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Powerful cultural productions: Identity politics in diasporic same-sex South Asian weddings

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Abstract
Queer diasporic subjects are multiply displaced and often excluded from familial, local, national, and transnational spheres. This ethnographic study examines five same-sex South Asian American Hindu wedding ceremonies to demonstrate that these events are spaces where power and one’s inclusion into the dominant social structure are negotiated. The ritualized performances and social interactions surrounding these ceremonies serve to enact, articulate and transform culture. The ceremonies enable the actors to claim ownership of tradition, and insert their subjectivities into one of its most fundamental institutions. While the structures of power operate most visibly on macro-political levels, they are often replicated, resisted, and subverted in numerous intimate arenas of lived experience, such as wedding ceremonies.

Keywords
diaspora, performance, power, queer politics, sexuality

Here, history is written on the body, not by abstract structures but by those who inhabit and comprise them. The inscriptions are made of words, but they are words with force, that cause pain, and that produce an awful beauty.

(Morris, 1995: 587)

The extract opening this article captures the essence of queer South Asian American Hindu wedding performances. These productions are valuable cultural
texts that evoke a sense of history, memory, and identity. In this ethnographic study I examine five such ceremonies to demonstrate that they are performances of power and identity that work within and against the dominant structure; rather than calling for an alternative societal order that lies beyond the periphery of mainstream society, the ritual performers negotiate their insertion into the existing power arrangement while simultaneously modifying its heteronormative logic.

Although the argument here is reminiscent of J.E. Munoz’s contention that the work of queer artists of color disidentifies – neither resists nor conforms – with dominant society (Munoz, 1999: 11), it differs in that the performances described here do not merely operate on the figurative level. Instead, these weddings literally insert the couples into an Indian cultural institution through the Hindu rites of marriage. Through these ceremonies of micro-resistance, actors engage in a set of cultural politics that foreground the conflicts of the public and private spheres. Transnational same-sex South Asian weddings serve to empower queer subjects and aim to redistribute power by transforming ideology and hegemonic practice.

This study contributes to the scholarly agenda of gay/lesbian anthropology in that it ‘demonstrates the willingness of . . . [queer] subjects . . . to talk back to . . . authority’, it brings ‘into sharper focus the mechanisms of power against which lesbian/gay (and other sexual) subjects are already struggling’; and it document[s] the social costs (and for some, the social benefits) stemming from regulatory control’ (Leap and Lewin, 2009: 3). While these weddings are essentially ceremonies of micro-resistance, the actors engage in a set of cultural politics that foreground the conflicts of the public and private spheres. Transnational same-sex South Asian weddings serve to empower queer subjects and aim to redistribute power by transforming ideology and hegemonic practice.

In this investigation, I have focused on diaspora as rooted in actual experience. The shortcoming of numerous valuable interdisciplinary studies of transnationality (e.g. Brah, 1996; Gupta, 2006; Shukla, 2004) is that they rarely move beyond a macro-analysis of various cultural forms and discourses (Lamb, 2002: 300–301). Similarly, studies of resistance have also tended to be ethnographically ‘thin on the subjectivity – the intentions, desires, fears, projects – of the actors engaged in these dramas’ (Ortner, 1995: 190). Such approaches overshadow important facets of lived experience that speak to the complexities of familial relations and the impacts of dominant regimes on individual subjectivities.

Here, I have focused on both micro and macro-structures, primarily by linking secondary sources with the interviews that I conducted with queer South Asian American couples, and by citing ethnographic details from their wedding videos, photographs, programs, and scripts. Compensating for the oversights in recent scholarship on queer transnational activism, the approach employed here serves to illuminate, in Tom Boellstorff’s words, ‘how non-normative subjectivities entangle with dominant discourses’, and the ‘processes by which inequality is challenged through forms of reverse discourse’ (2007: 23). The theoretical perspectives that have abetted the investigation of these processes include Foucauldian and Gramscian ideas of knowledge and power, theories of resistance and social reproduction, symbolic and interpretative anthropology, and folklorist theories of
performance. These perspectives highlight how same-sex South Asian American ceremonies exert counter-pressure on unjust beliefs and practices, and the extent to which they empower marginalized and multiply displaced queer subjects.

**Methodology**

In this study, I have treated performative spaces as concentrated, albeit temporal, islands of performance and exchange, where same-sex South Asian American weddings emerge as transient diasporas worthy of ethnographic research. Although I gathered data using a number of qualitative research techniques, I was unable to attend the weddings as they took place prior to the commencement of my research. Moreover, in the absence of the perspectives of wedding guests, this actor-centered project serves as a preliminary study meriting further investigation.

I used snowball sampling to locate informants through South Asian American Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer (LGBTIQ) listservs. In order to protect the privacy of the research participants, I have used pseudonyms and altered a number of identifying characteristics. The majority of the data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, each of which was about an hour and a half long. I conducted phone interviews with two of the couples who lived at a great distance. After gathering biographical data about the participants (including information about their family and religious backgrounds, immigrant status and experience, views on family and marriage), I asked them to describe their weddings in detail and to explain the meanings and intentions behind the various sociocultural elements that were fused into the ceremonies (e.g. wedding rituals, dress, aesthetic elements, participation of family and friends, the challenges they faced, impacts of the ceremony, and so on). Each interview was recorded and transcribed before analysis. Where possible, I watched wedding videos and looked at photographs, scripts, and programs. I watched videos of three of the weddings (after conducting interviews), two of which I saw with the participating couples. These secondary sources of data were especially valuable since I was not physically present at the ceremonies.

The couples who participated in this research are from the upper-middle class, and most of them reside in metropolises along the north-east and west coasts of the USA. Of the five, four of them are lesbian couples, and only two unions were legally recognized marriages at the time this study was conducted. They were all in the early-30s to mid-50s age range, and include both first and second-generation Indian immigrants. San Francisco residents, Manoj and Kunal, the only gay couple in this study, had a private ceremony in Toronto at a relative’s house in 1996; Darshana and Debbie had a Hindu–Jewish wedding in a New York City church in 2000; Deepti and Emily got married on a small college campus in New Hampshire in 2002; Jaya and Arpana were married in Seattle in 2002; and Reema and Sarah had a Hindu–Buddhist ceremony at a Buddhist temple in Massachusetts in 2004.

