

Itinerant Sex

Anjali Arondekar

I have just four very broad comments to make. I've ambitiously called my comments "Itinerant Sex," and I'll say why in a minute. First, I want to situate my remarks within the current controversy/political debates around sexual harassment that are happening not just with Harvey Weinstein, but of course within the field of South Asian studies. I know many of you are well aware of what I am invoking here. I'm not interested in rehashing the gory details of what transpired or what will transpire, in the aftermath of the reportage and social media exposure of South Asian male academics accused of sexual harassment. I do, however, want to speak directly to our local contexts, because some of us—Mrinalini Sinha, myself, Indrani Chatterjee, Raka Ray, and Priti Ramamurthy—about three years ago, worked with Lalita and several other people to institute a policy around sexual harassment at the conference, because we had encountered several similar complaints, situations, and we wanted to develop some language to speak to that problem. And what we foregrounded then—and what I talked about last year at a large gathering on sexual harassment—is that we need to theorize sexual harassment within the context of area studies and within the context of feminist theory. That is, why does area studies (particularly if the "area" in question is in the Global South, and in our case, South Asia), inevitably get produced alongside questions of sexuality in some errant or itinerant form, a form that doesn't conform to our sense of how we think of the idea of geopolitics and/or area. So, the fact that the letter in *Huffington Post* accusing a senior scholar in South Asian studies, and the complainant in the infamous Farooqui episode in Delhi, were both white feminist scholars working on South Asia is something we need to engage with, and think through carefully, beyond simple nativist indignation.

First, even as much of this debate has invoked and provoked a lot of important discussions that should have happened long ago, I want to say something more polemic and therefore perhaps more predictable: The queers and/or those of us who work on/and in sexuality studies will always remain the improper subjects/objects of study. What do I mean by that? What I mean by that is that the language of *hailing* that is working now, is a language that at least some of us in my generation, the generation before and the generations now, have already encountered in some way. Let me explain what I mean. I teach in the University of California system where there has been a marked rise in the number of cases and complaints filed under Title IX. Even if a fraction of these complaints are found to be true, that is still an alarmingly large number. What interests me is that from what we know about the content of these matters, many of the complaints have to do with queer subjects in a complicated way.

So, one example would be of someone (and I can talk about this now because this is public terrain), of a young queer (I should say “gay man,” because he identifies as gay) who was watching gay pornography during his lunch break in his office—not advisable but definitely not punitive or punishable! And, a young student walked into his office when he was watching this pornography and claimed sexual harassment, and said he felt threatened and triggered by the encounter. And now the person has been put on leave without pay and his computer has been seized because the institution is worried it may contain child pornography, etc. This is obviously an extreme example, but it does help us attend to the errancy of sex or sexuality as an intellectual project that often gets domesticated within debates and reform around issues of sexual harassment. How do we sustain the disruption of sex/sexuality that we fought so hard for, even as we politicize—and I’m vested in that politicization—around questions of sexual harassment. Such questions have become even more pressing for me because I am thinking a lot about itinerant sex in the context of Portuguese India for a book I am currently finishing on a community of Goan Devadasis (the Gomantak Maratha Samaj) who choose to be itinerant, to eschew belonging, not in any phantasmic way that celebrates nonbelonging, but nonbelonging as a form of strategy.

I want to connect these observations to a broader meditation on two field formations, South Asian studies and queer sexuality studies that I have spent the past fifteen years studying, and to speak to how the errancy of sexuality as an object of study has become contracted/circumscribed within those fields. And what do I mean by that? I’m not making the familiar argument that we are resorting to identity formations as a placeholder for our politics. I think many people are doing that, but I think that for the most part, we know that is a dangerous place to reside in. So, even as we have expanded the LGBTIQI project to

think more broadly about queer–trans studies, we have somehow forgotten, or perhaps elided—“forgotten” may be too strong a word—the legacies of sexuality studies that did not have to do exclusively with LGBTQ-queer projects. And, I’m thinking specifically of South Asia studies. In my training as a graduate student, there was no definable queer sexuality, nor were there many people working within South Asian studies, but there were a lot of people working on gender and sexuality in South Asia that do not currently get recognized in the genealogies we pick up in the ways in which we craft the field. I am thinking here of the work of folks like Veena Talwar Oldenburg.¹ So, even as the field has expanded in its queer mobility in terms of genres, disciplines, we have paradoxically become less concerned with issues such as agriculture, reproduction, sanitation, philology, all of these things, which for my generation—and it’s less a question of age, it’s literally about intellectual training—were very much a part of what you did if you did “sexuality studies.” So, in some ways, I’m curious as to why such expansions and contractions occurred.

