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What is This?
Queer Blogging in Indian Digital Diasporas

A Dialogic Encounter

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Queering and transgendering practices have been visible across the Internet since the time of multiuser domains (MUDs), MUD object oriented domains (MOOs), e-mail lists, and Web bulletins. This article maps some themes of queering in the Indian digital diaspora through an intergenerational lens, produced in the acts of online and offline coauthoring, weblogging, and reading of instances of such online queering relationally. By way of a dialogic encounter on their own blogs and employing performative writing that simulates the blogsphere, the authors look at the interplay of codes of identity through the employment of themes, language, symbols, and cultural influences in their writing. Examining the themes emerging from the specific blogs they study, the authors ask how power is shifted and relayered in these articulations and what the inviting interactional features of their writer-audience communities are that allow for certain kinds of self-expression while also shaping their performance of sexuality in these spaces.

Keywords: queer blogs; GLBT; gay Indian movement; queer new media

Cyberdiva live posts on her blog,
writing relationally—reading relationally
writing relationally
would mean writing
in relation
to
reading relationally
would mean reading
in relation to

Authors’ Note: In this article, we intersperse performative blogging with our analysis. To emphasize the blog dialogue, we refer to ourselves in the blog excerpts using our blogger names, Cyberdiva live and Livinghigh. We would like to thank the anonymous reviews of this article and the editor of the journal for their invaluable help and suggestions in the shaping of this article.
we always do that
but to be actively doing that in reading blogs . . .
only infrequently is there something I relate
to
Posted at 01:59 pm | by cyberdivalive

Comments
Livinghigh responds:
relationally speaking . . .
reading/writing “relationally to” . . . that is what alcoff (1991) suggests: speaking TO and not FOR/ABOUT the “other” . . . and i think that we’re on the right track here. we’re all voyeurs here, reading . . . but as we read, we also write here, hence as an active participant in the reading, reporting and writing parts, i act as a participative cog in the relational wheel. you and i are not trying to “explain” or “give voice” to the blogs we’ve interacted with; instead, we speak “in relation to” them and each other. a good start, methinks.
Posted on Mar. 23rd, 2008 12:42 am (UTC) | by livinghigh

Queering and transgendering practices have been visible across the Internet since the time of multiuser domains (MUDs), MUD object oriented domains (MOOs), e-mail lists, and Web bulletins. As noted communication scholar Larry Gross suggests, the Internet, within limits, permits those of us with access to the technology to make choices in how we present ourselves. In responding to the question of why the Internet can be viewed as “somehow queer,” he writes,

Well, for one thing, there’s the disembodied performativity of cyberspace, the place where no one knows you’re a dog, or whatever you choose to present yourself as. Queer folk are past masters at this game, as nearly every one of us went through the training program during childhood. Even if we weren’t singled out for special (unwelcome) attention as sissies, tomboys or other gender non-conformists, most of us survived society’s sexual boot camp—high school—either by masquerading and passing, or living on the margins. (Gross, 2007, p. vii)

South Asian digital presences likewise have been visible since the early days of the Internet (Rai, 1995; Sudha, 1993). Meaning making within these intersects with offline communities and global formations shaped through transnational flows of capital and media and through convergence with other forms of media such as satellite TV, Bollywood films, and so on. 3-D game-like environments such as Secondlife also contribute to this queering in the current Web 2.0 generation of South Asian digital diasporas. This article examines specific instances of queering in the Indian digital diaspora through an intergenerational lens, produced in the acts of online-offline coauthoring, Weblogging, and reading of instances of such online queering relationally. We specifically focus on textual analysis and thinking through of themes that
emerge for us through an in-depth examination of some of the blogs written by queer South Asian (mainly Indian and some Pakistani) men and women.

Scholarly material focused specifically on both queer blogging as well as negotiation of online queer Indian identity is scant, even as there are several postcolonial queer theorists who examine queer diasporas from South Asia (Gopinath, 2005; Puar, 2002). Williams (2007) and Rak (2005) are some of the few scholars who have examined the issue of queer representation in blogs—but even their studies deal only with American-identified queer bloggers. In many ways, the issues of identity representation and reach are truer for blogging than for any other Internet tool (Rak, 2005; Williams, 2007), and so the lack of study of queer South Asian blogs is a gaping void for both queer theory and South Asian studies. Through a dialogic encounter on our own blogs and employing performative writing that simulates the blogosphere, we look at the interplay of codes of identity (the bloggers’ sense of being Indian and queer) through the employment of themes, language, symbols, and cultural influences in their writing.

Of particular significance for this article is how important the label of “gay/lesbian blog” is for these bloggers, what practices they code as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) and/or South Asian through their writing, and how the practice of blogging serves to interconnect different nodes of queer blogging into a cluster of meaning in the Indian digital diasporic scene. Although we move away from earlier queer Internet research claims and analyses of GLBT virtual community formation, we do note how the interconnected nodal nature of online blogging is relational and allows for discursive material and online-offline formations of meaning making around what it means to be Indian or “desi” and “gay/lesbian/bi” in transnational spaces. Thus, it is not just the blogger who creates meaning but also the reader and the commenter of the blog who interprets the posted material and suggests contested meanings for it. There may not be a cohesive community being formed in this space, therefore, but the webbed interpretation is suggestive of a much larger macro picture than the original individual blogger might have laid ground for.

From the early Internet scholarly narrations of gay and lesbian virtual communities and coming out spaces online (Alexander, 2002; Heinz, Gu, Inuzuka, & Zender, 2002) to the observations of how transgendering and queering happens through mobile cultures (see Berry, Martin, & Yue, 2003), as well as critical cybercultural examinations of various intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality online (see O’Riordan & Phillips, 2007), the notion that online spaces somehow offer up zones for queer articulation seems unquestioned. In this article, rather than reiterate and celebrate the presence of GLBT Indians online in an implicit celebration of the Internet as a liberator of all oppressed populations, we focus on an examination of how these presences are manifested in blog spaces. Thus, our method of writing this article and conducting our research examines blogging as situated practice—at radically varying contextual disjunctural and conjunctural online-offline intersections. Hence, our performative presentation of this article comes into play.
This article juxtaposes traditional academic writing with the blogging schemata to be found online. Our dialogue is thus intergenerational and interspatial. Many of the posts presented in this article are extracts from our own blogs, where we simultaneously discuss examples and theorize on South Asian queer blogging. In order to give an idea of the fluid dynamism of the blogging environment and the crucial importance of the reader and commenter (and not just the blog writer), our blog dialogue has been not just through individual posts in our distinct blogs but also via comments and suggestions on each others’ blogs, leading to connected postings on the parent blogs. All the third-party blogs discussed and cited in this study are open to read for everyone on the Internet. We have referred to them either through the names of the blogs or through the blogger profile names and underlined the references to indicate hyperlinks of an online environment. Thus, the blogs we draw from are those by Closetalk, Kris, DeviantChick, Mike-higher, JerryMumbai, Men I Like, Livingsmile, Hanuman, VenialSin, Uberhomme, and DeviantCore.

