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## Paradoxes of Visibility in the Field: Rites of Queer Passage in Anthropology

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**T**his essay is about the disintegration of our U.S. lesbian identities that my partner and I experienced during two years in South India. In lieu of a formal academic treatment of the subject, I have written my critical and theoretical observations directly into the text of one story. It's a funny but a true anecdote, and in writing it down, I've come to recognize its troubling complexity.

Such recognition would probably develop were I to narrate any of numerous encounters that relate in some way to the topic of identity transformation; from two years of anthropological fieldwork one has two years worth of just such anecdotes. I might have written, for example, about the many women who made it their mission to bring us their very own special spicy fresh fish—surely there is some meaning to be found in it, some fishy gendered institution to be exposed, captured in such acts as a neighbor waking us up in the morning by dangling a whole raw fish in through the grates of our bedroom window. There's also a long tale to unravel in the way everybody but everybody attributed blood relation

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to Kate and me—be she my younger sister, my daughter, or my granddaughter—forever cloaking our difference in webs of the familiar.

On return home, what makes all these encounters so ripe for narration is their apparent ridiculousness. But beneath this initial sense, this surface implausibility, lie telling bones, buried somewhere (“in the field,” to be sure) between our misreadings of “the natives” and theirs of us. One laughs at these misunderstandings so as not to cry. In a skeletal sense, they are the articulations that connect otherwise distant lives. Such is the case for the story I tell here. Of all, it seemed the most implausible, preposterous even, and thus the least likely to dissolve into anything too tidy in the acid wash of analysis. In true anthropological spirit, then, I’ll try to convey both the raw, unprocessed, and embarrassing lived realities of this story, and to situate this encounter analytically as I understand it now, six months after our return to the U.S.

Bronislaw Malinowski’s fieldwork in Melanesia has become the much problematized prototype for ethnographic fieldwork as a rite of passage into the discipline of cultural anthropology. Almost every definition of anthropological fieldwork relies on some intensifying qualifier, some thickening descriptor by which to capture the simultaneous increased depth, and heightened awareness, of experience attending “fieldwork”—from A. C. Haddon’s introduction of the term in 1903 as the “intensive study of limited areas” (Stocking 1983) to contemporary notions of “intense participation in everyday life” that turn on “a willingness to change one’s perceptions through this intimate contact” (Kondo 1986). To frame sections of this paper, I’ve used Malinowski’s *Diary* (1989)—his posthumously published private chagrin—as an object of contemplation that testifies to how long standing a tradition it is, by now, to find oneself, through fieldwork, plunged into a resituated questioning of discourses of self and desire. I’ve used the reflexive ruminations of two other esteemed ethnographers, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1977) and David Maybury-Lewis (1988), on the interior terrain of “the field” in the same manner. Both are from narrative accounts of their respective stints of fieldwork in Brazil.

Through these three voices, each one eminent in the discipline and relatively distant from my own (by generation and gender at the very least), I mean to showcase the continuity between their self-reflective impulses, and what is now commonly referred to as “the current reflexive turn in anthropology.” Present proposals for an anthropology that recognizes the epistemological significance of experience (Kondo 1986), and that includes emotional and erotic equations (Newton 1993) in the calculus of fieldwork-knowing, invite us to bring difficult insights regarding the politics of our situatedness as fieldworkers to bear not only on the crafting of our central textual genre, ethnography, but also on how we

might change fundamental relations in the production of anthropological knowledge. This essay seeks to expand the boundaries of "the field" and how we think of our relations within it. I treat not work *per se*, but rather the equally phantasmatic Western pursuits of "leisure time" and "privacy." I suggest that the denaturalizing project central to anthropology necessarily extends to an ethnographer's own sexuality, and that one mercuric gauge of the mutuality of fieldwork effects—or perhaps of any deep, intense, and ongoing conversation across societal lines—lies in the changes we register in our notions of the personal.

One final set of introductory remarks. This story was originally written for presentation at the Fourth National Graduate Student Lesbian Transgender Bisexual and Gay Studies Conference held in Austin, Texas in the spring of 1994. Its rather intimate tone grew out of my assumptions about this audience's basic political and interpersonal orientations; I didn't bother to include either lengthy, tone-setting apologia, or preliminary riggings of my theoretical agenda. The result was an essay I liked. In order to keep it that way, contrived as it may be for publication, I've maintained those same assumptions. In short: firstly, I assume the reader is consciously antiracist, and aware of the racism of the colonial project and its legacy for present-day relations between first-world travelers and residents of postcolonial societies. Secondly, that s/he is fundamentally feminist with a belief in multiple feminisms and an enthusiasm for complicating and improving feminist discourse by studying other social systems and learning how people living within these structures think about their lives and the sex/gender systems (Rubin 1975) of their societies. And third, that s/he shares our (Kate's and my) begrudgingly acknowledged, defensive interest in countering the stereotype that all Americans are either rich, straight tourists, or their rich, straight "seeker" kids—while nevertheless maintaining an openly critical stance on the American global media export empire of a hegemonic "Santa Barbara" (the soap opera, beamed by Asia-Sat to Indian television each evening) style neo-colonialist corporate culture.

All of that said, you may be relieved to hear that this story is, at least partially, about sex. Not many of our stories can promise even this much, simply because we rarely managed sex; you'll see why. I request your patience, especially in light of the fact that our own lack of it already so saturates this tale.

#### **Madurai**

*Lewdness is beginning to be something alien to me.*

B. Malinowski's 1914 *Diary* (1989:65)

The events concerned occurred rather late, chronologically, during our stay in India. Kate and I had already been living in Tamilnadu for nineteen months.

Although she had come from America expressly to be with me, Kate quickly assessed that she couldn't really tolerate staying where I lived for the purposes of my ethnographic research. So half the time we weren't even in the same city: she stayed in Madras (the most cosmopolitan locale in the South, which doesn't really tell you about Madras so much as it does about Kate's personal inclinations) working with an AIDS awareness program, while I conducted my dissertation fieldwork in Madurai, an inland city most frequently described, by the more metropolitan set, as an overgrown village. All of my research was conducted in the Tamil language, which Kate neither spoke nor understood, and the frustration she experienced at her sudden dearth of communicative avenues eventually led her, wisely, to decide not to even visit me in Madurai. To see Kate, I would travel to Madras, at the very least a nine and a half hour ride by train. I made the trip there and back every month.

The life I lived in Madurai was very different from the one Kate and I set up together in Madras. For the first year I lived with a small nuclear family (an actress, her musician husband, and their two adolescent daughters) in a tiny urban flat. The family members were, in that infamously convoluted relation so central to anthropological fieldwork, both my best friends and my key informants. They are part of the popular theater community that I had come to Tamilnadu to study. We had known each other for several years. Despite the actress's hard-working nights and her indomitable spirit, the family's material poverty remained chronic.

