

## **Writing Through Activisms and Academia: Challenges and Possibilities**

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### **Introduction**

Critical writers suggest that academic work, thinking and research can be activist in its motivations, processes and outcomes. Activist oriented research has a long-standing tradition of engaging legacies of feminist politics and participatory and collaborative research processes (Farrow et al, 1995; Gatenby and Humpries, 2000; Moss, 2002; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002; Sharp, 2005; Thomas, 1993). A body of work has explored the role of the academic-activist, engaged academic, politically purposive researcher, and scholar-activist in furthering social change (Chatterton, 2006; Kindon et al., 2007; Mitchell, 2008; The Autonomous Geography Collective, 2010). Yet there exist few studies that discuss the actual process of working and writing collaboratively from the perspective of both academics and activists across national contexts in the area of sexualities. This chapter looks at how academics and activists collaborate to produce academic and academic/activist work in two projects concerned with sexualities. One is located in India, where Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code criminalizes certain sexual acts<sup>1</sup>. After a brief reading down in July 2009, this was reinstated in December 2013, the same year that the same sex Marriage Act was passed in the England and Wales. Putting academics and activists across India and the UK into dialogue, this chapter contests the ways that some nations are seen as moving 'backwards', and the need to learn from

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<sup>1</sup> Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code has its origins in an 1860 British colonial law. It was read down by the Delhi High Court in the Naz Foundation vs Government of NCT of Delhi case on 2 July 2009. In the Suresh Kumar Koushal v Naz Foundation case, the court reversed the 2009 judgment on 11 December 2013.

others who are moving ‘forward’. Instead we speak as academics/activists who engage in co-producing useful knowledges with which to intervene in local/national sexuality politics.

In this chapter, we share stories about how we came to write together in our respective projects, and the challenges and possibilities of writing across activism and academia in the UK and India. Speaking together from our different contexts, we discuss the motivations underpinning our collaborations across activist/academic boundaries, the audiences we sought to engage, the complexities of publishing work that refuses the neat boundaries of academic/activist, issues of framing the research findings, and the outcomes of this process. We argue that when considering the politics of sexual geographies, we also need to explore the politics of research, and the processes through which we construct knowledges around marginalized sexualities and sexual lives in different contexts and places. Coming together as academic/activists across geographical and institutional borders in transnational ways, we seek to interrupt hegemonic divides around the politics of sexuality research. These politics include the hegemony of Anglo-American research and activism. Through our narratives about the thoughts, motivations, journeys that underlie knowledge production about struggles and stories around sexualities we hope to interrupt the popular perceptions about ‘backward’ and ‘forward’ places. We bring activism and academia in a productive dialogue at the heart of an academic text, interrogate the binaries between theory and practice, and queer the process of knowledge production in geographies of sexualities research.

### **Queering Participatory Research**

Participatory Action Research (PAR), with its roots in feminist challenges to traditional research models, has contested the hierarchies of researcher/researched dichotomies (Kindon et al., 2007). Discussion of this form of research methodology points to how all research is constructed through power relations, and suggests other ways of developing research. Participatory research is not necessarily empowering (Kesby, 2007) or transformative (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) and may even reproduce social hierarchies (Banerjea, 2011). Increasingly this form of research, or at least research that involves its 'end users' and creates impact, is demanded by funding bodies and assessment exercises, such as the Research Excellence Framework in the UK. What began as a challenge to positivist epistemologies and specifically the normativities of distant and objective research and researchers, is increasingly becoming a codified, sanitized and state required norm in some contexts. The 'impact agenda' has come under some critique (see ACME, 2013). Yet, considerations of usurping the hegemonies within research processes are undoubtedly important in rethinking how our research is and might be political and politicized. The importance of PAR in academic knowledge development is that it has the potential to question and (re)configure researcher/researched hierarchies and points to the ways in which we might queer, that is disrupt the normativities of research fields (see also Browne and Nash, 2010). We see this chapter as addressing the overlap of queer and PAR critiques, where both seek to contest normativities of knowledge creation and practices.

