

Queering Knowledge in West Bengal

Academia in the Hands of Activists

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Abstract

This paper explores the tensions and resonances between academic and non-academic approaches to scholarly knowledge through fieldwork conducted at an NGO that promotes the rights of lesbian, bisexual, and female-to-male transgender people in Eastern India. I analyse both productive and frustrated exchanges between activists and academics from the activists' point of view and make the following two arguments: Firstly, I argue that interpretations, developments, and uses of knowledge instigated by non-academics must be taken seriously by academics even when they are in tension with the dominant academic understanding of that knowledge. Secondly, and expanding upon this argument, I go on to suggest that academics should consciously seek to write in a style and tone that does not assume extensive shared specialist knowledge, in order to open up fertile scholarly ideas more fully for engagement with those outside academia or within different disciplines and sub-specialisms of scholarship.

Introduction

Terms travel. This is widely acknowledged and applies as much to academic concepts and terminology as to the popular and cultural items we are more accustomed to considering as parts of globalised 'flows' (Appadurai 1996). Anthropologists are no longer surprised to find that informants have already heard of 'cosmopolitanism' or 'kinship diagrams'. Therefore, when working with NGOs, activists, or students we should not be surprised to find that concepts such as 'speech act theory' or 'performativity' are likewise familiar concepts to some of those we work with. In recent decades, NGOs and activist organisations have become increasingly prominent in local politics across the world, especially in South Asia (Farrington and Lewis 1993; Fisher 1997). The work of such organisations has often called upon anthropological and other academic forms of knowledge to support and further its cause (Speed 2006). This has led to increasingly lively debates about the relationship between academia and activism (Jean-Klein and Riles 2005; Goodale 2006; Englund 2011). However, such debates have usually discussed what positions academics should take in relation to activism, rarely considering how those identifying primarily as 'activists' engage independently with scholarship as part of their own strategies and practices.

Drawing on preliminary fieldwork with queer activists in Kolkata, India, I suggest that the aforementioned situation is a crucial oversight in studies of activism and of knowledge. Specifically, I contend that viewing the relationship between the knowledge produced by academics and activists respectively in this way actually reflects and magnifies implicit global hierarchies of knowledge and knowledge production. In these hierarchies, Western, academic knowledge becomes the yardstick and standard by which other forms of knowledge are judged (Moore 1996).

Working with a different set of premises and priorities, activist interpretations of academic work can challenge anthropologists working primarily in academia in productive – but very often combustive – ways (Speed 2006; Englund 2011). Despite the potential discomfort this may cause academics, I am convinced that such engagement provides an important opportunity for academics to fully assess the breadth of impact and potential applications

of their work in the world they study and write about. Furthermore, these non-academic engagements with scholarship are an essential and legitimate route for the inspiration and production of new, alternative, and democratic knowledge forms.

This article is produced as part of an ongoing project with queer feminist activists that focuses on the role and interaction of various knowledge-forms in acts of activism and resistance. Since June 2013, I have been working closely with Diana¹, a registered NGO working for the rights of lesbians, bisexual women, and female-to-male (FTM) transgender people in Eastern India. My fieldwork to date has comprised three separate trips, each of several months' duration. From my first moments working with Diana I have been confronted with a level of engagement with academic material that forced me to consider the relationship between academic and non-academic worlds, and take 'non-academic' engagements with 'the academic' more seriously.

Tracing their roots to 1999, Diana is based in the urban centre of Kolkata at its office and resource-centre. Here members meet on a weekly basis to discuss upcoming projects and future plans, and full-time members of staff are employed from Tuesday to Sunday to organise events, create and curate the archive, and provide counselling and support in addition to carrying out a range of other smaller tasks. In pride of place at the office is the organisation's reference library of over 400 books on gender, sexuality, and related subjects, with access provided both to members and external researchers. The influence of academic ideas such as 'performativity' (Butler 1990), 'masculinities' (Chopra, Osella and Osella 2004), 'becoming woman' (de Beauvoir 2014), and, as becomes especially pertinent in the course of this article, 'homonationalism' (Puar 2007) reveal themselves in mundane ways and through the programmes of large, public-facing projects such as their biannual newsletter, the biennial National Queer Conference, the annual Rainbow Carnival, and the films selected for the annual Queer Film Festival in Kolkata. These authoritative academic voices are integrated to inform Diana's daily archiving routines, guiding its focus on what questions should be asked, what cuttings should be taken, and which discussions need to

¹ Diana is a pseudonym as are all personal names in this article.

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be had. As I will explore later, this orientation towards academic material is expressed in multifarious and sometimes conflicting ways.

Activist and 'grassroots' appeals to academic knowledge have been noted in a number of scholarly examples, although they are rarely the focus of discussion and analysis (Speed 2006). This is particularly true of queer and feminist social movements which, in addition to gathering and producing knowledge as part of their own operations, have long mobilised academic research and scholarship to structure and legitimate their ideas and claims (Messer-Davidow 2002; Spalter-Roth and Hartmann 1996; Menon 1999). The history of intimate and at times dialectic relations between feminist and queer activism and relevant scholarship makes Diana a particularly interesting place to observe and investigate the relationship between activist practices and academic knowledge.

