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Yoni Ki Baat

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Refiguring the South Asian American Tradition Bearer: Performing the “Third Gender” in *Yoni Ki Baat*

In recent years, a growing group of scholars has begun to draw upon queer theory as they research aspects of LGBTQ folk performances and texts from around the globe. In the process, folklore scholars have become increasingly intrigued by bodies that appear to transgress dimorphism, and complicate binary oppositions like male/female. Performances of gender identity and sexuality by hijras in South Asia have awakened audiences' imaginings since the Kama Sutra period (Gupta 2005:180). In folktale, dance, song, religious epic, and popular culture, the figure of the hijra often evokes a liminal play of “otherness.” Commonly known as the “third gender”—a conceptual space outside of typical Western constructs—hijra individuals engage with varied notions of transsexual, transgender, intersex, cross-dresser, eunuch, or sexual fluidity. This article focuses on a feminist appropriation of the hijra within Yoni Ki Baat, a South Asian American version of The Vagina Monologues. The authors explore how the figure of the hijra—drawn from South Asian folk narratives, religious discourse, and popular culture—might be used strategically by social activists in political performance narratives to (1) encourage a complicated sense of sexually ambiguous or queer practices and identities, and (2) acknowledge individuals facing social oppression due to their marginalized identities. As such, their approach conceptualizes performance as both a relational space and as a space in which to wonder about questions of relationality (Madison and Hamera 2006; Schechner 1990).

Keywords

AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Activism, performance, performativity, witnessing

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Most Hindus are familiar with, and quite often enjoy, tales with sexually ambiguous themes. The masculinity of a hero is never threatened when he dons female attire. No one censors the tale of a man who becomes a woman. No one is offended by the tale of a woman who marries another woman. Indeed, a god's androgyny makes him worthy of adoration. This, however, does not mean that the average Hindu is comfortable with 'queer' identities.

—Pattanaik 2002:5

Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward dawning futurity. . . . Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.

—Muñoz 2009:1

SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S ROLE as "tradition bearers" within their diasporic communities has been the focus of much research in the fields of folklore, American studies, women's studies, and anthropology (Garlough 2008; Gopinath 2005; Purkayastha 2005; Sharma 2010). Often, this research begins by documenting the rise in South Asian immigration during the 1960s Brain Drain. It then points toward the ways women in private homes, ethnic schools, and public performance contexts played central roles in communicating the artistic merit and cultural significance of folk dance, folk song, cooking, and folk crafts—frequently within the framework of a national ethos (Nair and Balaji 2008). These South Asian American communities have continued to grow. At present, nearly 3.4 million South Asians live in the United States, hailing from home countries as diverse as Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, or diasporic contexts like Africa, Guyana, and Trinidad/Tobago.¹ Today, many South Asian immigrants continue to demonstrate an eagerness for teaching their children about their cultural heritage (Shankar 2008). Some educational contexts—such as the School of Indian Languages and Cultures in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota—offer progressive educational opportunities that reflect a diversity of languages, regional cultures, histories, and lifestyles (Garlough 2013). In other settings, participants tend to re-invent conservative elements of South Asian culture such that "US multiculturalism is joined with desi conservatism to invoke certain aspects of desi culture as desi culture tout court" (Prashad 2000:113).

Indeed, diasporic folk performances and broader cultural practices are not simply entertaining. In terms of recognition and identity politics, they also allow for individuals to publicly ally themselves with burgeoning communities. However, aligning oneself with South Asian identity certainly does not assure an equal voice for all immigrants (Sharma 2010). Instead, for example, folklore performances at India Day or Pakistan Day events tend to promote a "model minority" image for South Asian American and mainstream American audiences (Maira 2002). Here, participants are encouraged to publicly demonstrate "culturally authentic" selves, in the hopes of engendering a sense of belonging to a homeland and being welcomed as citizens into US national culture. As a result, those who depart from the fixed repertoire of US multicultural and desi conservatism, such as individuals identifying as queers or feminists, are often silenced or ignored (Das Gupta 2006).

What interests us in this article are the ways South Asian American folk practices, performances, and narratives are critically appropriated by young, progressive South Asian American women who critically engage with the notion of “tradition bearer” to (1) call attention to the social marginalization and disacknowledgment faced by many community members, (2) increase civic activism and community participation, (3) articulate experiences of socio-cultural change, (4) preserve community diversity, and (5) encourage acknowledgment rather than recognition or identity politics. More specifically, in this article, we offer a case study that documents how college-age, South Asian American women from Madison, Wisconsin, refigure their sense of “tradition bearer” to promote discussion of gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ issues within an annual South Asian feminist performance context called *Yoni Ki Baat* (YKB; Conversation about the Vagina²).

From this framework, we engage with a YKB performance written and enacted by Ayesha. Here, she strategically interprets South Asian folklore related to the lives of *hijras*. Who are hijras? Hijras in Pakistan and India often self-identify as “third gender”—individuals who identify as neither female nor male (Bose and Bhattacharyya 2007). Notions of the hijra, found in classical Hinduism, were divided into four categories: the male eunuch, the hermaphrodite, the testicle voided, and the female eunuch. In this way, Hindu traditions acknowledged the existence of sexual ambiguity (Nanda 1992:177). Today, South Asian hijra communities are diverse and may include people (typically born with male physiology) who are transgender, transsexual, eunuch, cross-dresser, transvestite, and some who are born intersex. Some hijras forsake sexuality entirely, choosing not to favor a specific sexual orientation. When entering into a hijra community, some individuals take part in an initiation rite called *nirwaan* in which the scrotum, testicles, and penis are removed. While neither castration nor *nirwaan* rites necessarily mean renouncement of sexuality or sexual desire, but merely renouncement of male insertive sexual performance,³ the act of *nirwaan* socially bestows sacred powers to some hijras as a result of transmutation of sexual energy. Subsequently, many hijras play important roles in the folk customs associated with blessings at weddings and birth ceremonies (Nanda 1992). Although many of their ritual practices are well-kept secrets, their powers have made them the subjects of many myths, tales, and legends (Bakshi 2004:213). Indeed, representations of hijras in rituals, rites of passage ceremonies, folktales, mythology, urban legends, and folk art have allowed hijras to create a culturally significant and institutionalized—albeit marginalized—space within South Asian societies. With more than 5 million hijras in India alone, this community has gained a new sort of notoriety. Scholars researching LGBTQ issues have put them forward as “an ideal case in the transnational system of ‘alternative’ gender/sexuality” (Reddy 2005:2).

In particular, research on hijras has been influential in complicating our consideration of people who, in particular places, cultures, and time, contest and potentially transcend the categories of male and female. This would include the cultural practices and performances of *serrers* in Africa, *berdache* in North Native America, *kathoe* in Thailand, *fafafine* in Polynesia, *meti* in Nepal, or *xanith* in Oman, to name but a few (Nanda 1990; Gupta 2005; Reddy 2007; Reddy and Nanda 2009). In South Asia, the figure of the hijra suggests a liminal play of “otherness”—a category that occupies

a conceptual space outside of typical Western constructs of sex and gender (Gillis, Howie, and Munford 2007; Herdt 1994; Reddy 2007; Nanda 1990). Representations in colonial documents and popular literature are often sensational, evoking exotic images of eunuchs advising rulers in courts or stoically monitoring the sexual activities of harem girls (Reddy 2005). Yet in contemporary society, many hijras struggle daily with social exclusion, poverty, police harassment, and discrimination that preclude them from mainstream employment (www.humsafar.org). Following in the footsteps of countries like Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Germany, Indian “law” finally “recognizes” the third gender, offering previously denied access to social welfare services, as well as minority rights protection, as of April 2014. However, social stigma remains (rooted in religious and British colonial social codes), and the Indian government is not progressive in their approach to LGBTQ issues in general. For example, in December 2013, the Indian Supreme Court upheld a law criminalizing gay sex, prohibiting hijras and others from engaging in such consensual sexual relations.