I call these events same-sex South Asian American weddings for three reasons. First, in each instance, at least one partner is of South Asian descent (i.e. 7 of the 10
participants are of South Asian origin). Second, those consultants who were of Indian origin, identified themselves as South Asian Americans. Third, the weddings were predominantly Indian-styled ceremonies (i.e. in terms of wedding aesthetics, style of dress, food, music, decorations, and so on) in which other cultural elements were largely overshadowed. While this project incorporated questions about the inter-racial/faith dimensions of the ceremonies, the data gathered revealed that these themes were less pronounced compared to the South Asian elements in the weddings. Moreover, being of mixed ethnicity did not appear to be problematic for the relevant couples both in terms of familial approval and scripting of the ceremonies. Accordingly, the South Asian and transnational features of the weddings figure dominantly in my analysis.

Marriage and diasporic politics

Marriage is an institution that has historically and universally been crucial to community life. Its centrality as the fundamental unit of economic production and social reproduction has made it the site of severe contestation. The significance of marriage in the Hindu belief system is evident in the second and longest of the four fundamental stages of life – the householder (grhastha) – that every twice-born man is required to experience.

To date, full marriage rights are available to same-sex couples in only a few parts of the world. Marriage licenses are issued to same-sex couples in only some US states (e.g. Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Iowa, Vermont). In India, homosexual relations were illegal until July 2009, when the Delhi High Court amended Section 377 of the Indian Penal code, a colonial injunction that criminalized adult and consensual sexual acts that were deemed to be against the order of nature. However, same-sex marriage in India remains a distant reality. In this global political environment of institutionalized heteronormativity, queer lifestyles are viewed, at best, as anomalous if not perverse.

Vital to this study are the exclusionary practices of familial, local, national, and transnational structures of domination that impact the lives of queer minorities. On the legal front, citizenship through marriage in the USA is a heterosexual privilege (Gupta, 2006: 91). In institutionalized domains, the marginalizing discourse of groups like AIA (Association of Indians in America), and NFIAA (National Federation of Indian Associations in America) ‘rests on a cultural argument that ... immigrants learn to be homosexual after coming to the West’ (Gupta, 2006: 69). Moreover, ‘South Asian queers experience racism ... in white-dominated LGBT spaces’ where their bodies are exoticized and their activism is ‘read as ... a rejection of their “repressive” homeland culture’ (Gupta, 2006: 71–72). The sum of these discourses – on sexuality, race, nationalism, and citizenship – produce multiply displaced diasporic queer subjectivities.

The exclusionary practices of dominant entities have resulted in the emergence of organizations that strive to protect the interests of transnational queer South Asians. Groups like SALGA (South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association) and
KhushDC have battled oppression by promoting awareness, visibility, and diversity through staged protests and social events. Unfortunately, except for the extensively cited near decade-long (1993–1999) conflict between SALGA and FIA (Federation of Indian Associations. e.g., Gupta, 2006; Gopinath, 2005; Shukla, 2004), where the former was barred from marching in the annual India Day Parades in New York City, there are very few visible episodes of queer South Asian American activities that have been closely examined by social scientists.

The cultural politics of same-sex diasporic weddings not only parallel but also diverge from organized queer South Asian activities. These performances allow couples to showcase their personal beliefs and practices instead of being entirely subsumed under the sociopolitical rhetoric of LGBTIQ organizations. Additionally, same-sex Hindu weddings also take place in India, but as Ruth Vanita describes in *Love’s Rite*, Indic queer unions, revolving primarily around incidents of elopement and joint suicide (2005: 91), invariably differ in scope and their potential social ramifications. With the exception of a few recent works (e.g. Bhan and Narrain, 2005), most scholarship on emerging gay and lesbian voices from the non-western world reveals that queer subjects ‘work in a variety of interlocutions within mainstream discourses’ (Chalmers, 2002: 135). Some scholars have illustrated the way in which sexual minorities may shift power in their favor either by attempting to gain respect within the existing societal structure or by morally differentiating themselves from other stigmatized groups (e.g. Reddy, 2005).

This article expounds that queer weddings in the South Asian diaspora involve other types of complications that are peculiar to transnational subjectivities. These weddings differ from the ceremonies of cross-sex couples who re-engineer traditional marriage rituals. For instance, in many secular weddings, the removal of religious references is common practice. Similarly, interfaith marriages may involve the creative amalgamation of religious traditions. However, same-sex South Asian American weddings differ from these heteronormative ceremonies in that they do not merely reinvent traditional marriage rituals, but they also use wedding customs to critique heteronormativity and the legal and social exclusion of queer individuals.

In some respects, this inquiry relates to Ellen Lewin’s study of gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies in the San Francisco Bay Area (1998). Supplementing Lewin’s work, this article illustrates that the diasporic context, because of its physical distance from India where same-sex sexuality is even more socially repressed, affords queer South Asian Americans the opportunity to publicly assert their sexual difference and create space for themselves within a desired cultural institution.

The intersections of sexuality, performance, and power

While the debates on sexuality and equality have been the central point of contention for LGBTIQ civil rights movements in the last couple of decades, they fall within a rubric of sexuality that Michel Foucault argues is centuries old. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault makes an argument about the
modern discourse of sexuality by describing how this social category came under the scrutiny of the public eye, and then gradually transformed into the contemporary need to confess and assert one's sexuality (Foucault, 1979: 33). The theorist linked the discourse on sexuality to the distribution and attribution of power, where competing arguments appear as opposing groups engage in power relations. Using Foucault's ideas, my project interrogates how marginalized subjects use performance to destabilize the meanings of sexuality and reallocate power.