Our reading of these blogs is based on the premise that queer bloggers negotiate unequal power relations online as well as offline. By blogging, they have not somehow transported into a “virtual reality” that releases them from social, economic, political, material, and discursive hierarchies. Instead, in examining the themes emerging from the blogs we study, we ask how power is shifted and relayered in these articulations. We also take a close look at the inviting interactional features of their writer-audience communities to see which of these features seem to allow for certain kinds of self-expression as their performance of sexuality in these spaces is simultaneously contained and released through such features and relational contexts. At stake here is, as Alcoff (1991) notes, the bearing of location on meaning and truth and the importance of “speaking to” and “speaking with” rather than “speaking for” or “listening to” the queer South Asian blogspace. Hence, in this piece we attempt to situate discourse “as an event, which includes, words, hearers, location, language, and so on” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 26). Even as we play the role of the “native informant” (Gajjala, 2004; Wood, 2004), our goal is to produce a discourse or conversation of our own that encourages difference.

As we examine the blogs we also take a look at how new media and the Internet have affected the historical progress of the modern queer movement in India and its future challenges. We look at the dichotomy between the person (or body) and the practice, through an examination of the bloggers’ reaction against the operation of institutional power that privileges heterosexism. Thus, we examine how the negotiation of both online and offline contexts, in the instances discussed, is specific to the experience of the bloggers in South Asian digital diasporas.

Queer Indian and New Media

Researchers in the field that has come to be known as postcolonial studies have noted the ways in which nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms have relied on
the role of the ideal woman as cultural icon. Through such framings of the ideal woman and the ideal man within postcolonial Indian nationalist discourse, there is a clear privileging of a modernized heteronormativity situated in class or caste privilege that further moves nonheteronormative practices into the margins of society. Within such a framing, any queer identity would be considered outside the mainstream. However, with the increasing visibility (albeit still marginalized) of GLBT identities and enhanced transnational purchasing power, multicultural queer identities and groupings become visible to the mainstream. Furthermore, the increasing Western academic interest in the study of GLBT identities across the world has led to academics searching for nonheteronormative indigenous groups such as the “hijras” in India (see Reddy, 2005) and the “kathoeys” in Thailand (see Enteen, 1999). However, even as there are communities of support and communication forming in Westernized and transnational spaces around GLBT lives, they face both racism and homophobia within the host communities, while they are not accepted within the mainstream of the diasporic contexts into which they migrate. This is implied in the blog post by Livinghigh (one of the coauthors of this article) as he quotes blogger Closetalk, who in turn mentions another blog, Engayging Life.

From Livinghigh’s blog post

One of my favorite blog posts from a long, long time ago, courtesy of Closetalk’s blog.
mood: curious

This one is actually going to be about gay blogging, and not just me spewing out crap about my erratic and erotic escapades (though some would say, that’s what I do best.). Indian gay blogging, to be precise. I’ve always wanted to find out some guys in India who blog about their homosexuality, whether openly or from within a closet, and I found a couple of them, the other day.

My favourite is Kris’, to which I’ve added a link on the right hand side. Kris is a gay doctor somewhere in Bombay, who saves lives by day and dreams of men by night. Wow—a hot Baywatch hunk gone gay? hehehe. I wish! (which doesn’t mean that he’s not, of course . . . !) The reason I like Kris’ posts? They’re amazingly easy: they’re about a life, and the fact that he’s gay is not the be-all and end-all. There’s no sermonizing about gay people—and that’s great. In the last few days, I’ve come across a couple of gay blogs which are full of activism—and it simply leaves me cold.

And that begs an explanation. The critics would slam me for being a “bad” gay person: I stay behind the closet, I write trivialities about my gay sex (and otherwise) life, and I try to stay as noncerebral as possible. I love the feeling of being unattached. I love the feeling of being independent. I hate to stand up for (and this demands capital letters) Gay Rights. I’m an awful (awful!) person.

That’s one way of looking at it. ;-) 

But I love the idea of meeting up people who talk about their gay lives online. It’s a thrill, perhaps. Something like being a voyeur. Something also like seeing a mirror reflection. A gay person in another situation, in another city perhaps, talking about . . .
Balderdash!
I can’t explain it. I just love it. Sheesh! This is the last time I try to be all profound. Will stick to the sensational stuff from now on! Harrrrrrmmmph!

Tags: blah blah

Posted at 02:22 pm / by Livinghigh

The post here illuminates some of the complexities involved in queer blogging and the search for similar “others.”

The notion of a homogenous gay identity has been critiqued by Laurent (2005) while reviewing the modern gay movements across Asia. For him, an important question that has to be considered is the existence—or not—of “Asian identities” or of an “Asian model” as far as LGBT issues are concerned, and which could be thought of as in opposition—or not—to “Western identities” or a “Western model.” (pp. 164-165)

Erni (2003) also calls for an “alternative logic” to Western notions of queer, and he argues that queer Asian youth may have found something of the sort through their dialogic encounters online. The questions we examine came to us through a lecture series we attended, that we connected to the queer Indian bloggers’ scenario, as explained in the blog post by Livinghigh below.

Starting With Questions
mood: artistic

So there was an interesting seminar this morning (technically yesterday, given that its 2-something-am already), following up on yesterday’s performance. Dr. Johnson said some very interesting things that I took note of, which I think are pertinent to the blog project.

