The Queer Turn in South Asian Studies? or "That's Over & Done Queen, On to the Next"

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"I am not your advisor, so I am not going to tell you what to do, but you do know there are a lot of people working on this?" It was my first year of graduate school. I was sitting across a table from an academic that I had read for years before beginning my PhD. It was that moment that every young academic simultaneously dreads and cherishes, the opportunity to share your ideas with an intellectual heavyweight in your field. We—a small cluster of students working across South Asia—sat across the table, gingerly holding our cups of coffee as each of us waited our turn to talk about our projects. One by one each of the first-year students shared their ideas, met with approval, encouragement, and constructive feedback. As the last student in the line it became my turn to speak towards the end of our brief meeting. I shared a rather inchoate interest in wanting to study queer activism in India. I was particularly interested in how organizations made demands on the state, worked with local government organizations, and imagined producing stronger relationships with a government that for the most part was responsible for upholding the very laws that perpetuated the disenfranchisement and violence towards sexual minority subjects.[1] It was hard not to feel a little bit crestfallen by the end of that conversation. It was even harder to try to remind myself that such sagacious advice probably came from a place of experience, concerns about academic precarity, and from a wider view of the field than my one year of graduate studies could manage. And yet I could not reconcile the feeling that I was studying something that had been

done with its near invisibility in syllabi, colloquia, and publications. I left that meeting feeling like I somehow missed a party that I was not invited to; one that somehow had "happened" without ever happening. I remember thinking to myself, "Like, did I miss the party and no one told me, sis?"

But when is the party officially over and who decides? This is a question that has occupied me for some time. And if I am being completely honest, it is a question that has haunted me since I started my graduate studies. I cannot count the number of times at colloquia, conferences, in passing I have talked about my research work and been met with either the awkward pause—sometimes with a "Was that your first research project idea?"—or the eye roll "do you know X who is working on that" one-two combo. I mean, what scholar does not enjoy being mansplained or heterosplained their research or the whole field to which they have dedicated their intellectual labor and academic life for the foreseeable future?

Laminated onto the already abundant feelings of impostor syndrome that come as part of the graduate school welcome materials, there has also always been this nagging feeling that I may have built an intellectual home, so to speak, in a dying field. This realization is a terrifying one for any graduate student eking out a possible future through the fruits of a decade-long academic project in a field that has been "sufficiently" cultivated. With pressures for originality, newness, and insightful interventions, scholars—especially beginners—are prized for their abilities to push the boundaries of existing fields, to help facilitate the abundance of academic debate. So, what are we to do, when a field, *our* field, is declared dead?

Long before I started graduate school, queer studies (particularly as queer theory) had informally been declared do not resuscitate. From accusations of moribund academic (anti)politics, to indictments of its limited capacity for intersectionality, to its U.S.-centricity, queer studies has managed to die, come back, and die again. Since its inception in the early 1990s, queer studies has stood as a placeholder for a shifting alliance of scholarly commitments to humanistic work on sexuality and gender, desire, intimacy, normativity, and power. But always with an asterisk or footnote, gesturing to the caveat, the incompleteness, imperfection, and—perhaps even—impossibility of a queer academic project.[2] Despite the litany of theoretical and ethnographic footnotes calling forth the constant openness and negotiation of queerness, its academic life somehow still has managed to run its course. To the surprise of probably no one, the voices that declared queer studies dead were mostly white gay men housed in large academic institutions in the West.[3]

It is curious that this death has been followed by a rainbow spring of sorts in South Asia and across the Global South. From the proliferation of laws providing

rights and recognition to transgender communities to the rescinding of rights to nonpenovaginal intercourse to thriving drag scenes in major urban centers to cinematic, literary, and artistic movements aimed to aestheticize queerness for the masses, there has been a boom. At a moment when there is so much happening, it is surprising to think not only of queer studies as passé, but as "over" precisely *because* of the booming academic interest in theorizing, documenting, and talking about everything happening across the global south.