In focusing on Ayesha's performance of hijra folklife, we build upon the work of a growing group of scholars studying queer folklore. Drawing upon queer theory, many of these folklore scholars have become increasingly intrigued with the concept of ambiguity: specifically with bodies, sexualities, genders, and performances that seem to resist traditional types of categorization (Azzolina 1996; Conner and Sparks 2004; Dresser 1974, 1994; Goodwin 2000; Greenhill 1995; Heller 1993; Laude 1993; O'Drain 1986; Stewart and Hamer 1995; Sullivan 2003; Turner 1993). The widening range of queer folklore research includes examples like Dundes's (1985) study on homosexuality in American boys' games, Newall's (1986) work on the marginalization of homosexuality in folklife, Goodwin's (1989) research on gay folklore and acculturation in Middle America, Mills's (1985) research on folk figures in transvestite disguise in Afghanistan, Hansen's (1992, 2002) important work on play and also the performances of Indian female impersonators, Greenhill's (1997) research on cross-dressing ballads, Turner's (1993) article on the queer politics of lesbian folklorists, and Pattanaik's (2002) *Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore*, to name but a few.

Our project grows from our shared research interest in South Asian political performances and folk culture. Christine—a gender and women's studies professor and folklorist—began her early research in Gujarat, India, in 1995, and continues to work there today. There, she conducts fieldwork with grassroots feminist organizations that seek to improve the lives of marginalized women in their local communities. Her research focuses particularly upon the ways traditional women's folklore is often critically appropriated by feminist activists and featured in political street plays, protest songs, and poster art to address issues such as domestic abuse, sexual violence, and female infanticide. Recently, she has been exploring the development of LGBTQ politics in Gujarat, particularly the ways it is (and is not) in dialogue with traditional hijra cultures. Christine also conducts research in the United States with South Asian American feminist groups who use theater and folk performance to engender acknowledgment and spur deliberation about social and political exigencies facing immigrant communities.

Ayesha was born in Pakistan, but sees herself as a product of many global influences—of ideas and ideologies imported into Pakistan, alongside food, media,

industrial goods, and World Bank and International Monetary Fund policies. As a child, she witnessed the relentless face of martial law in the form of General Zia ul Haq's military regime, several failed attempts at the restoration of democracy, and another military coup by General Musharraf in 1999. She also observed the effects of the Hudood Ordinances on women and sexual minorities, along with perpetual religious violence between Shias and Sunnis, and the "otherizing" of ethnic minorities.⁴ However, theater provided a means through which she could channel her political activism and challenge the status quo, if only in an indirect way—through farce, humor, and allegory—and she became part of a street theater group in Pakistan. While earning a PhD in Medical Anthropology, Ayeshah has spearheaded the formation of *Yoni Ki Baat* and the grassroots feminist collective called South Asian Sisters, in Madison, Wisconsin. Our decision to co-author this paper reflects our commitment to combining folklore, critical theory, and feminist performance.

In the first section of our article, Christine lays out the historical background and progressive political context of YKB. She describes the ways this performance opportunity may empower South Asian American women to write and enact autobiographical and fictional monologues about topics such as domestic violence, sexual violence, demeaning representations in mass media, sex positivity, sexual orientation, and LGBTQ politics. In the second section, Christine considers significant aspects of hijra folklore and folklife that ground Ayeshah's performance, while Ayeshah discusses Muslim and Pakistani historical and contemporary perspectives on hijras. Finally, the third section provides a personal account, written by Ayeshah, that reflects upon her performance in YKB. Specifically, how might the figure of the hijra in traditional South Asian folklore provide audiences with an opportunity to explore questions of sexual difference? How might notions of a third gender inform the ways we understand contemporary LGBTQ sexual practices, identities, desires, histories, and politics in diasporic and mainstream communities? And how does Ayeshah's performance engage with an ethics of care and acknowledgment?

Yoni Ki Baat

Since the early 1980s, many new South Asian American organizations have developed to represent the diasporic and transnational interests of those who have been marginalized due to perceived differences in sexuality, economic standing, education, ethnicity, race, or nationality. Through organizations like SAWA, Sakhi, Mahavi, and Trikone, immigrant activists work to address social problems like domestic abuse, hate crimes, poverty, religious intolerance, and prejudice, and to "change existing social and political arrangements when most organizations in South Asian communities desire to be incorporated" (Das Gupta 2006:5). As Garlough has detailed elsewhere, South Asian Sisters is just such an organization—a feminist grassroots collective originating in San Francisco (Garlough 2013). Comprised of young, politically progressive South Asian American women, the grassroots organization's mission statement reads: "We are a diverse collective of progressive South Asian women dedicated to empowering our community to resist all forms of oppression through art, dialogue, conscious alliances and grassroots political action" (<http://www.southasiansisters.org>).

Through their community work, they are aligned with other progressive South Asian American organizations in the Bay Area such as Narika (a local domestic abuse shelter) and Trikone (a local LGBTQ organization), and have focused largely upon producing their annual performance of YKB (Garlough 2013). *Yoni Ki Baat* was first conceptualized by Sapna Shahani, at a 2003 South Asian Sisters meeting, and was inspired by Eve Ensler's feminist classic, *The Vagina Monologues* (1998). As their 2006 call for participation notes: "We took the underlying messages of that show, women's rights, female sexuality, voicing the taboo in a quest to end domestic violence, and made it personal to our South Asian community." Often, part of this cultural contextualization means drawing upon South Asian folk narratives and practices in their performances, from women's folk songs to traditional folk narratives, to vernacular folk apparel.

Yoni Ki Baat, like *The Vagina Monologues*, draws upon autobiographical testimony and fictional storytelling to re-imagine socially disparaged desires, fantasies, sexual experiences, and gender identities—presenting private experiences in a public venue (Bell and Reverby 2005; Cooper 2007). *The Vagina Monologues*, in particular, is a succession of first-person narratives in which women reflect upon and re-envision their relationship to their vaginas (Ensler 1998). Performed in theaters around the world and translated into over 45 languages, it is regarded as a "feminist classic" and a carnivalesque and transgressive cultural event by many (Bell and Reverby 2005; Cooper 2007).

Despite the seemingly subversive content, in recent years, *Vagina Monologues* has been critiqued by some feminist scholars researching issues of diversity and difference. For example, Cooper (2007:729) notes, while *Vagina Monologues* (VM) audience members appear to have "direct access" to marginalized voices and vaginal experiences, the monologic form of the narratives is problematic. In particular, she argues that, "in both their form and their content, the monologues reduce their speakers to versions of the same, whatever the patina of diversity adorning their surface." Others agree and claim further that within VM scripts, representations of race, ethnicity, disability, gender identities, and alternative forms of sexuality or sex positivity are excluded, treated superficially, or used for their commercial value (Cheng 2004; Hall 2005). In this process, the raising of feminist consciousness ends when the curtain closes, rather than being a prelude to talk (Bell and Reverby 2005). *Yoni Ki Baat* was envisioned by the South Asian Sisters as a response to such critiques, and places a particular emphasis upon a diversity of experiences with sexuality, gender identities, and sexual violence within South Asian American communities (Garlough 2013).