- The import of “institutional power” within the realm of homophobia: everyone’s homophobia or heteronormativity doesn’t have the same meaning or the same strength; some are stronger than others, depending on the weight of institutional power behind them. Where is the power manifest in the blogsphere—or is the blogsphere a reaction to the “institutional power” in the real world? By writing these blogs, are South Asian queer writers appropriating that “power” for themselves? A reflective question: do I not feel powerful when I write? Do I not feel . . . uninterrupted?

- The “framing” of situations and the inherent “negotiation” of spaces: This seems to be following up on the idea of “institutional power” and the reaction(s) to it. . . . Depending on how I frame my situation and the message I try to get across, I shape (or attempt to do so) the discourse. How successful am I . . . or the South Asian queer bloggers? How do we/I negotiate our space in cyberspace? The cyberspace is already rife with discourse on sexuality. . . . Does this constitute a difference?
The presence of “strategic silence”: successful framing and negotiation demands this. How do the queer South Asian blogs maintain their simultaneous flow of narrative and silence? Everything is only partially revealed, everything is held up only for partial review, perhaps that is why everything is so . . . tantalizing.

Tags: blah blah, nerdland, practical classroom

Posted at 02:14 am / by livinghigh

But why blog?

cyberdivalive

2008-03-21 05:51 pm UTC (link)

of course—me being from an older generation—I will ask—why blog?

(Reply to this)

Before examining the issue of institutional power and the negotiations of queer blogging, it is necessary to contextualize the blogging by noting the course of the modern gay movement in India. Drawing on Partha Chatterjee’s (2002) notions of “civil society” and “political society,” Narrain (2007) notes that

the abstract figure of the citizen has to have a specific character so as to be deserving of rights . . . queer relationships stand excluded from the very framework of civil rights. For all practical purposes, the queer person is invisible in the entire discourse on citizenship rights. (pp. 62-63)

To understand the implications of this invisibility, we may refer to Bacchetta (2002), who examines the role of NGOs, traditional anthropological studies, and online representations of the Indian queer community.

Furthermore, as scholars studying gender and sexuality have argued, the institutions of family and marriage are exclusionary. For instance, Narrain (2007) and Khan (2001) observe that “the construction of patriarchal social systems, the enforcement of compulsory marriage, and the necessity of producing male heirs has created a pattern of destruction, marginalization and denial concerning alternate frameworks of sexualities and their histories in India” (Khan, 2001, p. 109).

The first semblance of queer Indian organization can be traced to the 1991 Naz Project, located in London, which established a presence in New Delhi, India, through its sister group the Naz Foundation, only in 1996. Although the country’s first gay magazine Bombay Dost (Bombay Friend) appeared back in 1990, the early queer movement seems to have been largely spearheaded by the queer Indian diaspora in North America and Europe (Khan, 2001; Roy, 2003). Trikone (1986) magazine catered to South Asian gay men and lesbians in the United States, whereas Shakti (strength) was set up in London and Khush (gay/happy) in Toronto (both have had Web presences since the early 90s). Prominent among the GLBT organizations that later sprang up in India during the 1980s and 1990s were the Humsafar Trust,
the Delhi Group, Sakhi, and Gay Bombay. Roy (2003) notes how essential new media and the Internet were (and continue to be) to these groups: first in appropriating ideas for the queer movement in its most basic avatar from North America and Europe and then later for organizational purposes. His analysis shows the construction of a “safe space” for both Indian gay men and lesbians online, at a time when offline or real contact between Indian queers for nonsexual purposes was deemed largely unimaginable. At the same time, his examination reveals an Othering in terms of access, contacts, and so on, in line with the observation of various scholars that new media also become a site of exclusion (Gajjala, Rybas, & Altman, in press; Marvin, 1988; Slack, 1989).

Furthermore, scholars studying queer formations in India have expressed several concerns regarding the implications and future course of the queer movement in India. For instance, noting the experience of the transgendered “hijras” and “kothis” (who were possibly the only clearly visible Indian queer community but were deemed “illegal” by colonial law), Narrain (2007) asks what implications their appropriation of this negative visibility has for the modern queer movement, which needs to overcome class barriers going ahead. On a similar note, for Roy (2003),

the concern is not whether the internet is a tool for a global homogenized gay movement; rather, the question that should be raised is whether the internet is becoming the only tool (or the most convenient one) for building a gay movement in different parts of the world. (p. 196)

Indeed, this should be read with those concerns raised by postcolonial theorist Gayathri Spivak (2002) when she writes that “the invasion of unmediated so-called cyberliteracy in the subaltern sphere is frightening,” and by NGO field activist Annapurna Mamidipudi when she raises the question of empowerment through the Internet in the following quote:

Who has the Internet empowered? What has been the process of it, and how relevant is that process for say Venkatavva, a dark brown third world woman in India? Venkatavva in Adilabad in rural Andhra Pradesh has seen the advent of roads, cars, telephones and television in the short thirty years of her life, and understands the advantages as well disadvantages and the illusion of access they give her. In a land of faulty cables and unpredictable electrical supply, her children drink milk on the days that the bus doesn’t run, because on those days the milk in the village can’t be taken to the city and isn’t worth money. [Online] modern technology holds no bogies for her [offline, however] she has choices that many women in the [urban centers of the world] don’t have access to. On days the electricity fails she watches the traditionally performed storytelling enacted in the village square instead of the distant Santa Barbara on television. As of today, the quality and quantity of her available choices are based as much on the failure of technology as its success. So would modern technology be working toward more quality and quantity in choice, or less? (Gajjala, 2004, p. 91)
Thus even as Roy, Spivak, and Mamidipudi caution us against an unquestioning celebration of how the Internet is being mobilized on behalf of marginalized populations the world over, we would like to add that we share this concern. Our concern is based in one of the coauthor’s research during the past 15 years examining marginalized identity formations and groups online. Thus, in response to Livinghigh’s question about bloggers and blogs as individual nodes, where he asks, “i see . . . bloggers and blogs as ‘individual nodes’ of connection more (and less as a ‘community’) . . . how would you regard them?” Cyberdivalive replies,

As I re-read our writing both in academic form and here—I begin to see how the production of identity in internet spaces is based in the production of an individual identity . . . This individualizing of identity, rather than become part of a larger public space, becomes scattered and connects—nodally as you suggest—to other dispersed voices.

