"*Choukathe Danriye"* (Standing at the Threshold): Queer Negotiations in Kolkata

by

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This paper is an attempt to bridge a divide within me. For as long as I can remember, I have maintained a distinction between my professional and personal writing. The former focuses on history, refugee identity, memory, and the dialectic between top-down policies and subaltern negotiations of power. The latter is about transgressions, hybridity, of speaking in forked tongues and un-belongings, and is mostly in the form of amateurish poetry. The former is published in academic journals and books and is designed for public consumption. I have only shared the latter within the protective circle of intimacy. On reflection, this separation, between public prose and private poetry, seems anything but natural. My fascination with history, and particularly with histories of the partition of India, can be traced back to my girlhood. Growing up in Kolkata, I was acutely aware that my family's roots lay elsewhere, across a border - in a land that was once home but is now another country. My habit of writing poetry, upon reflection, also began in my girlhood in Kolkata. I wrote to mark my transgressions across the invisible, yet pervasive borders of compulsory heterosexuality. Both are, in essence, narratives born of the limits and possibilities of crossing borders. Yet, one form of autobiographical border-crossing became a resource for the public performance of expertise, while the other was designated to remain private and amateurish.

This split life as a writer was not the result of any kind of conscious choice. It was rather an instinctive protective response, born of negotiating a queer childhood and adolescence in an overwhelmingly heteronormative and homophobic society. It follows that this divide between prose

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and poetry, public and private, also neatly coincided with an unspoken, yet pervasive division that permeated public forums in the Kolkata of my girlhood. This was the divide between respectable themes, which were deemed to be worthy of public debate, and the marginalised world of queer bodies and desires. Closeted writing became my dominant strategy for preserving some semblance of an authentic self, while passing as 'normal' in a homophobic society. It allowed me to carve out a private safe space where through writing, I could not only explore queer desires, but also experiment with an intimate chronicle of a queer self as a work-in-progress. This refusal to hold up my queer identity to public scrutiny created a precious breathing space, a paradoxical freedom of the closet.

This is by no means a unique experience. Naisargi Dave's ethnographic study documents how the public obfuscation of queer identities was a common strategy used by lesbians in India in order to retain a public, political voice, while also making room for intimate possibilities.[1] However, the freedom of manoeuvre offered by the closet is inherently precarious. Such spaces and possibilities can be easily destroyed through exposure, ridicule, shame, and the violent policing of women's desires.[2] In my case, the safety of the closet was never compromised. But my success in passing as a 'normal' scholar, researching and writing about one of the most mainstream topics in Indian history, i.e. the partition of India, came at a price. I scrupulously avoided all-things-queer within the academy, systematically depriving myself of a queer lexicon and a queer academic community. The loss entailed in this refusal to develop a public voice that could speak of queer selfhood became apparent as the years went by. I felt uncomfortably alienated from the growing field of queer studies. So, the invitation to this forum, and its format of encouraging personal and reflexive essays on queer negotiations of

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[1] Naisargi N. Dave, 'To Render Real the Imagined: An Ethnographic History of Lesbian Community in India', Signs, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Spring 2010), pp. 595-619.
[2] *Ibid.* For multiple strategies of negotiating a lesbian identity in India, and the hostility encountered in coming out see Ashwini Sukthankar (eds.), Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India, Delhi: Penguin, 1999.

research and fieldwork, provided a welcome opportunity for me to begin bridging this internal split between the private scripts of a queer self, and the public domain of academic essays. However, to paraphrase Adrienne Rich, silence can be 'the blueprint to a life', so the absence of words, written or spoken publicly, cannot be equated to absence.[3] This essay does not build bridges where none existed. Instead, it allows long-ignored connections to come into focus; it illuminates an intricate web of connections between the private queer and the public academic.

In Lieu of Beginnings: Queer Conjunctures

There is no good place to begin a project of tracing the entanglement of the private queer and the public scholar. Queer lives often resist linear narratives, and mine is no exception. In 2004, shortly before I came out to my mother, I chopped off the long black hair that was my primary means of passing as a good Indian girl. Years later she asked me, did chopping off my tresses make me gay,[4] or did I chop off my hair because I was gay? My honest answer was a bit of both. The absurdity of this question and my answer is indicative of how narratives of becoming queer seldom follow a linear trajectory. In coming out narratives, cause and effect cannot be neatly separated and arranged so that one follows the other. Coming out does not necessarily mark the beginning or the end of becoming queer. Instead, it marks a rupture with heteronormativity that allows for new possibilities of self-expression and self-making.

