

# “The Asymmetrical Geography of My Heart”: Forms of Queer Diasporic Desire in Anurima Banerji’s *Night Artillery*

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If Anurima Banerji’s *Night Artillery* may be viewed as an exploration of some of the contours and textures of South Asian Canadian queer bodies, desires and poetics, then this book poses an important question: “what genre can I write you into?” (“bending towards exile” 46). As a queer writer of colour, Banerji works to push and recreate language beyond the confines of colonial, patriarchal, heterosexist and nationalist traditions, and she does so in order to open up possibilities for imagining a queer diasporic poetics of the erotic. Throughout her poetry, Banerji draws from two equally predominant wells of imagery, meaning, and sense experience, which serve as conjoining sites of metaphor-making. In constructing one set of metaphors, Banerji refers to diasporic experience, including personal and public histories of displacement and attendant questions of what it means to be South Asian, racialised, or part of an im/migrant history within a Canadian nationalist context.<sup>1</sup> A second set of metaphors is built through the poet’s threading together of imagery that relates to private and political understandings of queer desire and erotic experience. The complex slippages and circuitries between these two locations of experience and meaning enable Banerji to assemble a unique poetic vocabulary that bears witness to “the twin sides of [her] heart.” (“Air India, June 1985” 46). In this way, *Night Artillery* sketches out cultural and sexual geographies of queer South Asian bodies and desires as they have been reconfigured in the diaspora, and maps out a hybrid ‘genre’ or poetics in which these bodies might be written. The hybridized body of this text—that is, the way it resists assimilation into

hegemonic definitions of what it means to be either ‘queer’, ‘South Asian’, ‘Canadian’, or ‘diasporic’, especially as these categories continue to be imagined as constituting coherent and mutually exclusive subject positionings—could account for why Banerji’s poetry [page 7] remains neglected within contemporary literary criticism and scholarship. My reading of *Night Artillery* hopes to offer a corrective to such absences by examining the ways in which Banerji helps us to (re)imagine written and embodied forms that queer diasporic desire might specifically assume.

I argue that *Night Artillery*’s creative and intellectual trajectories address queer diasporic subjectivities and attendant structures of queer racialised desire, the details of which have only recently begun to be recognised within contemporary literary and academic discourse. Despite the fact that throughout colonial history, the regulation of sexuality has played a crucial role in maintaining racist and nationalist ideologies (just as the regulation of racial bodies has often upheld dominant sexual and gender regimes)<sup>2</sup>, scholarship that engages the complexities of how institutions such as colonialism, nationalism and heterosexism interlock in intricate and socially-specific ways is still rare. More recently, however, a growing body of interdisciplinary research by and/or centering on queers of colour insists on the value of “a renewed queer studies ever vigilant to the fact that sexuality is intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference” (Eng, Halberstam and Muñoz 1). To this extent, the work of critics such as José Esteban Muñoz, Roberto Strongman, Gayatri Gopinath, David L. Eng, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan has challenged the white gay and lesbian movement’s deployment of developmental discourses that centre around Euro-American norms and standards, while also questioning assumptions about the postcolonial nation’s necessary heterosexism. In the context of such scholarship, work on ‘queer diasporas’ is one site where such intersectional investigations can take place.<sup>3</sup>

Banerji’s *Night Artillery* is part of this larger body of work by queers of colour in that it endeavours to investigate forms that queer diasporic subjectivity might take, expressly in terms of the South Asian diaspora, and amidst the topography of Canadian poetry and cultural production. In relation to these specificities, Banerji’s work mirrors Jasbir K. Puar’s provocative and insightful question: “How could/should one ‘queer’ the diaspora(s) or ‘diasporicize’ the queer?” (406). *Night Artillery* could also be read in light of Gayatri

Gopinath's recent book-length study, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. In this book, Gopinath argues that "if 'diaspora' needs 'queerness' in order to rescue it from its genealogical implications, 'queerness' also needs 'diaspora' in order to make it more supple in relation to questions of race, colonialism, migration, and globalization" (11). An examination of a wide range of South Asian cultural texts (including the work of well-known Canadian authors Shani Mootoo and Shyam Selvadurai), Gopinath's book makes the [page 8] assertion that queer diasporic expressive arts open up new possibilities for imagining collectivity, especially for those subjects who find themselves rendered invisible or 'impossible' within different national spaces. My reading of Banerji's poetry further illuminates the ways in which a specifically lesbian/femme South Asian diasporic poetics may contribute to building language (and new possibilities of language) for queer diasporic desires.

As a Canadian queer writer of colour, Banerji finds herself speaking back to multiple and interlocking axes of social power that situate her subjectivity—for example, heterosexism, patriarchy, racism and colonialism, as well as Indian and Canadian forms of nationalism. For this reason, Banerji positions her writing within an anti-colonial and anti-Orientalist poetics/politics, and draws attention to the gendered and sexualised grammar of colonial constructions of race and the racialised body. In her poem, "Passage to India," she powerfully deconstructs the title of E.M. Forster's famous novel and its typically colonial, racist constructions of Indian masculinities, femininities, and sexualities. Her poem reveals the ways in which these constructions continue to inform stereotypical ideas about the category of 'South Asian woman' in a Eurocentric Canadian imaginary, and, thereby, to limit the positions and possibilities available to such subjects within a present-day colonial and racist nation-state. "Passage to India" moves through a plethora of such stereotypes, negating each with wit and alacrity:

    this is no karma queen  
        indian princess  
            brown sugar  
                exotic beauty  
                    sapno ki rani  
                        (51)

this is no desi dasi  
cooking your curry  
making your chai  
and rasmalai

this is no arranged marriage bride  
in red and gold benarasi sari  
seeking your ashirbad

(52) [page 9]

.....

[no] orgasmic ecstatic tantric liberation  
exotic erotic kama sutra vulva  
opening her divine legs  
mysterious oriental fantasy  
come to life  
(53)

Ending with the lines, “*no / my vagina is not / the passage to india*” (53), this poem stages a compelling talking-back to the “heteropatriarchal” (Alexander 65) relations and assumptions that underlie Western colonialism and racism, as well as Canadian and Indian constructions of nationalistic cultural identity. In particular, it is the poem’s diasporic queer critique that is able to expose the ways in which Otherness is reinforced through discourse and language.

