

Migrancy, Remixed: Bodies Beside(s) Themselves

This paper begins with the thought that to be interpellated by migrancy – or to be unhoused from the borders of the nation-state more generally – is also to be unhoused from the social spaces of the body. For, migration does not simply involve the act of a body moving from one place to another; rather, bodies, themselves, are produced, invented and reinvented in and through the act of migration. We might think of migrant bodies as remixed: simultaneously deconstructed and rebuilt, made up of bodies beside(s) and other than/to themselves. What, then, can migrancy tell us about the socially embodied spaces of race, gender, sexuality and desire? In her recent essay, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology," cultural critic Sara Ahmed asks: "What does it mean to be oriented? How is that we come to find our way in a world that acquires new shapes, depending on which way we turn? ... What does it mean for sexuality to be lived as oriented? What difference does it make what or who we are oriented toward in the very direction of our desire?" In response, Ahmed suggests that "[i]f orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence, of how we inhabit spaces, and who or what we inhabit spaces with" (543). Ahmed's proposal leads me to a number of associated queries. If sexuality is, indeed, about the spaces and places we might reside in or inhabit, then how does migrancy (re)figure desire? Is there something already queer about the migrant body? What shapes or forms might the migrant or diasporic queer body take up, inhabit and be inhabited by?

'the asymmetrical geography of my heart': Anurima Banerji's *Night Artillery*

The 'asymmetrical geographies' of *Night Artillery* (TSAR Press, 2000), a first book of poetry by the South Asian Canadian poet and performer, Anurima Banerji, may be viewed as precisely such an exploration around the contours and textures of queer diasporic desire. As a queer writer of colour, Banerji works to push and recreate language beyond the confines of colonial, patriarchal, heterosexist and nationalist traditions, and she does so in order to open up possibilities for imagining a queer diasporic poetics of the erotic. *Night Artillery* sketches out both cultural and sexual geographies of queer South Asian bodies and desires as they have been reconfigured in the diaspora, and maps out a hybrid 'genre' or poetics in which these bodies might be written. The hybridized body of this text – that is, the way it resists assimilation into hegemonic definitions of what it means to be either 'queer', 'South Asian', 'Canadian', or 'diasporic', especially as these categories continue to be imagined as constituting coherent and mutually exclusive subject positionings – could account for why Banerji's poetry remains neglected within contemporary literary criticism. My reading of *Night Artillery* hopes to examine, then, some of the ways in which Banerji's work helps us to (re)imagine written and embodied forms that queer diasporic desire might specifically assume.

I argue that *Night Artillery*'s creative and intellectual trajectories address queer diasporic subjectivities and attendant structures of queer racialised desire, the details of which have only recently begun to be recognised within contemporary literary and academic discourse. Despite the fact that throughout colonial history, the regulation of sexuality has played a crucial role in maintaining racist and nationalist ideologies (just as the regulation of racial bodies has often upheld dominant sexual and gender regimes)¹, scholarship that engages the complexities of how institutions such as colonialism, nationalism

and heterosexism interlock in intricate and socially-specific ways is still rare. More recently, however, a growing body of interdisciplinary research by and/or centering on queers of colour insists on the value of “a renewed queer studies ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference” (Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz 1). To this extent, the work of critics such as José Esteban Muñoz, Roberto Strongman, Gayatri Gopinath, David L. Eng, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan has challenged the white gay and lesbian movement’s deployment of developmental discourses that centre around Euro-American norms and standards, while also questioning assumptions about the postcolonial nation’s necessary heterosexism. In the context of such scholarship, work on ‘queer diasporas’ is one site where such intersectional investigations can take place.²

