

Queering Diaspora Space – Creolizing Counter-publics. On British South Asian Gay and Bisexual Men’s Negotiation of Sexuality, Intimacy and Marriage¹

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‘Culture is the precaution of those who claim to think thought but who steer clear of its chaotic journey. Evolving cultures infer Relation, the overstepping that grounds their unity-diversity.’
(Édouard Glissant, 2010a, 1)²

‘Glissant’s notion of creolization seems one of the most interesting and successful attempts at moving beyond the binary model of thinking so engrained in the ways we perceive the world’ (Fatima el Tayeb, 2011, 172)

Introduction

In this article, I deploy a queer diaspora framework, public sphere theory and a creolization perspective to understand the narratives and opinions of British South Asian gay and bisexual men on key queer tropes of sexuality, intimacy, non-monogamy and marriage. The recent increase in cultural, social and political organizing among British South Asian lesbian, gay male, bisexual, transgender and queer people, I argue, results in the formation of discursive spaces that allow for the articulation of complex narratives on intimacy, sexuality, cultural or religious values and citizenship that creolize queer thought and politics. I conceive

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² Italics in the original.

these spaces as part of larger process towards the formation of queer diasporic counter-publics. A creolization perspective is helpful for refining diaspora theory, because it endorses a rhizomatic understanding of connection, privileges 'routes' over 'roots' and avoids categorical rigidity and singularity, which have been common features of certain multicultural orthodoxies (Glissant, 2010b). Creolization focuses on multiple 'point(s) of entanglement', which allows for the conception of inter-related and 'situational' communities. It highlights frictions, but does not resolve tension into ready-made assumptions of 'possible' or 'impossible' identities (El Tayeb, 2011, 172).

The chapter will first develop a queer diaspora framework as a conceptual tool for reading respondents' comments on sexuality and sexual politics. Diaspora theory has frequently advocated hybridity as the concept most suitable for interpreting processes of cultural mixing. I argue here that creolization is a preferable alternative, because it avoids some of the shortcomings of the hybridity model. This is then followed by an argument that a dialogue between diaspora and public sphere theories can be helpful for understanding British South Asian gay and bisexual men's ideas on relationality. Again, creolization provides an important perspective here, because it highlights the multiple connections around which these negotiations take place, captures the extent to which they are constructed across power relations and sensitizes the analysis for the transformative force of contemporary queer British South Asian cultures³.

³ This chapter engages with narratives of British South Asian men who participated in a qualitative multi-method research into discourses on non-monogamy in gay male and bisexual social movement spaces (1997-2003). I conducted forty-four interviews with roughly half the sample consisting of gay men and the other half of bisexual men and women. I further organized four group discussions. Here, I present data gathered in a focus group with a support group for South-Asian gay and bisexual young men (nine participants). I further draw on individual interviews with three British South Asian gay men.

Towards a queer diaspora framework

In *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath (2005) turns her attention to popular culture (and to a lesser extent political organizing) to trace alternative discourses of belonging in the imaginary and material relations within queer South Asian diaspora space. Gopinath's suturing of 'queer' to 'diaspora' combines two interrelated epistemological strategies, that is the '*queering* of diasporic studies' and the '*diasporizing* of queer studies' (cf. Braziel, 2008). It entails the *queering* of diasporic studies in that 'it recuperates those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic and nationalist imaginaries' (Gopinath, 2005, 11). Alternately, it entails the *diasporization of queer studies* in that it 'situates the formation of sexual subjectivity within transnational flows of culture, capital, bodies, desire, and labor' (Gopinath, 2005, 13). Gopinath's concept of a queer South Asian diaspora aims to critique the lasting legacy of coloniality and to challenge western-centric definitions of modernity and ethnocentric LGBT rights discourses which identify 'progress' in white queer bodies, white queer politics and Euro-American liberal democracies. . Since September 2001, culturalist racist stereotypes about South Asians have been expanded by (and partially reframed within) an aggressive Islamophobia which frequently conflates South Asianness with Islamic religious extremism, gender inequality and homophobia (cf. Puar and Rai, 2002; Puar, 2005, 2007; Arondekar, 2005; Bhattacharyya, 2008; Haritaworn et al., 2008). These developments provide the backdrop to an increased interest in Muslim non-heterosexualities.

It is striking that while there is a significant amount of research available on Islam and homosexuality (which often samples large numbers of South Asian research participants) (Haritaworn et al., 2008; cf. Siraj, 2006, 2014; Yip, 2004, 2005, 2007; Minwalla et al., 2005; Jaspal and Cinarrella, 2010; Abraham, 2008), there are much fewer publications on diasporic South Asian sexualities which do not foreground religion or look into other significant religions in South Asia or South Asian diasporic formations (Bhugra, 1997; Awan, 2003;

Gopinath, 2005). In sum, the analysis of diaspora needs a queer perspective as much as queer critique is dependent on an engagement with the question of diaspora, in order to fully grasp the effects of racism, colonialism and the neo-imperial world order on contemporary sexualities. A focus on the dynamics and terms of creolization is conducive for achieving such a fusion of perspectives. Yet before I develop this argument in closer detail later, it appears necessary to problematize the diaspora concept even further.