For me, coming out allowed a subterranean queer subjectivity to rise to the surface. It marked the beginning of a process of a radical retelling of my intimate biography. Suddenly, a life marked by absence of any 'real' relationships, which according to society, could only be with the opposite sex,

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[3] Adrienne Rich, 'Cartographies of Silence', in *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-77,* New York: WW Norton & Company Inc., 1978.

[4] Gay is often used as the generic term for queer people by English-speaking Indians. This is partly born of the comparatively greater visibility of gay lives and gay issues in India, and partly born of a cultural reluctance to name female desire in any form.

became one peppered with a kaleidoscope of authentic desires and heartbreaks. It is tempting to deploy this queer subjectivity to retrospectively erase all evidence of discordance. However, any attempt to narrate a seamlessly authentic queer self, cleansed of all traces of heterosexual passing, would amount to a kind of narrative violence. I find it more productive to abandon the quest for an essential queer self and instead embrace what Avery Gordon calls a 'complex selfhood', haunted equally by histories of normative passing and of creative transgressions of the heteronormative.[5] Such hauntings can be best traced in particular episodes or incidents, where a closeted past collides with an out present in unexpected ways.

The incident that forms the core of my reflections in this piece happened in December 2014. A cousin sister was getting married in my hometown, Kolkata. She chose to invite me and my transgender partner to her wedding. This invitation to participate as an out queer person in the most heteronormative of events – a traditional wedding – set in motion an incredibly thorough process of coming out, in a society where homosexuality is still a taboo, and in a country where queer desire continues to be criminalized.[6] As validating as this invitation was, the day before the wedding, I found myself standing guard at the doorway to my aunt's apartment, facing off with a group of *hijras* who had arrived to exact their customary due upon the birth of a baby boy.[7] Why was it that I found myself standing at the *choukath* or threshold that separates the private from the public? And what did it mean for an out lesbian to actively prevent the intrusion of *hijras*, who are perhaps the most visible and the most marginalised amongst queer people in India, into the respectable interior of the heterosexual

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[5] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997

[6] For a succinct summary of the criminalization of homosexuality and the beginning of the queer movement in India, see Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (eds) *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India,* New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005. For a summary of the convulated history of decriminalization followed by the recriminalisation of homosexuality in India, see 'Section 377 and the law: What courts have said about homosexuality over time', *Hindustan Times,* 5 February 2018.

[7] See next section for an explanation of *hijra* identity.

family? This incident is illustrative of the complexity of living out queer lives in heteronormative societies. Unpacking it offers an opportunity to illuminate the multiple entanglements, of the public and the private, and the normative and the queer, that constitute a complex self.

Coming Out is not Coming In

My cousin's decision to invite me and my partner as a couple, to her wedding, was a radical departure from the way the rest of my family negotiates my queer identity. I have been out to my family since 2004. While how I identify has changed in the ensuing years, from bisexual to lesbian to queer, for my family, my queerness has consistently generated social anxiety. To grasp the texture of this anxiety it is necessary to understand that in Kolkata's middle-class society, maintaining status and respectability requires constant negotiation and management of an extended web of relatives, in-laws, neighbours, colleagues and servants. Within this milieu of urban, English-educated and westernized Bengalis, the incommensurability of a queer child has little to do with God, customs or religion. No one was particularly bothered about conforming to customs anyway. For the self-professed 'cultured' Bengali, who clung to a largely Victorian sense of morality that viewed explicit expression of sexuality as obscene or uncivil, a queer family member was primarily an embarrassment. While my being queer might have been cause for mild disappointment or disapproval, my insistence on coming out posed the bigger challenge. The unwritten rules of respectability demanded that the web of relatives and friends who made up our shared social worlds had to be constantly divided and re-divided into those who can be told and those who cannot be told. This was based on a series of convoluted calculations where the relevant factors included real and imagined homophobia, concerns over loss of respectability and personal biases or fears.

