Rescaling Transnational “Queerdom”: Lesbian and “Lesbian” Identitary-Positionalities in Delhi in the 1980s

Paola Bacchetta

Department of Geography, Women’s Studies Program, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, US; p.bacchetta@worldnet.att.net

This essay emerges from my astonishment and concern during several recent professional conferences (not the Association of American Geographers’) in the US wherein transnational queer identities and social movements have been discussed. In these contexts I have repeatedly heard US-situated academics assert, generally in a praising mode, that finally queer movements emerged in the postcolonial world in the mid-to-late 1990s and are currently thriving. Indeed, over the past twenty years or so and most especially within the last decade, US queer scholars, activists, and even tourist agencies have produced a plethora of representations of queers located outside the US. They circulate increasingly in academic, activist, leisure, and other contexts. These productions and circulations are certainly created through a range of desires, including queer academic and activist longings for cross-queer connectivity, solidarity, and community. Paradoxically, however, they all too often have the opposite effect. For transnational queer representations can be inadvertently paired with other queer effacements in an inseparable representation/effacement configuration. This essay addresses some of the problems that such representations/effacements pose for the sites being represented and not represented and for possible transversal (Yuval-Davis 1998) queer alliances. By transversal queer alliances, I mean connections of solidarity both within and across scale, such as within a local site, from one local site to another, from a local to a regional site, or transnationally, in a myriad of possible arrangements.

In the first section of this paper, I examine some polemics around representations/effacements that currently abound in academic contexts. An exhaustive list of them is beyond my scope. Instead, I limit my discussion to three central issues: segregated queer identitary
production sites within the US (such as separate spheres of academic, activist, and leisure production); constricted conceptions of scale and scapes (Appadurai 1984) in the production process; and inattention to the effects of intersecting systemic relations of power, such as those based in colonialism, racializations, class, and especially misogynarchies. By misogynarchies I mean various systems of women’s oppression and repression, such as patriarchy, fraternarchy, or filiarchy, that bear upon queer people of all genders and sexualities, albeit differentially in different sites across the globe. In the second section, I focus on one local fractal situation of queer effacement: that of some lesbian and “lesbian” (defined below) agentic positionalities in Delhi in the 1980s. These positionalities are fast fading in the conscious memory of lesbian and gay organizing within or in relation to India, and yet, paradoxically, they remain one source from which much current organizing in India is produced. At the transnational scale, they are completely absent. Finally, in my concluding remarks I bring these two sections together to offer some thoughts about how to reimagine local to transnational queer apparitions and their interimbrications in ways that might support reinscribing the local and its own historical-contextual continuities while facilitating transversal alliances. Throughout, this essay is informed by my own location as an academic (in women’s studies, geography, and sociology) as well as by my experiences as an activist (in India, Italy, France, the US, and transnational entities) in lesbian, feminist, antiracist and anti-imperialist organizing.¹

I. Inscriptions/Erasures
Transnational queer representations/effacements are produced within the US in a variety of sites. The three most central in the academic discussions evoked above are: international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) concerned with queer rights globally; anthropological studies of local queers outside the US; and Internet connections among queers within and across national borders primarily for leisure purposes. Each of these sites involves different sorts of actors, respectively: collectivities of activists, lone academics, and individuals with access to the Internet. The actors tend to be privileged on a number of accounts: most are located in educated sectors of the west, and most are male. Their activities are differentially disciplined, whether by national laws, the academy, or modalities of censorship. They provide differentially scaled representations of queers (transnational, very local, or intranational to transnational).

INGO Queer Productions
Some of the earliest forms of contemporary transnational queer connectivity and interventions happened through INGO queer activist
organizations such as the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) and the International Lesbian Information Service (ILIS). This was followed by the more recent establishment of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC). All three organizations were founded in Europe and the US. They attempt to intervene in any site across the globe where they feel queers are being persecuted. A recent example is IGLHRC’s intervention in Egypt (see the IGLHRC Web site for more information).

The Web sites of all three organizations publicize their goals, provide information about their interventions, and call for new members to join. On the Web, in other promotional literature, and in their practices, the organizations also produce and circulate representations of transnational queer identities that are current in academia. While they are often simply accepted, some academics have begun to problematize them. For example, in an insightful article Martin Manalansan (1997) examines ILGA publications and points out that the organization imposes Western assumptions of queer identity and activism onto postcolonial queers. He (1997:486, 490) argues that international queer organizing privileges “western definitions of same-sex practices” and Western assumptions about queer visibility. Such organizations insert all queers into an imagined developmental process that begins with “an unliberated, ‘pre-political’ homosexual practice” and “culminates in a liberated, ‘out,’ politicized, ‘modern’, ‘gay’ subjectivity” (Manalansan 1997:489). Manalansan (1997) also interrogates international queer organizing that positions Stonewall, a specifically US event, as a symbol of the origin of all queer organizing, a move based in what I call the “from-Stonewall-diffusion-fantasy” (see below). He then goes on to juxtapose INGO- and US-based “internationalist” discourses with narratives “in the shadows of Stonewall” by Filipino “gay” men living in the Philippines and in New York City. He productively concludes that these local, marginalized voices disrupt the dominant queer discourses, and urges that they be listened to.

It seems to me that Manalansan’s points are well taken. I would like to add to them some nuances and additional points. First, the “from-Stonewall-diffusion-fantasy,” which relies on a variant of the Western originality/postcolonial mimicry discourse (Bhabha 1994:85–92; Chatterjee 1994:5) is ultimately politically disabling not only for queers of color in the US and for postcolonial queers, but also for queers across racialized positions within the US. Leaving aside Bhabha’s (1994:86) otherwise useful insights about the mimetic as “at once resemblance and menace,” the “from-Stonewall-diffusion-fantasy” is exactly that: a fantasy. It operates in conjunction with geopolitical power. It is produced in relation to the double sociospatial internal erasure in preceding injurious binaries within its own production site, the US,
such as the urban-versus-rural, wherein the rural is made to disappear, or, within the urban itself, the New York City and San Francisco, wherein other sites (Philadelphia for example) are made to disappear.