Practices of reflexivity, positionality and polyvocality are key to unsettling the stable subject/object and researcher/researched distinction. However, by itself these practices may not necessarily destabilize the norms of knowledge production based in the

dualisms of theory/practice and expert/community. The ‘participants’ or ‘the community’ need to be engaged with the research in ways that question academic knowledges, in an ethically accountable manner. Richa Nagar characterizes accountability as arising out of a recognition that ‘knowledge must emerge out of sustained, critical dialogues with those who are the subjects of that knowledge.’ It is ‘through these dialogues, the subjects of knowledge become the primary evaluator, critics and intellectual partners of those who are seen as experts’ (2006, p. XLVII). This dialogic act, we argue, is an aspect of queerly produced research practice. A critical dialogue *with* activists needs to be placed in social critique that troubles the ‘academic knowledges and vocabularies’ (Nagar, 2014, p. 173) through which institutions reproduce their legitimacy. A critique about sexual marginalization, privileges and decolonization has to simultaneously involve an interruption of the processes through which such conversations are produced in the first place.

Collaborative dialogues are complex, involving a movement away from the ethnographic gaze and co-construct knowledge through a careful and often delicate process of negotiation (Crick, 1982; Denzin, 1997; Steier, 1999) These dialogic interactions are not fixed but meant to be ongoing. Madison points to dialogue as ‘situated in multiple expressions that transgress, collide, and embellish realms of meaning’ (2012, p. 11), meanings that also alters as the self experiences change. Thus the beautiful paradox about a queer project is that as the dialogic moments of the self and others are created in writing, meaning is brought forth, but one that is resistant to conclusiveness.

However, talking to and across boundaries challenges the ways in which academics operate, and are inherent to moving across/between different cultures is a risk of ‘missed opportunities’:

Many times scholars and activists talk past each other: scholars want the “big picture” and develop a conceptual vocabulary to bring that big picture into focus, whilst activists address immediate concerns and rely on experiential knowledge to make decisions about issues and strategies. Subsequently we miss opportunities to benefit from each other’s stock of knowledge. Each purpose is important but there may be ways to reorientate the knowledge produced by each for mutual benefit (Valocchi, 2010, p. 2)

Valocchi points here to the importance of meaningful dialogues between activists and scholars that can create mutually beneficial knowledges. Yet, whilst Valocchi engages with communities and operates his research ‘in dialogue with’ activists, the final book is written solely by Valocchi. He is not alone, activist/community outputs and those targeted at academics outputs are often separated, presuming diverse audiences with differing interests (theory versus practice), and abilities (accessibility versus complexity, nuance). Whilst offering different knowledges appropriate to specific contexts can be productive, we question the presumptions that each works to their own with separate ends and we question that they work to divergent purposes. Whilst we may ‘benefit’ from different knowledges, what activists and academics do with these knowledges is often presumed to be for separate ends.

Whereas, authorship for community resources is diffuse and diverse challenging the boundaries of who ‘owns’ and created these knowledges, academic authorship in the

main is not. Exceptions exist consider for example mrs kinpaisby (2008), The Autonomous Geographers Collective (2010), the Women and Geography Study book (1997) and Gibson-Graham (1996; 2006). All of these flouted academic conventions of authorship by refusing single named authorship. Nevertheless, these collectives and pairings still consisted of only academic scholars, and thus the hierarchy of the knowledge producer remained in place. This hierarchy is buttressed by an understanding that theorization by academics is at a higher plane than non-academic activist writings. When incorporated with 'non-academic' forms of writing practices, an academic piece is often labelled as 'methodology', 'activism', 'atheoretical' (Nagar and Swarr, 2010, p. 8). Our writing practices should perhaps come under the same scrutiny of power relations that we use both to explore our fields of study and critically examine data collection processes. After all, the use of people as research subjects in the conduct of the projects have been roundly critiqued for many years and new ways of working formed. Similarly, neglecting an examination of writing practices reiterates norms that we might well want to critique.

