South Asian digital diasporas and cyberfeminist webs: Negotiating globalization, nation, gender and information technology design

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ABSTRACT *This paper discusses theoretical and applied concerns that arise in attempts to design and produce South Asian cyberfeminist e-spaces. Such attempts must inevitably negotiate diasporic and nationalist gender, class and caste identity formations, as well as online corporate and academic cultures situated in an increasingly global economy. In addition, they must also negotiate liberal cyberfeminist celebrations of technology as empowering to all women. The first part of this paper therefore discusses available literature in relation to South Asians and information technology, South Asians in digital diaspora, and the third world and cyberfeminism with the intention of mapping out theoretical paths leading to connections between theoretical examinations of South Asians in cyberspace and applied practices of designing and building online spaces. The second part of this paper discusses some issues that arise in practical attempts at building South Asian cyberfeminist webs, based on my experience working on such projects for the past eight years.*

I am not a technophobe and I certainly do think that cyberliteracy is an excellent, enticing and seductive wonderful thing. But the invasion of unmediated so-called cyberliteracy in the subaltern sphere is frightening.[1]

Who has the Internet empowered? What has been the process of it, and how relevant is that process for say Venkatavva, a dark brown third world woman in India? Venkatavva in Adilabad in rural Andhra Pradesh has seen the advent of roads, cars, telephones and television in the short thirty years of her life, and understands the advantages as well disadvantages and the illusion of access they give her. In a land of faulty cables and unpredictable electrical supply, her children drink milk on the days that the bus doesn't run, because on those days the milk in the village can't be taken to the city and isn't worth money. Modern technology holds no bogies for her, she has choices that many women in

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the north don't have access to. On days the electricity fails she watches the traditionally performed story-telling enacted in the village square instead of the distant Santa Barbara on television. As of today the quality and quantity of her available choices are based as much on the failure of technology, not its success. So would modern technology be working towards more quality and quantity in choice or less? What, then, is the process by which a Venkatavva is empowered?.[2]

This paper discusses theoretical and applied concerns that arise in attempts to design and produce South Asian cyberfeminist e-spaces. Such attempts must inevitably negotiate diasporic and nationalist gender, class, religious and caste identity formations, as well as online corporate and academic cultures situated in an increasingly global economy. In addition, they must negotiate liberal cyberfeminist celebrations of technology as empowering to all women. The first part of this paper therefore discusses available literature in relation to South Asians and information technology (IT), South Asians in digital diaspora, and cyberfeminism and third-world women.

The intention is to map out paths that will make apparent the connections between theoretical examinations of South Asians in cyberspace and applied practices of designing and building online spaces. Thus, the second part of this paper discusses some issues that arise in practical attempts at building South Asian cyberfeminist webs based on my experience working on such projects for the past 8 years. [3] Such a project raises questions about the subjectivities invoked, necessitated and, in turn, produced within specific technological environments.

Part I: Theory

While there is a growing body of mainstream literature on topics related to South Asians and IT, South Asians in cyberspace and the digital divide, most articles are celebratory with regard to the potential of informational technologies for the various populations of the world. Hardly any of this literature problematizes gender, class, rural–urban differences or any other issues related to socio-cultural and economically situated identity formations as factors to be considered in the shaping of design and adoption of IT. Much of this literature relates to business applications, software design and production for businesses worldwide.[4] Some concerns relate to programming labor for businesses, access to IT-related jobs for the South Asian populations, and issues of access from South Asia to the global commercial centers of the world. The discursive socio-cultural spaces that internet spaces enable, or how the design of information technologies shape the possibilities and impossibilities for the emergence of marginalized subjectivities, are not adequately examined in such writing.

Other bodies of literature related to South Asia and IT do, however, exist. These examine socio-cultural aspects of online activity, and discursive formations online in relation to subjectivities that emerge online and in relation to issues such as 'voice and voicelessness', 'marginalized populations' and 'subaltern counterspheres' addressed by cultural studies, postcolonial theory and

feminist scholars.[5] My interest in this article is to complicate discussions of South Asia and IT by not only engaging issues of gender as in women's access to IT, but also in relation to how technological spaces are gendered and classed within specific contexts. Thus, South Asian nationalist identity formations online as well as processes of economic and cultural globalization through the spread of multinational corporations (MNCs) are important factors shaping the access and empowerment of third-world women through technological spaces.