Second, because Manalansan’s short text provides no account of internal struggles within queer INGOs, the reader may be left with the impression that stances within them are homogenous. In fact, the positions of these organizations are a result of struggle, and many who belong to them do not agree with every tenet. Some of Manalansan’s critiques were first posited within activist contexts themselves. In fact, all three organizations mentioned above have had internal struggles around racism and sexism. For example, in 1983 the all white Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) applied for ILGA membership, but an ILGA member group, the Scottish Homosexual Rights Group, lobbied against GASA’s inclusion because GASA took no action (and no stance at all, in fact) against apartheid. As a result, ILGA placed GASA on one-year probation and did not accept GASA’s membership until GASA denounced apartheid, participated in the antiapartheid movement, and “opened” itself to Black members (Gevisser and Cameron 1995:54–57). In another example, ILGA had long included gay male groups denounced by parallel lesbian groups (located in the same sites) as misogynist, and made little effort to include lesbian groups or individuals from postcolonial sites. Unsatisfied with the ILGA leadership’s response—or rather, non-response—to these critiques, many lesbians present at ILGA’s 1982 annual meeting in Turin, Italy, myself among them, separated and formed the ILIS. In subsequent ILIS conferences, many of us posited critiques of dominant-sector European ideals of lesbian identity and visibility that inadvertently alienated lesbians of color within Europe and beyond. ILIS conferences included workshops on intersections of racism, lesbophobia, and empire. ILIS had a presence at the 1985 parallel NGO conference to the United Nations Conference on the Status of Women, out of a desire to reach lesbians well beyond the West, either in groups or as individuals. Finally, the organizers of the 1986 ILIS conference in Geneva spent over one year raising funds to allow for wider participation by lesbians of color and lesbians in postcolonial societies. Justly, the 1986 conference slogan itself, “Political Exile for Lesbians of All Countries,” sparked an interesting debate. It was critiqued for its assumption of greater freedom for queers in the West than elsewhere, its underlying basis in a “First-World-will-save-Third-World” narrative, the fact that it addresses itself exclusively to lesbians who are “out” and subject to repression while ignoring other forms of lesbian or “lesbian” subjectivities and conditions, and so on. My point is that as academics write about activist problematics, it would be very productive to explore the internal complexities and debates among activists themselves.
Third, the dominant notions of queer visibility and being “out” to which Manalansan rightly points as problematically universalized are not only specific to the West, but also specific to Western misogyny. As Luce Irigaray (1974) has argued, scopic privileging criteria are based in the metonymic and metaphoric seriality of the masculinist valorization of the visible penis-to-phallus and the devalorization of women’s invisible internal sexual organs.

Fourth, in this transnational organizing, national-normativity remains the dominant frame. That is, queer activists themselves from outside the (unmarked because dominant) US are understood as national subjects—as parliamentary representatives, in Spivak’s (1993) sense. They are often made to speak for or are interpreted as speaking for the entire queer population of their nation. This poses several problems. First, nations are not homogenous and the conditions of variously positioned queers (by class, racialization, caste, gender, or sexualities themselves) can also vary considerably. When national subjects who speak in transnational forums are made to represent all of queerdom in their nation (or diaspora), this possible range of intranational queer subjectivities gets effaced. The effacement may occur for a number of reasons. For example, transnational queer activism has come to require some competence in the English language, which is often a privilege of elites. Further, interqueer connectivity within nations themselves cannot be assumed; the national speakers in question may be oblivious to the range of queer subjectivities in their own national contexts. Finally, in patriarchal/fraternarchal/filiarchal national contexts, lesbian and “lesbian” voices may be totally silenced, to the point that they become doubly silenced at the transnational scale. Second, insofar as homophobic laws are often national laws, it is certainly necessary to deal with the national scale in the context of gay rights. However, here, too, lesbians and gay men may be differently constructed by national legal systems. In a host of countries across the globe, sexual agency is considered exclusively male. Where women are not imagined to have sexual agency at all, lesbian sex is not outlawed because it is not imagined to exist. In such cases, dealing with national legal systems may mean ignoring lesbians and their conditions. Third, women and men—and lesbians and gay men—have different relations to the nation and are called into being as national subjects diversely. Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) discerns that women participate in nationalism in four ways: as biological, cultural and national producers; as cultural embodiments of collectivities and their boundaries; as carriers of collective “honor”; and as participants in national and ethnic struggles. Because the nation itself is often conceptualized as the heteronormative family writ large, the situation of lesbians in relation to nationalisms is further complicated (Nast 1998). Thus, lesbians may...
be constructed: as internal Others refusing to play a role in the hetero-normative biological and cultural reproduction of the nation; as threats to, not embodiments of, heteronormative national culture; as dishonoring heterosexual male citizen-subjects because not appropriated by them; in xenophobic, lesbophobic terms, as originating outside the nation and as antinational (for a discussion of xenophobic queers, see Bacchetta 1999:143–144); or, in the context of colonial narratives of Progress and of Civilizing Missions, as improperly progressed and civilized prenational subjects.

Finally, Manalansan (1997) rightly argues that positing Stonewall as an originary moment for transnational queer identities and activism is a recolonizing move. In fact, the “from-Stonewall-diffusion-fantasy” forgets the historicity and forms of queer resistance elsewhere, reproduces the dominant US notion of the US as everything universally desirable, reiterates the oppressive US notion of itself as “the world” (as in “We are the world …”), and again posits Western notions of identity and activism as the pinnacle. However, the “from-Stonewall-diffusion-fantasy” is also misogynist. In the queer celebratory imagery of Stonewall itself, male and male-to-female subjectivities and agency are foregrounded, while lesbians (and female-to-males and others) are often absent.

**Anthroqueer Productions**

The volume of anthropological studies centered on localized queer subjectivities (from Native American berdaches to Melanesian homosexuality, to Thai gays, to Hijras in India—and the list goes on) is constantly increasing and expanding geographically. Anthroqueer studies similarly adopt a national scale frame, but pinpoint local queer communities within it. Most often, the lone (frequently often male) fieldworker ventures into a little-known space or community, retrieves information about gender, sexuality, and sexual practices, and presents this to a Western academic community. Anthroqueer studies could potentially disrupt the “from-Stonewall-diffusion-fantasy” and other colonial discourses of Progress, Perfectibility, and Civilizing Missions. They already often undermine US measurement criteria by thickly contextualizing the genders, sexualities, and sexual practices in question.

But anthroqueer studies, too, can present several problems. For example, to date the subjectivities foregrounded in these studies are, again, mainly male. In addition, the queers in question are generally understood in isolation, not as part of a global world, and as arrangeable in the Progress narrative as premodern. This is true even in some cases where the queers in question are urban, own TV sets, and drive cars, such as the hijras in India. The queer subjectivities risk being reorientalized and exoticized. Finally, while many of these
studies are of detailed quality, as yet they have had little impact—if any at all—on queer theory produced in the West or on queer organizing.

_Cyberqueer Productions_
Perhaps a dominant site for the production and circulation of transnational queer representations is cyberspace. The Internet is used by academics, activists, and queers alike seeking leisure. While it has in some ways democratized contact among queers across vast distances, Internet access is transnationally a class privilege and often a male privilege, as is evident from even a cursory gender- and sexuality-based comparison of transnational queer Web sites and listservs. In the context of global inequalities, reliance on the Internet for transnational queer connectivity can contribute to reinforcing colonial and misogynous representations of queers outside the US.