When I arrived in India this time, the family was renting a single six by six foot room on the roof of a five-floor walk-up in the center of town. Drinking water had to be carried up, heavy vessel on hip, flight after flight, day after day, from the municipal pump located at the intersection of the main and side streets below. This municipal water flowed from 4:00 to 5:00 in the evenings, and slowed to alternate days in the hot season. Otherwise, salt water for washing could be pumped up the pipes for building residents by switching on an excruciatingly loud motor located in the center of our roof. This motor ran for two hours each morning, and two hours each evening, fitfully spurting out its salty contents. Still, the family was lucky to have the place; it was hard to find anything they could afford in this busy central neighborhood where work required they live.

As luck would have it, I was able to rent the adjacent six by six foot room on the same roof. The arrangement was mutually beneficial in lots of ways. We shared all the space there was, including the tiny concrete closet of a kitchen, and the outdoor latrine. Since I was only one person, rather than another family of four such as had been living there before I came, the family's overall spatial domain was relatively enlarged. Taken collectively, our living space more than

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doubled their one room, because the entire roof was now ours. The family was pleased to have more space to work with in structuring their domestic life, and eager to have me there. When relatives would drop in, which was often, there was room enough for them too.

For my part, while it may not have had any highly desirable features for my trained-to-be-discerning American consumer body, it nevertheless fit readily into an equally familiar American middle-class discourse of roughing-it "adventure" — a well-seasoned and carefully constructed, largish box, in which "fieldwork in India" has a certain pride of place — and I was thrilled with the arrangement. The roof was my research heaven. (I admit this even knowing that it may resonate, for any of you who saw the movie, with that deeply obnoxious moment in Hollywood's portrayal of Dian Fossey's *Gorillas in the Mist*, where Sigourney Weaver, returning for further alien battles, embodies all that crazed giddy greed for knowledge associated with Western science, while on the hunt for primate life in Africa. After an arduous climb to the top of a big mountain, having attained the high plateau, Weaver-cum-Fossey plants her feet wide, and actually wriggles her hips, a moment of supreme gender hyperrealism, and gleefully, brazenly unselfconscious of the natives staring at her, proclaims the site "Research Center!" Weaver belts out this Adamic performative in a crooning cadence otherwise found primarily in late-twentieth century beach habitats of Southern California, in expressions like "Way to go, dude!" This celluloid moment congeals most everything I am squeamish about in the endeavor of anthropology.)

Anyway, the family and I lived together on that roof, they including me as they did so well, me in my research heaven. The only arrangement that bore direct relation to the fact that we paid separate rents for separate rooms lay in the storage of our belongings: the family had a dresser in the room on the right, and I unpacked my suitcase onto shelves in the room on the left. This did not, however, mean that these were our respective rooms in any way. When we went to bed at night, all females slept in one room, while the only male slept by himself in the other. It didn't matter which room, right or left; it only mattered that the sleeping arrangements were gender-segregated.

In practice, the whole arrangement meant that I had very little privacy: I was getting a public re-education in being female. I moved with other women as my proper school. At night I slept sardine-like between the actress and her thirteen- and fifteen-year-old daughters. My toes rested against the blue cement of the opposite wall, and my nose against the coconut oil in the girls' braids. We slept, so close, always dressed, on a layer of the girls' mother's old saris, stretched out on the concrete floor. Their father slept, always dressed, on an old blanket

on the concrete floor in the next room. The doors to both rooms were kept open. We could hear each other breathe. The family slept soundly. They were very comfortable with these arrangements; they had been sleeping like this all of their lives.

I had not. Sometimes I felt comforted by the way we females settled in to sleep beside each other, but at other times I found it unsettling, and uncomfortable. These feelings came in waves, which I seemed to have no control over. The nocturnal physical proximity was matched by waking practices that I found much easier to manage; it seems consciousness helped, in my case. I really enjoyed these certain intimacies: having a woman lay her head in my lap, so her hair could be stroked, or laying my head in her lap and letting her stroke mine; letting her feed me chosen morsels from her hand; bending down at her feet to arrange the pleats of her sari, or having her do mine; wearing each other's saris; buying each other small, pretty gifts; cooking food for each other; holding each other's hands while in a crowded room; sitting so close together in a crowded space that our hips touched, and her leg flopped onto mine. Women do these things all the time. This is socially expected, acceptable behavior. To have refused this closeness would have read as snobbish, mean-spirited, and in certain situations, casteist. When women did these things with me they were including me in some of the more playful, pleasurable, and common women's activities in their lives: an equalizing embrace, a bonding gesture, hanging out together, moving in tandem. I never quite stopped feeling a kind of double-consciousness about much of it. A gauze of memory surrounded me like a mnemonic wrap, always repeating the same message: "At home, I am a lesbian; these practices mean something very different there." But no one else heard this nagging refrain, or noticed the quietness into which I felt myself retreat when it sounded.

Cognitively, it helped to understand that, in place of privacy in my days and nights, what I was experiencing in Madurai was *pācam*. Comparative linguistics was made for such epiphanies. *Pācam* translates as love but that's primarily because in English we have just the one word, whereas in Tamil there are at least four. The contemporary Tamil-English dictionary of choice (Cre-A 1992) distinguishes the four as follows: *pācam* as affection, attachment; *anpu* as affection, love; *kātal* as love (between man and woman); *kāmam* as sexual desire, lust, love. Each of these four is important and plays a role in human life, etc. Some people gravitate more naturally to one than the others. In general, Tamilians say that Americans have lots of lusty *kāmam* and no kindred *pācam*. Indeed, when Tamilians perceived me as fitting in well in Tamilnadu, they would frequently ask how I fared in America, where (as everyone knows) *pācam* doesn't exist.

My Madurai family gave me lots of *pācam*. There was *anpu* there too. There were not, however, the other two, *kātal* and *kāmam*<sup>1</sup>. There would have to have been a marriageable man present for those to have been recognized as present also, and the only man in the household, the children's father, was, in the sensitively designed fictive kin network the family had established for me, my older brother—I could be the youngest child, and only daughter, of his mother—and thus eminently unmarriedable to me. All these arrangements were lovingly safe.

One of the trickier issues between Kate and me, and one of the primary reasons she stopped visiting me in Madurai, is that it was painful for her that the family made no distinction between their own attachment, affection, and love for me, and the attachment, love, and affection that Kate and I had for each other. The family was pleased and reassured to see how much *pācam* Kate and I had for each other. That didn't stop them, however, from interrupting all our conversations, from wanting Kate to sleep in a row with the rest of us sardines, or from trying repeatedly to get Kate to wear a sari. She preferred the long shirt, loose pant combination known as a *churidar*, which she found more comfortable and more butch, but which our Madurai family considered an outfit appropriate only for younger girls.