Banerji’s *Night Artillery* is part of this larger body of work by queers of colour in that it endeavours to investigate forms that queer diasporic subjectivity might take, expressly in terms of the South Asian diaspora, and amidst the topography of Canadian cultural production. In relation to these specificities, Banerji’s work mirrors Jasbir K. Puar’s provocative and insightful question: “How could/should one ‘queer’ the diaspora(s) or ‘diasporicize’ the queer?” (406). *Night Artillery* could also be read in light of Gayatri Gopinath’s recent book-length study, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. In this book, Gopinath argues that “if ‘diaspora’ needs ‘queerness’ in order to rescue it from its genealogical implications, ‘queerness’ also needs ‘diaspora’ in order to make it more supple in relation to questions of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization” (11). An examination of a wide range of South Asian cultural texts (including the work of well-known Canadian authors Shani Mootoo and Shyam Selvadurai), Gopinath’s book makes the assertion that queer diasporic expressive arts open up new possibilities for imagining collectivity, especially for those subjects who find themselves invisibilised or rendered ‘impossible’ within different national spaces. My reading of Banerji’s poetry hopes to further illuminate the ways in which a specifically lesbian/femme South Asian diasporic poetics may contribute to building language (and new possibilities of language) for queer diasporic desires.

'this is no karma queen // brown sugar / exotic beauty': the sexualized grammar of race

As a Canadian queer writer of colour, Banerji finds herself speaking back to multiple and interlocking axes of social power that situate her subjectivity – for example, heterosexism, patriarchy, racism and colonialism, as well as different contexts of nationalism. For this reason, Banerji positions her writing within an anti-colonial and anti-Orientalist poetics/politics, and draws attention to the gendered and sexualised grammar of colonial constructions of race and the racialised body. In her poem, “Passage to India,” she powerfully deconstructs the title of E.M. Forster’s famous novel and its typically colonial, racist constructions of Indian masculinities, femininities, and sexualities. Her poem reveals the ways in which these constructions continue to inform stereotypical ideas about the category of ‘South Asian woman’ in a Eurocentric Canadian imaginary, and, thereby, to limit the positions and possibilities available to such subjects within a present-day colonial and racist nation-state. “Passage to India” moves through a plethora of such stereotypes, negating each with wit and alacrity. Ending with the lines, “no / my vagina is not / the passage to india” (53), this poem stages a compelling talking-back to the “heteropatriarchal” (Alexander 65) relations and assumptions that underlie Western colonialism and racism, nationalistic constructions of cultural identity.

For example, "Passage to India" highlights colonial representations of South Asian women as both brides and courtesans, at once the archetypal devoted wife and the exotic lover: "this is no arranged marriage bride // no sandalwood-scented lover // exotic erotic kama sutra vulva / opening her divine legs / mysterious oriental fantasy / come to life" (52-53). According to the colonial mythos, the South Asian woman is coded through images of repression and asexuality, on the one hand, and deviant or excessive sexuality and fantasy, on the other. Speaking of the ways in which such stereotypical constructions of the South Asian woman haunt the Canadian nationalist imaginary, Himani Bannerji explains that "the genealogies of these reified cultural identities which are mobilized in Canada are entirely colonial"; they "perfectly tally" with earlier European Orientalist perceptions of Asia as essentially 'traditional' and 'patriarchal', in comparison to a 'modern' and 'progressive' West (49). These constructions are thus not only highly gendered and sexualised, but also classed and raced.³

JeeYeun Lee further elucidates how American Orientalist sexual and gender taxonomies – especially the assumptions of whiteness that organize how differences are seen and understood – impact on queers of colour and on queer Asian identities in particular. In her essay, "Why Suzie Wong Is Not a Lesbian: Asian and Asian American Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Femme/Butch/Gender Identities," Lee describes a variety of other stereotypical images of 'Asian-ness' that Asian and South Asian queers often negotiate: from the 'model minority' to the sexually passive 'lotus blossom' and the sexually aggressive 'dragon lady' (118). Emphasising that such constructions must be viewed in relation to past and present North American military and imperial interests in Asia, Lee points out that these constructions also circulate in particular ways within mainstream North American gay and lesbian communities. For example, binary understandings of 'tradition' and 'modernity' continue to be operative in North American queer publics, where this opposition serves to structure difference between white and non-white queers. Based on interviews with Asian and South Asian queers, Lee's article reveals that 'whiteness' often comes to signify both 'progressive-ness' and 'queerness' within such spaces, whereas non-white queers are often read as 'backwards' and/or 'heterosexual'. Lee's interviewees thus speak of their invisibilisation within queer spaces, as their gender and erotic identities are rendered unseen.⁴