What comes out as a group formation through these voicings is less and less a public space of protest in newer blog spaces—perhaps because of the ways in which blogs privilege the individual.

These voicings, of necessity are part of a transnational elite discourse—whether or not the actual bodies putting the discourse out are part of that elite or not. Ironically, therefore, simultaneously [at the same time] as there is an enabling of the production of marginalized subjectivities as scattered individuals—there is also the subsuming of them into a larger hegemony where they find themselves “placed.”

Khan (2001) in turn asks whether the “emerging identities” of urban, middle-class queer India “will reflect (or perhaps imitate) Western constructions and whether those who adopt these identities will attempt to live these out within Indian cultures, or whether differing identities will be constructed” (p. 111). Finally, Bacchetta (2002) urges the creation of ways to “re-imagine local to transnational queer apparitions and their imbrications in ways that might support re-inscribing the local and its own historical contextual continuities while facilitating transversal alliances” (p. 948).

Although we are hesitant to claim that the queer Indian blogspace, with its emphasis on individual and online-based collective interpretations and reinterpretations, is the panacea for all these concerns, we do examine how, through their blogs, queer Indians negotiate a balance between their identities as “Indian” and as “GLBT.” This is not to say that queer bloggers identity themselves chiefly by their sexual orientation. On the contrary, our study of the Indian queer blogsphere corroborates Alexander’s (2002) view that queer personal Web sites have begun to move away from a queer-identity-as-core-of-self model to a queer-identity-integrated-into-self model. This is a situation comparable to what Boellstorff (2003) labels “dubbing cultures.” While studying the constructs of gay and lesbis in Indonesia, he uses the film-dubbing metaphor to describe how Indonesian queers have “dubbed” Western notions of gay and lesbian for themselves: “They do not regard themselves as a ‘rerun’ of the West; they view themselves as different, but this difference is not seen to create a chasm of incommensurability” (p. 36). We see a similar appropriation of identity
among Indian queer bloggers and argue that the blog output reflects this “dubbing of cultures.” It is not at all surprising therefore that the next anthropological investigation that Boellstorff takes on is the process of “Coming of Age in Secondlife,” where he critically engages with issues of identity negotiation in the three-dimensional online environment (see Boellstorff, 2008).

**Renegotiating Institutional Power: Queering Sexual Practices Versus Performativity of Identity**

Although Erni (2003) and Laurent (2005) have called for an “alternative logic” to the Westernized notions of queer identity, Altman (1995, 1996) elaborates on the “institutional power” both for and against queer representation and the “apparent globalization of postmodern gay identities” (Altman, 1996, p. 77). Sullivan’s (2001) attempt to lay out a structural framework for homosexuality, on the other hand, as age-defined, profession-defined, transgendered, or egalitarian homosexuality (p. 254), stems from his review of literature on the emergence of queer identity in both the West and East as a reaction to capitalism, industrialization, and changing family structures.

The expectation that blogging can be a reaction to institutional power lies in neoliberalist (Rak, 2005) and individualization ideologies (Williams, 2007). In this view, blogs are viewed as spaces that allow the possibility of resistance through a speaking “back” to certain power structures. This so-called speaking back in actuality occurs through the resituating of the bloggers’ subjectivities within frameworks that privilege the individual. In doing so, the individual simultaneously risks loss of community while he or she hovers at the entrance to another community. Yet in this act of individuation, not just does the individual unravel structures that contribute to his or her oppression, but certain critical community-based structures of support are also delinked from him or her. Feminists of color and transnational feminists have articulated this problematic in relation to dilemmas that women from marginalized communities face.

Uma Narayan (1989, p. 265), for instance, writes of the “dark side of epistemic privilege” and of the double vision generated through the code switching necessitated by continual negotiation of multiple contexts. The “double vision” that results from the encounters with spaces of individualization leading to voicing on the Internet could result in a variety of negotiations in relation to cultural oppression during the transition from one kind of community-based hierarchy to another. These transitions work in conjunction with transnational capital flows and upward mobility in the case of the present generation of Indian bloggers. A post-1995 economic climate in India, with an “open market,” tends to privilege particular practices validated by the dominant groups of GLBT identity formations situated in and framed through
Whiteness. In general, this would tend to lead to the “[rejection of] the practices of [their] own context” in an effort to “try to be as much as possible like members of the dominant group” (Narayan, 1989, p. 265). In the case of queer bloggers from India, this is likely, once again, to “veil the subaltern” (Gajjala, 2004, p. 5) and the contextual specificities of various nonmainstream sexual practices by merely labeling them as either queer identities or GLBT identities through the hegemony of frameworks for GLBT identities available via the Internet and related Westernized spaces. Gayathri Reddy (2005), in her work on “hijras” in Hyderabad, does a good job of historically situating and differentiating the “queer” sexual practices of “hijras” from those of Westernized transgendered performances in mainstream Westernized media while noting the need to unpack the specificity of the sexual practices involved in private “hijra” life instead of merely locating the performance of “hijra” identity in public and external domains. Thus, she is able to complicate and situate the “hijra” in a historical community context that simultaneously owns and disowns the “hijra” while noting how the postcolonial legal system criminalizes the everyday practices of the “hijra” community. In terms of class and class locations and in terms of access to literacies needed for participation in the transnational spaces, where only specific queer identities have purchasing and negotiating power, the “hijra” remains a point at which queer sexual praxis and queer performativity are both outside of legitimate home space. Online, however, the degree to which formations of masculinity, femininity, and sexual practices are affected by historical, cultural, religious, and social contexts within located communities is often flattened through analyses that just focus on examining queer identities performed textually, without a nuancing and rescripting of notions of sexual practices that are different from the heteronorms of variously situated hegemonies.

