do not form the subject-matter of this project, critiques

of South Asian national heteronormativity found a launching-pad in the work of scholars like Gayatri Gopinath. Gopinath reminds readers that the relationship between nation and diaspora need not be one in which the latter buttresses the heteronormative structures of the “original” home. For, as she observes, a “concept of a queer diaspora enables a simultaneous critique of heterosexuality and the nation form while exploding the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy” (11). This dissertation has refocused related kinds of queer critique, but as occurring within a nation-space made radically, irreducibly, plural: in its readings, this project has engaged in another sort of dispersal of settled orders.

The existing and expanding corpus of queer literary and cultural texts from contemporary India allow for expanding the insights developed in the previous chapters. Both Dattani’s and Rao’s *oeuvres* are greater than the texts selected here, and the readings of those would yield as much as this project has, at least for this author. Rao’s development of “Confessions” into a second novel is one clear area of developing readings, as are his collection of short poems, from the chapbook *Bomgay*. Dattani is prolific as a playwright, and ideas developed in Chapter Two would have wider applicability, especially given the pluralizing, anti-essentialist, spatially dense representations in many of his existing works. While this project has focused on queer male relations and subject-positions, the representations of difference in queer female domains will no doubt yield fresh angles to the pluralization of spaces and peoples making up the compound, “queer India.”

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Appendix

Appendix A: The “open-ended register”

The following is an expanded quotation from Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan’s Introduction to *Because I Have a Voice*. The passage includes what Narrain and Bhan describe as the “open-ended register” of queer Indian subject- and identity-positions. Readers will note the particular ramifications of class- and lingual-difference in the range of groups referenced below.

“If one were to compile an open-ended register which would reflect some of the diverse practices that come under the political project of ‘queer,’ the list would minimally include:

- The Hijras: As a community, they represent an existing Indian tradition which clearly contests any hetero-normative understandings of gender, sexuality and the body. Hijras include men who go in for hormonal treatment, those who undergo sex-change operations and those who are born as hermaphrodites. The community has its own culture and ways of living, including its own festivals and gods and goddesses. Hijras divide themselves into *gharanas* or houses and the strength of the hijra community lies in its close-knit relations, their sole source of support against the social ostracism they face in mainstream society ...
- The Kothis: The kothi is a feminised male identity, which is adopted by some people in the Indian subcontinent and is marked by gender non-conformity. A kothi, though biologically male, adopts feminine modes of dressing, speech and behaviour and would look for a male partner who performs masculine modes of behaviour, speech and dress. Most kothis also

identify as non-English speaking and coming from middle, lower-income, and working-class backgrounds ...

- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Communities (LGBT): Nearly all urban centres in India have large and diverse communities of men and women who identify as being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. The use of the abbreviation LGBT is largely restricted to urban, English-speaking, middle- and upper-middle-class men and women.
- In addition, each region of India has traditional identities that are based on practices of gender and sexual non-conformity, such as the *jogappas* and *jogtas* in North Karnataka and Maharashtra, or the *shivshaktsis* and *ganacharis* in parts of South India.... There are many more gender- and sexuality-based identities in India today, and the categories are part of merely an illustrative, and in no way exhaustive, list.” (Narain and Bhan, “Introduction” 5)