_Reimagining Transnational Queerdom_
It seems to me that all three sites could potentially be subverted for productive purposes if they were opened to further inclusion, reconceptualized, placed in dialogue with each other, informed by a cross-scale perspective. I mentioned above that queer INGO and cyberqueer apparitions remain in the national and transnational scales and often eliminate the local-contextual, while anthroqueer studies confine themselves to the local and often eliminate the global. Indeed, it might be most fruitful to address all possible scales, even when pinpointing only one. Perhaps transnational queerdom could be reimagined in terms of a thickly historicized, contextualized, rescaled transversality in which the material and symbolic dimensions would figure strongly. In what follows, I hope to do this by contextualizing 1980s lesbian and “lesbian” agentic forms in Delhi in relation to scales, scapes, and hot sites of power. By “scapes,” a term I draw from Appadurai (1994), I mean people and culture, technology, finances, media, ideology. Appadurai (1994:328) understands scapes as “deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors,” which he lists as nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, subnational groupings, movements, villages, neighborhoods, and families. How these scapes (such as people) flow or are blocked within and across borders has to do with local-to-transnational relations of power. By “hot sites of power” I mean points at which powers intersect, settle, and give off effects. Some examples include: state apparatuses or their parts, such as the legal system; sites like the World Trade Center or Pentagon; international institutions (here the United Nations is particularly pertinent); or regulatory bodies, such as multilateral trade agreements. Finally, while I find these terms useful for my analysis, I
do not intend to imply they have universal validity or that they should in any way be reified.

II. 1980s Lesbian and “Lesbian” Agentic Forms in Delhi

In what follows, I move in reverse time to arrive prior to Western queer sightings of postcolonial queers, and across scale from cyber and very local to city, to uncover some lesbian and “lesbian” agentic forms in Delhi in the 1980s. I place quotation marks around “lesbian” because for some Indian “lesbians” the term is a Western imposition based on the Greek Sappho of Lesbos. I use “lesbian” to refer to women who love women and do not identify with the term lesbian, and lesbian to signify those who do. Among the many possible subjects, registers, and grids for understanding the 1980s (it is my hope that others will write about these), the urgency of undoing effacements without rehomogenizing leads me to focus upon three lesbian and “lesbian” microproductions of agentic-positionalities (explained below). I situate this essay in the 1980s not to posit that period as an origin for queer emergences in India or to posit a fixed typology of agentic-positionalities for the decade. Indeed, lesbianisms and “lesbianisms” appeared in India earlier, much prior to the US’s existence as a settler colony itself (see below); and beyond the agentic-positionalities presented here, which are limited to middle-class Hindus, are a multitude of silenced others across classes, across religions, in Delhi and elsewhere. I use decennial temporalization as an oppositional device to undo the “from-Stonewall-diffusion-fantasy” of the global queer late 1990s. Given my own limitations, my necessarily incomplete archive (see below), and India’s complexity (its population of over one billion, its axes of domination/subordination based in class, religion, caste, region, urban/rural configurations, languages, and so on), it is impossible to do justice to any one voice, let alone all, in this context. My discussion is necessarily fractional and will require future correctives.

Unfortunately there are few written traces left of lesbians and “lesbians” in India in the 1980s; thus, my archive is necessarily limited. I draw from what lesbian and “lesbian” authored documents remain: a few fictional texts in a 1990s collection (see Sukthankar 1999), a book by one of the women discussed below, unpublished papers, and protest letters to editors of mainstream newspapers. I rely upon conversations with lesbians and “lesbians” who experienced the period. And I draw from my own memories of the period, which are necessarily positioned, fragmented, incomplete.

Throughout, I deploy the term “identitary-positionality” to mean a self-elaborated political stance that is positioned within time-space-specific conditions, that is impermanent, unfixed, in its relation to a shifting symbolic-material context traversed by multiple glocal flows.
Identitary-positionality distances itself from identity, which lends itself to decontextualization, to essentialism, and which has been rightly in-terr-ogated (excavated) and en-terred (in the sense of enterre [in French: buried]) in queer theoretical reflections elsewhere (Butler 1990). Identitary-positionality should also be distinguished from Spivak’s (1993:3–10) otherwise useful concept of strategic essentialist identity; indeed, identitary-positionality—unlike, say, the strategic identitary term Woman for (many) feminists—does not imply a (nonuniform) unified identity elaboration for political enablement. In fact, in the 1980s there was little agreement among lesbians, among “lesbians,” and between lesbians and “lesbians” about identitary terms, and in some work (see discussion of Giti Thadani’s, below) a multiplicity of terms surfaces precisely to dismantle fixity. Further, identitary-positionality reterritorializes the notion of agency in terms useful to this context, thereby distancing itself from agency’s manifestations in dominant-Western sociological scholarship, where it implies the subject’s placement in linear historical temporality, or routinized praxis, or rational action, or all of the above (Embirbayer and Mische 1998). A growing anthropological literature (some of it is problematically reductive of “Indian” to “Hindu”) understands Indian selves in modes that render Western notions of identity and agency inapplicable. For example, Bharati (1985) delineates multiple types of Hindu selves (swayam, or material-self-acting-in-the-world; atman, the spiritual self; etc) produced within various temporalities (linear; generational; the yugas or cyclical time). Marriot (1989; see also Moffatt’s 1990 critique) interprets the Indian self-acting-in-the-world as dividual, not individual, and as fusional, not bounded and separate from other selves. Finally, Das (1989), who moves beyond Hindu-confinedness and dominant-Western elaborations of the self, argues for displacing normative Western paradigms of agency and action to uncover forms of affective and iterative discourse that develop their own language.

I begin by contextualizing, then engage with the identitary-positionalities, and finally offer some concluding remarks.

**Delhi: The Setting**

Das (1990) has remarked that India’s 1980s are characterized by “intense uncertainties,” “fundamental changes in society and polity,” and “an escalation of violence.” Historically, gender and sexuality have been central to sociopolitical conflicts in India (Chatterjee 1994; Nandy 1983; Sinha 1997) as elsewhere, and this period is no exception. To understand this aspect of the 1980s, it will be necessary to backtrack to the previous decade, at least, and to shift across scales from national to transnational to local.

Perhaps the most marking national political event of the 1970s was the State of Emergency (1975–1977) that Prime Minister Indira
Gandhi of the Congress Party called. Fearing her loss of upcoming elections to growing opposition, she was able to use Emergency to censor and imprison oppositional social actors, left and right. After Emergency, a right-wing Hindu nationalist party defeated her center-left Congress Party to win state power (1977–1979); Congress was then re-elected in 1979. Hindu nationalists propose a Hindu nation-state wherein non-Hindu Indians (especially Muslims, but also Buddhists, Christians, Jains, etc) are to be “converted” or eliminated from the citizen-body, and they prescribe polarized models for normative gender and sexuality. Having tasted power in the 1970s, Hindu nationalists increasingly mobilized for electoral purposes, an effort that culminated in the April 1998 election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to state power.