Also of relevance here are Antonio Gramsci's transformative political theories, which complement Foucault's scheme of knowledge and power. Gramsci's interest in social self-production and the creation of a critical citizenry, led him to advocate for a 'conscious working-out of our own “conception of the world”' (Crehan, 2002: 81). In his dynamic view of culture, the disenfranchised should not only aspire to acquire power that is withheld from them, but should also question the legitimacy of the existing power structure in order to avoid perpetuating inequality.

Another body of scholarly literature to which this research is linked is anthropological research on everyday forms of resistance. A number of South Asianist and Middle Easternist scholars have illustrated the multiple ways in which marginalized subjects critique, reinterpret, and resist dominant ideologies. Grounded in practice theory (Bourdieu, 1977), much of this work on agency focuses on small or local resistances that are circumscribed within existing cultural forms rather than strive to overthrow the system (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Ahearn, 2001; Lamb, 2000; Mahmood, 2001; Raheja and Gold 1994). Subaltern subjects may either draw upon subtle forms of resistance, such as secrets, gestures and silences as conscious strategies, or produce subversive discourses through jokes, gossip, songs, and folktales to express their contempt for and to reinvent oppressive cultural phenomena. While the weddings described in this research are far from subtle, they relate to the aforementioned inquiries on resistance in that they do not propose an alternative to the institution of marriage. Instead, the ceremonies are localized cultural practices that work within and against the existing structure and contribute to its reproduction. In other words, they are culturally constrained forms of resistance, embedded within rather than independent of the system.

Symbolic and interpretative theories demonstrate how performances, ‘thick’ with meaning, integrate into larger schemas of power. According to Keith Basso, rituals are forms of ‘play’, that is, highly framed actions – staged, ritualized, intentional, or rehearsed behavior – that stand out from everyday life events (1979: 4). The significance of play can be understood through the Geertzian and Turnerian notions of inversion and anti-structure, where the normative meanings of symbols are reversed in ritual context (Geertz, 1973; Turner 1969). Packed with layers of signification, ritualized performance has the power to weaken ideology through transposition. However, it would be naïve to treat play and performance as false or less ‘real’ in relation to social interactions or events occurring in ordinary life. Reducing public performativity as inauthentic not only diminishes the importance of self-representation as a source of pleasure and desire, but also devalues the rendition of the imagination into social practice.
Performance perspectives go a step further in describing how coded messages may affect normative meanings and actions. Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs delineate ‘the interrelated processes of entextualization, decontextualization (decentering), and recontextualization (recentering) . . . [as] a way [of] illuminating the larger systemic structures in which performances play a constitutive role’ (1990: 80). They suggest isolating and then analyzing these key aspects of performances as a way of linking play with dominant discourses. The disenfranchised may use performances to address social norms, separate normative meanings from cultural beliefs and practices, and attach new connotations to hegemonic constructs. Even those performances that work on a single cultural category, like sexuality, may simultaneously attack other identity norms (Morris, 1995: 583).

Crucial to many studies of performance are parody and irony (e.g. Manalansan, 2000; Munoz, 1999), techniques that are employed in performative genres such as drag. In contrast to mock ceremonies and theatrical enactments, performances of important life-cycle rituals such as marriage do not merely criticize unfair practices but literally transform them when actors reappropriate cultural phenomena. In agreement with Deborah A. Kapchan, I view such events as ‘heightened’ presentations, where the ‘notion of agency is implicit’, (1995: 479) and cultural forms are produced and reconstructed.

Another component of this study is concerned with the way language and action work in tandem to disseminate identities and facilitate the acquisition of power. Kapchan defines performances as ‘aesthetic practices – patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment – whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities’ (1995: 479). Within the context of performance, the mimetic and metacommunicative role of the body is empowering and pleasurable for the actors who are presented with the opportunity to command attention and represent themselves, uninterrupted, before a watchful audience.

Based on the logic of essentialist discourses on gender, sexuality, and race, queer diasporic South Asians are often cast out of their homes, histories, cultures, nations, and even the social imaginary of the communities of which they are a part. This research demonstrates how private and public debates on sexuality are embedded within a specific genus of queer diasporic presentation and the incidents surrounding its enactment. Symbolic, interpretative and performative approaches and the theoretical insights on power, agency and social reproduction are valuable in the context of same-sex South Asian American weddings because they provide a framework through which several strategies of transnational queer identity politics can be scrutinized. The subsequent sections illustrate through ethnographic detail how these ceremonies offer the possibility of exploring the linkages between performance, sexuality, knowledge, and power.

**Locating public discourses in private moments**

The couples in this investigation related their personal experiences with dominant discourses on gender and sexuality by alluding to repressive entities that impinge
upon the freedom of diasporic queer South Asians. Darshana Goel acknowledged that she wanted to have a ‘traditional’ ceremony in order ‘[t]o be a part of ancient traditions with which [she is] deeply connected, and from which some people want to exclude [her].’ Here, Darshana refers to the social institutions from which LGBTIQ South Asian Americans are banished by the various factions operating in the diaspora. For instance, the United Nations refused to rent the couple its chapel when the organization’s representatives discovered that the space was intended for a same-sex wedding.

Arpana discussed the importance of publicly referring to her ceremony as a wedding for both personal and political purposes.

I call it a wedding. It was a wedding and for me that was also a political statement. ‘You’re coming to a wedding!’ ‘This is a wedding!’ ‘There are two women who are getting married in a wedding!’ You know? And now we’re married and I call Jaya my wife.

Instead of calling it a ‘commitment ceremony’ or a ‘same-sex union’, terms that have implications for something less momentous, Arpana, and every other couple in this study, used the words ‘wedding’ and ‘marriage’ to describe their ceremony. A same-sex ‘union’ not only connotes fewer legal privileges but it would also position the couple’s marriage beyond the periphery of culturally valued lifestyles, and as a consequence reinforce their marginal status. The appropriation of these terms diverges from the prevalent queer practice of resisting assimilation into the status quo by opposing ‘tradition’. In contrast, the linguistic strategy adopted by these queer South Asian couples helped thrust their ceremonies into a socially and politically charged and esteemed genre.