My exploration of the relationship between academic and non-academic uses of knowledge was triggered by significant episodes in which informants became frustrated by barriers to particular academic ideas or works that they wanted to access as part of their political and social-activist agendas. In this paper I focus on a period at Diana at which the term homonationalism, as borrowed from the American theorist Jasbir K. Puar (2007), had acquired an unusually elevated status in the organisation. It was not a term I had come across before, and during my time in the field I struggled along with my informants in a condition of quasi-ignorance and frustration. Through receiving the confused stream of partial, contradictory, and jargon-laden information I developed a keener sense of how knowledge presented in the academic register is experienced by interested parties outside of academia. Therefore, rather than explaining at this point in the article what homonationalism means, I invite the reader to experience exposure to the term first from an 'activist' point of view through ethnography before providing a theoretical explanation later in the article.

Academia as an Activist Strategy

There is no escaping the concept of homonationalism at the office. Slogans speaking out against it cover the homemade posters on the walls, and one of the founder members has enthusiastically explained to me that homonationalism

is the most important, 'cutting-edge' concept emerging from academia at the moment. She explains that members need to understand it so that they can 'empower' themselves and keep up to date with 'relevant' issues in the world today. Her opinion is echoed by others around the office, some of whom go on to confess to me that they are not exactly sure what homonationalism is except that it is 'important'. A talk is due to take place later that day on the very subject. The speaker, Avijit, is a native Kolkatan now working as a post-doctoral fellow at a leading American university. Deepika, one of the organisation's employees, is preparing for the lecture by reading an article published on the subject in the organisation's biannual newsletter some months ago by Avijit and Dr. Ray, another Kolkatan now lecturing in the US.

'Anita, what is transnationalism?' she asks, sheepishly. I fumble to explain the concept and all its connotations to her. The article is structured in the form of a conversation between Avijit and Dr. Ray and assumes a great deal of prior academic knowledge. An opaque passing reference to 'biopolitics' leaves Deepika stumped and significantly demoralised. Her face lights up as she makes it to a descriptive passage in which Avijit describes a cruising encounter with a 'fair-skinned, Brahmin' boyfriend of his. For Avijit, this is an example that represents homonationalism, although he doesn't exactly explain why. Perhaps he assumes that readers will connect for themselves the dense theory and his evocative example. Nonetheless, Deepika feels gratified. 'This I can understand,' she says. However, she is still no closer to understanding clearly what this theory of homonationalism is.

This ethnographic excerpt illustrates the tensions, contradictions, and misunderstandings that make up the fabric of non-academic engagements with academia, particularly where academia is careless towards this part of its potential audience. The engagements are multiple and multifaceted. The excerpt highlights in particular the three main ways in which I saw and understood the engagement of Diana activists with academic knowledge. Firstly, I saw senior members of the organisation lead these engagements with urgency, picking up on trends in academia and seeking to use them to the advantage of their cause.

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Secondly, the organisation's members at large were motivated to attempt an understanding of academic work, which some of them claimed 'empowered' them through an understanding of key issues relating to their personal and group identity. This 'empowerment' that the various members refer to can be understood as the ability to stand up credibly to both large-scale and small-scale challenges to their personal choice and gendered/sexual identity through the reference and support of academic ideas and material. In this sense, 'empowerment' is a primary goal of the organisation as an activist body and as an emotional support group. Finally, at the individual level, genuine interest and effort put into readings of academic writing may have been met with frustrations and barriers that allowed only partial access to the knowledge concerned.

It is important to understand why academic knowledge is attractive to activists. The first and most obvious reason is apparent in the urgency of the Diana founder member who is concerned that the organisation should be up to date with the 'cutting edge' of concepts about gender and sexuality. Trying to be at this 'cutting edge', moreover, is driven by a desire for 'empowerment'. Quite simply, knowledge is power, and this group of activists is seeking to garner power for itself. Indeed, activism of any kind is always bound up with power. Diana's activism seeks to redress patriarchal orders of power that underpin the mainstream Indian social structure. In this system, queer women and transmen are marginalised and oppressed by cultural and social tenets and notions of gender, personhood, and sexuality. By presenting themselves, their arguments, and their organisation as rooted in internationally recognised scholarship, Diana demands the respect and social capital that academic knowledge holds in Indian society. This kind of support is especially weighty in the historically literary and university-focused culture of urban West Bengal.

The context of contemporary India, where Hindu nationalist politics have risen to dominance, makes sourcing such power even more important as the validity of queer identities, lifestyles, and sexualities is often violently denied (Anand 2011). 'Scientific' or academic arguments, especially those based within a South Asian context, bring a crucial legitimacy to such forms of being. An example of this is the countering of the Hindu nationalist claim that homosexuality does not constitute a part of Indian culture with the

scholarly presentation of historical examples of representations of same-sex love in ancient, pre-colonial Hindu Indian culture. This has been detailed in the work of Giti Thadani (1996) on female same-sex erotic temple sculpture and in cultural studies of art and literature (Vanita and Kidwai 2000; Vanita 2002). Although this strategy is met with varying degrees of success and recognition, photographs taken by Thadani of such sculptures are hung on the walls in the office, whilst others are kept as a framed collection. Work such as that of Thadani, Vanita, and Kidwai is often brought up in conversations where the possibility of an identity encompassing both 'Indian' and 'lesbian' is being discussed.