Thus far, available literature regarding South Asians and cyberspace reveals three broad categories. The first engages issues related to access to information technologies, software jobs and industries in South Asia, and the job opportunities for South Asian technology professionals through the development of IT both inside and outside the region.[6] Their concerns are limited to examining IT in relation to a privileged minority that has material and cultural access to it, and is thus invested in the maintenance of current manifestations of cultural and economic structures connected with processes of globalization. For instance, in the case of India, only 25% of workers are engaged in service occupations; and it is these 25% that directly benefit from IT-related progress or work. Examining just this range of workers allows researchers and practitioners to be celebratory about South Asian IT successes, and to boast of progress by pointing to facts and numbers that indicate countries such as India have a larger number or the same number of information workers as the developed nations of the world. They justify their concern with only those 'millions of information workers' who are 'mostly urban and educated, living lifestyles similar to information workers in Silicon Valley, Tokyo or London'.[7] This perspective works for 'Internet elites', whose 'mobility in cyberspace furnishes them with opportunities to work within the world of international finance and business; like the elites of the First World, they are beginning to live in time, and space poses no barriers for them … The time-space compression that cyberspace typifies only works to the advantage of these elites'.[8] Thus, from a perspective unquestioning of a westernized patriarchal and urbanized transnationalism that works for the very few culturally and materially privileged populations of the world, it is possible to see IT and South Asia (especially India) as an unproblematic success story.

A second category of research examines South Asians in the digital diaspora[9] as discursive formations online; describing the socio-cultural aspects of online formations of various South Asians both located geographically in and out of the region. Much of this latter body of literature focuses on the various religious diasporic formations online, discussing such topics as the Hindu or Sikh or Eelam or Muslim diaspora.[10] This literature, while it does acknowledge the role of gender in national formations online, is mainly concerned with analysis of existing diasporas online. The focus of much of this literature is on textual analyses, with little attention paid to the applied problem of designing e-spaces. Most of these are based on analyzing online spaces as 'texts'.[11] Thus, such studies are more concerned with the consumption[12] of electronic spaces. The production end—issues related to designing and building of e-spaces—is thus

left to the 'techies' (engineers and programmers) and to professionals engaged in marketing and other e-business-related activities. Implicitly, a divide is created between 'culture' and 'economics'; between 'applied technology' and 'discourse'. Furthermore—and, perhaps, as a result of the textual analysis approach—even where gender or geography is engaged, women and rural populations are hardly ever portrayed in ways that suggest they could be active producers of online spaces and IT design. Thus, such analyses implicitly rob marginalized populations of agency in relation to technological contexts.

There is a third body of literature that deals with the problem of women and IT in relation to developing regions such as South Asia. This literature, less easily lumped together as a category because of its attempt to negotiate various disciplinary and contextual boundaries, is produced by scholars, activists and cyberfeminists working in development and other related fields attempting to place subaltern and indigenous populations onto the global cyberspatial map[13] on their own terms, and raising critical questions in relation to the challenges posed by IT design and contextual socio-cultural and economic-based gendering processes in technological environments. They practically, theoretically and contextually engage a variety of issues that intersect and complicate matters when attempts are made to use information technologies against the grain and texture of the mainstream.[14]

Even within this third category, there appear to be two main approaches to the study of women and IT. One approach is situated in development specialists' efforts at empowering women worldwide, commonly known as the 'women in development' approach.[15] The other approach is that by many media studies and cyberculture feminist scholars, mostly situated in the Western academy (drawing on theoretical frameworks within cultural studies), that I will call the 'gender and technology' approach. While there are several cyberfeminists negotiating both frameworks for examining the gendering of technological environments,[16] there is not enough dialogue between these two sets of researchers/activists. Within both these approaches there are varying levels of commitment to, and awareness of, the contextual issues regarding marginalized populations, depending on whether the researcher/activist tends to be technophiliac, technophobic,[17] or critical yet pragmatic in her engagement of the issues at hand.

It is my intention to attempt to understand what frames and theoretical lenses are provided by postcolonial, feminist and diaspora studies scholars in writing about South Asians in the digital diaspora, and how they might help shape the practical activity of trying to build subaltern technological counterspaces (thus leading to a connecting and an expanding base in the second and third bodies of literatures). I begin by carving a theoretical path leading to connections between available approaches to the examination of South Asians in cyberspace. The attempt is based on efforts to further the lines of inquiry and discussion that would lead to the design and building of projects that theoretically and practically connect specific community needs and technologically mediated environments (such as the internet) in order to make technological design work for marginalized populations of the world. To this end, the article is exploratory and

seeks to open up conversations leading to further theoretical and applied connections, while contributing to bodies of literature already in existence.