Etymologically the term diaspora is derived from Greek and signifies ‘scattering’ or dispersion from a centre. The concept was originally deployed to signify Jewish dispersal after the Babylonian exile. It has subsequently been applied to many dislocations, migrations and re-settlements (Cohen, 1997). Avtar Brah (1996) uses a diaspora framework to theorize the history of settlement of migrants from South Asia in the UK, a history which has been profoundly shaped by colonial power relations (cf. Sayyid, 2006; Hesse and Sayyid, 2006). She advances the notion of diaspora space which in distinction to one-dimensional models of diaspora ‘includes the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of “staying put”’ (Brah, 1996, 209). Brah’s careful reflections reveal her wariness to avoid nationalist or ethnicist interpretations which may result from treating diasporas as sociological entities on the basis of the *attribution of common origin* (cf. Anthias, 1998). This is why she likes to see the concept applied to ‘forms of *relationality* within and between diasporic formations’ (Brah, 1996, 183) and ‘the *configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another*’ (Brah, 1996, 183). This allows her to focus – among other issues – on women’s struggles in diasporic contexts.

Queer diaspora theories have revealed how sexual diversity unsettles the heteronormative orientation of many diaspora formations (Eng, 2001; Manalansan IV, 2003; Gopinath, 2005; Binnie, 2004). I use the term ‘queer diaspora’ to signify an elusive and inter-relational space which connects various cultural locations and identifications. I do not simply refer to a collective of queer-identified people. Gopinath (2005) has proposed queer diaspora

as a methodology for making non-heterosexual desires and erotic or cultural practices intelligible, even if they are expressed in forms different from categorical enunciation or public manifestation. This resonates with my study, in which some research participants used a gay identity label, while others oscillated between different identities (such as, for example, man who sleeps with men, bisexual, heterosexual or gay). Others, again, stressed fluidity, refrained from self-labelling or mocked the idea of sexual orientation. The multi-relationality of practices of identification inevitably involves practices of cultural mixing. The emergence of non-bounded, non-essentialist cultural practices have been theorized in manifold ways. In the following section, I argue that Glissant's creolization perspective can do this in particularly effective ways. According to Glissant (quoted by Murdoch, 2013, 879), '[c]reolization is marked by the coming into contact of several cultures, in a specific world-space, and resulting in a new reality, one completely unforeseeable in terms of the sum total of the synthesis of these elements'.

Queer diaspora – from hybridity to creolization

Hybridity has been a popular concept in diaspora studies throughout the 1990s, where it has been applied to 'all sorts of things to do with mixing and combination in the moment of cultural exchange' (Kalra et al., 2005, 71). It has been celebrated by many for its potential 'subversion of naturalized forms of identity centred on the nation' (Kalra et al., 2005, 2). In this section, I argue that Glissant's creolization theory is in many regards more dynamic and supple than most conceptualisations of hybridity, because it is not hampered (to the same extent) by biologicistic connotations, an implicit dualism or abstract idealizations.

Many scholars have been wary of the hybridity terminology, because its genealogy links it with biology and race science (Young, 1995; Werbner, 1997; Ifekunigwe, 1999). In contradistinction, the primary point of reference of the term creolization has always been

social, cultural and linguistic forms of mixing (around the concept *creole*), rather than racial purity (Chaudenson, 2001; Sheller, 2003). For Glissant (2010b), the formation of creole languages within the slave labour plantation regimes of the Caribbean was the prime instance of creolization which then exploded into a multi-textured inter-cultural connectivity (p. 34). Even if the term was later also used to signify ‘mixed-race’ populations, Stuart Hall argues that ‘it was never historically, and is not today, fully fixed *racially*’ (2003a, 29).

Édouard Glissant, who originally worked with the concept of *métissage* (hybridity) himself (see Glissant, 2010a), later abandoned it in favour of creolization, which he thought to be less constricted by an implicit dualism: ‘If we posit *métissage* as, generally speaking, the meeting and synthesis of two differences, creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and consequences unforeseeable’ (2010b, 34). In brief, creolization lends itself for the description of more complex cultural scenarios than hybridity. It points beyond closed models of multiculturalism towards a description of the ‘chaos’ of culture as ‘diversal’ or ‘multiversal’, envisioned in Glissant’s ‘poetics of Relation’⁴ (cf. Noudlemann, 2013).

Some critics of hybridity argue that the concept does not help to uncover the unequal power relations which govern cultural mixing in neo-liberal postcolonial settings (Anthias, 1998, 575). While scholars like Homi K. Bhabha (1994) in his work on mimicry and the ‘third space’ have deployed the concept in insightful ways to describe the cultural power dynamics in colonial and postcolonial settings, other usages of the concept have been less concerned with structural inequalities. In contradistinction, power relations are right at the core of the concept of creolization, due to its origin in the analysis of cultural dynamics around slave

⁴ Creolization and Relation are closely interconnected processes. ‘Relation envisages human reality (and in fact, the natural world as well (...) as a dynamic networks of connections and interactions between elements (especially communities and cultures) such that the elements are constantly changing in ways that are impossible to predict’, explains Britton (2011, 675).

trade and slave labour. 'Creolization *always* entails inequality, hierarchization, issues of domination and subalternity, mastery and servitude, control and resistance. Questions of *power*, as well as *entanglement*, are always at stake' argues Stuart Hall in his critical review of creolization theory (2003a, 31).

