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Queer Spaces and Strategic Social Constructions in Rao's *The Boyfriend* by Frederick D. King

In her preceding article, Kelly Baker argues that “individual and collective senses of belonging are shaped by and hinged upon both the material and symbolic manifestations of place” (23). Baker rejects the primarily urban conception of the queer individual as spatially placeless, insisting that queer identity, both individual and communal, is rooted in material place. I agree with Baker’s material conception of queerness, however, I want to trouble her universal impression of queer identity being “rooted in material place” (21) by looking at the cultural limits of queer belonging within a cultural place outside of Western social conventions.

R. Raj Rao’s *The Boyfriend* (2003) explores the problematic use of homosexuality as an essential identity for men who experience same-sex desire in 1992 Bombay, several years before the city is renamed Mumbai. Homosexual identity is difficult to locate in Bombay at this time because of the adaptable constructions of queer spaces necessary response to the government’s use of Section 377 to persecute people who engage in same-sex relations. Suparna Bhaskaran explains the history of this anti-sodomy statute, introduced by Lord Macaulay on October 6, 1860 making illegal voluntary participation in “a carnal knowledge committed against the order of nature by a person with a man, or in the same unnatural manner with a woman, or by a man or woman in any manner with an animal” (qtd. in Bhaskaran 15). The definition of sodomy, remains

vague and arbitrary to this date, hence its malleability to political interference (22). Freelance journalist Yudi Pandava and impoverished slum resident Milind Mahadik each negotiate a space for themselves within Bombay where they can have sex with other men. Yudi associates this sex act with being homosexual (or gay), constructing an identity that crosses boundaries of caste and seeks queer spaces in a community defined by its common rejection of heteronormative constructs of sexuality. This means that queer spaces for Yudi are available to a variety of same-sex identities including drag queens, MSMs, hijras, and koti. However, Milind defines himself primarily by his caste as a Bhangi (74) and his traditional religion as a follower of Gautama Buddha (74), viewing his sexual desire for men as secondary to the heteronormative spaces in which his identity is defined by his family, religion, and caste. Milind finds himself in conflict with this heteronormative self-construction as he begins to explore same-sex desire. He conflates sexual roles with perceptions of masculinity, thereby limiting his experiences to those in which he can perceive himself as manly. What is revealed by Yudi’s and Milind’s differences in self-identification is that social perceptions of the self such as gay, straight, active, passive, man, and woman are constructed signifiers without an essentialist signified to represent. Without a common or essential truth to define same-sex desire, place, as

per Baker's definition, cannot be "rooted" to a particular location.

As Baker claims, symbolic material manifestations of space shape both individual and collective senses of belonging. The fictional experience of Yudi and Milind illustrates the additional cultural factor of class, in this case caste, in determining one's spatial relationship with queer culture. Milind defines himself, not in relation to the spaces of the underground queer nightlife of the city, but by his sense of masculinity, as defined by his family and social upbringing. Only when Yudi alters queer spaces and caters to Milind's gender insecurities can Milind feel comfortable in the queer underground that, for Yudi, is home. The Bombay of 1992 does not fit Baker's concept of an urban neighbourhood around which community can form, since, in environments where the law still prosecutes sodomy as a crime, queers must adapt and transform specific locations into sites for queer sexuality. Rao shows how gay men transform public toilets and passenger trains from generic urban conveniences into moveable queer space. Where Baker's concept of place is rooted in "attachments to place" (32), I will examine how Yudi and Milind's conception of place interacts with their different "individual and collective senses of belonging" (Baker 23), in order to emphasize the benefits of queer space and the limits of a collective place.

In Rao's novel, individuals negotiate same-sex desires within a socio-political construct controlled by the heteronormative culture of Bombay in the 1990s. The sexualities of Yudi and Milind threaten this construct of culture because they do not conform to the reproductive model of opposite-sex desire. A politically active social community of individuals who experience same-sex desire is necessary in order to position such outcast people as equal in value to the constructed normalcy of heterosexuals.