1. While these types of love are Tamil, it is not only in Tamilnadu that a fieldwork situation relies on such delineations. I am thinking of how Margaret Mead represented the enlarged role the "gentler" kinds of love begin to take on when one is alone doing fieldwork, as she was for her early work in Samoa. Later of course she and her successive anthropologist husbands (Reo Fortune and Gregory Bateson) mutually benefited, to an exhilarating degree, from fieldwork together. But of her early fieldwork alone, albeit mediated by both half a century and the presence of Bateson in her life, she wrote in her memoir: "It is the babies who keep me alive in contexts in which otherwise my sense of touch is seldom exercised. As Gregory Bateson phrased it later, it is not frustrated sex, it is frustrated gentleness that is so hard to bear when one is working for long months alone in the field. Some fieldworkers adopt a dog or a kitten; I much prefer babies. I realized now how lonely I had been, how much I wanted to be where someone else wanted me to be just because I was myself" (Mead 1972:155).

Such heightened affective relations with the young and cuddly seems to me part of a larger infant-mother role playing experience that many (most?) women alone in the field undergo as part of being taken in, and taken up, as a daughter. The honorary daughter persona seems by definition to involve a kind of docility that is inevitably in conflict with the inquisitiveness inherent in anthropological fieldwork. The dutiful, docile daughter paradigm can be found in any number of female anthropologists' narrative accounts of their field experience. See Briggs 1970, Golde 1970, and others in Golde, ed. 1970; Kondo 1990. These narratives often have a turning point when the docile role is shirked, out of frustration over the limits it exerts on work, and a sexualized adult female self has suddenly to bravely emerge into a sexualized adult male public sphere, for better or for worse. Male anthropologists have begun writing about the complementary role of honorary son, and how it can exert pressure to have sex, prove masculinity, and actively participate in sexist discourses, among other infamies (Angrosino 1986; Turnbull 1986).

These things bothered Kate. She was, for her part, pleased and reassured that this family was including me in so much of their lives, but when she came to visit, she wanted me to be primarily with her. The family instead tried to engulf her too, but she resisted them. Kate, as I had learned in my first year graduate school core course in anthropology, was maintaining an *exocentric* approach to the experience of fieldwork in a foreign country: her important relationships remained those that were outside her current cultural environment. Seeking to sustain outside ties allowed her to situate this experience within a certain global grid.

Kate was constantly looking to meet people with whom she could engage in academic or political analysis of the discourses swirling through India in the 1990s: communalism, development, public health, environment. She was equally hungry to swap foreign food fantasies. Above all she wanted the clarity of distance, an overarching perspective. She traveled to several conferences in North and South India, did some networking in the budding international Indian gay movement, read English language weekly newsmagazines, went to watch the weekly American television news broadcasts every Friday at the U.S. consulate, significantly revived her connections with her parents through written correspondence, and devoured novels. I am reminded of James Clifford's notion that Malinowski's binge reading of novels in the field had to do with a desire for communion: novels as "places where a coherent subjectivity can be recovered in fictional identification with a whole voice or world" (1988:109). If not exactly communion, Kate was interested in connection with a macro view—"all the news that's fit to print" and all that. She wanted to know, not only what else was happening in the global frame, but where we fit in now that we were somewhere else.

I on the other hand proved to be *endocentric* to the core. I was so focused in the "experience-near" that I hardly registered any feelings of longing beyond those that could be met by an hour of shopping cure in the center of town. My desires were attuned to the local: the variety of sari styles, the sweet and sour spread of seasonal fruits—mangoes and tender coconuts, toddy-palm seeds and custard-apples—and the crush to see the latest Tamil movie. Once, in a vague attempt to unify my worlds, I brought the family a small tin globe, from a Madras stationary store, to show where India and the U.S. were. My explanations confused my actress friend. It turned out that she thought the Earth was India, and America was someplace in it, quite far from Tamilnadu. Her children teased her; they were in school. But her Earth *was* India, and America *was* someplace in it. The little tin globe sat atop the family's television for a while, until a neighbor's boy threw it off the roof, and it flattened irreparably.





**Figure 1.**  
 "Moving in tandem":  
 An anthropologist among  
 actresses. At the Ma-  
 durai Drama Actors As-  
 sociation annual Guru  
 Puja celebration, Novem-  
 ber 1992.

While there were, as I mentioned, snags—as overlay and undergirdings of memory—I was busy, and that busyness occupied pretty much all of me. The female homosocial life I experienced was tamely sensuous, and I never felt plagued by the tugs of *kāmam* or *kātal*. The acceptance granted by Tamil society for female-to-female affection had its own beauty and trust, and it sufficiently squelched any other possible desires when in I was in Madurai. I really was the chaste woman they thought I was. My work fixed my gaze in an intense, bright focus on the acting community qua community: I would interview actors and actresses by day, and watch and ponder their performances of love songs and lovers' quarrels by night. These love scenes are formally in the genre of *kātal*, but involve lots of parodic and farcical commentary on any and all kinds of love. The scenes last all night, and I would sit up all night to watch them, together with the other women, on the women's side of the audience.

Every several weeks, *exo-* and *endocentric* would meet. The story I shall tell here occurred on one such occasion.

### Madras

*Last night I again had a strong attack of monogamy, with aversion to impure thoughts and lusts.*

B. Malinowski's 1914 *Diary* (1989:68–69)

It was late April, and the week of my birthday. I had been in Madurai for a month running, working way too hard, in the frenzy of beginning to wind up the research project. It was the height of the hot season, with daily temperatures hovering around 110 degrees fahrenheit, in the shade. Kate had landed us a super-plush housesitting gig in Madras for our final three months in India, a time we hoped to spend more of together. This place was a separate bungalow with a grass and flower garden and a private bore well for a guaranteed drinking water supply. It had a kitchen full of modern conveniences including a four-burner gas stove, a blender, a wet grinder, and a refrigerator. The living room had a table that sat squarely between strong, cooling cross-breezes off the Bay of Bengal, and was surrounded by bookshelves lined with eclectic English-language paperbacks. And above all, there was an upstairs with two air-conditioned, furnished bedrooms. We were overwhelmed by these bourgeois comforts, indeed by the entire organization of the place, as we had been living with the same few (overly academic) books we'd lugged from home, and a smattering of cheap furniture, in various and sundry drab concrete flats (including, of course, my research center on the roof) over the last nineteen months.

This bungalow was the lovely home of a married couple in their thirties with one child. Their kind of nuclear family exists primarily in the upper and upwardly mobile middle classes in India, in conscious contrast to the joint (or extended) family paradigm considered traditional in Tamilnadu. This nuclear family was a telling counterpart to the very differently "nontraditional" acting family I lived with in Madurai. Acting has long been considered a disreputable profession, and most families don't allow any members who act to remain at home. An actress must make her own way, by her own devices, for herself and her children if she has them, and sometimes her husband too, if she is his first or primary wife (many actresses are "second wives," a.k.a. mistresses). It is out of necessity that actresses live in downtown urban areas, where they can be easily contacted for work, and readily travel to scattered performance venues. By contrast, an upper-

class, forward-caste “modern” wife comes to live in a nuclear family in the metropole under very different circumstances. With her white-collar professional husband, she moves away from the extended family by choice, into the very urbane life of private homes and private cars and private schools that an engineer’s or a Citibank employee’s salary can support.