However, it should be noted that Glissant's later work, in which he moves on from his initial analysis of colonial/postcolonial culture in the Caribbean (Caribbeanness and Antillité) towards more generalized claims about cultural dynamics on a world-scale (creolization, poetics of Relation, globalité, Toute-Monde, etc.), too, has been criticised for side-lining questions of oppression and power (cf. Britton, 2013). While it is certainly true, that some of Glissant's later work is shaped by a higher level of generalization (due to his consideration of globality), his main concepts remain grounded in a material analysis of power relations. They grow out of and remain significantly inflected by their Caribbean origins (cf. Murdoch, 2013). They are highly place specific, soaked not only with the poetics of landscape, but also loaded with the trauma of history, namely the middle passage and the terror of the plantation regime. In the *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant (2010b) locates the genesis of creolization (and subsequently Relation) explicitly in these violent histories, shaped by racial and geo-political domination. A concern with power and inequality is intrinsic and deeply engrained in Glissant's poetico- conceptual language. His concepts are designed to counter and undo cultural power dynamics, also when applied to other "world" cultural dynamics. Yet even at his most universalizing moments, Glissant never gives up a concern with detail, specificity and particularity. For him, globality (mondialité), is 'the finite, realized quantity of the infinite detail of the real' (Glissant, quoted in Noudlemann, 2013, 870). This concern for singularity in multiplicity and for every detail (cultures, languages and communities) leads him to reject universalism and particularism at the same time, argues Claude François Noudlemann (2013, 871).

It is important to keep this insistence on both power and specificity in mind, if we wish to counter the common tendency to deploy ‘creolization’ as a simple metaphor within a de-politicized narrative of ‘postmodern globalization’ (Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Littler, 2007; Cohen and Toninato, 2010). Some critics of this tendency also argue that ‘creolization’ has been so specific to particular historical and cultural configurations (i.e. the plantation regimes of the French Caribbean) that it should not be applied elsewhere (cf. Bernabé et al., 1989; Enwezor et al., 2003). Postmodern usages lack sensitivity to detail and the brutality of the colonial context which has shaped the experience which some have described as creolization (cf. Sheller, 2003). Those who have applied the concept elsewhere have frequently limited their application to African or Afro-Caribbean diasporic settings (Hall, 1993, 2003a, 2003b; Gilroy, 1987, 1993). While ultimately remaining ambivalent, Hall (2003a) takes a less rigid position on this question. For him, processes of transculturation are central to the diaspora definition. He stresses affinities between the concepts diaspora, hybridity and creolization, all of which he has occasionally used in his work. He argues that theorizing always involves the reworking and abstraction of already existing concepts and he takes Glissant’s statement that ‘the whole world is becoming creolized’ as an indicator that at least one of the key theorists of creolization believed that the term could be deployed to understand other cultural configurations.

I agree with Hall, that any contextualised application of creolization theory should bring to the fore questions of power and inequality, if it wishes to stay truthful to its original intention. I believe that creolization theories can be helpful tools for researching diaspora space in Europe, in particular because postcolonial conditions remain thoroughly overdetermined by the lasting legacies of colonialism (cf. El Tayeb 2011). For example, I see a striking resonance between the emphasis on colonialism, slavery and violence at the heart of theories on *créolité* and creolization (Vergés, 2003; Hall, 2003a, 2003b) and the argument that a postcolonial framework (and the recognition of the violent histories of coloniality and

racism) are vital for an understanding of the exclusivist dynamics which shape the current experiences of British South Asian settlers in the UK (Sayyid, 2006; Hesse and Sayyid, 2006).

Creolization theories have a stronger potential than most works on hybridity to bring to the fore these power relations. They may further help us to take account of subaltern agency which has given rise to various modes of resistance and contestation (Sheller, 2003). Glissant's concepts of creolization and Relation also direct critical attention to questions of community attachment, boundary formation and exclusion. They thus create a space from which to question and challenge national rhetoric about identity and citizenship (Britton, 2011; Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Littler, 2007).

In the following section, I explicate these aspects of creolization and what they add to thinking about queer diaspora as I turn to the voices and narratives of the British Asian gay and bisexual men in my study. Here, I will argue that a queer diaspora perspective can gain from an alignment with critical work on the public sphere and counterpublics (cf. The Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Warner, 2002; Plummer, 2003). The counter-public argument foregrounds the political nature of struggles around representations and highlights unequal relations in an over-arching 'diaspora space' (Brah, 1996) within which creolization enables the contestation and challenge of national and communal identities.

Queer South Asian Diaspora and the Creolization of the Public Sphere

The participants in my study articulate divergent views deploying ideas shaped by discourses around gay rights, gay liberation, various religious codes, culture, family, anti-racism or nationalism. It is difficult to identify such a thing as 'community values' which as some researchers argue provide normative guidance for queer people to construct their relationships (cf. Weeks et al., 2001). Mark Blasius (1994) hypothesizes a so-called 'gay and lesbian ethos', which is informed by *community knowledge* and enables gay men and lesbians to choose their lifestyle – based on autonomy, choice, informed consent, and egalitarianism.