Virtual communities and South Asian nationalisms

Can South Asian digital diasporas be empowering spaces for women, and can they provide access for the various socio-culturally and materially underprivileged populations of the developing world? Information communication technologies (ICTs), nationalisms, and religious diasporas are inextricably linked within processes of globalization. The world becoming smaller is enabled through a variety of technologies, and the clashing of various cultural, religious, and political discourses and extremisms has material consequences. The processes of production and cultural activities surrounding these processes are both products of an economic globalization and transnationalization that rests on the need for self-contained identity formations (consumer demographics) and a performance of multicultural difference. *Jihad* and other religious fundamentalisms and nationalisms are examples of 'concepts of belonging', and ways of imagining community that are 'currently being mobilized in the service of the larger political and economic demands associated with globalization'.[18] As is the case with the processes of re-bordering and the recent surge of ethno-nationalisms in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, different fundamentalisms based in ethnic and religious identity formations are linked to emerging 'global reconfigurations' that help the imagining of ethnic and religious communities transnationally, while providing selective class-based access to global capital: '[i]t is essential to realize that … concepts of belonging are currently being mobilized in the service of larger political and economic demands associated with globalization'.[19]

What might be the role of virtual communities in fostering such nationalisms? A virtual community can be defined as a social space 'in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both "meet" and "face" … virtual communities [are] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that unite people who were physically separated'.[20] In the case of a diasporic individual for whom home is no longer a concrete geographical place, cyberspace presents itself as an ideal site for the recovery of 'community' and connection with other diasporics with similar backgrounds. For men and women in the diaspora, 'home' already exists within the 'two-dimensionality of memory and nostalgia';[21] therefore, it has been suggested that cyberspace may provide a way for these disembodied minds to make contact with apparently similar beings. This creation of identity by technology is determined in various ways by access to technology, the design of the technologies, and the medium through which the identity will be shaped. The collective imaginations of the people involved will also be restricted by what is perceived as their material, social, cultural, ethnic, religious, and geographical location.

There has been much discussion of the imagining of community in the available literature that examines virtual community formations.[22] Imagining, as these explanations imply, happens on an individual level, where there is an

attempt 'to connect the individual (often personal) experience with macro-socio-logical features, often by translating one directly into the other'.[23] This is related to the imagining of any kind of community online, based in common interests, hobbies, collaboration on projects, professional interests, and so on. For instance, on any listserv (an internet-based open discussion forum), we imagine our readers/audience when posting within an online community based on what the listserv frequently asked questions and information sheets describe; we imagine co-members of the community, a kind of affective/intellectual 'communion'. This imagining does not necessarily connect directly to our various real life communities, or to other imagined ones online.

The other sense in which the term 'imagine' is used in relation to community is related to Benedict Anderson's understanding of imagined communities,[24] framed around national, ethnic, religious, diasporic identity/subject formations. For Ananda Mitra:

> The 'imagination' that binds the members of the electronic group is the common memory of the same putative place of origin from which most of the posters c[o]me. The sense of community is based on an original home where everyone belonged, as well as a sense of a new space where the question of belonging is always problematized. Since the original home is now inaccessible, the Internet space is co-opted to find the same companionship that was available in that original place of residence.[25]

Thus, some researchers examine the socio-cultural manifestations of diasporas online, and write of imagined communities of diasporic postcolonials in cyberspace. Jon Anderson, for instance, suggests that, '[m]uch as Benedict Anderson's creoles of early modernity were crucial to the imagined communities of ethnolinguistic nations that are modernity's signature, so, too, may be the "virtual" communities for the emerging Information Age'.[26] Mitra, in turn, makes a connection between imagining and imaging, indicating ways in which an electronic community 'can textually produce itself, thus imagine itself—as well as present itself to the outside world, and thus produce an image'.[27] He further suggests that there exist opportunities for various peoples in the diaspora to form communities via the internet across place-based geographic boundaries that are based on the constructs of 'commonality and fellowship' while connecting to the 'conditions of existence of diasporic individuals'.[28]

While Anderson and Mitra write of Arab and Indian diasporas online, not specifically focusing on the religious diasporas that have emerged in relation to various fundamentalist nationalisms and have arisen most visibly in the past decade, Amit Rai and Vinay Lal extend discussions of online imagined communities to an examination of religious diasporas, specifically the Hindu Diaspora and the discourses surrounding the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, India, in 1992.[29] (Still others have focused on the gendered nature of these online religious diasporas, with their implicit and explicit objectification of the Hindu woman as an icon of pure Hindu culture.)[30] Rai attempts to interrogate the diasporic publics and counterpublics in the context of Hindu religious fundamentalist activities. He too uses Anderson's concept of imagined

community while arguing that cyberspatial networks 'provide a space for South Asian Hindus to construct and contest identities that are doubly marked by the nightmare of all the dead generations—what we diasporics remember as India— and by the always deferred promises of this new land of opportunity—what is imagined as America'.[31]

Rai's use of the notion of imagined community leads him to examine the style in which diasporic communities are the imagined 'regulatory fictions'[32] seen through the 'totalizing classificatory grid[s]' produced in British colonial times. The performance of diasporic identities in these online communities is thus regulated through historic, political and religious discourses associated with colonial and postcolonial geographic territories and nationalisms.

