
Pursuing the Sacred: Discovering the Profane

ABSTRACT Through self-reflexive, queer autoethnography, this article depicts the author's transition from a religious scholastic to a queer-embracing person over four years at university. While enfolding the individual and the collective self, the author unearths new forms of existing that allow for authenticity with none of the complicity associated with double consciousness. This article examines how writing leads to meaning-making, visibility, and self-affirmation and becomes an exercise in letting go of shame, loss, and love. **KEYWORDS** religious, queer, sexuality, Roman Catholicism, Jesuit, university

MAKING A CHOICE

I sometimes wonder how the most banal act of massaging my friend's penis with a palmful of coconut oil while he was asleep could have had such a profound impact on the course of my life. At eighteen, when I was angry, lonely, and lost, the words of this very friend reverberated within me: "What pleasure do I get from doing these things?" Coming from a deeply Catholic family in Goa, India, these questionable "things" mainly were expletives and grudges. So, wrought with guilt and having experienced forgiveness and undeserved love, I decided to leave my old boat behind on familiar shores and set my heart to follow my God by joining the Society of Jesus.¹

As long as I was in the religious order, I lived it ardently and never imagined a life outside its confines. During my novitiate, a life of prayer helped me come to terms with my uneasiness about being born in a male body. It brought about self-acceptance, confidence, and a feeling of sacredness. Since I had a flair for the humanities, I was being groomed to train future scholastics for the juniorate, a stage in Jesuit formation. After studying philosophy as a requisite for my priestly studies, I was sent to Hyderabad, India, at the English and Foreign Language University (EFLU) in 2009 to earn a Master's in English Literature.

Life in the religious order is about personal negotiations. There is a personal self and a collective self, personal values and collective values, a personal truth and a collective version of a truth. Though all Jesuit scholastics go through similar formation stages before being ordained as priests, each individual must assume personal responsibility for his holistic formation. Early on, I chose to be true to myself. Even as a novice, I was aware of my attraction to men and believed I was singularly created in God's image to celebrate God's uniqueness through my sexuality and personhood.

DEVOURING DIFFERENT TEXTS

On my first day at the university, I went into the library and picked up a book on creative writing.² The first exercise focused on getting rid of writer's block. It involved writing whatever thoughts came to one's mind, unfiltered and without edits, until the end of a page. I did this, almost addictively, over several writing sessions. As the stream-of-consciousness flowed and my heartbeat quickened, words took shape, and my thoughts got bolder and more honest. My writing expressed erotic desires for a Jesuit companion I had guiltily fantasized about. This act of writing, disembodied from myself—as if the writer had no connection with the Jesuit scholastic who had renounced any hopes of sexually fulfilling his desires—left me in the torment of having to embrace myself as a sexual being attracted to male bodies. The thought of Steven's³ sweat-drenched, huge-dark-nippled body, clad in moist underwear, kept visiting the silence of my solitude as I gazed at the loincloth-clad Jesus on the cross hanging on the wall. The desire that flowed through my pen stylistically and purposefully unravels this narrative through memory, images, and book impressions.

Being alone in my room were moments for conversations with my youngest sister, Ancy. About two and half months before shifting to Hyderabad, Ancy, who was uncannily comfortable in the company of girls, had passed away. She wanted to prove to a nun (her confidant and lover), who cut off contact, that the nun meant the universe to her. So, she tied a sack of stones to her body and, like Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*,⁴ breathed in the river. Her diary revealed her affection for the nun and her tumult of being a sinner in God's eyes, owing to her conflicting emotions. Why is it, I often asked Ancy, that the Catholic Church bequeaths guilt more than love? Christian sexual guilt had filled me with enough remorse to radically turn my life and embrace the Church. But why did it have to be so drastic for Ancy?

Life at the university was like a fresh salad waiting to be devoured. Thoughts and philosophies were served as books, courses or academic papers waiting to be bitten into and relished. Despite studying philosophy with other Jesuit scholastics, where we were “encouraged” to ask the why of all things, all our explorations were confined within a Catholic and Jesuit worldview. Any thread of thought that did not operate within its moral boundaries was politely discarded. In hindsight, this seems contrary to the pursuit of philosophy, which seeks to arrive at different points of view.

