

Rupkatha Journal

On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities

An Online Open Access Journal
ISSN 0975-2935
www.rupkatha.com

Volume VI, Number 1, 2014

Special Issue on LGBT & Queer Studies

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Indexing and abstracting

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Three Book Reviews

Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect and Queer Sociality

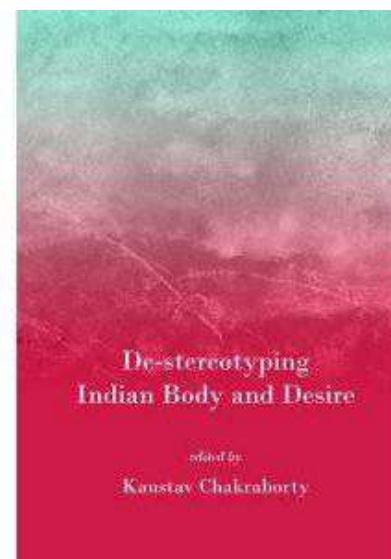
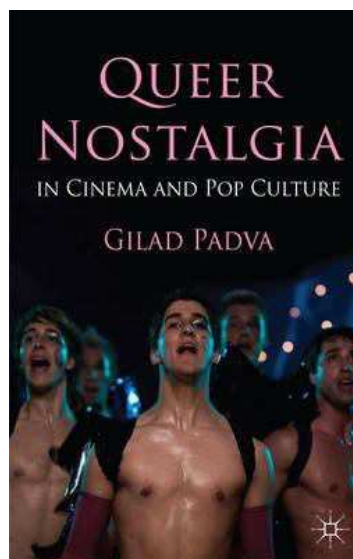
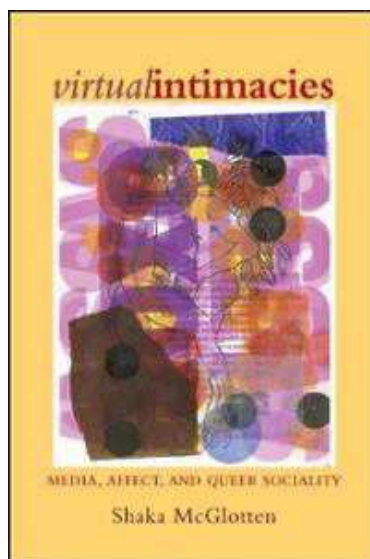
Shaka McGlotten: SUNY Press, 2013.

Queer Nostalgia in Cinema and Pop Culture

Gilad Padva: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014

De-stereotyping Indian Body and Desire

Edited by Kaustav Chakraborty. Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013



Review by

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It is not every day one comes across a fascinating book like *Virtual Intimacies*. Shaka McGlotten has put together a very interesting ethnographic account of queer men's negotiation with the digital world. A study of affect within cultural studies has seen a growth in recent years with several works of scholarship exploring this area. *Virtual Intimacies* is an important intervention not only in the field of digital media and communication but also more largely within contemporary queer studies. The relationship between digital culture and the queer identity has been commented upon by many including Sharif Mowlabocus' *Gaydar Culture* and Christopher Pullen's edited volume *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*. It would not be wrong to say McGlotten's

Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities (ISSN 0975-2935), Vol. VI, No. 1, 2014.

Ed. Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay & Tarun Tapas Mukherjee

URL of the Issue: <http://rupkatha.com/v6n1.php>

URL of the review: http://rupkatha.com/V6/n1/21_Three_Book_Reviews.pdf

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work extends some of the boundaries of these previous works. McGlotten places himself at the centre of this enquiry, as he navigates the digitally mediated queer sites which entangle the lives of queer people both online and offline. His own position as a gay man of colour informs the way he navigates and understands the politics of and possibilities of intimacy on the cyberspace. This auto ethnography gives this book a much more stronger and personal feel. He argues that that fluidity of the cyberspace and the intimate possibilities that it (supposedly) affords have been punctured by corporeality (3). Particularities such as race and class have an obvious impact on the possibilities that this space can provide. Queer spaces as he further argues were spaces where normal rules of social intercourse were suspended, whilst none of these were 'truly liberatory' (4), they are testament to the expansiveness that characterises queer sexual practices.

What is interesting about the book is also how McGlotten notes that 'Janus faced' effect of digital culture in intimate encounters. Whilst on one level it has expanded areas of sexual encounters it has also foreclosed the possibility of unpredictable desire. The author's multisited approach, describing a range of encounters over chat rooms, instant messaging, tweets, porn, hook up apps, multiplayer online games and dating sites reflects on the very nature of queer culture on contemporary times.

For instance in his exploration of the massively multiplayer online game World of Warcraft, he describes the intimate possibilities that the game affords. He focuses on two of the most common forms of intimacy that Word of Warcraft affords its players- group and solo play. McGlotten explains that one way in which casual players take part in the game is by joining other players in groups called guilds. These guilds provide a form of shared experience through affiliations and affinities of fellow players. However as the author further points out the use of epithets such as 'gay' and 'fag' are not uncommon in these spaces and as a for of response several GLBT friendly guilds such as Oz and Amazon have sprung up in recent years which is an example of how 'feelings of shared belonging caved in and gave way to instrumental forms of play' (53). In the following chapter 'Feeling Black and Blue' (which is also one of my favourite chapters in the book), McGlotten asks what it feels like to be a black queer man in online gay sex publics. Narrating his own and experience alongside those of other black gay men, McGlotten discusses the ambivalent and often anxious racialisation of desires within these spaces. The utopic idea that the internet allows a borderless, raceless and genderless existence has been challenged by many critics. McGlotten adds to these growing voices by exploring the experiences of black gay men and the racialised (and often fetishised) patterning of navigating desire. The chapter is organised around three dominant feelings- anxiety, paranoia and optimism. He concludes by noting that queer optimism opens up alternative and emergent gay practices that help dislocate the constraints imposed through race and towards a 'more than representational account' (76) of black queer life.