Fortunately, queer scholarship on South Asia is not necessarily just dead, but dead because it is oversaturated. In conjunction with the shifting legal, political, and cultural landscapes of South Asia regarding queerness, there has been growing scholarly attention devoted to counterheteronormative gender and sexual practices, subcultures, and collectivities. Although this focus has energized a range of classic questions and subfields within South Asian studies, broadly defined, it has also rehearsed the common claim that often accompanies growing theoretical and scholarly investment in the bodies, practices, and experiences of subaltern people, racial minorities, sexual and gender dissidents, and the differently abled: that this field is "over," "done," and "saturated." These are comments that students like myself and my colleagues working across a range of geographic, temporal, and thematic capacities within South Asian studies (and in the Global South more broadly) have heard in conferences and seminar rooms as well as seen scribbled across project proposals and buried into reviewer comments. In very crude and basic social scientific terms, social scientists have understood data saturation as the point at which no more new information can be garnered from their research question. It is, in theory, the point at which the question(s) have been answered. But when, how, and why does a field, particularly one built on queer of color experience, become "saturated?" Who, really, decides the time of death? And how might concerns over "saturation" repeat the trope that scholarly work invested in gender and sexual dissidence or race is "niche" within the university?

This set of questions emerged out of a frustration about the comparative method that comes with the territory of working in South Asian studies, or for me being an anthropologist working in South Asia. By "comparative" I do not mean the habit of comparison enshrined in particular strands of anthropology as looking at cultures across time and location to find difference and similarities to fuel particular theories of the universal or the universality of the particular. I mean the strategy of understanding scholarly work and even scholars themselves within the constellation of ideas and scholars in their so-called field. Comparison becomes a loosely held mode of understanding the entirety of someone's project or questions through the notion that someone else has already studied this thing, thus, what could possibly be new? Ultimately it is a

mode of authenticating a scholar and their scholarship by reproducing particular norms around authenticity and virtuosity. I take specific acts of comparison (often masked in the language of newness, saturation, and niche) as not only a mode of scholarly gatekeeping but also as an insidious and dangerous mode of fixing the fluctuating thematic, temporal, and spatial diversities of research into singular and authoritative representations of nuanced questions and concepts.

))) Innocent Questioning (Read: Policing)

As a scholar who does not appear to be of South Asian origins, but also not white, positioning myself both within my field and within my broader research has been a taxing job of having to refuse, critique, and challenge particular comparisons as well as notions of authenticity My work centers itself on examining the contested productions of queerness as a category claimed for minority status amongst the panoply of gender and sexual minorities across India, and on queerness as the current political condition that enables regimes as law, as sovereignty as power and even as kinship to conflate violence and care, rights and regulation, policing and pleasure. Ethnographically, the field sites that I have worked in have been fluid, shifting, and constantly moving. These changes suggest that even when scholars take the same objects of study and work with the same interlocutors the questions and concepts that emerge can be (and often are) radically different. *"Interesting. But where are you from?"*

It is unsurprising, and yet no less strange how quickly the language of questioning (and perhaps even critique) slips into the language of the police. Among my favorite questions I am asked by South Asianists, anthropologists, and scholars alike is "why aren't you studying these questions in Africa (or the Caribbean); surely there is something new to be done there." Such questions are not as naïve or innocent as the upseak[4] intonations in which they are often asked would suggest. They frequently come from positions of academic gatekeeping, of keeping certain bodies of research bound only to the bodies of those researchers that seem like they ought to be the ones doing it. That queer studies and South Asian studies (as well as academia) have a black problem is a whole other article that desperately needs to be written. From being the only person on panels asked why I work in India to statements like "oh of course I remember you, there are not too many non-South Asians (read: black people) working in South Asian studies," every interaction about research inevitably becomes a conversation about my origins, the histories of British colonialism in the Caribbean, and the persistent limitations of insider/outsider understandings of ethnographic work. *"Fabulous! But, do you even speak Hindi?"*