As such, the organizers encourage women to write their own performance narratives that express their unique experiences within the diaspora. Within these narratives, the issues they explore are often made meaningful to audience members through the strategic use of folk or popular culture (Garlough 2013). Viewed as a political intervention, these types of feminist performances are understood as embodied feminist struggle (Hamera 2006; Hart and Phelan 1993; Kousaleos 1999). *Yoni Ki Baat* performances are a mode of community activism that encourages both conventional and emergent forms of engagement in the public sphere. As Dolan (2005:93) notes, such performances with pedagogical orientation are important because they show

audiences how to be active citizens and invite these citizen-spectators “into a critical conversation about politics and oppression, about love and hope.” Moreover, as Garlough (2013) observes, YKB performances often move beyond “claims for recognition” typically found in human rights discourse; rather, the focus is upon a sense of “acknowledgment” grounded in an ethics of care that is characterized by attentiveness, compassion, responsibility, and responsiveness.

Yoni Ki Baat has now been performed in San Francisco for more than a decade, for hundreds of audience members comprised of South Asian community members and a multicultural group of friends, colleagues, family members, and students. In the process, it has been described as a “feminist performance movement” that extends across the country to include the Aaina Theater Festival in Washington, the South Asian Network in Los Angeles, the Rasaka Theater in Chicago, and college campuses like University of Michigan, Rutgers University, University of California Santa Barbara, and University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Yoni Ki Baat at the University of Wisconsin–Madison was spearheaded by Ayesha in 2008, and since 2009, it has become an annual spring event at the university. It has been performed in various large venues from UW–Madison’s Play Circle Theater to the downtown Overture Center for the Arts. The success of these performances is evidenced by sold-out crowds and a growing number of performer participants (Garlough 2013). Working within a philosophy of cultural diversity, Ayesha and the cast draw upon diverse cultural heritages and personal life stories to explore issues and exigencies facing women of color. Viewed as a political intervention and embodied feminist struggle, these YKB performances often have explicit pedagogical orientations—evidenced by opportunities such as the “talk back sessions” following the performance that invite audiences “into a critical conversation about politics and oppression, about love and hope” (Dolan 2005:93). In 2011, Ayesha wrote a performance piece addressing social problems and prejudices facing the LGBTQ communities in South Asia and the diaspora by drawing on hijra folklore and folklife.

Hijra Folklore and Folklife

Queer expressions of sexuality are often inhibited in public settings by heteronormative social standards. Yet performances of gender identity and sexuality by hijras openly challenge the politics of sexuality in South Asia (Bose and Bhattacharyya 2007; Gillis, Howie, and Munford 2007; Herdt 1994; Reddy 2007; Nanda 1990). In recent years, hijras have a new sort of notoriety, as scholars researching issues related to LGBTQ concerns have put them forward as “an ideal case in the transnational system of ‘alternative’ gender/sexuality” (Reddy 2005:2). Certainly, research on third gender has been instrumental in complexifying our understanding of individuals who, in particular places and times, transcend the categories of male and female. Yet many authors caution that this understanding must be culturally grounded, because although third sexes appear consistently in certain cultures, they cannot be found at all places and times (Anzaldúa 1997; Herdt 1994; Khanna 2007; Nanda 1990; Reddy 2007). This sense of complexity, and how it might be represented, certainly guides our work in this article as well.

In particular, we stress that research on third gender as an alternative sex/gender should not celebrate or simplify hijras as people idealistically unconstrained within the sex/gender binary. This runs the risk of ignoring the social, political, and economic exclusion, physical violence, or relational difficulties experienced by this community of people. It also risks homogenizing those who occupy this subject position. There are significant differences in how one becomes part of a hijra community, the ways they experience their sexuality, the means by which they construct their identities, and in what manner they perform them over time. For some, their identity remains somewhat stable over their lifetime, but for many others, their sexual identities are fluid, responding to contextual issues. Moreover, as Reddy (2007) aptly observes, “hijra and the emergent category of kothis are not *just* a sexual or gendered category as is commonly contended. As with any other community in India, they are crosscut by a range of other axes that shape their identities. Though sex/gender is one and perhaps even the most important aspect of their lives, hijras and kothis are not reducible to this frame of analysis” (Reddy 2007:301). Consequently, South Asian queer theorists, like Khanna (2007) and Bose and Bhattacharyya (2007), suggest understanding hijras from an intersectional perspective, paying close attention to facets of kinship, age, religion, regional culture, and class to minimize the pitfalls of representing them merely through the framework of sexual identities.⁵ Furthermore, as transgender studies scholars have noted, the potential for debate about “emancipatory queer futures” has been undermined by a crucial tension. How might one challenge attempts to create “proper trans social subjects” that must in some way integrate into mainstream societies, and recognize these individuals as social subjects who hold the potential to give important gifts to communities and work contexts, as well as be self-sufficient in their own lives? (Irving 2013:16). That is, what is the potential for openly living a transgressive life within the mainstream? (Chase 2003; Corber and Valocchi 2003; Cromwell 1999; Ekins and King 2006; Stryker and Whittle 2006; Stryker and Aizure 2013). In what ways is the third gender in South Asia being influenced by conceptualizations within Western transtheory? (Chakraborty 2007).

In addition to these popular global discourses, many hijras also draw on traditional South Asian folklore and religious discourses to understand and mitigate the disacknowledgment they face. Here, gods and goddesses, and heroes and heroines demonstrate a playful variance in terms of gender and sexuality (Pattanaik 2002:3). To be sure, hijra folklife has a long history in South Asia—in both Hindu and Islamic cultures. Consequently, in small hijra communities, led by a guru, one finds diversity not only in membership (in terms of age, caste, and familial background) or sexuality (including men who identify as more feminine than masculine, hermaphrodites, intersex people, and women who do not menstruate and thus are thought unable to pursue a “normal” female life) (Reddy 2005). One also finds variety in the ways hijras strategically draw upon a syncretic blend of folk and socio-religious practices—borrowing from Hindu and Muslim traditions—in an effort to find a common ground in a complicated living environment (Loh 2011). Indeed, although many hijras gain legitimacy from Hindu goddesses, many also enact practices seen as explicitly Muslim. For example, when initiates join a hijra community, many often adopt new names—a male first name and a female last name, or vice versa, depending upon the part of

gender identity with which they identify. In the process, some of these initiates choose one name that is female and Hindu and another that is Muslim and male. This male name is typically the official name entered into the hijra register that is maintained by the *nayak*—the senior member of the hijra house (Reddy 2005).

One also can see Muslim traditions in the everyday customs of many hijras, including the practices of circumcision and daily prayers (*namaz*) (Malik 1999). Some hijras also embrace Muslim practices of dress. This may involve using a burqa when in public settings alone or meeting a male companion. Interestingly, however, when leaving the house to perform at ceremonies where they are being paid, burqas are not worn (Reddy 2010). In addition, the practice of worshipping at Muslim shrines and participating in Muslim festivals like Pir panduga is pursued by many hijras, especially in Pakistan. Some also undertake pilgrimages to sites of Muslim significance, even participating in the *hajj*—the holy pilgrimage to Karbala, Mecca, and Medina (Loh 2011). When these hijras pass away, they also may request Muslim burial customs.

Indeed, in hijra folk and socio-religious practices, one can observe the amalgamation of Hindu and Muslim rituals and concepts based on individual beliefs, prior life experiences, regional cultures, and so forth (Loh 2011). Another important pool of cultural resources for hijras is derived from Hindu myths, epics, and folktales. Hijras often evoke these narratives to explain their marginalized position, social alienation, and a sense of disacknowledgment. For example, some contemporary hijras assert that they are the descendants of ancient *klibas*, beings who are neither women nor men, and are represented in foundational texts like the *Kama Sutra* or Brahman creation myths (Nanda 1990). These stories describe a great sadness in the universe when the gods separated the heavens, underworld, and earth. To ease the burden of humankind, the gods put the sorrow of heaven into a prostitute. They then poured the unhappiness of the underworld into a thief. Finally, they embedded the sadness of the earth into the *kliba*. In addition, texts like the *Manu Smirti* outline 14 different kinds of *klibas* and the social restrictions they face, which include being prohibited from participating in many religious and social rituals, as well as owning property (Reddy 2005).

