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Joyraj and Debanuj: Queering the city across space and time

Paul Boyce and Rohit K Dasgupta

Introduction: Querying Kolkata

In this article we want to evoke two characters that each suggest different points of departure for thinking about Kolkata as a queer kind of space. By this we want to query ways in which non-heteronormative and non-cis gendered life-worlds might be evoked and contested in respect of ethnographic context. Putative queer characters, we suggest, may be present but always not necessarily evident in a given location, this being an attribute of how sexually and gender dissident life-ways may require secrecy even as they may also, in parallel, entail overtness (Boyce and Dasgupta 2019). This is conversant with a viewpoint whereby queer (as an adjective) does not simply imply extant queerly identifying subjects (Wilson 2019). As such, and while here we are concerned with sexual and gender ‘non-normative’ life-worlds, our wider intent is to employ a queer (ethnographic) perspective as it opens out vistas on worldly phenomenon in respect of their capacity for dissent and difference, qualities that may not always be tangible from a heteronormative perspective. This entail a focus not only on human social actors but also attention to objects, places and other entities for their capacity to query social and material worlds (Graham 2014, Manalansan 2013). Architecture, infrastructures, city landscapes and so on may be read for their often suffuse and hidden queer experiences; cinema halls in Kolkata for example that have offered shadowy spaces for same-sex encounters; the social worlds of cruising areas in the city – centrally located but hidden, depending on perspective (Boyce 2007); and the role of the digital- a medium through which queer life-worlds are expressed and performed, within and across urban and suburban landscapes in ways that may be deeply present but empirically intangible (Dasgupta, 2017, 2020; Dasgupta and Dasgupta, 2018)

In proposing these viewpoints we seek to evoke a dispersed conceptualization of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’, and material and insubstantive attributes of our ‘Kolkata characterizations’. This disrupts any envisioning of places and persons as if they were discrete entities, in relation to which and whom the ethnographer (or other researcher) might simply write about people while sketching in social and geographical context as

if simply a neutral background. Rather we explore our characters' being-in-Kolkata in respect of their senses of world and self as sites of our interconnected experiencing as these in turn come to be phrased by us as authors in the present text (Lillis 2008) .

This quality emerges in the stories told here in respect of our representation of Kolkata not only as a site of everyday life but as a locus of aspiration and departure; our characters *actual* but also *imagined* presences in the city perform as a means via which they each, and how we as ethnographers, have conceived a sense of same-sex desiring as pertaining to identity in relation to place. Thus even as our characters are not always, or even often, in the city, Kolkata itself can be seen to perform as an actant in the making of their life-projects (Dhall, 2020)

In the terms we propose Kolkata emerges as both deeply present and partially elsewhere and intangible. This coheres too with how the city, and the lives of the characters about whom we write, are also partial aspects of our own experience, and hence necessarily of ethnographic representation. As authors neither of us lives in Kolkata any longer. Rohit was born in the city and worked within LGBT organising and sexual health advocacy until moving away for doctoral studies in 2009 only to return to research on queer men's digital culture in 2011. Paul moved from London to Kolkata in the mid 1990s to work in one of the early HIV prevention projects for 'men who have sex with men' that was being set up there at the time. This soon after led to a number of years living in the city for doctoral and post-doctoral work focused on problems of conceiving sexualities and gender in HIV prevention. We both share a sensibility of the city as context wherein our life-worlds, as same sex desiring men, have taken shape at times intimately with its contours; evocative of secret places, lost loves and changes in the sexual landscape of a city that we have variously lived in, left and returned to.

Sometimes we have reflected that we share the city out of synch; we met in London and recall many common places and events in Kolkata that in fact we could not possibly have shared. Although we sometimes lived in the city at the same time we did not know one another then and our experiences are separated by time and age. Paul's most formative experiences in Kolkata were during his late twenties in the mid 1990s whilst Rohit got involved with queer organising when he turned sixteen in the mid 2010's a good decade later. And yet we feel a connected history. This is much in

the way in which queer experience disrupts linear temporal imaginaries, both as a theoretical framework, and way for being. Queer life projects may be both present in the world and yet unrealized, the time for their proper manifestation not having arrived (Munoz 2009). Such circumstances present complex epistemological challenges for ethnographers as they might seek to describe queer-life worlds in the present when the conditions of the proper liveability of queer lives do not pertain (Hendriks 2018, Boyce et al. 2018).ⁱ

Within these circumstances, and their temporal and contextual complexities, the characters whose stories we focus on have come in and out of our lives over time, as we have met up with them during return visits to Kolkata; or as we have reconnected elsewhere in the world (one of our characters moved to the US in the mid 1990s and did not spend much time in the city for many years thereafter). Amidst these journeys there are then no ‘whole’ characterizations of the city or people on display in this paper; no complete sense of Kolkata or authoritative accounting of our chosen characters as if simply representative of extant queer life-worlds – fixed in time and space.

