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Decolonial beginnings

This chapter addresses the concealment of non-Euroamerican queerness embedded in standard western narratives of progress and modernity in relation to non-heteronormative gender and sexual configurations. Building upon the work of decolonial thinkers, it aims to uncover ‘the myth of modernity’ that places Europe in a dialectical relation to its other and marks, in the words of Enrique Dussel, the ‘process of concealment or misrecognition of the non-European.’¹ Specifically, it reassesses the contemporary queer paradigms in the west and its other, South Asia. Defying the Eurocentric assumption that homosexuality is a modern western conceptualization, it focuses on South Asia as the geographical location that is traditionally associated with the repression of all forms of sexuality. In so doing, it aims to develop tools for a decolonial critique of global queerness that obliterates specific gender and sexual arrangements which cannot be subsumed under the over-arching language of gay rights, same-sex marriage and kinship.

The category of modernity in the context of South Asia often appears as a vexed site. The binaries of tradition/modernity, old/new and non-modern/modern acquire renewed sustenance through an assumed linear notion of time and history, which configures the west at the centre of time and modernity. As Dussel, Aníbal Quijano and Dipesh Chakrabarty have variously noted, in this eurocentred reading of history, the west appropriates the discourse of newness by positioning Western events like the French Revolution, the secularization of religion and the Industrial Revolution, as key factors in the development of political modernity in the world.² Non-western forms of knowledge production that include historically enduring yet metamorphosing cultural practices, written or non-written cultural memorabilia, such as, culinary traditions, sartorial customs, rites, rituals, and religious conventions to name a few are relegated to the periphery of the knowledge industry. Even academic and philosophical canon in the area known as the global south receive acknowledgement only when they garner support or explicitly re-produce the Eurocentric disciplinary grounding. As Walter Mignolo suggests, the ‘rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality, constitutive of two heads from the same body’ creates and re-creates enduring binaries of difference.³ This dichotomous relation between the west and the rest

and, knowledge and non-knowledge, the knowing subject and the performing object, embodies therefore the visible boundaries of the eurocentric modernity.

Coloniality or the colonial matrix of power 'is constitutive and not derivative of modernity. For this reason, we write 'modernity/coloniality'. The slash (/) that divides and unites modernity with coloniality means that coloniality is constitutive of modernity: there is no modernity without coloniality.'⁴ In this regard, decoloniality constitutes the de-linking from discourses of modernity that Euroamerican-centric thinking proliferates. In this chapter, I shift the critical focus towards allegedly traditional cultural practices, such as Punjabi women's dance-and-song performances during wedding and birth ceremonies, called Giddha, to mark a delinking, a decolonial shift. Reading queer cultural practices of Punjabi women's songs as a contrast to western narratives of queerness will be an attempt to erase the binary of modernity/nonmodernity that the western queer coloniality of power exerts over cultural embodiment of queer knowledge and memory.

To disrupt the seamless self-referential linking of modernity with Euroamerican frames, the pulverization of the eurocentric assumption that routinely posits the west as the originator of modernity is imperative.⁵ The critical issues that bear upon this chapter incorporate questions regarding the over-reliance on western modes of knowledge production and *our/my* epistemological obedience to them nonetheless. This recognition functions as an 'enabling acknowledgement', to borrow from Jasbir Puar,⁶ of the western location of my own writing. However, by enacting a critique of hegemonic formations of western modernity, I am, akin to Mignolo's thought, 'starting and departing from already familiar notions of "situated knowledges".'⁷ Consequently, this act of interrogating western claims to modernity inaugurates the premise of disagreements, collision and de-linking from the Euroamerican centre. It offers perhaps the opportunity to *re-link* with those ways of thinking and being that within the confines of imperial western knowledge-churning industries are relegated to the realm of study and control.⁸ The critique of hegemonic eurocentric modernity does not, in any respect, presuppose the establishment of counter-hegemonic practices of non-Euroamerican modernity, whatever that might mean, as the original or referential category of analysis. It entails, instead, the re-emergence of forms of

human knowledge and practices that lay buried beneath centuries of eurocentrism. In this regard, this re-existence serves to signal the availability of one option, the decolonial option.

My primary concern is to develop the span of queer studies by enabling a dialogue between queer and decolonial analyses, which enables a productive decentring of Euroamerican queer paradigms. The set of questions that frame the discussion in this chapter are:

1. Given the dominance of western models of queerness that are consistently (mis-) construed as templates for queer modernity and global queerness, can a formulation of decolonial queerness (albeit not singular) prompt a regenerative option of *living and experiencing queerness* without reproducing the eurocentric bias?⁹
2. Does the shift from imperial languages (English, French, Spanish ...) to another language or culture (here Punjabi) possibly transform itself from linguistic to epistemological redefinition of queerness?¹⁰
3. And crucially, what does the articulation of decolonial queerness reveal about the trajectory of non-western queerness(es)? Can the move from critique of eurocentrism to the re-construction of the queer non-European other outside the relations of coloniality of power effectively participate in what Quijano terms the 'epistemological reconstitution' whereby differences in queerness does 'not necessarily imply the unequal nature of the "other"' and is 'not necessarily the basis of domination'?¹¹