There are many problems with such a neat and idealistic narrative. There are no references to bisexuality, transgender, gender conflicts, intersectionality or people's multiple identifications and community affiliations. The strong emphasis on egalitarianism obscures the persistence of power relations in same-sex relationships. Ultimately, Blasius's theory rests on a disavowal of differences both within and between different LGBTQ spaces (Young, 1997).

Many of the British South Asian participants problematized the notion of a universal 'gay community'. As Irfan explains:

Irfan: I don't really feel I associate myself with any one particular community. (...) I'm sure everybody's unique, but I feel very... I'm Asian and in a really white culture. I'm Muslim and in a Christian country. I'm gay and living in a heterosexual society. I'm Scottish and living in England. Erm... and even in my profession, eighty percent are female. So I've always really been in a minority. (...) I've never really had that sense of wanting to have to belong to some place. But belonging to a community? I would say that I feel I belong to the gay Muslim community, the gay Muslim Pakistani community. Yeah, I belong to the gay Pakistani Muslim community, as I do the straight Pakistani Muslim community, or the Muslim community, or the community of physiotherapists or, you know, to the community of men. But I've never really associated myself with the gay scene as such. (...) Being part of the community for me is not something important.

Irfan considers his 'nominal' membership in a range of partially overlapping communities, but he does not strongly identify with any one of them. In particular, he stresses his distance from the gay community which he explains with the strong Islamophobia he experienced as an out-Muslim gay man among gay people in commercial and political gay spaces (cf. Haritaworn et al., 2008; Puar, 2007). His points of reference are the gay Muslim community or the gay Muslim Pakistani community. Irfan goes on to explain the ambivalent role of

‘communities’ in his life. He discusses in detail his difficulties with the Pakistani and the South-Asian communities in Britain. His major concern is what he perceives as a pronounced homophobia which pervades British South Asian diaspora space. It is only recently that he has found a place for himself in this context through his involvement with Al-Fatiha UK– a LGBTQI Muslim support group founded in 1998.⁵

Community has provided a powerful language for self-identification, belonging and solidarity. At the same time, it is evoked to legitimize social regulation (through appeals to morality), political censorship (for the sake of the common good) and exclusion (in the name of authenticity) (cf. Young, 1990a; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992). Because of these paradoxes it is difficult to discard the vision of community altogether. In a discussion of Black community discourses, Shirley Tate (2007) shows that due to their performative nature community discourses produce their own kind of governmentality. This notwithstanding, Tate argues that for many a melancholic attachment to community remains inscribed into the production of Black subjectivity – often in spite of the experience of exclusion. In my study, too, not all research participants rejected the idea of community in an out-right fashion. Ali, for example, explains that ‘at the end of the day I’d love to do a lot for the Asian gay community – for the gay community as a whole’, positing the Asian gay community as a substratum of a larger gay community. Religion, nationality and sexuality are the core ingredients of the community discourses deployed by most research participants (see Ali and Irfan above).⁶ Yet these appeals to community, too, are exclusive. It is not only that they are highly specific in terms of culture, ethnicity, nation or religion. Women, for example, do not figure at all in either Irfan’s or Ali’s community discourses. This mirrors a common androcentrism in gay male politics, but is nonetheless striking at least in Irfan’s case, because

⁵ The group took on the name Imaan in 2004 (see Siraj 2014).

⁶ References to cross-racial or cross-ethnic alliance-building, as it has been envisioned, for example, in 1980s anti-racist politics around the signifier ‘Black’ are rare and limited to research participants in the 40s.

at the time he was an active member of Al-Fatiha UK, a mixed-gender social support and political campaigning group.

Since the term ‘community’ suggests shared interest and close affinity it has a tendency to obscure antagonism, conflict, internal divisions, hierarchies and hegemonic domination (Sennett, 1970; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Young, 1990b). I have argued elsewhere (Klesse, 2007) that the concept of multiple public spheres can avoid such shortcomings. Such a perspective can be derived from debates within feminist political theory (Young, 1990a; Fraser, 1997), queer theory (Warner 2002; Berlant and Warner, 1998), and Black and Asian cultural theory (The Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Gopinath, 2005). The notion of a public sphere emphasises discursivity and is more suitable for the analysis of conflicts bound up with diversity and multiplicity. Work on counterpublic currents is illustrative of this potential (Fraser, 1997; Warner, 2002; Plummer, 2003). The emphasis on discursivity does not have to imply a deflection from the body and various scholars have highlighted the gendered, sexualized and racialized nature of public sphere interaction. Yet how do we avoid the closure of the representations of counterpublics around hegemonic identities? Recognizing the creolized (and creolizing) nature of public sphere interaction prevents the conflation of the notion of publics with sealed-off ready-made identity-based collectivities. ‘[C]reolization, which overlaps with linguistic production, does not produce direct synthesis, but “resultants,” results: *something else, another way*’, argues Glissant (quoted in Murdoch 2013, 877). This perspective allows us to conceive a queer South Asian (counter)public sphere as the site of the construction (and contestation) of continuously emerging – and transforming – ‘situational communities’ (El Tayeb 2011).

