

*Worlding Postcolonial Sexualities: Publics, Counterpublics, Human Rights*

Kanika Batra

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In *Worlding Postcolonial Sexualities: Publics, Counterpublics, Human Rights*, Kanika Batra analyzes feminist and LGBTQ+ print publications from the pre-digitalization period of the 1970s to the 1990s. She reads them as activist literature, with the aim of offering a “feminist-queer history” (1). Specifically, she reads South-South connections of “common grounds of feminist-queer solidarities toward decolonial futures” in the Indian, Jamaican, and South African contexts (2). The comparative aspect is crucial to her method and argument as Batra’s main claim is that these publications “inscribed postcolonial genders and sexualities with cautious publicness that led to LGBTQ+ emergence from closeted enclaves to global arenas” (1). As such, Batra traces a journey from local awareness-raising and information sharing to inscription in public spheres to global solidarities.

The publications that Batra examines are mainly in English from urban metropolitan and multilingual locations, and include such varied materials as journalism, meeting records, manifestoes, case histories, action documents, short stories, poetry, and drama. What brings them together is that they “translate middle-class and subaltern experiences into feminist and queer analyses for a local and national readership across varying levels of literacy” (5). Methodologically, Batra anchors her textual analysis in contextual historical, political and legal frameworks. Between 2008 and 2020, she engaged in “sustained interaction with collectives and organizations” (5) in Jamaica, India, and South Africa in the form of semi-structured interviews, unrecorded conversations, attendance at meetings, workshops, and training sessions, and observation and participation in performances. This work greatly enriches the textual analyses at the centre of the project.

Theoretically, “worlding” and “counterpublics” are the project’s key concepts that help Batra understand and frame what the organizations and publications that she reads strive to achieve. “Worlding” for Batra means to create a sense that issues of sexuality and gender are present and matter in the public sphere, often through alliances of local and international networks. The concept of

“counterpublics” also serves Batra’s analysis well. Drawing on Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Seyla Benhabib, Batra sees the world-making potential of counterpublics which define themselves “in tension with a larger public” and which, with the help of, for example, rights discourses, develop space for, as Benhabib argues, “new actors” “to enter the public sphere” (qtd. in Batra 14).

The book is divided into three parts, in turn dealing with case studies from Jamaica, India, and South Africa. Each part is further divided into two chapters, one of which covers the feminist materials and the other the LGBTQ+ materials. In Part One, Batra shows how the material under investigation challenges ideas of Jamaica as a solely problematic space for LGBTQ+ and feminist lives. Analyzing the work of the organization the Gay Freedom Movement (GFM) and its newsletter, *Jamaica Gaily News (JGN)*, shows how one of the earliest postcolonial gay movements tried to create space for queer people in Kingston in the 1970s and 1980s despite working in difficult circumstances. Through a focus on cultural, educational, and health issues, the GFM and *JGN* attempted to create a sense of community and raise awareness, while structural state reform remained out of reach. Around the same time, the working-class women’s group Sistren Theatre Collective organized activities and circulated its newsletter. As an avowedly political movement, it operated quite differently from GFM, staging theater, conducting research, engaging in community outreach, and cooperating with a number of other women’s rights organizations. However, it struggled with connecting “sexual and reproductive autonomy as pressing concerns” (58).

Part Two turns to India, where Batra first analyzes women’s rights counterpublics through the Indian Women’s Movement (IWM) and the journal *Manushi*, printed in the 1980s and 1990s in Delhi. Here, Batra coins the concept of “locational counterpublics” to express how despite its outward reach, *Manushi* and similar publications centered “locally directed interventions” (88). *Manushi* particularly focused on gendered sexual harassment and violence within a human rights framework. Like Sistren, *Manushi* consciously did not cover LGBTQ+ sexualities from an editorial standpoint. On the other hand, 1990s *Bombay Dost (BD)*, and its associated NGO Humsafar Trust, was primarily a gay male magazine. *BD* created “intimate readership with an incipient LGBTQ+ community” (125), by providing cultural content on cinema and Bollywood celebrities, bar culture, and gossip, and also, together with the NGO, carried out HIV/AIDS health and awareness work. Although located in Mumbai, Batra shows *BD*’s wide network nationally and internationally.

Finally, Part Three focuses on feminist and LGBTQ+ publications against the backdrop of South Africa’s constitutional gains in respect to gender and sexual rights in the late 1990s. The Gay Association of

South Africa (GASA) and its newsletter *Link/Skakel* (later the magazine *Exit*) were in the 1980s driven by a consumerist ethos and legal activist model inspired by those from the global North and mainly directed at white gay men in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, excluding people who did not fit the mould. Their apolitical position was challenged by organisations operating with what Batra calls a “queer Afropolitanism” which worked to “connect races, genders, and classes within and beyond the nation” (145). Connecting issues of race and class was similarly the aim of feminist magazines *Speak* and *Agenda*. Here Batra notes that, contrary to the other case studies, these feminist magazines were not in tension with the LGBTQ+ movements. They focused on gender aspects of civic issues, but also incorporated sexual health, HIV/AIDS awareness, sexual autonomy, and analysis of sexuality, gender and power.

With its South-South comparisons, *Worlding Postcolonial Sexualities* is an important entry in the ongoing project of decolonizing knowledge. The book challenges preconceived notions of feminist and LGBTQ+ activism as somehow originating in or spreading from the global North, and highlights how activism can be simultaneously local and engaged in wide-ranging networks. As such, this book also contributes to the fields of world literature and periodical studies, which illustrates how much queer and feminist publications have to offer in terms of analyses of world-making. The highlight of this book is naturally the extensive archival and fieldwork conducted, and it is a valuable resource on the periodicals covered. The author commendably offers a nuanced picture that responds to the material at hand, and thus does not shy away from troublesome opinions or deliver a too-rosy pronouncement on the organizations and publications analyzed. For example, in her analysis of both GFM/JGN and Sistren, Batra shows great sensitivity towards the compromises, failings, and exclusions that such organizations had to operate with in a climate hostile to certain gender expressions and sexualities. She notes how “[c]ollectives such as Sistren, even with their ambivalence and inability to address LGBTQ+ rights, helped develop a vocabulary of rights and routes to sexual health, sexual choice, and reproductive autonomy in collaboration with other civil society groups. These can be the basis of feminist-queer solidarities” (77). Batra’s monograph shows precisely how fruitful it can be to unite analyses of feminist and LGBTQ+ work, which are often in positive and negative tension with each other.

An issue not central to the book, but relevant for each case study and deserving of further attention in the future, is that of language. Although English dominates the publications, there are attempts at bilingual editions and the use of local varieties of English to embed the texts in specific cultural environments and address certain readerships. The magazines’ interactions with their readership are also touched on

in the analyses, perhaps most intriguingly in the way *Manushi*'s readership brought up lesbianism when the magazine would not. Further study of these interactions in relation to worlding and the creation of counterpublics would be interesting, if perhaps methodologically complex. Finally, as Batra herself acknowledges, gay male issues tend to dominate in the LGBTQ+ publications, as do heterosexual perspectives in the feminist publications; further work with publications that specifically attempt to involve trans people, bisexuals, lesbians, and other marginalized populations within the feminist and LGBTQ+ communities would be very valuable. In discussing the Indian context, Batra brings up small and/or transnational lesbian and more intersectional publications, of which it would have been interesting to hear more. Batra's book points at the treasure trove of unexplored feminist and queer publications, scholarship on which would further nuance our understanding of postcolonial sexualities.