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# methodological 'elsewheres' in queer anthropology: A conversation between Bob Offer-Westort and Shakthi Nataraj

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Shakthi Nataraj

Bob and Shakthi are both anthropologists and went to graduate school together. The conversation transcribed here took place a few years after Shakthi had graduated and was working in a department of law, considering leaving academia altogether because she wanted to illustrate and write in other formats. After years away from anthropology, Bob invites her to think about how her disciplinary wanderings 'elsewhere' have influenced her work as an ethnographer. **[AQ: 1]**

**Bob Offer-Westort:** Maybe we can start with the theme of this issue, 'Queer Elsewheres'. You have a background within linguistic anthropology, and have also been recently working with scholars in socio-legal theory and feminist economics. How has your engagement with these disciplinary 'elsewheres' informed your work as an ethnographer of queer communities in India?

**Shakthi Nataraj:** I feel the greatest sense of belonging within feminist and queer anthropology, where linguistic anthropology sometimes has a negative reputation as a very technical, purist and insular field. I am not attached to the term 'linguistic anthropologist', but I do feel that linguistic anthropological methods can help address some impasses faced by ethnographers of queer communities in postcolonial contexts. I conducted an ethnography of reading, writing and speaking practices, and it led me to find unexpected citations ... 'elsewheres' if you like! ... that created the context for sexual identity.

**Bob:** For context, can you describe your research project and fieldwork?

**Shakthi:** I conducted participant observation with people who have come together as part of the *thirunangai* rights movement in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Many of them identified as *thirunangais* or *kothis*, but the movement included several allies who did not. *Thirunangai* is the preferred translation for the term transgender woman and in Tamil literally translates to 'respectable woman'. The term became popular in the mid- to late 2000s, as a progressive alternative to *aravani* or the Hindi term *hijra*. *Kothi*

is a pan-Indian term referring to a person who was assigned male at birth but identifies as quite feminine. *Kothis* have not undergone surgical transition, so they retain the flexibility to present as male when they would like. Part of my research was about the changes in terminology over time and what was materially, ethically and politically at stake in claiming one gendered term over another.

**Bob:** What was the research problem, or impasse, as you describe it, that led you to turn to linguistic anthropology?

**Shakthi:** When writing about queer communities, I found that invoking a sexual identity category quickly reproduced a landscape of overdetermined tropes that overwhelmed the writing. This became much worse if I relied on a first-person interview with a person called to represent that identity category. For example, the term *kothi*, when my colleagues used it in 2015, was inseparable from the HIV/AIDS prevention organisational machinery within which they worked. When HIV was first detected in Tamil Nadu in the late 1980s and 'Men who have Sex with Men' (MSM) were defined as a high-risk group by global health agencies, community-based organisations in India engaged in what Lawrence Cohen (2005) calls 'the Kothi wars', where *kothi* was increasingly proposed as the 'local' equivalent for MSM. At [anonymous], the organisation where I was, it still functioned in that way. For example, when donors visited the office, the manager would assign people to the roles of *kothi*, bisexual, gay and *thirunangai* and have them share life stories, showcasing the typology of the communities served.

So, methodologically it was problematic and circular to go in as an ethnographer wanting to talk to *kothis* and gather their life stories. There are boilerplate *kothi* life stories that have been in circulation for a long time, crafted in a way that makes *kothi* identity easier to decontextualise and insert into other institutional machineries. Office staff were cynical about the canned life stories sought by researchers, and these were often the subject of parody. I was especially aware of this because before graduate school, I had worked doing documentation and report-writing for HIV/AIDS prevention and LGBT rights organisations in Chennai. I was skilled at adapting life stories into various genres, like best-practices documentation for a government agency, pitches for donors, a police complaint, a human rights fact-finding report and so forth.

**Bob:** How did you adapt your methods to tackle this problem?

**Shakthi:** For one, I avoided soliciting life stories or interviews where people were asked to give an account of their identity. Instead, I tracked the social lives of life stories used to evidence sexual identity. I found myself conducting an ethnography of reading, writing, speaking and translation practices, tracking the citations that made sexual identity meaningful and consequential at a given moment. This method led me to 'elsewheres'—unexpected research questions, referents and criteria that produced the quality of *kothi*-ness.