Academic knowledge therefore bears a certain kind of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 2011), or, it is a resource that can be strategically employed in lobbying, demonstrations, and in the general presentation of Diana to challenge dominant social perceptions and power structures. This is evident within the pages of the organisation's newsletter, which is one of the main interfaces between Diana and the general public of Kolkata. This newsletter contains articles in both English and Bengali and is presented as a space for silenced queer voices to express themselves. It is also, however, disseminated as a means of representing the organisation to a wider public audience both online and, notably, in hard copies at the prestigious and well-attended annual Kolkata Book Fair. Previous contributors have included leading scholars from the Indian subcontinent or who are of South Asian origin, bolstering the legitimacy of the organisation's goals and arguments with their individual tenures. Similarly, the biennial of a National Queer Conference draws positive public and media attention, with Diana as organiser at the heart of a gathering of distinguished scholars and speakers from all over the country (Das 2013).

Whilst ties to 'front line' academia craft a particular image for the organisation, the desire to command social respect through links to authoritative and fashionable academia seems at certain moments to be in tension with the organisation's original *raison d'être*: to tend to the personal and emotional requirements of their everyday, Bengali-speaking members. Amidst the knowledge-seeking activities, it is possible to lose sight of the fact that the activist wing of Diana grew out of the emotional support group Sappho, which was founded on the tenet that sharing experiences, feelings, and ideas would provide a supportive forum for same-sex loving women (Akanksha and Malobika 2006). This kind of experiential or

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personal knowledge is valued by Diana as one of the most important parts of mutual 'support' that it facilitates, and emotive, poetic, and artistic representations of this aspect of queer identity appear in the organisation's newsletter and publications. On the one hand, personal and experiential knowledge expresses information about trauma, isolation, conflicting feelings, emotions, and ties. On the other hand, members are given quasi-academic foundations through which to make these experiences understandable through analysing the structure of Indian society and understanding *why* certain gender and sexual identities are excised, branded 'deviant', and become 'transgressive'.

Academic or scholarly knowledge can therefore work in harmony with emotive and experiential knowledge forms to provide context or rationalisation for the complex and confusing personal identities and emotions that queer Indian women experience. However, as shown by the ethnographic excerpt given above, this engagement is not always easy or smooth. Although academic knowledge is not the only knowledge form of importance at Diana, it is a significant presence and it is this presence and its interaction with other forms of knowledge that I continue to focus on in this paper.

Homonationalism and Diana

The importance of academic knowledge in the daily life of Diana became apparent during my 2013 fieldwork when, for reasons still unclear to me, homonationalism was the most spoken about topic in the office. I had not come across this term before arriving in the field and was extremely impressed that this activist group should be so up-to-date with relevant concepts that are primarily discussed in academic circles. The examples of homonationalism given to me by the founder members and employees of the organisation referred mainly to gated communities in the US that were exclusively for gay couples and their families. The idea of such communities, including schools for the children of gay couples, horrified the members of Diana, who asserted that their primary goal was integration and a queer sexuality and 'lifestyle' that was free from social constraints and stereotyping. One founder member stressed to me her concern that such a set-up avoided – and therefore failed to address – the challenges of accepting and integrating alternative sexual or gender identities and that she was anxious about the possibility of such a

configuration spreading to India in the future. Considering the ghettoization of Hijra² communities in Indian slums, this anxiety is contextually understandable.

Some members were also aware of homonationalism in connection with the term 'pinkwashing'. This is a term used by some theorists to refer to the marketing-style strategy in which the Israeli government promotes the state as formally supportive of LGBT rights and therefore more progressive than other Middle Eastern nations (Schulman 2011; Gross 2013). This strategy has been criticised as a 'public relations' exercise through which the government attempts to draw attention away from human rights violations in Palestine (Schulman 2011), despite the post-national aspirations of queer Israeli ambassadors (Gross 2013). However, most of my informants were not able to elaborate upon the term in this way. Those who were able to elaborate understood 'pinkwashing' and the related concept of 'the pink dollar', in which gay people are targeted as ideal consumer citizens (Bell and Binnie 2000), to be exploitative and to lead to the pernicious stereotyping of LGBTQ*³ communities. There was the sense that homonationalism represented a sham acceptance of homosexuality, either forcing the separation of homosexuals from mainstream society or selectively accepting certain forms of queer love because they were somehow economically and politically profitable for the heterosexual majority citizenry. This thought was unpalatable to members of Diana, whose primary objective is acceptance on their own terms, as citizens like any other rather than as defined or delineated by their sexual preferences and gender identities.

Since homonationalism had been of such interest to my informants, when I returned to the UK one of the first things I did was look up Puar's 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. While there are resemblances between Diana's

² Hijras are the ancient 'third gender' of South Asian society. Born male, they elect to undergo castration and often live in community enclaves. They usually present a hyper-feminine gender identity and appearance (see Nanda 1986, 1994).