The narratives presented by British South Asian gay and bisexual men in my study take recourse to a mix of multiple paradigms of cultural understanding and identification, ethical orientation and political analysis. At the same time, they are all too often aware that these frameworks are negotiated under conditions of an unequal power. For these reasons,

too, the discourses emerging from the formation of a British South Asian queer diasporic public sphere can be said to reflect the creolization of sexual cultures and politics in Britain as a diaspora space. The power dimension becomes most obvious in the discussions of racism in the gay male community.

The gay male scene, racism, alienation and self-organization:

Many men who participated in the group discussion, like Wijaj, complained about the pervasive racism on the gay male scene:

And one thing that I noticed, coming out on the scene when I was about seventeen, is there's a lot of like racism on the gay scene, you know, and it's really... it's really low-key, but there's a lot of racism, [cross talking] you know, and erm what is beyond I think stereotype...

In the context of this discussion my position as a white researcher became an issue, too. For example, Wijaj directly addressed me to learn about my opinion on racism on the gay scene. Racism was cited as one of the major issues why many group members felt alienated in the wider white gay male scene. Such concerns with racism and ethno-centric hegemony are widely documented across various diasporic contexts (cf. Gupta, 1988; Roy, 1998; Awan, 2003; Minwalla et al., 2005; Baddurudoja, 2008). It is also echoed in the individual interview narratives. Ali explains his sense of alienation on the gay scene with the metaphor of being 'out of place'.

And none of those places, I couldn't really associate... I never found... it just... I don't know. The Asian people are very bitchy. But so are the white people, bitchy as well. It's just that I feel... I felt a type of racism to be honest. I don't mind going to a white club with a group of Asian friends. But just to go with like ... I just feel out of place. I feel so out of place. Plus the music I don't really enjoy myself. But at the end of the day ... It may be like that, but I still have white friends.

Ali emphasises that he has got white friends several times throughout the interview. In this way he makes clear that he does not want to have his comments understood as a kind of 'reverse racism'

I've got all my gay friends and everything, and, I don't know, with them, they're like Asian, that's the only problem... as if they're like Asian people. They're white but they're Asian. They watch Asian films, they've got Asian interests. They've got Asian partners. And whereas white white guys, it's just like... I don't know, they just look at you or they look at you really like dirty eyes, and like 'what are these Pakis doing here?' type of thing. I don't know, that's the thing that goes on all these like... all these like Asian, Paki... that's the... they say 'what are you lot doing here? I know, you couldn't find a mosque or something to go to?' I've heard those comments actually in a club. And I don't know, I think that things pissed me off

Ali makes a distinction between different kinds of white gay men. First, he refers to his 'gay friends'. It is interesting that 'gay friends' stands here metonymically for white gay friends which may indicate Ali's sense of a conflation of gay identity with white values and culture. At the same time, Ali also highlights the mimicry of these (white) friends who strongly engage with Asian culture (cf. Bhabha 1986). Ali finds their identification with Asian-ness problematic and rather uncanny: 'they're like Asian, that's the only problem... as if they're like Asian people'. He comments that their Asian interests also extend to an interest in Asian men as sexual and intimate partners. I read his statements as a repudiation of exoticization (an issue Ali took up later by complaining about white men's lack of respect for physical boundaries and 'transgressive touching' in public gay spaces). Ali complains about the fetishization of Asian culture and brown bodies, a process aptly theorized by Sara Ahmed (2000) as 'stranger fetishism' and metaphorized by bell hooks (1992) with the image of 'eating the other'. Second, there are those white men which Ali refers to as the 'white white guys' who articulate more aggressive forms of racism. Ali's discussion comments on

differences and nuances within the performativity of whiteness.⁷ He emphasises the simultaneity of various cultural dynamics: out-right racism and exclusion as much as inter-ethnic interaction, conviviality, intimacy and sexuality. Yet none of these contexts is free of power imbalances, with power clustering in the hands of ethnically and racially hegemonic white subjects. The participation of British South Asian men in gay culture highlights its – all too often disavowed – creolized nature. Their stories of racism are striking reminders that inter-ethnic interaction in British queer diaspora space is over-determined by post-coloniality.

Some men in the focus group felt sad about the lack of connection among queer British Asians in mainstream scene spaces and highly welcomed the creation of independent social and cultural spaces for Asian gay men, lesbians and bisexuals as a response to racism and exclusion. In the group discussion and the interviews South Asian gay and bisexual men stressed the importance of groups and events such as Shakti, Club Kali, Al-Fatiha UK, several groupings run by the Naz-Project in London, and groups in other cities, such as Bradford and Birmingham. The organisational network of LGBTQI South Asian groups has evolved since the year 2000, when I conducted most of the interviews presented in this chapter (Kawale, 2004, 2005; Safra Project, 2002, 2004). Some of these groups are sponsored by the health sector. Rizwan who is himself running a group for South Asian men as part of his HIV prevention work sees the primary purpose of these groups as a self-help and a mutual learning process which can stimulate individual and collective cultural development. Other groups, such as the Muslim organisations Safra Project, Al Fatiha UK (and its successor organisation Imaan) are primarily directed towards educational work and policy development as forms of political activism. These developments attest to the growth of a network of supportive groups and/or forms of self-organization. They can be framed as an integral part of a wider Queer South Asian counterpublic across (British) diaspora space (Gopinath, 2005; cf. Fraser, 1997; Warner, 2002).