It was no coincidence that interview narratives relating to marriage ceremonies frequently gravitated towards the dominant discourses on gender, sexuality, race, and citizenship. The participants of this study told me their stories of displacement and exile based on their experiences that consumed them, and their desire to bring public attention to aspects of their lives with which they were extremely dissatisfied.

**Critiquing and rewriting culture**

This section explores how performances provide a critical spotlight over oppressive configurations of South Asian patriarchy and heteronormativity. Here, the focus is on the performative techniques through which the actors transformed the Hindu marriage ritual. ‘Historically, Hindu wedding ceremonies have never been uniform’ (Vanita, 2005: 30), and yet the *pheras* (sacred circles made around the wedding fire) are a constant feature of Hindu wedding rites. Every Hindu wedding has at least four *pheras*, but their performance differs between the various Indian cultures. Gujaratis and Sindhis, for instance, take four *pheras* around the fire, of which the groom leads the first three rounds. *Arya Samaj* weddings typically consist of
seven rounds, where the groom leads the first four *pheras* and the bride walks before him in the last three.

Not surprisingly, then, the *pheras* were also central to the weddings in this investigation. Not only did the participants’ understanding of the conventional observance of the ritual vary, but also each performed a distinct form of the custom at their ceremony. Deepti, who perceived the ritual to be a representation of the patriarchal power structure, described what she believed to be the standard form of the *pheras*.

A lot of it is basically the wife telling the husband, ‘You can have my family’s cows . . . I will help you within the home.’ Things like that. In a [heteronormative] Hindu wedding, the husband leads the first six, and for the last one the bride walks around the groom. So we talked about the . . . dimensions of domestic life but we expanded it slightly . . . Plus we wanted it to be a union between equals so we flip flopped.

Deepti interpreted the *pheras* as a ritual that reflects unequal power relationships, where the husband rules the household and the wife is expected to submit to him. Deepti and Emily’s adaptation of the sacred circles was a refined enactment of the ritual’s dominant performance. The couple highlighted the imperfections of mainstream cross-sex marriages while emphasizing the equality of their own partnership in taking turns to circle the fire.

The ritualistic, symbolic, and performative dimensions of same-sex South Asian American weddings establish new meanings for an ancient cultural practice. The wedding rituals in this study can be considered as forms of ‘play’ – rehearsed performances that stood above quotidian life – on two separate accounts: first, the Hindu wedding custom is a sacred ritual of a vital South Asian institution, and second, its heteronormative logic was inverted by those enacting the rituals. Not only did the couple not have a priest officiate their wedding, but Deepti and Emily’s enactment of the *pheras* was also a stark divergence from their perception of the typical performance of the sacred circles, where the ‘husband leads the first six, and for the last one the bride walks around the groom.’ The couple chose to ‘flip-flop’, taking turns to circumnavigate the fire in order to underscore the equality of their relationship. This instance of inversion was a way of resisting and subverting conventional practices, and by implication undermining domestic male authority. The actors released themselves from patriarchal oppression through their performance of a refined version of the *pheras*, one that works on and against the dominant power structure.

Similarly, Reema and Sarah’s performance of the *pheras* underscored their equality in marriage. The couple circled the sacred fire three times, with Reema leading the first, Sarah the second, and the two circling side by side in the final round. In these performances, the agency of the participants lies not merely in their reconfiguration of the *pheras* but also in what they chose to transform about the ritual, what this revision meant to them, and how the significance of their appropriation differs from that of different Indian communities (described earlier in this
section) whose revisions are typically not reactions to the dominant patriarchal constructions of the *pheras*. Moreover, the agentive improvisation of the ritual must be considered within the overall context of the ceremonies, where the full impact of the ritual is felt in the presence of the same-sex couple (as opposed to a man and a woman) circumnavigating the wedding fire.

In contrast to the lesbian ceremonies where the participants switched positions upon the completion of each sacred circle, Manoj and Kunal’s performance of the ritual was more in keeping with its conventional practice. The couple did not swap places until they were halfway through the ritual. Their performance must be analyzed in light of their interpretation of the *pheras*. Manoj explained that partners typically ‘exchange places later [in the ritual] and that symbolizes equality’. In other words, Manoj and Kunal did not engage in a performative critique of the *pheras* because they did not perceive the ritual as a marker of heteronormative oppression.

These weddings also involved a complex process of reappropriating symbols. In discussing the aesthetic aspects of her wedding, Jaya mentioned having lotus candles as centerpieces, and the imprint of the lotus flower as a design element on her wedding invitations. In Hindu mythology, the lotus, embodied by the goddess Lakshmi, forms a repertoire of signification that conjures up images of creation, compassion, enlightenment, purity, resurrection, and the embodiment of spiritual perfection. I wondered if the lotus had special significance for the couple and questioned Jaya about it: ‘For me ... in the context of our marriage ... [the lotus means] two women, celebrating female spirit and power, [and] celebrating the vagina.’ Jaya read the symbol as a commemoration of womanhood and of her union with Aparna.

However, the use of the lotus in this ceremony was not a simple case of integrating a culturally grounded symbol. In fact, the couple’s adaptation of the lotus mimics Bauman and Briggs’s aforementioned process of en-contextualization, de-contextualization, and re-contextualization. In the first phase, a culture-specific symbol is contextualized. Using a familiar symbol, such as the lotus, is effective because it is easily identifiable to a large number of people. The subsequent step, termed de-contextualization, involves stripping off the object from its conventional meanings; here the symbol may be separated from its traditional context, which, in this case, is redolent of images of Hindu deities and their attributes. Jaya and Arpana separated the lotus from its various cultural registers, in particular, the idea of creation through female reproductive power. In the last phase, they reappropriated the symbol into the context of their wedding, where it was interpreted as the relationship between two women and the celebration of the female spirit and power. Ironically, Jaya’s objectification of the vagina is an interesting twist on the lotus’s traditional symbolism of purity, especially since the union of two women renders the female sexual and reproductive organ, although itself viewed as unclean, free of seminal impurity. Hence, the couple drew upon a culturally recognized symbol, one that evoked a sense of Indian history, tradition, and culture, and then reformulated it in relation to their activist and cultural beliefs.
These complex processes of critiquing and rewriting culture exhibit the agency of social actors and their conflicts with certain mainstream cultural ideals. It also illustrates how oppositional behavior can work within dominant social constructs as a way for the disenfranchised to salvage power through their insertion into and reformulation of the existing social hierarchy.