³ Due to the extreme diversity of sexual identities in the South Asian context I elect to use this set of initials with an asterisk, which indicates that I am aware that there are other identities included in the alternative sexualities bracket.

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construction of homonationalism and that in the text, the foci of the two versions of homonationalism are significantly different. Puar's text explicitly concerns the context of post-9/11 America and, as such, tropes of Middle Eastern, Muslim, and 'terrorist' identities are central to the formulation and meaning of the concept. Her ideal 'homonational' is the middle-class, white male citizen of North America. Whilst global homosexual discourses elevate this figure, it is clear that this is not the standard which Diana members are wary of being held up against. In particular, Puar explores the contrasting moral distinctions suggested by different LGBT lifestyles. She highlights the various media methods through which the figure of 'the Arab' or 'the Muslim' is feminised and criminalised through tropes of deviant sexuality, which includes an implicit moral indictment of the Middle Eastern and Arab nations and their failures to control male sexuality. At the same time, she shows how certain kinds of 'gay lifestyle' have been put forward as a sign of American liberalism and social progressiveness, and by implication, moral superiority.

The term homonationalism has further been picked up by other authors such as Gross (2013), who has used it to understand similarly selective, ambivalent, or strategic national political attitudes towards LGBT sexualities in the context of global political relations including contexts of war (see also Puar 2011; Schulman 2011). This work, and contributions to it by Puar herself, constitutes the origins of the term's connections with the notion of pinkwashing (Puar 2013). Taking all of this into account, how have the themes of gated communities (something I failed to find mention of in Puar's book) and pinkwashing (a peripheral concept developed by academics much later) come to be at the core of Diana's understanding and work around the term? Where has this 'knowledge' come from?

When They Read What We Write

The title of this section is borrowed from Caroline Brettell's (1996) insightful volume, which brings together anthropologists' cautious and diverse analyses of informants' and readers' reactions to their work. Readers' reactions traverse a familiar range of criticisms and expressions of wounded feelings that authors attribute largely to 'misunderstandings' and alternative points of view. Since the publication of this collection, the issue of informant/

reader reactions to anthropological work has become ever more important to the point where it is commonly pre-empted as part of research training.

Academics today are increasingly accountable to our informants, and issues such as responsibility, collaboration, and the balance of power between researchers and researched are at the forefront of professional and ethical codes of conduct (ASA 2011; RCUK 2013). Informants in the present day are much more likely to read the work academics produce about them than they might have been in the past. This means that anthropologists and other social scientists are increasingly confronted with informants' interpretations, opinions, and understandings of their work (Brettell 1996; Scheper-Hughes 1998; Mosse 2004, 2006; Speed 2007; Englund 2011). This often raises a range of unexpected and sometimes unpleasant exchanges and objections from both parties, which are rarely easy to resolve.

So it seems that as anthropologists today we reach a critical dilemma. We are, in the first instance, extremely anxious about how our work is used and interpreted when it gets into others' hands after some disastrous run-ins with policy-makers and the international development industry (Mosse 2004, 2006; Jean-Klein and Riles 2005). Yet, there seems to be a growing consensus that in order to stay relevant to the world we study, the work we produce has to make itself relevant beyond academia (Lassiter 2005; Goodale 2006). We want our work to contribute both to the world in a general sense and to the particular people and groups we interact with. Indeed, somewhat controversially, the form in which our work achieves this is increasingly stipulated by some of the more coercive conditions of institutional and professional research guidelines. At the same time, however, many anthropologists cite genuine worries about our discipline losing its distinctiveness, its authority, its credibility, and its fundamentally academic character (Cancian 1993; Jean-Klein and Riles 2005; Speed 2007; Englund 2011).

Along with an increased likelihood that anthropologists' informants will read the work to which they contributed, calls for anthropology to be answerable to the people it researches mean that anthropologists are increasingly called upon to feed back and negotiate their work with their informants even before publication. This is evident in situations where the

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anthropologists' political or ethical beliefs differ fundamentally from those of their informants (Anand 2008) or when the anthropological study raises critical insights or interpretations that are not welcomed by the informants themselves (Scheper-Hughes 1979; Mosse 2004, 2006; Englund 2011). Perhaps the most famous example of this is the conflict David Mosse faced when former colleagues from the Department for International Development (DFID) objected to Mosse's representations and analyses of development organisations, projects, and outcomes they had worked on together some years before. This led to ethical tribunals and although Mosse was thoroughly vindicated by the academic community, his experiences have become an oft-cited example of the perils and conundrums of attempting collaborative or participatory academic research (Mosse 2004, 2006).