For example, “Passage to India” highlights colonial representations of South Asian women as both brides and courtesans, at once the archetypal devoted wife and the exotic lover. According to the colonial mythos, the South Asian woman is coded through images of repression and asexuality, on the one hand, and deviant or excessive sexuality and fantasy, on the other. Speaking of the ways in which such stereotypical constructions of the South Asian woman haunt the Canadian nationalist imaginary, Himani Bannerji explains that “the genealogies of these reified cultural identities which are mobilized in Canada are entirely colonial”; they “perfectly tally” with earlier European Orientalist perceptions of Asia as essentially ‘traditional’ and ‘patriarchal’, in comparison to a ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’ West (49). These constructions are thus not only highly gendered and sexualised, but also classed and raced.<sup>4</sup>

JeeYeun Lee further elucidates how American Orientalist sexual and gender taxonomies— especially the assumptions of whiteness that organize how differences are seen and understood—impact on queers of colour and on queer Asian identities in particular. In her essay, “Why Suzie Wong Is Not a Lesbian: Asian and Asian American Lesbian and Bisexual Women and Femme/Butch/Gender Identities,” Lee describes a variety of other stereotypical images of ‘Asian-ness’ that Asian and South Asian queers often negotiate: from the ‘model minority’, to ‘shopkeeper’, to the sexually passive ‘lotus blossom’ and the sexually aggressive ‘dragon lady’ (118). Emphasizing that such constructions must be viewed in relation to past and present North American imperial and military interests in Asia, Lee points out that these constructions also circulate in particular ways within mainstream [page 10] North American gay and lesbian communities. For example, binary understandings of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ continue to be operative in North American queer publics, where this opposition serves to structure difference between white and non-white queers. Based on interviews with Asian and South Asian queers, Lee’s article reveals that ‘whiteness’ often comes to signify both ‘progressive-ness’ and ‘queerness’ within such spaces, whereas non-white queers are often read as ‘backwards’ and/or ‘heterosexual’. Lee’s interviewees thus speak of their invisibility within queer spaces, as their gender and erotic identities are rendered unseen.<sup>5</sup>

An engagement with Banerji’s *Night Artillery* must likewise grapple with the multiple and interlocking systems of power that situate both the text and its readers’ subjectivities. However, an important question that the book poses is: if dominant stereotypes and representations of race, gender, sexuality and nation are clearly inadequate to one’s own understanding of self, body and desire, then what are the specific forms, languages, traditions, images, and metaphors that a queer South Asian diasporic identity and poetics might claim? In this paper, I argue that Banerji’s queer diasporic perspective provides an important lens through which she is able to construct critically hybrid genealogies, and thus unique poetic vocabularies, for expressing and situating queer racialised desire.

The deployment of a diasporic framework is certainly one of the ways in which Banerji works toward fashioning her voice and aesthetics. While the word ‘diaspora’ has its roots in the history of Jewish dispersal, this term has more recently been expanded upon by theorists, such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, working in the areas of

postcolonial and Black cultural studies. Applied broadly, ‘diaspora’ may be used to describe the existence and situation of a variety of migratory and/or displaced ethnic communities in the context of colonialism and its aftermath. The idea of ‘diaspora’ is also frequently linked to concepts of ‘hybridity’, or what Ania Loomba describes as “the mobility and cross-overs of ideas and identities” (173) that have resulted from colonial dislocation and other related intercultural movements of people. While it is important to distinguish between historically and politically distinct forms of diasporic identity—for example, between divergent experiences and histories of migration, or between the specific circumstances of dislocation—many diasporic writers and critics have also attempted to sketch out certain shared tropes that might emerge out of disparate diasporic histories. For instance, JeeYeun Lee writes that “the history of a diasporic people” is often about “a displaced community looking backward onto another time and another land” (“Toward” 186). In [page 11] Banerji’s *Night Artillery*, these tropes of displacement, departure and diasporic exile are at once deployed and reworked.

The experience of diasporic exile is perhaps best encapsulated by the title of the third and last section of Banerji’s collection, “Bending Towards Exile.” In the poem that bears the same name, the poet writes: “I have lost the / home that housed my childhood” (44), echoing a common lament for the loss of originary homelands, and the ensuing longings, that often mark im/migrant and diasporic subjectivities. The poem continues with the speaker “bitterly / looking inside” (44) and possibly looking back to an ‘India’, or originary home, that has been left/lost due to the fact of personal and historical migrations. Addressing this childhood place directly, she describes herself as “wanting to touch [its] walls” (44)—that is, wanting to grasp the embodied contours of this home that has been lost or left, to remember and imagine it into being. Yet, as soon as the speaker tries to remember, she is also confronted with the knowledge that memory and the processes of remembrance are complicated. For example, the speaker notes that “she remembers all the childhood / stored in the soil beneath foundation” (44) and mourns that she “remembered / things [she] never wanted to leave” (44). At the same time, she says, “I do not remember / fragments of glass pieced along bricks to bleed / any trespasser into my memory” (44), revealing memory to be at once a site of comfort, longing, pain, danger, and treachery. Here, memory and the processes of remembering are layered through with equally powerful forgettings.



In this and other poems, memory is often described as broken or fractured. In “Elegy for June,” the speaker “write[s] letters to amnesia” (47), while in “Shanti Jal,” “memory turns in cycles and loops, / mirror, ocean, mimesis // she is spilling, crashing” (9); the poet “make[s] her grow into poems / planted in another country” (9). The simultaneous presence/absence of memory parallels the diasporic subject’s relationship to the originary homeland, which is at once made imminent and yet also made distant, or misplaced, through remembrance. The ruptures and eruptions of memory found in these poems may also point to certain forms of critical historicising important to Banerji’s queer diasporic perspective.

Throughout her poems, Banerji acknowledges the impossibilities faced by a diasporic subject in trying to claim an authentic past, history, or cultural identity rooted in essentialist versions of an originary homeland. For example, speaking of “delhi’s sun, delhi’s streets,” the persona of “bending towards exile” remarks that “every scene is like a painting and work / of art” (45). The landscape of this poem may be less of an actual geographical place than a cultural identity or location, which has been recreated through **[page 12]** art, artifice, and imagination. Accordingly, the speaker of “bending towards exile” notes, “when / I see you I want to fill you with my / symbols. you conform to the past / I have made for myself” (44). Here, the speaker reveals her awareness that histories and pasts are far from a neutral or transparent rendition of ‘facts’; remembrance is always mediated through the speaking subject’s current desires and social locations. Banerji’s poetry thus moves beyond the bounds of simplified forms of cultural nostalgia that sometimes function to reify the homeland into fixed or reductive images.

For example, addressing a “you” that may refer to a lost or departed home, the speaker of “bending towards exile” says, “I stared at you, as if expecting / you to wait” (44) and then later reflects, “you may still be familiar but / we have changed and neither of us / stopped growing that desire / for belonging” (45-46). If the “you” of this poem can be interpreted, even partially, as a ‘childhood’ or ‘originary’ homeland, then these lines suitably reflect the diasporic subject’s longing for the home that has been left, coupled with the critical awareness that this ‘home’, as Hall has said, “does not constitute a common *origin*, since it was, metaphorically as well as literally, a translation” (396). For diasporic and colonised peoples, Hall argues, our ‘origins’ cannot simply be ‘recovered’, since they too have been altered and continue to

undergo processes of transformation (399). Understanding this is crucial if we are to resist colluding with Western colonialist and Orientalist ideologies that typically ‘freeze’ non-Western Others into an essential, static, ‘premodern’ or ‘prehistoric’ past.

