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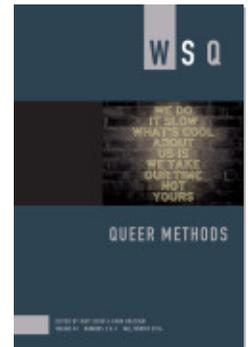
Thinking Sex with Geopolitics

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Thinking Sex with Geopolitics

Valerie Traub's *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, Philadelphia:
University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015

Anjali Arondekar

Whatever queer/sexuality studies may have (or have not) become, we all at least have reason to believe that it stridently refuses all gestures of conceptual, methodological, and temporal totalization. Or so one hopes. Readings of sexuality now emerge as necessarily provisional and open to transformation and to the velocities and inscriptions of *other* histories. It is this willingness to perceive sexuality as always somewhere else, as a force of disruption, even displacement, which has been the rallying call of all forms of queer/sexuality studies. Indeed, what studying sex (within and without queer studies) has taught us is that we are always inhabited by histories that exceed our capacity to capture them. Valerie Traub's magnum opus, *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, in many ways exemplifies such a dictum; it is in equal parts a spirited homage to the inscrutability, wantonness, and sheer messiness of histories of sexuality and a sharp censure of the limitations, methodologies, and theories of scholars obscuring those histories. Fueling Traub's project is her embrace of sexuality's constitutive opacity. As she writes emphatically: "[S]ex may be good to think with, not because it permits access, but because it doesn't" (4). Traub turns primarily to the early modern period (specifically Tudor and Stuart England) to explore the epistemological problem of sex where the opacities of eroticism (in all their forms) secure knowledge precisely in the ways in which they don't and can't be translated into digestible histories of the present.

While there is much more to say about how the opacity of sex travels various routes within Traub's dizzyingly ambitious text, I want to gesture instead to its epistemic affinities with another conceptual category that is equally marked by its attachments to opacity: *geopolitics*. For both concep-

tual categories—sex and geopolitics—the turn to and/or away from opacity orients habits of analysis that generate the value/capital that is implicit within both. Geopolitics, however, enters the diversified holdings of “historical sexuality and queer studies” (a term Traub uses to mark scholarship that is attentive to archives of the historical past) through languages of capitalization that shift the value of opacity into the labor of incommensurability. That is, geopolitical sites (particularly in the global South) continue to be read as obdurately and enticingly unresponsive—literally ungraspable forms. Indeed, the seductions of such unresponsiveness (often cast in the broad languages of divergent spatialities and temporalities) accrue a certain political value where you cede to geopolitical difference precisely to lay aside the epistemic work such difference does. Thus even as scholars repeatedly gesture to the vastness of geopolitical landscapes (the required self-reflexive move that marks a reading as limited to the West while more knowledge awaits us in the “Rest”), little effort is made to translate those gestures to the content of citations.¹ There continues to be a paucity of comparative histories of sexuality that engage, for example, the various temporalities within which the idea of the “early modern” sutures itself to the category of sex across geographies and linguistic formations.² Simply put, thinking sex with geosemiotics makes opacity a concept ineluctably linked to asymmetry, whereby a geographical location garners value through its (untranslatable) relationship to the West—in other words, through the labor of incommensurability.³ In so doing, we recast as it were, over and over again, the early debates inaugurated by Gayatri Spivak’s seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as histories of *elsewheres* perform necessary scenes of nonrepresentability and reprieve (recall Spivak’s opening invocation of the conversation between first-world intellectuals Deleuze and Foucault). After all, we cannot not want the incommensurability of the “Rest”!

Given such a conceptual quagmire, how then do we harness the tremendous generative potential of opacity, as outlined by Traub, and think sex with geopolitics without ceding meaning *and* value? How do we mark the opacity of geopolitics with the simultaneous plaint that such opacity is irrevocably compromised, interrupted, even staged? Let me say more about what I mean. I am currently working on a historiography of a *Devadasi* diaspora, the *Gomantak Maratha Samaj* (Goan Maratha Society) that moved back and forth between Portuguese and British India between roughly 1860 and 1961. *Devadasi* is a pan-Indian term (falsely)

interchangeable as sex worker, courtesan, prostitute, and slave. *Devadasis* are familiar and sought after objects of historical recovery within studies of gender and sexuality as their (lost) stories provide rich counterexamples of sexuality's diversity and presence in South Asia. Unlike the familiar economies of loss that accompany histories of sexuality, the archive of this collectivity offers a radically different relationship to the opacity of the past. Most significantly, the archive is abundant, accessible and continuous to this day. An examination of this massive, self-fashioned archive (housed in Panaji and Mumbai) reveals an exhausting range of archival genres—novels, short stories, minutes, property deeds, medical case records, biographies, private correspondence, to name a select few. Of significance is that the preferred genre is fiction where the seductions of the veracity archive are routinely undercut by the poetics of representation. We have abundance (in terms of materials) but ungraspability in terms of stable historical truth.⁴ If the opacity and/or allure of sex derives from its enduring unavailability, as Traub deftly argues, then what happens if we are confronted with a different history of sex, where the attachment to absence as the desired value-form is jettisoned, forgotten, as is the case with the history of the Gomantak Maratha Samaj? The task here is to configure histories of sexuality that attend to the congealments and attachments of geopolitics through an understanding of sex as both incommensurable and quotidian, recalcitrant and ordinary. Our historical challenge, if I were to think sex with geopolitics, impossible or self-deconstructing as it may be, would be to neither inhabit opacity, nor to mobilize it for the accretion of value, but to interrogate the contradictory and unsettling directions in which it continually operates.

Notes

1. An extended meditation on such gestures can be found in the introduction to a special issue I recently edited with Geeta Patel. See Arondekar and Patel 2016.
2. Traub, for instance, is attentive to the incursions of postcolonial thinking within histories of the early modern, but speaks specifically to those as “decolonizing” strategies that highlight the temporal and spatial hegemony of the West. I am interested more in the geosemiotic habits through which such hegemonies continue to be sustained.
3. Traub does engage with the term “incommensurability” on two occasions in

the book, pages 34 and 64, and in both instances, the term is invoked in terms of a challenge to the task of translation.

4. For an extended exegesis on these materials, see Arondekar 2012 and 2014.

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