This, however, is not the only set of creation myths with which some hijras associate themselves. A subset of hijras also identify with Shiva in his role as creator god, as well as in his form as Ardhanari (when he is merged with his consort Parvati as half man, half woman). In one particular Hindu creation myth important to some hijras, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva arise from the cosmic waters. Shiva is invited by the other gods to create the world (Reddy 2005). He consents and then departs to the cosmic waters to prepare for a thousand years. As the years pass, Vishnu grows impatient and convinces Brahma to create the world himself. When Shiva emerges from the cosmic waters and discovers there is nothing in the world left to create, he is furious. In a rage, he removes his phallus, and throws it down to earth, claiming that he no longer has need of it. This act of castration granted the world fertility. For this reason, many hijras see themselves in the image of Shiva when they castrate themselves in the ritual of nirwan. In sacrificing their own reproductive potential, hijras are granted the power of bestowing fertility, good luck, good health, and blessings to other people through ritual birth and wedding events. Consequently, hijras' bawdy

songs often describe pregnancy, and many of their dances parody pregnant women. Traditionally, for these gifts, the host is obligated to pay the hijra (Nanda 1992).

To be sure, many hijras earn their living by dancing and singing at these family events. As Chakraborty notes (2007:110):

At what are traditionally held to be the two most auspicious moments in an adult person's life, namely, marriage and the birth of a male child, hijras are conventionally allowed to come into their own as persons possessed of the power of conferring blessings and, complementarily, inflicting curses. It is said that a bride's face must not be open to the gaze of hijras, since the curse of infertility might fall on her. On the other hand, when hijras confer blessings on the child, this ensures that the child will have healthy progeny. The presence of hijras is auspicious, and yet terrifying; and while themselves incapable of carrying or seeding children, they appear to have some mysterious inevitable power over the reproductive process.

If payment is denied, hijras often begin to sing poorly and loudly, lift up their dresses, and conjure a curse that brings bad luck or infertility to the miserly. Fear of these curses, as well as the unwelcome public commotion, typically has ensured that the hijras' demands will be met. However, in contemporary society, belief in these negative outcomes has waned. Consequently, with few other options for income because of social marginalization and prejudice, more and more hijras have been forced into prostitution, putting themselves at risk for HIV/AIDS to make a living.

In Pakistan also, hijras continue to be identified with entertainment and sex work, and can be found singing and dancing outside the shrines of Muslim Sufis and saints. In doing so, they often adhere to an informal code of ethics between clans that prohibits encroaching onto other hijras' public space. Consequently, if one group of hijras has a designated shrine for singing, dancing, or begging for alms, other clans must show respect and find their own place for performances. These public performances are justified by hijras through strategically drawing upon cultural and historical "third gender narratives" in folklore and ritual practices despite restrictions of Pakistani law.⁶

Folktales based on the two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* also recognize people of the third gender. For example, according to a Tamil Nadu folktale based on the *Mahabharata*, Arjun's son, Aravan, urgently wishes to win the Kurukshetra War for his family, the Pandavas (Reddy 2005). In return for a victory, he promises the goddess Kali his lifeblood, and she agrees to the bargain. The evening before the battle, Aravan searches desperately for a bride as he does not want to die a virgin. However, no woman will accept a husband doomed to die the very next day. In this moment, the god Krishna takes pity on Aravan and transforms him into Mohini—the most beautiful woman imaginable. The two are married and, consequently, in South India, many hijras believe Aravan to be their progenitor. In tribute, they call themselves *aravanis*, and celebrate an annual 18-day festival to honor the union. The festival enjoys such popularity that more than 25,000 individuals participate in the town of Koovagam alone.

In another folktale from North India, while on her way to a holy hilltop site called Baba Darga in Kelshi, a hijra encounters a weary mother and offers to carry her baby (Nanda 1990). The woman ungraciously replies: "You are hijra. Do not touch my child."

After being repelled, the hijra prays to Baba for a baby of her own. Miraculously, 10 months later, she gives birth to her own child. Through telling folktales like this one, hijra performers make calls for acknowledgment regarding their social marginalization, point toward relational desires, and call attention to their special relationship with their patron gods and goddesses.

In Gujarat, a western province of India, hijras are typically devotees of the mother goddess Bahuchara Mata, a mother goddess connected to many tales associated with transgender behavior, sex change, impotence, abstinence, and emasculation. Indeed, Bahuchara Mata—riding on a giant rooster with a trident and a sword—is considered a spiritual guide who distributes blessings to those with non-heteronormative identities (Nanda 1999). In one such folktale, this goddess was represented as a princess. Frustrated that her husband was behaving as a woman and failing to coming to their marital bed, she castrates him. In another folktale, a group of traveling women is attacked by robbers near Vadodara. To protect her honor, one of the women cuts off her breasts with a sword and is later celebrated as the sex-change deity by hijras (Chakraborty 2007). In yet another tale, Bahuchara Mata curses a man with impotence after he tries to rape her. Panic-stricken, the man implores her to do away with the curse. He is absolved of his crime only after he relinquishes his masculinity, wears the clothes of a woman, and worships Bahuchara Mata. Another story focuses on a king desirous of a son. Praying to Bahuchara Mata, he finds his wish is granted. Unfortunately, his son is born impotent. One night, Bahuchara Mata appears to this son in a dream. She directs him to castrate himself, dress in female clothing, and become her devoted servant. He agrees (Abbott 1999:329). For this reason, it is commonly believed that when impotent men are summoned by the goddess in their dreams, they should be emasculated. Men who do not surrender to this call will be born impotent for seven future births.

References to transgendered individuals are open to interpretation in the Quran, which recognizes that certain individuals are neither male nor female, but may have both male and female or neither male nor female characteristics.⁷ The Hadith refers to *mukhannathun* or *mukhannatheen* as “effeminate ones” or “men who resemble women,” revealing that these individuals were recognized as a social category during the time of Prophet Mohammed (Nanda 1990). However, scholarly literature on the gender categories, social status, identities, and sexual orientation of mukhannatheen in the pre-Islamic and early Islamic era is not abundant, although scholars have acknowledged the importance of these individuals in Arabic music and the performance arts in Mecca and Medina, especially during the early era of the Umayyad dynasty.⁸

In contemporary South Asian society, these stories and practices provide a culturally significant framework for hijras and their communities. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible to note a discrepancy between the hijras lived experience on the margins and the special patronage represented in some religion and myth (Chakraborty 2007). As Reddy (2005:95) notes, in everyday discourse, urban legends about hijras abound and “hijras serve as the quintessential bogeyman of India; children are threatened with potential kidnapping.” Today, many hijras remain on the margins of society, and face discrimination in terms of employment, law, healthcare, education, and employment. As a result, some hijras have begun embracing the culture and language of the

international LGBTQ community, despite objections to Westernizing influences, to protest for their civil rights.⁹

Ayeshah's performance about hijras grows from her interest in these social concerns and the complexity suggested by queer theory. It also is drawn from her personal childhood experiences in Pakistan, memories of folk narratives and figures, as well as representations in popular culture. Her *Yoni Ki Baat* narrative combines these elements in order to make calls for acknowledgment that seek to garner an engaged and compassionate response from audience members—a moment of presence and care (Garlough 2013). In addition, her performance seems to gesture toward what queer theorist Jeanne Vaccaro intriguingly calls “a politics of the handmade.” Vaccaro argues that transgender embodiment is “more a matter of something handmade, textured, crafted—with all the implications of that term as women's work or amateurism and also as a collaborative and communal process” and in doing so, calls attention to “the relation between matter and feeling within experience, specifically the sensation (bodily, cognitive and otherwise) of gender in transition” (Vaccaro 2013:91). In this way, focus is drawn to the everyday aspects of transgender experience that often are not deemed “queer enough” for scholarly attention.