While researchers such as Mitra use the concept of imagined community implicitly in an effort to examine possibilities for the emergence of diasporic/ subaltern counterspheres and seem not to question whether the internet has the potential to enable a variety of liberatory and counter-hegemonic coalitions, Lal writes explicitly against the celebration of the notion of imagined communities online. Furthermore, he begins to address the linkages between economic globalization, e-commerce and these socio-cultural diasporic cyberspaces by pointing to how 'the agenda of the Internet elites' is linked with currently manifested hierarchies of globalization.[33] Such a global economic climate suggests that, contrary to being a panacea to the world's problems, 'cyberspace represents a more ominous phase of Western colonialism, the homogenization of knowledge and, in tandem, the elimination of local knowledge systems'.[34] The use of information technologies, thus, is situated in a larger socio-cultural ethos that in itself denies the possibility of access and voice to certain populations of the world.

Nation and gender online

Researchers such as Rai also address the gendered nature of online diasporas by pointing out how these discourses engage 'the history of the nationalist resolution of the "Woman's Question' ",[35] which objectified the woman as an icon of cultural purity and the maintainer of the cultural essence of home. An image of the 'New Hindu woman'[36] was produced in such nationalistic discourses. This woman, argues Partha Chatterjee, is the Other of the common woman, who was 'coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, and sexually promiscuous …'.[37] Annanya Bhattacharjee extends Chatterjee's work to write of diasporic South Asians with regard to accusations made against diasporic feminist organizations like Sakhi[38] that westernized and/or feminist women 'have their source in the kind of identities immigrant communities assume'.[39] She examines the problematic ways in which an immigrant community creates a space for itself in a country where it is looked upon a minority. Bhattacharjee feels that the idea of nation as an ideological force is central to the creation of immigrant community identities. Like Chatterjee did in his essay, she too links 'nation-ness' to the 'women's question'.

South Asian women in the diaspora face a double bind in relation to Western feminism and resistance to colonial discourses sometimes implicit in liberal feminist attempts to 'save' the 'oppressed' third-world woman. Western feminist narratives regarding third-world women seem to echo colonial discourses—only in this case, instead of the white man attempting to rescue the brown woman from the brown man, it is a case of the white woman trying to 'enlighten' the 'politically immature' brown woman. Gayathri Spivak discusses this problem in relation to the practice of *sati* within colonial India: '[f]aced with the dialectically interlocking sentences that are constructible as "White men are saving brown women from brown men" and "The women wanted to die", the postcolonial woman intellectual asks the question of simple semiosis—What does this mean?—and begins to plot a history'.[40] In prior work,[41] I explored this bind within online communities of South Asian women. I observed that Indian women are faced with a tension between Indian nationalism's discursive positioning of the *Bharatiya Nari* (Woman of Bharat/India), and Western feminism's complicity with colonial discourses. The Indian woman's expression of agency is complicated by the fact that both these discourses speak for and about her, but do not allow her to speak for herself. In addition, I observed that such discourses are also based in class-specific access to the internet.

Madhavi Mallapragada takes the examination of gendering in South Asian cyberspaces further by examining masculinities produced in the online 'Indian Diaspora'.[42] She examines websites within the context of diasporic female audiences. Mallapragada argues that the articulation of Indianness on such websites idealizes a 'traditionally uppercaste, middle class male Hindu (oftentimes North Indian Hindu) version of cultural tradition and practices'.[43] She refers to this particular dynamic (situated in a modernized postcolonial configuration of class, caste, gender, religious and linguistic hegemonies) as the 'new hegemony … of the "curry brigade," a self-identifying term that circulates in the U.S. based "Silicon India" '.[44]

Rai and Lal trace the production of masculinity in these cyberspaces to a Hindutva re-reading of Vivekananda's work, thereby showing how Hindu fundamentalist movements could remain complicit with Westernization and Modernity, while at the same time insisting on a Hindu identity in opposition to Muslim identity and Western culture. They suggest that the production of a certain type of masculinity was also a strategic articulation in response to 'White masculinity'.[45] However, as Mallapragada points out with regard to the representation of the male IT worker in magazines such as *Silicon India*, this interpretation misses the contradictions of South Asian urban masculine subjectivities in relation to globalization processes and the mobilization of certain kinds of third-world labor in the service of multinational corporations. She writes, therefore, that '[w]hile one easy reading of the more sexualized macho male figure would be to see it as a rejoinder to prevalent mainstream while American perception of Asian male as effeminate … it inadequately addresses … a much more complex interplay of race, gender, sexuality, [religious discourse] and cultural and political power'.[46] This complex interplay is structured around the

feminizing of certain IT-related tasks assigned to third-world technology labor (through offshoring and outsourcing as well as the setting up of technology-related sweat shops, body shops and *maquiladoras* in third-world locations) within the current multinational corporate structure.