**Performing history and identity**

Same-sex wedding ceremonies are empowering because they allow the actors to publicly represent their multifarious identities and to position themselves as the bearers of knowledge. Through a set of physical gestures and verbal expressions that labored against the limitations of normative marriage, the couples narrated histories of ‘self’, marriage, race, and sexuality.

The ritual of ‘Jumping the Broom’ allowed Deepti and Emily to spread awareness, depict a time of slavery in the USA, and represent their experiences of growing up in the American South. At their wedding, one of their friends described the ritual’s significance to the assembled guests.

In the days of slavery, African-Americans were not allowed the legal right to marry. However, marriages did take place, witnessed and blessed by families and friends, if not by the government. Jumping the broom is a custom from that time. It symbolized that the couple was entering into a new life together. Today, we jump the broom with the hope that someday our relationship will be acknowledged by society just as you have acknowledged it by being here today.

Following this speech, the couple completed the custom by holding hands and leaping over an Indian broom. Commenting on the ritual in her interview, Deepti, who grew up feeling lost and isolated in Austin, Texas in the 1970s, emphasized the significance of portraying her background in her wedding ceremony.

Even though our wedding was very South Asian heavy, it really combined the different cultures from where we grew up. I grew up in Texas and Emily in Arkansas and so growing up in the South was something that was very much a part of our lives and we wanted to bring that in to the wedding.

The ritual served the dual purpose of enabling the couple to make a statement about unjust practices and represent their fractured past. Deepti’s memories of life in the South were replete with an overbearing sense of loneliness, which she attributed to her being the only child in her nuclear family, the only Indian American in her school, and the only lesbian she knew.

Deepti’s performance and commentary on broom-jumping demonstrates the multiple functions that the ritual served. First, it politicized the wedding performance by paralleling the plight of African-Americans with the current LGBTIQ struggles for equal citizenship rights. Drawing upon a historical account of
injustice, Deepti and Emily contextualized the absurdity of legal strictures that prevent same-sex unions from being lawfully endorsed in the present. Second, the ritual allowed the couple to find empowerment by drawing the support of family and friends in the endeavor to be recognized as a same-sex couple by society and the nation-state. Third, the act had an instructive quality that placed the ritual’s participants in a position of authority from where they were able to inform, uninterrupted, the less aware amongst their guests in audience. The ritual became, as Keith Basso suggests, a privileged mode of communication; the participants situated themselves under limelight and gave their spectators a valuable lesson in history that was agreeable with contemporary sensibilities of racial equality. Fourth, performing the ritual of ‘Jumping the Broom’ enabled them to emancipate themselves from the legal restriction against marriage. They took control of what they believed was their fundamental right, notwithstanding the legislative disregard for their marriage. Fifth, they reflected upon their silenced past by representing their Southern backgrounds through the ritual. For Deepti, jumping the broom was a momentous point in an ongoing journey that began in Texas, where her childhood was marked by repressed emotions and numerous dislocations from home, community, and nation. This liminal performance of selfhood served not only as a therapeutic and celebratory approach to recalling a past strewn with conflict but also as a way of asserting oneself in the present, and envisioning a brighter future.

The embodied performances – combinations of linguistic enunciations and physical gestures – that make up same-sex South Asian American weddings play ‘a central role in conserving memory and consolidating identities’, 5 (Taylor, 2003: xviii). Here, oppressed sexualities, fractured subjectivities, and dislocated experiences, hidden from the sight and possibly even the imagination of loved ones, take center-stage. Working within and against hegemonic norms, these weddings serve as safe spaces for reflection and initiative where silences are broken and invisible desires are articulated.

**The politics of belonging and reverse discourses**

As renditions of a prominent Hindu ritual, same-sex South Asian American weddings may critique contemporary religious practices by claiming ownership of an ancient form of Hinduism, and consequently produce reverse discourses. Jasbir K. Puar offers similar insight in her discussion of queer diasporic texts that engage in ‘recovery work’: ‘The emotional and political imperative to claim India seems linked to a desire to explode the myth of homosexuality as a Western construct’ (1998: 411). The act of recovering suggests a return to a former state, and in aligning oneself with an authentic past lies the potential of re-territorializing the multiply displaced.

Manoj, for instance, recalled the past by making a distinction between unadulterated religious beliefs and conventional practices. His *Arya Samaj* (a Hindu religious movement) ceremony, which he described as being ‘as close to the essence as
possible’, with its focus on *Vedic* ideology rather than grand rituals, implied a return to the true ideals of Hinduism. Negating popular discourses that portray queer South Asian Americans as perverse, Manoj procured power by exalting his status from deviant to spiritual. Through the enactment of *Arya Samaj* marriage rites, he represented himself as the seeker and practitioner of truth, spiritually superior to those who have forgotten the essential facets of Hinduism. In this sense, Manoj represents the new diaspora, one that holds firmly to ‘authentic’ dimensions of culture for both personal and political reasons.

Manoj dealt with unjust institutions by treating them as false interpretations of Hindu philosophy while providing alternative explanations for oppressive beliefs.

If you look at incarnation, which is central to Hinduism, it... doesn’t say men are always incarnated or that women are always incarnated... But... it is acknowledged that the soul [becomes] enlightened... It’s the soul that lives eternally. So marriage in Hinduism is not so much about a man and a woman, as much as it is about two souls coming together. It’s a union of souls.

Refusing to conceive of marriage exclusively as a union between a man and woman, Manoj gave a philosophical reading of the concept of incarnation, in which he superimposed the significance of souls over gendered bodies. This type of discourse asserts that a pure form of Hindu ideology has been lost to a narrow understanding of marriage as a heteronormative arrangement.