'what genre can I write you into?': bodies and language, remixed

An engagement with Banerji's *Night Artillery* must likewise grapple with the multiple and interlocking systems of power that situate both the text and its readers' subjectivities. However, an important question that the book poses is: if dominant stereotypes and representations of race, gender, sexuality and nation are clearly inadequate to one's own understanding of self, body and desire, then what are the specific forms, languages, traditions, images, and metaphors that a queer South Asian diasporic identity and poetics might claim? Indeed, "what genre can I write you into," asks the speaker of Banerji's poem, "bending toward exile." In this paper, I argue that Banerji's queer diasporic perspective provides an important lens through which she is able to construct critically hybrid, or remixed, genealogies, and thus unique poetic vocabularies, for expressing and situating queer racialised desire.

The deployment of a diasporic framework is certainly one of the ways in which Banerji works toward fashioning her voice and aesthetics. As Gayatri Gopinath argues, practices of critical memory and historicising are often distinctive to queer diasporic subjects: "Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside of history, what is remembered through queer diasporic

desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles” (4). Similarly, Banerji’s challenge and complicate both colonial and nationalist constructions of ‘home’, ‘homeland’, or ‘nation’ that rely on exclusionary, territorial, or otherwise violent histories and practices, while simultaneously exploring the question of how South Asian cultural identities may be refigured through a queer diasporic poetics.

The poem, “bending toward exile,” for example, reveals the complex and multiple ways in which ‘home’ is imagined and understood. In this way, the poem moves through multiple connotations and metaphors of home, and sketches out the many different embodiments that ‘home’ might take within a queer diasporic imaginary. This poem figures home, on the one hand, in terms of physical architectures and concrete houses, as well as in terms of national homes and homelands. The concept of home is related to structures of domesticity and also to ideas of origin. In the poem, home is both a site of belonging and unbelonging: home is pictured as a protected racialised and cultural space, and at the same time, homes, families and nations are posited as violent institutions. The poem draws on memoried, forgotten and imagined homes. The body also becomes a home, just as home becomes the body. These shifting meanings of home relate to Lee’s idea that “diasporic queers cannot inscribe themselves onto an imagined or real homeland without radically changing its terms” (“Toward” 193). The poem, “bending toward exile,” precisely “translat[es] house into flesh from mortar / and brick” (45) and then again into the “immediate imposition of / poetry” (46). Multiple meanings of home are opened up, challenged, figured and reconfigured. Each of these meanings cross over with others in order to reflect the multiple, often uneven, relations that diasporic or migratory queer subjects have to institutions/concepts of home.

Just as the particular images of homes shift and migrate throughout “bending towards exile,” the notion of home itself is redefined. The speaker seems to find her home, her sense of familiarity and experience, in the living-out of multiform departures and exiles – or what Homi Bhabha describes as a condition of “unhomeliness” (9). Departure, or the feeling of being unhoused, is in fact one of the most powerful and persistent tropes of the entire collection, and it resonates in multiple ways throughout Banerji’s poetry. In poems such as “bending toward exile” and “Shanti Jal,” we find images of departed homes and countries, while “Air India, June 1985,” evokes and re-writes the loss of loved ones in the context of historically-situated national disavowals. In pieces such as “Summer” and “Passage to India,” tropes of departure are reformulated in order to address marginality within social systems, as well as resistance or the refusal to conform to dominant social imperatives. In “Elegy for June,” departures of memory, language and self are evoked. Still, in a substantial number of other poems, including “I Have Your Body for Proof,” “Heart Murmurs” and “The Sound of a Heart Cracking,” it is the recurrent figure of the departed or absent lover that structures yearning. While the precise images and meanings of both desire and departure change and register differently in specific moments, the various figurations of love, loss, belonging and longing also interleave, and help to define one another. For example, diasporic longings and lesbian eroticism, while by no means identical, are also not imagined as wholly incommensurate axes of desire. In the context of *Night Artillery*, these different figurations of desire frequently, though sometimes surprisingly, slip into, intersect, or interrupt one another. For the queer diasporic poet, these slippages mark, specifically, contiguous sites of language, experience and affect.