Queer eurocentrism

In the provocative video rendition of the song 'Kamasutra' from the album *Festival* (2002-03) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m847IUUby6w&spfreload=10>), the renowned Italian sister duo Paola and Chiara engage in a highly sexualised performance of female same-sex desire. Inscribed in the contemporary trend of lesbian hypervisibility for male spectatorship, which global artists such as Madonna, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera have popularised in recent years, Paola and Chiara's act extends the visual limits of lesbian sexual pleasure by incorporating scenes of explicit sadomasochism with glossy PVC strap-on and other leather outfits. The cascade of images that accompanies the rhythmic and ecstatic incantation of Kamasutra creates the impression of an unproblematic, harmonious

emancipation of queer female sexuality. Throughout the song, heterosexual desire appears restricted as its representation remains confined to the television screen that the sisters watch intermittently. It seems as though heterosexuality relates to a distant past and inevitably functions as a sign of faded memory. Where bright spotlights enhance the sensual quality of the corps à corps between the sisters, etiolated images of male-female lovemaking serve to displace heterosexual desire as the master signifier. For a brief instant, an almost inaudible sound of Punjabi women singing a traditional folk song ‘ਕਾਲੇਆਂ ਬਾਗਾਂ ਦੀ ਮੋਹੰਦੀ’ (‘Dark Henna of the Gardens’) – (for one version, see, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTvkwthqH8Q>) – interrupts the Italian-language song. As the Punjabi voices merge with the Italian rhythms, the verbal cadences replicate the visual contrast between same-sex and heterosexual desire. Like heterosexuality in the visual arrangement, the remote voices of the Punjabi women exist as a mnemonic as well as partial presence in the overall vocal composition of Paola and Chiara. The final audio sequence literally effaces the sharp and irregular Punjabi beats, and the sisters end the song in soft tones.

The inclusion and ultimate suppression of the Punjabi song in the sisters’ purported queer performance depends on a eurocentred interpretation of Indian culture in terms of temporal stereotypes. The fading voices of the Punjabi women invariably recall the visual sequence of heterosexuality as anterior to the lesbian act. Like the almost invisible images of heterosexuality, the gradual obliteration of the Punjabi song locates it in a binary relation to the Italian song. North Indian queer folk culture, which “Dark Henna” references, appears as a former, almost ancient version of the politically *mature* queer presentation by the duo.¹² Clearly, in this context, South Asian queer configurations are subjugated in conventional western narratives of modernity whereby constructions of “Third World” sexualities as anterior, pre-modern, and in need of Western political development ... are recirculated by contemporary gay and lesbian transnational politics.¹³ In other words, they become the past, the earlier template of the modern Kamasutra of the west. The embedded binaries of tradition/modernity, old/new and non-modern/modern acquire renewed sustenance through an assumed linear notion of time and history, which positions, in a eurocentric bind, Paola and Chiara’s performance at the centre of modernity.

Dussel's scrutiny of the allegedly 'emancipatory "concept" of modernity' with the 'concomitant "fallacy of developmentalism"' resulting from eurocentrism is particularly apposite to comprehend the notion of temporal modern/non-modern distinction. By anteriorizing the Punjabi song, the sisters extend Hegel's 'idea of a "necessary" movement of history from East to West,' to borrow from Dussel.¹⁴ Within queer studies, the category of modernity is mobilized in an attempt to depict the west as progressive and temporally advanced. Current manifestations include, among others, Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton and David Cameron's self-positioning as champions of queer rights. Such discourses imbricate the postcolonial third world in teleological narratives of development and progress, and exemplify what Chakrabarty labels the 'measure of cultural distance ... between the West and the non-West' and in the field of queer studies, what Ratna Kapur calls tenets of the 'newly emerging hegemonic, colonising queer.'¹⁵ As Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan explain, the underlying notion of these tendencies is 'a premodern, pre-political, non-Euro-American queerness' that must follow Western identity categories 'in order to attain political consciousness, subjectivity, and global modernity.'¹⁶ Further, in her study of queer nationalism, Puar contends that 'even as patriotism immediately after September 11 was inextricably tied to a reinvigoration of heterosexual norms for Americans, progressive sexuality was championed as a hallmark of U.S. modernity.'¹⁷ Puar's analysis points to geopolitical strategies of temporal distinction between the west and its others that are regularly used as justification of international intervention and aggrandisement in which queer sexualities are co-opted. The song aptly attests to the international circulation of artistic and cultural practices that is manifest in Paola and Chiara's reference to the classical Indian text of *Kama Sutra* and the Punjabi song. As a paradigmatic moment of western cultural theft of third world art, the song follows the routine trajectory of what Gopinath terms 'the standard circuits of commodification and appropriation.'¹⁸ The performance offers an insight into how global modes of consumption underpin questions of queer identity whereby exoticism in the form of South Asian culture can become readily available for the articulation of the western queer subject even whilst the sisters play at being lesbian and do not indeed offer a positive perception of queerness.