This bungalow, accordingly, was arranged for regular habitation by three, rather than by the ten or fifteen people its size might suggest to many (my friends in Madurai included). These spatial proportions, coupled with the fact that the owner’s tastes were an international blend—he’s German, she’s Tamil, and they both studied in the U.S.—meant lines, styles, decorative motifs, indeed an entire interior design that linked disparate histories and bridged continents. These structural and stylistic elements inevitably made this stucco bungalow feel more familiar to us than any home we’d thus far entered in India. In fact, we felt so at home there as to find ourselves a bit transported, lulled by comfort, and the resonance of the known, into almost forgetting where we were.

Except for one thing. One thing made this unquestionably a bourgeois lifestyle *in India*: servants. This small family employed seven regular servants at last count: a cook, a gardener, a night watchman, a cabinet-duster, a toilet cleaner, a man who irons, and a woman—named Angela—who washes the floors and everything else.

Now, when we agreed to do it, we were operating on certain assumptions about what the phrase “house-sit” means. But like all assumptions about English-origin terms employed in an Indian context, ours bore little relation to the task at hand. We thought *we* would water the plants, keep the place clean, be a presence to deter burglars. In short, we thought wrong. When the owners gave us the keys, they mentioned that they’d also left a set of keys with Angela, their “maid-servant,” who would wash the floors every other day, and water the garden every evening. We protested: surely we could water the garden? but they refused: “She’ll do it, she’s already been paid for the three months in advance, and you can arrange for timings that are convenient for you, say if she comes at four or five in the afternoon? She’ll stay outside completely for watering the garden, and then every other day she’ll do the floors; it should take her just thirty minutes or so.” Servants were to be understood as both a convenience and a class privilege. Neither convenience nor privilege was to be disdained—nor servants dismissed. Our main function as house-sitters, it became apparent, was to serve as place-markers within a hierarchy of relations, upon which servants were as dependent as we others were upon them.

Temporary arrangements had already been made with the other servants, none of whom would be coming regularly. And though each of them did nevertheless make at least one unexpected appearance that was uniquely unnerving (each in its own way) during our stay, it was Angela whom our path was fated to cross.

### The Bungalow

*I had to admit to myself that the Indians had got on my nerves. Even if we had been in perfect health and possessed of endless reserves of cash I would have wanted to leave. It was not until we were on the motor-boat that I could begin to see them in perspective. Who could blame them for their begging and their truculence, for their hypocrisy and their deceit? They were fighting for their lives in a way which people who have never faced the total obliteration of their own society cannot understand. And everything was against them. Still, that did not make them any easier to live with.*

D. Maybury-Lewis on his 1955 fieldwork (1988:148)

Kate picked me up from the train station on our white Vespa scooter. She looked good. She had on a new eggplant-colored oversized shirt, and had the same color hennaed into her long brown hair, to very glamorous effect. It was 6:30 a.m. and she looked radiant, smiling at me as I straggled off the train in my wrinkled cotton sari clutching my beaten-up suitcase. (I hated that bag, but it was indomitably functional. It was covered in that fake Oriental-Victorian flowered tapestry that Samsonite uses for their more feminine Skyline luggage sets. This under-the-seat case had roller wheels and a leash too. My itinerant actor friends coveted it; you can't get such sturdy yet flowery baggage there. It was a birthday present from my parents eight years ago, who bought it for me when I decided to become an anthropologist, since as everyone knows, that means travel!) I was tired.

Kate's smile and her scrubbed-pink radiance made me feel shy, actually—I hadn't seen anyone remotely like her in over a month. She was a giggly mirror, a flare of style from the streets of other cities in other lands, and a flesh-and-blood emissary from my prior private lesbian life. I needed to bathe.

We cut a clean line on the scooter to a friend's place where we could stay until the house-sit began the next morning. I slept the entire day, ate some eggs, and went back to sleep for the night. Early the next morning we moved into the dream bungalow. We dropped the bags downstairs and hit the bed. Privacy. We kissed. We cried. We lay on top of each other with our clothes off. Such a strange feeling to have one's clothes off in India—a never-never feeling. The women I

moved with in Madurai slept in clothes, bathed in clothes, and gave birth in clothes. From what I could tell, women never had their clothes off in India. We were the only two women I knew who ever had their clothes off, let alone had them off together, in naked union. It sent shivers down our skin even in the summer heat, and we went slowly.

Suddenly someone was pleading "*Mā! Mā!*" in a female voice just like so many other voices begging for money and attention on so many streets and so many bus-platforms throughout Tamilnadu. The voice came from just outside the bedroom door, inside the house, and the handle turned, and the door was thrown open. A small woman appeared briefly and immediately fled. "*Oru nimisham!*" (one minute), I cried as we scurried to wrap ourselves. Emerging from the room, only a mopping bucket stood on the landing; I headed down the stairs, and there stood the woman in the middle of the living room. At the sight of me she started a brusque harangue in Madrasi slang: I have to wash the floors upstairs, and you are in the room so late! You should answer the doorbell if you are home! Didn't you hear me ringing it over and over? (It was an electric doorbell that sounded like chirping birds, and we hadn't picked it out from the general sounds of summer morning.) What can I do if you are up there with the door closed, and the sun already so high? I asked her to please come only in the afternoons, as planned: we like to sleep in. She replied that she always comes in the mornings. I said I was told she'd come only in the afternoon, and inside the house only every other day. She said she comes every day, both in the morning around seven, and in the late afternoon. I said this wasn't necessary. She said it was.

Angela was a Christian. People often made a point of informing me that the many Indian Christian women at work as domestic servants throughout India were from families and communities that converted to Christianity in an attempt to escape a low-caste Hindu status. Angela lived within close walking distance of the house, but not in the low-caste Hindu fishing community whose huts skirted all these wealthy bungalows by the sea. Though women from the fishing community also did much of the manual labor for their better-off neighbors, Angela would have nothing to do with them. She lived with her widowed mother and her one child (her husband was a cycle-rickshaw driver and an abusive alcoholic who rarely came home) on the road leading to the fish market, but she never went there herself. She claimed to know nothing about fish. I found all this out when I tried, some few weeks later, to talk recipes with her, a blatant attempt at bonding such as I'd learned in Madurai, but she dismissed me. She told me this was a vegetarian house (vegetarianism being an index of Brahminism, and thus also of forward caste mobility) and not to use any of their pots or pans

my throat, a black fish, pointedly turning up her nose at my low, piscivorous way.

I couldn't make any headway with Angela. I tried for the next five days, the next precious first five days in this house of reunion, the first place where for any length of time in over a year and half Kate and I found seclusion, sensed the possibility of that entire field of intimacy we know as privacy, and were drawn to each other within it—to be close in the coolness of morning, the only coolness of summer, on a big double bed by a verandah of flowering magenta vines.

I'd think I'd convinced Angela to take a day off, or at least ironed out a workable schedule with her, then the next morning she'd show up again. I tried to negotiate hours, 7:45 instead of 7:00, for example, but it turned out Angela was innumerate, clock-time included. It got to where we imagined her voice when we got undressed, we'd stop midembrace to wonder whether that warbling trill was a live bird or the doorbell. Angela swore she wouldn't come upstairs while we were up there. She would do the downstairs work, the watering, the washing—the interminable washing, consisting primarily of whacking wet cloth against a stone pillar. It was her own clothes she whacked and washed, not ours; yet we couldn't wash her sulky, suspicious gaze out of our minds.