Banerji’s writing is thus important not only in its attempts to sketch out a queer diasporic poetics, but also, more specifically, in its endeavour to develop a language of the erotic that centralises a queer, South Asian diasporic identity, history, and politics. As queer South Asian desires and bodies (both

subcontinental and diasporic) are silenced and erased not only from dominant, heteropatriarchal forms of South Asian nationalisms, but also within white, mainstream North American gay and lesbian cultures, our sexualities and erotic expressions, too, are frequently rendered unrecognisable and unintelligible. For example, if sexuality and eroticism are understood as culturally- and historically-constructed, then it is possible to understand why the various discourses around gender and sexual-orientation that help to visibilise racially- and economically-privileged gay and lesbian cultures in North America may not necessarily reflect, or be transferable onto, a variety of identities that do not organise themselves strictly according to Euro-American sexual and gender binarisms. Further, the globalisation and imposition of such terminology onto these non-normative sexual identities/practices often constitute, as Roberto Strongman argues, a form of cultural imperialism that erases culturally-specific strategies of naming and resistance for racially marginalised ‘queer’, or sexually dissident, identities (176). Thus, the very languages that operate to visibilise (white) gay and lesbian desire and politics may equally function to invisibilise queer racialised subjects from these discursive arenas.

The task of (re)claiming languages of queer racialised desire, however, continues to be a vexed and complicated undertaking – one which is constantly mediated by colonial, neocolonial and nationalist global economies. In the context of queer South Asian cultures, Ruth Vanita asks, for example, how we can understand the various erasures around a whole range of discourses pertaining to non-normative sexual and gender histories, as “colonialists and nationalists attempt to rewrite multivocal traditions into a univocal, uniform tradition” (3). In *Queering India*, Vanita identifies the British colonial era, in particular the nineteenth century, as a period when earlier South Asian homoeroticisms (and other eroticisms) are replaced by modern Indo-European forms of homophobia, which draw from Victorian versions of Judaeo-Christian discourse (3). During this time, a more regulated heteronormativity comes to pervade South Asian cultures, for example, through the introduction of British anti-sodomy laws in India and the increasing criminalisation of non-heteronormative sexual relations and practices; this rigid division of culture along the lines of a homo/hetero sexual binary is once again taken up by later nationalist projects.⁵ Considering colonial, as well as nationalist, erasures and re-writings of heterogeneous South Asian sexual histories, it becomes all the more pressing to re-envision these histories from a queer perspective.

Such re-envisioning, however, not only entails rediscovering or reclaiming alternative sexual histories, but also developing new languages and frameworks with which to view both historical and contemporary queer racialised identities. In resistance to the homogenising tendencies of both colonialist and South Asian nationalist heteronormativities, as well as of a white Euro-American gay and lesbian mainstream, South Asian queers, particularly in the diaspora, “have had to invent themselves,” as Nayan Shah remarks, “often with new words and names of identification” (141). Paraphrasing the ideas of the lesbian poet Suniti Namjoshi, Shah elaborates on how various contestations of language – including translations, resignifications, and appropriations of language – have been crucial to constructing South Asian queer identification, since “words have invented the world of South Asian queer affiliations and social networks” (142). With similar purpose, the work of Banerji’s poetry is to create and craft new erotic languages located in the specificities of queer South Asian diasporic experience.