For the lesbians and “lesbians” discussed in this essay, the 1970s marks the rise of the current wave of the Indian Women’s Movement’s (IWM). Although struggles by and for women have a very long history in India, and this wave of the movement was well in force prior to 1975, as Ray (1999) points out, that year it was given increasing legitimacy and publicity because of the “decade for women” called for by one of the globe’s hot sites of power, the United Nations. In urban sites throughout India, including Delhi, women’s 1970s protests (in collective forms such as demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, and the like) centered on dowry murders, rape, wife-battering, and gender-differential deprivation linked to poverty (Basu 1992; Ray 1999). Simultaneously, male directors in Bollywood (“Hollywood” in Bombay/Mumbai, the central site of popular Indian film production), in a new trend, began to produce revenge films centered on wronged female protagonists who retaliated against offending males. In so doing, they massively—albeit perhaps inadvertently—diffused models for women’s individual revolt throughout parts of the national cultural scape.

In the 1980s, three national political issues became focal points for the production and massive media diffusion of right-wing representations of gender, sexuality, and religion and of counterrepresentations by women engaged in women’s struggles and in movements against Hindu nationalism. The earliest was the Hindu nationalist campaign to demolish the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque. Hindu nationalists claimed that the “Muslim invader” Barbar had razed a temple marking the Hindu god Rama’s birthplace (Ramjanmabhoomi) to humiliate Hindu masculinity and had constructed his mosque, the Babri Masjid, on the temple’s ruins. For Hindu nationalists, the resurrection of Hindu manhood required a reversal: the demolition of the mosque-phallus and the reconstruction of the temple (Basu 1993; Bacchetta 1999, 2000). They carried out a very high-profile campaign against the mosque for a decade. Then, in December 1992, during a
mass demonstration they had organized on the site, Hindu nationalists succeeded in illegally battering the mosque to the ground. Those who participated were mainly men, but some Hindu nationalist women were also among them (Bacchetta 1993, 1999; Basu 1993, 1999; Sarkar 1993). Throughout this conflict, women “figured as crucial markers of identity—of nation, community, caste group and religious group” (Chhachhi 1994). Following the mosque demolition, Hindu nationalists orchestrated riots between some sectors of Hindus and Muslims near the demolition site and in a few urban centers across India. In these actions, Hindu nationalists moved to hyperprotect Hindu women’s bodies while sexually violating Muslim women (Bacchetta 1994, 2000).

Another national political struggle that provoked shifts in gender and sexuality in the 1980s was the challenge to religiously based legal rights (Engineer 1987). This began in 1985 when Shah Bano, a 76-year-old Muslim divorcee seeking maintenance rights, publicly challenged Muslim personal law. In India, personal laws (for Hindus, Muslims, etc) constitute a system of religious laws governing civil matters (marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, etc) that are parallel to all other branches of law that uniformly govern Indian citizens regardless of their faith. For many Indian feminists, all the systems of personal laws are detrimental to women, for they reify male familial and religious community control over women. Hindu nationalists used the Shah Bano case to represent Muslim males as more-oppressive-to-women-than-we and proposed a uniform civil code based in Hindu law to Hinduize India’s legal system. Feminists engaged in a vigorous and interesting debate: some advocated a secular uniform civil code; others recommended preserving, but internally reforming, personal laws. Eventually the Shah Bano case reaffirmed misogynarchal control of women by their “religious community” with the passage of the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Bill in 1986.

A second major issue of the 1980s was the 1985 sati (widowed wife entering the funeral pyre of the dead husband) of a young widow, Roop Kanwar. It sparked further feminist-versus-Hindu nationalist polarizations around Hindu women’s relation to husband, family, “religious community,” and nation. While sati is an extremely complicated issue with a sordid history in colonialism and is subject to elaborate debates, in general feminists maintained that Kanwar had been drugged and forced to die, while Hindu nationalists defended the practice.

Perhaps the most significant event of the 1970s and 1980s for the lesbians and “lesbians” discussed herein is the fact that, at this time, lesbianism itself began to appear in the national mediascape. The first reports were about lesbian suicides and marriages.
Lesbian suicide appeared first, in 1979, when partners Jyotsna and Jayashree, after forced marriages to men, jumped in front of a train together (ABVA 1991:70). On June 29, 1980, college students Mallika and Lalitambika, both aged 20, tied themselves together and leaped into a channel, but were “saved” against their will (ABVA 1991:70). In October 1988, Gita Darji and Kishori Shah, 24-year-old nurses facing separation by Gita’s husband, hanged themselves together (India Today 1988). In August 1990, Vandana Cibbal, aged 22, shot her lover Simmi Kapoor, aged 21, and then shot herself, one month before Simmi’s scheduled forced marriage to a man (Thakur 1990:33). The press produced these women as tragic, dangerous, or simply unintelligible.

Reporting on lesbian marriages began later (Cath 1996). Partners were represented in three modes: as asexual friends; as uppity masculine-identified woman with uppity feminine-identified woman; and as transsexual with otherwise-normative woman. A first example is of village teachers Aruna Sombhai Jaisinghbhai Gohil, aged 31, and Sudha Amarsinh Mohansinh Ratanwadia, aged 29. They entered maitri karar (friendship agreement) before a notary public in 1987 after nine years together (ABVA 1991:69). The media was not unfavorable; some journalists seemed to presume the bond was asexual and thus in compliance with middle-class asexual/hetero norms. In contrast, in the second model are 28-year-old police constables Leela Namdeo, a widow, and Urmila Shrivastav, who, as an adult, rejected the man to whom her marriage had been arranged at age 3. A Hindu priest performed their December 1987 marriage ceremony in a Hindu temple in their parents’ presence (ABVA 1991:67–68; India Abroad 1993). Following disapproving press, they were fired and banned from their town. A third example is the December 1989 marriage of Tarunlata, a female-to-male transsexual aged 33, with Lila Chanda, aged 23 (ABVA 1991:36). Lila’s father got their marriage annulled under Indian Penal Code 377 (an Indian antisodomy law imposed under British colonial law and never repealed).

This mediascape attention had multiple effects. For some, the public attention constituted a form of violence. Lesbianism was now constituted as the negative supplement, in the Derridian (1976:244) sense, to women’s proper identities and as a site of nationalism renegotiations. Indeed, some of the reporting contained a recurring theme that lesbianism was not Indian, but rather a British-imported perversion. A number of lesbians and “lesbians” resisted xenophobic-lesbophobic attempts to white-out lesbianism by reterritorializing lesbianism (as Indian) in letters to the editors. At the same time, some lesbians welcomed the mediascape opening of the topic because it allowed them to gage their family’s, community’s, and wider society’s views on the subject.
By the 1980s, public—especially middle-class—debate was increasingly polarized around sexuality. At that time, several shifts occurred. For one thing, some parts of the mainstream press began to discuss anormative heterosexuality and pornography and to adjoin these to homosexuality, all in opposition to normative, national, proper sexuality. For example, the popular magazine Sunday, in an issue entitled “Sex and the Urban Indian,” produced hetero “unchecked excesses” and designated them, too, as “not Indian”: pornography, prostitution, and extramarital sex (Sunday 1992). The issue contained a photo including an activist pamphlet, Less Than Gay: A Citizens’ Report on the Status of Homosexuality in India (1991) by AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA—AIDS Antidiscrimination Movement) as an example of pornographic literature, and the editors refused to publish protest letters (Bacchetta et al 1992). This outpouring of condemnatory discourse was countered by much dissent. For example, several renowned actors and writers and a religious figure, the Dalai Lama, publicly supported homosexuality. And some Hijiras (male-to-female transsexuals and/or transvestites [see Cohen 1995; Kumar 1993; Nanda 1993]) were suddenly given roles in Bollywood films such as Daayra, Darmiyaan, and Tamanna (Chawda 1996). Ultimately, one can ask the question of to what desires this overall outpouring of discourse—for those who expressed pro-queer positions and those who imagined themselves as the sexuality police alike—corresponded during the period.