One of my 'windfall' moments was when [anonymous], the manager of [anonymous], shared with me a set of fictional and semi-fictional stories written by [anonymous] staff members in the year 2000 describing *kothi* life. They'd been written at the time for a PhD researcher at Madras University who had wanted to use them in his thesis. When I tracked this researcher down on Facebook and spoke to him, it turned out that he hadn't used the stories at all. He had switched PhD topics since MSM was still a taboo topic in the 2000s. He now worked for the World Health Organization. The history of HIV/AIDS-related research, which incidentally connected that PhD researcher with me, was a constitutive context for *kothi* 'identity stories' at [the office].

I asked [anonymous] and my other friends if they could select some stories for us to read together at [the office] and discuss, like a seminar meeting or a book club meeting. Somebody would read the story out, and then we would discuss it. We spoke about the characters within the story and outside, the writers' lives since (many were still part of the activist community, even if they had now transitioned to being *thirunangais*), the politics of publishing, how *kothi* identity had changed in the past two decades and so forth.

Participants also created context for the characters, in ways the author did not. For example, in one of the *kothi* short stories, participants speculated that the protagonist was a software engineer who had moved to Chennai in the 2000s at the height of the IT boom. Someone speculated about how the life of the *kothi* in the story would have been different if they'd been alive now, when ART<sup>1</sup> medication had been invented. So *kothi*-ness took shape not just in contrast to *thirunangai*, man, woman and other identities that we conventionally understand as genders. It also took shape against other figures, like the type of masculinity represented by a small-town boy moving to Chennai to take up an IT job, or the life one would have had if they had remained in a male body and not transitioned, the changes in life expectancy and stigma, the economic landscape that had transformed gender roles in the past few decades and so forth.

If I had gone in as an anthropologist asking people what their gender identity was and how they came to be that, then I would have had no sense of these different temporal planes that created the stakes of claiming *kothi* identity or not, the sacrifices and possibilities that gave it weight and made it meaningful. My method was to hunt down citations rather than persons, to see how personhood emerges in a contingent way.

**Bob:** That's really interesting. What were some of the theoretical concepts you found useful in analysing these texts and moderating the discussions?

**Shakthi:** I was very influenced by M.M. Bakhtin and P.N. Medvedev's *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (Medvedev and Bakhtin, 1978 [1928]), where they outline their programme for a 'sociological poetics' that is critical of both Russian formalism and Marxist literary criticism.

Basically, they point out that a character in a novel is neither a direct and straightforward window into social reality, nor is it purely a formal construct created for the purpose of the plot. Rather, the character is an 'oblique refraction' (I love this image) of the artist's own ideological horizon. As the novel is read and circulated, it gathers traces of the places where it has circulated, the genres it has been categorised with and the material history that has unfolded—and so its meaning is underdetermined, it emerges only in its reading. The elements in the novel, the people who have cited and read it, all of them rejoin social life as figures in their own right.

Methodologically, I also drew from anthropology of media where you study the production, circulation and reception of media over time. So, any sexual identity category like *kothi* or *thirunangai* or woman bears traces of countless potential 'elsewheres' ... the research task is how to give an account of what temporality anchors it in *this* moment.

**Bob:** Bakhtin and Medvedev are writing about analysing novels, whereas you were doing ethnographic fieldwork. How did you adapt their writing on literary criticism to extend to everyday spoken interactions?

<sup>1</sup> Antiretroviral therapy for HIV treatment.

**Shakthi:** I used a broad and expansive definition of a 'text', drawing on William Hanks' work. A text, in this tradition, is any sequence of signs that speakers and users consider to be a coherent and bounded unit; it is a temporal unit (Hanks, 1989). So it can refer to an utterance, to a poem, to any linguistic form. As an ethnographer, your job is to keep an ear open to how your interlocutors cut up segments of language to form coherent pieces, forms, genres and sets.

The problem with the term 'text' is that people tend to just think of books and documents or something. But one of Bakhtin's most useful insights is about how language flows in and out of written and spoken genres continuously. When speaking, we are always implicitly citing and recirculating language. So when I say I looked at texts, that included everyday speech, formal addresses like at protests, reports, novels and autobiographies people wrote or read, different versions of a story someone told me, my own discussion with them about the versions.

When approaching any piece, I tried to read in the temporality of the text and also with the other person, following the new texts that they were creating as they discussed and described it. I'm really interested in how people combine different references to create some temporal planes where some sexual identity becomes available and meaningful. What kind of genre or corpus is produced by the set? How does somebody's 'kothi-ness' take shape as a kind of a temporality that can change suddenly with context?