This was Angela's mistress's house, and we were unknown persons. Angela resented us fully; she rightly resented the logic that gave two foreigners full range of this turf, her turf, the turf she swept and swabbed daily with her own hands. Indeed, this would seem the socially expected, obvious, psychologically healthy reaction to invasion—a quite righteous postcolonial anger to such an historically loaded situation. The frightening fact is actually how uncommon this reaction is, and how much rarer still its open expression. Angela's behavior was highly unusual for someone in Angela's position. But Angela worked in an unusual household, the household of an international "progressive" couple, intellectuals with that familiar liberal, guilty class conscience that comes from, among other things, reading many of the same books we too had read. As a result, Angela enjoyed certain extended liberties in compensation for the historical oppression inherent in her class position. In short, Angela had the rule of this roost, and her employers believed her entitled.

The symbolism of this loosened, somewhat topsy-turvy class dynamic pertaining in the house did not go unobserved locally. Other housewives on the block commented openly that the mistress of the house was way too lenient. That Angela sorely lacked the deference that marks proper mistress-servant relations. That Angela deserved to be taken down a peg. But the progressive mistress of

the house wanted to *change* the balance of the servant-mistress relationship; she was an articulate feminist, and member of an active Madras feminist group. Of course. That is how she and we met.

When directly faced with our white faces, most women of servant status either froze in fear or gazed in astonishment. Our whiteness was so glaring, people unused to it seemed blinded to any other distinguishing features about us. Kate, in her exocentric rage, wanted our Lesbianism and our Leftism to *matter*, to qualify our Americanness, even our Whiteness, significantly. But no such semiotic existed. On the street in both city and village, bands of young women would regularly point and snicker at us. We were other, but not for reasons we were used to. We were odd, but again, not as a statement we'd chosen to make. We stuck right out, whether we wanted to or not. We wore our clothes wrong, even when they weren't the wrong clothes. And no one ever imagined speaking with us, or that we might be able to understand their running verbal commentary on our palpable discomfort. We were not people to engage with, but to stare at.

But none of this is new or unique. In the U.S. many people have a similar experience: fixed by a gaze that sees only race. In India the racial gaze came coupled with historically predetermined deference relations, still insurmountable in the subcontinental post-colony. Deference, and distancing—we were ever the unwilling dominatrices. Every interaction was colored by the fact of our whiteness. It always is.

But Angela, Angela was used to white foreigners, the master of the house being a big blond German, after all. Angela's progressive mistress had married him, after all. Angela's dislike of us was more specific than just race, but not so specific that it could be called personal. Indeed, I wanted at the time to say that it felt most like homophobia, except that an arrow can't be true to a mark that doesn't exist. In Tamilnadu, lesbianism doesn't exist. It has not been marked. It has not been named. To say, "an arrow pierced her heart" is to acknowledge the existence of something called "heart." But lesbianism has no such status in Tamil. It is something too inherently inconsequential to be plucked out of the original namelessness of all things. It is no-thing, quite literally. There is no way to say "lesbian" in Tamil. (We coined a fabulous word, but no one got it.)<sup>2</sup>

2. In spoken Tamil, *āmpillai* (*ān* + *pillai* is man + child) means man; *pompillai* (*pon* + *pillai* is woman + child) means woman; and *ōmpatu* (nine) means male-to-female transvestite/homosexual man. Recombining these prefix and suffix sounds, we took the *ōm* from the homosexual man and fixed it onto the "pillai" of the two genders, and hoped that the resulting, sufficiently Tamil-sounding "ōmpillai" might work to signify "lesbian". But the conceptual space wasn't there, simply waiting for a label; the absence is deeper than such a quick linguistic fix could resolve.

There is already in Tamil, however, a rather unique term for denoting the female companion of a female. *Tōli* is a classical Tamil word, centrally employed in creating the heightened interiority which characterizes ancient Tamil poetry (Ramanujan 1967, 1984). It continues to bespeak the enduring importance of homosocial bonds in structuring Tamil life. A *tōli* is a woman's dear friend, her confidante, her co-worker and her chaperone, but not her lover. The presence of a female companion protects a woman from aspersions that would be cast on her character were she to venture out alone. The presence of a *tōli* puts an effective brake on the otherwise inevitable questioning of the virtues of a girl who goes out alone, and of her judgment in so placing at risk her chastity. A dear female companion is understood as necessary to a young woman's proper evolution into a bride; in this way, female companions are the antonymous counterparts to lovers, and function as virtual seals of virginity.

Kate and I had never been perceived as so benign in all our lives. We became each others' *uyir tōli*, approximately translatable as "female life companions," or "female soul mates." This was the phrase used in a Tamil daily to soften even Martina Navratilova's muscular edges: she and Judy made worldwide news with their breakup (American divorce being an ever popular topic of Tamil-centric cultural comparisons), while this pithy local caption—*uyir tōli*—on the whole affair stopped just short of claiming Martina as a chaste Tamil heroine. The standard Tamil understanding of two unmarried female companions who never entertain men places them perhaps most analogously in the time-honored position held by nuns in the Christian cultural imagination (prior, of course, to shattering revelations made by certain sisters in recent decades): these women are assumed to be both beyond reproach, and supremely benign.

In the rare instance when an incident of female same-sex is reported (or rather, *exposed*, usually at a "ladies college" hostel) and emerges rough and ready into public discourse, denotation will rely on imported words—*homosex*—as though this problem, too, were strictly a Western one; yet another modern, imported evil. Such discursive choices distance as "foreign, outside" that which, already inside, remains unspoken. This discourse inadvertently paves the way for an increasingly hostilely imagined international gay community. Of which, of course, we are already a part.

That affective female world to which I was privy in Madurai—so resonant with what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has termed "the female world of love and ritual" for nineteenth-century America—and which I had learned to carefully qualify with notions of *pācam* and *anpu*, was never taken up by Tamil journalistic discourses. The *tōli*, and the tightly clasped groups of young women, and the



women sleeping like sardines, and making each other snacks, and wearing each others' clothes, are taken-for-granted conventions so central to normative Tamil cultural self-conceptions that they passed unremarked. It was there that we, too, went most unnoticed. The signs of same-sex intimacy that mark us as dykes in the U.S. — a visibility which we have only relatively recently begun to trade on to our advantage as a dyke movement — were the same signs that allowed us to blend seamlessly, invisibly into the norms of a female gender world that proved our safest haven from the relentless visibility we otherwise experienced as foreigners in a foreign land.

The paradox was irreducible: where we felt most anomalous and different (in what we generally call our private life), we belonged and were unremarkable, while where we unconsciously assumed a kind of egalitarian anonymity (in that worldly sphere known as public life), we were inescapably marked. The relentlessness of both our visibility and our awareness of its paradoxes made us take to all forms of modulating devices, from sunglasses to shutters to shut doors. And a shut door, it turns out, was a sure sign that the foreigners were indeed up to foreign business.