The Vagina Monologues *and Memories of Adolescence: Ayeshah*

I saw my very first performance of Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* at the University of Wisconsin–Madison in February 2002, which left a lasting impression on me. This was the first time I had heard women speak publicly about some of their most private thoughts and experiences. Sex, sexual abuse, incest, and female masturbation were not issues many Pakistani families discussed openly. At the age of 12, when my mother overheard me listening to George Michael's “I Want Your Sex,” she promptly marched into my room with a horrified expression on her face and demanded if I knew what “sex” meant. When I honestly told her I didn't, she simply replied: “Sex is the relationship between a husband and wife after marriage.” End of conversation. I somehow had to learn to read between the lines. We had no sex education in school, so the closest I could get to learning about sex was through ninth-grade biology class and through secretly reading *Cosmopolitan* magazines, borrowed from my friends, in the bathroom. This was a time before satellite TV, the Internet, or social media. Adolescent rebellion was smuggling MTV music videos from friends and watching them on the VCR while parents were away. My understanding of sex was that it was something private, secretive, and shameful. In fact, even now, years later, I do not know if a word for sex exists in literary Urdu, or if I am just oblivious to it. I am inclined to think that the latter might be the case. It is likely that gender segregation and the norms of middle-class female modesty prevented my exposure to such language—although I still managed to learn Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, and Pashto swear words pertaining to male and female genitalia from various relatives, domestic servants, friends, and Bollywood movies. The closest term I am aware of that represents sex in Urdu is *milaap* or “union.”

Perhaps my young age was another reason why my older female relatives sheltered me from sex talk, for I surely overheard it among women at women-only gatherings

(where the “aunties” presumed I was too young and clueless to understand the details). Many women-only gatherings would be organized around rituals marking some rite of passage: baby showers, wedding rituals such as *mayun* and *mehndi*, childbirth—occasions associated with female biological functions. Men usually respected such gender-segregated spaces. Other women-only gatherings were more religious in nature, such as a *milad* (mawlid), commemorating the birth of Prophet Mohammed. But milads were held on many other occasions—preceding weddings, housewarmings, recovery from illness—anything that called for Allah’s special blessings and mercy. The milad would be led by one or two female *Qari* (women who memorized and recited the Qu’ran), while the rest of us followed in a call-and-response fashion, singing hymns in praise of Allah and Prophet Mohammed.

The Vagina Monologues reminded me of the women’s gatherings I had witnessed in my childhood. Although I could not relate to all the different cultural experiences of the women in Ensler’s narratives, I strongly identified with some themes, particularly the quest for self-discovery, and the struggle to be understood and acknowledged. Being on stage for the first time made me realize what a privileged, scary, and empowering space it was. The stage can be distant and elevated enough to separate the audience from the performers, giving performers the perception that it is a safe space. Yet it is not, for it also simultaneously exposes performers in harsh lights (while shrouding the audience in the dark), focusing all attention on them, revealing vulnerabilities, forgotten lines and ad-libs, facial expressions, and bodily gestures. A performance necessitates a reciprocal relationship between performers and what Boal ([1979] 1985) called “spect-actors,” where each depends on the other for encouragement and fulfillment of expectations.¹⁰ For example, during our performances, cast members sometimes complained that the audience for a particular show was “low energy” and not as responsive, which would affect the quality of their performance. When audience members were encouraging, applauding, and cheering, cast members would make more of an effort to give their best. The dynamics of power between performers and audience are unpredictable and changing as performances can exceed or underwhelm expectations, offend or delight, and call to action or alienate. The stage’s centrality is, nevertheless, a significant public forum allowing the acknowledgment of marginalized narratives that may otherwise not have the opportunity to be heard.

From Vagina Monologues to Yoni Ki Baat: The Transition

In 2006, I became a cast member of *The Vagina Monologues* and went on to co-direct and produce it at the UW–Madison campus in 2007. By this time, after having been intimately involved with the production, I was beginning to see the cracks in what I once thought was wholly empowering. For one, the voices of women in the Global South were missing or underrepresented.¹¹ I have deep respect and admiration for Eve Ensler. Having been part of V-Day as well as the One Billion Rising campaign, I think her work has been groundbreaking in calling attention to violence against women around the world. In *The Vagina Monologues*, for example, through a first-person narrative of a Bosnian woman titled “My Vagina Was My Village,” Ensler draws attention to rape as a war crime. Using third-person narrative, she also addresses

violence against women in the Global South—in “optional” monologues that became part of the production at a later date when she toured Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and conducted interviews with women. Perhaps Ensler’s decision to not include first-person narratives of women in the Global South is a political statement calling attention to the marginalization of these women in local, national, and global contexts, where their voices have been silenced. However, I think that her exclusion of the voices of these women from *The Vagina Monologues* also denies them the very agency that she claims to be fighting for on their behalf, thus reducing them to homogenized caricatures in which their identities are defined by the violence inflicted on their bodies.¹² In addition, the exclusion of these women’s voices also reifies old colonial and ethnocentric tropes of women’s passivity and helplessness, giving rise to rescue narratives that assert how “brown women” must be saved from “brown men” by their white colonizers (to borrow from Spivak 1988).

My intention behind initiating *Yoni Ki Baat* at UW–Madison stemmed from my desire to create a forum on campus that foregrounded the experiences of women of color and minorities and of which I, too, could be a member with a voice. In 2008, I had the opportunity to watch a performance from *Yoni Ki Baat* at a South Asian Queer Pride event in the San Francisco Bay Area. The event was hosted by the South Asian LGBTQ group Trikone. I was immediately captivated by the style and delivery of these passionately written, self-penned monologues. Later, I approached Vandana Makker, a member of South Asian Sisters and the outreach coordinator for *Yoni Ki Baat* in the Bay Area, and requested permission to produce and direct such a show at the UW–Madison campus. Vandana graciously agreed and sent me the script. In 2009, the first production of *Yoni Ki Baat* in Madison was co-directed and produced by my friend Snigdha Singh and myself. We received an overwhelmingly positive response from the Madison community. Some audience members approached us after the show, sharing that they had come from as far as Minneapolis, Milwaukee, and Chicago to watch the performance. We even received good reviews from one Pakistani man, in particular, who had earlier threatened to disrupt the show, erroneously thinking that the performances were designed to bring negative publicity to Muslims and Pakistanis. Despite a security alert, the man was somehow able to gain entry into the theater and watch the show. Later, he e-mailed one of the cast members, telling her that he left “transformed” by the experience.

Perhaps *Yoni Ki Baat* would have remained a South Asian diaspora-centered production at the UW campus had we not had the presence of a cast member who identified as Lebanese American. Not being able to fully relate to the South Asian monologues, she decided to write her own narrative: a letter to her father revealing her wish to marry a Hispanic man whom she loved. With more and more women of color showing an interest in *Yoni Ki Baat*, our new team of directors, consisting of Bornha Ghosh, Amberine Huda, and myself, took an executive decision with the consent of South Asian Sisters in the Bay Area to make Madison’s *Yoni Ki Baat* a more ethnically diverse production. I wrote a concept paper about our vision for a more inclusive *Yoni Ki Baat* that would focus on narratives of women in diaspora. The South Asian Sisters board members in the Bay Area welcomed our experiment. Our cast members for the 2010 production included Latina, Caribbean, East Asian, South Asian, Asian American,

African American, and African women. The shows were very well received with full houses on both nights to the extent that some audience members had to be turned away after the room reached its maximum capacity of 168 people.