By absorbing the literary and cultural forms of expression from other geographical locations, western queer subjectivity simultaneously defines itself in opposition to a non-western Other and opens up mainstream spaces to cross-cultural influences. However, it embodies the exotic otherness of South Asia in a tangential and subordinate relation to western queer sexuality as the exclusive focus on the sexualized bond between the sisters resists any sustained representation of the South Asian elements. Queer sexuality, framed within the dominant western cultural specificity of fusion between the east and the west, elides and occludes alternative spaces of cultural expression when such spaces encounter their western counterparts. In other words, the centrality of the incestuous relation between Paola and Chiara inevitably marginalizes and results in the erasure of non-western cultural spaces that the song invoked in the first place.

Interestingly, both citations of South Asian culture in the song 'Kamasutra' are dependent upon diasporic articulations of the nation. The US-based Indian filmmaker Mira Nair directed *Kama Sutra: A Love Story* (1996), and the Punjabi song features in her internationally acclaimed film *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8nYL4NsAYk>). Paola and Chiara's references thus borrow from diasporic translations of South Asian culture, and make evident the transnational trajectory of cultural and literary representations. The incorporation of exotic themes in fact illustrates how third world cultural practices systematically require diasporic revision and adaptation in order to become intelligible in the west.¹⁹ Furthermore, the direct reliance on diasporic frameworks to (re-)present postcolonial national cultures regulates the movement of non-western cultural products. Extending the paradigm of capitalist regulation of goods, I suggest that South Asian cultural products necessitate the process of validation through the diasporas prior to their entry as global commodities. By opting for Nair's version of Indian culture, the sisters control and command the access of third world cultural practices in first world markets.

Walking away

Paola and Chiara's allusions to South Asia demand additional scrutiny as they obliterate complex histories of South Asian queer sexuality. Vatsyayana's text *Kama Sutra* (fourth century C.E.) has gained popularity in the west, as Michael J. Sweet notes, for 'its treatment

of sex in its more mechanical aspects, although that only forms a part of its subject matter.²⁰ It also offers an examination of non-normative sexuality such that 'the proponents of a gay liberation ideology ... have sometimes refashioned this text according to their own wishes.'²¹ Even though the reference to the ancient text *Kama Sutra* is a coded acknowledgement of its queer aspect within the thematic specificity of the song, it explicitly functions as a complement to the performance of the sisters. On the other hand, Punjabi folk songs with all-female voices and dance performance called *Giddha*, conventionally feature in wedding rituals and celebrations in North India and Pakistan. Culturally, they are markers of female homosocial spaces and often involve overtly sexual lyrics and homoerotic performances. In her critical evaluation of Nair's diasporic refashioning of female folk songs, Gopinath suggests that she replaces the 'queer potential' of the female homosocial place by 'straight female bonding' in *Monsoon Wedding*.²² Similarly, in referencing the Punjabi song, Paola and Chiara evidently point to the space of queer female pleasure that it occupies. However, the gradual absorption and elision of the song "The Henna of Dark Gardens" forecloses the possibility of South Asian queer female pleasure even while it evokes it. The South Asian voices are abrasively absorbed and occluded in the Italian setting. To borrow from Dussel, Paola and Chiara's liberatory sexuality is 'constituted in a dialectical relation with a non-European alterity that is its ultimate content.'²³ Yet, the silencing of the non-western subject is in effect the erasure of female homoeroticism with its enduring legacy of homosocial history in South Asia, especially since the sisters fashionably appropriate queerness. Therefore, the song establishes queerness as a western construction in which queer elements from the global south can only become visible when they serve to augment, highlight and complement western queerness.

The elision of South Asian homoeroticism in the pastiche of queer identity resonates with the routine process of commodification of third world items in a first world context, a process that neither acknowledges nor disputes the global hegemony of the west. Two other critical instances of the regular absorption and erasure of the global south in *products* of the north include performances of Boy George and Queen. The band Culture Club's song 'Karma Chameleon' (1983) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JmcA9LIIXWw>) topped the charts in the UK and became a successful single globally establishing Boy George's queerness/androgyny as the single most defining feature of the song. I would aver that Boy

George's queerness precludes the meaning of the Hindu concept of Karma even though it is summoned in the title. More significantly, the music video sets the scene in Mississippi in 1870 and depicts cross-racial relations in incredibly benign terms. Queerness, I would argue, predicates upon and glosses over racism and becomes problematic in this regard. The second example concerns the literal erasure of the third world marker from the band Queen's main singer, Freddie Mercury. Often regarded as an iconic queer figure, Freddie Mercury was born Farookh Bulsara to Parsi-Indian parents in Zanzibar. His father worked for the colonial administration. The foreseeable suppression of his Parsi name and the adoption of the name Freddie Mercury speaks to the ways in which queer diasporic renditions in the first world produce the injunction of *leaving behind* the history of the third world. It is a similar movement to the incorporation of Nair's diasporic rhythms into Paola and Chiara's song.