**Bob:** It sounds, though, like you are not just giving an account of categorisations of sexual identity. Like this is not a matter of different terms that correspond to equivalent ontological entities.

**Shakthi:** You are right, it isn't sufficient to just chart the different subjectivities and terms that form a series; it is necessary to give an account of the material arrangements that make those categories consequential.

One of my influences was the queer linguistics literature of the 1990s where sociolinguists were ethnographically observing how terms for sexual identity emerge through contrast with adjacent terms in everyday speech and performance. I was especially influenced by Kira Hall's work on how linguistic forms indexing *kothi* identity were produced through contrast with adjacent possibilities like *hijra*,<sup>2</sup> man, woman and so forth (Hall, 2005). Observing how people switched between sexual identities in everyday speech was one of the methods that I found useful from queer linguistics here.

But the problem with just giving an account of terms is it seems rest **[AQ: 2]** on this assumption that humans have a need to assert what their gender is to each other and that's the end game. But it's not.

The question is, to paraphrase a quote from Lawrence Cohen (1995), 'what does it mean to make sexual difference matter?'. Because to have a sex is to have a purpose, to be entrusted with a social and material assignment at which you can fail, or refuse, and your failure or refusal has consequences for the social body, and, crucially, for the fate of yours as well. That's how surgeries, violence, illness, medication, genitals are inscribed on some bodies and not others. So my question was what was material,

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<sup>2</sup> The community of ritual specialists, many of whom have undergone a ceremonial surgery marking a transition from male to female. The term is heavily mediated and politicised and, like any gender, should not be taken just as a straightforward reference to existing persons.

what mattered about these categorisations and what they brought into existence for the panoply of persons who were attracted to the *thirunangai* rights movement.

**Bob:** Your method here sounds especially interesting, since as anthropologists and academics we are well familiar with the politics of writing and publishing, and trying to control the circulation and reception of our texts.

**Shakthi:** The community of ritual specialists, many of whom have undergone a ceremonial surgery marking a transition from male to female. The term is heavily mediated and politicised and, like any gender, should not be taken just as a straightforward reference to existing persons. Yes, exactly, that's where it becomes useful to study the history of certain genre conventions and criteria, and how boundaries between genres are drawn.

In the South Asian context, there is a material and historical connection between anthropological writing, colonial ethnography and policing and titillating sensationalist fiction, at least in English. For example, anthropological writing by colonial ethnographers like William Sleeman established categories like 'Criminal Tribes' by writing up their ethnographic interviews with members of those communities, typologising them in the process. This writing was repurposed into sensationalist novels that recirculated in nineteenth-century England, like Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* (2001 [1839]; see also Freitag, 1991). Indeed, as Kath Weston (2013) insightfully points out, colonial anthropological writing and its 'flora and fauna' way of describing 'native sexuality' always sat dangerously close to titillating pornographic writing.

So there are historical reasons it can be difficult to treat certain topics in writing without being suctioned into a certain trope, like social science writing on sex work shows up very close to these fictional stories about the sordid underworld of Mumbai or some gritty investigative journalism piece or a development sector report about how to 'save these women'. These create a discursive regime that it is tricky to navigate if you are in the business of representation, and first-person narratives fit right in in a really problematic way.

I think it is in response to this history that *thirunangai* activists and allies have been reclaiming these genres and fostering a culture of creative writing and publishing within their community, producing a rich archive of autobiographies, autoethnographies, poetry, films and essays.

I entered this world when I participated in 2012 in Chennai in a writing workshop conducted by *thirunangai* activists, where people were given exercises to write about their experience being queer, share their pieces for feedback and critique and so forth. One of the collaborating groups was the Tamil Nadu Progressive Writers and Artists Association, a left-leaning intellectual community of writers and filmmakers who have really embraced the cause of *thirunangais*. These collaborations sit in a broader context where wielding formal Tamil in a specific way is also a key mode of establishing political credibility in the Dravidian political milieu. So in some ways, my material really demanded that I have a robust set of tools to analyse language use, and this led me to linguistic anthropology.

**Bob:** Another useful aspect of focusing on genres, conventions and context is that it circumvents the tendency to assess statements based just on truth and falsity. For instance, the concern about 'are my informants telling the truth or are they withholding?' seems like a naive way to understand communication. Is that right?