Banerji is likewise critical of diasporic versions of national(ist) longing, especially when these become no more than a static image of “*love quantified into a commodity of remembrance*” (“bending towards exile” 46). As Gayatri Gopinath argues, practices of critical memory and historicising are often distinctive to queer diasporic subjects: “Rather than evoking an imaginary homeland frozen in an idyllic moment outside of history, what is remembered through queer diasporic desire and the queer diasporic body is a past time and place riven with contradictions and the violences of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles” (4). Similarly, Banerji acknowledges that migration changes the migrated self, that the departed homeland also changes, and perhaps, like the self, the homeland was never a static, singular, or homogeneous entity. This critical awareness allows Banerji to challenge and complicate both colonial and nationalist constructions of ‘home’, ‘homeland’, or ‘nation’ that rely on racist, exclusionary, territorial, appropriative or otherwise violent histories and practices, while **[page 13]** simultaneously exploring the question of how South Asian cultural identities may be refigured through a queer diasporic poetics.

The poem, “bending towards exile,” reveals the complex and multiple ways in which ‘home’ is imagined and understood. In the first lines of this poem, childhood homes and origins are metaphorically described as a physical house: as the architectures of insides, outsides, and walls that concomitantly protect, enclose, form a dwelling place, and mark various sorts of boundaries. Later in the poem, the speaker imagines home in the form of “wooden floors and functional furniture,” which compose, she says, the “simple architectures of the outside” (44). This image evokes not only the material structures that might make up a house, but also the ideological structures of colonial and/or heteronormative domesticities. Here, too, home takes the shape of “incarceration, extracted through violence” (44), and is afterward pictured in the form of “prisons, four walls, closed doors, concrete foundations / that cannot disintegrate” (45). At the same time, the sparse mechanical structures of “wooden floors and functional furniture” are transformed within the poem, through the speaker’s imagination and through culturally familiar references, into an image of home as a subjective interiority and protective racialised space: “but



I imagine you as a home with peacocks and lizards / all the animals nursed in your confines” (44). We find in this poem both actual and symbolic houses, for example, the image of the Taj Mahal, which is at once a tomb and a monument of love<sup>6</sup>, a site of “splendour” and of “haunt[ing]” (45). In this way, the poem moves through multiple connotations and metaphors of home, and sketches out the many different embodiments that ‘home’ might take within a queer diasporic imaginary.

For example, “bending towards exile” figures home in terms of physical architectures and concrete houses, as well as in terms of national homes and homelands. The concept of home is related to structures of domesticity and also to ideas of origin. In the poem, home is both a site of belonging and unbelonging: home is pictured as a protected racialised and cultural space, and at the same time, homes, families and nations are posited as violent institutions. The poem draws on memoried, forgotten and imagined homes. The body also becomes a home, just as home becomes the body. These shifting meanings of home relate to Lee’s idea that “diasporic queers cannot inscribe themselves onto an imagined or real homeland without radically changing its terms” (“Toward” 193). The poem, “bending towards exile,” precisely “translat[es] house into flesh from mortar / and brick” (45) and then again into the “immediate imposition of / poetry” (46). Multiple meanings of home are opened up, challenged, figured and reconfigured. **[page 14]** Each of these meanings crosses over with others in order to reflect the multiple, often uneven, relations that diasporic and/or migratory queer subjects have to institutions and concepts of home.

Just as the particular images of homes shift and migrate throughout “bending towards exile,” the notion of home itself is redefined. The speaker seems to find her home, her sense of familiarity and experience, in the living-out of multiform departures and exiles—or what Homi Bhabha describes as a condition of “unhomeliness” (9). Departure, or the feeling of being unhoused, is in fact one of the most powerful and persistent tropes of the entire collection, and it resonates in multiple ways throughout Banerji’s poetry. In poems such as “bending towards exile” and “Shanti Jal,” we find images of departed homes and countries, while “Air India, June 1985,” evokes and re-writes the loss of loved ones in the context of historically-situated national disavowals. In pieces such as “Summer” and “Passage to India,” tropes of departure are reformulated in order to address

marginality within social systems, as well as resistance or the refusal to conform to dominant social imperatives. In “Elegy for June,” departures of memory, language and self are evoked. Still, in a substantial number of other poems, including “I Have Your Body for Proof,” “Heart Murmurs” and “The Sound of a Heart Cracking,” it is the recurrent figure of the departed or absent lover that structures yearning. While the precise images and meanings of both desire and departure change throughout the collection and register differently in specific moments, the various figurations of love, loss, belonging and longing also interweave, and help to define one another. For example, diasporic longings and lesbian eroticism, while by no means identical, are also not imagined as wholly incommensurate axes of desire. In the context of *Night Artillery*, these different figurations of desire frequently, though sometimes surprisingly, slip into, intersect, or interrupt one another.

For the queer diasporic poet, these slippages mark, quite specifically, contiguous sites of language, experience and affect. In “bending towards exile,” these crossovers become evident when one notes that the “you” that is being addressed is also continually shifting and migrating, and takes on different meanings, depending on how the speaking voice is situated. Placed “two, three, four continents away” by compound and repeated traumas of departure and travel, the speaker of “bending towards exile” observes, “no other house has made me its own” (44). Describing herself as “immune from roots,” the poet says, “dispossessed, my language / means nothing, as if you put me into exile, from owning the deepest parts / of myself” (45). Discussing both the external and internal landscapes that **[page 15]** she inhabits, the speaker remarks, “I am betrayed and relieved by / the lack of life inside you—the insolence / in loneliness, without claiming me as / the body of your territory” (45). In these lines, the “you” may very well refer to the ‘India’—“the bittersweet delhi days”—that the speaker desires to “possess” (44). If this is so, then the speaker is also aware of the impossibilities of such a claim, either because the India to which the diasporic subject has returned has changed, or because this and other home-spaces are always socially contested on the basis of race, class, caste, gender, sexuality, religion, geographical location, as well as other axes of power/difference. Then again, it may not be the case that ‘India’ is the ‘homeland’ being addressed and imagined; rather, the speaker may be addressing the im/migrant’s home, in this case the Canadian nation, which also does not claim her as properly belonging.

Alternatively, the “you” of Banerji’s poem may be addressing the

speaker's lover, a lover who has left or who is being left behind in any one of these places. In "bending towards exile," this interpretation signals a queering that serves once again to remap the poem's geographies, the speaker's possible location(s) in these landscapes, as well as her understandings of home and (be)longing. The poem's multiple undertones—including its slippages between different meanings of home and exile, as well as the slipperiness of address and the speaking voice's actual location(s)—help to elucidate key elements of queer diasporic subjectivity. The speaker cannot claim, nor is she claimed, by any one home, territory, or body—at least not fully or unequivocally. Instead, she asks, "is there ever a return from exile, / time punctured before you can claim it?" (46). The poem's question reflects Gopinath's remark that "queer diasporic texts evoke 'home' spaces that are permanently and already ruptured" (15), as well as Karin Aguilar-San Juan's idea that when a queer diasporic text "places home, the family, and community into question, it does so against a historical backdrop that is already littered with such questions" (34). Accordingly, the personae of Banerji's poems traverse multiple and uneven speaking locations, and occupy many different social insides and outsides, each of which constitute complex, imbricated, and shifting degrees of home and exile.