#### What Angela Saw

*It was about this time that we finally admitted to ourselves that the simple life which we had hoped would be one of the compensations of field work in Central Brazil was a mirage. We had simply exchanged one set of frustrations for another.*

D. Maybury-Lewis (1965:103)

*I was again angry at the natives. In the evening I read Conquest of Mexico.*

B. Malinowski's 1914 *Diary*

After such a perfect first meeting I didn't expect Angela to like us. But I became aware of the absolute impossibility of smooth relations only after I'd experienced her sullen, suspicious passive-aggression over the next few days. Nor did I expect that we would grow to like her. We were too worn out. Instead, I tried to impress upon her the temporariness of our stay, just three months. Three months when she wouldn't have to work every day! Three months of a more leisurely schedule. But the Tamil domestic servant does not belong to an industrialized proletariat class that works by the clock, and this was not a matter of alienated wage labor. Angela remained unmoved. This was a matter of the reproduction of dominant

relations of loyalty, property, pride, reputation, and—if I may venture another stab at the heart of locally nameless matters—heterosexual privilege. After all, though we were sleeping in the master bedroom, no master codes of coupledom applied to us.<sup>3</sup>

Our frustration grew. If ever we wondered, how the mistress and master of this bourgeois home ever have sex, we quickly realized how deferential Angela would be to their heterosexual union. She would know about that, it had many, many names, and she would hold it in esteem. She was deeply attached to the child. Their brilliant, rich, light-skinned boy was nothing like her own dull black lazy son, she said. These were deep waters, often navigated, fully named. These were matters of life and livelihood, matters that mattered to Angela. We somehow interrupted their flow. We must have been like a big boulder dropped one day and still—five days later—damming up the essential matters of washing, watering, and worrying whether everything was in its proper place. The longer we lived in the house, the more of it we touched and the more we disturbed its ebb and flow. We imagined Angela's hatred for us mounting.

But the kernel of this story is not what we imagined about Angela, but what she imagined about us. We gained some insight when, on the sixth day, exasperated, we called in a mediator. The mediator was a neighbor, a highly competent and energetic woman in her thirties, a known and trusted friend of the mistress of the house and, also like her, an upper-class Tamil Brahmin and—perhaps most significant to Angela—a housewife in her own right who, living across the street with her husband and one son, also employed a battery of servants, many of whom were Angela's friends or acquaintances. This goodly woman was predisposed to our cause by her own, previously mentioned, long-suffering desire to discipline Angela. These were indeed trying times for any last remaining liberal feminist leanings either Kate or I might have had. We were calling in the commandant; the analogy was only strengthened by the fact that this salutary soul worked by day in the German consulate, for the German consul-general. Of course. That is how she and the international couple met.

3. Not that we would want them applied. Like most queers we know, we invariably analyze and strategize our representation as a couple wherever we go, mindful of the overdetermination of the couple form in America, and its depoliticizing, hyper-privatizing effects. We both believe it's not socially necessary that everyone be determinately gendered, coupled, and sexed, or that all these parameters must line up in any one configuration. See Sedgwick 1993, especially pages 5-9, for an exemplary breakdown of the configurations "the family" and "sexual identity" in contemporary America and the usefulness of the word "queer" in the face of them. We are not interested in simply donning the mantle of inevitability that cloaks and validates the heterosexual couple, at home or abroad, while leaving all other structures of domination intact.

Anyway, it was a foregone conclusion. She heard both sides, and then she sided with us. Hers was a world where "we" mattered, or at least where foreigners and their foreignness paid the rent. The gavel fell on Angela:

The foreigners have a right to their privacy. They are not used to all this. They are entitled to their sleep. Where they come from they sleep in the morning. They have schedules! They make schedules according to their own convenience. They don't want to get up in the morning. If you come into the house it will disturb them. You must not disturb them in the morning. You will come only in the afternoon.

It was as though suddenly the police had become our bedfellows. Kate even told this internationally savvy ally the real reason we wanted our privacy in the mornings. Kate said the word "lesbian." But of course, Kate and our mediator were speaking fluent English. In English she could say it:

You see, we are lesbians and we haven't been able to get any privacy for nineteen months. Every time we start to have sex this woman interrupts us. She opened the door on us stark naked the first morning, I don't know what she thought. I think she must hate us so much because she saw what we were doing and she knows we're lesbians and she's on a mission to make our lives miserable!

Somehow this highly efficient woman appreciated Kate. At least she discreetly didn't let on otherwise. Class privilege seems to have overshot the divide between the two overly articulated sexualities (housewife and lesbian) that would have riven this encounter at home. Here, the two agendas intersected at Angela, and the need to discipline her, which seems to have been sufficient grounds for friendly conversation. Our neighbor was demonstrably on our side: she let us in on what Angela had made of the primal scene. As she put it:

No, no, Kate, Angela hasn't any idea of all that! It's far more serious, you see, what Angela imagined. She said you shut all the doors upstairs and you stay there for hours, you and your foreign machines. She is sure you are minting money. Yes, minting money!

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## The Bedroom

*The first thing we see as we travel round the world is our own filth,  
thrown into the face of mankind.*

C. Lévi-Strauss (1977[1955]:27)

What we did that first morning in the house, to us it was a kind of ritual recreation. We were re-creating our lesbian selves, unpacking them, dusting them off. We had carted them all the way from overseas only to shelve them, along with our academic books: all our important readings lay together in the dry red dust. Of course we had lugged all these things—the things which identify us at home—we'd carried it all with us. We brought ourselves and our luggage; it's a package deal nowadays. That's how we people come and go. It makes us largely the travelers we are: those who come from overseas with their baggage (Samsonite Orientalism, in all its glory) and who go back overseas lugging ever-accumulating stores of it. We do more than simply represent foreign markets: we are foreign cargo. After all, we brought ourselves all the way here.

Our lesbianism, too, we brought over, but we couldn't use it much. Stuck it on the shelves with the books, buried it in among the too-thick clothes (denim, leather) that we couldn't use either. Signs of another symbology, going unread, accumulating dust. That morning, we were picking ourselves up off the shelf, pulling ourselves out of the suitcase, reacquainting and reassessing. Looking at the lesbian in each other, all frayed, crumpled, squinched up. Do you want this anymore? Air it out, out by the flowering verandah. Let the leaves breathe. Shaking it out, our American lesbian-ness. There—our difference. Lying there waiting for us to pick it up again. Our different love. Upstairs re-creating our difference. Empowering our selves. Using our foreign goods. Finding we can still access them. Our difference is all bound up in it: access to all this foreignness, foreign ideas, foreign clothes, foreign tubes of foreign food, foreign fun. Some of it we bought (when we could find imported-goods stores); most of it we brought. We brought it, from overseas, *with us*.