Each course and its constellation of texts and voices spoke to me. A study on modernist poetry taught me to subvert structural conventions. Sexuality, like modernist poetry, can be nonconforming, expansive, and atypical, breaking away from a sex and binary-gender convention. The subdued eroticism in Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*⁵ left me desiring my own erotic experience, upsetting the imaginative structure of my religious identity. It rekindled my exploration of fiction as a young teenager when I stealthily read Sydney Sheldon's *Never Love a Stranger*⁶—away from the scrutiny of my mother (who reckoned Sydney's books as adult novels). Growing up, I would fantasize about the young protagonist going for a swim “stark naked” with other boys. My mind would often linger and play out the scene with thick detail. Stein's relationship with Alice

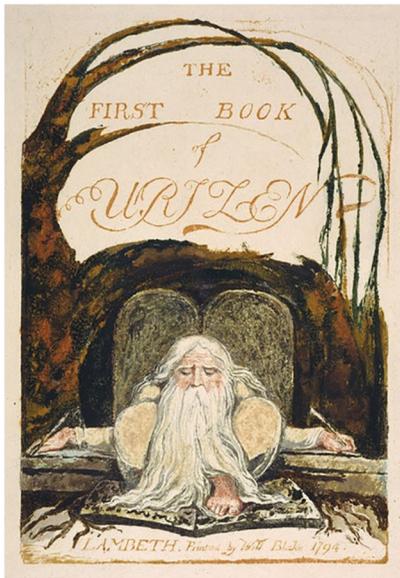


Figure 1. *The Book of Urizen.*

I believe that our collective act of reading William Blake’s engravings emboldened my critique of the church’s authoritarianism. The prophet squats on a book of stone, etched with the (un)holy written word. The sacred stony book offered a newer understanding of the ‘word of god’—over which holy wars were fought and violence was perpetrated. Are the words being written by the fully-clothed prophet on stone dead? What is the prophet conveying as he engraves the word? Do the two tablets behind the prophet signify tomb stones or the possibility for new beginnings? I gaze below at the roots squirming into the soil, possibly embedding themselves within the earth. What does this say of institutional doctrine that has its laws laid in stone amidst the continuity of life?

B. Toklas excited a fantasy of two lesbian women tickling each other’s tender nipples and implanting love codes in cryptic poems that I was determined to decode. Another course on William Blake’s poetry compelled me to read poetry visually, critiquing hierarchical (often religious and political) institutions with rules etched in stone, similar to the one depicted in figure 1.

Blake’s *The Book of Urizen*⁷ resonated with my state of being “consum’d inwards, into a deep world within: A void immense, wild dark & deep”⁸ regarding my belief in God and the Catholic Church’s violent history and rigid conduct. Likewise, William Shakespeare’s *King Lear*⁹ prompted me to reflect on the pervasiveness of institutional (the Church’s) and ideological power over individual freedom. For me, an increasingly deepening schism arose between the notion of a God of truth, beauty, and love and the God in institutionalized religion. Unlike my philosophy courses, which fit neatly like the jigsaw puzzles of a singular design, my English Literature courses impelled dissonances with multiple possibilities.

Unlike the religious ardor for spiritual matters, I was intrigued by the “human body” and eagerly explored it in each course. In a course entitled “The Visual and the Verbal,” we engaged with literary texts depicting nude bodies, albeit of the female form. We were given the liberty to work on any topic relating to the concepts discussed. I was enraptured by Bhupen Karkar’s paintings, where naked, brown-skinned men evoked intimacies in rural India in *Two Men in Banaras*¹⁰ and *You Can’t Please All*,¹¹ as well as in *Yayati*,¹² illustrating a tale from Bhagavata Purana (one of Hinduism’s foundational literary texts) with father–son incest between a man and an Icarus-like fairy with their turgid appendages facing each other. When I evinced an interest in exploring homoeroticism in Karkar’s work, my professor promptly told me that I wouldn’t want to work on that! Perhaps he failed to realize that even religious people like me have a sexuality and embrace

our queer and spiritual selves. I realized no matter how “liberal” a university might claim to be, some thoughts are always elided, edited, and erased from discourse. Certain lives are deemed to be outside university spaces, where they can be freely explored without hindrance. That prompted a new survival strategy of never bringing up homosexuality when I shouldn’t.

The religious way of life dictated adherence to certain expectations. Yet, in the years preceding my entry into EFLU, I had already begun to rebel against the expectations from me as a Jesuit scholastic. My rebellious streak stemmed from notions of how I am expected to dress and present myself outwardly. Five years earlier, one evening while playing basketball in Goa, I found a red-and-brown, wooden-beaded necklace on a bench. When I wore it around my neck, I experienced a wicked thrill. Wearing adornments as a religious was breaking convention. The first time the necklace graced my neck, I had butterflies whirling in my tummy as I sat in the refectory having dinner with other Jesuit fathers and scholastics, imagining myself becoming prey to their possibly unfiltered criticism. That day, no one said anything, at least to my face. I passed my test. I embraced my individuality and emerged victorious. This only emboldened me to assert my originality, sartorially and aesthetically, within the constraints of my religious identity.