Since 2009, *Yoni Ki Baat* has become an annual event at the UW–Madison campus, usually running three shows in the month of April. The shows are attended by varied audiences. On some nights, the majority of the audience comprises members of the LGBTQ community, students, faculty and staff (especially from the Department of Gender and Women’s Studies, as well as those who identify with the show’s message and those who consider it part of their schoolwork). On other nights, the audience comprises performers’ families, relatives, and friends, as well as people from Madison and the greater Wisconsin community. Our overall surveys and talkback sessions show that 90 percent of the audience responds positively to the shows. A small percentage of the audience has admitted to feeling uncomfortable during some performances, as they have not previously experienced such candid discussions of sexuality.

Yoni Ki Baat performances invoke an ethic of care for their audiences by having counselors present during the show (Tronto 1993; Garlough 2013). Emcees issue “trigger warnings” before performances potentially evoking personal trauma, for example, sexual violence. At every step, from writing the monologues to presenting them, actors and directors consider their imagined future audiences, reactions of past audiences, and how sensitive issues can be addressed and social boundaries pushed when necessary, without alienating audiences.¹³

In the 2011 auditions for *Yoni Ki Baat*, the directors—Borna Ghosh, Nathalie Cheng, and I—received responses, mostly from white women, to the call for auditions. Intense debates ensued over whether the criteria for selecting actors should necessarily be based on ethnicity. We finally reached consensus that while we would not exclude women simply on the basis of race or ethnicity, YKB was a space for those who did not enjoy privilege in mainstream society because of their race or gender or class or sexual orientation.¹⁴

In April 2012, Swati Bhargava and I received permission from South Asian Sisters in San Francisco to begin the Madison chapter of the organization. Currently, South Asian Sisters-Madison is a registered student organization with a 501(c)(3) status, operating as a non-profit. *Yoni Ki Baat* is now an annual event of the South Asian Sisters-Madison at the UW–Madison campus.

Hijra Performance: The Making of “As I Am”

I wish I were Cleopatra, the most beautiful woman on the planet. Queen Cleopatra, ruler of the Nile. Some say her life was a tragedy. Well, I refuse to be a tragedy.

— excerpt from “As I Am” written by Ayesha Émon, quote inspired by Laxmi Narayan Tripathi’s interview in *Between the Lines* 2005)

My interest in hijras dates back to my childhood when, at 9 years of age, I first saw a hijra named Basheera dance to a popular Punjabi folk song at a male cousin’s wedding. I was surprised at Basheera’s sexually provocative dance moves, which both men and women seemed to enjoy—the men joining in the dance and responding to Basheera’s flirtatious gestures; the women clapping, laughing, and holding out rupees as tips for

Basheera to collect. The women appeared to be more comfortable with the idea of a man cross-dressed as a woman flirting with their husbands rather than the thought of a female dancer. And yet the hijra identified as female, with a female name, using feminine pronouns. The audience members, however, referred to her as a man, using male pronouns. The ambiguously gendered figure of the hijra allowed guests the space for imagining and constructing a gender identity that was less threatening to them.

Among the many urban legends existing about hijras in Pakistan, there are some that depict them as bogeymen—or rather, bogey persons. If my siblings and I didn't go to bed on time, the *ayah* (maid) would threaten us: "If you don't go to sleep, the hijras will come get you!" I heard stories about hijras "sniffing out" their own kind, showing up at hospitals and robbing babies that they believed were hijras from their cradles. Many Pakistanis believe that hijras, especially those who are intersexed, are a physical anomaly, but that Allah has compensated them by giving them special spiritual powers. My grandmother would warn me to never make fun of hijras. They were God's special people, she would say, and he listened to their prayers immediately. If one hurt them or upset them, they would put a curse on the person through "bad dua" (literally, "bad prayer"), wishing them ill.

"The truth is I was not going to change. My 'disease' ran deep.

Deep inside me, I knew who I was. . . . I just didn't have a name for it." (excerpt from "As I Am")

I had always understood being hijra to be a way of *doing* (i.e., gender performance), rather than a reified way of being. What did it mean to be third sex or third gender,



Photography from Ayesha Émon's *Yoni Ki Baat* collection, Marisa Sarto performance photographer, Yoni Ki Baat performance, Madison, WI.



Photography from Ayesha Émon's *Yoni Ki Baat* collection, Marisa Sarto performance photographer, Yoni Ki Baat performance, Madison, WI.

to occupy a third space, as opposed to a first, second, fourth, or tenth? Towle and Morgan (2002:472) observe how the term “third gender” has been problematically used and romanticized within Euro-American anthropological context to conflate all non-normative gender variations into one category, while glossing or ignoring the diversity or complexities of social change within various groups. Indeed, “third-gender” societies are, sometimes, erroneously represented as an idealized space in the Western imaginary. I am very aware of the problems and politics of representation the “Other” through my own training in cultural anthropology at a time when the discipline, all too conscious of its colonial roots, extends a reflexive and self-critical gaze inward at the observer as well as outward at the observed. Along these lines, I also never assumed my South Asian ancestry would automatically make me an “insider” to the complexities of hijra lives. Narayan (1993) critiques the view of the supposedly “native” anthropologist who brings an “authentic” insider’s perspective to the profession. Moreover, the intention behind my performance was not to romanticize hijras. Rather, in my research or performances, I was concerned with a critical and activist orientation toward acknowledgment and care, which encourages close examination of the realities of everyday life of those who are marginalized. As Tronto (1993) argues, meeting the demands of care and acknowledgment requires people to be attentive, responsible, and responsive when taking into consideration conditions of vulnerability and inequality.

I had not considered hijra identity through the lens of liminality until I emigrated to the United States and found a name for the condition I had perpetually experienced—the feeling of wanting to, but being unable to belong in my home or host

country. Narratives on hijras usually describe them as being “in-between” something: “between the lines,” “between two worlds”—“betwixt and between,” as Turner (1967) put it, but neither “here” nor “there.” I began to wonder if the body can be imagined similarly to a country—a home and host for all that one is and all that one does—and yet also a site within which one’s imagined true self feels alienated or trapped at times? Van Gennep (1909), Turner (1967), and others have written of liminality as one stage in the social rite of passage of individuals in a given society. The terms “rite” and “passage” imply temporality—a transitional state leading supposedly to a more permanent one. But I wondered if the experience of liminality is necessarily transitory—a stage one enters and leaves? Can liminality ever be long-term or even permanent?

In initially exploring these questions, while being at a distance from South Asia, I began to trace my own memories of hijra folk culture—the tales and performances that had engaged my imagination in childhood. I surveyed secondhand accounts available from books, article, blogs, YouTube clips, and other online Web resources, and read queer and feminist theorists, as well as autobiographical narratives and coming-out stories of LGBTQ communities (including South Asians in the US and UK diaspora). I also spoke to individuals I knew in the local LGBTQ community about their experiences. While I am aware that the cultural and historical contexts of people in EuroAmerican LGBTQ communities are not the same as hijra communities in South Asia, I, nevertheless, wanted to listen to a diversity of accounts. Unfortunately, at the time directly preceding my performance, I did not have direct access to individuals who identified as hijras. Thus, the two hijras whose stories served as the main source of inspiration for my monologue in *Yoni Ki Baat* were A. Revathi (her autobiography *The Truth About Me* provides an extensive insight into her life as a hijra) and Laxmi (Lakshmi) Narayan Tripathi, an outspoken hijra activist from north India.