Ironically, this rhetoric of purity mimics fundamentalist Indian nationalist discourses where homosexuality is perceived as a threat to the sovereignty of ‘Indian culture’. While dominant South Asian groups aim to ostracize non-heteronormative subjects based on the belief that they are contaminated with western culture, diasporic queers reverse the logic of purity to attack the legitimacy of mainstream Hinduism and Indian nationalism. Consequently, opposing parties engage in authenticating their distinct accounts of history, religion, and tradition in attempts to shape and assert cultural belonging. These oppositional discourses illustrate how proponents of dominant and minority groups negotiate power by inserting themselves into cultural memory and possessing it by force.

In most of the weddings, aesthetics played a crucial role in aiding the performers to express cultural belonging. Deepti and Emily had their bridal outfits custom made from India. Manoj and Kunal demonstrated their allegiance to India by adorning silk *dhotis* (a rectangular piece of unstitched cloth wrapped around the waist and legs).

*Dhotis* are about as Indian as you can get. If you look at contemporary India and you see all these *churidars* (tightly fitting trousers) and what not... these forms of dress are recent imports to India. If you go back a couple thousand years, there were no *churidars* and... *shalwar kameez* (loose trousers and a long shirt). The Indian dress then was a piece of cloth – no stitches. So we wore dhotis because that was sort of like getting in touch with our roots... There’s nothing more quintessentially Hindu or Indian as *dhotis*. 
Manoj made an argument about his cultural authenticity by sporting the oldest form of Indian dress. He engaged in identity work by simultaneously asserting his gayness and his Indianness, often perceived in mainstream South Asian society as irreconcilable traits. At the time of his wedding, same-sex sexual relations were illegal in India. His ceremony offered him the opportunity to traverse time and lay claim to an imagined era that predated colonial India where no penal codes existed against homosexuality.

Queering the past is yet another technique of establishing cultural belonging. The following linguistic component of Jaya and Arpana’s wedding demonstrates how the spirits of ancestors were invoked as a way of aligning homosexuality with ‘tradition’.

We’re inviting the elements of the universe to bring us to . . . this event . . . We call upon possibilities and the probabilities of earth . . . We acknowledge the . . . contributions of those who have come before us to pave the way. This ceremony is a tribute to those who have risked and provided truth to the existence and longevity of same-sex love.

This prayer pays homage to those ancestors who would be described as queer in contemporary terminology. Jaya and Arpana asserted their sexuality and South Asianness by acknowledging the presence of queer elders, and making it possible to imagine a past where same-sex love existed.

Engaging in politically charged performances is about gaining ownership of culture, one’s body, and life choices. This fetish for control signals the fear that many queer South Asian Americans have of sociopolitical forces that police their sexuality, attempt to curb their freedom, and banish them from their traditions. Akin to feminist rituals, such as, ‘Take Back the Night’, that aim to cease control from the perpetrators of brutality (Jacobs, 1990: 39), queer diasporic South Asians ‘take back’ the much-desired elements of tradition that are withheld from them by culture’s gatekeepers. This retrieval of tradition is often facilitated by extensive knowledge of South Asian and American histories. Just as Foucauldian analysis indicates that ‘dividing practices’ depend upon institutionalized knowledge to categorize, ostracize, and disempower people and places (Knauf, 1994: 405), so too do queer diasporic South Asians rely upon historical knowledge to excavate their subjectivity from culture and tradition in order to affiliate themselves with their roots. Hence, knowledge operates, in this context, as a device that is indispensable in the production of reverse discourse and in the acquisition and maintenance of power.

The points of rupture

In addition to the ritualized performances, a deliberate engagement with dominant ideology also surfaced in numerous familial interactions surrounding the weddings. There are a myriad reasons why most South Asian parents are opposed to homosexuality and same-sex marriage, but quite often the notion of ‘respect’ (izzat)
creates rifts within the home space. Deeply embedded within South Asian cultures in various localized forms, the concept of *izzat* is relevant to several domains including gender, sexuality, and kinship (Reddy, 2005: 41–43). Parents may either turn homophobic or try to conceal a child’s queerness from the public eye due to the fear of derision and ostracism (i.e. loss of *izzat*). Moreover, keeping up with appearances and assimilating into the status quo are especially important to the maintenance of ‘traditional’ norms and values in the diaspora. Representing modernity and ‘westernization’, same-sex weddings signal a flight from treasured values of the home nation. All the individuals in this investigation have faced varying degrees of familial discrimination throughout their lives. Their experiences around the time of their weddings demonstrate not only the power struggles that kept them occupied, but also the various techniques that helped them either dodge or confront unjust treatments.

The negotiations encasing the wedding planning process, in particular, expose the rupture points of family ties. Dominant regimes are replicated in the private domain where parental control emerges as a strand of macro-forces of oppression. Hence, minimizing parental interference during the planning phase was a common objective of most informants. Deepti and Emily were determined to have complete freedom in making decisions pertaining to their ceremony. ‘We planned it far more than any of our parents’, she explained, ‘and we wanted things to be on our terms ... [we] wanted to call the shots ... so we paid for all of it on our own.’ In contrast to the prevalent South Asian custom of family-funded wedding parties (Leonard, 1997: 164), Deepti did not want her parents to finance the ceremony as she felt they would prevent her from crafting the wedding in a manner she deemed fit. Deepti skirted confrontations with discriminatory behavior by taking charge of her ceremony.

One of Deepti’s many negotiations with her parents was over her wedding guest list. She described how she defied her mother’s wishes by inviting South Asian family friends to her wedding.

[M]y mother did not want me to invite all those people. She didn’t think they would be okay with it ... There’s a lot more secrecy about things with her ... she’s a lot more conventional. But Emily was like ... ‘[I]t will be good for you to be able to hold your head up high and have these people witness you.’ So I invited them and they all came!

Deepti confronted her mother’s homophobia by asserting her sexuality over communal concerns and taking the opportunity to be ‘witnessed’ as a lesbian marrying a woman in a Hindu ceremony. Had she allowed her parents to finance her ceremony, Deepti would have had less control over the guest list and other important aspects of her wedding.

