

# The Sex of History, or Object/Matters

by Anjali Arondekar

## SCENE I: PASSING RETURNS

In April 2019, I was invited by the *History Workshop Journal* to write a brief meditation on the impact and legacy of Stonewall from a global perspective. Records of the past provide anthems of the present, or so the story goes, and the charge seemed relatively straightforward: speak to the reverberations Stonewall has had as a historical event on the histories of sexuality that animate your scholarship. The oft-cited 1969 Stonewall riots, as has been well documented, occupy a central role in the history of LGBTQIA movements<sup>1</sup> in the US, even as the character of the event itself has taken multiple historical forms, its script continually rewritten through erased plot twists around race, transgender, class and labour concerns. There is no singular historical account of Stonewall, Americanist historians of sexuality routinely remind us; rather, it is an event whose afterlives found the conditions of possibility and solidarity for what is often understood as the modern US queer/LGBTQIA movement.

On receiving the invitation, my first response was ungenerous, as I noted to myself that the Stonewall riots had no significant impact on the narration of histories of sexuality in South Asia, beyond their generalized role as an imagined event through which some approximation of global struggles for queerness can be managed. In other words, Stonewall served more as a site of historical metalepsis, I thought, an effect that was miscast as cause in global histories of sexuality. And further, in saying that, I was also loath to provide a local historical supplement to Stonewall, to flag events of historical import in South Asia that had been predictably and routinely overlooked by the Euro-Western tilt of queer/sexuality studies. Surely, my task must be more complex than merely adding historical events and details that have hitherto been ignored in the historical narratives of sexuality. The much-touted scholarly ebullience about the globalization of histories of sexuality has rarely, if at all, shifted the epistemological orientations of Euro/American history. Histories of sexuality in the non-West still serve as exemplars of sexuality's difference/s, their geohistorical and geopolitical locations providing much-needed evidentiary fodder for the global march of sexuality's empire.<sup>2</sup> To fold histories of sexuality in South Asia back into the lineages of Stonewall was surely to reproduce the very asymmetry of geopolitics of the West and the Rest. In other words, I was stonewalling the invitation to think Stonewall globally.

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## SCENE II: ARE WE THERE YET?

It is 14 March 2019 and I am in Lahore, Pakistan, on the beautiful and eerily bucolic campus of the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS). This is a privately funded, highly respected and ultra-elite university, with a surprisingly robust focus on the humanities (its name notwithstanding), nestled within the heavily militarized zones that make up the complex urban landscape of Lahore.<sup>3</sup> It is my second trip to Pakistan; the first was many years ago when I was working in the Sindh archives in Karachi. This time I am here at the invitation of my friends and comrades, the Dean of the Humanities, Kamran Ali, and co-organizers, Omar Kasmani and Nida Kirmani, to give a keynote talk at what is being heralded as the first queer conference to be held in Pakistan. Boldly conceived as a deliberation on 'Queer Futures: Politics, Aesthetics, Sexualities', the three-day conference promises an invigorating and wide-ranging conversation on Pakistan's myriad queer modalities.<sup>4</sup> The stage is set, and I am raring to go. The journey to Lahore has been marked (unsurprisingly) by a concatenation of histories and collaborations. Indo-Pak relations are once again imploding: airports are hard to get to and visas even harder to procure. Yet I am finally here, and all that remains now is my short walk to the conference venue. Map in hand, I step outside my guesthouse, hail a 'woke' looking student, and ask him if he can direct me to the venue. Nodding confidently, he says, 'you are going to the *musafir* sex conference? yes, I can show you where that is'. Bemused, I turn to him again and say, 'no, I am going to the queer conference'. Without missing a beat, he rolls his eyes, and says, '*musafir* sex, queer conference – same thing, na?'

That playful, throwaway, yet resplendent figuration, '*musafir* sex' stayed with me, proffering a sightline for an alternate and potentially radical historical orientation: *musafir* as traveller, guest, visitor, itinerant (in Arabic, Hindi, Persian, Urdu, and even Romanian, Turkish and more – though spelt as *misafir*), coupled with the cruising, moving body of sex, more precisely, queer sex, summoned a geo/epistemology, a challenge to the historical imagination that surely merited further exploration. What would it mean to conjure '*musafir*' sex as historical object, to conjure it through a hermeneutics of protean and playful translation?