The opening lines of my monologue “As I Am” are borrowed directly from the words of Laxmi Tripathi’s interview with a journalist in Thomas Wartmann’s (2005) documentary *Between the Lines*, which features an insider’s perspective of the lives of many hijras. “I wish I were Cleopatra, the most beautiful woman on the planet,” Laxmi expresses in an eloquent style with a firm command over the English language, reflecting her Brahmin upbringing, and revealing, simultaneously, the class dynamic within the hijra community.

As I watched clips from *Between the Lines* and compiled a list of prominent themes in the narratives, it dawned on me that even though the struggle for gender identity was a major source of contention, at the heart of all the narratives was something much more basic: the everyday desire to be loved, accepted, respected, acknowledged, and cared for.

The story of Munee in my monologue is about feeling alienated inside one’s body—knowing from a young age that the body and identity one is bestowed with at birth are not the ones desired. Munee (Urdu/ Hindi [f/s]: little one) is born Munna (Hindi/ Urdu [m/s] little one) with male genitalia. Her family is modestly middle-class—her father is a government servant and her mother, a primary school teacher in a girls’ school. As a child, Munna prefers to play with dolls and identifies with heroines in the folktales and Bollywood films. While her parents and friends identify her as male, she sees herself as female.

Munna's life changes at age 14 when she develops breasts, much to the distress of her parents who cannot fathom what is happening to their son. They see the changes in their son's body more as a result of the social upbringing they provided in his childhood. The father blames the mother for pampering Munna to the extent of feminizing him. Munna's mother visits every holy man in the village, seeking charms and amulets to make his breasts stop growing. At night, she places heated clay cups over his breasts, praying fervently to the gods, as if the combined effect of heat and prayer would somehow miraculously flatten his growing bosom. Munna's parents are not the only ones aware of the changes in his body. The vigilant neighborhood boys observe them, too, and make him a target of ridicule, teasing him and beating him up so he has to change his walking route frequently and wait until after dark to go home from school. Munna is finally "outed" by his father who accidentally walks in on him one day as he is trying on his mother's clothes, a secret Munna has been hiding since the age of 8. A severe whipping ensues, after which Munna, humiliated and hurt, flees from home. He takes a train to Mumbai while his parents are asleep, leaving them a note saying he will no longer be a burden on them.

Munna's anger and guilt are self-directed. Instead of holding others accountable for failing to understand him or blaming god for creating a "flaw," Munna blames himself. He wanders homeless in Mumbai for several weeks before he finds a hijra community. His vulnerability and fear of assault in his new surroundings is apparent by his decision to dress in men's clothing. Once adopted into a hijra community, Munna undergoes a formal ritual transition into Muneer. Through Muneer's eyes, the audience comes to know the other hijras in the community and their rituals. Some of them have chosen to undergo ritual castration in order to be with the men they love. Guru Ji, herself, we learn, was once in love with a "straight" married man, and even underwent castration to be with him. The man, however, decided to go back to his wife.

When Muneer's desire to find acceptance eventually leads to a man she thinks is her true love, she is afraid of telling him that she is not *nirwaan* and rejects his sexual overtures. But he eventually finds out by surprise when he suddenly lifts up her skirt in a fit of passion. Muneer is forced to strip off her clothes and stand under the scrutiny of her lover's gaze.

Her fear of her lover's rejection forces her to consider castration. She wants his love, but wonders whether she is desperate enough to cut off what she believes is an essential part of herself. At the end of the monologue, we find Muneer exploring her choices. Although she is standing on stage addressing her lover, her intimate manner of speaking to the audience portrays the audience as a lover. "Why must I carry the burden of your shame, because you cannot accept me as I am?" she asks. Then stretching her arms out to the audience, as if poisoning herself for an embrace, she pleads: "Accept me as I am."

At this moment, she stands in her most vulnerable state before the audience, who has been privy to the truth of her identity all along. The audience has been a witness to Muneer's life as both voyeur and co-conspirator, watching her dress in her mother's sari, adorn herself with jewelry and makeup, and admire her reflection in the mirror in the privacy of her parents' bedroom. Muneer's relationship with the audience has

been open from the very beginning, and they know parts of her story that neither her parents nor lover know. It is the audience from whom Munee is seeking acknowledgment and empathy. When Munee's lover demands that she undress so he can examine her body, she also stands symbolically naked and exposed to the gaze of the audience. She awaits both her lover's and the audience's judgment. Will they accept her as she is? The question is left unanswered. We are left in a liminal space where we are unsure of the collective reaction and her fate.

In writing about Munee, I struggled with issues of representation in a manner perhaps best described by Ruth Behar (1993, 2003). How does one speak of the marginalized without further exoticizing or excluding them? Moreover, how does one portray gender ambiguity on stage? (Hansen 1992, 1999, 2002). Put simplistically, I was a female-bodied individual playing a male-bodied individual "in drag" (Butler 2002). Munee's character made me feel perplexed about the very gender binaries I had hoped to transcend or at least complexify in my monologue. My monologue may not capture all the nuances and complexities of the lives of hijras, but it is a medium through which I draw attention to their everyday struggles. It is my call for acknowledgment—for the potential to be respected and treated with dignity, as I believe all human beings should be.

Final Thoughts

This article opened with a quote by Pattanaik that suggested that tales with sexually ambiguous themes are often a popular mode of entertainment, despite the reality that, in everyday contexts, the average person is often distinctly uncomfortable with "queer" identities. Yet a close study of hijra folklore tells us even more. In a Presidential Address to the American Folklore Society in 1986, Venetia Newall stated: "Even now, I think there is still a strong tendency to romanticize folklore, to regard it as something rather charming and quaint, that we can escape into when the outside world becomes disagreeable. But looked at in another way, it stands as a record of the unkind way in which we often treat other people" (Newall 1986:123). This is certainly the case within a subset of South Asian folklore about hijras, folklore that implicitly expresses, the "inflexible morality of the folk, summoned with all its force against the non-conformist, to crush him or her, into the mould that the community has prepared" (124). Critical engagement with a range of folklore forms—within their natal families, hijra communities and in public spaces—deserves closer scholarly attention.

Ayeshah's performance is compelling precisely because of the complex ways it considers the breadth of responses—both insider and outsider—to hijra folklore. It is powerful not only for the cultural critiques it offers, but also for the questions that it explores regarding social disacknowledgment and community belonging (Hyde 2005). Within her fictional narrative, the figure of the hijra and hijra folklife become hermeneutical and rhetorical devices that provide audiences a means to explore issues related to sexuality, gender, violence, and identity politics in a Pakistani cultural context. Yet it is also apparent that these concerns are voiced from a diasporic LGBTQ perspective that complicates understandings of the third sex in South Asia. They are embodied by a female performer "in drag" who seeks to perform the role of secondary

witness to discrimination and social violence against hijras. Even more important, for our purposes, are the ways Ayeshah's performance attends not only to "struggles for recognition" that take into account a variety of axes of identity, but also enacts calls for acknowledgment in a public sphere that often envisions hijras as perpetual "strangers at the door" (Derrida 2000). In doing so, she focuses on evoking feelings of compassion and an ethical concern for the well-being of others that may move audiences toward social engagement.

As Ayeshah suggests to her audience, the assemblage of sexual practices and identities associated with queer identities is becoming ever more complex as global migrations of people and ideas continue to accelerate. To be sure, after Ayeshah's performance, the audience members had many questions about hijra marginalization and how hijra folklife may come into dialogue with South Asian and South Asian American LGBTQ communities. They asked, for example, about the differences between trans people and hijras. They contemplated, in addition, if traditional hijra identity includes those who transition from female to male. To what degree do hijras' transgender identities remain stable over their lifetime? Or are their sexual identities fluid and responsive to context? To what extent, if at all, do South Asian American members of diasporic LGBTQ communities recognize or connect with traditional hijra culture?