This process of individualization apparently reduces the hold that the state and legal structures have on the individual, and this gives the impression of freeing up the individual to explore cosmopolitanism and transnational political arrangements. To the upwardly mobile citizens of the world aiming at participating in the global economy and in possession of at least some of the specific cultural capital necessary to participate in these cosmopolitical and transnational arenas, this sort of individualization seems to better address their needs. However, the individualization enabled through online blogging of the Indian GLBT blogger removes the performance of queer identity from the home location of the blogger in a way that maintains the invisibility of the sexual practices of the queer blogger. This reproduces the ghar and bahir (private and public) binaries. This allows for a separation of sexual practice (which takes place in private spaces invisible to mainstream society) and queer performativity (which becomes acceptable as signaling participation in a neoliberal and modern transnational economy). This also permits and legitimizes the kinds of queering of Bollywood and cultural scenarios offline that Gayathri Gopinath (2005) describes in her work, while still putting at risk the differently sexed BODY when this body is in particular “home” spaces.
Scholars (Beck, 2001; Bennett, 2003; Mittleman, 2000) have argued that the Internet-enabled direct production and distribution of information has altered the conventional social and identity principles, as formulated by Gramsci (1971). For instance, Bennett (2003) observes that “the unexamined traces of group memberships [have] become replaced with far more examined identity processes . . . the collectivism is less rooted in ascribed (Gramscian) social group memberships than in individual choices of social networks,” while Mittleman (2000) contends that because of the “instantaneous communication” that is now possible via the net (and seen on blogs), “the Gramscian framework of resistance thus must be stretched to encompass new actors and spaces from which counter-hegemonic consciousness is expressed” (p. 169). Thus, they argue that the very basis for understanding institutional power has been changed.

However, we do not agree that if the basis of understanding institutional power has changed, this necessarily leads to the conclusion that the “instantaneous communication” is in and of itself somehow liberating. The globalization forces (both original and “dubbed”) that play a huge role in this scale shift need to be closely examined in order to understand how and if the stretching of Gramscian frameworks of resistance is indeed happening. In this article, we pose this question implicitly while further examining the implications of the private and public separations that lead to the separating of sexual practice from queer practice so that particular queered speech and performativity are placed in the public space and expected to stand in for queer formations while specific situated queer sexual practice is shifted to the invisible private spaces still not to be revealed for fear of consequence.

From the blog exchange presented below, we see at least three differing ideas of practice that may be obtained, which construct the dichotomy between situated queer practice and a universalized (legitimized through transnational purchase power) queer performativity: first, the practice of queer marginalization in the “offline”; second, the practice of queer online representation; and third, the practice of anonymity and partial review of both blog writer and blog reader. In what follows, through the blog exchange of the coauthor-bloggers of this present article, Livinghigh names the dichotomy of “practice vs person” to talk about this difficult negotiation of private and public, online and offline, in relation to contextual sexual practice and decontextualized queer performativity.

From cyberdivalive’s blog post:

*So livinghigh writes on his blog:*

“And then, what does “institutional power” have to do with the blogs project? Where is the power manifest in the blogsphere—or is the blogsphere a reaction to the “institutional power” in the real world? By writing these blogs, are South Asian queer writers appropriating that “power” for themselves? A reflective question: do I not feel powerful when I write? Do I not feel . . . uninterrupted?”
If I may interrupt . . . the straight upper caste NRI academic that I am . . . in one sense participating in a certain center of discourse production even though I started in margins different from the bloggers you speak of. . . .

In one sense participating in a certain center of discourse because I was never part of the margins maybe same as some of the bloggers you speak of?

But really in certain senses based on our everyday practices and participation in community—we are not at all marginalized.

What practices do we privilege/center (yes I am saying this—that—when we say we are in the margins—we are complicit in the production of the center) when we claim to be in the margins?

So what—I ask—what if blogging makes you feel powerful? Why does it make you feel power at all? What are the conditions of this blogger production? The notion of power perhaps needs to be unpacked somehow and perhaps the specificity of the notion of interruption allows us to stop and ask—yet again—how do you define power?

Posted at 06:38 am

| posted by cyberdivalive |

COMMENTS

livinghigh

PRACTISE what you preach . . . ?

what struck me the most while reading this post was that PEOPLE are not marginalized, really . . . PRACTICES are. two implications from this:

(1) the “power” i spoke of earlier was not in terms of what i can do with it—but in terms of how the absence/presence of it allows my practices. in that sense, your “interruption” wasn’t really an interruption of the kind i meant, because you haven’t usurped my “practice” of writing/posting/blogging, but have, in fact, sharpened/goaded me on to a subtler (sub)category . . . (i don’t want so say “new direction” here, because that entails far too much!)

(2) i understand the criticisms i read somewhere earlier, about queer theory in general being too focused on “identity,” and maybe there exists a need to “unpack” this theme (as is necessary for “power”) . . . this becomes terribly important now, if you think that gay as such is not marginal, but gay SEX, gay THINKING, gay ACTING is marginalized—and indeed, this is the case even for “institutional power.” Look at the case of India: the law of the land (Indian Penal Code Sec 377) does not ban homosexuality, but “carnal acts against the order” of humanity . . . whatever that may mean. PRACTICE becomes the core therefore . . . and i argue, do we queer Indian bloggers not take full advantage of this when we blog . . . ?

*whew* I like this stream of thought, and plus, it became a regular post, rather than a comment! :)

Posted on Mar. 23rd, 2008 12:56 am (UTC)

cyberdivalive

Re: PRACTISE what you preach . . . ?
so it is in the ACTing out of specific events that one gets named as such and such . . .
[more later]

Posted on Mar. 23rd, 2008 02:17 am (UTC) /

cyberdivalive

Re: Re: PRACTISE what you preach . . . ?
then what are the implications of separating practices from the bodies that they are
associated with?

Posted on Mar. 23rd, 2008 02:51 am (UTC) /

Livinghigh posts on his own blog:

So says the Wizard of Oz . . . (Queer Oz) ;-)  
mood: awake

Cyberdivalive asks in a comment-to-my-comment: “then what are the implications
of separating practices from the bodies that they are associated with?”

Let me attempt to answer this using two illustrations:

DeviantChick is an army brat in Delhi, making a very good living for herself in the
publishing business. Since her father is a retired colonel in the Indian Army, she
regularly attends parties and get-togethers organized by army folks—of course, while
she is out to her closest friends and her sister, her parents do not know of her (self-
confessed) bisexual status. At one of these parties last year, she met two people whom
she was attracted to: a young man, the son of one of her father’s friends, who spent
the whole evening wooing her and finally asked her out for a date at the close of the
party; and an older woman, who turned out to be her neighbor, and who DC had
previously exchanged some fleeting sexual activity with on an earlier occasion . . .