In *Night Artillery*, we can see how such a queer South Asian diasporic poetics of the erotic is assembled in the poems “Madhur,” “mulaqat,” “rati” and “Mashuqa.” In this set of poems, specifically South Asian linguistic and cultural vocabularies of desire are at once evoked, queered, diasporicised and reworked to build an aesthetic that is expressive of a diasporic South Asian lesbian/femme identity and

eroticism. the complex layering of distinct wells of experience and imagery, including diasporic longings and sexual desire – serves to build a new, hybrid aesthetics of the erotic that is rooted in the specificities of queer racialised desire, and in particular South Asian diasporic vocabularies. The titling of these poems, for example, signals not just a reclamation, but also a remaking of the erotic languages of particular South Asian cultural, poetic and performative traditions. As Banerji explains in her “Notes,” the word “madhur” translates into English to mean “sweet”; the word “mulaqat” means “meeting”; “rati” can describe “sexual love”; while “mashuqa” is a name for the feminine form of “the beloved” (58). Drawing from a linguistic continuum that incorporates both Hindi/Sanskrit and Urdu/Persian terms, Banerji exercises the multivocal meanings of these words: “madhur,” which describes a honeyed nectar or sweet syrup, is also sometimes used as a term for linguistic eloquence; similarly, “mulaqat” is used both in terms of conversational, as well as sexual, intercourse or encounters.

In many ways, Banerji’s use of language in these poems can be related to the literary traditions of Rekhta/Rekhti, the linguistic predecessor of modern Urdu, as well as other traditions of the ghazal.⁶ Meaning ‘mixed’, ‘poured-out’ or ‘scattered’, Rekhta emerged as the performative form of the colloquial language common to Delhi/Lucknow during the eighteenth century; however, Rekhta fell out of use by the end of the nineteenth century as the distinction between literary Urdu and Hindi became more rigid. Rekhti is the feminine form of this verse; written in the language of women and often addressed to a female beloved, Rekhti typically described, in an embellished or consciously performative manner, women’s bodies and bodily functions, clothes and jewelry, conversations and quarrels, everyday domestic situations between women, and female-female homoerotic relations.⁷ Although Rekhti was practically excised from literary canons by the late nineteenth century, possibly due to the increasing regulation of heteronormativity by colonial notions of morality, Banerji’s verse re-appropriates, adapts and transforms the languages of Rekhti and the ghazal to fashion a contemporary lesbian/femme aesthetics.

In the poems “Madhur,” “mulaqat,” “rati” and “Mashuqa,” Banerji relies on the various sexual, gender, cultural and linguistic ambiguities of the literary and performative traditions from which she draws. As Vanita has pointed out in *Queering India*, the precise meanings of terms from the past to describe same-sex desire “are highly debatable and cannot be fixed” (4). The grammars of sexuality, eroticism and gender used in Rekhta and Rekhti poetry, as well as in other traditions of the ghazal, cannot simply be framed within Eurocentric hetero/homo or male/female binaries. For this reason, these genres can and have been claimed, alternately, as containing explicit celebrations of male-male or female-female homoerotic desire; as ambiguously gendered, in order to disguise their homoerotic content; as patriarchal, misogynist and heterosexist; as instances of cross-gender identification and performance; or as more about other relations of power, such as class, caste, nationalism or religion, than about gender or sexuality alone. In many ways, Banerji uses her contemporary queer perspective both to expose and recast the polyvalent meanings and eroticisms of these earlier genres. As such, these poems open up alternative re-readings of South Asian sexual and gender histories, which have been obscured by essentialising colonial and nationalist narratives of purity; in turn, situating Banerji’s poetry within these alternative sexual and gender historicities opens up multi-layered readings of the poems themselves.

Likewise, Banerji’s diasporic lens – already suspicious of ‘originary’ stories that seek to lay claim to a pure, authentic and singular national past – is brought into play in order to rediscover cultural forms whose syncretisms have been over-written by the homogenising tendencies of rigid nineteenth-century cultural, religious and linguistic binarisms. Although Banerji’s language imitates the poetics of earlier

genres, such as Rekhti, her 'inauthentic' reconstructions of such genres produce the awareness that these cultural forms were themselves 'mixed' and 'remixed' and cannot be contained by colonial frameworks that view art as simply either 'original' or 'imitative'. Much like the work of a "spy, stealing treasures," or "the magic of alchemy" ("Mashuqa" 15), Banerji's poetry recasts and re-appropriates the words and artefacts of already hybrid, or 'impure', cultural forms, at once disassembling and reassembling these into something new, something of one's own making.