Building subaltern counterspheres: cyberfeminism from below?

In the broader context of corporate globalization, Ursula Biemann points to the feminizing of the global industry and digital industry, through her work on the *maquiladora* workers situated along the United States–Mexico border who are 'the producers of the machines that enable cyberspace'.[47] She adds that such workers 'are the new members subscribed to transnational citizenship that will afford mobility and freedom to consume, not for themselves, but for millions of others North of the Border'.[48] If cyberspace is produced at the expense of millions of men and women all over the world who are not even able to enjoy its conveniences, how can we make claims that ICTs are changing the world for the better? Yet, as Laura Augustin points out, 'some of those excluded from much of mainstream society want to include themselves in this new technology, whatever it turns out to be'[49] because they can see how to make new technologies and current processes of globalization work for them in some way. Therefore, '[t]hey [can] see themselves as protagonists of the revolution'.[50]

   Unlike liberal cyberfeminists who tend to equate access to technology with empowerment,[51] critical cyberfeminists are more engaged with issues relating to the politics of race, gender, sexuality, geography and place in the context of globalization. Connections need to be made between these activities and the literature that examines socio-cultural aspects of South Asian digital diasporas in order to produce cyberfeminist strategies and tactics for intervention. Such strategies and tactics would open up categories not only for scholarly analyses, but also for applied methods for the building of projects that theoretically and practically connect contextual community needs and technologically mediated environments—such as the internet—in order to make technological design work within diverse local contexts to the advantage of historically underprivileged populations.

Part II: Practice

What (academic, practical and everyday) discourses and histories are invoked in the juxtaposing of cyberfeminism, e-commerce and transnationalism within the context of a variety of communities of production situated within diverse socio-cultural and economic spacio-temporalities? What new utterances might we add in order to disrupt and transform the linear and oppressive teleology of technology, development and progress discourses? In an effort to find answers to such questions, since 1995 I have been involved with designing and maintaining e-mail discussion spaces and websites concerned with third-world women's identities. My theoretical and applied intervention in this area of research and

practice began with my dissertation-related work of studying South Asian women online,[52] which led to my building e-spaces in relation to South Asian female subjectivities. In addition to a few scattered websites,[53] my efforts involved starting and maintaining e-mail discussion lists such as *third-world-women*, *women-writing-culture* and *sa-cyborgs* as a member of the Spoon Collective.[54] My interest in the design of technological environments has also led me to investigate offline real-world locations. My most recent collaboration has been with a non-governmental organization fieldworker, Annapurna Mamidipudi, who works with handloom weavers in Hyderabad, India. Collaboratively, we investigate socio-cultural and economic structures that shape access to and use of available ICTs. We continue to work on trying to design e-commerce from below by trying to find ways in which the internet could be used for and by the weaver without compromising her/his autonomy in the process of marketing goods within a global economy. At the same time, I have also been investigating critical pedagogical possibilities of engaging digital media (such as digital imaging and digital video) production within higher education contexts in the American Midwest.[55]

I must emphasize that my attempts at designing and building e-spaces are limited to the use of available software and hardware. Since most of this was not designed and put together with the everyday contexts and problems of marginalized populations of the world in mind, my attempts to think through the possible design and use of such technologies in counter-mainstream ways can only be tactical. My past and current collaborations do not include collaborations with software developers or with hardware designers. Therefore, when I refer to myself as a designer and builder of e-spaces, I am a consumer first of available hardware and technology and, only after that, can I be regarded as a designer and producer of online content. The production aspects with which I am involved include shaping of online spaces such as e-mail lists and websites through discursive (textual) descriptions, setting up the technical features of access for such e-spaces, and the actual designing and building of web-based interfaces.

In my attempts at designing and building websites and e-mail lists, I have encountered limitations not only in the form of available software and hardware design, but also in the lack of visibility of the socio-economic and linguistic diversity of populations that access and participate in such contexts,[56] classificatory grids situated within Western academic discourse. Labels, definitions and categories such as gender, race and class are shaped through discussions and articulations from within a westernized academy, and are situated in contexts that are culturally, economically and historically specific to only certain populations around the world. This means that populations are allowed a voice only within hegemonically available categories and labels. Discourse, itself, however well-intentioned and democratic the rhetoric and ideals contained within it, limits the ability produce counterspheres.