As a child of African Americans and Afro/Indo-Caribbeans tracing their genealogies back to Guyana, Africa, and Bihar, I have inhabited a queer positionality to questions of origin, race, and even place. This is a queerness that is further amplified within the contexts of academic worlds and disciplinary practices that still rehearse the concreteness of insider and outsider as demarcated boundaries to be located in the racial, gendered, caste, ethnic, and cultural markers of the researcher's body. But questions about where I ought to be doing research also operate under the assumption that queer scholarship only matters or exists within the context of larger disciplinary formations because queer subjects are doing the work. The idea that the "work is being done" is not necessarily an engagement with the scholarship, its nuances, or its divergences, but rather pointing out that there are already "enough brown queer bodies" in the field, go elsewhere. This is problematic not least of all because of the false connections drawn between the researcher's body, hyphenated identity, and their research but also because it repeats the idea that queerness (as theme, analytic, cultural criticism, and even as method) is tangential to the larger disciplinary trajectory of South Asian studies. Studying queerness is cute, and maybe even fabulous, but it is not serious or rigorous scholarship, apparently. "*But why even study that? Aren't there more real political issues?"*

Imagining scholarship as literal fields to be claimed, sown, and profited off of rehearses an understanding of research as an exercise in virtuosity and as an affirmation of authenticity. As performance studies and ethnomusicology scholars Pavithra Prasad and Jeff Roy have elucidated in their article on the convergences between performance studies and ethnomusicology of South Asian sonic cultures, existing disciplinary norms around preservation, expertise, and authenticity suppress not only critique, but also different approaches to studying and thinking with music and culture.[5] They further argue that what often constitutes both the virtuoso and the authentic are access to the varied racialized, gendered, classed, and caste levers of power. Virtuosity and authenticity are a "ghostly presence" that haunts "graduate admissions, job applications, course loads, and conferences."[6] They also come to stand in for scholarly worthiness. Extending Prasad and Roy's fabulously constructed polemic, I would further add that questions around newness, saturation, and the niche, also conjure the specters of virtuosity and authenticity that validate scholarly worth through the performance of a virtuosity that is possessed by an authentic body. To put it simply, if it looks like a South Asianist and sounds like a South Asianist, then it *must* be a South Asianist. *"But you don't even look Indian, you must have a hard time in the field."*

To look or sound like a South Asianist is to perform oneself intellectually through the existing, dominant norms of the field. Sometimes it is to rehearse a certain fidelity to longstanding cultures of citation or even to weaponize the

canon against citational others. At other times, the performance of our disciplinary genre is also to play into and participate in particular epistemological norms that constrain racial, caste, class, gender, sexual, and religious difference. This framework not only commands the policing of a scholar's body and in some cases race, caste, gender, sexuality, and so on—*Where are you from? Why are you studying in India? Shouldn't you be studying elsewhere?*—but perhaps also demarcates what kinds of questions constitute legitimate sites of scholarly inquiry and even politics. I argue that in such a formulation, queerness then becomes neither an authentic question, nor starting place for questioning, nor path that leads to virtuosity—and ultimately respect—within the discipline.

Prasad and Roy point to the difficulties of dissent, how silences are conditions of flourishing as well as the mechanisms of disciplinary, personal, and professional violation. Roy in particular notes that his own lived queerness alienated him within spaces of Hindustani music as well as academic, South Asian ethnomusicology spaces. As he elucidates in his own experiences with his guru, the active silencing of his own queerness was the condition of possibility for the flourishing of his musical training and access to his guru's time and tutelage.[7] Theirs is a dissent that wanders off the page, critique that is located in the very suppression of voice. Couched in the language of reticence to the preservationist method of ethnomusicology and a demand for a more "embodied process of research," Prasad and Roy are also asking for a disruption of the very logics that silence queer scholars and sustain their invisibility within existing disciplinary formations. Reading between the lines of their criticisms of disciplinary methods around expertise, preservation, and authority is also a voice of antinormativity. To demand space for embodiment is as much a call for feeling, experience, and nuance as it is a call to queer the researcher's body, what it can do, and who it is allowed to be.