## SCENE III: OBJECT/MATTERS

I begin with these two scenes because they make differing hermeneutical demands on our settled habits of theorizing and even politicizing histories of sexuality. Both deploy what Gayatri Spivak and Lauren Berlant have argued (albeit in divergent geopolitical contexts) for: an acute collective historical sense, a historicist intuition that compels the object of gender and sexuality to be summoned at the precise moment of its disappearance or memorialization (which is also after all a renewed repetition of loss and absence).<sup>5</sup> In the case of the mandate to think Stonewall as global historical event, the invitation to engage the archival behemoth that is Stonewall in

South Asia necessitates a difficult act of translation. Was my goal as a historian of sexuality and South Asia to decentre the primacy of Stonewall with local historical events of import? Or was it more epistemological, to address instead the question of why historical causality and memorialization work differently within the fabular geography that is South Asia? In other words, did the history of the Stonewall riots create more of a political demand on subaltern collectivities to ‘produce’ their own seismic historical event, or did it foreground even more the epistemological divide between the West and the Rest? And how did the queer conference in Lahore fit into that conceptual conundrum? Was it an origin story that needed to be built up as a moment of repetition and rupture? Was it the local refurbished site of struggle that summoned the spirit of Stonewall? We were on familiar territory (another conference on queer formations) and yet on unfamiliar ground (in a heavily Islamicized space such as contemporary Pakistan).

In the case of the Pakistan conference, we were invited to think of queer futures in locations where they ostensibly have no collective pull. After all, are queer rights Pakistani rights? Are they *musafir* rights in that they travel in, settle, commingle – remnants of a persistent sex that can only be configured through chancy deliberations and encounters? As historical event, is the conference the radical archival trace for queer futures, or more emblematic of the quagmire of archival representation? We know that the conference was held at an expensive, elite institution, LUMS (that very few Pakistanis can afford, or have access to), and yet it was the elitism and the protection of the institution that allowed for like-minded *musafirs* to arrive, cohabit and exchange sex/objects without fear of persecution and censure. I was able to get a visa because the largesse of the institution procured governmental favours that bypassed my sex, my work and my Indian origin, and focused on my *musafir* status. I was, as the consul general at the Pakistani embassy in Los Angeles told me, a welcome *mehmaan*/guest, a scholar of Karachi and Sindh, even if my work on Sindh was about homosexuality and its sins.

At stake in both these scenes of reading is the narration of a history of sexuality, one from within and one from without. At stake also are renditions of subaltern and global histories of sexuality that continually harden certain historical habits of visibility that need to be rethought anew. How does one break out of such stagings where the provincial/vernacular clarifies or corrupts the global and/or the hegemonic? After all, Pakistan is as much the minoritized and fetishized geography within South Asia, as is South Asia in globalized histories of sexuality, be they of Stonewall or beyond. How does one then translate the richness of a region’s myriad politics, theoretical nuances, multilingual aesthetics, without falling prey to historical habits of legibility?

In what follows, I want to reverse the order of question at hand. Instead of speaking to the global impact of the Stonewall riots within South Asia, what would it mean to consider the global impact of the first queer conference in Pakistan on our memorialization of the events of Stonewall? If