That's what's different about us from Angela. We have access to foreign goods, foreign tongues, whole foreign selves. We have access to certain kinds of experiences, most of which cost money and mean power. She picked up on that part all right. We foreign women up there empowering ourselves. Stock-taking on our riches. Cashing in on our wealth. Banking on our stores. Coining private reserves. Minting money. With each sweet touch we got rich. We made it. Unfolding each other in the tens, twenties, fifties, hundreds. Angela was the only one who got it. She was the only person who knew how valuable Kate and I

were to each other. She gave us the translation into the local currency that we'd been looking for, horrifying as it was. We'd never found a way to explain how much we mattered to each other, because relations between women don't rate by themselves. They shine only as refractions of a central luminous male: mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, defined by him. We had no man and so we were no thing. Nothing we did together was important enough for anyone to even remark on.

Except Angela. She saw what we were doing as something serious. Criminal even. Completely illicit, out of bounds, and nasty. Her take on us was strangely familiar, resonating as it did with the ways we learned to see ourselves at home. Illicit and nasty are among those key terms whose use opens vast signifying chains in a world of Christian-influenced antihomosexual discourse.

In the blink of Angela's eye our two female bodies were transformed into machines of modern capital, a-whirr and a-glint with newly-coined values. And we recognize ourselves in that description! She saw us, in terms that neatly capture what sells big on our popular culture market: illicit and nasty? Cool! How much?

At first we laughed off Angela's charge, laughed it off as too ridiculous and patently offensive for words. But rethinking it now, here, I find no shortage of words; quite the opposite. Minting money proves an unsettlingly tidy, productive metaphor for us late-capitalist lesbians, already well versed, out of necessity, in coining our own meanings, and transforming our own value. As a lesbian and an anthropologist, the attraction of the distant mirror lies in the mutuality of the foreignness it reflects: s/he to me and I to he/r. This is the most precious of commodities, the most valuable access. And when it dispels the naturalness of all currency, it is also the ultimate subversion.

The increasingly productive way the trope of minting money works for us, however, says nothing about how it works for Angela. We know only indirectly the pragmatic context of her accusation—to the neighbor of her employer, and not, luckily for us, to the real police—and unnervingly little of its broader cultural context. Angela was not a subject of my research, but rather a thorn in the side of my days off. I didn't know much about her, nor she about me, and the disinterest was mutual. Consequently this belated meditation is unredeemably one-sided, impossibly nondialogic. The complicated web of discursive, experiential, and subjective associations that allowed Angela to see counterfeiting, and not sex, value and not affect, money and not intimacy when she flung open a bedroom door one fine summer morning surely indicates a sex-money-power nexus that contains rich cultural deposits for future study and a veritable gold mine for

metaphor theory. Whole sets of questions open up around sexuality as a currency in the capital logics of local patrilineal kinship and marital exchange, where women are not only property but represent a whole set of property relations, including their ongoing domestic and reproductive labor, that moves with them into the husband's house and lineage. Likewise, there are also capital logics involved in cross-cultural flows and their histories, be they in imperial, colonial, postcolonial, transnational, touristic, or academic exchanges. No such study can be embarked on here. Here only the disorganization and reformulation of our own fields of discursive, experiential, and subjective associations, drawn through one inadvertant instance of "culture-contact," are traceable. To me the suggestive shapes are most evident in the jarring of our own polytropic constructs, and in the altered reaggregation of our own desires, that now include my ongoing attempts at charting just such processes.

Regarding the paradigmatic context of Angela's allegation about illegal, foreign activities in the bedroom, we know only that counterfeiting money is a terrorist activity not infrequently reported in Tamil newspapers, a seditious act of fraud and deceit against the Indian government. Police searching a cache of notes are suspicious of those trafficking across coastal borders, and place particular scrutiny, since the intensification of civil war in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, on the coast south of Madras, and that short stretch of the Bay of Bengal between Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. Fishing communities of the Tamil coast are suspected of aiding such traffic: Madrasi fisher folk are poor and foreign traffic quickly becomes local traffic. Angela lived at the southern tip of Madras, where the Madrasi fishing community is biggest. She lived next to the fish market. The wealthy white-collar family bungalows, like the one we house-sat, enjoyed these same sea breezes, just a stone's throw away from fisher family huts. Many of the fishing community women worked as servants in these rich houses, and Angela defined herself against them: she did not like, buy, or eat fish. In this multi-caste, multi-class neighborhood where Angela lived and worked, there were quite a few foreigners. For the past decade or so, several apartments, in one of the larger buildings on the same street, has been regularly rented out to American Fulbright scholars. Quite a few neighbors are affiliated with the German consulate. Just down the road is the campus of the famous Kalakshetra Colony, an internationally renowned school of classical South Indian performing arts, which draws and trains an elite international, as well as a local, student body.

It is in this context, or rather in all these contexts, that Angela saw us. She saw our intertwined bare bodies as one among many other foreign machines in that spacious, air-conditioned bedroom, where the engineer housed his big,

first-generation facsimile machine, and a wireless, white, portable and rechargeable phone. (Since as suspect paraphernalia it all reminds me of Maxwell Smart and his secret shoe phone, I instinctively put the blame on imported B-movies and repeatedly broadcast television serials that make white women the accomplices of creepy men in airports, plotting to take over casino-rich island nations, stashing briefcases full of counterfeit bills in airport lockers, and the locker keys in their bras. But I don't know if Angela has ever seen one like that, however ubiquitous they seem to me.) In the context of that bedroom, privacy made sense primarily as a property relation. It seems clear that there was no way to use privacy, in the master bedroom and among the master's tools, to create an intimacy that might be separate from relations of private property.

Therefore I am convinced that Angela's description of our private activities to our mutual neighbor was not intentionally metaphoric. That is, I believe that Angela—by saying “they were upstairs minting money” rather than “what they were doing upstairs was as seditious as minting money,” in either case, an act she had most probably never directly seen—intended simply to describe what she saw, or thought she saw. Of course there is nothing simple about this; no fixity separates descriptive reference from metaphoric reference.<sup>4</sup> What of any of it, of this scene, these relations, that coastal road, our sex, her vision, my belated words, and value itself, is not canny metaphor?

#### **Our Lady of the Stage**

*Then, tired by talk, read Lettres Persanes, but I found none of the ideas  
I was looking for, only lewd descriptions of harems.*

B. Malinowski's 1918 *Diary* (1989:251)

Quite contrary to the nasty/illicit/hot construct that has cache in the U.S., Kate and I were usually seen in a Tamil context as embodiments of the licit (affinal), clean (ascetic), and modest (feminine). Confirmation of this reading came in myriad ways, and indelibly marked my experience of fieldwork. The most vivid example, as is often the case, comes from the stage, and it is the last I'll share before closing.

4. “. . . metaphors and conventional domains can shade or change into one another in response to changes in context. . . . The difference between literal and figurative meaning, or what is recognized as straightforward reference and what is perceived as metaphor, in other words, is not essential but pragmatic or contextually relative” (Turner 1991:128).