For me, visiting my family in India did not involve going back into the closet. Instead, what usually ensued was a dance around my sexuality. It required nimble footwork to step around questions

that could not be answered, or at least, could not be answered truthfully. 'So, is there someone special?', 'When is the good news?', or the more direct, '*Ki re? Biye tha korbi na?*' ('What's up with you? Won't you get married?') Living rooms and social gatherings required particularly virtuosic performances, where the audience was often a mixed one of those who knew and accepted, those who disapproved, and those who could not be told under any circumstances. In this dance, the fact that I am civil-partnered[8] to a transgender person faded in or out of view, depending on the person for whom I was performing.

This well-rehearsed dance, which became harder and not easier with practice, suddenly became redundant at my cousin's wedding. Her open acknowledgement of my partner and my own queer identity did not just stop at the invitation. During the wedding, she proceeded to introduce us as a couple to every aunt, grand-uncle, family friend, cousin and in-law. A few jaws dropped, there was a lot of nervous laughter, some uncomfortable shuffling, and a lot of taking it right in the stride to prove how progressive we were. To close friends and immediate family, this was not news. However, my cousin's wedding saw me coming out in my home town, amongst friends and family, with a thoroughness and on a scale that is extremely rare. If queer visibility in *bhadralok*[9] society was the goal, I would have hit the jackpot. Yet, on the morning of the wedding, I found myself marking the boundary between my respectable heteronormative family, and my queer kin, the *hijra*s, who have long been excluded and marked as disreputable.

The word *hijra* translates poorly into English, or to the western lexicon around transgender identities, because it resists classificatory schemas based on a gender binary. Used primarily as a noun,

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[8] Civil partnership in UK is a legally recognized union of same-sex couples, which gives them rights similar to those of marriage.

[9] Literally meaning 'decent people', the term was originally used to describe the landed and educated Hindu middle-classes of Bengal. However, as a result of economic decline, it now mostly represents a claim to social respectability which is bolstered by superior educational qualifications, upper-caste lineage, and cultural pursuits, which may or may not be reflected in economic status.

it denotes a complex identity that encompasses gender performance, social identity and religious customs. Recent scholarship counters earlier pathologising or essentialising constructions by describing *hijras* as 'a complex identity of marginalised male-born (or rarely intersex) transvestites', who may or may not undergo castration and penectomy.[10] However, being a *hijra* usually also involves living outside the norms of heteropatriarchy, and within a community, with its own kinship-based organization, internalized hierarchies, distinct customs and rituals based on Hinduism or Islam, and a shared sub-cultural code or language, most commonly called *ulti*.[11] The difficulty in translating or explaining who exactly a *hijra* is to anyone who is not familiar with India, is inversely proportional to the visibility of the *hijra* community in India. Thousands of Indians encounter *hijras* on an everyday basis – as individuals collecting money or *cchalla* at traffic signals and on commuter trains, and more rarely, on the birth of a child when *hijras* arrive, usually in a small group, to perform a baby-blessing or *badhai*. Aniruddha Dutta's work on the dynamic and evolving identities of *hijras* and *kothis* in India traces how within kinship-based *hijra* households or *gharanas,* there is a tendency to strictly control the practice of *badhai* as legitimate and respectable means of customary income, while dismissing both the practice of *chhalla* and sex-work, and those who practice it, as inauthentic.[12] These internal debates and distinctions, though important, have little bearing upon how mainstream society views *hijra*s. For the everyday commuters and passengers on local trains, the comparatively well-heeled who can hide behind the tinted glass of the raised windows of taxis and cars, and last, but not the least, the heterosexual family that gathers to celebrate the arrival of a new life, an encounter with *hijras* is one

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[10] Descriptions based on Gayatri Reddy's *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005 and Lawrence Cohen's 'The Pleasures of Castration: The Postoperative Status of Hijras, Jankhas and Academics', in Paul R. Abramson and Steven D. Pinkerton (eds), *Sexual Nature, Sexual Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 276–304, as cited by Aniruddha Dutta, 'An Epistemology of Collusion: Hijras, Kothis and the Historical (Dis)continuity of Gender/Sexual Identities in Eastern India', Gender & History, Vol.24, No.3, 2012, pp. 825–849.
[11] Reddy, *With Respect to Sex.*
[12] Aniruddha Dutta, 'An Epistemology of Collusion'

that is usually laced with fear and loathing. To identify as a *hijra* is to leave behind the relative safety of passing as either a cisman or a ciswoman. In some ways, to pass would entail the loss of visibility as a *hijra*, and with that, the loss of efficacy in collecting *cchalla* or *badhai* money. In others words, even if I imagined *hijras* as my queer kin, we had nothing in common when it came to our means of negotiating heteropatriarchy.