We present this chapter in a dialogic form as a political strategy. We bring academic/activist voices from two different nations in conversation with each other within the pages of an academic output, as a means of further politicizing the processes of writing theory. We do not contest the binary output strategies where 'community' outputs are separate from academic ones, as we don't think that this output will be widely read by activists. However, we are challenging the location of activists writing outside the academy. We see this, often unspoken, dissemination approach as deserving of questioning, critiquing and rethinking. This is not to deny the importance of separate

modes of dissemination, but instead to consider what new spaces for the discussion of research may be created by crossing the divides between community/University, activist/academic, and Global North/Global South. These are important concerns, as writing ‘with’ rather than writing ‘about’ is a challenge that academics have taken up in recent years in order to redress concerns about marginalization, essentialisms and differences in representation. This chapter seeks to be part of these spaces, spaces that have offered significant innovation, including *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (Kennedy and Davis, 1994) and *Playing with Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism through Seven Lives in India* (Nagar, 2006). Each text in its own way queered/crossed the established modes of academic writing by placing oral narratives and journals by working class lesbians and grassroots development workers at the heart of text, thus questioning what counts as historical analysis and theory.

This chapter draws on a transnational discussion between the authors, undertaken in 2013 over Skype across Brighton and Kolkata, and subsequently edited and updated for this chapter. Leela and Kath worked on the Count Me In Too project, [www.countmeintoo.co.uk](http://www.countmeintoo.co.uk), a project where LGBT activists worked with the public sector and others to improve the lives of LGBT people in Brighton and Hove. This led to a co-authored book, *Ordinary in Brighton: LGBT, Activisms and the City* (Browne and Bakshi, 2013a). Niharika and Subhagata are collaboratively working on a book project on community and spaces of activism in Kolkata. The discussion was transcribed, coded and edited. We present this chapter as an edited version of the conversation. We have followed academic conventions of citation here, whereby the author who has ‘lead the piece’ is the lead author. We have then ordered the authors in relation to contribution and

the alphabet. The voice of the introduction, first section and conclusion is an academic one, where Kath and Niharika ensured a properly cited narrative that places this dialogue in appropriate fields. We also edited the narrative into something coherent for Leela and Subhagata to look at and then we all edited our contributions, which reflect other power relations that can be overlooked in participatory research, that is the ways in which academic research and especially academic writing benefits academic researchers and our careers. In this way the academic authors of this piece are indeed stabilized as the primary authors of the text. This reiterates certain academic institutional privileges and axes of power. We acknowledge our academic privilege and power as a political act to interrupt this from *within* by centering our thoughts about our respective academic/activist projects in a dialogic form in an academic production. The time commitment that non-academic activists give to research needs to be acknowledged and addressed, with the legwork done by those with institutional support for our time, and recognition of the ways in which benefits accrue differently to those in different positionalities. Our conversations in this chapter are not timeless, but are temporal accounts about dynamic and changing process of collaborative work about queer activism and writing in Brighton and Kolkata in 2013/14.

### **Tensions, Motivations, and Engagements with Activism and Academia**

**Kath:** There is a gap in the literature around writing, with activists and academics writing together. What you have is the discussion of doing the research together. And then academics write up the reports and give activists (and policy makers) the reports. Or a community activist gets involved and writes the dissemination for community stuff. And

then academics write the academic stuff. What Leela and I try to do is something different. Which is we both write the academic stuff.

**Niharika:** When Sappho for Equality and I began our book project, Subhagata, Sumita (my other writing partner) and I talked about what this book is going to do or achieve outside the academic circle. We decided that after the book is complete we will have to write a parallel piece which would be useful for dissemination in non-academic circles.

**Kath:** I think we have to acknowledge that one of the motivations for this work is that it creates good data and writing that is a part of my job. I get paid to do it, but there is a responsibility there as well. If I do a project, I need academic publications that come out of it. However, my work is connected to activism in ways that might not be possible in other jobs. I think, as academics we have to acknowledge our privilege there as well.

**Niharika:** Yes, absolutely. There is a professional demand to publish with an academic publisher especially during the start of one's career. This cannot be discounted.

**Leela:** I think another motivation is advancing the priorities of the LGBT communities. Activists get clever insight on things we (academics) have been talking about for ages. And that tends to get a bit subsumed into an academic agenda, not in a bad way because the new thinking involves activists as well, but it can pull in a different direction from where activists want to go. I think academic questions become more relevant when they engage with activism and what activists are concerned about. It becomes irrelevant (to activists)

when it starts looking at questions that do not have practical application.