There has been significant discussion about the best ways to respond to informants who contest, dispute, or complain about anthropological work (Brettell 1996). A great many of such responses assert the difference between anthropological/academic ways of thinking and the 'everyday' or activist thinking of informants (Speed 2006; Jean-Klein and Riles 2005). Englund (2011) claims that this difference is inevitable and is pre-ordained by the differences in agenda between academically trained anthropologists and the people they work with. Englund illustrates his point with two examples from his work in Malawi. He first gives an example of a situation in which his anthropological interpretation of a medical emergency in an activist group was not felt to create any meaningful 'value' for the leaders in that group. As a result of this impasse, Englund ultimately stopped working with that group. Secondly, Englund recalls how as an expert witness in a trial that pitted villagers against the police, his alternative interpretation of villagers' testimonies proved crucial to supporting their case and as such was recognised positively by the people he lived and worked with. Using these contrasting examples, Englund explores both the potential created by this difference and recognises the cost of failure inherent in remaining stoically loyal to the academic project.

This area of debate has recently focused more on how anthropologists should conduct themselves in academic, expert, and activist capacities respectively. Engagement is therefore seen as something that the anthropologist does or participates in and, as such,

informants' responses or interpretations of the academic's work are generally picked up when they come about as direct result of contact with a particular academic, or are a managed part of the academic anthropologist's research agenda. But what of engagement initiated by activists themselves?

The non-academic engagement that I encountered at Diana is somewhat different from the above examples in that it does not entail confrontation, but rather a misunderstanding that is productive and moves ideas into a new domain. That is, taking a marginal or utterly tangential aspect of an idea or concept, the members of Diana have developed an understanding of an academic term and body of writing that is so far from the author's words as to be at first glance unrecognisable. It is a free and voluntary engagement with existing academic work and is not managed, arranged, or policed by any particular academic. Their understandings and 'misunderstandings' are therefore all the more interesting, being neither guided nor refuted by authoritative scholarly parties.

The engagement of activists at Diana is an example of how 'anthropological texts may reach unexpected audiences and assume unanticipated significance in unplanned places' (Glazier 1996: 38). How is this in itself to be understood? Amongst the range of possible responses to misinterpretations or 'mis/understandings' of scholarly work it is difficult to know how, as an anthropologist, to evaluate that response without reinstating a hierarchy in which academic knowledge is legitimised by scientific authority (Handler 1996) and the hegemony of Western scholarship (Moore 1996). Whilst responses may be unavoidable and even necessary, I therefore suggest that responses explaining or acknowledging different ways of thinking are not entirely unproblematic and may be insufficient.

Reflexivity around research practice has become the norm within our discipline, but it is mostly deployed as a tool for self-improvement which, whilst admirable and important, may produce an overly inward-facing discussion. In the spirit of engagement and democratising knowledge, how can anthropologists bring that reflexivity into the fabric of their main publications to the benefit of informants? How can this reflexivity be carried through so that it opens our work more fully to a wider audience, rather than primarily benefiting anthropologists and perpetuating internalised conversations?

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A number of possible ways are modelled by the examples of Mosse (2004, 2006), Englund (2010) and the authors in Brettell's (1996) volume, and more explicit methodological suggestions are known from the Writing Culture and Collaborative Anthropology schools (Clifford and Marcus 1986, Lassiter 2000). The appropriate response is likely to depend upon the given research context and interests of the informants concerned. In a situation where there is potential fruitful exchange and development from engagement it may still be very productive to persist with knowledge sharing endeavours and research despite differences of opinion and interpretation (Englund 2010, Jean-Klein and Riles 2006).

To return to the case study of engagement and understanding at Diana, I later learned that although the office's library holds a copy of Puar's original text, nobody had yet read it. This may have been because Puar's book was not widely available in India and because Diana members were not aware that a copy was available in their library. Their exposure to the idea of homonationalism had come primarily through second or third-hand explanations, analyses, references, and applications of the concept in scholarly or semi-scholarly articles and talks exchanged in activist, feminist, and queer networks in Kolkata. For instance, many had learned of it through articles in the organisation's newsletter or from hearing about it at lectures and study circle events in Diana's office. As concepts are restated and re-applied in different contexts by different scholarly agents, their meaning shifts subtly through the process of transmission and retransmission, as academics are well aware. This is because scholars adapt aspects of ideas that resonate with their work and interests, presenting accounts with new emphases and biases. I suggest that Diana's interpretations should also be understood in this way and that little or no distinction should be made between the activists' reframing of the concept for their own purposes than those done by recognised academics.

As academics, we write not only to present and share the knowledge we have gathered and created, but to further the project of knowledge production. In involving human informants and communities, anthropological knowledge is arguably particularly closely related to the subject matter and concerns of its research. However, the concept of 'author' as ultimate creator, combined with the years of hard work and emotion authors invest in

the production of their writing have increasingly led us to the mistaken belief that the author 'owns' the meaning of the words on the page (Foucault 1986; Barthes 1977). As Barthes eloquently explains in his essay 'The Death of the Author', in the act of writing, identity and the origin of the voice is lost and words take on a range of possible meanings which are perhaps more dependent upon the life-world and psyche of the reader than they ever were upon that of the writer (Barthes 1977).