During these 1980s debates, some middle-class lesbians and “lesbians” in IWM networks began autonomous discussions. They recognized each other through what Valentine (1996:154) terms “lesbian manners and styles.” These sometimes included cues such as single status (not always; many are married) and a certain psychic and corporal sensibility. The middle-class urban lesbians and “lesbians” discussed in this essay often met in each other’s homes. However, only some homes, or parts of home, where the heterofamilial could be avoided were appropriate: apartments and rooms of those living alone, or bedrooms of those who did not. The kitchen in the middle-class heterofamilial home in Delhi (unlike the kitchen of Kitchen Table Press) is a workspace trafficked by male and female servants and female family members; it is not a gathering site, and was therefore not an option.

From these early conversations was born the Delhi Group (the term “lesbian,” a subject of disagreement, is notably absent). Group discussion topics included: pressure to heterosexually marry; familial and societal lesbophobia; economic independence; countering anti-lesbian media; relations to the IWM; and heterosexist laws. Soon there was a split over strategies (remain a discussion group? engage in projects? mobilize a rights campaign? visibility or not?). Some founding members of the Delhi Group formed Sakhi (a term habitually translated from Hindi as “best woman friend of a woman,”
but which Thadani [1996] redefined as female friend, lover, erotic relation between equals). Two lesbians remained simultaneously in both groups. Sakhi created India’s first lesbian archives and published the first out lesbian statement (in 1990) in the gay magazine Bombay Dost (Bombay Friend).

Two lesbians—one from Sakhi and the other from the Delhi Group—were among the cofounders of the 1980s Red Rose Rendezvous Group, which was open to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgendered people, and transsexual people. The Red Rose group was so named for its meetings around a red rose at India Café in New Delhi’s center, the large terrace of which dominates colonial-constructed Connaught Place. India Café was chosen because of its central location and its openness to many different classes of people. Early participants in the group were mainly middle-class gay men. Eventually, expansion efforts drew some lower-class participants, again primarily gay men. Within a year, meetings moved to a public park, another multiclasd site, contingent to the elite India International Center (IIC).

Let us pause for a moment to think about the spatial politics of these groups. A scopic-centered glance seeking a quick analytical fix, cyberinformed of today’s queer meetings at a McDonalds in the city of Mumbai, might read current queer subjectivities as produced in a shift from 1980s deheterosexed homespaces to the nationalizing India Café to the nationalizing-inter-nationalizing India International Center to a 1990s dominant transnationalizing insertion into McDonalds that recolonizes. For a less compressed, more patient analytics, the sites might be infinitely more complicated than this linear schema allows. Consider, for example, McDonalds. What if we imagine McDonalds’ glocality across scale and foreground the various isolated, intersecting, hybridized instances it contains? What if McDonalds signifies an outside constituting a threat to local he(tero)gemonic-misogynarchal queer national-exiling? What if McDonalds is US-dépaysé-India-repaysé (US-uprooted-India-rerooted) to become a local Indian referent like any other? What if, locally, McDonalds is desirable as a class-inclusive site? What if McDonalds’ lure is not McDonalds but rather its contingency to a park useful for boyish after-meetings fun? What if McDonalds, homes, India Café, and the IIC are just a few among a multitude of simultaneous queer sites in India, but the others remain invisible? (That is indeed the case, but let us return to our focus.)

Throughout the 1980s another cluster, “lesbians” who often worked in bastis (urban slums), self-identified as single women (see below). One single-woman “lesbian” participated in the Delhi Group.

These 1980s lesbian and “lesbian” emergences at multiple simultaneous scales undo the West-centric private-versus-public dichotomy, including its feminist incarnation as women-private/men-public. The multiple emergences also confirm and undermine Indian sociospatial
organization as a home-to-world continuum (Kaviraj 1997); lesbians and “lesbians” crack it open to identify and invest deheterosexualizable and lesbianizable/“lesbianizable” sites throughout.

### III. Some 1980s Lesbian and “Lesbian” Identitary-Positionalities

**Kanchana**

In the 1980s, Kanchana situated herself politically in the Delhi Group, as a lesbian, and as a critical academic specialized in religions. She engaged in activism across scale: she harbored individual lesbians escaping familial repression, intervened against anti-lesbian attacks in a high school, and attended the first Asian Lesbian Network conference in Bangkok in 1991.

From early challenges to male authority on women in Hindu texts, in the 1980s Kanchana’s focus became gender and lesbianism in sacred and secular texts across religions. At the time, she circulated her work among friends. There was no other audience. Unfortunately the bulk of her work remains unpublished today.

To understand something of Kanchana’s engagement, it is important to know that she has been a practicing Hindu since her childhood. She was born into a (non-elite-class) Brahmin family, began learning Sanskrit as a child, and gradually added other Indian languages throughout her adulthood. Totally uninterested in any form of monolithic inscription of identity or “religious community,” though her specialization is Sanskrit texts, she extended herself to work with Urdu texts, with Christian literatures, and with secular creative writing in several languages. Unlike other lesbian interrogations of the period, her project is not directly oppositional to Hindu nationalism’s polarization of normative/anormative gender and sexuality. Though she does deconstruct this polarization, her project is primarily beyond the indigenous/alien, tradition/modernity binaries. Kanchana conceptualizes the texts she works with as a living corpus outside linear conceptions of temporality, a corpus usable here and now for her multifaceted liberation project, which both includes and moves beyond sexuality: “I clearly don’t want myself to be reduced to a mere sexual being. Freedom in a larger sense is what I need, and such freedom would naturally entail the achievement of sexual freedom also. I also need economic, political, spiritual, and other kinds of freedom” (Kanchana 1986:13–14).

From an early period, Kanchana took a both/and stance in relation to lesbians and “lesbians” in Delhi, and her work foregrounds both erotic and nonerotic bonding among women. She felt kinship with the single women. I have not rejected the word lesbian in English, or words in any other language that mean women who
love women. I have identified with lesbians and single women who live and organize independently from men (gay or heterosexual). I am a feminist and a political lesbian. I am a political lesbian and not a social lesbian. The social lesbian does not see herself as political; she just sees herself as a person who sleeps with women. (Personal communication, 1998)

Integral to Kanchana’s work is her denunciation of economic and political domination across scale: from colonialist, to nationalist elitist, to internal queer misogynarchal, to internal lesbian and “lesbian” forms. For example, her 1980s critique of “class, caste, religious, linguistic and north/south divisions among lesbians” in India provoked much discussion by the 1990s (Kanchana 1998a). At issue for her today is representation and representability—who speaks for whom about what, and in what type of forum. She feels that “Westernized Indian lesbians” are trying to represent Indian lesbianism for the West and are doing so erroneously. (In that sense, she understands them as internalizing and enacting what Spivak refers to as parliamentary representation).