Parmesh Shahani in *Gay Bombay* (2008) proposes this to be a form of strategic essentialism that he develops from the work of Gayatri Spivak in regards to postcolonialism. Shahani quotes Spivak's definition as "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest." He says that

Spivak feels that essentialism (that is a certain essential meaning or property or quality that can be ascribed to something, say a word or a person or a race) is a trap, at the same time conceding that is impossible to be completely non-essential. She resolves the dilemma by pursuing "strategic essentialism" —or self consciously essentializing in order to accomplish one's goals. (294)

In relation to same-sex desire, strategic essentialism groups together all sexualities that do not conform to the reproductive model of heterosexuality as queer. This is a social necessity as per Pierre Bourdieu who warns that "If you want to launch a political movement or even an association, you will have a better chance of bringing together people who are in the same sector of social space [...] than if you want to bring together people situated in [different] regions" (326). Queers must form a community based on their rejection by the heterosexual construct by uniting disparate communal identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, that limit the inclusion and reduce the numerical power of a politically unified community. The label of queer, meaning "non normative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity embodiment, and activity in space and time" (Halberstam 2), unites these sexual diversities in opposition for political purposes.

The concept of strategic essentialism that Shahani reads in Spivak is in fact another construction

that provides a convenient means of assembling diverse groups of individuals and communities into a united queer political movement. Jacques Derrida states, “everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*” (294). With this establishment of a decentred universe where the chain of signification lacks a transcendental signified it is possible to recognize all community identities as non-essential social constructions. Communities determine ideology, not by biology, as Milind seems to fear, but by personal interactions within social space. Heterosexual constructions of normal sexual identity and their resultant construction of non-heterosexuals as outcasts motivates a respondent construction of queer opposition that, as Rao’s novel illustrates, does not necessarily work for all outcasts of heteronormativity.

A complication when considering queer space is that heteronormative space in India is also at a premium. Bombay in the 1990s was a city of contrasts that included condominiums, call centres, and slums. Sujata Patel’s article discusses the economic and political history of Bombay and how in 1995 the Shiv Sena changed the name of the city to Mumbai. While seen as a sloughing off of a colonial past, Patel argues that it exemplified “a populist-oriented ethnic and religious identity” (250). Patel shows us that it is not a break from an oppressive past but a new form of oppression primarily serving to discriminate against Muslim citizens, now segregated as outsiders in opposition to a constructed Hindi India (Masselos 1995). In addition to the economic development and movement of labour, Patel says of India’s economic growth that: “while income and earnings have risen,

the basic conditions of work and living environment have not changed for many of Bombay’s citizens”; therefore, “Bombay is now a city of extreme contrasts. Over half the city’s population of ten million inhabitants lives in slums, on pavements, under bridges, near railway tracks” (267). This speaks in relation to Mahim, the transit camp where Milind resides and the resultant social boundaries between him and Yudi. They each make assumptions about the other based on a misunderstanding of their economic disparity.

Place, as Baker argues, is not metaphorical and not necessarily urban either. Instead, “identity can be imaginatively rooted and socially constructed in material place” (25). Yudi insists that: “Homos are no different from Bhangis. Both are Untouchables,” because of this, according to Yudi’s perception, “homosexuals have no caste or religion. They have only their homosexuality” (81). This is how Yudi has constructed his own identity and he assumes his sense of self is universal for all gay men. He does not account for Milind’s own experience. From Milind’s underprivileged perspective, Yudi is wrong; Milind’s social status is continually reinforced, even in the casteless world Yudi wishes to make available to him. For example, when Milind is thrown out of the Taj Hotel while waiting for Yudi, Yudi is enraged: “The thought that Milind was disgraced while he sat in air-conditioned comfort, munched club sandwiches, and indulged in bourgeois talk, filled him with remorse. He had half a mind to go up to that durwan and slap him across the face. [...] But would it really matter? the man who had just been thrown out of a five star hotel was only Milind Mahadik, a ward boy’s son.” Yudi decides that unless he “evolved a strategy, such episodes would constantly plague their lives. This was India, after all, and Milind a working-class Dalit” (98). Another social construction is required

here so that no one will question Milind's presence in places deemed appropriate only for Indians of a higher caste. This means a lie is formed in which the assumptions of Milind's caste is diminished either by fine clothes to make Milind appear of a higher caste, or by pretending to be Yudi's servant in order to supersede such caste considerations. In Bombay, social perceptions and caste are the lenses that construct individual identities, diminishing Yudi's physical adaptations of Milind into performance.