As such we are consciously disrupting any sense that ethnographic characterizations may be magnified to say authoritative things about a given context, in the way that anthropological uses of character in the past (and sometimes still today) have been employed to speak about a whole groups of people; an analytical operation via which individuals have been made to stand for wholes, so to speak (Reed and Bialecki 2018). Rather we seek to pursue a version of ethnographic characterization whereby characters (and contexts) are themselves sites of alternating possibilities and changing worldly experience (Reed and Bialecki 2018). Such an approach queries certitude in any recounting of the ethnographic ‘other’ and allows for portraits of the people and places to speak in more equivocal terms (Boyce and Dasgupta, 2019). Such an approach speaks to, tensions in our text, since the remit of this special edition is to write about Kolkata characters, a premise perhaps being that stories of singular subjects tell us something about a greater whole, Kolkata (and vice versa, that the city reveals itself through characters). Nonetheless our approach is to defer any authoritative truth claims. Rather the fractures, fantasies and flights in our characters’,

and our own, relation to Kolkata emerge as scenes of necessarily incomplete depiction and partial experiencing.

At the core of our article is also a consideration of what queer liveable lives look and feel like (Banerjea and Browne, 2018). Building on Judith Butler's (2004) premise that liveability is more than just survival; Banerjea and Browne ask us to rethink struggle and resistance, charting queer lives (in India and the UK) both through and against hegemonic orders and normativities. For both of our characters liveability can be interpreted as a struggle for meaning and fulfilment across shifting time and space in relation to Kolkata as a site of socio-sexual possibilities and problems. Our characters also describe a modality of queer utopianism which is invested in potentiality for transformation and resistance associated with imagined better futures, that in the stories given here Kolkata both represents and refuses (Boyce and Dasgupta, 2017; Munoz 2009).

The first of our characters, Joyraj, is recounted by Rohit; a story of friendship that was forged in the process of research. The second character, Debanuj, is narrated by Paul; a story of friendship that crosses lines between researcher and researched and memory and forgetting. Taken together each character portrait may say something about the greater whole, Kolkata, but in equivocal terms. Each story also queries the role of friendship, intimacy and the forging of kinship bonds during the process of doing research with queer participants (Tillman, 2003).

Joyraj

When I (Rohit) first encountered Joyraj, I must say I was quite intimidated. I had met him on an online chat forum on PlanetRomeo, the popular gay social networking site. I say intimidated because Joyraj was a confident, vivacious 18 year old who always had an opinion on almost everything that people were discussing on the forum whilst I was more of a 'lurker' than participant on these forums. One particular 'thread' was on 'coming out'. Whilst most of the other participants were churning out the liberal lines of- 'we can only be free when we are out and proud,' Joyraj was quick to admonish them. He wrote:

Ei je eto out and proud bolchish tora. Amake jokhon bari theke baar kore debe tokhon ki tora amake matha gojar thai dibi naki chakri dibi. Eishob ingreji customs borolokder chole amader moto nimno modhobittyora pare na

(All of you are talking about coming out and being proud. What happens when I get thrown out of my house- will you offer me refuge or get me a job? All these 'English' customs work for you rich people but not for lower middle class people like me).

Joyraj's outburst was not received with much enthusiasm on that forum. Some even responded that he should be writing in English and not Bengali as it was the global language. Others just did not engage with his comment and moved on. In some ways the silence and critique his comment received went on to show the classed nature which had gripped the queer movement and especially the gay social scene in Kolkata in 2009.

My next meeting with Joyraj happened quite by chance. This time it was on the steps of Nandan, a film and cultural centre in the middle of Kolkata on a hot July afternoon. The high court had just read down section 377 effectively decriminalising homosexuality in India. I had received a few texts from my friends informing about an informal get together to celebrate the decision. By the time I reached, the steps of Academy of Fine Arts in Nandan area had become a sea of rainbow. People were laughing and dancing. Several activists had tears in their eyes. The media was chatting to everyone present. A little away from me there were three young boys standing- all dressed in t shirts and jeans with generous amounts of kohl in their eyes. I thought I recognised Joyraj amongst them. I was almost tempted to go up to him and speak but realised how strange this might look given we had never even chatted online. Suddenly the confidence that intimidated me online vanished. The Joyraj I saw standing there in the midst of our celebrations looked slightly lost, maybe a bit unnerved but with a smile on his face. As I contemplated whether to walk up to him, a group of individuals had started singing 'amader bhoy kahare' (What fear have we of anyone) and 'amra korbo joy' (we shall overcome). There was a sudden change in Joyraj as he joined the chorus of singers and started dancing with them.