Banerji's figuration of 'home in exile' consequently serves to deconstruct the home/exile binary itself, and this deconstruction is reflected in the very title of the poem, "bending towards exile." Here, more conventional diasporic longings for originary homelands are critically reconfigured. While the word 'bending' connotes ideas of reaching and yearning—possibly a series of arrivals, departures and returns—we notice that the title [page 16] describes not the usual nostalgia for the homeland, but rather a desire for, a turning toward, exile or outsideness itself. The poem also describes how the exiles engendered by colonialism, nationalisms and/or migrations operate to bend, twist, deform and reform the self:

... my contours  
have been deformed. fragments define me now.  
divisions, partitions, reclamations  
are my history, the asymmetrical  
geography of my heart. (45)

Likewise, the last lines of the poem describe the various distortions and recreations of self experienced by the diasporic subject; as the

speaker notes, “*the accident of migration has made me more beautiful, / less myself*” (46). In this poem, ‘bending’ may connote the refigurations of self in the diaspora, a movement that is neither singular nor unidirectional; the self, like memory, “ceases / to become linear” (69-70), traveling in the motion of returns and overlappings, like the layers of a palimpsest, never exact. But, ‘bending’ may also connote the queerings of desire and bodies, the dissident yearnings for the lover who is being addressed, or “the erotics of space / another freedom allows” (44). These multidimensional architectures of queer diasporic desire, Banerji argues, can only be approximated in the genre of “collages, / and pastiche, a cornucopia of riches / swimming the chaos” (46). As such, Banerji’s work can be read as attempting to fashion a hybrid poetics, one which seeks out the specific forms that queer South Asian diasporic desires and bodies might take on and take up, and in which they might be written.

In the context of queer Canadian poetry and literary studies, Banerji’s writing is thus important not only in its attempts to sketch out a queer diasporic poetics, but also, more specifically, in its endeavour to develop a language of the erotic that centralises a queer, South Asian diasporic identity, history, and politics. As queer South Asian desires and bodies (both subcontinental and diasporic) are silenced and erased not only from dominant, heteropatriarchal forms of South Asian nationalisms, but also within white, mainstream North American gay and lesbian cultures, our sexualities and erotic expressions, too, are frequently rendered unrecognisable and unintelligible. For example, if sexuality and eroticism are understood as culturally- and historically-constructed, then it is possible to understand why the various discourses around gender and sexual-orientation that help to make visible racially- and economically-privileged gay and lesbian cultures in North America may not necessarily reflect, or be transferable onto, [page 17] a variety of identities that do not organise themselves strictly according to Euro-American sexual and gender binarisms. Further, the globalisation and imposition of such terminology onto these non-normative sexual identities/practices often constitute, as Roberto Strongman argues, a form of cultural imperialism that erases culturally-specific strategies of naming and resistance for racially marginalised ‘queer’, or sexually dissident, identities (176). Thus, the very languages that operate to make visible (white) gay and lesbian desire and politics may equally function to render invisible queer racialised subjects from these discursive arenas.

The task of (re)claiming languages of queer racialised desire, however, continues to be a vexed and complicated undertaking—one which is constantly mediated by colonial, neocolonial and nationalist global economies. In the context of queer South Asian cultures, Ruth Vanita asks, for example, how we can understand the various erasures around a whole range of discourses pertaining to non-normative sexual and gender histories, as “colonialists and nationalists attempt to rewrite multivocal traditions into a univocal, uniform tradition” (3). In *Queering India*, Vanita identifies the British colonial era, in particular the nineteenth century, as a period when earlier South Asian homoeroticisms (and other eroticisms) are replaced by modern Indo-European forms of homophobia, which draw from Victorian versions of Judaeo-Christian discourse (3). During this time, a more regulated heteronormativity comes to pervade South Asian cultures, for example, through the introduction of British anti-sodomy laws in India and the increasing criminalisation of non-heteronormative sexual relations and practices; this rigid division of culture along the lines of a homo/hetero sexual binary is once again taken up by later nationalist projects.<sup>7</sup> Considering colonial, as well as nationalist, erasures and re-writings of heterogeneous South Asian sexual histories, it becomes all the more pressing to re-envision these histories from a queer perspective.

Such re-envisioning, however, not only entails rediscovering or reclaiming alternative sexual histories, but also developing new languages and frameworks with which to view both historical and contemporary queer racialised identities. In resistance to the homogenising tendencies of both colonialist and South Asian nationalist heteronormativities, as well as of a white Euro-American gay and lesbian mainstream, South Asian queers, particularly in the diaspora, “have had to invent themselves,” as Nayan Shah remarks, “often with new words and names of identification” (141). Paraphrasing the ideas of the lesbian poet Suniti Namjoshi, Shah elaborates on how various contestations of language—including translations, resignifications, and appropriations of language—have been crucial [page 18] to constructing South Asian queer identification, since “words have invented the world of South Asian queer affiliations and social networks” (142). With similar purpose, the work of Banerji’s poetry is to create and craft new erotic languages located in the specificities of queer South Asian diasporic experience.

Banerji’s “Raga Malkauns” is perhaps one of the collection’s most

stylistically innovative pieces in this sense. This poem reworks the classical musical tradition of the raga sangeet into a poetic form for expressing queer South Asian desires and eroticisms. Banerji draws particularly from the North Indian style of the raga sangeet, which emerges syncretically out of different traditions of music, including the Hindu temple tradition of Vedic hymns, or dhrupad, and the Islamic tradition of the qawwali, a devotional song.<sup>8</sup> A performative and improvisational art form, the raga is a basic unit of melody with which the musician works, and is usually composed of a combination of notes that rise and fall. Each raga expresses a distinct mood, emotion or feeling, and is often connected to a particular time of day; the malkauns is a late-night raga, and its mood is characterised by a deep, intense and vast creative complexity, underneath a deceptively simple surface. In “Raga Malkauns,” Banerji relies on, but also transforms, the aesthetics of the music to compose her poem, and in doing so, she develops a new ‘genre’ or poetics in the process.

The timbre and rhythms of Banerji’s poem are indeed modeled after the cadences of the raga sangeet itself: the poem is divided up into the three classical sections of the raga, and respectively titled “alap,” “jor,” and “jhala.” In Banerji’s poem, however, the structure and patterns of the raga sangeet are used, metaphorically, to describe an intimate encounter between women and thus to express the rhythms and movements of lesbian desire. Each of the sections of Banerji’s poem functions in a manner similar to the corresponding section of the classical sangeet. The “alap” composes a slow introduction and encounter, as it describes the lover who “is waiting for the woman / who promises to be her muse” (16). Just like the lover who waits, the tempo of the alap “lingers,” and its language speaks through quiet “whispers” and “prayers” (16). The “jor,” or second section of the poem, gathers pulse as the meanings and metaphors are expanded, compounded and complicated further. The central image of this section is the movement of the lover’s hands, “her fingers skilled in subtle lines” (16). The ornate pathways traced out by hands and fingers are simultaneously linked to at least three ideas: love-making; the playing of a musical instrument; and poetry or poetic insight, including the physical act of writing. [page 19]

In the “jhala” section, the imagery is built up even further; indeed, much of the skill and pleasure of the “jhala” can be attributed to the way the metaphors are piled and layered on top of each other, much like the way the raga sangeet also builds itself up in tempo and

sophistication. In “Raga Malkauns,” the lingering tones of the “alap” give way in the “jhala” to a sense of passionate urgency:

I have waited for her these centuries  
while my skin turned from gold to grey  
I waited through my senseless days

(I waited for you, becoming the salt desert  
drained of a mellow sea) (16)

No longer willing to linger or wait, the poem concludes in a climactic series of rapid, rhythmic and dramatic lines, the last image being that of the unlocking or release of breath. Banerji employs the arrangement of the raga in a rather playful manner, mimicking the improvisational qualities of the musical form itself; yet, Banerji’s reworkings are more than just skillful play. By transforming the musical structure of the raga into a poetic form, Banerji is able to place her writing within culturally-specific traditions and genealogies, yet modifying these for a queer diasporic art of the erotic.