Milind and Yudi's relationship is a microcosm of the intense caste interactions within a crowded modern Bombay. Jim Masselos explains that:

When a high-rise building is constructed, it is built by people who set up their shanties on the perimeters of the land on which they are building. They stay there until the building is completed, when some move on to other jobs, but many refuse to do so and stay in their shanties beside the high-rise buildings they built. The result is that the area acquires not only an upper-class high-rise enclave but also a shanty settlement at its base. (211)

The rich move into high rise condominiums while the poor who built the units squat in slums beneath, creating a crush of castes that no one can escape. Such crowds are the reality of all aspects of Bombay life, including transportation. The trains are so overcrowded with people of all castes that young men hang out the windows, a site of limited space queered by Rao: "The mere sight of these men turned [Yudi] on, as they leaned out together, in twos and threes, tossing their hair in the wind, and crotches pressed against buttocks." When Yudi tries to do the same thing, it is made clear to him that "his days for acrobatics were over. No one cautioned the

young men who hung out of rakes day after day" (21). The city swarms with people and there is no space for anyone to disassociate themselves from the crowd.

Bourdieu considers the constructed nature of social spaces and how the powers in authority seemingly control those spaces while, at the same time, "the holders of bureaucratic authority never establish an absolute monopoly, [because], there are always, in any society, conflicts between symbolic powers that aim at imposing the vision of legitimate divisions, that is, at constructing groups" (332). Queer space, even within an oppressive regime, can exist outside this control. The benefit of queer space in India as presented in *The Boyfriend* is that queers, in this case homosexual men, cannot be located. Baker's concept of a queer neighbourhood is rooted in Western experiences where homosexual acts are decriminalized and gay villages can openly claim part of the larger community as their own. However, in Bombay, queer spaces are mysterious because their activities are in public spaces subverted for sexual activity and continually on the move, whether dancing at a disco, travelling on a train, or visiting a religious shrine. Community is as dependent on perception as it is on material place.

Homophobic cultures that assume heteronormativity drive queers underground into other constructed spaces. Queer space serves to protect those who use it, but such spaces also divide queer culture into disparate subcultures without a united voice. Samuel Delany speaks to the problematic desire to identify homosexuals as a conflict between ontological and epistemological concerns. While some want to understand the behaviours associated with being gay, others want to know what causes homosexuality. The question at the "epistemological level" is "what qualities do we possess, that signal the fact

that we partake of the pre-existing essence of 'gayness' that gives us our gay 'identity' and that, in most folks' minds, means that we belong to the category of 'those who are gay?' (187). Delany explains the "ontological level" of the question as "What forces or conditions in the world take the potentially 'normal' and 'ordinary' person [...] and 'pervert' them (i.e. turn them away) from that 'normal' condition so that now we have someone who does some or many or all of the things we call gay" (187). Queer theory, according to Delany, tries to balance these considerations (188) but both concerns centre on the identification of homosexuality en masse. Such identification is not possible because the construction of a strategic queer culture implicitly consists of multiple identities, all sexual identities that have been rejected by heteronormative constructions of sexuality. Queer space acts to protect the oppressed queer from arrest or quarantine within heterosexual Bombay because of its fluidity of place.

Architect and queer theorist, Aaron Betsky, defines queer space in relation to the rise of western middle-class bourgeois power in the nineteenth-century at which time these spaces of entertainment, places that serve no necessary purpose, become available to the masses (8). In these public locations, these groups of gay men congregate and socialize, generating queer space through social and erotic interaction. These spaces have since adapted to the modern metropolis, subverting discos, pubs, public toilets, dark alleys, and abandoned piers for the queer activities of cruising and homoerotic sex:

It was a space that could not be seen, had no contours, and never endured beyond the sexual act. Its order was and is that of gestures. What makes this space of cruising so important is that it shows that you don't have to

make spaces to contain and encourage relations between people, because they will just appear exactly at the moment where they are least expected—or wanted. These spaces, moreover, have a sudden sensuality that belies the anonymous emptiness of the modern city. (141)

While Betsky warns that such spaces are vanishing amidst the commodification of western culture (14), for Rao, Bombay of the 1990s is still a place full of queer spaces where homoerotic desire is illegally in opposition to the values of growing middle-class constructs of heteronormativity. The necessity of silence in the face of Section 377 makes for a thriving underground of sexual activity in adapted queer spaces. Perhaps Rao is asking his reader to consider whether the Bombay of 1992 was a more vibrant, sexually honest city, than a twenty-first century Mumbai where indigenous queer cultures are more heavily influenced by the internationalization of Western social practices.