**Shakthi:** Absolutely. The problem with relying on self-reportage and direct interviews as social science methods is precisely that we are forced into a naive binary of truth and falsity when assessing the 'data'. But in fact, what anyone says is never reducible to 'truth' or 'lies'; they are just speaking in a genre that they understand is expected and appropriate for the social occasion of an interview. And as linguistic anthropologists like Charles Briggs (1986) have argued, the ethnographic interview is itself a very particular kind of communicative event and genre and its social history needs to be a part of the analysis. Briggs (2007) elsewhere looks at how narratives that seemingly offer a 'window into real-time events', framed in genres like news reports or confession, are heavily mediated.

Relying on interviews is problematic also because for historical reasons, there's a social force when hearing certain words come out of the mouth of certain persons, making it easy to entextualise into genres like news reports or ethnography for that matter. It promises a direct window to a real event, but this promise is very political and heavily contested.

I came across a powerful example of this in my fieldwork, which was when I encountered this colonial-era narrative that *hijras* 'kidnap and castrate children'.<sup>3</sup> *Hijras* have long been invoked as an icon of 'traditional transgender culture' in South Asia by a range of social scientists. This kidnapping narrative was a key element that helped colonial administrators categorise *hijras* as a 'Criminal Tribe' in the nineteenth century, seizing their land and turning them into ethnographic curiosities.

The narrative saw a revival in the 1990s and early 2000s in Tamil Nadu when debates about choice and coercion of gender transition and around sexual agency and so forth were unfolding. In 2010, I was volunteering with a sexual rights organisation in Chennai when a *thirunangai* filed a police complaint alleging that other *thirunangais* had kidnapped and castrated her against her will.

Most activists described her complaint as a move in her own personal feud with these others, but the police and news media took it up voraciously. Journalists had encountered examples of parents filing such complaints before but there was an explosive force to this complaint since it was spoken in the first person.

I was asked to be part of a fact-finding mission to assess the 'truth' of her complaint. In being part of the mission and writing the report, I was disturbed by how, within the generic conventions and limits of a human rights report, the only possibility was to evaluate her words naively and literally as true or false. There was no room to examine the complex relationship to Criminal Tribes legislation and all the ways colonial anthropology has circulated over centuries before finding its way into the police complaint and report.

Rather than issue a verdict on truth or falsity, I instead explored how different interlocutors accounted for the force of the narrative and how they connected speech to its referents. When I listened to their takes on what was 'really' going on beneath the police complaint, I saw that they did not just evaluate it through truth and falsity. They evaluated the authenticity of the teller, the aesthetic framing of the story and the ethical implications of telling it in this context and not that. In short, they highlighted the material consequences it had for the complainant, the accused and all the people who were put into motion by its telling.

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<sup>3</sup>For a deeper discussion, see Nataraj (2019).

Like with the *kothi* stories, this method of 'talking about talking' led me 'elsewhere' to unexpected contexts for *thirunangai* identity. These included the stakes of distinguishing Tamil Nadu from the Hindi-speaking states, the rise of anti-trafficking movements, the greater availability of sex-change surgery, changing norms around parenting and adoption and so forth, which were being debated through this narrative.

**Bob:** Are there elements from your research that you think might be of interest or of use to people who are in advocacy and activism?

**Shakthi:** Well, tragically the linguistic anthropology aspect of my own academic writing is quite useless in those realms, I think. Outside of academic anthropology, I write in genres that belong more squarely in those advocacy worlds, like press releases, activist statements and policy reports, as well as Tamil-to-English translation, and those have very different generic conventions and circulatory fields. That said, it is always interesting to me when a text is read or cited in a place I don't expect.

As an ethnographer, I was also interested in what my colleagues at [the office] felt lent itself to advocacy work. For example, what were the criteria used by [anonymous] and others to select these stories for our reading group and not others as a representative sample? How did bookshop owners, for instance, decide how to categorise *thirunangai* autobiographies and which shelves to put them on? What books did they suggest to me? These were all questions I asked my interlocutors.

Now I find myself returning to academic anthropology and also to creative writing and illustration, which on the surface appear to be very far from advocacy-oriented reports. But then, the range of writing in the *thirunangai* movement is much more expansive than what would be categorised as conventional advocacy-based writing but it is critical to the movement. Each artist has a particular utopian vision of the world and a distinct political intervention. I feel more authentic engaging as a queer artist and ally and not an academic. I want to follow my own sense of what's *beautiful* (and not just *useful*) by translating writing that moves me, in collaboration with writers and readers. Whatever the genre, I want to create work in the formats that best do justice to the nuance of the many visions that make the *thirunangai* movement a compelling political home for so many of us.

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[AQ: 3]

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