Another form through which sexuality studies within South Asia appears to have literally shrunk is through the over determination of the here and now as the preferred periodization of critical labor. To explain, 90 percent of the graduate students I supervise, or who currently work on queer sexuality studies (the folks gathered in this room bear evidence to this statement), are mostly interested in working on the contemporary moment. Very, very few people are working on earlier periods, and even the nineteenth century seems out of reach for most new work in sexuality studies. Again, I’m not slapping you around to say you should. I want to ask: “Why not?” What is lost if we continue to circle around histories of the present (not in the Foucauldian sense!), especially if you work on South Asia, where historical writing provides many of the vernacular epistemologies for the theorizations of gender and sexuality. I don’t mean here history qua history. After all, I’m a literary scholar who works on the historical archive. Rather, I want us to think about what has happened in the past few years that has created such an allure of the contemporary in queer/sexuality studies in South Asia? Does it coincide with the prominence of anthropology in that field, which I think is both its strength and weakness. So, that’s my first major comment.

The second comment that I want to make is about South Asia as an epistemological space. Meaning, what? As I have just noted, I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about how to get people to think about South Asia when I talk to queer sexuality studies scholars not as an exemplar of the difference of sexuality, but as a place of interrogative politics. For example, how do you use South Asia to think anew rather than to think additively. Alternately, we (i.e., queer scholars

working within South Asian studies) equally need to do more to situate sexuality as a conceptual form that must become a constitutive part of South Asian Studies as a field formation. Even as feminism has become institutionalized within the ways in which South Asian studies is taught and circulated, sexuality–gender studies remains a ghettoized (and thus strangely seductive) form that must be smuggled through one way or the other.

I want to end my brief commentary with a small rant on another site of much-needed errancy—language. I am hugely fatigued by the monolinguality of gender/sexuality studies. I am hugely fatigued by the lack of diversification (and I mean that in an entrepreneurial sense), which is that we need to see more work outside of history, anthropology, sociology, and literature. For example, how do we actively engage with scholars working in the sciences, in disciplines that take us outside our settled orientations to the idea of sexuality as an object of study. I'm thinking here about someone like Vernon Rosario, for example, who works between literature and psychiatry, and who wrote the first books on science and homosexuality. Such examples of cross-disciplinary work have somehow faded away but were very much present in the earlier days of queer/sexuality studies. It could simply be due to a lack of resources, or the press of overprofessionalization, but it could also be a kind of monolinguality, a turn to speaking in a singular vernacular, in literacies that stay within disciplinary formations. So, even as many of us who work in queer/sexuality studies claim interdisciplinarity as our methodological mantra, that interdisciplinarity still partakes of settled fields and disciplinary formations, and rarely travels across temporalities and actual languages. If we are to be taken seriously, we need to work across diverse languages and literacies (humanist, scientific) to engage and traverse the multiple itineraries of sex.

NOTE

1. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

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Anjali Arondekar is associate professor of feminist studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her research engages the poetics and politics of sexuality, colonialism, and historiography, with a focus on South Asia. She is the author of *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Duke University Press, 2009, Orient Blackswan, India, 2010), winner of the Alan Bray Memorial Book Award for best book in lesbian, gay, or queer studies in literature

and cultural studies, Modern Language Association (MLA), 2010. She is coeditor (with Geeta Patel) of “Area Impossible: The Geopolitics of Queer Studies,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (2016). Her current book project, *Abundance: On Sexuality and Historiography*, grows out of her interest in the figurations of sexuality, ethics, and collectivity in colonial British and Portuguese India.