On this occasion, DC records a very enticing game of cat-and-mouse, where it was
clear that she had everyone’s approval in flirting with the young man (and in fact
she did so, finding him quite good looking and intelligent to boot!) while they were
dancing, and at the same time, taking every opportunity she got (on the dance floor,
at the buffet line, on the lawns, away from her family . . .) to flirt with her neighbor,
who completely reciprocated . . . DC concludes her narrative, by admitting that the
two women did in fact get some time to “play” in private that night—and also, that
she was going to meet the man on a date the next day.

Mike-higher is a software professional employed with a famous company in
Bangalore. He is also involved in a long distance relationship with his long-term
partner in Mumbai, who usually travels to Bangalore every alternate weekend. In
M’s case, I don’t have a particularly illustrative incident, but it is clear that M is de
facto out at his workplace, even though he has never actually admitted so. His part-
ner accompanies him to official parties that are usually reserved for heterosexual
couples, and his treatment of the inevitable “so is there a special someone?” ques-
tions at work, using a terribly disconcerting (if hilarious) response of “yes”-and-
then-a-daring-smile-that-forbids-further-questioning, has assured this. M does not
go to great lengths to hide his identity on his blog, and I have been reading his blog
for the past three years now, and known him personally for about two . . . But he
does make it absolutely clear that the comments he makes on his blog have no import on his employers. . . .

For me, both these examples show a division between the PRACTICE and the BODY/PERSO

N. In DC’s case, the “practice” is very overt: it is her sexual advance (and response) on (and from) her neighbor in the auspices of a very authoritarian nature (the army folks’ party), as also her very funny (if explicit) account of it in her blog. It’s also very clear that it’s not the FLIRTING that would be under fire here—just her flirting with her neighbor. In M’s case, the practice that is marginalized is not so much being gay, as being gay OPENLY—and again, there is a separation of spaces here, whether it is the professional and the personal; or the online and the offline. M’s blog is not filled with stories of gay debauchery, and neither is DC’s—but neither do they pass over the sexual or the acknowledgment, respectively. So while there is a separation of the PRACTICE and the PERSON/BODY in marginalization, there appears to be a similar one between the blogosphere and the offline space, but there is also a subtle intermingling of the two in terms of the discourse generated and responded to online.

Strange(r) response to a strange question? :)

Tags: blah blah nerdland

Posted at 01:13 am / by livinghigh

Each of these themes regarding practice in this context is explained below.

**Theme 1: Practice Versus Person in Queer Marginalization**

On the first theme, Laurent (2005) notes that

so-called “Asian values” put the emphasis on family and social harmony, which often stand in contradiction to what is usually pictured as “lesbian and gay rights” and “visibility” in the West. . . . Most of Asian societies can be thought of as “tolerant” (for lack of a better word) as long as homosexuality remains invisible. (p. 213)

Similarly, Narrain (2007, p. 64) cites specific case studies to highlight the violence that may be unleashed by the family in case “open” queerness threatens it. His analysis of Indian law also upholds the separation of practice and the person or body. He argues that “even the infamous Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code targets only the act of ‘carnal intercourse against the order of nature’ and has nothing specific to say about identity” (Narrain, 2007, p. 67). Although the “hijras” or eunuchs were the only queer population expressly covered by state policy (via an amendment to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1897), branding them as “criminal enterprise” led to their effective marginalization from the mainstream. For other queer groups, however, identity has not been focused on, but the act of sodomy, which is deemed “unnatural,” has. Despite the marginalization of “hijras,” however, Narrain (2007) asserts that they have been “successful in building networks that can tackle
violence in the language and idiom of political society” (p. 69). This partial success holds lessons for the modern Indian queer movement, in case it demands representation of the body rather than of practice, he contends.

The division of practice and body-person within marginalization is most evident when one steps away from the large city-based queer movement in India and looks at the smaller towns and the non-Western educated populace, asserts Khan (2001). He draws a divide between the queer “acts” or “things” people do and the notion of “queer self” they may have because same-sexual behavior may play a relatively insignificant role in the construction of identity. . . . What they do does not have a central significance as to who they perceive themselves to be, which tends to be oriented more towards family and marriage. (p. 106)

Blogging allows queer Indians to represent themselves in a way that this marginalization and violence against practice is artfully avoided.

Theme 2: Practice Versus Person in Queer Online Representation

On the second meaning of practice, that of queer online representation, there is also a play of institutional power. Scholars have pointed out how social ideological struggles are negotiated in relation to technologies and how various practices in turn produce hierarchies around the use, production, design, and distribution of these technologies—and this is reflectively true for the queer Indian blogspace as well.

"Institutional" English

mood: aggravated

The Queen’s English . . . no pun intended. :) There’s at once that spark of mischief and gay-speak there (Cameron & Kulick, 2003; Hayes, 1981), as also the idea of a global “standard.” Cyberdivalve refers to it in passing in her book and tonnes of scholars have spoken about the Anglophila of the internet. So what? I’m as guilty as the next one. I don’t like the word “guilty.” For more reasons than I can list, really. . . .

In keeping with the anglophila then, I blog in English . . . it’s the language I’m most comfortable in, really, and I don’t mean to sound a snob or a postcolonial what-have-you, when I say this . . . it’s merely the truth. I blog in English, and the blogs I read, by Indian and Pakistani bloggers who seem the most at ease with their status as “queer bloggers” do the same . . . (perhaps that’s why I read them). I read the blogs where it is obvious the writers know how to read/write/speak English well . . . they talk, they joke, they report, they speculate about their lives and others’ . . . they laugh and they worry, and I put my two bits in . . . not just in my comments but also in my reinterpretations . . . (in the Queen’s English). Another illustration of the “connection” we form?
But these are the blogs I’m “closest” to—they’re not the only ones out there, nor the only ones I scroll through, now and then. There are those who don’t use language at all . . . just the perfunctory introductory heading (Men I Like, or something like that) and then columns of erotic (depending on who’s looking) pictures of supposedly Indian and Caucasian men in various stages of undress, like JerryMumbai’s blog or Men I Like . . . and some of them use both racy pics and “normal” blog-text. If this is one of the limits of the Queen’s English, it is clear there are others: for instance, despite the profusion of gay South Asian “pictorial” blogs, there are hardly any (I can’t recall a single, really) showing (a) Black or (b) Asian men . . . . Everyone knows South Asians are racist—especially the post-colonial pundits.