Likewise, as queer scholars of South Asia endeavor to explore queer questions that emerge from different engagements with archives, areas, and sites, queerness lends itself to becoming a site of multiple forms of sanction, such as disciplinary alienation and even personal injury. From a general ambivalence to the field to active silencing regarding the political, theoretical, and methodological import of queer studies, queer scholars are often tasked not only with demands to translate themselves into dominant epistemic regimes of South Asian studies but also at times expected to refuse certain translations of queerness because of its imagined incommensurability (or newness, or Western-ness, or impossibility) with particular areas. *Queerness is in this place but it is not of it.*

How can we as scholars ostensibly invested in the queerness of various institutional, political, religious, social, and aesthetic formations within our respective research contexts simultaneously queer the institutional norms that we are

bound to as practitioners of particular disciplines and methods? To borrow somewhat liberally from Geeta Patel and Anjali Arondekar's usage of the phrase *bhul gaya* (I, you, one [or all] forget) within the pages of a recent *GLQ* special edition on the intersections and impossibilities of queer studies and area studies, we might resist the notion of oneness (embodied in the singular authoritative account of a scholar's oeuvre) or even resist comparison as situating and fixing the messiness of divergent spatialities and temporalities, as foreclosing the possibility of wandering, and even wandering into each other through the pathways of shared research interests, topics, and even objects of study.[8] Instead, we might locate in the researcher and research—emerging from presumably similar spatial and temporal locations specific traces of nuance, complexity, and even queer translations of the so-called familiar. To quote Arondekar and Patel, *bhul gaya* "calls for a queer hermeneutics that refuses the seductions of homing devices, of theoretical pathways that suture geopolitics to forms (refused or otherwise) of region, area, nation."[9] I take it as a theoretical wandering that is perhaps also indifferent to questions of disciplinarity, newness, area, and so on. It is also an analytic that highlights the impossibility of a stable, whole object of research. Thus, to research a place, or an area in Arondekar and Patel's formulation, is to acknowledge places as sites of "political contest" rather than "nations," or contested terrains rather than stable, bounded entities.[10] And if a region like South Asia (or for our purposes in this commentary, queer South Asia) is a loosely held assemblage built on persistent contestation, then continued scholarly engagement should not be considered saturation, but different ways of apprehending a multitude of voices, experiences, and perspectives that exceed the categories of gender, sexuality, and queerness.

Arondekar and Patel's turn to *bhul gaya* sutures together queer studies and area studies to summon questions that might produce "epistemology without rendering . . . knowable" or "area without representation."[11] Their wandering hermeneutic invites us to imagine the possibilities of queer engagements (or even engaging queerness) that abandon the seductions of virtuosity, authenticity, and even discipline. Thus, to wander, in the terms that Arondekar and Patel proffer is perhaps to always already jettison the authorial voice of authenticity as well as the seductions of mastery, or virtuosity. Rather, what a wandering hermeneutic might entail particularly for queer South Asian studies scholars is to engage in recursive acts of translation that repeat, repackage, and return to ostensibly settled questions, texts, archives, field sites, and places, with the knowledge that this time, "home" is slightly different—maybe even askew; the paths that have led to it are also divergent, disparate, and different. Such a recursivity might subtend not just the problems of authenticity, virtuosity, representation and even discipline, but also the logics of newness, saturation,

and niche that imbue the individuated scholar's acts of translation as authorial, representative, and universal truths of a place.

))) Untimely Ends

I cannot count how many times I have been counseled by well-meaning academics and colleagues to remember to "make my work speak to the larger disciplinary vocabulary" when applying for jobs, fellowships, and postdocs. I have lost count of how many times I have sabotaged my own voice in an effort to amplify someone else's voice in the guise of my own. Colleagues in my field tell similar stories of censoring, costuming, and silencing themselves to seem like "real" students of South Asian studies. At times it feels as if our queerness—as sites of academic pursuit, intellectual curiosity, and personhood—is an impediment to our scholarly realness, to flourishing. In the language of drag, it is this very queerness that renders the scholar "clockable"—inauthentic, a poor and nonpassable mimesis of some supposedly real thing. But the problem with realness is sewn into its very name. The search for the real is the search for a perfection that misrecognizes the moment of ideal invention as the truth of an original ideal. Thus, perhaps to jettison the voice of realness, authenticity, virtuosity, is to speak in the voice of recalcitrance—to be a little undisciplined about discipline.