My first book in the Lesbian and Gay genre was Janet Winterson’s *Written on the Body*.¹³ The desire for a lover, who could be smelt, tasted, and heard in the most intimate parts of the other’s body, separated by their skin, was so distant from the desire of consummation with a transcendental being that I was schooled in through my religious training. The sexual coming-of-age in Shyam Selvadurai’s *A Funny Boy*¹⁴ reflected the arrival of sexual honesty with myself. Reading it made me revisit moments in my school life when sexual possibilities thrived, if I weren’t naïve enough to see past them. Suniti Nam Joshi’s *The Conversations of Cow*¹⁵ made me aware of how life for people with different sexualities involves a lot of struggle and fortitude.

DESIRING AND CONFLICTED

My coming-of-age happened quite inadvertently. Foreign delegates from Latin American and Asian countries would visit campus for a three-month International Training Program (ITP) to enhance their English communication. Some months into my program, I was delighted that free salsa classes were being organized. A ravishingly handsome Costa Rican, Jason volunteered as the instructor. Jason’s athleticism and beauty swooned many of my batch mates (including girls). Then, over scrumptious conversations on Jason, despite pining to add my bit, I would keep mum, too afraid to give my gayness away.

One day, as Jason and I happened to cross paths on campus, he asked for my number. I was ecstatic. Steadily, our messages turned playful. That marked the beginning of a life-affirming relationship. Jason was perceptive, honest, and humane. He came out to me as gay, while my cowardice held me back. I spent time with him, had access to his room, and was lucky enough to see his pierced nipple and tattoos. It was as if my childhood “stark-naked” protagonist from *Never Love a Stranger* appeared before me in the flesh. Through our conversations, he opened a world of different meanings on sexuality, gay

identity, and sexual attitudes in Latin American countries. Each time he spoke Spanish, it was uplifting. I was aware of my growing vulnerability and desire for him—something I had allowed to feel only for God. It was beautiful yet conflicting when I allowed myself to desire him. I wasn't prepared to experience attention or affection from another person. When he left India, my only way of honoring his memory was to learn Spanish, vicariously writing the language of desire on my body.

UNSHACKLING MYSELF FROM THE CHURCH

While my musings concerning the Church were primarily theoretical, an incident affected my relationship with it. During my second year, I got a distressing call from my parents that our parish priest had publicly denounced the eucharist celebration (mass) at home. Sant Estevam, a predominantly Goan Catholic island with houses amalgamating together, had a tight-knit village community that allowed for greater involvement and friction. Ancy's death, a suicide, was an occasion for shaming our family. Her death was our personal and social loss, a girl whose life ended in an un-redeeming social system. I had access to spaces outside the domestic realm because of male privilege. Ancy's social world was confined and controlled by domestic pressures. To foster goodwill, a priest—a family friend—celebrated the eucharist at home (the domestic space that pushed her to commit suicide). But when the parish priest regarded this gathering as a disobedient act by making an announcement to the entire congregation, I re-evaluated my connection with the Church; it was not worthy of me. It was insensitive in death, still trying to establish hierarchy and control instead of demonstrating empathy. The high-handedness of power manifesting itself filled me with extreme loathing for the catholic church (lowercased intentionally hereafter).

My reflections on the church (its beliefs, institutionalization, and apathy) continued. My engagements with the university folks challenged my personal beliefs. I felt like new wine that didn't suit an old wineskin. The church's sheen that once held me in awe had lost its lustre. I concluded that the catholic church would take decades to respect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) lives. If I had to continue being in the church, I would be coerced to espouse the church's position. That would negate my personhood. I had mentally left the Jesuit order months before I actually left it. For eleven years of religious life, I unwittingly enjoyed the certainty of every meal and a roof over my head. My greatest fear was the uncertainty of my finances. Yet, I believed I would survive.

The day I signed my exit papers, I felt empty. Leaving the order was also a severance from the catholic church. I felt blessed because I got myself a job as a language trainer and continued with my advanced-level Spanish classes at the university. My proximity to the campus gave me a sense of home. Those moments were peppered with a desire to connect with someone. As my friends began getting into relationships, I mulled over my unpredictable future. A friend started dating someone, and he no longer had time to connect.

One morning, I overheard a Latin American man speak Spanish. My instincts confirmed he was gay. I don't know whether I was charmed more by the Spanish or the beautiful man. He was a (closeted) Colombian who came for the same three-month ITP

program. One evening at a party, we began sharing notes on our lives, and the next morning he had my love marks all over his neck. Somehow, he filled a void briefly and detachedly. After he left, I felt sad for myself and envious of gay people in those countries where they could be themselves. I often thought I'd have to earn a lot of money and (in my old age) go to a foreign country and meet other gay people (assuming I was the only gay person in India).