In “Raga Malkauns,” Banerji foregrounds a hybrid poetics. She draws from a variety of cultural and literary sources—including different traditions of the Indian subcontinent, as well as from Western colonial tradition, which she implicitly critiques. For example, in the final section of the poem following the “jhala,” the speaker, addressing a lover, concludes with the following climactic lines:

and when the ocean parts  
    *her thighs*  
when I move  
    *into the red tide*  
you will step  
    *from my shoulders*  
to the peninsula  
    *you will walk on the prickly bones*  
of my spine  
    *to genesis*  
and send me bloated kisses  
    *until I breathe* (17) [page 20]

Here, there are conceivable references to the Judaeo-Christian biblical stories of Genesis and Exodus, to Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib, as well as to the parting of/passage through the red sea. However, Banerji



consciously reworks these mythologies. In this poem, Eve does not in fact emerge from Adam's rib; rather a woman steps from her lover's shoulders and moves down her spine to send her kisses. Similarly, it is not the red sea that is parted; rather, the speaker "move[s] / *into the red tide*" as "the ocean parts / *her [lover's] thighs*" (17). Earlier, too, there are plausible allusions to the Garden of Eden story, such as to the 'apples' or forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. Within the context of the stories in the Book of Genesis, knowledge and temptation bring a falling, a loss of innocence, and the loss of beginnings. However, in Banerji's poem, there is no falling into sin, though there is a falling into love and passion, and this is what leads "*to genesis*" (17), that is, to a new consciousness and awakening.

In "Raga Malkauns," various Eurocentric scripts are thus either changed or displaced (both substantively and formally) such that the primacy of these models is challenged. The poem overturns and upsets some of the foundational myths of the Judaeo-Christian Western tradition, which typically posit bodily desire and knowledge as loss. Instead, Banerji seems to lean toward the Sufi concept of the body as a site of divinity, ecstasy and knowledge. For example, linking sexual pleasure with insight, "Raga Malkauns" describes a lover who "does not see with her eyes," but rather whose "hands...have the gift of sight" (16). Many of the other poems in *Night Artillery* evoke and draw further connections to some of the philosophical tenets of Sufism, including the centrality of corporeal love and pleasure to devotion, as well as to corresponding poetic and performative forms such as the ghazal and the masnavi.<sup>9</sup> In "the libra allegories," the speaker writes, "let kisses be my ghazals to your lips // let the arch of my back curve into mathnawi" (3). As signaled by the book's epigraphs, which reference Sufi poets Jelaluddin Rumi and Farid Uddin Attar, Banerji is careful to locate her writing specifically within the homoerotic currents of this body of literature, including influences of style and thought that transverse other South Asian religious and cultural traditions. In the context of "Raga Malkauns," Banerji utilizes these cross-currents in order to situate poetics and eroticism within culturally-specific South Asian forms. Banerji's beautiful reworkings of the raga sangeet into a new literary 'genre', and the transposition of this form into a lesbian erotics, allow her to develop a unique and contemporary queer diasporic aesthetic.

In *Night Artillery*, we can further see how such a queer South Asian diasporic poetics of the erotic is assembled in the poems

“Madhur,” [page 21] “mulaqat,” “rati” and “Mashuqa.” In this set of poems, specifically South Asian linguistic and cultural vocabularies of desire are at once evoked, queered, diasporicised and reworked to build an aesthetic that is expressive of a diasporic South Asian lesbian/femme identity and eroticism. The bodies of these poems recast various cultural, social, and personal symbolisms as metaphors appropriate for describing particular rhythms, movements or textures of queer South Asian diasporic desire. The poem “mulaqat,” for example, is abundant with images and metaphors of displacement, migration, and rootlessness. “[Y]ou stole my body from its roots,” says the speaker, who then goes on to describe the figure of a “nomad wandering through borders of bone” (14). This line ends with the speaker saying, “i have no home”—but, if we read on to the next line, we find out that the speaker has “no home / but your woman’s body,” and that she is “living between curves of shoulder / and breast head inside the temple of your thighs” (14). The poem further draws on imagery relating to migratory and diasporic history—such as in the various allusions to oceans, water and border crossings—and yet also transforms and plays with the meanings of these images; as the speaker says, “we cross the waters and enter each other’s bodies” (14). Here, the various images of migration, of being unhoused or rootless, do not entirely, or exclusively, refer to geographical or cultural migration; rather, they are used metaphorically as a means to describe the movements or ‘dispossessions’ that come with bodily and sexual ecstasy, specifically the pleasures of lesbian love-making. At the same time, Banerji’s language of eroticism does not simply refer to an universalisable ‘lesbian’ subjectivity; rather, the poem’s mixing of metaphors—the complex layering of distinct wells of experience and imagery, including diasporic longings and sexual desire—serves to build a new, hybrid aesthetics of the erotic that is rooted in the specificities of queer racialised desire, and in particular South Asian diasporic vocabularies.

The titling of these poems, for example, signals not just a reclamation but also a remaking of the erotic languages of particular South Asian cultural, poetic and performative traditions. As Banerji explains in her “Notes,” the word “madhur” translates into English to mean “sweet”; the word “mulaqat” means “meeting”; “rati” can describe “sexual love”; while “mashuqa” is a name for the feminine form of “the beloved” (58). Drawing from a linguistic continuum that incorporates both Hindi/Sanskrit and Urdu/Persian terms, Banerji exercises the multivocal meanings of these words: “madhur,” which

describes a honeyed nectar or sweet syrup, is also sometimes used as a term for linguistic eloquence; similarly, “mulaqat” is used both in terms of conversational, as well as sexual, intercourse or [page 22] encounters. In many ways, Banerji’s use of language in these poems can be related to the literary traditions of Rekhta/Rekhti, the linguistic predecessor of modern Urdu, as well as other traditions of the ghazal.<sup>10</sup> Meaning ‘mixed’, ‘poured-out’ or ‘scattered’, Rekhta emerged as the performative form of the colloquial language common to Delhi/Lucknow during the eighteenth century; however, Rekhta fell out of use by the end of the nineteenth century as the distinction between literary Urdu and Hindi became more rigid. Rekhti is the feminine form of this verse; written in the language of women and often addressed to a female beloved, Rekhti typically described, in an embellished or consciously performative manner, women’s bodies and bodily functions, clothes and jewelry, conversations and quarrels, everyday domestic situations between women, and female-female homoerotic relations.<sup>11</sup> Although Rekhti was practically excised from literary canons by the late nineteenth century, possibly due to the increasing regulation of heteronormativity by colonial notions of morality, Banerji’s verse re-appropriates, adapts and transforms the languages of Rekhti and the ghazal to fashion a contemporary lesbian/femme aesthetics.