The queer preconference that has curated this forum of commentaries (and will return to the 2018 Madison South Asia conference) has been one space that imagines itself as undoing the work of discipline, of playing with and distorting the arbitrary boundaries that constitute disciplinary homes. That is not to say that the organizers and participants imagine developing a newer, queerer, discipline, but rather of creating intellectual space for queer epistemologies, methods, and ontologies. To reiterate, it is an area for generating questions and not necessarily fine-tuning representation. For instance, the theme for the 2018 preconference invites a similar kind of scholarly recalcitrance, by asking scholars to unmoor themselves from a singular focus on sex, gender, desire, and intimacy, to imagine how race, class, and caste are embedded within the archives, sites, and theory that queer scholars think with. But the preconference is not necessarily new or innovative. In addition to the preconference there have been numerous panels, symposia, and conferences intersecting South Asian studies and queer studies. Much like the preconference, many of these panels, conferences, and symposia have produced buzz, interest, and engagement in the possibilities of queering the trajectory of South Asian studies. And yet, the rigor and engagement produced have not translated into more concrete opportunities for scholars as publications, jobs, or even teaching opportunities—quite the opposite.

Amid symposium and seminar room comments of queerness becoming passé and out of fashion or—in the more formal language of reviewer comments—"done," queerness's supposed expiration has not culminated in much academic or epistemic visibility for scholars, scholarship, or the field itself.

Somehow, the flourishing queer approaches to caste, religion and spirituality, the archive, urban studies, and globalization are curiously absent from conferences, syllabi, and larger disciplinary conversations and yet the field is saturated with queers. I take the suggestion that it is perhaps too much of the same thing (a focus on identity politics, historical practices, anti-Western sexual subjectivities and so on). I acknowledge that there have been fabulously edited volumes, colloquia, papers, and essays organized on queer south Asia. But has queer scholarship really had its moment in South Asian studies? If the field is supposedly saturated, who are these scholars and where are they working? Has there been a queer turn, yet?

It is noteworthy that core syllabi across major universities with longstanding departments of centers for South Asian studies have a dearth of content by queer scholars or about queer content. Syllabi offer a week on kinship, a week on gender, a week on class, a week on desire, occasionally peppered with queer scholarship but by in large it is mostly absent. This absence is striking, not only because there has been and continues to be great work that is being produced, but also because it positions queer studies as peripheral to the larger oeuvre of contemporary South Asian studies. It is at most a week (or a separate class) but rarely a central character in the larger narratives of the discipline. But perhaps South Asian studies move into deeper, and closer engagement with queer critique and the flourishing queer approaches to the field as well. Teaching a unit on caste and kinship? Why not include Lucinda Ramberg's fabulous ethnography *Given to the Goddess*, which takes up extended questions of child dedications to Yellamma and explores the queer implications for kinship and caste of *devdasi* practices.[12] Considering a unit on partition and postpartition? Why not read Nayanika Mookherjee's *The Spectral Wound*?[13] Mookherjee's riveting historiography of the *birangona*, the dual figure of the war heroine and rape survivor, examines the construction of modern state through the lens of sexual violence while simultaneously gesturing to the queer historical work of making visible and invisible the stories of women raped during the 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh. In my own teaching and training within the discipline, I have included texts such as Ramberg's and Mookherjee's into my syllabi, producing thoughtful, rigorous, and nuanced engagements with students on the queer potentials of kinship (and caste) as well as the queer violences (and silences) that punctuate the narratives of state formation. What their work along with many other scholars working across the region demonstrates is that a "queer turn" in South Asian

studies need not be a singular emphasis on queer studies, queer theory, or investment in a monolithic understanding of gender and sexuality as identity. Perhaps a queer turn means to approach existing debates around caste and structure, the politics of the nation state, or even human–animal relations from perspectives that are animated by understanding the alignments among sexual, gender, caste, anthropocentric, class, and religious hierarchies.[14]

))) Wandering

So whither the queerness? As a student, and a researcher working in South Asia, I have questioned colleagues about the absence of queer scholarship from introductory syllabi, I have often heard (and read) that queer studies is a Euro-American centered academic project, authored by Western scholars. This is a point well taken. However, I would also ask—if we are at the point of unloading our Western baggage—why does South Asian studies continue to cling to Foucault, Marx, continental philosophy, the concept of religion, the stability of woman (and man), as well as a range of other concepts and theoretical trajectories that have been vibrant places of scholarly engagement and debate that also take the West as their starting points? Why is it that those invested in theorizing sexuality, gender binaries, queer activism, and a range of other relevant projects are charged with contaminating an ostensibly bound cultural field with Western thought?