The feeling of being different and alone became suffocating and alienating. There were times when I yearned to end it all (like Virginia Woolf and Ancy) by jumping before a running train. The gentle water enveloping their bodies seemed more inviting than the brutal thrust of a metallic body crushing into my flesh. I would then imagine my family surviving yet another suicide and refrain myself. Yet the visceral itch to end it all and the imminence of death was so intense that I needed a release. Returning home from work one evening, as yet another train passed by while I stood on the platform, the momentary impulse to jump surfaced encore. I weighed the moments when I thrived and considered getting back into academics. Though I'd be risking a financial catastrophe, it would be a chance worth taking. I could at least feel alive for the days I had left.

QUEERING MY SPACE

In August 2009 (a month after the Delhi High Court amended Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code),¹⁶ I registered for the MPhil program at EFLU. I knew that if I evinced interest in a Lesbian-or-Gay-Studies topic for my viva, I would not get accepted into the program. (We could change our research topic later.) So, I gave the review panel an impassioned defense for an intertextual reading of I. Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama*¹⁷ by relating it to texts on family lineages (like Latin American fiction writers—Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabelle Allende—and the bible), other Anglo-Indian writing, and the Nama texts (chronicles) of Moghul Emperors. Exactly a year later, I would face a larger, all-male English Literature Department panel to get into the PhD program at EFLU, where I wanted to explore the futures envisioned within Indian queer texts. I was to be rejected because queer-related topics continued to be stigmatized by those on the panel. The head of the department began by saying that it was fashionable to be gay, a professor who usually asked grilling questions dozed off, and some other professors laughingly spoke among themselves about an openly gay professor's sex life. At that moment, I felt myself transported outside my body, witnessing this unfold, too stupefied to believe this was happening. Perhaps comprehending a subjectivity based on sexuality or sexual performativity seemed phantasmic to be deemed allowable within the university. This incident made me ponder the kind of research being (dis)allowed, and the need for more queer voices to reverberate within the campus and challenge the gatekeepers of the university and the gender composition of their panels.

After getting into the MPhil program, I planned to work on sexuality and queerness under the cloak of "masculinities" (a covert strategy of *not* making myself vulnerable by indirectly outing myself) by working on a queer poet/playwright, either Jean Genet or Christopher Marlow. I was apprehensive about finding a supervisor if I mentioned the

words “gay” or “queer.” In pursuing an MPhil supervisor, I recall having unsuccessful conversations with several professors, sandwiching the word “queer” amidst gibberish, scared of being rejected. Three days after discussing with a newly joined associate professor, Prakash Kona (a student of the openly gay professor and sensitized to notions of sexuality), who recognized my closetedness, he proposed that I work with him and title my thesis “Queering Genet!” On hearing those words, awestruck as I was, I responded almost orgasmically, like Penelope Bloom in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “yes I said yes I will Yes.”¹⁸ Prakash’s willingness to accept my personhood indelibly impacted me. Some people’s kindness and understanding exponentially enhance our lives.

Reading the first book, *Transitions: Queer Theories*,¹⁹ made me reflect on my earlier unexamined shame regarding my sexuality. As I read about the grit of queer people, who reclaimed their personhood by throwing stones at their police tormentors, I felt inexplicably confident. Until then, the sole incommunicable aspect of myself was my *being gay*, when I had nothing to be ashamed of. It is who I am. That day, I bicycled to the university and came out to my supervisor and another batchmate, knowing well that sharing a secret on campus was tantamount to throwing a lighted matchstick on a stack of dried hay. Yet, I felt light and exhilarated.

By then, Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai’s *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History*,²⁰ Hoshang Merchant’s *Yaraana: Gay Writing from India*,²¹ and Ashwini Sukthankar’s *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*²² had unfurled ancient, medieval, and modern tales of queer intimacies for me. From Najmuddin Shah Mubarak’s Urdu poetry from ancient India advising his beloved on the art of wooing (which could sagaciously be appended to Vyatsyayana’s *Kama Sutra*),²³ to Hoshang Merchant’s unabashed persona, animalistically and unashamedly ravishing his lover beside a window that purposefully opens for prying neighbors (and made me squirm with repulsion), to Puja and her lover, both profoundly deaf, feeling estranged from other lesbian women who speak, each of these pieces emboldened me with narratives from my own country. I turned every page and searched for Goa—and found none! I would think of what the red-*kashti*-loincloth-clad men in Goa might have done to other men as they trod in the open, or what the catholic priests with their roving eyes did in the quietness of their rooms. And my imagination would weave out queer possibilities. Yet, the most redeeming book was Arvind Narrain’s and Gautam Bhan’s *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*.²⁴ Its contemporary autoethnographic voices infused me with power, vocabulary, and resolution to re-examine my thinking and to radically transform my world. I began to realize how my imagination implanted desire on the *kashti*-clad men and catholic priests to frame my subjectivity as a gay Goan and validate me. For gay people, marking sexualness (or non-heterosexualness) allows for potentialities for different ways of being.