⁷ See Tate 2005; 2009 on the performativity of race.

Social and cultural events such as South Asian Gay and Lesbian club nights which have drawn enthusiastic crowds in cities such as London, Birmingham, Manchester and Leicester are an important part of this counterpublic (Dudrah, 2006; Bassi, 2006, 2008). Located at the fringes of the pink economy, these clubs have enabled the celebration and assertion of queer desire in a primarily British South Asian setting and provide multi-focal and sensual points of cultural identification. The significance of bhangra (both Old Skool and Post Bhangra) and integration of Bollywood clips into individual and collective dance performances at these events align them with wider cultural trends among 2nd and 3rd generation young South Asians who have developed and recycled bhangra and bollywood (in combinations with other genres of music and film) as an important mode for self-expression (cf. Kaur and Kalra, 1996; Dudrah, 2007, 2008). Popular culture, arts, as much as politics in a more narrow sense drive the consolidation of British South Asian queer counter-publics as a site of creolized practices. The aesthetics enacted and produced at British South Asian LGBTQ club nights mix musical styles and cultural references in an indulgence of queer adaptations (cf. Dudrah, 2006). Because these events are shaped by profoundly creolizing dynamics, they provide multiple points of connection which fosters inclusivity. The multi-referentiality of identifications and cultural codes (e.g. music, film clips, dress, dance styles, gender presentation, etc.) creolizes South Asian queer communities in that it keeps boundaries fluid to a certain extent. Yet even fluid boundaries are subject to contestation. Community definitions are negotiated across a wide range of positionalities around gendered, sexual, racial, ethnic, religious, class-related and political perspectives. As we will see in the next section, the question of non-monogamy, too, plays a role in this contestation of community practices.

Non-monogamy and cultural or religious values:

Non-monogamy was a contested issue in the discussion with the members of *Matai*. Many group participants valued committed long-term relationships which they saw as incommensurable with non-monogamy. Many considered non-monogamy to be the accepted norm, in particular with regard to periods in which a person may not have a steady partner. Others saw non-monogamy as the perfect solution, particularly for people with a high 'sex drive'. While there seemed to be a consensus that non-monogamy would in principle be a valid option for the people who are 'up for it', the revelation by one man that he has been in a non-monogamous relationship himself appeared to be quite confessional in the group context. Ali told me that he had been teased by friends because of his open approach to sexuality. Reflecting on his experience of being in an open relationship with a now ex partner/lover, he identifies the combination of closeness and freedom as the most significant enjoyment linked with this experience:

Christian: What were the things you enjoyed about it?

Ali: The things we enjoyed in an open relationship... you have like all the things you have in a relationship, such as like the closeness... but at the end of the day you can just sleep with anyone else you like. That's the thing. You can have the physical aspirations with anyone you want. And the person is not going to question you about it. Because they themselves have the same situation and they respect what you're doing. That's the main thing. He never once questioned me like that about 'you're sleeping with this person – I don't want you to do that'. He never tried to put a hold on me. He gave me as much freedom and I never questioned him about what he did.

One man in the focus group session cautiously suggested that non-monogamy would not be commensurate with 'Asian values' and that sleeping around was basically a 'white men's thing'

Aalim: Culture [is] part of it, it's like... no-one actually said no, my parents or any Asian people didn't actually say to you, dictate to be in a monogamous relationship. Bless you! But that's just what I assumed that I should be, and you know when people like sleep around and just fuck and chuck..? It just seems like... I know it seems like a really ignorant question, but that's what a white man would be ... to me. Does anyone else feel that? I didn't know this had started happening until I came back to the scene.

Bikhu: I'm sure there's plenty of Asian men that do exactly the same thing. But...

Fadi: I'm sure, no doubt ... [laughter]

Although Aalim's thesis did not find approval in the group, his argument points to the existence of anti-promiscuity discourses which deploy the language of ethnic essentialism (Klesse, 2007). Non-monogamy is also cast as problematic in certain religious discourses, very similar to homosexuality (cf. Yip, 2004). In an individual interview, Irfan explained that his non-monogamous relationship with a white non-Muslim partner was initially complicated by a sense of guilt on his part which stemmed from his worry that non-monogamy would be at odds with his commitment to Islam. Irfan worked out a different position for himself as time progressed. He describes the empowerment which he experienced as a Muslim gay man through engaging with Al Fatiha UK as a central step in this development. Self-organizing and the creation of support structures and political campaigning groups is an essential part of forming alternative public spheres (Fraser, 1997). These queer counter-publics provide support and a discursive repertoire on subjectivity and community for British South Asian LGBTQ people to negotiate conflicting values in a more confident and assertive manner (Siraj, 2006, 2014; Minwalla et al., 2005; cf. Jaspal and Cinirella, 2010). These groups are sites which stimulate the creolization of discourses on identity, intimacy and sexuality across

the boundaries of different public spheres and ‘communities’. This undermines any claim to universalism, whether uttered in the name of a ‘gay community’ or religious or cultural South Asian authenticity. We can also see this denial of universalism in terms of the participants’ views on marriage and coming out.