Around this time my friends decided to go for a drink and I left with them. There was a clear unspoken class divide as some of us headed towards a pub whilst others walked towards Howrah and Sealdah stations to get their trains back home to suburbia. Joyraj by then had disappeared. I did not think we would ever end up meeting each other again after this...

ASL (Age, Sex, Location)

Online chatrooms on yahoo became quite popular amongst the gay community in Kolkata in the early 2000's with ASL as the preferred greeting. I was somewhat surprised when I suddenly received a similar private message from Joyraj one day on Planet Romeo. It had been a few months since I had seen him in the celebration rally in Nandan. I responded with a hello and said I was in my 20's and lived in Tollygunje. Joyraj responded immediately this time in Bengali asking if I was Bengali. When I replied affirmatively he started chatting in Bengali. Despite some initial flirtatious messages to each other we soon established there was no sexual or romantic connection. In some ways this was liberatory for both of us. As Joyraj told me many years later- 'I did not have to continue pretending I was masculine and try to impress you.' I replied I was under a similar pressure too!

Over the next few weeks Joyraj and I chatted almost everyday. Joyraj lived in Barasat, a suburban neighbourhood in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal, part of the Greater Kolkata metropolitan area. In private Joyraj was much more open and vulnerable. Gone was his confidence and swagger that he displayed on the public forums. Joyraj came from a lower middle class family. His father had a clerical job and the family did not have a computer at home. His neighbourhood Ashwin Cyber Cafe was his way of engaging with a wider and imagined gay community in the city. The cyber café and the endless opportunities of the internet however was not without its dangers. Once whilst he was browsing Planet Romeo, the owner suddenly came and stood over his computer screen. When he saw the pictures of semi nude men, he was given a tight slap for watching pornographic content and told he would not be allowed in if he ever did this again.

From then on Joyraj had found more creative ways of continuing his browsing activity. He opened up a number of pages including ones dealing with college admissions so that when he realised he was being observed he could quickly switch that on. For Joyraj surveillance was an everyday matter and often one that came with physical and mental abuse.

Once Joyraj and I had established a sort of friendship, I invited Joyraj to meet me. He was very hesitant at my choice- a coffee joint in Salt Lake which was quite popular with students and somewhat queer friendly. After cancelling me twice Joyraj finally relented and we met up for the first time outside our computer screens...

Limits and Excess

Our first meeting was quite eventful. It was a rainy afternoon and I was sitting at a coffee shop in a shopping mall in Salt Lake area of Kolkata. Joyraj had only been here once and had already sent me a few texts very nervously asking if I could 'escort him inside'. A few minutes later a very wet Joyraj walked into CCD with his broken umbrella. I quickly smiled and brought him over to my table. I asked him what he wanted and he said nothing. Joyraj looked at the menu card and then looked back at me. In a moment it occurred to me, how careless I had been in my choice of venue. Not only was it in an area that Joyraj was uncomfortable with but I had also not factored in the fact that the prohibitive price of coffee would be out of his reach. Joyraj however to my surprise chose a beverage and proceeded to start chatting with me about mostly mundane things like the weather, traffic and food. It took a while before the screen barriers behind which we had formed a friendship finally tumbled down when he pointed me to a group of college boys and said - 'tomar kake pochondo' (which one do you like). It seemed that was the moment the ice finally broke between us. After a few hours of gossiping about the city men we decided to go home. I offered to pay for his coffee but Joyraj was at once proud and paid it himself saying don't worry, next time we will go somewhere else and then you can tell me all about your research.

The next meeting did not take too long to arrive. Joyraj invited me to come down to his house a few weeks later so that I could meet his mother. He had already told his

parents that I was researching his life and they were puzzled why I would be interested in Joyraj at all. Joyraj lived with his parents in a small one storied house where he had to share a tiny rectangular bedroom with his parents, which had a large bed, a small *alna* (clothes stand), and a small desk stacked with his books, a tape recorder, and a few audio cassettes. There were also a few posters of Hindu gods belonging to his mother displayed alongside two newspaper cut-out pictures of the popular Bollywood films *Kaho Na Pyaar Hai* (Say its love, 2000) and a bare-chested Aamir Khan from *Lagaan* (Tax, 2001).