At the *choukath*, two radically different interpretations of queer life in India faced each other. Looking outward from the biological and heterosexual family, I represented a highly individualistic and middle-class negotiation of queer sexuality and identity. My journey to that threshold had involved strategic disavowals, the ability to pass as 'normal', a paradoxical experience of freedom and safety within the closet, and a halting and staggered coming out process. Outside the threshold stood radically-out queer people who had left their biological families to build and live within alternative kinship structures. Becoming a *hijra* does not leave much room for selective coming outs, or for romanticism around the paradoxical safety of the closet. Strangely, the reason I was at that threshold, barring the entry of the *hijras* into the home, was not unconnected to coming out. It is very likely that my queer identity had convinced some of my family members that I would be best able to 'handle' the demands of the *hijras*. I was incredibly prompt in acceding to this request. But, only when I was actually standing at the threshold did the incongruity of my position, and the irony of the situation, strike me. The *hijras* were there to exact as much money as possible from my cousin, the proud father of a baby boy. I was there as my family expected me to get rid of the *hijras* as soon as possible, and with as little expense as possible. Being queer had landed us both at the threshold of the hetero-patriarchal family, but on opposite sides of the doorway, primed to interact as adversaries.

Queer Solidarities and Impossible Sisterhoods

My cousin's wedding was not my first encounter with *hijras*. Growing up, I passed as a 'normal' girl, part of a mainstream middle-class family. So like the rest of mainstream society, I too had grown up

encountering *hijras* as disruptive events that happened to 'normal' people at crossroads and in public transport. These encounters are usually adversarial and generate patterns of knowledge about *hijras,* where the main theme is how 'we', who live within respectable families, can best survive and 'handle' these encounters with 'them'. To grow up in Kolkata was to accumulate anecdotes of such incidents, and along with it a dehumanising manual of strategies to handle 'them'. The advice was often contradictory, and ranged from speedy compliance and avoidance, to aggressive screaming and crass abuse. The latter was usually justified as the only language 'these people' understand. Underlying this range of advice was a consensus regarding the undesirability of queer presence in public places and the illegitimacy of the *hijras'* customary demand for money. As a straight-passing girl, I had access to this body of anecdotal knowledge about *hijras,* although I failed to be outraged or discomfited by their unapologetic and public queer presence. If anything, I was fascinated by all performances of gender non-conformity, long before I had the awareness of or an ability to articulate my own queerness. However, a distant fascination of a proto-gay childhood such as mine does not necessarily amount to any kind of a shared sense of a queer community.[13]

During the 2000s, the landscape around LGBTQ rights in India changed rapidly. This was largely spurred on by the decision of an NGO, the Naz Foundation, to challenge the criminalisation of homosexuality at the Delhi High Court. This opened up new spaces for queer conversations and collaborations in urban India. Though the movement designed to decriminalise homosexuality by repealing Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was disproportionately focused on 'gay rights', it nevertheless signalled a larger shift within activist circles in urban India. The need to fight discrimination against gender and sexuality minorities gained greater visibility and traction within mainstream feminist and left-wing spaces. As I began participating in these spaces as a closeted queer

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[13] I have borrowed the concept of a proto-gay childhood from Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century,* Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009.

woman, I encountered *hijras* as outspoken comrades and activists. We marched together for a different world at the 2004 World Social Forum in Mumbai. In 2007, *hijra* delegates argued eloquently for their rights as women, at the Seventh Autonomous Women's Conference in Kolkata. I met *hijras* as panelists, activists and delegates, and learned to see them as queer sisters, as one of us and not as 'those people.'