There are some who go against the diktat of “institutional” English, of course. . . . Blogger does allow Indian scripts. . . . There’s the closeted man (Hanuman) somewhere in Uttar Pradesh who talks about being gay and married, nothing too fancy, a plain white background, and simple black script. Devanagari Hindi. You’d be surprised to know that even gay men in the smallest, least industrialized, most rural towns of the Indian heartland scout for tricks online . . . email and guys4men.com is a great way to make their presence felt in their tiny district (and even though they probably never imagined) in cyberspace. I do sound snobbish here now. (Yikes.) I’ve come across a Tamil queer blog once also (Livingsmile). I don’t know how to read/speak the language, and the only way I know it was written by a queer author was because I found it from an online list of queer Indian blogs. In the spirit of all the “negotiation” and the “strategic silence” we discussed earlier, here we have these examples: a negotiation of language and power out of sheer necessity or preference; and a strategic silence in the “institution” of English but a presumed eloquence in Indian languages.

Tags: nerdland

Posted at 01:30 am / by livinghigh

The politics of representation among queer community Web sites have been studied by Heinz et al. (2002), who report that “the hierarchical placement of English as the ‘other’ language, the lingua franca of the internet, and the language of a global or US-based gay rights movement, appears unquestioned” (p. 122). However, the researchers admit traces of what Boellstorff (2003) calls “dubbing culture,” in that some of the sites reviewed did reflect strong national cultural characteristics and intra-national diversity, being created as they were mainly for national audiences. For them, “community” and “relationship formation” (either romantic or sexual or platonic) appeared to be the dominant theme. In Alexander’s (2002) review of personal Web sites of queer Americans, in addition to evidence of a subliminal U.S. queer culture, he found that “as some representations are put forward, others are left behind and critical silences are created—silences that reveal assumptions, values, and omissions that call for interrogation” (p. 98), a kind of “strategic silence.” While admitting to the potential for community formation through the use of these silences, symbols, and references, Alexander is however mindful of the tensions and intersections between
the virtual (online) and the real (offline), and so he joins O’Brien (1999) in asking whether “the traditional ghettos [are] being reproduced in emerging online communities” (Alexander, 2002, p. 99).

This mode of inquiry is carried onto the realm of queer blogs by Williams (2007) and Rak (2005), who both concentrate on American-identified bloggers. Williams follows the specific markers of queer identity laid down by Weight (2002) and studies their specific relevance to blogs: references to and discussions of sexual orientation and references to same-sex relationships. Both these instances are apparent in Indian queer blogs as well, as seen from the blog posts presented in this article (e.g., Mike-higher once posted about a seminar on alternate sexual orientation tolerance at his workplace, and DeviantChick talks about her affair with her neighbor here, etc.). Williams (2007) also notes the emergence of a theme not originally specified by Weight, that of references to queer culture or community affiliations, which he says “may be the most versatile category of textual representation of public queer identity” (p. 40). His (and Weight’s) findings on graphic and symbolic queer representations also ring true for queer Indian blogs. The queer Indian blogspace includes those who use mainly text (e.g., Livingsmile, Kris, and Mike-higher’s blogs) or mainly visuals (e.g., Men I Like) or a mix (in varying proportions) of both (as seen in the blog by JerryMumbai)—and many of these visuals include queer cultural symbols (rainbow flags, pink triangles, logos of queer organizations, and their variants), or homoerotic pictures that reinforce the sexual nature of identity, or queer-oriented pictorial elements (e.g., Closetalk portrayed a pictorial result of a quiz he took to determine how good his sexual performance was). The use of YouTube videos is also prevalent, and the first author of this article recalls a blog post by Closetalk including a particularly persuasive video that spoofed popular commercials to advocate “Be Gay Today” to heterosexual audiences.

**Theme 3: Practice Versus Person in Anonymity and Partial Review**

On the third theme, we find a very clear division between practice and person-body in blog anonymity or partial review, part of what Rak (2005) calls the “rhetoric of the blog.” Her interpretation of blog confidentiality and confession arises from Foucault’s (1978) discourse on sex, that is, where

one had to speak of sex; one had to speak publicly and in a manner that was not determined by the division between licit and illicit . . . one had to speak of it as a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated or managed. (p. 24)

This is expressly seen in the Indian queer blog scenario, where so many bloggers (e.g., DeviantChick and her story about the party seduction) “confess” their (in)decisions about both the sexual and the social complications of being queer, from reflections on intercourse to temporary lusts, to secret marginalization at the workplace where one is in the closet—the roster is endless on this count.
But the blog rhetoric is not just about “confession,” for that would put the blogger in the same role as those whom Lejeune (2004) calls “cyberdiaristes”; bloggers are different by virtue of the very real, very planned, and very assured audience that the blog obtains. Recalling Rousseau (in Porter, 1995), Rak (2005) notes the rhetorical convention in self-disclosure in order to gain readers in the blog community. . . . Most blogs, therefore, work within what I call a semi-private environment, where private aspects of a person, such as habits, relationships, living arrangements, and economic status, are made public so that other members of the blog community will stay interested. (pp. 172-173)

Aspects like the design of the blog, customized settings, and the basic assumption that the blogger is writing the truth are other elements that highlight the essentially individualistic construction of the blog space. There is, of course, space for collision between interests, as Livinghigh posts:

*On anonymity and physical separation*

mood: contemplative

I use both here, because even where the bloggers may be “out” in the offline/“real” world, there is still that physical separation from the “real” that affords blogging its lure. Anonymity helps a gay blogger to be his or her “self” online—but I dispute how much of this “self” comes through. Anonymity is useful in that it allows the blogger to decide how much of him/her self to reveal online—and there are dividends in a partial disclosure. There are several kinds of anonymous gay bloggers:

1. those who are completely in the closet (even to themselves) and thus treat their blog posts as a kind of “confession”;
2. those who know they are queer, but are not “out” to anyone else either online or offline—but this group usually makes “contact” with other queer bloggers online, and thus forms a loose “connection”;
3. those who acknowledge their queerness to themselves, contact other queer bloggers, and come to form a stronger “connection” that might even translate into offline/“real” ties and friendships; and finally,
4. those who are completely comfortable with their queerness, are probably “out” to (some or all of) their offline friends (if not family), but are still anonymous because the lack of identity affords them a space to critique, be, act in a manner that will not have personal repercussions in their offline space.