Yudi forms queer community by engaging in mutually gratifying sex in public. As a gay man in Bombay, Yudi is aware of the spaces in which he can seek out this sexual gratification: Churchgate station, the gay cart on the train, Testosterone, Stonewall, Bombay Dost, and the Azad Maiden, a favourite from his youth. In these places, other men who seek men to have sex with congregate historically in a mutual search for sexual contact. Desire has constructed these spaces. As the Swayamwar page in Bombay Dost advises: "Swayamwar is for homosexuals who wish to meet other homosexuals and for lesbians. Transvestites, transsexuals, and hijras can also advertise in swayamwar. This page is not for heterosexuals. Heterosexuals, [...] already have innumerable opportunities to meet each other. We there-

fore urge Heterosexuals Not To Abuse This Precious Space” (qtd. in Rao 84). These locations cannot be defined specifically as gay space since other groups like MSMs and hijras access them as well but queer space is appropriate because they are spaces where discreet non-heterosexual social contacts are developed and a resultant subversive community is constructed that provides support to diverse groups whose sexualities are threatened by heteronormative oppression.

The first queer space that Rao reveals is the men’s bathroom at Churchgate Station. Located at the end of the train’s run through Bombay, men congregate to have casual and anonymous sex. Yudi’s description of the place is simultaneously vulgar and worshipful as if it were a sacred space:

The stinking places were always humming with erotic activity. Orgies in the dark, amidst piss and shit. The foul smell, somehow, made the sex more enjoyable. Having spent so much of his life in these loos Yudi had come to the conclusion that there was indeed something sensual about filth. If the toilets were clean, scrubbed with phenyl, patrons wouldn’t achieve orgasm. (28)

It is a sensually spiritual and fetishized experience as Yudi makes his pilgrimage to the men’s toilet at Churchgate Station because having sex with other men provides a reassuring self-definition for Yudi as a homosexual. Yudi identifies as a gay man not because of where he is—material place does not define him. Instead, the queer space available in the public toilets allows him the opportunity to gratify the need for sexual experiences that he feels define him.

Yudi leaves the toilets with a sense of belonging to something outside of the heteronormative world:

“this was the most urgent of factors that drove him to Churchgate. The gents’ toilet at Churchgate provided a twenty-four-hour supply of men; the amount of semen that went down the urine bowls was enough to start a sperm bank” (2). The priority of sexual contact in Yudi’s life isolates him from heteronormative social constructs: his mother is restricted to Sunday visits and “in his opinion that was more than enough,” while his employer and co-workers “knew that he was gay; and they knew that he knew that they knew,” but such a description evokes a sense of social distance allowing for the possibility “that in their heart of hearts, they thought he was weird” (28). Therefore, the heterosexuals in Yudi’s life are peripheral, offering little more than acquaintance and obligatory congenial interaction without a sense that they understand Yudi personally. Even his friend Gauri uses him for her own purposes without any real interest in whom he is beyond what he can do for her: “There was no objective correlative between Gauri’s knowledge of Yudi’s sexual orientation, and her behaviour. She continued to think of him as a possible husband. In his private lingo, she was the ‘Backbay Reclamation’ kind. She assumed that all men were naturally attracted to women. If something about their sex life had gone awry, there was no reason why they couldn’t be reclaimed, reformed” (52). Gauri attempts to transform Yudi, into a heteronormative space by constructing a malleable perception of his sexual desires. Yudi can only escape these pressures to perform heterosexuality within the sacred spaces of queer sexual desire that he has created for himself for casual sexual encounters. The spaces in which Yudi and Milind can experience same-sex intimacy are on the move throughout the book. The most important of these spaces is the train. Yudi takes Milind on the train after their night of sex to return him to his slum