In the poems “Madhur,” “mulaqat,” “rati” and “Mashuqa,” Banerji relies on the various sexual, gender, cultural and linguistic ambiguities of the literary and performative traditions from which she draws. As Vanita has pointed out in *Queering India*, the precise meanings of terms from the past to describe same-sex desire “are highly debatable and cannot be fixed” (4). The grammars of sexuality, eroticism and gender used in Rekhta and Rekhti poetry, as well as in other traditions of the ghazal, cannot simply be framed within Eurocentric hetero/homo or male/female binaries. For this reason, these genres could or have been claimed, alternately, as containing explicit celebrations of male-male or female-female homoerotic desire; as ambiguously gendered, in order to disguise their homoerotic content; as patriarchal, misogynist and heterosexist; as instances of cross-gender identification and performance; or as more about other relations of power, such as class, caste, nationalism or religion, than about gender or sexuality alone. In many ways, Banerji uses her contemporary queer perspective both to expose and recast the polyvalent meanings and eroticisms of these earlier genres. As such, these poems open up alternative re-readings of South Asian sexual and

gender histories, which have been obscured by essentialising colonial and nationalist narratives of purity; in turn, situating Banerji's poetry within these alternative sexual and gender historicities opens up multi-layered readings of the poems themselves.

Likewise, Banerji's diasporic lens—already suspicious of 'originary' stories that seek to lay claim to a pure, authentic and singular national past—[page 23] is brought into play in order to rediscover cultural forms whose syncretisms have been over-written by the homogenising tendencies of rigid nineteenth-century cultural, religious and linguistic binarisms. Although Banerji's language imitates the poetics of earlier genres, such as Rekhti, her 'inauthentic' reconstructions of such genres produce the awareness that these cultural forms were themselves 'mixed' and cannot be contained by colonial frameworks that view art as simply either 'original' or 'imitative'. Much like the work of a "spy, stealing treasures," or "the magic of alchemy" ("Mashuqa" 15), Banerji's poetry recasts and re-appropriates the words and artefacts of already hybrid, or 'impure,' cultural forms, at once disassembling and reassembling these into something new, something of one's own making.

Moreover, the translative and transformative remakings of language that Banerji performs flow simultaneously in different directions. The hybrid vocabularies of her queer diasporic perspective help to newly imagine earlier dissident gender and sexual histories, just as much as these earlier erotic languages could be understood as influencing, or forming the building blocks, of a contemporary queer diasporic framework. In this sense, Banerji's aesthetic resonates well with Shah's ideas about the ways that South Asian queer diasporic subjects have had to "invent themselves, often with new words and names of identification," precisely through approximating, resignifying or performing anew fragmented records of personal and public history (141-2). Similarly, Banerji's poetics constitutes both a reclamation of older forms of erotic poetry and a new genre for writing queer diasporic subjectivity and desire.

Banerji's ironic reconstruction of different traditions, mythologies and frameworks points to a significant theme of *Night Artillery* itself: the very question of how genealogies may be constructed, challenged, reclaimed or reconstituted by those bodies who are at once inside and outside many different social traditions. Throughout her poetry, Banerji questions, and ultimately overturns, the foundational status that colonial, sexist, and heteronormative narratives of the Western

imaginary must have to her life, to her telling of history, and to her art. Instead, she locates other possible genealogies in which to place her writing by crafting her aesthetics out of bits and pieces of multiple sources. The genealogies that Banerji constructs for her art are characterised not by purity, but by hybridity—the spaces “between noon and dusk, nuances of shade / lying between azure and turquoise” (“Raga Malkauns” 16). In this way, Banerji holds on to different aspects of her self and her history, especially as these differences are so often constructed as mutually exclusive or oppositional within dominant [page 24] discourses. Banerji’s poetry shows that queer identity does not have to entail an abandonment of South Asian cultural, religious, or aesthetic traditions of identity, just as the poems also challenge the Eurocentric and racist assumption that the queer body is primarily a white body.

The conscious construction of queerly South Asian diasporic cultural and literary genealogies is perhaps one of the most important contributions that *Night Artillery* makes as a whole. For queer writers of colour, Banerji’s work provides innovative models for addressing the question of how we might go about claiming certain sorts of genealogies—whether linguistic, literary, historical or political—and how we might think about situating ourselves within these. Speaking of the ways in which South Asian queers are so often erased from dominant or official public records, Shah remarks that, because of this, we have “enlisted history—personal, archeological, and social—to attain visibility and voice” (142). Accordingly, in order to construct a queer South Asian diasporic identity, Banerji looks to a variety of conventional and unconventional archival sources: family relations; myth; religious and cultural iconography; South and West Asian poetics; contemporary postcolonial literatures; and everyday cultural or regional practices.

For example, in poems such as “Hysterics for My Mother” and “Merge,” the poet draws from personal and familial relations. However, instead of emphasising the purity and authenticity of the lineages she draws, Banerji queers these relations by choosing to focus on untold or “fugitive” (“Hysterics for My Mother” 41) stories that complicate dominant understandings of family, ancestry and history. For instance, in this poem, the word “fugitive” refers to the mother’s hands, their “open fingers / fleeing suspicion” (41). The hands, in one sense, stand metonymically for how the mother shamefully hides from a daughter’s dissidences and disclosures, the mother only knowing “the detail of what passes through / man and woman” (40). Yet, the

evading hands also represent the many untold stories of the mother's life, and it is precisely these disruptive stories that ironically, and queerly, connect mother and daughter in relations of both semblance and dissemblance. In "Merge," the speaker similarly traces out family genealogies by imagining herself as a "mapmaker" and a part of a generation of "new cartographers" (43) of familial and communal histories, especially as these have been broken or ruptured through migration. In this piece, the daughter measures both her distance and proximity to the father, whom the poem addresses. Relaying back to the reader her father's (patriarchally protective) advice, the daughter realises that she departs from, but also keeps close to and continues on various lineages of his [page 25] advice and affection, albeit in 'queer' or unexpected ways. These two poems thus quite literally chart family trees, but rework these at the same time by wrenching ideas of ancestry, heritage and genealogy away from systems of nationalist and heteronormative reproductive logic.

Banerji also traces out various mythic genealogies in which she situates her writing. For example, in "Summer / or, / I Want the Rage of Poets to Bleed Guns / Speechless with Words," the speaker figures herself as the mythical Draupadi of the Hindu epic, *The Mahabharata*. In this epic, Draupadi's female body is a site of intense violence, an object of male desire, a marker of honour/shame, and the focal point of a war between men. Banerji draws from her knowledge of the utility that these gendered and sexualised narratives have for modern constructions of (dominant Hindu) Indian nationalism, but also transforms this text and intervenes in various forms of nationalist mythologising by highlighting the hidden histories within these: the Draupadi of Banerji's poem, for example, is a figure of rebellion and resistance, and a "traitor" (54) to sexist, heterosexist and racist regimes. Again, this poem demands a re-reading of dominant mythologies, in order to uncover suppressed stories, by transposing these myths and icons into new and unexpected contexts.