It could be true that invisibility is not absence, that the broader arc of the discipline has been shaped by a strong engagement with the anti-normative, critiques of discipline, colonial knowledge production, orientalism, and so on. But the politics of citation also matter. Queer scholars, scholarship, and the rich archives that researchers draw from ought not remain hidden in the footnotes and be reminded both within and without the discipline that they are "dead." How can queer studies be dead or over at a time when it has not become part of the mainstream thematic, disciplinary, or methodological *Geist* of South Asian Studies? This is not to deny the existence of rich and vibrant scholarship, but to restage the question a bit more forcefully: How can queer studies be dead and over if it is still relatively invisible within South Asian studies? It is perhaps fitting that queers might find a way to die in anticipation of life.

I agree that queer studies, rightfully move away, from a "recuperative hermeneutics," a project of finding the traces of queer subjects in the archives or in the ethnographic register.[15] Rather than seek out queerness purely in the representational form or in the service of proliferating the "flora and fauna" of human sexuality, serious engagement with queer scholarship, concepts, and methods

could breathe life into ongoing debates about caste, spirituality, the politics of nation building, the rapidly changing cityscapes, and a host of other topics within the field.[16] Moreover, an engagement with queer critique might offer new registers for asking old questions. For instance, what might queerness teach us about the sexual politics of caste? What stories can it tell us about the erotic desires ensconced within sacrosanct religious practices, long-studied ritual, and the ordinary? How might queerness fill the cracks between the boundaries of man, woman, third-gender, animal, and other, which are constantly reconfigured under the signs of ongoing political, economic, religious, ecological, and crises?

As scholars, within both our disciplinary and institutional practices, we ought to question and challenge these seductive "homing devices" that produce the grounds for comparison and ultimately the feeling of saturation. These homing devices need not be merely place, which can inadvertently assume the universality of queerness or a national queerness that transcends Bombay to Bangalore to the rural. But perhaps we also resist even queerness itself as a homing device that organizes us as scholars and disjoints us from the more so-called pressing matters of the region. How might the queerness we trace in our research as bodily practice, sexual appetite, performance/performativity, subversion, resistance, and submission find itself in the unfamiliar, and inhabit an indifference to questions of newness, comparison, and singularity?

There are many reasons that a field can die, but the proliferation of scholarship need not be one of them. Queer studies, as studies of sexuality, gender, desire, intimacy, the body, pleasure, and a host of other topics need not die to rehearse the scarcity model of academia. Instead, scholars inside and outside the field ought to cultivate an enchanted relationship towards the familiar, to approach seemingly familiar or "done" questions, topics, and archives with fresh eyes and fresh understandings. This might entail unconventional readings, generous engagements with other scholars' work, and support for students and scholars invested posing queer questions to the study of South Asia. Second, perhaps queerness can continue to give us disciplinary life by being unghettoized from the margins. This means a certain kind of recalcitrance, resisting the box of queerness in singularity ("Oh you are working on what? How niche.") as well as compelling more queer scholars to converse with the larger fields. It might entail facilitating space not only for queer preconferences or symposia, like the one that started this forum, but also cultivating a more visible and forthright space for queer work outside of cordoned off spaces. To return to Arondekar and Patel it might entail queer work "wandering" outside of the familiar and safe spaces of queer panels and queer conferences and preconferences. Such wanderings may be quasi-suicidal diminutions of our own disciplinary safety. And yet, may

be the precise kind of un-homing that can generate vibrant, new, and fabulous modes of scholarly engagement.