while he returns himself home. On the train, Yudi finds the gay compartment where men infamously have sex with each other but at the time Yudi and Milind arrive, its contents are not worth the risk of public sexual contact: "The gay coach didn't seem to be living up to its reputation. It was stuffed with the most insipid, uninspiring males, entirely devoid of sexuality" (21). Sexuality is literally on the move, it is not a stable identity. Stability, as I have argued, would be dangerous and allow heterosexuals to identify and locate queers for the purpose of persecution. These communities cannot be easily identity if they are perpetually in motion on trains amidst the anonymity of the crowds. Queers continually move via the trains and can perform sexual contact in whatever space suits their need for privacy whether that space be on the train or at any of its stops throughout Bombay. Therefore, the train disperses queer space into a multitude of adaptable possibilities.

Within these queer spaces Yudi makes it clear that there is still a negotiation of masculinity to be performed that is imposed by heteronormative culture. In his introduction to *Whistling in the Dark* (2008), Rao says that "[i]n queer theory, the anus is not just an orifice in the body for the discharge of excrement [but, l]ike the vagina for feminism, it is a political site, with all its implications of entry, exit, surrender and feminisation of the male body" (xvii). Within the queer spaces of Yudi's sexuality, the men he sleeps with are often uncomfortable with anal sex, so to ease tensions Yudi takes the role of "the bottom." In other words, he adapts to the limits of queer space by allowing these other men to penetrate him during the sex act: "As long as men were allowed to penetrate, there was no fear of their returning afterwards to demand money or beat you up. [...] It was only when these men were penetrated that they became wounded tigers. They felt emasculated.

They could then even murder" (12). While Yudi insists that he finds sex "more relaxing" (13) without the pressure to perform as an active penetrator, as a man who proudly claims possession of a "cucumber" in a bathroom full of "chillies" (6), his acceptance of this role is portrayed by Rao as a mediation of peaceful interactions, not as a sincere performance anxiety. Yudi is not threatened by the role of penetrated because he does not equate the sexual position with effeminacy. Other men are threatened by passive penetration, including Milind who feels confident that his manhood is not threatened when it is he who actively penetrates: "as he saw it, there was no humiliation here, really, for it was he who had fucked [Yudi]. Their roles were quite clear" (14).

Milind has to be the penetrator, he marries in order to feel like a man, yet he has these desires that are natural to him, more natural than any desire for the wife he regularly "flogs" (231). He cannot accept such feelings as a natural way to live because the social structures and traditions of Indian lives are antithesis to the lifestyle such a desire would involve. To live a life without producing children would result in an abrupt halt to Milind's place in the patri-lineage of his caste. For Milind to refuse marriage to a woman would be equivalent to him refusing to become a man. Such a choice would place him in the perceived position of a perpetual child. He already feels emasculated by Yudi's age difference and economic status; as a result, Yudi, conscious of Milind's wounded pride, allows him to be the penetrator and even casts him as groom in a play-fully subversive marriage ceremony: "They lit a fire in the fucking room, and were about to go round it seven times, when a major dispute arose between them. Each wanted to be the engine as they encircled the fire. [...] In the end, of course, Yudi capitulated. At his age, love rarely came without sacrifice" (107). Even a play ma-

riage implies the justification of their relationship in heteronormative terms which allow Milind a sense of masculine supremacy even as those same terms inflict the crisis of masculinity in the first place. Subversive social constructs within heteronormative society do not yet exist so Milind feels obligated to repress his sexual interests and socially comply with heteronormative constructs of Indian manhood.

Interestingly, Yudi, established by Rao as using queer spaces for casual sexual gratification, now desires companionship. Being in his early forties, he develops a fear of being alone: “as he grew older Yudi felt the need for a mate. Perhaps it was a feature of middle age: one wanted stability. Ten years ago, he was at peace having casual sex. Any sort of commitment would have at that time seemed a bother. Now he wanted someone to care and share his life with” (38-9). This leads him to follow up with Milind who may potentially commit to him for financial motives, which Yudi believes is the only reason Milind remains with him: “he would foot it all; it was the price he had to pay for his Milya’s company. Nothing, after all, came without a price” (116). Rao portrays love and monogamous commitment as another constructed space generated by Yudi’s need to feel a sense of belonging that he associates with having a family—even in this case, a queer family.