Joyraj took me to the field outside his house as he did not want to be overheard in his home. He had not managed to get admission to Ashutosh College which was in central Kolkata, instead he had enrolled himself in his local college. This was quite sad for him as he was desperate to 'escape' his suburban existence for what he thought were the 'utopic' queer possibilities in Kolkata. His exaggerated version of the Kolkata queer scene was quite an interesting observation

I have heard that places like Park Street have lots of handsome gay men. Is that true? Last time I went to Dhakuria Lake I came across so many good looking men. I have also heard the colleges there have gay clubs? I really want to move out of my house and live there someday but for now I would have love to go to college there.

Over the next few weeks Joyraj became busy with his studies and did not have much time to meet up until one day he got in touch with me excitedly to say he would be attending a 'gay party' in the city and wanted to know if I would be there.

One of the LGBT groups in the city had organised a 'queer party' in a five star club in Park Street which I was invited to. After paying the eight hundred rupees to enter, I was standing in a beautifully decorated hall which bore no resemblance to the broken pavements, beggars and smell of sewer I had just navigated through. There was a sense of jubilation and happiness. This was probably the first time I was seeing so many gay men in such a mainstream venue as this. The party had been organised by a well known fashion designer and a NGO worker. The club chosen was notorious for

their entry policies so it was heartening to see so many queer people enjoy themselves in such a space.

Once the disco lights faded out- I looked around for Joyraj. He had promised me he would be attending this. Apparently one of his new 'boyfriends' was coming to this and he would be paying for him. After a couple of hours when Joyraj did not attend I forgot all about him until the next day when he called me and wanted to talk. I went to Joyraj's house and we walked over to a field nearby to sit down and chat about last night. I asked him why he was not there. Before he could tell me his story he looked at me teary eyed and said- 'Aami parlam na' (I could not).

It transpired that Joyraj had gone to the party but was denied entry. He was told at the gate that he was not wearing appropriate clothes and as he found out later it wasn't just him but several others had also been turned away. There was backlash on social media where some people recounted their stories of transphobic screening owing to gender non conforming clothes. In the case of Joyraj however it was his jeans, worn out shoes and cheap T-shirt from a pavement stall which differentiated him from the other wealthier club clientele that denied him entry.

Rohitda, it was so humiliating. Whilst Raja was allowed to go inside I was told I was not wearing the correct shoes. I know how they looked at me. It was demeaning. You tell me is the Kolkata 'queer scene' only for those with money? What about boys like me. Do I not belong here?

Joyraj's outburst was understandable. There exists a clear divide along class lines within Kolkata's urban queer scene. Joyraj's inability to feel like he belongs there is a testament of the class constraining attitudes that determine mobility and access within Kolkata's queer scene. Joyraj's sense of failure in 'aami parlam na' has a resonance that many queer men in Kolkata feel.

Joyraj's experience challenges the neoliberalisation of LGBT identities and movement in a place like Kolkata. Be it on spaces such as Planet Romeo where the ability to speak English and its class connotations determine one's experience of that space to outright hostility faced by people like Joyraj in the socialising scenes where

one's clothes, class background structures the city's queer movement. Alternative spaces such as those provided by NGO's like SAATHII, Sappho and Varta Trust do exist but for people like Joyraj it offers little respite. As he continued:

I am not interested in just going to NGO offices. What is this double standard. If you are poor and don't have an English background is that all that is available to us? I want to have fun. I want to meet other boys like me. Unfortunately these English boys (middle/upper middle class) don't want the kind of me around them do they?

The liberalisation of queer identities has seen the movement fight for more visibility, for marriage rights and against workplace discrimination. All of these of course remain important but as Joyraj's example shows it takes away the radical potential of the movement. People like Joyraj are not looking for mere inclusion in the sidelines but also want the centre stage in the current socio-political struggle of queer people...

Coda

I last met Joyraj a year ago. This time we met at College Street's famous Coffee House. Joyraj had finished his degree and had found some part time employment giving private tuitions. The employment market in Kolkata as he said disappointingly was really bad and there were thousands of graduates like him still looking for a job. Things at home had also become rockier. His cousins had discovered his sexuality when they browsed his phone and saw pornographic images of men on it. They went on to tell his parents about this which led to a bitter showdown with his father beating him up. He was told if he did not mend his ways he would be thrown out of the house. Without the security of a job and still completing his studies Joyraj decided that rather than challenging this he would tell his parents what they wanted to hear and be quiet.