This sense of sisterhood leaked into the more mundane, everyday interactions. It became a habit for me to give money to *hijras* who collected it from commuters at traffic signals. I also developed the habit of addressing them as *didi* or elder sister. This was in some ways nothing more than common courtesy. In Bengali society, elder sister is the appropriate and respectful way to address an older woman. Yet, common courtesy is so often denied to *hijras* that this bit of normal interaction, devoid of fear or disrespect, seldom felt ordinary. One such extraordinary moment happened in a local train, in Mumbai. A *hijra* had just collected some money from me and turned to leave, when she suddenly stopped and turned back. On that day, I was travelling with my partner, and we were both dressed in Fab India kurtas and jeans with the full intention of passing as unremarkable, 'normal' people. She looked at the two of us, pointed, and tilted her head in a wordless question. I nodded a yes. In response, she quickly blessed us both, and left. The entire interaction was wordless and took a few seconds. Yet, this fleeting encounter felt like the affirmation of some sort of a queer sisterhood, a shared solidarity that could transcend massive social and economic differences.

At the *choukath,* my biological family had no knowledge of these queer encounters, or any inkling of an imagined queer community that included *hijras* as sisters. Their faith in me to 'handle' the situation placed me not only at the threshold of a doorway, but at the borderlands between two radically different conceptualisations of who my people were, and where I belonged. Negotiations with *hijras* over the amount of money due to them for performing a baby-blessing or *badhai* are notoriously adversarial. The tone is set largely by widespread and entrenched prejudice against *hijras*

within mainstream Bengali society, which makes their very presence at an auspicious occasion, or a social event, deeply undesirable. Families usually pay up as a means of getting rid of their disruptive queer presence. *Hijras* often use society's phobia to their advantage in negotiations over money. When refused adequate payment, they often resort to a series of strategies designed to disrupt respectability and cause maximum discomfort. These range from loud altercations and sexually explicit language to threats of entering the family homes and disrobing in public. The idea is to make their presence so undesirable, that families would lose the edge in negotiations and agree to pay a higher sum.

Nevertheless, while haggling is ubiquitous within India's informal economy, bargaining with *hijras* can very quickly deteriorate into an unpleasant and deeply transphobic event. My biological family clearly expected me to represent 'our' best interests and drive a hard bargain. It was impossible for me to refuse this role as besides affective ties, there was no doubt in my mind that I had been moulded by the *bhadralok* upper-caste culture of my biological family. Despite being queer, I had benefitted significantly from inherited class and caste privilege. Any kind of a queer community that could hold both me and the *hijras* seemed like an impossible aspiration that was destined to disintegrate when faced by the substantive solidity of my moorings in my biological family. Yet, it was also not possible for me to see the three *hijras* standing in front of me as anything other than queer sisters. I quite simply did not have the necessary ingredients for an adversarial negotiation - fear and loathing towards queer bodies, or a belief that the money they demanded was anything less than what hetero-patriarchy owed marginalised queer bodies. Faced with an impossible choice, I did the only thing I could. I came out to the *hijras* as soon as I saw an opportunity. What ensued was a remarkably ambivalent exchange.

The negotiations had begun following a routine script. The *didi* who was leading the negotiations began by quoting a steep amount, possibly because she fully expected us to negotiate. A second *hijra* in her team of three retorted with threats to force her way into the home and to disrobe,

if we refused to pay what was demanded. The first opportunity to disrupt this adversarial script opened up when the lead negotiator tried a slightly different angle to shore up her demands. She alluded to the misfortune of *hijras* in never being able to have a child. God had robbed their wombs, she said. This was an allusion to the cisgender privilege that heterosexual families enjoyed in being able to fully participate in the hereditary structures of patriarchy. The birth of a baby, particularly a baby boy, was the embodiment of this privilege. Therefore, the payment of *badhai* could be seen as not just a customary due, but also reparations of sort, owed to the marginalised *hijras* by hetero-patriarchal society. My response was to sympathize, while whispering that technically speaking, as a lesbian, I could not fully participate in this either. Suddenly, the tone changed and the screaming stopped. She was curious and wanted to meet my partner. I explained who my partner was, their transgender identity and that sadly, they were not around. Halfway through what had now become a conversation, she remembered that we were supposed to be following a very different script as adversaries, in a bitter negotiation over money. Abruptly, she reverted to threats and demands. However, neither of us could stick to our roles in any consistent way. Soon after *didi* had faltered, I stepped out of my assigned role of cutting down my family's cost of getting rid of the *hijras*.