The wonder Ayeshah's performance provoked and the potential reflection these questions opened for audience members—male and female, young and old, South Asian American and other ethnicities—is precisely the sort of ethics and activism that *Yoni Ki Baat* is meant to engender. In this way, South Asian American women re-imagine their roles as tradition bearers and strategically appropriate South Asian folklore for progressive political purposes, working together to create the possibility for social change. These performances do not simply "add in" voices that are silenced or missing in mainstream discourses. Rather, *Yoni Ki Baat* participants create scenes of public learning—grounded in an ethic of care—in which to explore exigencies (both at home and abroad) and potentially begin the work of acknowledgment.

Notes

1. <http://saalt.org/about/> (accessed June 5, 2015).

2. *Yoni* is a Sanskrit term, which has come to represent the vagina, but technically carries several meanings, including "divine passage," "sacred space," "place of birth," "place of rest," and "home." *Ki* is the preposition "of," and *Baat* carries variable meanings in different contexts. It can mean "issue" or "matter" in the sense of "as a matter of fact," or "in this matter." It also refers to being in conversation or dialogue with someone, implying the presence of some sort of relationship between a speaker and listener. In this sense, the term *baat* carries a more complicated meaning than the terms "talk" or "speak, which refer to the act of verbal communication and are often used as a gloss for *baat* in some Hindi and Urdu translations. Unlike the term "monologue," *baat* implies dialogue, making *Yoni Ki Baat* a dialogue between performers and audience members, an idea that South Asian Sisters-Madison upholds by organizing talkbacks and Q&A sessions with audience members after the show.

3. We would like to thank Dr. Maria Lepowsky for this observation.

4. The Hudood Ordinances were promulgated by General Zia-ul-Haq in 1979 and are based on narrow interpretations of the *Shariah*. The Ordinances conflate the categories of rape and adultery, subjecting adulterers to death by public stoning unless four Muslim adult male eyewitnesses satisfying court requirements of "good moral standing" (*tazkiyah-af-shuhood*) testify to the act of penetration. Non-Muslim witnesses

are only allowed in the event that the defendant is non-Muslim. Hudood laws make it extremely difficult to prove rape or incest, and allow perpetrators of sexual violence to go free. The laws are particularly detrimental to women and girls, who frequently become targets of false criminal accusations and subsequent punishments. In 2006, General Musharraf passed the Women's Protection Bill, which brought rape and adultery laws under civil law instead of the Shariah. However, human rights activists have protested that the Hudood Ordinances must be repealed to stop false accusations and human rights violations against women. For more information on Hudood Ordinances, refer to Hudood Ordinance: The Offence of Zina (Enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance, 1979. http://www.pakistani.org/pakistan/legislation/zia_po_1979/ord7_1979.html (accessed May 14, 2014). Also refer to Rahat Imran's 2005 "Legal Injustices: The Zina Hudood Ordinance of Pakistan and Its Implications for Women," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 7(2):78–100; and Martin Lau's *The Role of Islam in the Legal System of Pakistan* (London-Leiden Series on Law, Administration, and Development, Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 2006).

5. Indeed, the constellation of sexual identities and practices surrounding the "third sex" or "third gender" are growing increasingly complicated (Chase 2003; Corber and Valocchi 2003; Cromwell 1999; Ekins and King 2006; Fox and O'Keefe 2008; Khanna 2007).

6. See Lauren Frayer, "Pakistan's Transgenders in a Category of Their Own," *NPR*, September 3, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/09/03/160496712/pakistans-transgenders-in-a-category-of-their-own> (accessed May 15, 2014).

7. For example, this is one translation of Surah 42:49 and 50 (Surah Ash-Shurah [The Consultation]): 42:49 "To Allah belongs the dominion over the heavens and the earth. It [Allah] creates what it [Allah] wills. It [Allah] prepares for whom It wills females, and It prepares for whom It wills males. 42:50 Or It [Allah] marries together the males and the females, and It makes those whom It wills to be ineffectual. Indeed, It is the Knowing, the Powerful." Malik (1999), examining the term "ineffectual," attributes it to individuals of multiple genders and sexual orientation as well as men and women who are abstinent or choose to be celibate. The gender of Allah is itself an interesting topic. While Allah carries a male gender in some translations, in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Hindi, it is possible to use pronouns that do not signify the gender of the subject. In some parts of the Hadith (e.g., Bukhari, Vol. 4, Book 54:416), Allah's love for Its creation is stated to be 70 times greater than maternal love. However, in the Quran, Allah appears to possess qualities that cannot be reduced to gender binaries (e.g., compassionate, benevolent, omnipotent, merciful, forgiving, vengeful, and so on). In English, the only way to get around gender binaries is to use the pronoun "It," which carries dehumanizing connotations when used for individuals. Nevertheless, "it" is the only acceptable English pronoun that circumvents masculine/feminine gender dichotomies.

8. Rowson (1991), examining the characteristics of the *mukhannatheen* during the first Islamic century through historical narratives of Arab scholars as well as the Hadith, identifies that they spoke "languidly," publicly adopting feminine attire and jewelry, and applying henna on their hands and feet. They were allowed in women's quarters because they were assumed not to desire women, and their ambiguous gender role allowed them to play matchmakers in marriages. The Hadith is not detailed about the extent of punishment for breaking gender rules, but there are instances of the banishment of certain mukhannatheen from women's quarters and from society (see Rowson 1991:674, 676).

9. In June 2009, after a special census on transgendered individuals order by the Supreme Court of Pakistan, the Court, for the first time in Pakistan's history, allowed self-reported transgendered individuals to have the option of a third gender on national identity cards. Hijras have not been barred from competing in Pakistan's parliamentary elections. In 1990, Aslam Khusra, a self-identified hijra stood for National Assembly elections from Abbotabad, followed in 2011 by Almas Bobby from Rawalpindi, and Sanam Fakir from Sukkur in 2013. While they garnered public support, they did not win the elections. However, they are all involved in social welfare work to promote awareness about transgendered individuals in Pakistan.

10. Audience members were active agents of change for Boal, not passive onlookers.

11. I use the term "Global South," instead of "Third World" or "less developed" in which I find problematic references to colonial and social evolutionary ideas.

12. The case of female literacy in Pakistan alone demonstrates this complexity.

13. Inviting parents and relatives presents particular challenges for performers, especially when family members are conservative in their beliefs. Some performers have written and performed monologues

on stage, addressed to parents or relatives who have not been invited to the show either because they do not reside in the same geographical vicinity or because performers fear that cultural and generational differences will not allow the monologue to be understood in the spirit that it was written. Yet many performers have also shared that verbalizing and presenting their story on stage has allowed them to broach the issue with their loved ones offstage. Writing and presenting, therefore, also have therapeutic benefits for many performers.

14. In particular, I suggested that we focus on experiences of exclusion and privilege. I think we all face exclusion and privilege in relatively different ways (race and ethnicity, gender, class, age, caste, language, and access to education, healthcare, and so forth). Given this, did we want the casting to be race-based rather than merit-based, thus selecting women of color because they filled the “color quota”? Did we see “white” as an ethnicity? Did the presumably white women who auditioned for us self-identify as white? Could we automatically assume they were privileged just because they were white? Was privilege based on social class and economic worth? Could privilege depend on chance, luck, or the opportunity of being born into a family with affluence, status, and power? Was privilege situational and changing? Could one move in and out of relative privilege depending on one’s circumstances in life? Could we seek to understand how privilege and exclusion were experienced through intersectionality?

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