My own friendship with him was apparently brought up. His parents were convinced that I had somehow brought 'bad ideas' with me and this had changed their son. Joyraj laughed at it and said 'shottyi kotha ta jodi janto' (if only they knew the truth). I asked him if he regretted leaving his phone unlocked expecting him to agree but

suddenly before me was the old Joyraj, the one I had encountered online, who had once intimidated me with his confidence. Joyraj retorted and said-

I am sorry it happened like this but Rohitda I only have one life. What good is it if I have to live in fear and hiding all the time. People like you can go away but I have realised this is my home. I won't be able to just move out so I have to try and change those around me. I have even started attending support group meeting with a NGO. They teach us about safe sex, being safe when cruising but above all I have found other like me, some of who have become my friends now.

I was quite taken aback by his statement. Not only had he decided that the utopic queer world he was looking for elsewhere did not exist but that he had to try and change the very world he did inhabit. Things like visibility, section 377 and Pride suddenly did not matter to him, what did matter was being able to create a liveable space for himself with no regret. He jokingly reminded me that the very technology (social media/mobile phone) he had been using for so long to remain anonymous and meet other gay men had also become the very technology that created the precarious situation he found himself in when he was outed to his parents.

Joyraj's hopes and aspirations for living a queer life free from interference and hostility had pushed him to make all the choices he had done- trying to get an English education, wanting to move to central Kolkata, wanting to go out partying and being part of the queer scene. In all of this he was rejecting his own existence in wanting to be someone else. His queer utopia emerged from this discontent and dissatisfaction with life which he had overcome not by trying to be someone else but through changing his own perceptions. As I walked away, Joyraj said- 'next time you come Rohitda lets meet in my house, I'll make you tea. We don't have to meet outside like this'...

Debanuj

In this story of a friend and interlocutor from Kolkata I (Paul) want to think about connections and departures across space and time; beyond any easy sense of a

singularly situated ethnographic location and outside of any representation of a 'Kolkata character' as necessarily being in the city; e.g. as if a subject identifiable with any objectively fixed or determining context. And yet too I want to evoke a 'sense of Kolkata' as intrinsic to the experiences of the character I have chosen, especially as for each of us being in, and being absent from, the city performs as a shared standpoint.

Against this background I want to tell the story of someone whose presence in my life has been both central yet nebulous; someone who was actually *not* in Kolkata for most of the time that I have lived there (and for years after) and who in many ways recedes from any easy sense of my writing about them based on shared involvements in the city. My aim is to suggest something of the intricacy intrinsic to defining an ethnographic character/informant against the complexity of life-ways that run beyond ready contextualization or temporally 'neat' story-telling, and where narrator and character (as it were) have oft been pulled in different directions.

I reflect here, then, on my relationship with a long-standing friend and colleague, Debanuj Dasgupta (also a contributing author to this special edition, about which I shall say more later). In opting to write about Debanuj I am seeking to deliberately complicate the composing of a 'Kolkata character', in as much as such a character might be imagined as an entity contained within the narrative horizons of a given ethnographic paradigm and setting. In respect of contemporary ethnographic perspective such containments are a hard fiction to sustain, of course. People we researchers meet during our fieldwork may have access to information about our work, for example. They may also have critical opinions on our work and they may indeed be researchers themselves – both in respect of academically institutional roles and other activities. Otherwise also, people who we met, spend time with, and get to know during fieldwork will produce many hypotheses about their life experiences, whether or not taking up an academic language that might reify some accounts as theoretical and others as 'lay perspective'. In these terms knowledge may be seen to flow back and forth across roles and relationships, in terms that may disrupt authorial veracity and any hierarchical claims to authority.

Given this, my intention here is not to simply evoke Debanuj via a re-telling of events in their life or to situate them as a singular subject in respect of my academic work. Rather my aim is to open out a space for conceiving of Debanuj as an ethnographic subject (so to speak) who has only been partially present in the Kolkata life-world that I have found myself inhabiting at different times over the last 25 years or more; and also as someone for whom too Kolkata is an ethnographic site, among other connections (where for example Kolkata also performs as a home city for Debanuj, albeit one they comes and go from). Amidst such reflections questions of rootedness and shared context emerge as points of query, suggesting wider questions about epistemology, representation, and location.