Incidentally, I would also spend time on Yahoo! Chat rooms.²⁵ Going by geographical locations, there were several chat rooms based on shared interests. Among them were “gay” chat rooms. Most of those anonymous profiles had a fictitious persona. In 2009, computer cameras were rare, sold separately and often expensive. Most of my interactions were fraught with libidinal desire and barely ever translated into a substantial friendship or connection. For many gay people, these online spaces offered the only visible avenues

of interaction. Physical spaces were uncommon and existed within complexly coded markers, shared among a grapevine of contacts. The online spaces offered different possibilities for exploring romantic relationships, sex, intimacy, kinks, and other non-normative desires. Conceptually, the promiscuous “gay” evoked within those chat rooms was not something I could relate to the “gay” activists who spoke of *sexual* identity. Why does one need to identify as “gay” at all? I became aware of a part of me that desired to have abandoned sex with other men. Yet another part of me felt singled out by my difference from my heterosexual friends who were raised with the idea of heterosexual love, entered relationships buffered by familial support, and often didn’t have to justify their difference (despite their constraints). Invoking the term “gay” gave me refuge and the power to summon my difference sexually.

Around this time, it seemed as if all the chickens (and cocks) came home to roost. One evening, quite unexpectedly, I began conversing with someone over Yahoo! Chat who hadn’t mentioned sex presto. We connected instantly over books. At one point, he mentioned Planet Romeo,²⁶ and brushed it off when I inquired about it. Days later, this sliver of conversation opened a new online world and soon enough got me in touch with another gay man in my neighborhood, who introduced me to his friends in a gay pub. That was the first time I encountered so many gay people like me (in the flesh, around my age, who did not resemble Satan’s glorious comrades in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*²⁷). Finally, it felt normal to be gay. No more would I have to dream of going to a foreign land to meet other gay people. A swarm had appeared in my backyard. The next evening, I met them at Eat Street. That meeting, and those that followed, would mark the stirring of many future activist-related gatherings.

As the Delhi High Court judgment put faces to gay, lesbian, and transgender people on the media, the twitter of homosexuality in academic spaces began. About two months after the judgment, there was a seminar on *Gay and Lesbian Literature: An Indian Perspective* at St. Andrew’s College in Mumbai, India. Ironically, this happened in a catholic institution, prudish and often known to be conservative in matters concerning sex or sexuality. A medical doctor began her presentation by expressing her fear of homosexual people being near her children. She used gruesome pictures of infected (almost mutilated) body parts to demonstrate that sex between people should be penovaginal and not penorectal, as the latter causes sexually transmitted diseases among gay men. Her presentation became a melee, vociferously interrupted by gay-identifying audience members. I bought two different copies of *Scripts*, a publication by LABIA (Lesbians and Bisexuals in Action),²⁸ a queer feminist LBT collective, to learn whatever I could. I was enamored by these people standing up for themselves, comfortable and eloquent about their sexual identity. In a homophobic society, these different voices radiated strength.

After returning to Hyderabad, I shared the need for articulating our sexualness²⁹ with my newly made gay friends. Then, the city lacked LGBTQ-designated spaces, and our friendships were ways of creating our own spaces. My friends had corporate jobs, enjoyed partying, and emulated the protagonists in *Sex and the City*.³⁰ Years later, when I watched the series, I realized why they had pined for a Dolce & Gabbana tee or meticulously dissected every sexual escapade together. Reliving those fictional characters made them feel

alive, glamorous, and unreal. And the camaraderie offered a semblance of community. I felt disconnected from their world. When we decided to document our personal LGBTQ narratives (as in *Scripts*), all were excited. Soon enough, we formed a team and created a website, *Prathibimb*. It was exciting to witness each person's story evolve through several drafts of text and curated photographs. On launching *Prathibimb*, we had emails coming from individuals expressing their loneliness and the desire to connect. A community feeling began to evolve. Ironically, especially among my Dolce-&-Gabbana-desiring gay friends, I would embrace myself as "queer." Apart from being attracted to men, I didn't share much in common. Our lived realities seemed vastly different. Queer reflected a path for me to connect with a wider community beyond gender. It reflected the multiplicity, porousness, and neutrality of desire. For people in India, queerness is pervasive everywhere; men grope and tightly embrace each other during celebrations, *hijras* are sought for their spiritual blessings and sexual favors, and women seek physical and emotional solace from other women without any of these occurrences or relationships being named or considered deviant. Our sexualness—our being, possibility, and flowing eroticism³¹—mingles with the everyday, pouring out of us like water dripping from a sieve.

Among those on campus was a bright, politically active, bisexual student, Samia Vasa, who led a feminist forum, *Samvad*. Together, we realized that if we were to sustain the momentum created through *Prathibimb* we needed to have community-building activities. We eventually formed the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) student group of EFLU, through which we screened bi-monthly, queer-themed films. Initially, gay men from the city would attend the screenings for the novelty of the movies and the men. Gradually, the number of outsiders dwindled when they realized that it was the same gay coterie attending. The screenings were followed by a film discussion for which a few university students stayed behind.