This idea can be explored with reference to the earlier ethnographic example, considering the section where the academic writer Avijit draws on Puar's themes of race, ethnicity, class (caste), and [homo]sexuality to understand the politicised bases of the eroticism he experienced in a remembered sexual experience. In doing so, Avijit is expanding and adding to the nuances of the meaning of the word homonationalism through his extrapolation of it. At the level of the reader, although Deepika experienced exclusion from the majority of Avijit and Dr. Ray's text because she could not understand their use of jargon, her primary interest in homonationalism is to better understand the lived experiences of herself and her friends at Diana. Therefore, of all the information and nuances offered in the article, she walks away with a blurred but distinct narrative understanding of homonationalism as something that can be lived and acted out between individuals, between lovers, as well as between classes and castes. Deepika, as the reader, also becomes a crucial agent in the development and evolution of the meaning of homonationalism. This is not simply the prerogative of the author.

Barthes asserts that to understand a text as having its origin and ultimate meaning in its author limits the text and closes down the expansive, productive, and transformative possibilities of the writing itself. Indeed, Barthes argues that the source and voice of text is actually in the reading of the text rather than in the writing. In other words, Barthes is asserting the readers' right to interpret a given text in relation to their life-world, their present context and the frame in which they read and understand it: 'A text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination' (1977:1 224). Thus for a text to have any contemporary relevance or future value, the reader must be 'born' and her understanding received as legitimate.

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Following Barthes presented me with a new problem: if I am to take the understanding of homonationalism accepted and circulated at Diana seriously, how should I approach their idea without closing down either its legitimacy or its connection with Puar's original text? Two thought paradigms have been particularly useful for me in coming to understand the ways in which knowledge and ideas that travel change as they move through time, space, different ways of thinking, and different cultural contexts. The first comes from Boellstorff's work in Indonesia with queer-identifying individuals and groups (2003), and the second has been developed by Viveiros de Castro (1996, 1998, 2011) through the combined influence of his own theory of perspectivism with ideas from Mauss and Deleuze.

Considering the Indonesian sexual identities of *gay* and *lesbi* in their independent yet intricately entwined relationship with Western notions of 'gay' and 'lesbian', Boellstorff has developed the theoretical lens of 'dubbing culture' (Boellstorff 2003). Using the concept of dubbing, as used in some films and television programmes, Boellstorff draws attention to the space created by holding together two different ideas in relation to one another without ever fully successfully conflating them. In the dubbing of the film this is apparent by the mismatch of the movement of the lips with the sound and the vagaries of translation from one language to another. This creates space for new interpretations in the 'dubbed' language. I suggest that, in the case of knowledge exchange, we pay attention to how non-academic or activist readers engage with material produced by trained scholars and the ways in which the gap between their agendas, ways of thinking, and political priorities create space for the production of new kinds of knowledge.

I see this gap between non-academic and academic ideas as a creative space, ripe with potential for the creation of new knowledge, knowledge forms, and ideas (see also Roy 2011). We can see how, in the case of Diana, the fetishised 'homonational' figure of the affluent, monogamous, family-oriented, American gay has become a central icon of great importance. Diana's members express anxiety about the significance of this figure for approaches to dealing with homosexuality and stress the importance of integration of *all* queer-identifying individuals as normal members of society. By contrast, although fairly central to Puar's book, Western phobias of Arab figures and analysis of the Western 'war

on terror' are, in the Diana context, evidently less relevant and perhaps less intelligible and important. In other words, these particular examples, which are key to much of Puar's original text, were not translatable into the 'language' of West Bengal's LBT activists at the time at which my fieldwork was undertaken.

Diana's members' understanding of homonationalism is that, in addition to being relevant to them 'in its own right', it has provoked deeper thought about the kind of future members want to fight for. At the individual level, we have seen that Deepika finished the newsletter's article understanding primarily those parts that translated into her own experience and those ways of communicating relatable to her. She was also keenly aware of the gaps in her knowledge, as one may be aware of the gaps between the dubbed sound we hear from a film and the movements in the picture. Whilst these kinds of engagements may sometimes seem to be more of a *misunderstanding*, it is nonetheless an *understanding* that has generated knowledge and thoughts. Crucially, this has been done through engagement between non-academic activists and academic scholarship and ideas, both of which were relevant to Deepika's life and circumstances.

The other paradigm I found useful in thinking about these engagements is set out by Viveiros De Castro (2011) in a recent article in which he attempts to combat the hierarchical orders of knowledge, things, and peoples imposed through historic relations of power (2011: 128). To do so, he draws heavily on Deleuze's critiques of linearity and hierarchical organisation of thought. With Guattari, Deleuze encourages readers to abandon these tree-like, hierarchically structured relationships and think instead of a 'rhizome': a growth with roots and bulbs sprouting in all directions, without a clear point of origin and without specific destinations (Deleuze and Guattari 2000). Much of their project is invested in tracing multiple and multifarious connections that come together to create 'plateaus', which are nodes of potential. Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the active nature of these connections, describing 'lines of flight' between and beyond conceptual planes and moments. Thus they displace the notion of 'origin' and emphasise instead live, active connections, and the crossovers between different ideas and energies. This way of thinking about the relationships between ideas, people, texts, agendas, and knowledge may allow us to be more gracious in our understanding of how non-academics engage with academic

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work and therefore check our expectations about what engagement, whether initiated by 'us' or 'them', could or should achieve. In the context of my informants and their understandings of homonationalism, for example, this would require academics (including me) to take on board Diana's interpretations as valid contributions to the meaning of the term and resist the temptation to criticise its members' contextualisation of the information as 'incorrect' or a 'misunderstanding'.