Through the course of the novel, Yudi challenges heteronormative spaces and works hard to indoctrinate Milind into his queer spaces while claiming possession of the boy as his lover. He offers Milind stability within an unstable queer space. The world to which Yudi introduces him is one of koti, discos, corrupt police officers, and a queering of heteronormative gender behaviour. This latter is what disturbs Milind the most; though, the spectacle of inversion is what simultaneously attracts his attention. As Shivananda Khan states: “The act of sexual

penetration is not so much a definer of identity, but one of phallic power. For many Indians, the ‘penetrator’ maintains a sense of ‘manliness,’ while the ‘penetrated’ will be seen as ‘not-man’” (107). Yudi’s efforts to reassure the boy of his masculinity are hampered by Milind’s financial dependence on Yudi. He is threatened by this position again, seeing his manhood as defined by his ability to financially support and care for a family. To have Yudi pay his bills is to make him dependent and in his mind, a woman. At the disco, another man finds Milind attractive and Yudi, out of a sense of possessive jealousy, fights the man, which further offends Milind: “In his scheme of things, men fought over women, not over men” (94). However, through his introduction to queer spaces, Milind learns that the queers objectified and made possessions are the more masculine men: “as Yudi explained to him, most gays preferred manly men to womanly men” because “sleeping with womanly men was as revolting to them as sleeping with women” (94-5). Milind begins to see beyond heteronormative constructions of gender roles because in spite of all of his insecurities, “he felt elated. Seeing Yudi’s bloody face, he realized that here was someone at last who cared for him” (95). There is a bond between Milind and Yudi but that bond is limited to the temporary queer spaces in which they connect.

Privacy is another construct of negotiation between queer and heteronormative spaces. There is a space of silence in Yudi’s domestic life where he has a silent understanding with his mother: “She knew why her son was a bachelor, but it wasn’t something she could bring herself to talk about, even in her nightmares” (193); still, she refuses to recognize that he will never fulfill her expectations of marriage and children. Gauri provides his mother with a false hope that she will help him lead the expected life of

an adult male: “her presence in the flat made his mom happy. A glimmer of hope rose in her heart: could it be that her son was turning normal?” (193). Because they live in silence, Yudi’s sexuality is not real or material. His mother and Guari cannot locate homosexuality so they diminish his desires to mutability. According to Khan, “There are specific understandings of what it is to be a man or a woman which are defined by socio-cultural duties and obligations to the marriage partner, family and community. Men and women are not seen as adults until they are married [...]. To be a single person after a certain age is seen as shameful, bringing dishonour to the family, and is often seen as an aberration or sickness” (108). Therefore, in his mother’s eyes, Yudi’s single lifestyle perpetuates his childhood. Meanwhile, Milind avoids his family. He does not go home because he does not want them to be aware of his relationship with Yudi or his life as a prostitute with the A. K. Modelling Agency. When Yudi invades this family space in a desperate search for the boy, Milind is horrified: “he had become the laughing stock of his family. See how the sight of Yudi amused his mother and brother! Look at the way his parents compared the chhakka to macho friends like Pramod and David, and found him wanting! [...] They must have suspected there was something odd about the whole thing.” (207). His family begin to see the nature of their relationship and in turn they encourage Yudi’s presence with an invitation to Milind’s brother’s wedding. Because he is of a higher caste, they see Yudi’s sexual interests as a means of earning an income—so long as Milind still marries and fulfills his heteronormative expectations. Milind’s wife Leela encourages the prostitution of her own husband, sending Milind off to beg for money not fully comprehending the sexual exchange this will entail:

Milya had a friend who earned five thousand rupees for every article he sent to the Times of India. If that was the case he must be rich, filthy rich. Of course, she did not think the man would be a Krishna to her family—for gods were gods and men were men—but where was the harm in asking for help anyway? She was not to know that unlike Krishna and Sudama, her husband and the journalist—corrupt mortals, after all—were both more and much less than friends. (223)

In Rao’s Bombay, sex is both commodified and a familial obligation within the heteronormative world. Such perceptions of sexuality cannot locate sex between men in a particular site. Within Milind’s Dalit working-class family and their community understand sex as adaptable and fluid for both financial profit and the continuation of one’s family through reproduction.