**Kath:** But then we talked about the identities and nuances and the complexities.

**Leela:** Yes, understanding the complexities helps the activists to be more effective I think.

**Subhagata:** It is a part of our activism to make a bridge with academia. This has been the motivating factor for this book project. There are not many texts about LBT issues in the Indian context. Also this city is very important because India is a very big country; it has different cultures in different parts of the country. Therefore the culture of Kolkata is quite different from Delhi. Hence, place specific studies are needed. Also, as an activist, I perceive this book project as a simultaneous process of documenting activism with some academic feedback or academic analysis. Also, we would like to try to broaden our movement. If we can produce this text, it may help those who are at our stage of activism. Finally, I think that writing and constantly dialoguing and connecting with academics is a continuous learning process for me. My activism is also application of the knowledge thus generated through this learning. I also feel that the lived experience, which creates my activism today is perhaps knowledge for the future.

**Leela:** I got involved in activism in 2005 with LGBT community groups because of the work they were doing at the time. And I think in some ways I was chased a bit for being the only ethnic representative. That group wanted to have people with disabilities, older

people and younger people. And some respectability comes with that...I think that's partly what motivated me to get involved. What motivated me the most was the quality of the work. What motivated me actually was the struggle, and that it was something that felt productive. I think that's when research is really important: to understand what the blockages are and understand what we have to deal with to understand how to move forward...The problem I had there was (what to do with) all the understanding that I didn't have before I started to do activism. And that partly has to do with the political entities and who is taking the power in Brighton at the moment.

**Kath:** What made you start writing?

**Leela:** I don't think I could have done it at the same time as the activism but the activism was winding down in a way and that left me free to do writing. And the question is where to go with this insight...It's like we get a period of activism and now I'm involved with writing the book. So in some ways the knowledge comes a bit late, but we certainly have much more insight into the problems we are working with than before we wrote the book. I think that I really didn't understand, in terms of motivations, the issues that we were dealing with, and there was a lot of tension in the group of activists as we could not explain what the problem was or the issue was. Now, we would be able to explain but we don't have the group of activists anymore...But I guess that where academic writing comes in for activists elsewhere. Maybe reading this text will help people with their own issues in their activism.

## **Accountability, Audience and Publishing**

**Niharika:** The question of accountability is a key issue framing our book project. We have read about accountability, but what does it mean in practice? I am interested in understanding what accountability means in the process of writing and knowledge production.

**Kath:** And when you talk about accountability, accountability to whom?

**Niharika:** Accountability to the people who are being documented and ‘written about’. I want to write *with* the activists rather than *about* the activists, as much as is possible within the demands of my profession. Also, as and when I am, let’s say, talking about the lives of the people we are working with or the politics and the political vision that we are trying to document, we are thinking who is going to read this, apart from academics in our field? Who is the audience?

**Kath:** We really struggled with the audience in terms of how we pitch the book and who to pitch it to. Trying to pitch it to both did not work for us at all. We kept trying to write across those boundaries but we ended up pitching to academics.

**Leela:** Because I think that’s what got it published. If we had a publisher who said we would rather have a book for activists, we would have done that.

**Kath:** When you go to the book publisher, you get a different set of agendas. We had not

really considered that, we just did our writing worrying about how those locally might read it, and believing that others would be interested...Even though we tried to write across academic and activists, we had those academic guidelines coming through very strongly. The academic agendas come through because of the structures you have to adhere to.

**Subhagata:** Is it possible to write a book in a way so that academics and activists can both use it?

**Leela:** So there was criticism of writing style, and referring to previous academic arguments. But there are sections that refer to academic arguments that I sort of understand but I don't really see the relevance, other than academics insist you do it that way... So in that sense we have gone more the academic route because that is how you get published. When we did the project we wrote for different audiences. We had the detailed findings reports and community summaries...But I don't know about the activism audience having a particular voice. The activists sort of have to pick from the different styles...The activists are more interested in having discussions than readings to be honest. So a lot of the project has been getting people together to work on stuff. Which was then written up.