To understand and circumvent the difficulties inherent to attempting to sustain multiple knowledges and break down existing hierarchies of knowledge, Viveiros De Castro turns to Deleuze's notion of '*Autruí*' ('other'). Deleuze claims that processing an 'other' expression of a possible world through one's own in the course of social interaction dissipates the structure of that possible world and validates or disavows it as a real or unreal belief. Viveiros de Castro points out that this leads to the trap of having to choose between possibilities. He suggests instead that we should seek to multiply our own world by deciding to sustain the other expressions as possibilities, neither relinquishing them nor seeking to explain or verify them. In this configuration, academics would be able to retain their work, theories, and values without disavowing the possibilities of the interpretations and subsequent knowledges produced by their informants and other non-academic readers. For an example of this in practice, see Mosse's gracious understanding of the ideas and 'proper' knowledge forms championed by the former development colleagues who contested his book about their aid work (Mosse 2006).

This is a complex web of ideas to grapple with, but its complexity is inherent to its very concept. If we take homonationalism as a meaningful concept to be a 'plateau' or a 'node', it is made up of the tangled, crossing lines of the understandings of Puar, Avijit, Dr. Ray, Deepika, and all of Diana's other members – indeed, of everybody who engages with this idea wherever they may be. The start and end point of these ideas cannot be identified, nor can the direction of their flow, and at the same time all of these 'lines' are bound together. In this way of thinking, homonationalism as a concept does not 'originate' with Puar and is not passed along from point to point, but forms as it travels through different paths that come together to actually create it. Without these multiple lines of thought

(Deleuze might call them 'lines of flight'), homonationalism could not exist as a meaningful concept, regardless of Puar's status as author of a 2007 monograph.

Drawing together all of these theoretical influences, I am convinced that the potential for the sharing and development of knowledge is generated by the very act of taking others seriously and sustaining others' ideas and possibilities even when – perhaps especially when – they are divergent or antithetical to our own. This potential is closed down decisively when instead we seek to validate or invalidate alternative perspectives or ideas by the standards of our own engagement, be these standards the racial standards of colonial superiority or the subtler and more insidious standards of Western-centric academia. Such standards create and reinforce a hierarchy of knowledge that essentially stunts a number of opportunities for further knowledge development and also, for engaged anthropology (Moore 1996; Buchowski 2004).

When We Write What They Read

In the 1970s and 1980s, anthropologies of engagement were very much focused on styles and practices of writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Indeed, questions of audience, tone, authority, and who should contribute to writing were central to attendant schools of thought, which sought to entirely reshape the ethnographic project. However, the solutions they offered focused on particular informants and on individual anthropologists rather than on opening up the work to wider audiences in more accessible ways (Ong 1996). Thus, they arguably failed to meet one of the key anthropological projects of diversifying and opening out understandings about 'the particular' and 'the general' of humankind, human culture, and thought.

Academic writing styles are notoriously limiting. I distinguish here between the transformation of concepts through alternative understandings, with the point at which any understanding at all is blocked in its entirety through inability to comprehend what is presented. This is amply demonstrated by the ethnographic example I gave before, in which the academic register effectively blocks Deepika's ability to engage at all with most of the paragraphs written on a concept she is eager to know more about. I am sure that many academic readers will also have experienced this at some point, reading a particular

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manuscript and feeling that they have gathered absolutely no understanding of what the author is saying even in the vaguest sense.

I believe that one of the key reasons for the 'inaccessibility' of academic writing styles is revealed quite accidentally by the form and structure of the piece of writing Deepika was attempting to engage with in the ethnographic example. The piece was structured as a conversation between two academics, presented in a script style rather than as a block of text. Deepika herself commented that when two individuals are having a conversation they can judge whether or not the other has understood them, but for another person 'listening in', academic chatter might not be as self-explanatory as the writers may imagine it to be. What Deepika is picking up on here is the assumption of shared knowledge – an assumption I believe academic writers make far more often than is justified.

Anthropologists often fail to clarify what our own particular understanding is of a given concept when we use it in our own work. James Ferguson eloquently highlights the diverse and sloppy usages of the popular academic term 'neoliberalism', remarking that its vague invocation often gives him the urge to demand what the author *means* by 'neoliberalism' in exasperated marginalia (Ferguson 2010). Whilst assuming that others will share knowledge of such terms and ideas may seem safe, it rarely is and this applies to any term or use of vocabulary that is not used in everyday language. The reasons are simple and fairly obvious. Terms and 'buzz words' in the discipline very quickly acquire different nuanced interpretations and meanings, with 'neoliberalism' in Ferguson's example, and 'biopolitics', which frustrated the informant in my earlier ethnographic excerpt, being excellent examples. Furthermore, different sub-disciplines and areas of specialism regularly develop their own terminologies and standard libraries of concepts that may not be automatically familiar to anthropologists from other specialisms or sub-disciplines. This illustrates further the ways in which anthropological understandings of particular terms, bodies of work and so on may not be shared with other academic disciplines, meaning that assumptions about shared knowledge could also be complicating or damaging interdisciplinary exchange within academia. Assumptions about shared knowledge can make reading difficult across different areas of specialism within anthropology and difficulties increase as readers come from more diverse areas. This means that reading

anthropology and other academic material can be very difficult indeed for the non-specialist.