Kanchana’s contributions to debates in the 1980s often shifted their very terms. When some lesbian friends lamented that sexuality was invisible in India, Kanchana maintained that “[S]uch ideas come from a colonial state of mind.” For her, ancient texts are “obsessed” with women’s sexuality: for example, Dharma Shastras, Arthashastra, Kama Sutra, Moksha Sastra (Kanchana 1986:16). If, in some Hindu texts, woman’s sexuality is viewed as an obstacle to male spiritual realization (she distracts him from his spiritual path), in others it is celebrated. In the latter, women are “the main source not only of generative power of sexuality, but also of the feeling of sexuality which is called in Tamil women’s feeling. There is no ‘silence’ on the issue of women’s sexuality” (Kanchana 1986:5–6).

For Kanchana, it is not the texts that silence lesbianism, but rather their colonial-orientalist reconfiguration (see Chakravarti 1989; Said 1978; Sprinkler 1992) into a Great versus Little Tradition and their inaccessibility to most middle-class subjects. Great Tradition texts often present lesbianism in a negative light. For example, the epic Vyasa’s Mahabharata (800 to 500 BC) refers to two women having sex and condemns them. In Valmiki’s Ramayana (200 BC to 200 AD), the god Hanuman spots two women making love in Lanka and reads it as a sign of a corrupt society. In many ancient law books, lesbianism is a punishable crime (cf Manusmirti, 200 AD). In other Great Tradition texts, lesbianism is acceptable, but not on its own terms. For example, in his Kamasutra (fourth to fifth century AD), in chapter 4 (entitled “Auparishtaka,” or “The Oral Congress”), Vatsyana presents royal harem women using penis-shaped objects with each other because
their husband cannot satisfy so many wives. Kanchana (1986) critiques Vatsyana’s heterosexist, phallocentric “rationale for bonding amongst women” but adds that “this information itself is valuable” as evidence of early lesbianism. In yet other texts, lesbianism is without “taboo or stigma attached” and is procreative (Kanchana 1986). For example, in the eighth-century Charaka Samhita (3.2.47), two women produce a child together. For Kanchana (1986:10–11), regardless of its connotations, women’s “sexual bonding must have been prevalent, and more or less widely practiced before men could take note of it.”

In the mid-1980s, Kanchana drew links between ancient and contemporary women ascetics who circumvent heterosexual marriage and lesbians. She did not find a wider audience until the 1990s, and her current reception is ambiguous. In 1997, when she read a fictional piece at an Indian university about a married woman who encounters a woman ascetic and leaves domestic life to join her, lesbian activists welcomed this, but some otherwise queer-friendly heterosexual Marxist feminists critiqued its solution as opting out (personal communication 1998). Kanchana responded that opting out of heterosexuality to bond with women is a valid mode of resistance to heteronormativity.

Today, searches for historical sources have been critiqued for reproducing the Hindu nationalist, exclusionary “Hindu=Indian” equation (see Puar’s well-argued 1998 analysis). Thus, it must be noted that from the 1980s Kanchana expressly sought materials outside of Hinduism. The problem is the inaccessibility of her work beyond a restricted circle. To provide just one example, in an as-yet-unpublished article written in 1986 (12) in the midst of the Babri Masjid and Shah Bano polarizations, Kanchana determinedly retrieved Islamic sources, such as this lesbian love poem by Muslim Urdu poet Bahu Begum dating from between 1855 and 1865:

All night when we met
I wished to gaze at her
She who is envied even by the moon!
Another this fear arose
Ah she is delicate
She may be crushed
By the burden of my adoring looks.

Giti Thadani
Giti Thadani is India’s earliest public, intellectual, out lesbian in this wave of lesbian organizing. In the 1980s, she wrote editorials against lesbophobic reporting on lesbian marriages and suicides (see reprint in Thadani and Anu 1993:81–84). She also published the first book in the current wave of queer organizing in India on lesbianism, entitled
Sakhiyani: Lesbian Desire in Ancient and Modern India (1996). Her controversial work, discussed below, directly confronts xenophobic-lesbophobic nationalist discourses (left, right, and center) that designate Indian lesbians as “not Indian.”

Giti was a founding member of the Delhi Group, Sakhi, and the Red Rose Rendezvous Group. She self-defines as a lesbian feminist and khush (gay, happy, referring to both lesbians and gay men), and has revived multiple Hindi and Sanskrit terms (see below). For her, the term “lesbian”’s association with Sappho “provides for a symbolic continuum” which “does not come from a ‘Westernized’ position but rather from a position of erotic desire (akarshan) and love for the ‘feminine’ as feminine which may be lived out on many planes: the sexual, cosmogonic, psychic and kinship” (Thadani 1996: 9).

For Giti, khush is useful for some unificatory practices, but inadequate because it effaces patriarchy. She sought other Hindi and Sanskrit lesbian designations, but concluded (1996:78) that earlier terms “have lost their former sexual, cosmosocial meanings and are simply translated as ‘sister’ and ‘woman friend’.” She (1996) thus reinvested terms to create: sakhi, bhagini (vaginal sisters), jami (twin, homosexual), and yuvati (ageless woman, in the dual form expressive of a lover relationship, related to the root yuj, to renew).

Giti’s views differ considerably from Kanchana’s on single women and the feminist movement. She (1996:90) supports single women’s “effort of building a space allowed to women outside marriage,” but feels that “the term ‘single women’ again conjures up a victim image, that of loneliness and not having the ‘privilege’ of a husband. It also fits with the paternalistic model that men should provide for deprived women.” (Single women “lesbians” disagree; see below.)

For Giti (1996:88), in the 1980s, the IWM sent the message that “lesbian rights express the needs of only a few ‘Westernized’, individualistic, and economically independent women,” while other issues (poverty, illiteracy, right-wing movements, etc) are more important. She (1994:5) feels these are vital issues, but are “all linked to ideologies and structures of compulsory heterosexuality.” For her, IWM single women confine lesbianism to a personal choice, while her own work posits lesbianism as political.