Moreover, the translative and transformative remakings of language that Banerji performs flow simultaneously in different directions. The hybrid vocabularies of her queer diasporic perspective help to newly imagine earlier dissident gender and sexual histories, just as much as these earlier erotic languages could be understood as influencing, or forming the building blocks, of a contemporary queer diasporic framework. In this sense, Banerji's aesthetic resonates well with Shah's ideas about the ways that South Asian queer diasporic subjects have had to "invent themselves, often with new words and names of identification," precisely through approximating, resignifying or performing anew fragmented records of personal and public history (141-2). Similarly, Banerji's poetics constitutes both a reclamation of older forms of erotic poetry and a new genre for writing queer diasporic subjectivity and desire.

Banerji's ironic reconstruction of different traditions, mythologies and frameworks points to a significant theme of *Night Artillery* itself: the very question of how genealogies may be constructed, challenged, reclaimed or reconstituted by those bodies who are at once inside and outside many different social traditions. Throughout her poetry, Banerji questions, and ultimately overturns, the foundational status that colonial, sexist, and heteronormative narratives of the Western imaginary must have to her life, to her telling of history, and to her art. Instead, she locates other possible genealogies in which to place her writing by crafting her aesthetics out of bits and pieces of multiple sources. The genealogies that Banerji constructs for her art are characterised not by purity, but by hybridity – the spaces "between noon and dusk, nuances of shade / lying between azure and turquoise" ("Raga Malkauns" 16). In this way, Banerji holds on to different aspects of her self and her history, especially as these differences are so often constructed as mutually exclusive or oppositional within dominant discourses. Banerji's poetry shows that queer identity does not have to entail an abandonment of South Asian cultural, religious, or aesthetic traditions of identity, just as the poems also challenge the Eurocentric and racist assumption that the queer body is primarily a white body.

The conscious construction of queerly South Asian diasporic cultural and literary genealogies is perhaps one of the most important contributions that *Night Artillery* makes as a whole. For queer writers of colour, Banerji's work provides innovative models for addressing the question of how we might go about claiming certain sorts of genealogies – whether linguistic, literary, historical or political – and how we might think about situating ourselves within these. Speaking of the ways in which South Asian queers are so often erased from dominant or official public records, Shah remarks that, because of this, we have "enlisted history – personal, archeological, and social – to attain visibility and voice" (142). Accordingly, in order to construct a queer South Asian diasporic identity, Banerji looks to a variety of conventional and unconventional archival sources: family relations; myth; religious and cultural iconography; South and West Asian poetics; contemporary postcolonial literatures; and everyday cultural or regional practices.

For example, Banerji draws genealogical linkages between the performances of her poetry and various everyday regional, religious or cultural rituals, as she remakes these to reflect the gestures and

modalities of her own aesthetic practice. In “Shanti Jal,” Banerji implicitly compares the rituals of poetry, or her “alphabet of tears” (10), to the Hindu ceremonial sprinkling and offering of peace water. Similarly, in “Sleeping Rumour,” she metaphorically relates the marks left on the skin by a lover to the decorative designs of alpana, or the regional/cultural practice of adorning the site of a festival or ceremony common to the area of Bengal; she then links both of these to the ‘designs’ of her own writing. This (re)modeling of specific cultural, literary, familial and mythic sites of experience is how Banerji constructs queer, hybrid genealogies in which to situate the processes, forms and performances of her writing; these, in turn, constitute particular locales of affectivity for her readers. As multiple metaphors fold into each other throughout the pages of *Night Artillery*, it is impossible (and undesirable) to separate ‘the queer body’ from ‘the racialised body’, or diasporic longings from lesbian sexuality and sensuality.