**Subhagata:** We have a sexuality resource center called Chetana, which means consciousness. This is the first of its kind in Eastern India. Students doing their Masters or PhD, can use our center for their research and get our book once it is completed. So it

is very important to enrich this center as well. These days the students are very keen to take up the subject of lesbianism or queer politics or LGBT issues or gay politics or transgenderism. All students are not necessarily from the LGBT community. These students despite their interest do not have access to much material or text on the contemporary local and national scenario. Therefore, our materials and our sources in Chetana are useful for them. We are the first organization who started LBT rights movement in eastern India. So it is very important to document this journey for both academic and activist purposes. We have been successful in creating a readership for queer politics and queer lives. It is kind of re-assuring to know that there is a theoretical back up for my activism. I am not only demanding rights through my activism, but also creating something which may be useful to the public, the LGBT community, the, state, the academia and whoever is connecting with us.

**Niharika:** Sappho for Equality has also published research reports, newsletters, essays, poetries and other pieces under its own banner. The drive to document and create an archive and a knowledge base is ongoing thing with this collective.

**Subhagata:** So it is not possible to write this book for both audiences if you want to get an academic publisher?

**Kath:** We were told that our stuff was not universal or international enough because it was based in a city in the UK. There is something that you have that we didn't have. You might find a publisher because you are read as an 'exotic other', international is

elsewhere. That was infuriating because one the key arguments in our book was place matters. So place plays an importance on how these equalities and issues play out and Brighton is supposedly equal accepting trendy right-on place but we still found those issues for LGBT people... Then they argue, “How will you internationalize that?” We would say but we don’t want to internationalize it, we want to argue that place is important. It quickly became obvious that we needed a publisher who understood the geography of sexualities.

### **The Journeys, Translations and Relationships of Writing**

**Subhagata:** During the course of this book project, Sumita and I dialogue with each other. We reflect on our past and think about our beginnings 14 years ago; traverse back and forth in time. Today’s activism and political understanding is standing on yesterday’s beginning of a nascent idea of queer politics. Today we term those ideas as queer politics. But when we started we didn’t know that we were doing politics or activism or whatever. That was our day-to-day living at the time. So we never thought that we would be engaged in politics in this way, and that finally, someday we will be engaged in this transnational academic/activist collaboration. So today we’re reflecting on the past and trying to be as close as possible to yesterday’s feelings. For me it is a challenge, because I am being obscured with my present understanding. I feel that the book should reflect a journey. Niharika is using academic terms, terminologies, definitions, to theorize this journey. It’s my feeling that she is putting practice into theory.

**Kath:** There is also something to recording those stories that memorializes them or creates passage that celebrates them in a way. Like you tell the stories to people about the activists that came before them and that in itself is activism, in recording what might otherwise get lost. I think that is a really important thing to do. But in terms of the academics making connections with activists, I think there is something of an expectation of what it means to write something in an academic book. Like terminology, class of categories, all that kind of stuff like you said. But in some ways it says ‘this is a legitimate study, this is important to academics and its important to investigate’. Therefore, our group’s views are legitimate and our aspects are legitimate.

That’s something I think is really important in terms of what that means in the creation of knowledge. Because it could increase our knowledge and that knowledge is legitimate to academics.

**Subhagata:** So this book will serve that purpose and we personally are being very optimistic. I am thinking of a very long-term usefulness for this book. We have begun to mobilize the youth in universities and colleges, as part of our advocacy and awareness. Maybe someday this book will be part of their curriculum; I am just dreaming.

**Kath:** I think that’s what academia can offer. It offers something that is ‘real’ knowledge. Makes knowledge in a way that isn’t known before you put it in an academic book. I mean we have talked about that before, it’s the same knowledge, it’s just put in a different place. And that makes it different.

**Leela:** But we have also written about recent history. And if we hadn't then there is no way to access it. And we have spoken to activists who now are doing different things. Otherwise that would be lost. The work is so partial because we have only written about the bits relevant to our project. There are loads of other stuff we haven't written about that won't get recorded.

**Kath:** And there is so much more to do and we are hoping that it's a start. It's a beginning rather than an ending and that other people will pick it up and do more with it.

**Subhagata:** We published a book with interviews that were only transcribed and translated, but not analyzed. I feel the word analysis is problematic. I feel that who am I to analyze other persons' life. Analysis can objectify, with which I am uncomfortable with, irrespective of whether I am an activist or an academic. So instead of analysis, we can comment.