Designing posters of intimacy between two men or two women was intentional. For me, it was an act of divinity and defiance. These pieces of art adorned campus walls! Tiny artefacts to redefine and widen the way we think of intimacy, eroticism, sexuality and love.

Figure 2. EFLU LGBTQ film screening poster.

The text for the film-screening posters mentioned “The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer student group of EFLU” along with a cautiously chosen semi-erotic cover picture (figure 2). Two women or (sometimes shirtless) men besotted with each other would be displayed. The posters were pasted in strategic spaces on campus to inform passers-by of the collective. Often enough, a movie poster suggesting gay sexuality at the men’s hostel would be quickly torn away (by those who couldn’t conceive of two men sexually desiring each other), while at the women’s hostel, it would stay. Those erasures in some parts of the campus and the continued visibility in others reflected the tension regarding diverse sexualities. As the public space on campus was being challenged by matters deemed private, the norms of (heterosexual) culture were being redefined imaginatively through these images to include a newer (queer-inclusive) public.

Once, we were to screen *Tipping the Velvet*.³² On entering a hall choc-a-bloc with students, I was peeved, thinking another department might have scheduled a parallel movie screening. Holiness of all holies was I baffled on realizing that we had an over-full house because it was a lesbian-themed film. Our film poster displayed two deep-low-neck corseted women swooning over each other. Some students sat on the desks; some stood. Sometime into the film, as the protagonist was making love with another woman, there was a curious, almost predatory, silence. Moments later, when she uttered, “I love you,” a peal of silly laughter rose among the largely male audience. At that moment, the queer-affirming viewership we shared in our earlier screenings felt violated. Yet those collective viewings had created spaces for different sensibilities, not only voicing approval or disavowal of films but also assessing the libidinal appeal of characters and audience alike. After the screening, barely a few students stayed for a discussion, yet we had consistent student viewership from then on. Years later, one of those students—emboldened by those film screenings—would reveal the beginnings of her queer self-acceptance.

SEXUALIZING POLITICS

Staying away from campus gave me the freedom to express what I wanted. I was always aware that negotiating my queer politics and my gay self as a resident in the men’s hostel might render me stigmatized or vulnerable. While involved with queer activism in the city, I decided to steer away from campus politics, as the campus wasn’t my broader political field. Besides the year-long film screenings on campus, I felt a resolute way to queerly politicize the campus was to inhabit the library with queer-themed books. Each research scholar could recommend ten books for the library. I ensured they treasured my list. I wanted the library shelves to resonate with queer voices. Eventually, my dissertation was my attempt to leave behind a seed of thought for future minds.

My understanding of sexuality and gender had a singular journey. Unlike my apprehensions around the term “gay,” “transgender” was easier to embrace because I had encountered *hijra* people earlier. Hijra people belong to communities with different religious rituals and traditions. They live their lives against the grain; their bodies are sexualized, and their embodied difference magnifies their marginalization.³³ However, “lesbian” was a term that eluded me. I couldn’t understand why someone would identify

as lesbian (or why I identified as gay). Yet again, I found myself reasoning out gay and lesbian identity. For most queer people—homed in temporarily non-native queer cultures that wrestled with colonial legacies like contemporary India—appropriating categories has its own beginnings, discontinuities, revisions, and trajectories. Despite India’s ancient religious history and heritage testifying to queer desires in its Islamic architecture in dargahs and Hindu temple sculpture,³⁴ hierarchies of power attempt to erase and silence them. Our lived differences cause ruptures in our sense-making and pave the way for newer and uncertain possibilities. Foucault’s *A History of Sexuality*³⁵ helped me to understand how knowledge and power systems regulate people’s ways of recognizing themselves as sexual subjects. I realized the need to interrogate concepts and values layered with meanings through different systemic structures. We speak power to social structures by identifying ourselves as lesbian or gay or transgender (or any other label).

Mark Turner’s *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London*³⁶ changed how I looked at men’s bodies. It instilled the idea of cruising for sexual partners merely by glancing with desire. The grunginess of a beard. The flight of a person’s step. The translucent sweat on a runner’s skin. Always Whitmanesque, “I sing the body electric, [t]he armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them.”³⁷ It now seems unbelievable that this insight manifested from a book. I realized I had always been immersed in the erotic through everyday ephemeral moments. All I needed was the awareness of their presence. I recall numerous evenings when two women friends and I would gaze unabashedly at guys on campus. Two of us shared a similar interest in men, while the other had an interest we couldn’t fathom. Two years later, we all shared a similar appeal for dusky, hairy, and lanky men.