Queer space subverts commodification for Rao who constructs same-sex desire as a sacred act, sacrilegiously imbued with the status of an occult ritual. As a result, Rao conflates religious spaces with the shared experiences of sexual ecstasy and community identity. For example, Yudi conflates the sacred space of a temple with the queer space of a public toilet: “Flower sellers dotted the road on both sides, stringing their marigolds into garlands. A replenishing breeze dried the muggy frames of devotees and sprayed them with salt water. Yudi saw a loo round the corner. The sacred and the profane co-existing nicely” (174). For Yudi, both hold sacred status, the flowers representing the spiritual practice of Hindu culture, the toilets representing the sacred mysteries of same-sex practices. Both fulfill a desire within Yudi to identify with a social community as a means to construct self-identity. Milind and his family both refer to Yudi as Krishna. These references

construct a perception of him as the warrior and king of Hindu myth (O’Flaherty 204). Wendy O’Flaherty also associates Krishna with the “motif of concealment” because he hides “the entire universe” in his mouth (218). Yudi, within the queer space of Bombay’s queer underground, holds Milind’s secret sexual desires inside his body—physically when he is penetrated, and socially because Milind keeps him separate from his family. However, Rao reveals the fragility of queer space when Yudi arrives at the transit camp where Milind’s family lives. Yudi reveals their secret love affair to Milind’s family who make Milind’s private sexual relationship vulgar with their derogatory response to Yudi’s effeminate mannerisms.

There is an attempt to recover their shared queer space when Yudi takes Milind on vacation. Torn between his desire for sexual promiscuity and his growing desire for Milind’s companionship, Yudi “began to see himself as the minor Hindu god, stoned by misery and impotence” (162), finding he is dependent on Milind’s reciprocation of love for self-fulfillment. They visit a sacred site of the Jain faith, the statue of a naked Gomateshwara (118). Yudi attempts to queer the phallic icon, placing same-sex desire firmly within a religious site of contact: “Do you know why Gomatesh is always naked? Because he had conquered lust! Looking at this mighty statue, though, it’s clear he hadn’t stopped thinking of his physique. Doesn’t he look like he worked out everyday?” (126). Yudi stops when Milind’s morals are offended by these suggestions as Yudi uses sex to make the sacred more compelling to a clearly disinterested boy who connects neither to the spiritual nor the sacred sexual connotations of the religious icon. Rao uses Yudi to conflate sexual ecstasy and religious ecstasy. Yudi’s construction of queer space at sacred sites throughout India trans-

forms sex into a sacred act. Sexual subversion can queer a multitude of heteronormative spaces. The inside jokes of queering are the occult rituals of queer space and the privilege of membership for the self-identified queer. Milind, because of his refusal to identify himself by his sexual desires and his association of identity with his caste, cannot access Yudi’s sacred narrative of same-sex desire and remains alienated from the queer space that Yudi offers.

Queer space is a construction simply because all spaces, including places of queer community, are constructions. To live in Bombay is to force yourself into a space in which there is physically no room for you. As a result, place is divided by caste as Bombay relegates the poor to the slums and the rich into crowded high-rises. Individuals and diversity are lost in the current of foot traffic that fills the streets. Same-sex desire, then and any attempt to identify as gay or queer insists on the creation of a space to fit the needs of a mobile community. Primarily this is defined by space in which people can have sexual desires met. The toilet and the train, even the privacy of Yudi’s bed, are not queer in any permanent sense. They are sites, momentary adaptations without a rooted queer identity. The only commonality amongst various queer cultures is the inherent opposition of this disparate group to the heteronormative constructs of sexuality. While queer spaces are a construction, Rao’s Bombay serves to complicate our perception of place and the material in community. No space is permanent and R. Raj Rao’s novel illustrates the mutability of all space in India. Kelly Baker is correct to point out the role of material place in community formation; my goal has been to show that the relationship between material space and identity—the perceptions of place and communal belonging—are mutable and lack materiality.

Community attachment to place is temporary and must remain on the move in order for queer spaces to adapt to contingencies created by varying social ideologies of exclusion in the past and the present, and in the east and the west.

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