Banerji further locates her writing within the genealogies of South Asian and West Asian poetics, particularly in relation to the homoerotic currents of ghazal poetry, Sufi theology and philosophy, and other culturally syncretic traditions of language, music and performance, as discussed earlier. In addition, *Night Artillery* places itself in the context of contemporary postcolonial literature, as well as a variety of modern national literatures, by referencing writers such as a Pablo Neruda, Michael Ondaatje, Rabindranath Tagore and Lorna Goodison. These allusions help to strengthen the work's cross-

national and diasporic connections, as Banerji incorporates but also refigures the words of these writers.

Finally, Banerji draws genealogical linkages between the performances of her poetry and various everyday regional, religious or cultural rituals, as she remakes these to reflect the gestures and modalities of her own aesthetic practice. For example, in “Shanti Jal,” Banerji implicitly compares the rituals of poetry—her “alphabet of tears” (10)—to the Hindu ceremonial sprinkling and offering of peace water. Similarly, in “Sleeping Rumour,” she metaphorically relates the marks left on the skin by a lover to the decorative designs of *alpana*, or the regional/cultural practice of adorning the site of a festival or ceremony common to the area of Bengal; she then links both of these to the ‘designs’ of her own writing. This (re)modeling of specific cultural, literary, familial and mythic sites of experience is how Banerji [page 26] constructs queer, hybrid genealogies in which to situate the processes, forms and performances of her writing; these, in turn, constitute particular locales of affectivity for her readers.

Banerji’s poems thus embody a certain experiential, historical and political situatedness, just as the writing helps to shape a larger and distinctively South Asian diasporic queer poetics. The pages of *Night Artillery* constitute and witness a dialectical relationship between the body and writing—and more importantly, between particular bodies and particular figurations of poetry, language and writing. “Raga Malkauns,” for example, draws an analogy between the meeting/desiring of lesbian lovers and the way the artist encounters her medium/tools: the lover’s skin “unfurls like a scroll of papyrus,” as she “inscrib[es] the secrets of sanskrit” with/on the speaker’s hips (16). The poem’s speaker describes the “calligraphy” of her lover’s tongue and how “this woman’s ink” is “brushed into [her] every pore” (16). A lover’s papyrus-like skin, her whispers and inscriptions, the movements of her skilled hands and fingers (her calligraphy) all transform themselves into the very “subtle lines” (16) that have become the poetry itself. In “Summer,” this analogical relation between the body and writing can be noted in how Banerji uses the imagery of tongues to evoke and bring into relation several concepts. Tongues function variously as weapons of resistance; traitors to dominant regimes; prayers, rituals and sites of healing; expressions of devotion and desire; and sensual/sexual languages. The idea of tongues is simultaneously able to connote a language of lesbian eroticism, as well as the notion of ‘mothertongues’ and Other tongues, or what



happens to language in the experience of intercultural migration.<sup>12</sup> As the poet “rolls syllables off her tongue” (55) eventually to “*becom[e] water / under her tongue*” (57), the tongue is metonymically imagined as both words and as bodies/desire, such that the figures of poetry and the figures of the body come to mirror one another in this poem.

Similarly, in “Elegy for June,” the poem is a body, and the body a poem. Read on its own, “Elegy for June” could be interpreted as mourning, alternately, a place, a land, a place in time, a family member, a particular event, or a lover. However, read in the context of the other poems in *Night Artillery*, the structures of loss and longing that this poem witnesses are realised in relation to the specificities of a queer South Asian diasporic body, and as such, it is perhaps mourning all of these. The poem’s corporeal imagery evokes diasporic or racialised melancholia, as well as queer desire and sensuality:

here are the hundred places  
where I find you, [page 27]

here is your heart  
painted on the blue skin  
of nostalgia

and I still keep your eyes  
on my wrists,  
unfolding these hands

to open a poet’s dream  
for the blind and living  
(47)

The losses and longings that imprint the poet’s body recycle into the shapes of a body’s desires; the poem gives form to this desire, while it is also the body—its wrists, its hands, its skin, its memory, its aching—that shapes and writes the poem. As multiple metaphors fold into each other throughout the pages of *Night Artillery*, it is impossible (and undesirable) to separate ‘the queer body’ from ‘the racialised body,’ or diasporic longings from lesbian sexuality and sensuality.

This metaphorical linking of ‘queer’ and ‘diaspora’ importantly functions to wrench each of these terms away from their hegemonic uses— where (white) queers and (heteronormative) nations and/or

diasporas come to be supposed universal signifiers for all queers and all imaginings of nation/diaspora. Alternatively, in *Night Artillery*, ‘queer’ and ‘diaspora’ are always involved with each other—and always qualified by each other. As Puar has noted, a major innovation of queer diasporic work is that it brings together the terms of queerness and of diaspora, critically reworking each of these in the process:

It is precisely through noting these terms as *relations*, rather than entities, that the exposure of their limitations produces potentially illuminative interactions. This interfacing of ‘queerness’ and ‘diaspora’ critiques the very terms they seek to incorporate, and in which they are incorporated, forcing particular redefinitions of the original terms. (407)

In Banerji’s poems, queer and diasporic desires importantly incorporate each other; indeed, they define, become, transform and translate for each other. They are located, systemically and somatically, within and through each other, and in and through a body that insists on maintaining both its multiplicity and integrity amidst systems that refuse to ‘see’ it, or grant it a certain materiality. [page 28]

In the context of Canadian literary studies, such a queer diasporic perspective importantly interrupts nationalist models of identity and cultural production, as these are often disciplined through colonial ideologies of whiteness and heteronormativity. Unlike nationalist frameworks, as well as multiculturalist approaches that reduce the expressive arts of Othered Canadians to examples of either ‘sub-national cultures’ or ‘ethno-nationalisms’, an analytical-interpretive lens that reads for registrations of queer diasporic subjectivity can illuminate certain affiliations, or critical genealogies, of desire which cannot be easily accommodated by nationalist or multiculturalist paradigms. In *Night Artillery*, these affiliative networks of desire are demonstrative of what Rinaldo Walcott has described as an ethical refusal to leave behind disruptive or “outer-national” (17) histories, memories, identifications and political commitments that can challenge many of the foundational discourses of ‘Canadian-ness’ and dominant constructions of identity. In turn, such political reconfigurations and praxes hold the potential for materialising a variety of Othered, or invisible, subject positionings.