Of course I am not suggesting that we should abandon dense and intellectually difficult concepts, nor do I claim that everything we discuss as academics should be explicable to anybody in words of few syllables. Nor should we abandon our concepts and deep engagement with complicated theory. These are part of what gives our discipline its form and character, and an intrinsic part of how we produce knowledge through understanding the world in a distinctive and, we believe, valuable way. Although some readers may, despite our efforts, still feel entirely locked out, I do think that it is both reasonable and possible to expect that all interested readers should come away with their own understanding of the vast majority of the text. However, as Deepika's confusion showed, this is something that anthropologists are not consistently achieving. This is not to claim that academic writers deliberately structure their work in an obfuscatory way. Indeed writing this article has been a significant challenge in terms of ensuring that I clarify concepts and retain straightforward vocabulary and structure so as not to be condemned by my own argument.

Ultimately, despite what some amongst us may think, academics are *not* the only people who read academic writing, nor are they the only people with a monopoly on the subjects we research and talk about. The fact that there are intelligent, interested people out there, be they amateurs, activists, politicians, policy-makers, or of any other description, is surely something that we should capitalise upon, research, and try to expand upon. Feminist, LGBTQ*, and socialist movements across the world are just a few examples of non-academic domains that have changed the world and that have relied heavily on knowledge that may have originated in the academic sphere. However, because of the way we write, not only do we often preclude such engagement and expansion but we also often alienate those who already wish to engage.

Conclusion

Remarking on the 'cherished connection' between scholarship and feminist movements, Srila Roy has suggested that feminist activist spaces can productively be understood as

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sites of alternative knowledge and pedagogy (Roy 2011). Diana certainly seeks to be this kind of space and, as an activist organisation, knowledge as an object and asset is a key focus. This can be seen through its diverse programme of work and projects. The legitimacy and support the members feel from awareness of global academic discourses on homosexuality are also evident in their confident use of historical, anthropological, and philosophical resources to defend their personal choices and sexual identities. I experienced this directly when, during individual interviews with a variety of Diana members, I asked whether they experienced any tensions between Indian and queer sexual identity. Almost all interviewed referred to the work of Vanita and Kidwai (2000) and Giti Thadani (1996) in their reply. This work, which traces same-sex love through art, poetry, and architecture in India, has only recently emerged but provides firm evidence for homosexuality's long-term presence in India that can challenge right-wing Hindu nationalist claims that homosexuality is a 'Western Import' (Vanita and Kidwai 2000). In a similar way, more abstract ideological and philosophical work explaining the tensions and harmonies between homosexuality and predominantly heterosexual, patriarchal societies solidifies the foundations of Diana members' arguments for their right to exist, live, and love as they choose.

At the same time, Diana members tell their own story by selectively adapting this information and knowledge according to the aspects that resonate with their own political and cultural situation. In doing so they bring new problems and ideas to the fore, contributing to existing knowledge with intensely personal and experiential knowledge that is typically emotionally raw and temporally immediate. This is of course most clearly pronounced when the knowledge they engage with is produced in a different culture, a different context, or a different politico-economic environment. Due to the highly abstract nature of many of the ideas dealt with in such disciplines, social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, and philosophy may be more open to interpretation and 'misunderstanding' than other forms of knowledge, as is revealed in the anxieties and ambiguities of activists' understanding of this body of work.

Various activists and social movements draw influence from academic writing, be it from political theory, philosophy, anthropology, or elsewhere. In doing so they expand upon

and challenge our work in ways our academic peers simply cannot. Whilst the fear of losing our hard-earned academic authority and of being misunderstood are well-founded, it is not unless we take the leap of faith in sustaining alternative understandings of the work we produce that we can claim to be fully open to engagement. Therefore, it is partly our responsibility as an academic community to contribute to the reduction of anxiety and barriers for non-academic engaging with our work by writing in clear and pragmatic ways, and to accept that as writers we are neither the final destination or consolidator of the texts we produce (Barthes 1977). An anthropology of engagement controlled exclusively by anthropologists deciding when, how, and why to engage is an anthropology revealing its insecurity as it clings on to whatever cultural power it has left.

When as a discipline we pride ourselves on taking 'local knowledge' and 'indigenous' responses to ideas, texts, and concepts seriously in our primary research, how can we justify brushing off such knowledge and ideas when they are formed in reaction to academic material about themselves or others? Rather, I suggest we should accept such responses as alternative forms of knowledge production and legitimate forms of engagement and knowledge exchange. Understanding how 'they' read what 'we' write can help us to understand the issues in our research that are important to 'them', resonate with 'them', and can teach us to improve our own proactive attempts at an engaged anthropology. Their ideas and responses may not be strictly 'academic', but they are forms of knowledge that will go on to travel, inspire others, and provoke further original thought, just as we hope our own production of academic work will do.

About the Author

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