In time, I realized I didn’t want to be reduced to my queerness. As a queer researcher, it was assumed that the personal collapses into the political, and personhood conflates into a (totalizing) sexual identity, which subsumes other categories of experience. Yet, sharing a minoritizing point of view heightens visibility and acceptance. I had been involved with initiatives in the city: curating a queer art exhibition, movie screenings, queer performances, and organizing potlucks, picnics, and protests, connecting with diverse queer people and building solidarities for future collective action. While on campus, I felt that being “out” had its privileges and pitfalls. I might have been a threat to queer students who thought they might “out” themselves if they were seen in my presence. The bitter-sweet irony was that I could be a voice among queer supporters while I was possibly a peril among queer folk.

A while after, I found myself attracted to a young medico, ten years younger, intelligent and funny, with a charm in his voice and a spark in his eyes. He was a devout catholic from Mangalore who spoke Konkani (the local language spoken in Goa) and sang in church choirs. We shared a connection over church hymns, our closeted christian culture, and our different dialects of Konkani. He shared hospital-related stories of opening cadavers, while I shared religious-order-related ones of closeted homosexual priests. Yet, we widely differed on our relation to the church; he was a believer, and I was passionately critical. One Sunday, I accompanied him to mass, and the gospel reading was the call of Peter. Jesus told Peter, cast your net, and I will make you the fisher of men! Yes, I will

teach you to *fish* men. Christ, how could I not have realized that all my life earlier? I was brimming with joy. My god is a queer god. Weeks later, my jovial choir singer confessed in a moment of bliss that he did not know where we were headed. I felt a sting of disbelief and could not stomach rejection. We fell out of touch soon after.

Eventually, by queering the university, I hoped the campus climate would be more accepting of other queer students and me. I presumptuously believed I was creating history and leaving an imprint. After my PhD interview at the English Literature panel that left me diminished (which I mentioned in page 450), I wanted to speak up for myself at the PhD interview at the Film Studies and Visual Communication panel, even if I were to meet a similar fate. I wanted to assert my voice. Among the interview panel was a gorgeous assistant professor in a purple shirt with a heavy moustache and a luscious round posterior. Another professor whom I perceived as conservative wore a south-Indian sari and bold mascara on her eyes. I was dizzy with anger that day. I began passionately arguing that John Abraham's "butt crack" in *Dostana*³⁸ was directed toward a gay audience (aware of the sari-wearing professor twitching in repulsion), while the assistant professor in purple and another pleasant-to-the-eye bearded assistant professor contested that it was also directed to a female audience. Eventually, my passionate defense, however obstinate, earned me a seat in that department, and I remained on campus to earn my doctorate. Inhabiting that space altered and strengthened me.

So, I question, why write personal his/her/their stories? His/her/their stories evolve individually and collectively in spaces that transform us as much as we transform them. We narrate stories to hopefully inspire, grieve, or entertain.³⁹ Perhaps this singular history of sexualness scratches the surface of other grander histories of sexuality and discourse. These stories offer a peek into the physical and mental labor that queer people undertake to find a resting place, given hegemonic inclinations and impediments within society's macro structures. These stories offer perspectives of how institutional history and heritage (which might have blighted queer sexualness and identities) can offer generative possibilities and relationalities to emerge. Writing stories amplifies our silences through language and action amidst forces that seek to eviscerate differences. "By sharing our truths," Audre Lorde uttered, "We can survive, by taking part in a process of life that is creative and continuing."⁴⁰

The texts we read, the concepts we embrace, and the futures we envision shape the contours of our lives. Our lives are accentuated in myriad ways, through experiences and apparent choices, and this story where Ancy was physically destined to be among us for a short spell, and even the banal act of massaging my friend's penis, which eventually led me through the church and the university to discover the profane within the heart of the sacred, were all moments that perhaps forever have their place in time and memory. ■

ANDY SILVEIRA has a doctorate in film studies and visual communication. They are currently an assistant professor at the Goa Institute of Management, India. They work on interdisciplinary topics such as management communication, gender, sexuality, and storytelling.

NOTES

My immense gratitude to Roshan Roymon for his presence, love, and feedback. Many thanks to akshay khanna for introducing me to autoethnography; to Gautam Bhan for his rigorous feedback; to Sheryl Araujo and Prakash Kona for their edits; to Tony Adams and Andrew Hermann for their support; and to the two anonymous *JOAE* reviewers for their critique and suggestions.