In her poetry, Banerji thus maps out a “private choreography” and an “unpublic heartbeat” (7), as she says in the poem “I Have Your Body for Proof.” In other words, Banerji’s writing offers a language of

queer racialised desire that remains largely unintelligible if read solely within the representational frameworks that make visible mainstream (white) gay/lesbian identities and public cultures in Canada. In the first poem of *Night Artillery*, called “the libra allegories,” the speaker describes herself as “craving to speak a history of the borderless” (3), alluding to this desire/need for alternative linguistic practices for materialising queer racialised desire. Addressing a lover, or perhaps even the reader directly, the speaker of “the libra allegories” begins with a request: “startle me into breath,” because “your eyes and my tears are places without maps” (3). The address not only figures the reader in the place of the lover, but also as someone whose eyes/readings act as placeholders for critical, political and subjective worlds yet to be imagined. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz explains that cultural/artistic work by queers of colour not only details the expressions of already-formed queer racialised subjects, but also operates to bring into being new subjects as this work is seen and recognised by others who are situated in shared yet differential (often as of yet un-named) locations. Hence, according to Muñoz, the engagement of queers of colour in performative and expressive art contributes to the creation of new “queer counterpublics” (146) for minoritarian subjects. In turn, these counterpublics [page 29] open up the space of our political and expressive possibilities. Similarly, for Banerji’s readers, *Night Artillery* has the profoundly political ability to startle us into new genres and lines of sight, thought, language and desire around the question of what it might mean and feel to be ‘South Asian,’ ‘Canadian,’ and/or ‘queer’—while refusing to properly assimilate into any one of these.

## Notes

1. My use of the word “im/migrant” reflects Nandita Sharma’s use of “(im)migration” as a term that draws attention to the racialised discourses and systems of “nationalized inclusions/exclusions [that] have historically shaped both the territorial boundaries of the Canadian nation and people’s consciousness about ‘being Canadian’” (6). Similarly, I use “im/migrant” as a means of signalling to the political discourses that differentiate between a wide range of subjects, as well as the ideological discourses that situate these subjects in overlapping, even contradictory, ways.

These subject positionings may include migrants; immigrants; refugees; diasporic identities; ethnic identities; racialised persons who may have been born in Canada in the context of either familial or historical migration(s), both forced and ‘voluntary’; and racialised citizens, as well as non-citizens, living outside/inside of Canada. [\[back\]](#)

2. See Siobhan B. Somerville’s *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*; Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*; Ann Laura Stoler’s *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*; and Andrew Parker et al.’s *Nationalisms and Sexualities* for excellent analyses of this point. [\[back\]](#)
3. See, for example, Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler’s *Queer Diasporas*, as well as Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan’s *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*. For work that examines the concept of queer diasporas specifically within South Asian diasporic contexts, see Gayatri Gopinath’s *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* and Jasbir K. Puar’s “Transnational Sexualities: South Asian (Trans)nation(alism)s and Queer Diasporas.” [\[back\]](#)
4. In her book, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism and Gender*, Himani Bannerji locates present-day racial stereotypes, as well as current Canadian state policies around race and ethnicity, quite clearly within Canada’s colonial-settler history; its colonial mythos of the French and English as the two ‘founding fathers’ or ‘originary’ nations of Canadian history; and the racist taxonomical systems that are generated in order to justify, manage and, at the same time, erase a colonial history of genocide and subjugation of Indigenous peoples on this land. Bannerji further argues that, in the context of Canada’s colonial history, racial and class formation is dependent on gendered and sexualized ideologies. According to Bannerji, old and new “colonial/racist discourses of tradition and modernity, civilization and savagery” are some of the main “conceptual devices [for] the construction and ascription” of racial, classed and gendered identities and

stereotypes in Canada (6). These cultural discourses provide key sites where racial, classed and gendered systems of power intersect and interact in order to help shape a nexus of state power through which nationhood, citizenship and political entitlement are legitimised, granted and/or denied to subjects. [page 30] [\[back\]](#)

5. For example, J.M., one of Lee's interviewees who identifies as a butch lesbian of mixed Cantonese background, describes the ways in which her models for butch masculinity can be rendered invisible; to illustrate this, J.M. notes that activities such as cooking and an orientation for family, although typically seen by white culture as 'feminine', constitute, for her, important links between Asian masculinities and butch lesbian embodiment (124). In other instances, femme and non-butch/femme identified interviewees explain how certain embodiments of hair, dress and expression (for example, having long hair or the wearing of particular clothing or jewelry) are often mis-read as 'heterosexual' or hetero-feminine according to dominant frameworks that make visible white 'lesbian' identities in North America, even though these expressions may have more to do with their identifications as 'Asian' or 'South Asian' than anything else (123, 127). In these ways, Lee's interviewees speak of how dominant white perceptions of 'queerness' often work to erase possibilities for 'seeing' or imagining queer racialised subjects, genders and eroticisms. Many of Lee's interviewees thus discuss the importance of recognising culturally-specific embodiments of queerness, of refusing to conform to white middle-class norms of what 'queer' means or looks like, and of maintaining personal, familial and political connections with the multiple communities in which they are situated. [\[back\]](#)

6. It is well known that the Taj Mahal (constructed between 1631-1653 and located in Agra, India) was commissioned by the Muslim Emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum for his wife, Arjunand Banu Begum, or Mumtaz. The main inner chamber was designed to house Mumtaz's cenotaph, with the grave located one level below. The elaborate structure was built as a monument to reflect Shah Jahan's immense love for Mumtaz, and thus the Taj is often noted for its romanticism. Upon his death, Shah Jahan was buried by his son, directly to the west of Mumtaz, the only asymmetrical feature of the Taj's multidimensional structure. The

architecture of the Taj Mahal is also often noted for its syncretic combination of Islamic and Hindu elements and iconography. In addition to being a major international tourist location in India, the Taj has also been, historically, a site of contestation, intervention and remodeling among British, Hindu and Muslim interests in colonial and postcolonial periods. See “Taj Mahal” in *Wikipedia, the free dictionary* [online]. [\[back\]](#)

7. For excellent analyses of the re-organisations of sexuality, particularly the criminalisation of homosexuality, that took place in India under British colonial rule, see Ruth Vanita’s “Introduction” to *Queering India*; Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, in *Same-Sex Love in India* (194-201); and Suparna Bhaskaran’s essay, “The Politics of Penetration: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code.” For an examination of how colonialism and anti-colonial nationalisms interacted to produce important shifts in sexual and gender ideologies in India, see Mrinalini Sinha’s “Nationalism and Respectable Sexuality.” [\[back\]](#)
8. The raga sangeet, as explained by David Courtney, is a system of music that can be traced back two thousand years on the Indian subcontinent; the current North Indian form of the raga sangeet emerges syncretically out of Hindu and Islamic devotional traditions. In her “Notes,” Banerji also discusses the basic structure of the raga. She explains that the raga begins with the “alap,” which may be translated as “introduction,” “meeting” or “encounter.” This slow introductory phase of the music is where the musician explores the chosen raga or melody. The next section of the raga is called the “jor,” which means “acceleration.” During the “jor,” the rhythm enters and is developed, as the music builds to a faster tempo. The step-by-step acceleration of the rhythm ultimately culminates in what is known as the “jhala,” where the music becomes the most playful and exciting. In this final section of the raga, the music is played very fast until it reaches a climax and then stops abruptly, often with the repetition of a significant set of notes, three times, in order to recapitulate