Stonewall has served as a global allegory for a rousing history of sexuality, what does the Pakistan event teach us about sexuality as historical object? Two questions are central here. What makes something an exemplar of histories of sexuality, adequate to the challenge of its representation and study? Why does the writing of a history of sexuality (Stonewall, or the Pakistan conference) take particular narrative forms and genres, and what troubles such habits of reading? Here I want to return to itinerant and/or *musafir* sex as the agent provocateur of this brief meditation to point to alleys that might muddle some of the more routinized passages through which divergent geopolitical forms have been recuperated in global histories of sexuality. Itinerant sex here proffers less reliable passages into representation: itinerant as in the sense of *musafirs* – vagabonds who traverse cross-hatched lineages of geopolitics, gender and aesthetics troubling the seductions of exile and nativism. In other words, *musafir* sex/cruising sex – where the celebration and/or recuperation of events such as Stonewall has no purchase, its value as constantly resurrected episteme/object dispersed. Itinerant sex also as a form of capitalization, as suggested by J. C. Van Leur's hoary 1930s research on the Indian Ocean and trade (I'm using him merely to make a historical point), and his attempts to grapple with indigenous concepts and bring those concepts into extant discussions. To this end he activated the idea of the peddler, the itinerant merchant, who carried high-value goods from place to place.<sup>6</sup> In both formulations, historical events (such as the Pakistan queer conference, or the mandate to think Stonewall globally) become languages of capitalization through which geopolitics enters the diversified holdings of sexuality and area studies. In other words, habits of analysis wander (travel the world as it were) to precisely link home ground, home territory within languages of ethical fortitude. How then can the vernaculars, temporalities and spatialities that make 'sex' intelligible as object and archive summon itinerant geopolitical forms that are often left behind? Itinerant sex calls for a historiographical hermeneutics that refuses the seductions of homing devices; as heuristic, it summons instead attentiveness to places that are inherently non-recuperative, not discovered (again), focusing on the lessons of geopolitics they bypass or leave behind.

As such, can the Queer Futures conference held in Lahore serve to model the very historical questions that animate any study of sexuality? To put it more vulgarly, how can this historical non-event become a methodological primer to present South Asia and its (non) relation to the Stonewall riots? Can the history of a queer event in *musafir* land become the archival trace for global histories of sexuality? How does the memorialization of the conference 'teach' scholars to enter global histories of sexuality? After all, the Pakistan conference has now become my history without a cause, placed as it is alongside the figuration of Stonewall. Let me end then with four readings of *musafir* sex at the Pakistan conference that should be constitutive historical method for any engagement of sexuality in South Asia:

1. Location, logistics and labour. As mentioned at the outset, the conference was mediated through a machinery of bureaucratic, intellectual and affective labour. Lahore, a piece in a broader geographical puzzle that is Punjab, is a city of myriad histories, idioms and intellectual genealogies. To stage a conference within such contexts is to embrace the mutable and explosive forms of shifting learning that constitute South Asia.
2. Contradictions as Promise. The contradictions of holding a conference that heralded queer vernaculars in a place (LUMS) and time (militarization) of peril were neither eschewed nor erased nor naively celebrated. Here, the paradox of queer emergence can become the very vernacular through which any history of sexuality must be articulated: a mad balancing act between the forces of censorship, populism, surveillance and the relentless march of dissident energies. The conference (as the final wrap-up session acknowledged) was equally a success and a failure, yet friendships were forged, sex was had (one hopes) and alliances of profit and pleasure negotiated.
3. Multi/linguality as Comfort: Baloch, Sindhi, Urdu, Punjabi and English were the languages afloat at the conference. Translations were offered on demand but interestingly were rarely accessed. For example, I sat through multiple recitations of verse whose cadences I heard and enjoyed but whose literal meanings eluded me. There was comfort in not knowing, in accepting our contact as a source of constant and uneven multi-lingual learning. The task of translation, here and as it has always been in South Asia, was flagged less as project of literalism, but more as a project of re-composition and rendition.<sup>7</sup>
4. Boys are out, or a map for queer (and South Asian) futures. Last but not least, most surprisingly, the central protagonists (or villains) of the conference were not gay men (as I had falsely assumed). No centrality was given to bio/cis/gay men; instead feminists, lesbians and trans/subjects took on key roles, not in any orchestrated summoning of safe places (as is the practice here in the US, or even in India) but more as an organic instantiation of the worlds outside the sanitized space of the academic conference. After all, even in terms of the sparse legal rights afforded to sexual minorities in Pakistan, the *khwaja sira* (a term that must be multiply understood as alternative or third sex, transgender, and more) have emerged at the forefront of many such battles.<sup>8</sup> We were constantly pushed to imagine *khwaja sira* lives as origin stories of queer emergence, emanating through messy, rich and complex genealogies of religion and practice. Queerness here was an embodied, religious and governmental form –the *khwaja sira* challenging our very modes of thinking queer futures alongside hitherto unmarked histories and affects.