Beginning in the 1980s, Giti spent ten years learning Sanskrit, reading ancient texts and traveling to temples throughout India in her own truck. She (1996:10) states: “My aim is to excavate layers of erotic memories and thus recreate historical continuums from the location of the present context of lesbian invisibility” which began with the Rg Veda. Parallel non-patriarchal “Vedas” were “lost”, but the Rg Veda itself contains elements that “have been derived, appropriated and manipulated from the earlier feminine cosmogonies and function as a palimpsest” (Thadani 1996:17). Giti (1996:18, 21, 28–29) explores
“gynofocal traces” through the “dual feminine,” in deities such as Dyava or duel mothers as jami, in Usha and Nakta, and in non-biological-kinship mother-daughter relations that include “eroticization of the breasts” and “revelation of the body” as “part of the erotic economy.” Beyond the Rg Veda, Giti has examined many other sources. She found lesbian iconography in temples in two forms: anthropomorphic (Khajuraho carvings depicting lesbian lovemaking) and symbolic (two triangles or two lotuses [vaginal symbols] touching). Giti (1996:93) links current Indian lesbians “with older pre-patriarchal cosmological figures or with the latter Kali spectrum of goddesses and Amazon warrior figures.” She has shared her work widely since the 1980s by conducting workshops on lesbianism in urban and village settings and giving talks and slide shows both inside and outside India (in, eg, Germany, Britain, France, the US, and Holland).

Academic, activist, Indian, Indian diasporic, and international audiences have received Giti’s work differently. For many in India, from one setting to another, her slides have opened discussions of lesbianism for the first time. This continues today. For example, her photos were used to provoke discussion in the first official workshop entitled “Lesbianism” at an annual IWM conference, in Bihar in 1998.

For some lesbian academics/activists in India, however, Giti’s work is historically inaccurate (see Natarajan’s 1998 critique). As a non-Sanskritist, I will not take a position on this. Rather, I center Giti’s claim to be “actively re-creating the past” (see her intervention in Parmar’s film Khush). The process of active re-creation can be understood as a lesbian strategic creative revivalist move, directly responsive to 1980s lesbophobic exilings (which continue today). I use the term “revivalist” in Farquhar’s (1967) sense, to mean conscious reinterpretation of existing materials in a spirit of political resistance. Revivalism privileges self-appropriation of history over historical accuracy. As Chakrabarty (1997:383) reminds us, “[A]nti-historical constructions of the past often provided very powerful forms of collective memory” that were mobilized in anticolonial struggle. Accordingly, lesbian strategic creative revivalist work might most productively be understood, not in terms of highly positioned academic criteria of historic precision/imprecision, but rather on its own terms, in its political activist significance.

The political significance of Giti’s work has also been critiqued. For some it reinstalls Hindu nationalist “Indian=Hindu” exclusions. For others (eg Natarajan 1998), it reproduces the Hindu nationalist homogenization, demonization, and exile of Indian Islam. Giti (1996:93) does globalize Indian Islam as an “external invasion” responsible for Hinduism’s heteropatriarchalization including through (lesbian) temple destruction, and this does echo elements of Hindu nationalist discourse. Irreducibly, paradoxically, her work also challenges Hindu nationalism.
and provides material for deconstructing dominant-West-based patriarchal-neo-orientalist cults with (white) lesbian members. For example, for Giti, the transformation to patriarchy begins within Hinduism, with the militarized upper-caste Hinduism that Hindu nationalists exalt. She (1996:38) points to Usha’s rape by the warrior god Indra in the Rg Veda. For Giti (1996:71–72), the heterocouple Radha-Krishna (the center of dominant-West-based Hari Krishnas, who financially contribute to Hindu nationalism in India) rose through marginalizing the Radhavallabhi sect, which is centered on a female divinity and whose “visual traditions often have very explicit lesbian depictions of Radha’s sakhis erotically playing together in water.” Giti critiques representations of the male-god Shiva (found within several dominant-Western cults) as Shiv-shakti or ardhanarishwara (half male, half female). For Giti, Shiv-shakti represents, not Shiva’s androgyny, but rather his misogyny. His shakti incorporation neutralizes feminine subjectivity; elsewhere, shakti stands independently.

Abha

Abha positions herself politically as a single woman. In the 1980s, she had been living with a woman for over ten years. She has been an IWM activist since the inception of this wave. She was briefly in the Delhi Group, but her main work has been with IWM single women across classes and religions.

According to Abha (personal communication, 13 February 1998), during the 1980s events outlined above, in the context of IWM organizing:

[W]e were raising the issue of women’s status outside the heterosexual institution of marriage and family. As we went along, we were not only able to form strong collectives of single women but also explore a whole range of erotic, sexual, affectionate interaction between women. I have, along with basti (urban slum settlement) women, resisted the definitions and prescriptions that homogenize women’s sexual expressions and experiences. Naming a group of people or the issue is a political act.

The term “single woman” was formulated in the context of building broad alliances across classes, religions, castes, regions, and now sexualities and asexualities. It was designed to be inclusive of all women who have ruptured with the heterosexual matrix: “lesbians”; celibates; ascetics; unmarried women; divorced women; widows. For Abha, single women disrupt patriarchal genealogies while establishing lineage with women within and outside their families who may or may not have been “lesbian”: “an unmarried aunt; unmarried activists in movements; ascetics or nuns” (Interview with Abha). This autonomous,
non-sanguinal female connection disempowers male sanguinal kin
who might otherwise expect to exercise control over no-longer-
marrid or unmarried women kin, including through corporal/
erotic policing.

Abha feels that the term lesbian, while enabling in the West, is
not politically useful to her struggles. Most of the women she works
with have little access to English and have never heard the word
“lesbian.” For Abha, what constitutes woman-to-woman relations
and the notion of visibility itself signify disjointedly in “Western” and
Indian contexts. She feels the “gender segregation” that is normative
in India paradoxically has historically both concealed same-sex love
and provided a space for its expression in multiple forms. Announcing
woman-to-woman sexuality (as lesbian or in other terms) would
isolate sexuality from its wider erotic/affective continuum, thereby
reducing it while constituting a threat to the space of its expression. For
Abha, giving up that female-only space would be counterproductive.
Further, introducing the English term “lesbian” would unnecessarily
impose diversionary debates about Westernization. It would mean
grappling with the national/alien binary—with lesbophobic exile—
instead of getting on with the work of construction of autonomous
female collectivity.

The term “single woman” inadvertently interrogates the place
reserved for “lesbians” in the hetero/homo binary: as part of a sepa-
rate, bounded category; forcibly assigned what Martin (1993) terms
a “totalizing identification”; as condemned to be a numerical minority.
The term “single woman” positions “lesbians” elsewhere: beyond a
totalizeable sexual identity, within an autonomous female potential
majority that could destabilize the binary’s dominant term by
shrinking it (even heterosexually married women can divorce or
become widows). Under the rubric of “single women,” lesbianism is
not isolatable; the “lesbian” potential in all women’s relations can be
recognized.

In her praxis, Abha links the classed, gendered, and sexuated spatio-
politics of the basti to single women’s struggles for total autonomy.
As an urban territory spontaneously squatted, often by subaltern
rural exodussed subjects, a basti is vulnerable to landowner and state
invasions and evictions; it is an unhomeable home in the world. Basti-
based IWM women have self-organized for a very long time. They have
collectively demanded state-supplied water and electricity, unionized
trades such as sweeping, spread health information, and supported
the decisions of battered women to divorce. The construction of
single-woman collectivities radicalizes women’s struggles against male
dependency across scale.