However, by investigating the particularly effaced moment that is the queer experience of Giddha, I refuse the eurocentric linear east-to-west movement and its concomitant teleological sequence of progress and development, which inexorably posit western formations as central to articulations of modernity. My insistence on Punjabi women's folk songs and performances is particularly critical of the traditional assumptions about the modernity of the west, assumptions that foreclose any engagement with the complex colonial and postcolonial queer histories of South Asia. Concurrently, it signals a commitment to the promise of a queer/decolonial reading of cultural practices. Paola and Chiara's song proffers a critical point of reference in addressing the multiple issues that constitute the work of decolonizing queerness. With this in mind, I follow Quijano's call 'to learn to free ourselves from the Eurocentric mirror where our image is always, necessarily distorted.'²⁴ Seeking to interrupt practices of absorption and gradual obliteration of non-western/non-white subjects in dominant western productions that, like the Italian song, expunge local specificity from global products, I *walk away* from the regular, matter-of-fact silencing and marginalization of non-western practices when considered in relation to their occidental counterparts.

The decolonial option for queerness

Eurocentrism is not a geographical construct. Instead it functions as a relationality that creates the “South” in relation to the “North”. In several instances it sustains and reproduces itself through processes of epistemological colonization. The ability to delink from such processes, as Mignolo suggests, can create the conditions for effective epistemological decolonization. This movement of delinking is, in my view, the movement of *walking away* from ‘the Totality of Western epistemology, grounded in Latin and Greek and expanded around the globe by means of the six imperial and vernacular European languages of modernity.’²⁵ In this chapter, the enactment of *walking away* from imperial languages and cultures materializes as *walking towards* Punjabi as both language and culture. It is a move towards the decolonial option, which is nothing more than *an option* among other options. In Mignolo’s words, this option is distinct from a ‘mission’ or the ‘civilizing mission’ since it is not constructed around ‘abstract universalisms’; instead it is characterized by ‘a world of “truths” in parenthesis.’ ‘Thinking decolonially,’ in this context, ‘(that is, thinking within the frame of the decolonial option) means to start from “enunciation” and not from “representation” ... The enunciation is constituted by certain actors, languages, and categories of thoughts, beliefs, and sensing.’²⁶ This implies that in the domain of queer studies, like the editors of the recent issue of *GLQ* titled “Area Impossible”, I attempt to ‘reinvent, from the are(n)as of the stories told, new queer idioms of the geopolitical.’²⁷ The option of reading specifically those purportedly traditional instances of Punjabi cultural practices that surface at the heart of heteronormative institutions such as marriage, births and other scripted/conventional life events gestures towards a de-linking from imperial languages and cultures and, a decolonial shift towards other “truths” in parenthesis.’

Foregrounding the long-standing customs and rites that animate a wedding, birth or significant heteronormative life-events, Giddha offers a spectacle of song and dance accompanied by drum beats in the Punjab regions of both India and Pakistan. The key manifestations of Giddha include the Mehendi (Henna) ceremony, the Batna (turmeric paste) ceremony, Jaago (all night dance in the village), ladies sangeet (music and dance before any wedding), Ghodi (when sisters sing for their brother’s wedding) and other performances linked to the change of seasons and celebration of new-borns. The performances are all-female spectacles, marked by the absence of men in the women-centric rituals and enscribed in highly coded rituals. These bodily, sometimes bawdy

sensations are characterized by physical indeterminacy which results in women playing male parts in the performance or participating in homosocial pleasure of affection, community and embrace. I suggest that Giddha creates and ceaselessly recreates the experience of female pleasure through a recall of the historically contingent availability of an enduring cultural practice. Further, the marginalization of biological males by their non-presence functions not only as a covert critique of heteropatriarchy as the women articulate their own oppression by redrawing the lines of oppressive social organization, it also enables a queer space where women's bodies through the enactment of physical desire are affirmed in homoerotic embrace. Patently, these queer performances, considered in the arena of domestic space, enable an escape even though momentary from the quotidian life of labour.