Here and There

The questions regarding location and connection that I have suggested are not only salient in that Debanuj and I have for the most part not lived in Kolkata at the same time, but also because we were not in touch much at all for many years, Debanuj having left Kolkata soon after I first arrived there in the mid 1990s. Elsewhere Debanuj has written of their experiences as a then upper-class migrant from Kolkata who decided to leave the city for the opportunities afforded by life in the US, a chance itself brought about by complex lineages:

My journey across the globe begins with the immigration reforms in the 1970s and '80s, which brought medical and engineering professionals from recently decolonized nations of Asia to the US. Several of my maternal aunts were married off to professionals migrating to the US in search of a better future. Most of my childhood winter vacations in India were spent playing with my cousins from the US — as we explained to them the stories of over three million Hindu gods and goddesses, they shared their Disney View- Master, and Lego toys with us. The dream of crossing the seven seas and living in the land of Mickey Mouse was firmly planted in my heart very early in life. Growing up in an upwardly mobile English-educated family in Calcutta meant that I had access to the United States Information Services and British Council libraries, where I would spent countless hours devouring the Atlantic Quarterly or Signs, learning about the emerging LGBT and new wave feminist

movements. The splashy rainbow flag images from the Stonewall 20th anniversary inspired some of us to start the first gay and lesbian support group in Kolkata. (Dasgupta 2014)

Such an imagined journey, which Debanuj eventually set-out on in 1996, was, like all stories of its kind, riven with encounters in desire, opportunity, racialization and power. Debanuj has described their experiences, for instance, of a master/salve relationship in the U.S. mid-west – finding themselves cast as somehow the brown-bodied object of lust and rejection amidst the shifting-politics of privilege and embodiment and they had found themselves amidst. Their sexualized body came to feel Indian/Bengali in a way that was new in this new place, the U.S.; this was intrinsic to the experience of not being in South Asia. The experience took Debanuj back to memories of Kolkata where their same body had not been marked as brown/other as such. There an upper caste/class status was readily readable, such that in context of sexual encounters social status was intrinsic; Debanuj was someone (unlike Joyraj, above) for whom access to cosmopolitan (sexual) scenes was not an issue.

Latterly Debanuj moved from Ohio to New York, finding livelihood as a waiter, cleaner and busboy – all ways of getting by in the world, barely, while being sexualized and demeaned by customers and clients, something they acquiesced to in hopes of earning a few more dollars. And then the fear and stigma that came to infiltrate the being of migrants in post 9/11 U.S., a set of experiences complicated in Debanuj's case by their HIV diagnosis at around this time. Debanuj became deeply involved as an activist seeking to overturn the U.S. Congress' travel ban on HIV positive people, keeping their own HIV status secret amidst these contestations, knowing the possible consequences.

As a story of a Kolkata character these events these might seem far away, elsewhere. And yet the connections to the city are essential, bound by colonialism, migration and stigma pulling in different directions against intertwined historical threadings of the contemporary. In this vein, perhaps, even as for many years Debanuj and I only knew one another only via fragmentary associations, we have remained networked too – through mutual friends (and sometimes foes) in Kolkata and the connotations that flowed across our shared areas of engagement and departure in sexualities scholarship

and journeying. Not always and easily so. Mutual friendships have sometimes been tense, complicated perhaps by their being pulled into ethnographic accounts and the nuanced ethical observances required amidst the re-telling of stories.

In figuring such concerns in the present moment, as I write this text I wonder, what it mean for me to write of Debanuj now, not as a character given a pseudonym or any other disguising devices. What ethical fractures, fictions and failures might emerge even as I checkout this re-telling with Debanuj while I am writing it? I want to avoid an overly sentimental narration – I do not want to over-stress or sentimentalise our connection amidst the flows of many more other salient relations for each of us. I might too perhaps not want to defer only to Debanuj’s recollections or viewpoint. This may be especially so as the act of ethnography inevitable tales much forgetting and erasure; ethnographic writing cannot depict life-worlds (of others) completely, always being a partial form of connection (between intellectual projects and between academic representation and lived experience; hence not an ‘entire’ account of any given cultural context). And so I have been checking out some of my recollections with Debanuj while writing this piece, noticing that we do not always share the same memories, or else we recall things quite differently.