The usual tactic to negotiate down the amount demanded by *hijras* for *badhai* was to insist that there was not enough cash at home. Someone from the extended family came up with this excuse while I was busy trying to bring down the amount demanded. The *hijras* retorted by getting ready to leave, with the promise to return in a larger group, to exact a higher payment. At which point, I found myself switching sides. I knew that my cousin brother did not live in Kolkata and had come down for the wedding. If the *hijras* returned at a later date, they would most likely find an empty house, with no baby to bless in return for money. I whispered this to the lead negotiator, asking her not to leave empty-handed. Immediately, all talk of coming back later was replaced by a determination to settle accounts on the spot. And thus it continued, back and forth, with each of us falling in and out of our

assigned roles. An attempt by the *hijras* to push their way in became a tussle that ended with jokes about going to the gym. I alternated between screaming and conspiratorial whispering with the lead negotiator about an acceptable final sum of payment. I quoted my cousin the sum they had whispered when he pulled me aside to ask what I could negotiate their claims it down to. Then, suddenly, the *hijras* turned on me, complaining about my presence as a problem, and asked me to go away. Eventually, a sum that made all sides happy was decided.

I know that my family felt grateful to me for stepping in and 'handling' the situation. But I have no idea how the *hijras* viewed me, or how to characterise my role in that negotiation. Was I guarding the borders of heteronormativity? Was I the bridge? The translator? A traitor? If a traitor, a traitor to whom? To my vague aspirational queer community, which did not exist in any real terms, or to my biological family, who had, to a large extent, accepted my queer identity?

It is difficult to come up with a definitive answer as this incident can be read in multiple ways. For me, the crux of the problem lay in my inability to choose a side, which left me in the unstable borderlands between contradictory notions of belonging. This impossible location can actually illuminate the possibilities that are opened up by inhabiting the borderlands, where disparate cultures or contradictory belongings edge each other. Gloria Anzaldúa traces the discomfort that is inherent in being a 'borderland woman' as well as its compensations and joys. In her words, to live in the borderlands is to keep 'intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity'.[14] My attempt to simultaneously hold my contradictory belongings to my biological family and my aspirational queer community did not merely transform the *choukath* of my aunt's home into a frontier between cultures of queerness and respectability. It illuminated how this borderland, where the possibility of queer solidarity grated against middle-class conformity, stretched across my life. Anzaldúa argues that to knowingly inhabit a borderland leads to the awakening of dormant areas of consciousness. Indeed, as

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[14] Gloria Anzaldúa**,** *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987, page 19.

I reflected upon this incident, I was able to perceive hitherto unnoticed connections between a queer orientation and other, seemingly straight-passing areas of my life that had little or nothing to do with sexuality.

Writing from the *choukath:* Queer tales of Impossible Belongings

I grew up in Kolkata, immersed in an urbane Bengali culture marked equally by songs of Rabindranath Tagore and Christmas celebrations in elite social clubs that are remnants of the British era. Upon reflection, my apparently 'normal' childhood seems to be replete with resources of building a queer sense of belonging. Growing up in Kolkata, it was entirely normal to be asked '*desh kothaye'*, or, where are you from, by complete strangers. *Desh* can mean either country or homeland in Bengali, so literally, the question meant 'where is your home/country'? However, this question was usually not asked of foreigners or visitors to Kolkata. Instead, it was posed to each other by Bengali-speaking residents of Kolkata. This seemingly meaningless question only made sense within the partitioned landscape of Bengal. Kolkata is a city that took thousands of displaced Hindu minorities who fled eastern Pakistan to seek refuge in India. This question was an attempt to locate people within this history and is a reflection of how the legacy of partition lived on in everyday interactions. In response, I would rattle off the memorised name of a village in eastern Bengal or Bangladesh that I had never seen: 'Gram (village) Panchchar, Police Station Madaripur, Jela (district) Faridpur.' To be from a place that I had never seen seemed entirely normal within this social milieu haunted by partition. At times, the question would be phrased as '*edeshi na odeshi'*, which literally translates as 'from this country or that'? Though I was born in a nursing home in Calcutta more than three decades after partition, the correct answer for me was that I was from 'that country', an *odeshi*. This too, felt entirely normal. I do not remember when I learnt to perceive such impossible belongings as not just the mundane everyday, but as a state

of affairs worthy of some intellectual exploration. As a historian, I have returned again and again to Calcutta to investigate the making of this 'normal'.