But to wander, we need a path or at least the promise of space in which to wander. This need perhaps speaks to the comments that many of the scholars in this forum have made: that journals focusing exclusively on South Asian studies are harder for queer scholars to publish queer work in. Instead, many of us have turned to journals that specialize in queer studies, gender and sexuality studies, and feminist studies to publish our work. This is neither a claim to slight nor to malign but rather to enquire as to what kinds of spaces can be produced for queer work to house itself within the pages of South Asian studies scholarship. It is also a call for more scholars to push back against efforts to sideline or silence queer scholarship through the tried academic tropes of newness, saturation, and dead fields.

))) The Future Could Be Fabulous

I have been told by colleagues at colloquia and conferences—more times than I care to count and in subtle (and not so subtle) ways—that the places in which I conduct fieldwork (queer parties and protests, in queer digital spaces, and in public places where strangers intermingle and cruise) are not "the real India." Such claims rehearse a larger *Hindutva* discourse, which seeks to construct queerness as a byproduct of the West and thus something that ought to be shunned. But perhaps more important, these arguments (often coming from a position that assumes gender and sexuality as purely "elite" concerns) reify ideas of an authentically "Indian" subject or India (and South Asia more broadly) as a monolith whose true representations are refracted in the ethnographic/academic gaze.

Instead, as scholars across global contexts have argued, queerness is the not yet here, a horizon of future becoming.[17] It is a mode of occupying a playful relationship between the virtual and the actual. Queer critique offers a style of commentary, rumination, and imagination of what can come out of the spaces between the here and now and the not yet. But in the present moments of intense negotiation, debate, flourishing, and possibility across South Asia, queerness is also *happening*. The kinds of questions and research interests that queer scholars within South Asian studies have pursued not only complicate efforts to singularly represent the region but also disrupt, challenge, and question the scholarly impetus towards virtuosity and authenticity that unduly grant the fragmented images of our research representational power.

Figure 1. Author walking in Queer Azaadi Mumbai (Mumbai Pride Walk) in 2017.

But perhaps most crucially, queer scholarship offers a way to provincialize the hegemony of heterosexual and cis-gender culture implicit in invocations of words like "tradition," enabling more agonistic readings of South Asia, readings beyond the resistance–domination paradigm. A "queer turn" in South Asian Studies is not an impossibility, or even premature, but instead a conversation engineered by the mass production of dialogue and scholarship cultivated by those in the field. It is an invitation to ask new questions, to reread the foregone with a new sense of enchantment. Above all, to cultivate queerness as an analytic, thematic, and methodological mainstay in South Asian Studies is to resist the scarcity problem and instead embrace the feeling of "saturation." So yes, so and so are doing such and such, fabulously. But they are not I, and I am not they. Our gazes are different.

Even within the so-called done, old, and dusted there are lines of flight into virtual, potential, and fabular modes of life that are not yet fully represented in our field, nor representable in any way that aligns itself with ideas of authenticity. It is in these present moments when subjects across the region are imagining new vocabularies of self-expression, aspiration, and desire, that I resist the seductiveness of the homing device that is academic newness dressed up as authenticity or virtuosity. It is in these moments of scholarly fecundity that I resist the temptations to weaponize a canon—queer studies, South Asian studies or otherwise—to police the boundaries of a discipline, to command the performance of realness. And it is in these moments of persistent "happening" across South Asia and the world that I argue that queer scholars have much to say and

to offer beyond proving their newness and disputing accusations of being niche. Rather, it is in collective pursuit of exploring immanent ways of loving, living, and laboring that we, the queer scholars of South Asian studies, gesture to the ephemera of what is and what could be. And it is in these gestural and fleeting glimpses that there are provocative, critical, and necessary queer fabulations of where South Asian studies might wander to next.