This metaphorical remixing of ‘queer’ and ‘diaspora’ importantly functions to wrench each of these terms away from their hegemonic uses – where (white) queers and (heteronormative) nations and/or diasporas come to be supposed universal signifiers for *all* queers and *all* imaginings of nation/diaspora. Alternatively, in *Night Artillery*, ‘queer’ and ‘diaspora’ are always involved with each other – and always qualified by each other. As Puar has noted, a major innovation of queer diasporic work is that it brings together the terms of queerness and of diaspora, critically reworking each of these in the process:

It is precisely through noting these terms as *relations*, rather than entities, that the exposure of their limitations produces potentially illuminative interactions. This interfacing of ‘queerness’ and ‘diaspora’ critiques the very terms they seek to incorporate, and in which they are incorporated, forcing particular redefinitions of the original terms. (407)

In Banerji’s poems, queer and diasporic desires importantly incorporate each other; indeed, they define, become, transform and translate for each other. They are located, systemically and somatically, within and through each other, and in and through a body that insists on maintaining both its multiplicity and integrity amidst systems that refuse to ‘see’ it, or grant it a certain materiality.

'places without maps', bodies and desires yet to be placed or fixed

A queer diasporic perspective importantly interrupts nationalist models of identity and cultural production, as these are often disciplined through colonial ideologies of whiteness and heteronormativity. Unlike nationalist frameworks, as well as multiculturalist approaches that reduce the expressive arts of Othered Canadians to examples of either ‘sub-national cultures’ or ‘ethno-nationalisms’, an interpretive lens that reads for registrations of queer diasporic subjectivity can illuminate certain affiliations of desire which cannot be easily accommodated by nationalist or multiculturalist paradigms. In *Night Artillery*, these affiliative networks of desire are demonstrative of what Rinaldo Walcott has described as an ethical refusal to leave behind disruptive or “outer-national” (17) histories, memories, identifications and political commitments that can challenge many of the foundational discourses of ‘Canadian-ness’ and dominant constructions of identity. In turn, such political reconfigurations and praxes hold the potential for materialising a variety of Othered, or invisibilised, subject positionings.

In her poetry, Banerji thus maps out a “private choreography” and an “unpublic heartbeat” (7), as she says in the poem “I Have Your Body for Proof.” In other words, Banerji’s writing offers a language of queer racialised desire that remains largely unintelligible if read solely within the representational

frameworks that visibilise mainstream (white) gay/lesbian identities and public cultures in Canada. In the first poem of *Night Artillery*, called “the libra allegories,” the speaker describes herself as “craving to speak a history of the borderless” (3), alluding to this desire/need for alternative linguistic practices for materialising queer racialised desire. Addressing a lover, or perhaps even the reader directly, the speaker of “the libra allegories” begins with a request: “startle me into breath,” because “your eyes and my tears are places without maps” (3). The address not only figures the reader in the place of the lover, but also as someone whose eyes/readings act as placeholders for critical, political and subjective worlds yet to be imagined. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz explains that cultural/artistic work by queers of colour not only details the expressions of already-formed queer racialised subjects, but also operates to bring into being new subjects as this work is seen and recognised by others who are situated in shared yet differential (often as of yet un-named) locations. Hence, according to Muñoz, the engagement of queers of colour in performative and expressive art contributes to the creation of new “queer counterpublics” (146) for minoritarian subjects. In turn, these counterpublics open up the space of our political and expressive possibilities. Similarly, for Bannerji’s readers, *Night Artillery* has the profoundly political ability to startle us into new genres and lines of sight, thought, language and desire around the question of what it might mean and feel to be ‘South Asian’, ‘Canadian’, and/or ‘queer’ – while refusing to properly assimilate into any one of these.

¹ See Siobhan B. Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*; Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*; Ann Laura Stoler’s *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*; and Andrew Parker et al.’s *Nationalisms and Sexualities* for excellent analyses of this point.

² See, for example, Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler’s *Queer Diasporas*, as well as Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan’s *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. For work that examines the concept of queer diasporas specifically within South Asian diasporic contexts, see Gayatri Gopinath’s *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* and Jasbir K. Puar’s “Transnational Sexualities: South Asian (Trans)nation(alism)s and Queer Diasporas.”