Looking back now, it seems that belonging has always been articulated as an impossibility for me. Once I left Kolkata to continue my education first in Delhi, and then in England, I was forever framed as the outsider. I was the Bengali in Delhi, the Delhi-type in Kolkata, the Indian abroad and the foreign-return in India. However, this perennially dislocated self did not feel particularly unsettling as I had been an outsider long before I had left home. Through my biological family that traced its roots back to eastern Bengal, I had been born into an inherited habit of presenting the self as the other – a person from 'that country' or an '*odeshi*'. Yet, there was no question that the *odeshi* belonged in Kolkata, as a *Bangaal*. In post-partition Kolkata, a *Bangaal* was a Hindu whose family came from the eastern districts of Bengal – those areas, that went to Pakistan and eventually became Bangladesh. There are no *Bangaals* in eastern Bengal. One could only be a *Bangaal* outside eastern Bengal, and particularly in Kolkata, where Hindus whose family came from the western districts of Bengal were called *Ghati*. Being a *Bangaal* thus set one apart from people who could belong to their homes without having to cross an international border. Yet, it did not denote any longing to return to this unseen homeland. Instead, being a *Bangaal* denoted a sense of being at home with displacement. In retrospect, this habit of belonging as outsider became a resource for negotiating a queer coming of age. My difference from other girls caused me very little angst while growing up. I was too busy exploring forbidden loves, unperturbed by their social impossibility. After all, I was already from a place I had never seen. So it was perhaps only natural that I would pour my heart into building 'special friendships', which had no future to go to and were as wrapped up in impossibility as my sense of belonging.

Coming out changed all this. I came out to my mother before I left to pursue a PhD in Cambridge. So during my fieldwork in Kolkata, while I was researching how refugees from eastern Pakistan negotiated displacement, I was also exploring how to inhabit a queer identity. With each successive trip, I insisted on coming out to an expanding circle of friends and family. During the same period, I felt acutely dissatisfied with the dry language of official policy. In order to understand how the government responded to the refugee crisis in West Bengal, I pored over official files in a dingy room at the back of Writers Building, read dust-laden reports at the National Library, and negotiated access to the police archives that was wrapped in bureaucratic red tape. Yet, conventional archival records fall far short of capturing the affective and everyday aspects of displacement. I wanted to know how uprooted people build a home. How can those displaced take up space? Where do those who are disinherited by history belong? To find answers, I turned to an alternative and diffuse archive constituted by memories. I sometimes wonder if articulating the possibility of a queer life is what shifted my research away from mapping policy, and towards exploring how new possibilities of belonging are articulated by refugees.

While it is possible that a queer subjectivity reinforced my interest in narratives of refugee belonging, my access to the diffuse world of an alternative archive of memory and private collections derived from a different aspect of my identity that had little or nothing to do with being queer. It soon became evident that my family's network of connections and distant relations was a powerful tool of research. Evoking my lineage opened doors. '*Indrani-r meye*?' ('Are you Indrani's daughter') a professor would ask, beaming, before sharing his personal collection of refugee interviews with me. He had studied with my mother at Presidency College, one of the most elite educational institutions in Kolkata. While many in Kolkata were wary of sharing scare resources of research with a scholar studying at a foreign university, being my mother's daughter allowed me to inhabit a world of trust and connections built on familiarity and social proximity. 'Ratan-er natni?' ('Are you Ratan's

granddaughter?'), confirmed the veteran social worker Ashoka Gupta as she settled down to be interviewed. Government permission, necessary to gain access the police archives was obtained through family 'contacts'. I discovered that even the bureaucrats whose private papers I was mining for information, namely Sukumar Sen and Saibal Gupta, were some kind of distant relations of mine. This was the incredibly incestuous and clannish world of *baidyas*- a caste unique to Bengal who claim the ritual privileges of Brahmins despite having somehow either 'fallen' out of Brahmin status, or never quite having risen to it. They tend to excel in white-collar professions and have a tendency to educate their daughters. So the contours of my field research were structured by the most heterosexual of privileges- cultural capital that is accumulated and passed down through caste groups. Thus, paradoxically, my access to alternative archives was premised upon my belonging to a dominant caste group. So in the ethnographic spirit, if I had to describe my orientation as a researcher, I would have to say that it was simultaneously *savarna* or upper-caste, with all its attendant privileges of access, and lesbian or queer, which brought with it an everyday awareness of the dynamics of social marginalisation.