One of the incidents that compelled me to write about Debanuj as my chosen character was a story that they told me a few years ago, when visiting the UK, where I now live. An old friend of Debanuj’s, David (a pseudonym), who lived in New York and who had conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Kolkata about 25 year ago, had died. David’s relative visited Debanuj soon after the death and had brought along David’s old fieldwork notebooks. Debanuj described the effect of looking at these, with their notes and maps and traces of places that we both knew well in Kolkata – cruising zones and other socio-sexual spaces. There was an intense reverberation in these shared recollections and material artefacts; in Debanuj’s taking possession of the note books in the first place and also in their knowing how their content would connect with my own experience (having been a ‘foreign’ ethnographer of the sexual in Kolkata at about the same time as David). Time space compression flooded into the telling of this story as we reminisced about places we had shared in the city long ago, even during our initially first short time together there. That was then an analogue sexual world, not digital media, no on-line cruising sites; the city itself was much

more explicitly intrinsic to how we met partners and others then, as we strolled and lurked about it.

Yet amidst such specific recollections memories are unreliable also. I recall Debanuj's sharing of this story vividly – it was only a few years ago. And yet when I mentioned to them that I was going to include this account in the present paper they had no recollection of it. I doubted myself; “did it really happen; did Debanuj tell me that?” I am sure that they did and so include the anecdote; Debanuj assures me that they forget many things – an effect of post-traumatic stress trauma after many trying experiences relating to stigma, HIV and other experiences. In writing this I reflect that one of the advantages (and challenges) of ethnographic method in that it offers an intimate resource that builds up over time, to which the researcher might return freshly from the perspective afforded by the contemporary. But that may also entail forgetting since it hard to retain everything, and we are our ‘informants’ also remember things differently.

Time and Travel

I find myself revisiting again and again my formative engagements in sexualities and health research in Kolkata from the mid 1990s onwards – both in return journeys and memory. Yet none of this is to evoke a return to an ethnographic context that simply yields objective facts. Nor is it to locate my research within relational webs that might be used to cite claims to authenticity or veracity, as if rooted in local world-view (of Kolkata, for instance) to which I (as ethnographer) have some kind of privileged access. Rather I seek to evoke entanglements and engagements that evade or resist easy depiction or recalling.

If I look back amidst many such entanglements, seeking to draw on some threads as a way to make sense of some things, I recall that Debanuj was instrumental in bringing me to Kolkata in the first instance, back in 1996 when I was completing an MA in Applied Anthropology and Community Work at Goldsmiths College, London. This was the era of a kind of emerging ‘AIDS Cosmopolitanism’ as ways of responding to the epidemic were circulating from one city to another globally. HIV arrived in many locations in these terms as a kind of ‘expected’ epidemic, with models of how to

develop community-based responses already attached. I had been wondering about such processes, about which I knew little, during the course of my MA. Having come to know about relevant projects working on 'male-to-male' sexualities in India, one in Delhi and one in Kolkata (then Calcutta), I wrote letters to each project and some weeks later received positive and encouraging replies. The letter from the Kolkata-based project came from Debanuj and I decided to take up the offer to come and work in the organization for a while; I recall I had asked about how Kolkata might be in summer, during the time I planned to visit. "Quite humid, but you'll cope!" I was advised.

During my first week in Kolkata, and soon after meeting, Debanuj let me know that they were planning to leave the city for a while. They had relatives in the U.S., specifically an aunt and uncle living in Ohio (see above); Debanuj was going to visit them, this being something they had wanted to do for a long time. I remember shopping with Debanuj for clothes to take on the journey, items that might be suitable in terms of style. In particular I remember buying a pair of Lee jeans from a shop in Shakespeare Sarani in the city centre. "What colour should I buy?" Debanuj asked me. "Black I said" apropos nothing, perhaps thinking they might look a little smarter or sexier. "Oh I felt sure that you would say blue" said Debanuj, disappointed. He bought the blue jeans anyway. Or what it the other way around? Did I suggest blue and Debanuj buy black? I cannot recall for sure.

Either way the concern was with which colour and style might be more apt in the U.S. context. This was a period not long after market liberalization in India. I did not have much prior point of reference, not having lived in the country beforehand. But friends I made in the city would comment on effects; the emergence of new malls, international produced consumables becoming visible in advertising hoardings etc. Jeans were a significant marker of change; friends would discuss the ethics of buying foreign rather than local brands. And too jeans (among other commodities) represented a certain kind of social status marker, in queer type spaces as elsewhere (as recounted in Joyraj's story above, where wearing the 'wrong' jeans was to be judged and excluded in respect of class and status). Debanuj's choice marked what they saw as a necessary attribute of going elsewhere; a purchase that perhaps

implicitly encoded a knowing that even an up-market Indian brand would have no cache where they were going, leaving Kolkata behind.