In the popular dramas I study, actors stage the key personages of a Tamil mythic imaginary. That imagined world turns on enduring repertory roles: the hero plays kings and gods, the heroine plays queens and goddesses, the male comedian plays the buffoon, and the female dancer plays the *tōli*.

I watched scores of these dramas staged. Only twice was I ever asked, on a lark really, to play a role on stage myself. In both instances, the roles into which I was cast were added just for me. The first was in a "Christian" drama, staged in a largely Christian village. The young heroine's arms are chopped off by bad men in a forest. She prays to the Virgin Mother for deliverance. Usually, Mary's off-stage voice-from-on-high answers the girl's pleas, and the heroine's arms grow back miraculously. My lines were minimal. "Child, do not worry. Everything will be for the best. Receive now my blessing and your arms back." They costumed me in a white, floral sari, its long end demurely covering my ridiculous short hair. A touch of red lipstick, very light, was all the cosmetic required, for, as was remarked backstage over and over again, this actress had no need of the otherwise obligatory white pancake—she's already "fair and lovely." On-stage, everyone's face was just as pale as mine: light skin, actors maintain, is more theatrically vivid and legible. My "naturalness" for the part of the Virgin was based on more than skin tone however. I evidently fit the bill in more personal ways: a Western woman of moral rectitude. Nor did anyone seem to mind that Jews are, ostensibly, the original blasphemers, disbelievers of the immaculate conception. As one actor concluded, when I tried to flag this contradiction, it's all part of the same story in the end.

The second role I played was as a *tōli* to a prostitute. My character was scripted by Madurai's reigning drama teacher, during a performance in his own natal village. The play's narrative is perhaps the most famous myth of the Dravidian South, the story of child-bride turned goddess Kannagi, and her dissolute husband Kovalan. It's performed now as a morality tale, arguing simultaneously against child marriage and dancing-girl courtesans. The courtesan, Mathavi, milks the wealthy Kovalan of everything he's worth for over ten years, keeping him in her house of ill-repute all the while. Finally news comes to Kovalan that his young wife, whom he married when she was five and who is now the ripe age of sixteen, is deathly ill. He tries to take leave of Mathavi and return home, but she won't allow it. Cruelly, she makes him honor a promise he made her years ago, and when he is finally allowed out of her clutches, he is a pauper. It is during his leave-taking scene that I enter. I am the female companion of Mathavi. I attempt to convince my female friend and mistress that her behavior is really despicable. I try to turn her from her evil ways, and assuage the evil she has already done.



I represent the possibility of reprieve: though we dwell amidst depravity, the road to righteousness lies always open. It was quite acceptable that a penitent on this road should be American, for Hollywood has made Western woman's immorality famous, and many Americans do seek salvation in their imagined Indias. My performance was cheered.

I was discomfited by both of these castings of me as "good," salvific virgin and repentant whore, since I disagreed profoundly with every one of the moral binarisms on which my characters were based. It seemed wrong however—a breach in my primary role as Researcher—to attempt to dismantle any of these constructs. What is an ethnographer to do when her best laid post-structuralist critique faces a local structural binarism (wrought in Victorian, in industrial-age iron) bent on incorporating her too? My spontaneous critiques found their way into conversations, but feminism among friends is an entirely different matter from the business of altering the foundations of a dramatic repertory. The show—not least of all because it earns the actors their living—must go on, additional bit parts or no. So I let myself be cast as both virgin mother and repentant whore, recognizing in these roles not merely a Biblical imprimatur, but also the two most familiar redactions of "morality" allotted to Western womanhood in South Asia. The export of imperial womanhood from Britain in helpmeets of all stripes, over several centuries, meant that female personages had long conveyed Victorian mores far into the colonies. Licit, clean, and modest, now we ladies fit the bill. For audiences, that is, other than Angela.



*We went for a walk on the beach; he was effusive about the plantation, I was full of admiration. He showed me his old house and told me a story about a snake—how many times has he showed someone around and told the same story? On the beach, discussion of missionaries—slight friction; I lost all feeling for him.*

B. Malinowski's 1914 *Diary* (1989:57)

In Tamilnadu two women alone together loving have no real purchase on power. Nevertheless, living there, Kate and I continued to love each other in all the powerful ways we do. As bonds of *pācam* and affectionate *anpu*, our love was not exactly invisible, just unrecognizable as lesbian.

The few self-identified Indian lesbians we knew were grateful for whatever inconspicuousness these unmarked categories of female bonding provided. These

dykes, in both Bombay and Delhi, were not about to be hurried out from behind the screen of a “female world of love and ritual” that just barely covered the new-fangled lives they led as single women. In the two largest economic centers of India, two giant working cities, these women could live economically independent from the family. It was the first time we met women for whom “single” was a viable, desirable identity.

In Tamilnadu, single, independent women are almost unheard of; the prospect of survival—loose from the net of kinship relations that are the basis of social and economic stability—is daunting, and to pursue such an uncharted course seems both foolish and suspect. For most Tamil women there are only two desirable identities, and they both revolve around her position within a male lineage: one is that of girl-child, living with her father’s family, and the other is that of woman-wife, living with her husband’s family. A “single” woman threatens to upset entire cosmologies that construct female sexuality as an aspect of women’s power that is benevolent only when contained in, and controlled by, family relations.<sup>5</sup> Understandably, in this context the dykes we knew were struggling, not to be validated as women *together*, but as women *alone*.

We grew to appreciate their position, their modest passing, and the quiet feminist transformations they worked for. In our coveted crucible of a private bedroom, we may have continued to mint our privately valuable selves, but we learned the extent to which those selves have currency only where they are recognized. Where they are not recognized—or worse yet, where they are seen as counterfeit tender—either one changes one’s currency, or one stops shopping. Eventually, we did a little of both.

For one thing, we moved out of the master bedroom. We started sleeping on the floor of the kid’s room; once we’d pushed the bunk bed up against the wall, there was an open space about six by six foot square. That, we found, suited us perfectly. It brought a sense of Madurai home to us in Madras, and showed us that we had changed in some intimate ways. Soon thereafter, Kate and I realized that we had quite unceremoniously dumped the idea of maintaining our treasured

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5. Scholarship on South India includes many explications of this state of affairs. An example is Reynolds 1980, on Tamil Hindu women’s religious worship of female deities: “women themselves are the staunchest supporters of a system that normatively renders them subservient and subordinate to men. . . . Why do women opt for goddesses such as Laksmi who are paragons of wifeliness, purity, and benevolence, instead of *ammans* who are independent, passionate, and capricious? . . . [T]he benevolent goddesses express an ordered, regulated, and properly classified world. To opt for the married goddess, then, is to opt for a world of order on cosmic, social, and existential levels” (43–44).

public dyke identity in Tamilnadu. Except for moments of possibility with our few Indian lesbian friends, on their rare visits to Madras, we had let it go. And we had stopped shopping for any equivalent. We saw other sides of ourselves, unpolished, raw. We fit in and stuck out differently in this other system of differences, which we gradually came to appreciate. But that, of course, is nothing new. It's what has always made anthropology a queer science.

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