By no means, is this list exhaustive. The notion of physical separation also becomes important when I think of those who are quite “out” in the blogsphere—that is, even if they do not use their offline names in their posts regularly, they have done so earlier, or made some prior mention of it somewhere, so that the majority of the blog’s regular readers know who he/she is. By physical separation, I mean a very clear (either implicit of explicit) segregation of the online and offline lives, in terms of (for example) no offline contact by any of the blog readers unless specifically
invited to, no attempt to popularize the blog to people in the bloggers’ offline circle (personal or professional), and so on. . . . When there is a transgression here, the blogger often decides to shut shop—which happened in the case of three queer blogs I have been a regular reader of, Uberhomme, VenialSin and DeviantCore.

Tags: nerdland

Posted at 09:21 pm  |  by livinghigh

In the blogsphere, the audience is not just catered to but also has a direct mechanism to “contact” the blogger, either through a disclosed e-mail address (which may be exclusively for the blog or may be a general e-mail address) or through the enabled “comments” application of the blog. Again, there is a choice here: The blogger can disable the comments application altogether or allow uncensored comments or take the time to censor the comments, depending on the disclosure the individual blogger chooses to submit himself or herself to. Of course, keeping in mind Rousseau and the argument that if the blogger wants a regular readership he or she will want to make the blog that bit more interesting in what is essentially a very competitive content market (the Internet), it stands to reason that censorship is not a commonly employed tool. During our research, we found no queer Indian blog that had actually disabled the comments application, and those bloggers who had censorship controls added them only after they were repeatedly spammed with either online advertisements or obscenities or threats. The blogspace thus allows a very unique system of interaction and censorship.

Conclusion

In the introduction to their collection of essays, Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia, Berry et al. (2003) argue that “the use of new media is not separate from but part of everyday life, conditioned by it in various locally specific ways and having particular effects on it” (p. 11). For this article, we have examined select queer Indian blogs through acts of relational writing and thinking through the practice of blogging, as bloggers as well as researchers. In doing so, we not only described how the queering of Indian cyberspaces takes place through present generations of bloggers but also demonstrated how the processual methodology of relational blogging allows us to collaborate and interpret meaning making through our own intergenerational and offline-online realities.

We have noted how “the activity of blogging itself, like offline activity, produces its own subject, whose relationship to offline discourses of truth and reality are designed to create identity as its special effect” (Rak, 2005, p. 180). The various blogs reviewed include those that have markers of both the queer-integrated-identity situation (in terms of text, references, and graphics) and those that subscribe to the queer-is-identity markers (in terms of mainly graphics and some text). There seem to be mixed signals here, then, in line with Heinz et al.’s (2002) observations.
However, although Rak (2005), in her study, finds a great degree of homogeneity and pandering to popular American notions of queer identity, our review reveals a great heterogeneity. The first author, in particular, has been an avid blogger for more than 4 years and has reported an astounding variety of queer blogs from South Asia. Some of these have already been described here—whether they are queer bloggers based in the larger cities of Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Karachi, Lahore, or Islamabad, South Asia’s queer bloggers come from a variety of backgrounds, use a variety of languages (Hindi, Tamil, Urdu, English, Kannada), and talk about a variety of experiences (coming out, life in the closet, being gay in school or college, married and in the closet, young gay man in the city, young lesbian in the city, older gay man, gay activist, diasporic life, etc.). Although there is an online performativity that participates in transnational globalization as Indian (“desi”) queer subjectivities are produced, we see that the blogs talk of offline negotiations with a tension between private sexual practice and public queer performativity. In addition, what comes across is the fact that institutional power is negotiated and spoken around and/or with in a variety of ways by each queer blogger. The blogs clearly delineate practice from the person, in ways similar to the institutional segregation of practice and person. However, this avenue of resistance and dialogue is not open to all, either in terms of access or in terms of expression: As Rak (2005) points out, “this is, therefore, a queer community with some privilege” (pp. 179-180).

This article examines how queer Indian bloggers (including not only those who write but also those who read and comment) utilize the Internet in trying to achieve a more local and equitable globalization for themselves while participating in a transnational socioeconomic environment.

There still remains much work to be done in relation to the metaphors of “real” and “virtual” communities, social networks, and intergeneration’s nodal reconstructions of the Indian digital diaspora through Web 2.0 and 3-D interactive environments within global spaces. In future empirical research, we plan to follow up on each of these avenues, to examine in closer detail how the Indian queer online community constructs and reconstructs its space.

Notes

1. Here we refer to Dr. Patrick Johnson’s seminar and performance for the Provost Lecture Series organized by the Institute for the Study of Culture and Society at Bowling Green State University. For more information, see http://www.bgsu.edu/offices/ics/about/index.htm.

2. The full text of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code states,

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to 10 years and shall also be liable for a term which may extend to 10 years and shall also be liable to fine.

An addendum declares, “Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.”
3. The 1897 amendment to the Criminal Tribes Act (An Act for the Registration of Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs) of 1871 decreed that local government keep a register of the names and residences of all eunuchs who were reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating children or committing offences under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Any eunuch who appeared dressed or ornamented like a woman in a public street or who dances or plays music or takes part in any public exhibition in a public street . . . be arrested without warrant and punished with imprisonment up to two years or fine or both. . . . Eunuchs are prohibited from acting as a guardian, making a gift, drawing a will or adopting a son. (People’s Union for Civil Liberties, 2003, p. 45)

References


O’Brien, J. (1999). Writing in the body: Gender (re)production in online interaction. In M. A. Smith, & P. Kollock (Eds.), *Communities in Cyberspace* (pp. 76-103). New York: Routledge.


Rahul Mitra is a graduate student at the School of Communication Studies, Bowling Green State University. His research interests are diverse, including the role and reproduction of heteronormative scripts in everyday discourse, the study of organizational culture and identification, and the South Asian queer blogosphere.

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