Sa-cyborgs

My experience within SAWnet, a women-only South Asian e-mail discussion

list,[57] during the summer of 1995[58] led me to ask questions regarding the design and production aspect of interactive internet spaces such as e-mail discussion lists. In an effort to understand the technical and applied processes of founding and maintaining a discussion list focused on women and creative expression, I started the e-mail discussion lists *third-world-women*, *women-writing-culture*, and *sa-cyborgs*, with the help of the Spoon Collective, as mentioned earlier. Over the years, *sa-cyborgs*' policies and list description have been changed periodically, based on problems and conflicts that have occurred.[59] One of the more recent information sheets describes the list as follows:

> This list focuses on interactive, experimental creative writing with an implicit focus on gender, race, class, caste, sexuality, age, geographical location. identity/political/economic/ spacio-temporal/geographic … issues pertaining to voice and voicelessness, silence and resistance, Self and Other narratives … "women" produce "writerly texts" (writerly texts— see Barthes—interrupt conventions of reading/writing and require readers to participate in meaning making—online this can happen visibly only if you participate on-list … "readerly texts," on the other hand, are those which fulfill our expectations of conventions that allow readers to be passive consumers … this is not the goal of this "list"). Participation is thus necessary and invited.

Note that the focus above is on 'wo-men's' subjectivities and creative 'self' writing.

To illustrate the nature of the discussions that occur on *sa-cyborgs*, I have selected a particular exchange in which it appears that the participants are trying to tease out the notion of 'silence'; is it ignorance, oppression or a refusal? The following are selections from this 'thread', preserved in the form in which they were posted, including individual signature files.

From owner-sa-cyborgs@lists.village.virginia.edu Wed Feb 3 21:19:08 1999
Date: Wed, 3 Feb 1999 21:12:01 -0500 (EST)
From: "cyberdiva (aka Radhika Gajjala)" <radhik@bgnet.bgsu.edu>
Subject: Re: Fwd: Re: silence
On Thu, 4 Feb 1999, schizoid wrote:
>>On Wed, 3 Feb 1999,
>>cyberdiva wrote:
>>>"The risk of mistaking the 'culture of silence' for ignorance or indifference is one to
>>>which the powerful are inherently prone."
>>>
>>>Deborah Eade — 1998
>>
>>If silence isn't ignorance or indifference, then what does it signify please?
>>
>>paula
>>
>
>i would say that it (meaning 'silence') could mean a refusal of the current paradigm — which is

> *clearly one of the modes of resistance adopted by the Zapatist rebels in Mexico, when*
> *the*
> *situation turned decidedly violent through methods of low-intensity warfare employed by*
> *the*
> *government.*
>
> *schizoid*
> ———————
>
> *"We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which*
> *others*
> *have made of us"*
> *—Franz Fanon*
>

Depending on the context of the silence — it could mean a refusal or it could mean forced
oppression -but is it fair to call it ignorance?

From owner-sa-cyborgs@lists.village.virginia.edu Thu Feb 4 12:11:42 1999
From: "Annapurna M" <mannapurna@hotmail.com>
Subject: Re: your mail
Date: Thu, 04 Feb 1999 09:10:59 PST

who gives me the right to question …
if you dont have the right to remain silent..

do i explain why i ask a question..
that you should explain your silence …

is it enough for me to say 'i want to know'
should i not say 'do you want to tell me'

and if you stay silent..
does that make you ignorant
or me deaf …——————————————
If silence isn't ignorance or indifference, then what does it
signify please?
——————————————
hurt?
helplessness?
being mute?
lack of comprehension?
fear?
anger?
discretion?
restraint?
despair … ?
… the list can go o … .

—————————————-
this is rather like the 'have you stopped beating your wife' question …
the answer can only be 'yes im ignorant' or 'no you're deaf'
maybe you could rephrase the question?
a.

From owner-sa-cyborgs@lists.village.virginia.edu Thu Feb 11 11:19:37 1999
Date: Thu, 11 Feb 1999 11:18:56 -0500 (EST)
From: cyberdiva ＜radhik@bgnet.bgsu.edu＞
Subject: so..

so … if silence is not ignorance,
is it not silence
that shapes the "speaking" to name it as
ignorance?
as silence shapes speech … .

r

—————————————————————————————
Radhika Gajjala.
—————————————————————————————
"Rivers know this: There is no hurry. We shall get there some day."
-From Pooh's Little Instruction Book
—————————————————————————————

From owner-sa-cyborgs@lists.village.virginia.edu Thu Feb 11 13:17:46 1999
From: "Annapurna M" ＜mannapurna@hotmail.com＞
Subject: Re: so..
Date: Thu, 11 Feb 1999 10:17:00 PST

my silence is response
to your speech

a weapon
against your ignorance

a taunt
to your insensitivity

a plea
for understanding

restraint
against your arrogance

discretion
in the face of your strength

i find i like my silence
more than your speech …

53

What makes possible certain kinds of exchanges online? In order to understand this, we need to examine various configurations and combinations of socio-cultural, structural, technical and economic constraints that inhibit possibilities for the emergence of various subjectivities online. In other words, we need to be aware that online discourse is shaped by the socio-cultural and economic framing of online encounters through the writing of the description of the list, linguistic restrictions based on the impossibility of using any other script but that enabled by the English alphanumeric keyboard and software interface, the varying speed and availability of internet connections, the implicit netiquette requirements, as well as the structure and physical form including the user's posture and negotiation of her everyday life as she fits the desktop computer into her daily schedule.