In their organizing praxis, single women from Delhi and elsewhere
have agitated openly against lesbophobia and homophobia across
scales, within India and beyond. They propelled IWM prolesbian stances on the suicides and marriages cited above. They organized the first workshop (called “Single Women”) in which “lesbian” relations were discussed at an annual national IWM conference, in 1990 in Calicut. They led the first passage of a national IWM resolution stating that all women have the right to sexual choice (1994, Tirupathi). They confronted the state in agitations against IPC 377. And they inserted their politics transnationally in a public statement against “the assumption of heterosexuality and the marginalization of lesbians” at the Indian preparatory assembly for the 1995 World Conference on Women in Beijing (Abha, personal communication, 13 February 1998). Single women insist on autonomy from gay men but demonstrate solidarity with them. For example, during a 1993 ABVA/Sakhi seminar, single women critiqued ABVA sexism and demanded a woman-only space therein (Jagori 1992–1993). But in 1994, when Vimla Farooqi, a leader of the Communist Party’s National Federation of Indian Women, asked the Prime Minister to ban a gay men’s conference in Mumbai, single women organized a nationwide IWM protest (Jagori 1994–1995). Finally, single women contributed to IWM support for lesbian rights when these rights were publicly attacked in 1998 by Hindu nationalists in the controversy over Deepa Mehta’s lesbian film, Fire.

Concluding Remarks

I conclude this essay with four points and some suggestions.

First, if we think of queers not as preconstituted subjects, but rather as produced through the historical-contextual, we might productively reimagine transnational queerdom through scale. A critical cross-scalar approach would explore or at least imagine other simultaneous sites of queer apparitions, such as the region, the nation, the city (and therein the neighborhood, the park, the street, etc), the village, home, and the body from lenses of internal and external axes of domination/subordination without homogenizing. For example, the three identitary-positionalities fragmentedly discussed here were elaborated within the same city but with other scalar instances that were sometimes the same, different or overlapping: for all, their homes; for Kanchana, in relation to the academy; for Giti, in relation to the national and trans/national; for Abha, in terms of the basti but also with interventions nationally and transnationally.

Second, attention to scapes and scapeflows might enhance some understandings of transnational queer subjectivities, agency, and conditions. Appadurai’s (1994) definition of scapes constitutes a useful point of departure, and queer scholars and activists might wish to modify some elements of it as appropriate to queer conditions. For example, Appadurai (1994:329) privileges collectivities in his discussion
of scapes and proposes that “[T]he individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part by their own sense of what these landscapes offer.” However, it seems to me that to get at queer emergences, and the place of gender and sexuality therein, we must take the (in)dividual into consideration. This is because the collective actors Appadurai (1994) names are heteronormative, appropriative-absorptive of women, and effacing of queers. Further, we cannot assume homogeneity in queer situatedness or in queer negotiations with the historical, linguistic, and political. Thus, though nationalist, lesbophobic, exiling mediascapeflows interceded in all the identitary-positionalities I have discussed herein, the what-to-do-with-it-and-whom differed in each case. For Kanchana, mediascapeflow importance was indirect (it resided in its internalization by other lesbians): she reclaimed history to re-empower herself and other lesbians by foregrounding lesbianism in sacred and secular writing across faiths. For Giti, mediascapeflow degradation was direct, and so was her opposition: she countered it in editorials and literally moved throughout national territory to reinvent a lesbian continuum (within Hinduism). Abha circumvented mediascapeflow confrontation by developing a discourse and a practice of broad autonomy including the sexual at another scale: the basti.

Further, Kanchana’s and Giti’s lesbian reterritorializing of lesbian sexualities (and that of others, such as M Kumar 1996) is a specifically gendered operation. In the 1980s, such reterritorialization was primarily a lesbian undertaking, notably excepting gay male Shivananda Khan (see Parmar’s Khush). Indeed, women and men are differently inserted and expelled from heteronormative, misogynarchal nationalisms. For example, to localize and elaborate a bit on what I mentioned above, while women are produced as ideally male-appropriated (by individual males to family to nation), asexual mothers, and signifiers of the nation’s purity, men are produced as the essential subjectivities of the citizen-body. Lesbians therein figure multiply as lack (of appropriate femininity, of Indianness), as excess (of sexuality, of subjectivity, of Westernness) and as in excess (of all male appropriations and of India’s borders). Lesbian reterritorialization is oppositional to lesbians’ multiple effacements, exiles, and appropriations. Perhaps this explains the urgency of some 1980s lesbians to center on lesbian historical symbolic recovery, while 1980s gay male scholars, possibly recognizing misogynarchy’s weight, often included lesbians in their historical gay recovery work (to varying degrees.) Today, Vanita and Kidwai’s (2000) joint lesbian-gay project unites both tendencies in one undertaking, as the earlier tendencies simultaneously continue.
Third, reconceptualizing transnational queerness implies energetic attention to the modes in which scale, scapes, scapeflows, and hot sites of power are produced by and embedded in shifting relations of power (of colonialisms, postcolonialisms, gender, sexuality, race, class, religion, etc).

Fourth, it seems to me that Western-based queers might productively engage in cross-sectoral dialogue. Most immediately, for example, INGO queer activists, anthroqueer scholars, and scholars of social movements might learn much from each other. For example, INGO activists have much experience with hot sites of power and transnational scapeflows (such as financescapeflows and mediaflows), while anthroqueer scholars are potentially better positioned to dialogue with and understand local-scale conditions, cultures, subjectivities, and cognitive grids.

Finally, the future of transnational solidarities may depend upon a continued ability to self-critique and a mutual will to avoid bulldozing, effacing, distorting, and excluding.

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Endnotes
1 My positioning within this is multiple, as insider/outsider. Given the focus of this essay, the exigencies of space, and the complexity of my hybridity and its signification in the Indian and US contexts, it will not be a subject of much narcissistic meditation here. I participated in lesbian and gay groups in Delhi during the 1980s. Though I am systematically in-corporated in Delhi streets as Indian because of the particularities of my physique, I am not an Indian national. I am a US-born lesbian of color, and an academic, and have lived most of my life outside the US (in India, France, and Italy).
2 ILGA and ILIS were founded in 19 ... and 1982 respectively. IGLHRC was founded in ....
3 This is not to posit a monolithic Indian self, but rather to critique the particular-universalisation of dominant-West notions of the self; they are also inapplicable to parts of the subaltern-West (see, for example, Sweet Wong 1998:168–178).
4 See, for example, analyses by Mani (1989) and Sen.
5 The IIC, an Indian-appropriated colonial institution, contains a restaurant, hotel, theatre, and so on.
6 In what follows, I have left out or inserted various details to respect the current wishes of Kanchana, Giti, and Abha. In addition, I would like to mention that Kanchana specified to me in a recent email that she no longer agrees with her 1980s positions on several of the topics presented here and is in the process of elaborating new work.

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Rescaling Transnational “Queerdom”


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