Creolizing marriage, family and coming out

Some controversy emerged on the question about the commensurability of religion and gay identity or gay life. The discussion was primarily played out with references to Sikhism and Islam. Wijai, for example, argues that there would be no place for him as a gay man in Sikhism and that religion is designed for male-female couples and families: ‘You cannot be gay and, you know, follow the Sikh religion’. Others oppose this view and argue that whether in Sikhism or Islam, this would be a matter of interpretation. They follow a relativistic argument or a critical hermeneutics which questions the absolute authority of religious traditions by highlighting inaccurate readings or socio-cultural specificity (Jivraj and de Jong, 2004; Yip, 2005; Shannahan, 2011).

The most controversial and emotionally charged issue was the question of marriage. Many participants felt pressured by the expectation of their families to marry and have children. One participant asked how other group members felt about gay men who marry but continue to have gay sex. Wijai rejected such an approach as being utterly unethical. He thought it was wrong to subject oneself to the pressure to marry (even if the pressure was high – in particular on women), if marriage was not an aspiration of one’s own.

Wijai: I think that’s really out of order. I think that’s a really bad thing, to have... to marry a woman, yeah, and for a woman to be heterosexual, and you to go and sleep with men afterwards. You know, I think that’s just... that just takes the whole edge off marriage. You shouldn’t be married to the woman. You shouldn’t have kids with her

in the first place. You shouldn't... if you want to be with a man, you should be with a man not a woman.

Labib: Sorry, can I just say... some men just like to go with a man and have sex and that's it...

Wijai: Oh, as a release?

Labib: ...it doesn't mean anything.

Wijai later goes on to explain that although he has lived openly as a gay man for many years, he would not rule out the possibility of entering a heterosexual marriage with a female partner of his choice.

Other discussants, too, argued that not only ethical, but also authentic practices of 'cross-orientation' marriage would be possible, based on the belief that the question whom to choose as a life partner is not (only) decided on the question of sexual attraction. These positions call into question universalistic views of marriage which place western constructions of (sexualized) romantic love at the heart of their understanding. South Asian practices of arranged marriage, for example, tend to appeal to different traditions of emotionality (Chantler, 2011; Ahmad, 2006). Research participants draw upon these broader cultural repertoires to make idiosyncratic life course decisions. By articulating these approaches within a gay-affirmative strategy they creolize both South Asian marriage cultures and lesbian, gay and bisexual marriage and family practices. Others who did not see such kinds of marriage as an option often found themselves in a serious dilemma. Kifayat told the group that he only just managed to avoid being married off against his wishes. Some saw it as risky to refuse marriage, since this could be interpreted as a sign of being gay which would carry

the risk of the break-down of family relationships. In individual interviews, Ali and Irfan talked about having been threatened or physically abused by family members, when they were suspected of being or found out to be gay. Ali was severely beaten up by a group of relatives. One family member made an attempt to take his life. He explains that he was sent to a private psychiatric institution, where he received conversion treatment, including electroshocks. Some participants evoked the possibility of entering a ‘marriage of convenience’ with a lesbian woman as the most ethical approach to their dilemma. Same-sex marriage was welcome by many, but the group was to a stronger degree preoccupied with the question of heterosexual marriage.⁸

Rizwan has been married in the past. His ex-wife and his son are currently living in Pakistan. He explains that although marriage is important to him personally, the wish to make his family happy provided an important motivation to get married.

Christian: And your family? Did they, although they knew that you were gay at the time, they still expected you...would have liked you to marry?

Rizwan: Yes, yes. I mean, the Islamic religion, parents... there are certain things that parents are expected to do within the Islamic religion. And one of them is they expect their children to be married before they die. So that’s what my parents wanted me to do. (...) And sort of, you know... and they got me married up and I wanted them to be happy. You know, but they got me married up...

Not only Islamic, but also hegemonic South Asian family values expect young people to get married. ‘Getting married is a family obligation or duty. To not marry is to ‘defy the expectations of family and community’ argue Gera Patel and Krishna Maharaj (2000, 14). In

⁸ I conducted the research before the introduction of the Civil Partnership Act 2004 and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, at a time when few people expected such laws to become reality in such a short period.

South Asian culture the family is frequently positioned differently with regard to the public/private distinction, coming out and/or the refusal to marry, may not only result in being ostracized within the family, but also in the wider community (see also Siraj, 2006 and Safra Project, 2002 who address Muslim LGBT men's and women's marriage issues respectively). Yet some participants in the group discussion challenge the assumption that coming-out has to necessarily result in the break-down of family relationships (see Bhugra, 1997; Minwalla et al., 2005). Wijai emphasises that his family has been accepting and highly supportive of his sexuality and identity.

Bikhu: But I mean...Ok, but there's a lot of Asian people who have come out to their families.

Wijai: Well I came out to my family, not like to my dad or grandparents, but my brothers and sisters and... and they've all known about me and they've seen me go on the gay scene, and they've seen me with people, and erm we haven't had much of a discussion about you know, boyfriends or... they know, you know... But the thing is they've been supportive. Like 'if any time you change your mind, you know, we'll be there to support you – but if you don't we'll be still there' type of thing. So they're like pretty cool about it.