Conclusion

If cyberfeminist agendas are to produce subversive countercultures or to succeed in changing existing technological environments so that they are empowering to women and men of lesser material and socio-cultural privilege the world over, it is important to examine how individuals and communities are situated within the complex global and local contexts mediated by unequal relations of power. In addition, it is important not to de-historicize digital contexts by erasing the complicity of Western technology and science in colonialist projects. Such a contextual examination necessitates a strategic convergence of various critical theoretical perspectives.

In this paper, I have mapped out a path through available literature on related topics based on some of the primary concerns that emerge out of my continuing engagement with issues regarding the collaborative designing and composing of digital networks. Such a mapping is an attempt to provide applied solutions for the problem of designing and building technological environments that actually work to empower marginalized populations, rather than continuing to contribute to existing systems that devalue, oppress and exploit them.

Notes and references

1. Radha Hegde and Raka Shome, 'Postcolonial scholarship—productions and directions: an interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *Communication Theory*, Vol 12, No 3, 2002, pp 271–286. The term 'subaltern' is a term used by the Subaltern Studies Group, an interdisciplinary organization of South Asian scholars led by Ranajit Guha, and is a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.
2. Radhika Gajjala and Annapurna Mamidipudi, 'Cyberfeminism, technology and international "development"', *Gender and Development*, Vol 17, No 2, 1999, pp 8–16.
3. See, for example, the Website: *Cyberdiva* http://www.cyberdiva.org.
4. See, for example, past and continuing themes in publications such as *Silicon India*. Website: http://www.siliconindia.com accessed, 2nd September 2003.
5. See, for example, Amit S. Rai, 'India on-line: electronic bulletin boards and the construction of a diasporic Hindu identity', *Diaspora*, Vol 4, No 1, 1995, pp 31–57; and Radhika Gajjala, 'An interrupted postcolonial/feminist cyberethnography: complicity and resistance in the "cyberfield"', *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol 2, No 2, 2002, pp 177–193.

6. See, for example, Richard Heeks, *India's Software Industry* (London: Sage Publications, 1996).

7. Arvind Singhal and Everett Rogers, *India's Communication Revolution From Bullock Carts to Cyber Marts* (New York: Sage Publications, 2001) p 17.

8. Vinay Lal, 'The politics of history on the internet: cyber-diasporic Hinduism and the North American Hindu Diaspora', *Diaspora,* Vol 8, No 2, 1999, p 140.

9. By digital diaspora, I mean socio-cultural formations of men and women online who trace their origins to South Asia, wherever they may be situated in real geographical space.

10. Lal, *op cit*, Ref 8, pp 137–172.

11. As, I have argued in earlier work, online interactions are both texts and speaking subjects, it is possible to examine them from both a perspective that sees them as 'readable' as static texts (studies that examine online interactions through a textual analysis or content analysis framework tend to privilege this textual aspect) as well as from an anthropological (ethnographic) perspective, where online interactions are subjects in formation. See Radhika Gajjala, *The Sawnet Refusal: An Interrupted Cyberethnography* (University of Pittsburgh doctoral dissertation, Dissertation Abstracts International, 99–00131, 1998).

12. I am referring to the act of participating online as 'consumption'—and not production—even though some of these authors might consider that to be production of discourse, because although the people who interact online exert agency with regard to the content, they do not actually design and produce the e-space. Design and production of e-spaces are done at various levels online and offline, starting with the design of the hardware, software, and then the socio-cultural and ideological framing of netiquette, as well as the allowed and disallowed content for any particular e-space.

13. Wendy Harcourt, *Women on the Internet: Creating New Cultures in Cyberspace* (London: Zed Press, 1999).

14. See, for example, Faith Wilding and Maria Fernandez (eds), 'Feminism, difference, and global capital', in Solfrank (ed), *Old Boys Network Next Cyberfeminist International* (Hamburg: Hein & Co., 1999); and Radhika Gajjala and Annapurna Mamidipudi, *op cit*, Ref 2.

15. See information available at websites such as http://www.awid.org (Association of Women in Development), accessed, 2nd September 2003.

16. See, for instance, some contributions to the online journal *Rhizomes*, No 4 at the website http://www.rhizomes.net, accessed, 2nd September 2003; and contributions and discussions to the virtual seminar series on gender and ICTs at the website *GAINS/UN-INTRAW*, http://www.un-instraw.org, accessed, 2nd September 2003.

17. For a discussion of technophilia and technophobia in relation to feminism and the technological fix, see Carol Stabile, *Feminism and the Technological Fix* (Manchester: Manchester University Press and St Martin's Press, 1994).