Following the investment of women of colour feminists and third world feminist scholars in critiquing differential racialized oppression of women, a remarkable oversight in white feminist studies, María Lugones problematizes and revises Quijano's conceptualization of 'coloniality of power.' Her focus on historical analyses of gendered sexuality makes racial heteropatriarchy emerge as a key signifier of the colonial/modern gender system that is entrenched in systems of eurocentred global power. The decolonial possibility, that Lugones highlights, decentres the 'binary, hierarchical, oppressive gender formation that rests on male supremacy without any clear understanding of the mechanisms by which heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification are impossible to understand apart from each other.'²⁸ Affirming the availability of pre-colonial multifarious genders and sexualities with examples from Yoruba and Native American cultures, she asserts that, 'as global, Eurocentered capitalism was constituted through colonization, gender differentials were introduced where there were none' in cultures which 'recognized "third" gendering and homosexuality positively' and consistently offered 'a gynecentric construction of knowledge ... that counters the knowledge production of modernity.'²⁹ Locating my discussion of the decolonial option for South Asian queerness in this frame, I suggest that through the numerous gender trajectories that have continued uninterruptedly in pre- and post-colonial times, Giddha performances excavate the historiography of possible gender and sexual configuration(s). The cultural archive that is uncovered in the endlessly repeated gestures of women masquerading as men opens up the unbroken stream of women's homosocial

bonding, 'the gynecentric construction of knowledge,' that memory through Punjabi mehendi songs and *boliyaan* (couplets) keeps intact.

There is an established history of men participating as women in Sufi poetry or Punjabi songs. Complimenting this routine aesthetic experience is the almost ritual/religious role of *hijras* (neither men nor women) in South Asian cultures. However, placing the emphasis on women's experience of ritual, even homosocial rituals, shows the violence of the 'dark side of the gender system',³⁰ to borrow from Lugones, that in the case of hijras allows celebration of the birth of male heirs thus reflecting upon their own perceived non-masculinity and for women often results in forced subjugation or even death in heteropatriarchal structures. It is precisely the masquerade of gender in Giddha that enables a critique of violence enacted upon women's bodies.³¹

The plausibility of female queer sexuality is initiated in the female-to-male gender inscription. Commenting upon all-women spaces in India, Zakia Pathak underscores the 'ritual recognition of the need for the release of emotions in uninhibited speech' during 'social, secular, gatherings of women at the wedding ceremony' where 'bawdiness is freely allowed.'³² Similarly, Gopinath argues that 'a Giddha performance itself, in its production of female homosocial space, may allow for forms of female intimacy that exceed the heteronormative.'³³ As in the staged performance 'भेंहँची भेंहँची' ('Henna, Henna') (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3h9SdIWC2bI>), the simulation of the heterosexual act by women iterates and enhances the queer aesthetic of the performance.³⁴ In the context of South Asian cultures, women playing men are particularly insightful instances of the relation between genders – and I am carefully using the pluralized form of the term "gender" here – since the crossing of genders has often been subject to heteronormative gendered hierarchies. Men playing women's role in local theatres in India and Pakistan, and in dance performances such as the Kathakali, signal the control of access to public space for women. That Giddha embodies the space of women performing men and simultaneously enables the expression of sexual desire between women indicates the iterative possibility of queerness that lies outside the colonial modern/gender system. The recuperation of the homoerotic pleasures in Giddha by Bollywood in several song-and-dance sequences

constructed around marriage rituals emblemizes the potential of its queer genealogy. In addition, the effacement of the Punjabi song in Paola and Chiara's performance, cited in the previous section, is constitutive of the erasure of the oral archive of Punjabi queerness.

Queer decolonial aestheSis

Decolonial aestheSis is a movement that is naming and articulating practices that challenge and subvert the hegemony of modern/colonial aestheSis. Decolonial aestheSis starts from the consciousness that the modern/colonial project has implied not only control of the economy, the political, and knowledge, but also control over the senses and perception. Modern aestheTics have played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of aestheSis, of sensing and perceiving. Decolonial aestheSis is an option that delivers a radical critique to modern, postmodern, and altermodern aestheTics and, simultaneously, contributes to making visible decolonial subjectivities at the confluence of popular practices of re-existence, artistic installations, theatrical and musical performances, literature and poetry, sculpture and other visual arts.³⁵

In the staged performance titled 'ਵੇ ਗੁਰਦਿਤੇ ਦੇਆ ਲਾਲਾ' ('O Gurditey's father') (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YNzal9iYAR8>), a woman, the grandmother of the bride, sits in the centre of a group of women clapping their hands to the rhythms of her song in which she plays the mother of a boy called Gurdit. Another woman, her own daughter, sits close to her, wearing the dupatta in the form of a turban, playing Gurdit's father. The grandmother wraps her orange silk dupatta on her face to mark/to parody the inhibition in women and their expressions. She sings to her husband, Gurdit's father, about the cycle of pregnancy whereby from the first month to the eighth month her desire for lemons, mangoes and sour foods becomes increasingly pressing. As Gurdit's father comforts her with simple utterances of affirmation to her mounting pain, she becomes impatient and curses him. The beats of the song participate in the urgency with which the grandmother recounts the advance of the pregnancy. Both the women regularly engage in a queer embrace where Gurdit's mother pushes away her husband. She says, 'ਮੈਨੂੰ ਪੁਹਾਡਾ ਪਾਕੇ ਤੂੰ ਪਯਾ ਵੇਹਲਾ ਫਿਰਦਾ' ('You put me in this trouble and now you are roaming free'). Sexual labour that results in the pregnancy becomes the focus of her curses.