**Kath:** Is in it interpretation too as well, maybe?

**Subhagata:** Interpretation, yes.

**Niharika:** Translating is a challenge. Often when I am using academic concepts, Subhagata stops me, saying, 'make it clear', 'I don't agree with you', 'this doesn't make any sense'.

**Subhagata:** To me of course!

**Niharika:** So I am constantly trying to translate and she is constantly trying to translate as well.

**Subhagata:** We are actually learning together.

**Niharika:** Yes, I think we are learning together. I am forced to make things very clear, but not simple. Clear accessible writing is also necessary if we are to reach a wider audience, as we talked about earlier.

**Kath:** We have spoken about what we will get out of the books, but it's also important to gather what we get out of these kind of collaborations as well. I am thinking around emotional support and having someone else to work with. Just being able to talk things through when you're seven months pregnant and get a rejection. I think we have a really good friendship.

**Leela:** I think the basic elements of why it works is very simple, and that is that we are interested in the same thing and we get along well as individuals.

**Niharika:** For me the friendship and bonding has been a very big aspect of this work. I have developed some deep friendships. So, along the way, I have begun reading more on

friendship and friendship as a way of life. What I ultimately write will also be informed by these friendships.

**Subhagata:** For me too!

### **Success and Costs**

**Kath:** There is something more fulfilling about doing this than other kinds of research I might do in terms of thinking or making a difference in the world is very motivating. To know the limitations of that and to know how small a change that might be.

**Niharika:** But a change nevertheless. How would you define an intangible success of the project?

**Leela:** I think for activists; a lot of people have called this a success. Activists and marginalized people and practitioners were able to sit and dialogue. In and of itself, this is one the major successes...I think what is questioned a lot is defining the outcomes of the project because its very difficult to attribute changes directly to the project. It could have come from somewhere else. I think people want to say that this project caused change or something to happen. And I believe that there have been lots of changes that have happen because of the project but we can't support that.

**Kath:** It's really difficult to think through what the successes are but I think for this research that's what we need to do because we don't write about that as much. You put a

lot more of your emotional energy than other research. It's important for us to see that we are creating and doing something worthwhile given the amount we are putting in. I'm very much invested in this project emotionally and personally.

**Leela:** I think there is some privilege in there, in being an academic, because they expect everything to go right. But I didn't expect everything to go right because my experience as an activist is that the work we do (at times) doesn't come to anything. It leads to conflicts. But we will try to publish it. Activists also talked about wanting to end homophobia and failing to do that. Again, it's too big of a goal to expect to embrace, but we still have this discussion on how we can end homophobia. So success is really difficult to define would be my honest answer. But I think that we were successful in lots of ways. For me, one of the big things will be having something that lives longer than writing in the newspaper. Because marginalized people have been very badly burnt by the power.

## **Conclusion**

A smug conclusion might note the ways in which this chapter continues to push the boundaries of academic conventions and writing, operating transnationally to explore the issues of working across activist/academic boundaries in ways that do not reiterate presumptions of the progress in the UK versus the move 'backwards' in India. However, instead we want to note the continued limitations of writing academic texts collaboratively. As we see from our conversations, there are different priorities that undergird academic and activist writing, including the need to publish and disseminate to

a scholarly audience and to advance the needs of a movement in an accessible way. But when academics and activists write together, then the common goal of documenting lives and/or a movement can help further the goals of both academia and activism. These priorities are held together by a sense of accountability for some, accountability in terms of who the audience of the text will be. Further accountability is not transparent but mediated by the needs of publishing, such as how international and thus marketable the text will be. We nevertheless continue to write together, journey into the motivations and emotions that brought us together to write in the first place. Writing of course is not easy, for it involves the challenge of translation. Writing needs to be both conceptual and accessible. Our language and our writing form emerging through practice, experience, and conceptual play. Apart from tangible successes of getting published and disseminating our work, the multiple intangibles, including the deep friendships that we generate through this process is invaluable, motivating us to continue this journey, and celebrate our small successes along the way. We are not arguing that all PAR or queer research should be written up with activists, what we are asking for is an exploration of these possibilities, recognizing that central to PAR, and indeed queer thinking, is the contestations of normative and potentially exploitative power relations.

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