³ In her book, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*, Himani Bannerji locates present-day racial stereotypes, as well as current Canadian state policies around race and ethnicity, quite clearly within Canada’s colonial-settler history; its colonial mythos of the French and English as the two ‘founding fathers’ or ‘originary’ nations of Canadian history; and the racist taxonomical systems that are generated in order to justify, manage and, at the same time, erase a colonial history of genocide and subjugation of Indigenous peoples on this land. Bannerji further argues that, in the context of Canada’s colonial history, racial and class formation is dependent on gendered and sexualized ideologies. According to Bannerji, old and new “colonial/racist discourses of tradition and modernity, civilization and savagery” are some of the main “conceptual devices [for] the construction and ascription” of racial, classed and gendered identities and stereotypes in Canada (6). These cultural discourses provide key sites where racial, classed and gendered systems of power intersect and interact in order to help shape a nexus of state power through which nationhood, citizenship and political entitlement are legitimised, granted and/or denied to subjects.

⁴ For example, J.M., one of Lee’s interviewees who identifies as a butch lesbian of mixed Cantonese background, describes the ways in which her models for butch masculinity can be rendered invisible; to illustrate this, J.M. notes that activities such as cooking and an orientation for family, although typically seen by white culture as ‘feminine’, constitute, for her, important links between Asian masculinities and butch lesbian embodiment (124). In other instances, femme and non-butch/femme identified interviewees explain how certain embodiments of hair, dress and expression (for example, having long hair or the wearing of particular clothing or jewelry) are often mis-read as ‘heterosexual’ or hetero-feminine according to dominant frameworks that visibilise white ‘lesbian’ identities in North America, even though these expressions may have more to do with their identifications as ‘Asian’ or ‘South Asian’ than anything else (123, 127). In these ways, Lee’s interviewees speak of how dominant white perceptions of ‘queerness’ often work to erase possibilities for ‘seeing’ or imagining queer racialised subjects, genders and eroticisms. Many of Lee’s interviewees thus discuss the importance of recognising culturally-specific embodiments

of queerness, of refusing to conform to white middle-class norms of what ‘queer’ means or looks like, and of maintaining personal, familial and political connections with the multiple communities in which they are situated.

⁵ For excellent analyses of the re-organisations of sexuality, particularly the criminalisation of homosexuality, that took place in India under British colonial rule, see Ruth Vanita’s “Introduction” to *Queering India*; Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in *Same-Sex Love in India* (194-201); and Suparna Bhaskaran’s essay, “The Politics of Penetration: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.” For an examination of how colonialism and anti-colonial nationalisms interacted to produce important shifts in sexual and gender ideologies in India, see Mrinalini Sinha’s “Nationalism and Respectable Sexuality.”

⁶ Banerji’s poetry can be usefully read in terms of Rekhta/Rekhti forms and conventions for a number of reasons. These include: the particular linguistic continuum from which she draws; the content of her subject matter, which mimics the longings for a beloved typical of the ghazal; the attention to bodily or corporeal language, especially female-female eroticism, as found in Rekhti; and also through other allusions within the collection, such as the reference to “mir” in “bending toward exile” (45). Here, “mir” likely refers to Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810), often cited as one of the greatest Rekhta poets; in fact, he is often credited with originating Rekhta and giving shape to the Urdu language itself. A noted characteristic of Mir’s poetry is male-male homoerotic desire.

⁷ See C.M. Naim’s “Transvestic Words? The *Rekhti* in Urdu” for this description of the subject matter of Rekhti. For Naim, however, the fact that most of the known Rekhti poets were males writing for a male audience, although in an “exaggerated feminine voice,” is proof that Rekhti belongs to a masculinist and heterosexist tradition (22-23). See Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai’s discussion of Rekhti, in *Same-Sex Love in India*, for an alternative account of Rekhti poetry that pays specific attention to Rekhti’s language of lesbian desire and eroticism, and various debates pertaining to the status of same-sex desire in Rekhti, and its genderings of voice and address (191-94, 220-21). It is important to note that Naim gives little weight to claims about Rekhti’s homoeroticism, nor does he seriously consider that Rekhti’s cross-gender identifications and performances could be linked to queer masculinities and queer femininities. For a useful description of Rekhta’s linguistic histories, see also Shamsur Rahman Faruqi’s “Conventions of Love, Love of Conventions: Urdu Poetry in the Eighteenth Century.”

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