This mixture of caste privilege and queer marginalisation made for a particularly productive research dynamic. It was impossible for me to speak in terms of a generic Hindu refugee, unmarked by caste, gender and sexuality. A key preoccupation of my forthcoming book, *Citizen Refugee,* which grew out of my dissertation fieldwork in Kolkata, is to explore how the Bengali refugee experience fractures along class, caste and gender lines. It reveals how *savarna* Bengali refugees relied on caste privilege and cultural capital to carve out a foothold in post-partition Kolkata. Within partition historiography, the fact that refugee men could only access rehabilitation schemes as heads of households has largely been treated as a 'normal' situation, unworthy of analysis. However, as a queer researcher, it is impossible to not notice the exclusionary impact of compulsory heterosexuality on official policy, simply because those who failed to live up to it were a small minority. While

heteronormative policies saw some single men entering into queer familial arrangements and 'fake' marriages of convenience, it sealed the fate of 'unattached women' as the 'unrehabilitable' residue of partition migration. Uncovering the violence of the normative upon misfit refugee bodies, and their queer strategies of subversion and survival is a central pre-occupation of my scholarship on partition refugees. Thus, my refusal to directly engage with queer studies provided scant protection from a queer research orientation. In the archives and in the field, I was a closeted and straight-passing scholar, who researched a mainstream topic like the partition of India. Yet, my research questions and the answers I theorized were born of the subterranean fault-line where the respectable, *savarna* scholar grates against a world of impossible desires and queer possibilities. This borderland, this threshold or *choukath* of contradictory identities, is not merely a space that I accidentally stepped into, at a cousin sister's wedding. The *choukath* forms the ground beneath my feet, informing both my orientation as a scholar and my queer negotiations of Kolkata's genteel heteropatriarchy.

To build upon this realisation is to grapple with the challenge of a deeply compromised queer selfhood, located at the borderlands of heteropatriarchy, where the inherited privileges of class, caste and cultural capital are interwoven with the inevitable social marginalisation of being a lesbian. This erratic interweaving of privilege and disenfranchisement is neither unique, nor particularly uncommon. Most middle-class and/or *savarna* queer Indians have to negotiate this uneven borderland in their everyday lives. This negotiation takes different forms for different people, depending on how their specific gender and sexuality position them within society. As an increasing number of middle-class families come to terms with having a lesbian, gay or transgender child, the question arises as to whether the acceptance of openly queer kin within the heteropatriarchal familial space queers the family, or encourages homonormative behavior and a politics of respectability? How does one balance the entirely human need for acceptance and respect from family members, with a desire for a broader queer community? As my encounters with *hijras* at the *choukath* illustrates, the invitation to belong to

the respectable interiority of the middle-class family can bring with it an invitation to turn against the more vulnerable and marginalised members of India's variegated queer community. In this particular instance, my inability to unambiguously align myself with either my biological family, or an aspirational queer community, turned an encounter designed to be adversarial into a deeply ambivalent one. While it is definitely true that my presence mitigated against unpleasant escalation and inject unexpected humour and a degree of mutual respect into the negotiations, it is difficult to know whose interests my actions ultimately served. What is certain is that a refusal to choose between familial loyalty and queer solidarity opened up a space for reflection on what Anzaldúa calls a *mestiza* consciousness, or the consciousness of being at home in the borderlands of contradictory identities.[15] To inhabit this shifting borderland is an unsettling experience, destined to fall short of queer radicalism. Yet, embracing this borderland as a home and learning to speak from it can be a worthwhile political project that can allow queer Indians who enjoy relative class, caste and gender privilege to be bridges instead of border guards along the frontiers of respectability.

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[15] Gloria Anzaldúa**,** *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza,* San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

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