Another strategy of dodging familial oppression was to exclude family members altogether from one’s wedding. While the decision of not inviting parents might be perceived as a replication of the exclusionary practices of dominant heteronormative institutions, it is, to the contrary, a way of avoiding further oppression from
them. Reema’s decision of not inviting her parents reveals her alienation from immediate kin, and how her separation from them fostered intimate friendships that forge familial ties. The following dialogue illustrates how close friends filled the void created in the absence of parents.

I didn’t [invite my parents]. I didn’t want people whose feelings I would have to deal with. This is why I invited Judy and Ken ... My brother’s mother-in-law and father-in-law . . . have been my substitute parents. They’ve given me and Sarah the type of things parents give you. You move into your new house and they buy you a dining room . . . You know, they’ve done that. They’ve been my parents in ways my parents have been absolutely incapable of being.

Judy played the part of Reema’s mother at the couple’s wedding where she participated in swayamvara (the ritual of garlanding). Reema did not invite her parents because she knew they would disapprove of the wedding and ruin her special day. Her chosen family is more ‘real’ to her than her given kinship bonds; they have provided nurturance, continually extended their love, and supported her lifestyle choices. Notably, the structure of Reema’s adopted family mimics dominant kinship systems. Despite the numerous dislocations that she has suffered within the familial sphere, Reema continues to adhere to the family concept, albeit, with innovations of her own.

Here, Reema’s re-creation of the notion of family seems to be consistent with the plethora of scholarly literature published in the last decade or so that either documents or advocates the lesbian inventions of kinship (e.g., Chalmers, 2002; Lewin, 1996; Sherman, 1992; Weston, 1991). If such self-fashioned families are perceived as exclusive lesbian spaces for belonging, it may be argued that they represent either the failure to assimilate into one’s nuclear family or the undesirability of such integration among lesbians. However, the following section demonstrates that even though Reema found substitute parents, she continued to haggle with her biological parents to include herself and Sarah into her family network.

Alternatively, not every couple used the avoidance route. In fact, there were those like Manoj who wanted their families to be present and involved in their wedding. This was especially important since South Asian parents, in viewing same-sex marriage as modern and inauthentic, fail to take queer unions seriously. Given his parent’s attitude towards his relationship with Kunal, Manoj found it beneficial to have an Arya Samaj wedding; being as close to the essence of Hinduism as possible, he believed that such a ceremony would help validate his union in his parents’ eyes, and serve as Kunal’s formal admission into his extended family.

The negotiations between same-sex South Asian American couples and their families demonstrate how the exclusionary practices of dominant regimes are contested, often in protean and contradictory ways, within the home space. On the one hand, some couples desired minimal parental involvement in their weddings in fear of unfair treatment from them. Where blood relations turned oppressive, much like
the entities that banish queer South Asians from nation and tradition, alternative families and communities were created and sustained. However, their strategy to keep parents at bay did not negate their overarching fetish for transforming and assimilating into society and their family networks; it was merely a way for them to create momentary distance from them in order to have a joyful wedding celebration. On the other hand, there were those who yearned for greater familial involvement in their ceremonies and in their lives, instead of being driven to the margins of their familial circles and being denied full access to cultural resources. Nonetheless, all five couples, irrespective of their inclination for or against parental participation in their weddings, refused to be forced into exile from family and tradition, and negotiated their inclusion through various strategies of resistance, avoidance, and reappropriation.

Post-wedding high social drama

The incidents that transpired in the aftermath of some of the ceremonies elucidate the continuing disputes between same-sex couples and their parents. These clashes indicate that same-sex South Asian American weddings do not necessarily terminate oppression. In fact, they may have little impact, or may even reproduce or exacerbate injustices. After his wedding, Manoj’s family continued to treat him and his partner unfairly.

I’ll tell you about a little episode that happened a day after the ceremony. It was my eldest brother’s twenty-fifth [wedding] anniversary, and to celebrate that they had a banner made on which they had the entire family’s names except for Kunal. . . I was really mad about that and everyone could see it. I was ready to walk out that day! That banner went to my Dad’s home in Chapra. . . A year later I go to Chapra and I see that banner and all those feelings come back to me. I was really upset and I’m like, ‘Why didn’t you fix the banner?’ Then I realized, this is not my house. So my growing up happened right then. I could fret about it, I could cut off my relationship with them, or I could find a way to let it go. When I was younger I would fight tooth and nail about these things, but now I’m at a point in my life where I’ve . . . realized that you can do your best and things may or may not go your way . . . [but] if you let these things get to you then you will lead the rest of your life bitter.

After contending with them for more than a decade and achieving a considerable amount of success, such as, having his mother officiate his marriage, Manoj finally resigned from his efforts to get his parents to fully accept his relationship with Kunal in preference for sustaining a relationship with them in their old age. Manoj’s narrative not only highlights the importance of familial relationships, but also the obstacles that queer subjects may face in efforts to include themselves and their partners into their family circles. The negotiations that occur with parents are crucial because it is just as difficult to break kinship ties as it is to deny one’s sexuality.
The following conversation with Reema and Sarah captures the complexity of social drama involved in some post-wedding familial negotiations.

Faris: Did you tell your parents about your wedding?
Reema: I told them after we got married.
F: How did they react?
R: Oh! They disowned me. They wrote me a letter and literally disowned me. They had given me a piece of property, a flat, and they took it back. They were afraid I would come out to everyone in their club. They tried to get the rest of my family to have nothing to do with me. No communication. Nothing!
Sarah: And this is consistent with their history. Years ago, [they] were calling a gay friend of ours and trying to get him to marry her ... And then this friend calls me and says will you get Reema’s mother off my back. She’s calling me at three in the morning trying to get me to marry your wife. (laughs)
F: No way!
R: And I asked my mom, ‘What on earth do you think you’re doing?’ And she’s like, ‘You’ll have a perfect life together. You’ll share the same house but the two of you can do whatever. He can have boys and you can have girls.’ (laughs)
F: Wow! So no communication after you told them about the wedding, huh?
R: Okay, so I had written to my parents and my mausi (aunt) about the wedding ... and they all had a fit together. Collective epic fit!
S: And then the daughter-in-law who was there on the scene would call and tell us what form the fit was taking, and how may times they watched Baghban.
F: The Bollywood movie?
R: Yeah! My mother woke up every morning, weeping, beating her head against the wall. You know, typical Punjabi mother style, and watching Baghban end-lessly – three times a day for three months. And my father would cry. He loves to cry.
F: Then?
R: So it actually took some time to calm them down. We went to Bombay, we negotiated, and were given the flat, which took a little work. And by the end of it my mother was calling Sarah her jamai (son-in-law) with my mausi.