Coda

Recently, in the summer of 2019 Debanuj and I connected in Kolkata again; we were running a workshop together in conjunction with a ‘queer café’ and community collective, *Amra Odbhut*, that had been set up in the city a few years earlier. In the workshop we were seeking to trace some of the space and time of the city; one of our group exercises involved using maps on which participants drew locations and links associated with same-sex and non-cis gendered socialities. We sought to reflect together on how these spaces had changed over time. Some of the mapped contexts were definite locales others less tangible – places where hints of same-sex and non-cis-gendered socio-sexual connection could be traced but perhaps not claimed as definite recollections or possibilities. Over and above this were digital networks and other communicative networks; in a sense these traversed the cityscape but operated outside of them also; worlds within worlds that queried the empirical locus of sexual connections and geographies.

After the workshop Debanuj and I strolled through the Lakes of South Kolkata, a large park and what had been one of the largest areas for sexual cruising, and sex work, back in the 90s when we had first met in the city. This had been an important social site for us back in the day; and too a place for both our ethnographic fieldwork. Now the place had become gentrified, cleaned up and secured. Probably there is a cruising scene there, but not so much, as compared to previously. For many that world has moved on-line and for others new kinds of location – such as *Amra Odbhut* – have opened up.

We reflected on the workshop as we walked. Changes in language were evident; words such as ‘queer’ and ‘transgender’ (used in both English and Bengali sentence constructions) have become more prominent in urban scenes now in a way that they were not before (back in the mid 1990s for instance). Points of reference have altered and laws have changed – positively and negatively. Over recent years homosexuality has been decriminalized in India and terms of transgendered recognition have been

legislated for by the state that at the same time rob transgender persons of legal self-determination. Much comes and goes we reflected and struggles continue; we continued our walk as we realised that although we had met elsewhere in the world this was the first time we had spent time together in Kolkata in twenty -five years.

To Conclude

As authors we have been pulled, in this paper, toward the problems of representing a character as they each might suggest something about Kolkata. We have called attention to some of the issues involved in such writing here, not as a problem to be resolved but as informative of our reflexive mode of writing. We have sought to conceive of our characters amidst flows of contextual ethnographic knowledge-making that we have inevitable been caught up in as researchers amidst the different kinds of everyday theory making about social worlds that the people we are writing about have composed (and continue to compose) for themselves (and to which we only have partial access). We have seen this as an important component of how ethnographies (and ethnographic characters and contexts are composed) – outside of any claims to absolute veracity whereby the persons (as it where) that ethnographers write about may be made to stand as if signifiers for whole cultural ‘truths’ (Strathern 2005, Boyce 2008)

Against this background writing about characters from Kolkata is especially salient in that the city has been so often imagined in writing as saturated with multiplicity; site of excessive population, immense diversity, migration etc. Problems of pluralism and scale come to bear in accounts of the city in as much as it has been conceived of as a place that contains more people, stories and life-ways than could ever be fully known; a scene of extremity and rumour and adda and life that cannot be pinned down (Fruzzetti and Ostor, 2003; Moorhouse 1972). And yet too Kolkata acts a cipher for narratives that pull us to the intimate relation between place and subjectivity, such that the lives of characters from the city are so often told though the interconnected motif of Kolkata itself as a literary/ethnographic figuration.

The two characters we explore here each draw attention to issues of belonging and migration, of both wanting to move to and away from Kolkata; creating new life-worlds via the city amidst its shifting sexual geographies, class and caste divisions, and wider Diasporic connections and fault-lines. Kolkata itself emerges as an attribute of the characterisations to hand, sometimes as distinct *mise en scene*, at others a kind of sensibility or resonance field for understanding (and not understanding) self and others.

For both of our interlocutors, Debanuj (as recounted by Paul) and Joyraj (as recounted by Rohit), Kolkata memorialises queer ways of being and failing through the biopolitics of HIV/sexual health, changing communication technologies and varying experiences of class, caste and embodiment. These attributes signal various ways through which sexualities, genders, race and ethnicity are (re)constructed and rejected across settings and infrastructures with Kolkata emerging as complex site via which both Debanuj and Joyraj might be seen to seek self-understand among enduring and changing (sexual) life-ways. Kolkata then, like any context, is not simply a scene within which a multiplicity of sexual characters enact their lives. Rather we have explored the city as enfolded into and refracted against the sexual, isomorphic with the shifting re-contextualizations of our characters.

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ⁱ The empirical relation between context and character becomes especially complex in these terms, disrupting any sense that 'queer others' might be retrieved into an ethnographic record as if they were simply present and available. Rather a queer perspective disrupts the putative veracity of any account – to query what may or may not be know about queer life-ways in any given location (Engebretsen 2008; Rooke 2009)