The performance instantiates the resistance of Punjabi women against heteropatriarchal oppression. Lugones describes resistant subjectivity as one that 'often expresses itself infra-politically, rather than in a politics of the public, which has an easy inhabitation of public contestation.' She adds that, 'infra-politics marks the turn inward, in a politics of resistance, toward liberation. It shows the power of communities of the oppressed in constituting resistant meaning against the constitution of social organization by power.'³⁶ I contend the availability of queer infra-politics in Giddha performances clears the space for a critique of heteropatriarchy. In this regard, the women's hierarchical reversal of gender roles within the frames of queerness actualizes as queer aesthetics in this performance. This queer aesthetics is already (dis-)orientated by the dupatta-turban clad patriarch who attempts to embrace his wife. Even though it is a parodic-cum-blithe enactment, the queer displacement of the husband's authority, as he tries to alleviate his wife's discomfort, generates an overt condemnation of reproductive heteromatriarchy.

Queer aesthetics in the performance functions in a non-normative relation to language. In Punjabi cultures the form of address for a husband is acknowledged by language of respect. Often, women do not call their husbands by their names. The word 'ji' functions as a signifier of respect for elders and its several forms can be used to mark respect for husbands. The title of the song therefore omits the name of the husband who is named as Gurdit's father. However, gendered hierarchies are subtly overturned by the husband's constant incantation of saying "ਜੀ" ("yes" and adding "ji") to it while the wife sings her pain. The respect that the husband displays then characterizes the politics of the 'inward turn', in Lugones's words, in order to critique standard conceptions of gender.

Linguistic wordplay is an indispensable feature of Giddha songs. It is through the subversive management of language codes that the critique of oppressive structures becomes intelligible. English language itself, the over-permeating linguistic, colonial signifier in South Asia, accommodates as a partial presence in the Punjabi couplets of the performance. Critiquing the prevalent practice of polygamy, Gurdit's mother

expresses anxiety at her deteriorating health which would prove beneficial to her husband's other wife. She interrogates the father whether her gardens, her silks, her outfits, her cosmetics and her trousseau will all be the property of the other wife. She sings,

ਹਾਏ ਮੇਰੇ ਗੋਹਣੇ ਤੇ ਕੱਪੜੇ, ਹਾਏ ਮੇਰੇ ਸੰਦਲ ਸਲੀਪਰ

ਹਾਏ ਮੇਰੇ ਸੂਟ ਤੇ ਸਿਲਕਾਂ, ਹਾਏ ਮੇਰੀ ਪੌਡਰ ਕਰੀਮਾਂ

ਸਭ ਕੁਛ ਕੌਣ ਸਮੇਸੀ, ਮੇਰੀ ਸੌਕਣ ਸਾਮੇਂ?

(All my jewellery and clothes, all my sandals and slippers,

all my suits and silks, all my powders and creams,

Who will take care of them? Will your other wife inherit them?)

In a carefully nuanced revision of English, she adjusts the pluralized form of the words “powder”, “cream” and “silk” to harmonize with Punjabi declensions. The queer aesthetic that allows critique of heteropatriarchy redoubles as the queer decolonial aesthetic whereby English *is assimilated into* critical encoding of Punjabi queerness. In this critical vocabulary, words such as “ਪੌਡਰ” (“podder”), “ਕਰੀਮਾਂ” (“careemaan”) and “ਸਿਲਕਾਂ” (“silkaan”) denote the collapse of conventional distinctions between colonizing and colonized languages in post-colonial global economies of consumption.³⁷ Colonial linguistic normativity that ‘enables the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices,’³⁸ as Mignolo and Vázquez suggest in their definition of decolonial aesthetic, is re-configured in the queer decolonial bind.

Queer re-emergence

Reading queerness decolonially opens up new avenues of exciting critical enquiry into queer South Asian formulations. I have attempted to counter the knowledge-producing western formations of modernity through a reading of queer and decolonial transactions which surface when cultural practices such as Giddha, that are deliberately attached to attributes of the “non-modern” in eurocentric frames, receive sustained critical focus. The over-invested analytical category of queerness can redeem its occidental bias by staging a re-emergence of sorts in its alignment with decoloniality. My proposed reading above is *only one possibility* in the exploration of the queerness of Giddha and other forms of cultural expression from non-white western worlds. As such, queer readings of Giddha can offer

multiple critical insights into diasporic revisions of dominant paradigms, configurations of caste hierarchies that have recently been enunciated by the artist Ginni Mahi, the queer patriarchal bond that binds women across generations, uncritical accounts of beauty, narratives of migration and queer performances of marriage, to name a few. Certainly, the work of building such queer historiography, what Quijano would term, 'epistemological reconstitution,'³⁹ must remain attentive to the aural/oral nature of this geo-biographical archive.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is critical to appreciate non-western queerness as another option that does not re-create the relations of domination or hierarchy with other modes of existence including heterosexuality. Queerness, in this context, neither supersedes nor substitutes extant cultural practices in any geographical location. What I have offered is one legible option of experiencing queerness through the decolonial perspective. This option remains committed to momentous crossings in theories and cultures and hinges on partial, un-recounted and unfinished narrations that will perhaps one day articulate how multiple decolonial and queer futures coincide, collide and benefit mutually. The visible gaps that this chapter has left behind rest on the optimism that further analyses will engage with those his/herstories, transgender narratives and even queerly *straightforward* anecdotes that I could not recount.