18. Claudia Sadowski-Smith, 'US border theory, globalization, and ethnonationalisms in post-wall Eastern Europe', *Diaspora*, Vol 8, No 1, 1999, pp 3–22.

19. *Ibid*, p. 8.

20. Roseanne Stone Allucquerre, 'Virtual systems', in Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (eds), *Incorporations* (New York: Zone, 1992).

21. Indira Karamcheti, 'The shrinking Himalayas', *Diaspora*, Vol 2, No 2, 1992.

22. See, for example, Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993); and Nessim Watson 'Why we argue about virtual community: a case study of the Phish.Net fan community', in Steve Jones (ed), *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety* (New York: Sage, 1997).

23. Website: Jon Anderson, *Cybernauts of the Arab Diaspora: Electronic Mediation in Transnational Cultural Identities*, http://www.bsos.umd.edu/CSS97/papers/anderson.html, accessed 30 September 2002.

24. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

25. Ananda Mitra, 'Virtual commonality: looking for India on the internet', in Steve Jones (ed), *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety* (New York: Sage, 1997) pp 55–79.

26. Anderson, *op cit*, Ref 23 p. 1.

27. Mitra, *op cit*, Ref 25, p. 54.

28. *Ibid.*

29. In 1992, groups of Hindu fundamentalists stormed a Muslim mosque (the Babri Masjid), claiming that it was built on the ruins of a temple that marked the original location of Ayodhya, the birth place of the Hindu mythological avatar and idol Rama (worshipped as a God by practicing Hindus).

30. Madhavi Mallapragada (2000), 'Indian Women in the US Diaspora and the "Curry Brigade": the politics of nation, gender and sexuality on the web'. Presented at *Constructing Cyberculture(s): Performance, Pedagogy, and Politics in Online Spaces*, 6–7 April, University of Maryland, USA.

31. Rai, *op cit*, Ref 5, p. 31.

32. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

33. Lal, *op cit*, Ref 8, p 140.
34. *Ibid*, p 141.
35. Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Kum Kum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), pp 232–253.
36. Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Kum Kum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), pp 232–253.
37. Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Kum Kum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), pp 232–253.
38. Annanya Bhattacharjee, 'The habit of ex-nomination: nation, woman and the Indian immigrant bourgeois', *Public Culture*, Vol 5, No 1, 1992.
39. Sakhi for South Asian Women was founded in New York City in 1989.
40. Gayathri Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
41. Gajjala, *op cit*, Ref 5.
42. Mallapragada, *op cit*, Ref 30, p 9.
43. Mallapragada, *op cit*, Ref 30, p 9.
44. Mallapragada, *op cit*, Ref 30, p 9.
45. Rai, *op cit*, Ref 5, p. 31.
46. Mallapragada, *op cit*, Ref 30, p 9.
47. Ursula Biemann 'Performing the border', in Cornelia Solfrank (ed), *Old Boys Network Next Cyberfeminist International* (Hamburg: Hein & Co., 1999), p 36.
48. *Ibid*, p. 36.
49. Laura Augustin, 'They speak, but who listens?', in Wendy Harcourt (ed), *Women on the Internet: Creating new Cultures in Cyberspace* (London: Zed Press, 1999), p 152.
50. Laura Augustin, 'They speak, but who listens?', in Wendy Harcourt (ed), *Women on the Internet: Creating new Cultures in Cyberspace* (London: Zed Press, 1999), p 152.
51. Gajjala, *op cit*, Ref 11.
52. *Ibid*.
53. All my attempts at building websites are currently linked to http://www.cyberdiva.org
54. While my activities as a member of the Spoon Collective include the technical maintenance of the *sa-cyborgs* e-mail discussion list, I do not consider this to be part of my productive designing activity since, in this particular instance, I took over the management of a pre-existing and pre-designed list. The Spoon Collective is a group of individuals who run discussion lists on a variety of topics via a server funded by the Institute for the Advancement of Technology in the Humanities http://lists.village.virginia.edu/ ~ spoons, accessed, 2nd September 2003.
55. See Websites: http://www.un-instraw.org, accessed; and http://www.rhizomes.net, accessed.
56. There is a linguistic and socio-cultural hegemony in terms of what and how something is said online, thus constraining the ability of even those with access by requiring them to fit into pre-existing social expectations such as a westernized race and class-based netiquette. Diversity of linguistic expression is also very difficult since English is the default language on the internet.
57. SAWnet (South Asian Women's Network) website: http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/, accessed, 2nd September 2003.
58. See Gajjala, *op cit*, Ref 11; and Gajjala, *op cit*, Ref 5.
59. These changes can be viewed in the public web archives of the list at http://lists.village.virginia.edu/ ~ spoons.