NOTES

1. I use "sexual minority" here as shorthand for a larger panoply of subject positions like lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender as well as local formations like *hijra, tirunankai, arvani kothi, panthi*, double-decker. I must admit here that there is no perfect shorthand, but this is the one I have culled from activist spaces as a convenient, less jargonistic, albeit incomplete, shorthand.
2. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner are perhaps some of the earliest voices to suggest that queer theory might be better conceptualized as "queer commentary," gesturing to its potentiality for stirring cultural critique, rather than being a disciplinary specialty or method alone. See Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 110, no, 3 (1995): 343–49. Queer scholars of color have also emphasized that queer theory is an unfinished (and perhaps insufficient) field in its lack of robust critiques of racial, classed, and geopolitical norms or "homing devices" as Arondekar and Patel describe as I explore further in this article. See Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, "Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 22, no. 2 (2016): 151–71. Cathy Cohen's indictment of the single oppression model in queer theory offered a landmark challenge to race-blind and class-blind queer critique. See Cathy Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437–65. Work such as E. Patrick Johnson's playful neologism "quare studies" also gesture to the possibilities of queer of color rereadings of canonical queer studies. See E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' studies, or (almost) everything I know about queer studies I learned from my grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no, 1 (2001): 1–25.
3. Michael O'Rourke's offers a detailed chronology of the different moments when queer theory has been declared dead as well as an incisive refutation of the many declarations of queer theory's untimely death (see Michael O'Rourke, "The After Lives of Queer Theory," *continent* 1, no. 2 [2011]: 102–16). From Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's caution against the disciplining of queer studies into an institutionalized field (see Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?") to the concerns of queer studies rapidly becoming out of vogue (see Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark, eds.,"Queer Moments: The Performative Temporalities of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick," in *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on*

Queer Culture and Critical Theory [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002]; and Jack Halberstam, "Reflections on Queer Studies and Queer Pedagogy," *Journal of Homosexuality* 45, nos. 2–4 [2003]: 361–4) or "going downhill" (see Heather Love, "Oh, The Fun We'll Have: Remembering the Prospects for Sexuality Studies," *GLQ* 10, no. 2 [2004]: 258–61) to speculative concerns about what comes next (see Janet Halley and Andrew Parker, "Introduction: After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 [2007]: 421–32), O'Rourke's article highlights queer theory's preoccupation with its own death from the very moment of its birth. James Penney has offered a polemic against both queer theory and the overdetermination of sexuality as a site of analysis, arguing for a return to a more robust critique of class (see James Penney *After Queer Theory: The Limits of Sexual Identity Politics* [London: Pluto Press, 2013]). In his demand for "a critical return to the psychoanalytic and Marxist traditions" (4), Penney's text rehearses an argument that demands queerness (and perhaps even gender and sexuality as well) be subsumed under an ostensibly more pressing emphasis on capitalism as a site of "genuine" political critique. This repeats the exhausted claim that queerness is not only a tangential politics, but perhaps an elite bourgeois concern, distanced from the sites of real politics. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz deals with a similar claim by briefly responding to David Harvey's accusations of queer and feminist politics as neoliberal turns away from collective struggle. Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 30–31. Penney's argument regarding the limitations of queer politics is crucial for queer scholars of South Asia who must contend with similar erasures of queerness both past and present. For example, in her historiography of lesbian activism in Delhi, Naisargi Dave brilliantly traced claims of queerness as political excess in the Indian feminist movement's initial resistances to the incorporation of queer politics within the broader ambit of feminist organizing in the 1990s. As Dave's text expertly demonstrates, queerness in South Asia has had to struggle to produce itself as a legitimate site of politics. Naisargi Dave, *Queer Activism in India: A Story in the Anthropology of Ethics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

4. Also known as high rising terminal (HRT) is to make declarative statements sound like a question through ending with a high rising pitch of the voice.
5. Pavithra Prasad and Jeff Roy, "Ethnomusicology and Performance Studies: Towards Interdisciplinary Futures of Indian Classical Music," *MUSICultures* 44, no. 1 (2016): 187–209.
6. Ibid., 194.
7. Ibid., 190.
8. Arondekar and Patel, "Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction."
9. Ibid., 159.
10. Ibid., 160.
11. Ibid., 162.
12. Lucinda Ramberg, *Given to the Goddess: South Indian Devdasis and the Sexuality of Religion*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

13. Nayanika Mookherjee, *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories, and the Bangladesh War of 1971* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
14. Radhika Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies: Interspecies Relatedness in India's Central Himalayas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
15. Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
16. Kath Weston, *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
17. José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

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