Acknowledgements as anecdotes

This chapter develops my presentation at the Summer Institute titled "Towards a Non-Eurocentric Academia: Border Thinking and Decoloniality from Asia to Africa and from Europe to the Americas," co-organised by the University of North Carolina and Duke University in May 2016.

Audre Lorde and Sara Ahmed, two queer women of colour thinkers of our times have emphasized the power of (queer) anecdotes to reshape our presents and reimagine our futures. Writing, telling, retelling our stories, our anecdotes can be both daunting and emancipatory. Below are two anecdotes to underscore the significance of why this chapter, this work is important to me.

Anecdote I:

In January 2015, my mentors and research collaborators, Suhraiya Jivraj and Silvia Posocco, and myself met in Ile Saint Louis in Paris to organise the first draft of the present collection. We were still in the process of reading the contributions and were reflecting upon the timescale for corrections, redrafts, revisions and other matters. The television in the flat constantly relayed the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting along with the escalation of threat of war from various French political formations. We wondered if we would ever terminate our three-day editorial meeting in a satisfactory manner given the violently morose atmosphere in Paris. However, the collective care, the lunch and dinner outings and walks, the *choux* pastries and couscous maintained an extraordinary semblance of routine reality that enabled the successful completion of our meeting.

Anecdote II:

As a child I considered all languages to be a single language. The realization of difference in languages occurred when I was travelling on holiday in Punjab in the 1980s. Seeing the Punjab Roadways buses was a routine sight, and yet, once, my father asked me to read the destination written on the buses. I wondered how my father who taught me complex mathematical operations could not actually read the boards on the buses. I realised that they were in Punjabi. My mother and I are the only ones who can read Punjabi among my people. This memory has made me more sensitive to the loss of language since Punjabi will diminish with me in the family. My sister does not read or write it and my niece and nephew cannot even speak it. Surely it must mean *something* to have the gift of a language that binds me in a bond with my mother despite my (un-)settled re-homing in French.

Notes

¹ Enrique Dussel 'Eurocentrism and Modernity (Introduction to the Frankfurt Lectures),' *Boundary 2* 20/3 (1993), 65-76, 66.

² See, Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity'; Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America,' *Nepantla: Views from South* 1/3 (2000), 533-580; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000).

³ Walter D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto,' *Transmodernity* 1/2 (2011), 44-66, 49.

⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, 'Global Coloniality and World Disorder: Decoloniality after Decolonization and Dewesternization after the Cold War,' *World Public Forum: Dialogue of Civilizations* (2016).

⁵ Quijano asserts that 'the Eurocentric pretension to be the exclusive producer and protagonist of modernity ... is an ethnocentric pretension and, in the long run, provincial.' Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power,' 544.

⁶ Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 24.

⁷ Walter D. Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 26/7-8 (2009), 1-23, 2.

⁸ Mignolo argues that, in the western narratives of modernity, non-European territories appear as 'places of nonthought' i.e., 'of myth, non-western religions, folklore, underdevelopment involving regions and people,' who 'have been waking up from the long process of westernization.' Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience,' 3.

⁹ For similar discussions of western models of queerness, see, Ruth Vanita, ed. *Queering India: Same-Sex Love and Eroticism in Indian Culture and Society* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002); Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV, eds. *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ In a similar vein, Raju Rage and Mia Nikasimo's contributions in this volume work to underscore the problematic relation of imperial language to queer of colour realities.

¹¹ Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,' *Cultural Studies* 21/2-3 (2007), 168-178, 177.

¹² In terms of historical narratives, Dussel argues that Hegel's philosophical arguments locate 'Asia in a state of "immaturity" or "childhood" (*Kindheit*). Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity,' 69.

¹³ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 12.

¹⁴ Dussel cites from Hegel's *Lectures* (1955): 'The movement of Universal History goes from the East to the West. Europe is the absolute end of Universal History. Asia is its beginning.' Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity,' 69.

¹⁵ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 7; Ratna Kapur, 'Multi-tasking Queer: Reflections on the Possibilities of Homosexual Dissidence in Law,' *Jindal Global Law Review* 4/1 (2012), 36-59, 47.