1. A self-reflexive writing process excavated memories from entries, social media posts, emails, class notes, and posters. A question constantly surfaced—is this a memoir or autoethnography? A memoir is a self-narrative that focuses on a fragment of an author's life, while autoethnography is a self-narrative that transcends narration to include cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang). This writing draws on elements from both these forms. Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*, Vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2016).
2. Linda Anderson, *Creative Writing: A Workbook with Readings* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006).
3. Name changed for confidentiality.
4. Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*, (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), 8.
5. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997).
6. Sydney Sheldon, *Never Love a Stranger* (London: Robert Hale, 1948).
7. William Blake, "The Book of Urizen" (1794). *The William Blake Archive*. Yale Center for British Art, Copy C, Call no. B1978.43.1419-1444. First published in 1794. www.blakearchive.org
8. William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 72.
9. William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (Cambridge: The New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1992). First performed in 1606.
10. Bhupen Khakhar, "Two Men in Benaras" (Sotheby's Baroda, 1982). <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/bhupen-khakhar-courageous-work-two-men-in-benares-1982>
11. Bhupen Khakhar, "You Can't Please All" (Tate, Baroda, 1981). <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/khakhar-you-cant-please-all-t07200>
12. Bhupen Khakhar, "Yayati" (Baroda, 1987). <http://tohumagazine.com/article/pleasures-other-flesh>
13. Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body* (London: Vintage, 1993).
14. Shyam Selvadurai, *Funny Boy: A Novel* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994).
15. Suniti Namjoshi, *The Conversations of Cow* (London: Women's Press, 1985).
16. See Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code (a penal provision for criminalizing sex other than heterosexual peno-vaginal). It reads: "Unnatural offences: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine. Explanation—Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section."
17. I. Allan Sealy, *The Trotter-Nama: A Chronicle* (London: Penguin Books, 1990).
18. James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 783. First published in 1922.
19. Donald E. Hall, *Transitions: Queer Theories* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
20. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, eds., *Same-Sex Love in India: A Literary History* (London: Penguin, 2008).
21. Hoshang Merchant, ed., *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia* (India: Penguin Books, 2010).
22. Ashwini Sukthankar, ed., *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (India: Penguin Books, 1999).
23. *The Complete Kama Sutra*. Translated by Alain Danielou (Rochester: Part Street Press, 1997).
24. Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan, eds. *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India* (Delhi: Yoda, 2005).

25. Zixin Chua and Zhenhui Jiang Zhenhui, "Effects of Anonymity, Media Richness, and Chat-Room Activeness on Online Chatting." In *Proceedings of the 14th European Conference on Information Systems*, ECIS, 2006.
26. Planet Romeo is a gay social networking site that began in 2002. See "On PlanetRomeo" in Akhil Katyal, *The Doubleness of Sexuality* (New Delhi: New Text, 2016), 118–167.
27. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2005). First published in 1667.
28. Asmita et al. (eds). *Scripts*. Number 9, July 2006. (Mumbai: LABIA); Chayanika et al. (eds); *Scripts*. Number 11, May 2008 (Mumbai: LABIA).
29. akshay khanna, *Sexualness* (New Delhi: New Text, 2016).
30. *Sex and the City*. Directed by Darren Star. The television comedy series covered four women protagonists' relationships and their sexual lives (Warner Bros, 1998–2004).
31. akshay khanna, *Sexualness*, 376.
32. Geoffrey Sax (director), *Tipping the Velvet*. Film. Written by Andrew Davies (UK: BBC, 2002).
33. Saria Vaibhav, "She Pricked Thee: Hijras Fucking Men in Rural India," *Etnofoor* 32, no. 2 (2020): 67–82.
34. Madhavi Menon, *Infinite Variety: A History of Desire in India* (New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2018).
35. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Vintage, 2012).
36. Mark Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 7–14.
37. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Bantam Class, 2004), 79. First published in 1855.
38. Tarun Mansukhani (director), *Dostana*. Film. Written by Tarun Mansukhani and Anvita Dutt (Germany: Rapid Eye Movies, 2009).
39. For texts on individuals narrating their experiences of being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer on campus, see Dominic Pecoraro, "Cut, Snap: Tales of Queer Face and Privacy," *Journal of Autoethnography*, 1, no. 2 (2020): 122–136; Esther Newton, *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Kate Bornstein, *A Queer and Pleasant Danger* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012); Keith Berry, "Embracing the Catastrophe: Gay Body Seeks Acceptance," *Qualitative Inquiry* 13 (2007): 259–281; Mark Vicars, "'Queer Goings-on': An Autoethnographic Account of the Experiences and Practice of Performing a Queer Pedagogy," *Auto/biography* 14, 14: 21–40 (2006); Parmesh Shahani. *Gay Bombay: Globalization, Love and (Be)longing in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008); Tristen Hall and Quortne Hutchings, "Claiming Our Truth: Exploring Black Queer Kinship through Autoethnographic Dialogues," *Journal of Autoethnography* 3, no. 2 (2022): 245–249; Tony E. Adams, *Narrating the Closet: An Autoethnography of Same-Sex Attraction* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011); William White and Tison Pugh, "'It's Just My Job to Be Out': Tenure Stories of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Academics," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 3 (1998), 93–112.
40. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 51.