Reema’s mother strove to find loopholes in the dominant structure through which her daughter could assimilate into the normative way of life and where her queerness could go undetected. Reema, however, asserted her sexual orientation by having a public wedding and then negotiated her inclusion as a queer individual into her family network. Consequently, she fell back into her parent’s good graces and they eventually came to accept Sarah in a manner they deemed culturally appropriate, that is, by recognizing her as their son-in-law.

Despite the noticeable differences in their interactions with their kin, Reema and Manoj’s personal experiences have one prominent similarity – the desire for inclusion. The two also demonstrate contrasting post-wedding negotiation strategies. South Asian American queers find a variety of ways of coping with familial
pressures that often entail long-drawn negotiations with parents. These clashes may vary in form and might even have divergent consequences, but they almost always involve a desire for acceptance and inclusion into one’s family circle.

**Conclusion**

The performativity in same-sex South Asian American weddings and the familial interactions surrounding them provide a unique lens through which to observe the diversity in queer transnational experience. Wedding performances encapsulate discursive strategies of queer politics – articulating identities, voicing opinions, critiquing unjust norms, claiming cultural belonging, producing reverse discourses, disseminating knowledge, and re-contextualizing culturally grounded heteronormative values – that highlight not only the desire for insertion into the existing system of power, but also for the reconstruction of its unfair logic.

This pattern in emergent cultural practices, where queer agency involves mimicking and refashioning hegemonic ideals, has implications for the efficacy, seductiveness, and functionality that existing power structures hold for many queer practitioners. Reinventing ideology would exclude queer subjects from the cultural resources of the communities into which they have been socialized. However, resisting oppression not only facilitates political discourse, but it is also a necessary step in initiating the process of reallocating power.

While attention to gender is important for a study involving both women and men, a sustained comparison is not possible here given that only one of the five weddings involved a gay couple. With these limitations in mind, the most prominent difference that occurs in these ceremonies along the axis of gender is the absence of a critique of gender disparity in the gay couple’s wedding. While the men focused primarily on the themes of national, cultural and familial belonging, the lesbian couple not only engaged in performative insertions into various socio-political spheres from which queers are excluded, but they also addressed issues of patriarchal and familial oppression and inequality between partners in heterosexual marriages.

Queer politics benefit from the small scale and scope of micro-cultural phenomena like same-sex weddings in ways that would be less possible through macro-political techniques. While mass-mediated and institutionalized interactions are necessary and effective in their own right, their impacts differ from those produced through intimate social exchange. Events like same-sex weddings present the opportunity for meaningful and enduring negotiations to occur within the domestic sphere, and have the potential to foster mutual understanding and compromise between oppositional forces.

However, the politics of insertion and power emergent in queer South Asian marriage ceremonies do not culminate in the cessation of hostility. Operating on a small scale, the weddings are not able to impact at once upon the multiple trajectories of domination that concomitantly exert their influence on queer South Asians. Moreover, as Foucault suggests, power relationships are perpetual.
(Heiskala, 2001: 244) – not absolute; power has to be acquired and constantly maintained.

While one of the prime objectives of most wedding performances and familial negotiations is to push the parochial limits of the existing societal order to the point of inclusion of queer sexualities and lifestyles, this goal is far from achieved since queer weddings are themselves parochial in scope. Such performances of sexuality are meant to enhance exposure to non-heteronormativity and to explode dominant myths about it. However, same-sex weddings are unable to represent the diversity of queer cultures because they are largely vested in homonormativity (Duggan, 2002), that is, a politics of normalcy, assimilation, domesticity, and what Jane Ward refers to as being ‘respectably queer’ (2008). Neither are same-sex marriages completely free from the nuptial challenges of cross-sex marriages, nor are they representative of the alternatives to marriage (e.g. open relationships) in which many queer people are engaged.

While this lifestyle choice may not be desirable to all LGBTIQ South Asians, the weddings are amongst the strides that marginalized queers have taken and will have to continue to take in order to create space for themselves in the prevailing social fabric while reweaving its existing form. However, reappropriation, performative critique, and the politics of insertion may not be the only strategies of redistributing power and expanding the received structures of knowledge. Only further ethnographic investigations can paint a holistic picture by documenting cultural patterns and assessing the efficacy of alternative queer practices and identity politics that go beyond promoting ‘respectable’ diversity.

Notes
1. I have used the term ‘queer’ to refer to all non-heteronormative styles of being.
2. This article is not a comprehensive representation of queer South Asian American identities and practices. There may be marked divergences between the activities of the same-sex couples in this study and other visible and assertive diasporic LGBTIQ South Asians. Moreover, this investigation does not account for the class-segregated inhabitants of South Asian diasporic locales, such as those referred to in Manalansan’s Global Divas (2003: 80), who may not identify as queer, yet engage in same-sex sexual behavior.
3. Christopher Carrington’s discovery of unequal labor divisions in the domestic lives of many North American lesbigay couples (1999: 20–21) should caution against the egalitarian implications evident in same-sex marriage rituals. While wedding performances are valuable indicators of queer identity and pleasure, they may not always match everyday practices.
4. I was curious to know if Deepti and Emily were inspired by Lewin’s, Recognizing Ourselves (1998), which describes other same-sex weddings involving this ritual. However, neither of them was familiar with Lewin’s work.
5. Far from being static configurations, constructions of selfhood are time and circumstance specific (Werbner, 2002: 18). The identities that emerge in same-sex wedding performances are products of the ongoing social and political conditions of diasporic LGBTIQ South Asians.
References


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