¹⁶ Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan, *Queer Globalizations*, 5-6. The deployment of queerness as a marker of Western modernity is documented and critiqued by Cindy Patton in her informed analysis of lesbian and gay rights in Taiwan. She explains how queer human rights discourse becomes complicit with a masculinist agenda of nationalism. See, 'Stealth Bombers of Desire: The Globalization of "Alterity" in Emerging Democracies,' in *Queer Globalizations*, eds. Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan, 195-218.

¹⁷ Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 41.

¹⁸ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 29.

¹⁹ For an insightful assessment of *Monsoon Wedding* as a diasporic product that, in several ways, explains Indian culture to the world, see Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 114-26. She asserts that, 'Nair functions as native informant and tour guide who traffics in the production of "authenticity" for the global marketplace.' Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 115.

²⁰ Michael J. Sweet, 'Eunuchs, Lesbians, and Other Mythical Beasts: Queering and De-queering the *Kama Sutra*,' in *Queering India*, ed. Vanita, 77-84, 77.

²¹ Sweet, 'Eunuchs, Lesbians,' 77.

²² Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 120.

²³ Dussel, 'Eurocentrism and Modernity,' 65.

²⁴ Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power,' 574.

²⁵ Mignolo, 'Delinking,' 493.

²⁶ Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, 'Decolonial Options and Artistic/Aesthetic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo,' *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3/1 (2014), 196-212, 198-199.

²⁷ Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel, 'Area Impossible: Notes toward an Introduction,' *GLQ* 22/2 (2016), 151-171, 166. Compare with Mignolo, who argues that decolonial thinking implies a change in the content *and the terms* of the foundation of knowledge systems. He says that, 'changing the terms of the conversation implies going beyond disciplinary or interdisciplinary controversies and the conflict of interpretations.' Mignolo, 'Epistemic Disobedience,' 4. Within queer studies, Arondekar and Patel similarly point to the challenge of re-writing geo-political and geo-historical queer narratives that are not informed by the centrality of the US, since 'such explorations were and continue to be resolutely contemporary and drawn primarily from the United States; that is, geopolitics provides the exemplars, but rarely the epistemologies.' Arondekar and Patel, 'Area Impossible,' 152. Also see, Arondekar's work on the im/possibility of recovering the historical archive of same-sex relations in the South Asia within the context of Eurocentric queer studies in Anjali Arondekar, 'In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia,' *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 25/3 (2015), 98-121.

²⁸ María Lugones, 'Heterosexuality and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,' *Hypatia* 22/1 (2007), 186-209, 187. Complimentary to Lugones's framing of racialized imposition of heterosexuality, Shefali Chandra provides the specificities of its implementation in India where caste, sexuality and white female sexuality interacted to create differential structures of power. Shefali Chandra, 'Whiteness on the Margins of Native Patriarchy: Race, Caste, Sexuality, and the Agenda of Transnational Studies,' *Feminist Studies* 1 (2011), 127-153, 128.

²⁹ Lugones, 'Heterosexuality,' 196. In her work on lesbian sexuality and visibility in contemporary India, Naisargi Dave points to a similar system of oppressive coloniality of power whereby 'queer women in India had not felt themselves torn between sexuality and nation until that incommensurability was strategically introduced in an act of interpellation that worked to contain an increasingly socially disruptive intensity.' Naisargi N. Dave, 'Indian and Lesbian and What Came Next: Affect, Commensuration, and Queer Emergences,' *American Ethnologist* 38/4 (2011), 650-665, 660.

³⁰ Lugones, 'Heterosexuality,' 206.

³¹ In her work on Bhangra (Punjabi men's performances), Gopinath expounds on the re-imagining of the nation in the UK that incorporates South Asian sound communities. In her view, the over-saturating impulse of equating Punjabi music primarily with Bhangra is highly problematic since it results in the erasure of Giddha and women-only experience. The diasporic rendition of the modern/colonial gender system, in this case, congeals into a masculine postcolonial (re-)presentation of colonized cultures. See, Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 29-62.

³² Zakia Pathak, 'Defamiliarizing Practices: The Scene of Feminist Pedagogy,' in *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics*, eds. Joan W. Scott, Kora Caplan and Debra Keates (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 341-354, 349.

³³ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 49.

³⁴ The diasporic performance of 'भेंहँची भेंहँची' ('Henna, Henna') by one male lead performer in a YouTube video titled 'Master Deepak Mehndi Mehndi Mehndi' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ly2qzFFJGc>) demonstrates how queerness re-circulates in transnational articulations.

³⁵ Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, 'Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings,' *Social Text* (2013), http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aestheSis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/.

³⁶ María Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism,' *Hypatia* 25/4 (2010), 742-759, 746.

³⁷ Hijras, for instance, use language queerly in order to confound the feminine/masculine binary. See, Kira Hall, 'Go Suck your Husband's Sugarcane: Hijras and the Use of Sexual Insult,' in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, eds. Anna Livia and Kira Hall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 430-460, 448-449.

³⁸ Mignolo and Vázquez, 'Decolonial AestheSis'.

³⁹ Quijano, 'Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,' 177.