The strength of this book is its accessibility for readers. Unlike many academic books steeped in jargon, McGlotten's work is easy to follow. His language in no way impedes the intellectual rigour that is the backbone of the book. His case studies offer up new avenues for further exploration as he highlights the creativity and resilience of the

queer community in navigating and building social worlds using alternative spaces and technology in ways that were never intended. The issue of emotions within contemporary queer culture is also explored in the second book by Gilad Padva.

Gilad Padva's *Queer Nostalgia* explores popular representations of queer nostalgia in films and music videos. He sees nostalgia as a means for empowerment, celebrating queer (counter) culture and memorising queer heritage. Padva is aware that nostalgia is often criticised for its manipulative and conservative nature (6), however he attests that nostalgia allows queer people to critically engage with their past experiences and this form of retelling the past is a major part of the queer heritage and development of a queer legacy. The book is divided into nine interconnected chapters which explore the diverse aspects of queer nostalgia in popular culture.

Chapter 1 sets the scene with an exploration of *Summer of the Sixties* and in a way questioning the domesticated vision of a counterculture movement that has been a controversial and rebellious era. He notes that this construction of the past illuminates the controversy of a produced authenticity and invented memory (32). Chapter 2 carries some of these discussions forward analysing Tom Fitzgerald's film *Beefcake* which sees the film as an alternative and erotic micro history in a nostalgic mode of a modern sexuality. Applying Foucault's work on power and body politics, Padva notes that *Beefcake* moves beyond just a lustful representation of the male body, rather it 'provides alternative knowledge of the male body's erotic potential and same sex attraction' (54). Countering this masculine representation of the gay body is built in Chapter 4 which examines the politics of effeminacy and sissyness through an exploration of Todd Haynes's *Dottie Gets Spanked* and *Velvet Goldmine*. The films according to Padva appropriates and politicises the power and positive attitude towards effeminacy which has in recent years been challenged even within the queer community through growing femmophobia. Padva explains 'feminostalgia can be highly valuable. Recognising and respecting one's effeminate nostalgia can be a healing process that reflects a gradual coming to terms with one's early transgression' (92).

Chapter 5 moves towards more contemporary visual texts- Todd Stephen's cinematic parodies *Another Gay movie* and *Another Gay sequel*. The chapter focuses on the celebration of sexual anarchy and erotic pubescence through youth nostalgia which appropriates some of the camp and drag elements of the earlier films. The carnivalesque aesthetics of these films comically criticise contemporary homophobia, evangelism and homonormativity. Another interesting chapter is 'Saint Gaga: Lady Gaga' Nostalgic Yearning for Queer Mythology' (Chapter 8). Lady Gaga has been the subject of much scholarly debate including queer approaches to her work. Her music videos, off screen persona and general disregard for mainstream culture has made her an influential gay icon. He wraps up the book with a look at Isaac Julien's influential films *Looking for Langston*. It did feel slightly ironic (especially after McGlotten's work) to see the issue of black queer sexualities reduced to a single chapter in this book. As Padva himself acknowledges, the particularities of black queer nostalgia and its political discontents are markedly different and focusing some more chapters on the intersections of race and

sexuality would have been highly desirable for a book such as this. Padva's work is exciting, interesting and original and will remain an important book in the field.

The next book by stark contrast, Kaustav Chakraborty's *De-stereotyping Indian body* moves away from the transnational focus of the previous two books instead focusing on the representation and reading of the Indian body. The editor has stated that the endeavour of this ambitious volume is to 'demystify the politics behind stereotyping and to advocate the justification of stereotyping'. Unfortunately the book does not always live up to its ambition. Other than the very illuminating and interesting introduction by R. Raj Rao which truly sets the scene in motion in evoking new areas for examination, most of the chapters lack the critical rigour displayed by the introduction. Applying a range of interdisciplinary work from various disciplines Rao constructs the notion of interchangeability, gender performance and sexual politics within contemporary social belonging. The theoretical structuring of this chapter paves the way for the other chapters to follow. Sarottama Majumdar's *Disempowering Gender Normative Desire* discourses begins by looking at the parameters imposed through cultural relativism. She follows this by invoking Foucault's work on power in interrogating the very concept of normativity itself. The following chapter by Chilka Ghosh (which is also probably one of the better chapters of this book) looks at a range of sculptures and paintings to question our understanding of beauty, gaze and body stereotypes. Two other very interesting chapters is Anomitra Biswas's exploration of the film *Kaminey* to examine how desire is routed through the Bollywood Cinema and Aparna Prem's chapter which looks at the male gaze and the female body in South Indian cinema.

The volume opens up a new area of which needs critical examination and the editor needs to be congratulated for this, but the lack of fully developing some of the chapters (The book was born out of a conference and I suspect the chapters are conference proceedings) leaves a lot more to be desired. The editor should have been a little more merciless with some of the weaker chapters and instead of publishing the volume as conference proceedings developed some of the finer chapters to full length contributions.

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