If my response to the invitation to think Stonewall globally reads as an excoriation of Euro/American lineages, it is not intended to do so. Rather, I am more focused on the analytical assumptions that forge the grammar of

such invitations. Instead of thinking Stonewall globally, I would like us to rethink the very geo/epistemology founding that formulation. To retune my young Pakistani guide's words in a slightly different tenor: *Musafir* sex, histories of sexuality? Same thing na?

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

An early version of this text was presented at a panel I organized on histories of sexuality at the Annual South Asian Studies conference in Madison, WI in October 2019. Indrani Chatterjee responded to the provocations of the paper in her usual incisive and erudite manner. Much gratitude is also owed to my fellow panellists: Geeta Patel, Durba Ghosh and Ishita Pande.

1 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual.

2 See Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, 'Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction', in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22: 2, 2016, pp. 151–71.

3 <https://lums.edu.pk/>.

4 <https://lums.edu.pk/news/general-news/3-day-queer-futures-workshop-provides-space-important-conversations>.

5 Lauren Berlant's theorization of the 'historical sense' can be generative here: 'How does a particular affective response come to be exemplary of a shared historical time, in what terms?'. See her 'Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event', in *American Literary History* 20: 4, winter 2008, pp. 845–60. As she herself notes, such a reading of affective event becomes the centrepiece of her later oft-cited opus, 'Cruel Optimism: On Marx, Loss and the Senses', *New Formations* 63, 2008. See also Gayatri Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge MA, 1999, and her rewriting of 'The Rani of Sirmur' in the chapter on history.

6 Jacob Cornelis van Leur, *Indonesian Trade and Society: Essays in Asian Social and Economic History*, The Hague, 1955. In many ways, van Leur's flawed yet comprehensive trade history set the tone for many future histories of Indian Ocean Trade that foregrounded networks, itinerancy and movement.

7 See Francesca Orsini, 'How to do Multilingual Literary History? Lessons from fifteenth and sixteenth-century north India', *IESHR* 49: 2, 2012, pp. 225–46; John E. Cort, 'Making It Vernacular in Agra: the Practice of Translation by seventeenth-century Jains', and Thibaut d'Hubert, 'Patterns of Composition in 17th c Bengali Literature', both in *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, ed. Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield, Cambridge, 2015; and Geeta Patel, 'Translation's Dissidence: Miraji becomes Sappho' in Brinda Bose, *Dissident Aesthetics: A Critical Humanities for Our Times*, Bloomsbury, 2017.

8 For more substantial reading on the *Khwaja Sira*, see Faris Khan's writings on the subject, including 'Translucent Citizenship and Alternatives to Dissent in Pakistan', in *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 20, 2019: <https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/>

5034; and 'Khawaja Sira Activism: the Politics of Gender Ambiguity in Pakistan', *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3: 1-2, 1 May 2016, pp. 158–64; doi: <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3334331>. See also Omar Kasmani, 'Futuring Trans in Pakistan: Timely Reflections', forthcoming in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2020; Amen Jaffer, 'Spiritualising Marginality: Sufi Concepts and the Politics of Identity in Pakistan', in *Society and Culture in South Asia* 3: 2, 2017, pp. 175–97; and Sara Shroff's blog on third-gender legalization in Pakistan: 'The Colonial Choreography of Queer Value', 2017: <https://www.zedbooks.net/blog/posts/the-colonial-choreography-of-queer-value/>. An additional work in progress comes from the Lahore conference itself: Mehlab Jameel, 'Hijragiri and Translation: a Post-mortem of Lost Genders', Paper presented at Queer Futures: Politics, Aesthetics, Sexualities, Lahore, March 15, 2019.

**ABSTRACT**

The mandate to think of Stonewall as a global historical event within South Asia necessitates a difficult act of translation. Was my goal as a historian of sexuality and South Asia to decentre the primacy of Stonewall with local historical events of import? Or was it more epistemological, to address instead the question of why historical causality and memorialization works differently within the fabular geography that is South Asia? In other words, did the history of the Stonewall riots create more of a political demand on subaltern collectivities to 'produce' their own seismic historical event, or did it foreground even further the epistemological divide between the West and the Rest? This brief essay is a meditation on these questions and more.