Kifayat: I think the kids are more ok with it nowadays with younger people than the older crowd.

Two men in my study, Irfan and Rizwan were engaged in educational work against homophobia. They did this as out-gay men and members of LGB(T)Q organisations.

The debate among British South Asian gay and bisexual men brought to the fore a set of quite distinctive concerns around marriage which went beyond one-dimensional demands for

formal same-sex marriage rights common among other participants in my study (Klesse, 2007). These concerns reveal the multiplicity of cultural understandings of personal autonomy, the relevance of coming out, the nature of love, the purpose of marriage and the content and scope of family obligation. The focus group discussion with members of *Matai*, a London-based support group for gay and bisexual British South Asian, can serve as an example of a (queer) micro-public. Different ideas and values (derived from different religious and cultural traditions, identity narratives or social movement ideologies) are negotiated which in turn produces a creolized discourse on sexuality and relationality. This entails novel and multiple identifications, the creation of complex and partially ambiguous community affiliations, the contestation of cultural and religious values, innovative redefinitions of kinship and marriage and the re-envisioning of life course narratives.

Conclusion: Beyond Multiculturalism. The Creolization of Queer South Asian Public Spheres

Gayatri Gopinath uses the term ‘South Asian public cultures’ ‘to name the myriad cultural forms and practices through which queer subjects articulate new modes of collectivity and kinship and reject the ethnic and religious absolutism of multiple nationalisms, while simultaneously resisting Euro-American, heteronormative models of sexual alterity’ (2005, 20). In this article, I have brought her notion of ‘South Asian public cultures’ in dialogue with the concept ‘counterpublic’ which has inspired feminist, lesbian and gay, and queer political theory throughout the last two decades. Because Gopinath uses a ‘queer diaspora’ primarily as an intellectual method rather than as a noun for an empirical entity, her analysis tends to avoid drifting towards romanticism which shapes some of the more celebratory texts on ‘counterpublicity’ and ‘counter-normativity’. Gopinath emphasises that diasporic identities and

desires emerge through fragile links established across uneven terrains shaped by power, violence, and displacement. Here Gopinath's public sphere argument further resonates with creolization theory.

The research participants articulate experiences which are distinctive to British South Asian gay and bisexual men. Yet even if it is possible to identify the salience of certain issues, their narratives do not establish a unified discourse. The overt disagreements among participants in the group discussion on ethical, cultural, religious, political and relational values attests to the 'unbounded' character and the contested nature of (queer) diaspora space. Research participants defined their identities, fashioned their styles of intimacy and shaped their ideas on sexual politics by drawing on a wide range of discursive resources derived from gay rights or gay liberationist frameworks, secular or religious ethics or individualist or communal life course narratives. These positions are worked out in a diasporic setting and are sustained by an emerging British South Asian queer counter-public. The novelty of this discursive formations and cultural the practices they build upon can be interpreted with Glissant (2010b) as an effect of creolization. Deploying a creolization perspective diminishes the risk that the notion of public spheres may relapse into the generalizing assumptions which have been characteristic of orthodox multiculturalisms (Holt, 1995).⁹ A creolization perspective prevents a closure of the concept of public spheres. It highlights a plurality of perspectives which allows for making visible internal differences and antagonisms.

I have turned to creolization, because more than any other paradigm of mixing, it foregrounds power, domination, agency and contestation. British South Asian research participants' narratives unsettle taken-for-granted ideas on identity, sexuality and intimacy commonly

⁹ Such risks become evident in the talk of *the* gay and lesbian public sphere, or of *the* Black public sphere, or *the* South Asian public sphere or *the* queer South Asian public sphere for that matter (Plummer, 2003; Baker, 1995; Holt, 1995).

promoted in British South Asian ethnic, national or religious or white mainstream British or European LGBTQ community discourses. In the face of white racism and hegemony in mainstream LGBTQ spaces they call into question the beneficial nature of a ‘gay community discourse’. Their voices echo complaints raised for many decades by sexual dissidents of South Asian origin residing in societies of the ‘West’ or the global North (Ratti, 1993; Gupta, 1989; Leong, 1996; Eng and Hom, 1998). Their criticism highlights the invisibility or non-intelligibility of South Asian ‘queer’ embodiment and subjectivity, the exoticization of brown bodies and the prevalence of racism in ‘gay spaces’ (Roy, 1998; Baddrudoja, 2008; Nasir, 2006). At the same time, they challenge the patriarchal and heteronormative character of mainstream and conservative South Asian diasporic cultures which render it difficult for non-heterosexuals, transgender people and gender-dissidents to openly express their identities or desires. Envisaging non-heteronormative sexualities and intimacies, they tread new and often risky territories. Their complex narratives on identity, desire, culture and politics show not only the ‘queering’ of diaspora or the ‘diasporization’ of queer thought and politics. They further attest to the *creolizing nature of these processes* and their potential to unsettle current orthodoxies on ‘gay space’, ‘British’ or ‘South Asian’ culture, sexual identity and orientation, the ‘nature’ of love, the purpose of community and queer kinship and families.

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