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queer call for the glocal comparative

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Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia

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Since the end of 1990s, there has been a surge of metropolitan interest in the phenomenal rise of what could be inclusively described as 'lesbian/gay/queer' (hereafter l/g/q) presences around the globe, forming a conspicuous publishing phenomenon in the field of sexuality studies, of which *Mobile Cultures* should be viewed as its latest manifestation.¹ Besides monographs devoted to one or a group of related regions, these publications also take the form of collected essays, covering, in a single volume, areas as far and wide as Taiwan and Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia.² Although none of these post-Foucauldian works has taken the theoretically naive stance of regarding their contents as evidence of a universal presence that can be simplistically called 'homosexual' or 'gay', this publishing phenomenon taken as a whole—especially the globally inclusive picture as presented in the collections—still leaves the impression of an identifiable same-sex culture (eventually?) emerging in various areas around the world as a noteworthy facet of globalisation.

Despite their methodological sophistication, the teleological tint of these recent publications reminds us of their historical precedents a century ago, when metropolitan anthropological research into the (deviant) sexual mores of other parts of the world were cited by homosexual apologists to prove the universality of same-sex intimacy for the purpose of naturalising its presence at home.³ Now, apparently devoid of such crude appropriative needs, this recent metropolitan interest in l/g/q globalisation should also subject itself to a similar contextualist interrogation. The following two questions should be answered: what is the his-

torical conjuncture that prompts this interest? what does it aim to achieve in terms of a l/g/q political agenda?

Mobile Cultures seems to entertain such a conjunctural awareness when the editors, in their introduction, mention 'the globalization of sexual cultures' as the 'one single preoccupation [that] has characterized both academic and popular discussions of sexualities over the past decade'. (2) However, naturalising metropolitan interest as a spontaneous response to (recent?) globalisation does little to address the first question. For one thing, global l/g/q cultures in their present form (for example, in Japan) have existed long before they caught the metropolitan attention.

As spelt out lucidly in the introduction and acted on earnestly in most of the essays, *Mobile Cultures* as a whole has a coherent polemical take on the phenomenal rise of l/g/q formations in Asia (and other parts of the world): it is a consequence of the contemporary process of globalisation, of which the so-called 'new media' (such as the Internet) constitutes a crucial part. And through concrete analysis of specific cases, the collection critically examines the question of whether the impact of globalisation is homogenising—in its spread of a certain kind of (sub)cultural formations and identity politics that model on the metropolitan l/g/q existence—or in effect 'glocalising'—in that any global trends, hegemonic as they are, inevitably hybridise as they become localised and indigenised.

Yet this question is rhetorical for *Mobile Cultures*, for not only the introduction but the essays directly tackling it have settled for the

latter option; the introduction in fact praises glocalisation as the 'recently ascendent paradigm'. (7) And for good reasons, because it is simply a more accurate description of the reality in point. However, what is disturbing about this polemical framework is its conspicuous tangentiality to the various local subject cultures covered in the volume, whether it be the l/g/q use of 'new media' in Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, India or Malaysia. For example, in the opening essay, which is also the one most directly concerned with the global influence of Western l/g/q lifestyle, Tom Boellstorff examines the Indonesian deployment of such imported subject positions as 'gay and lesbi', wondering whether those self-identified gay and lesbi Indonesians are 'puppets of the West' (what strong words!) or rather whether these labels in effect function 'as a veneer over a deeper indigeneity'. (40) Although he claims that this 'dilemma' of deciding between the two can be transcended by his theorisation of so-called 'dubbing culture' along with its disregard of 'the notion of authenticity', (41) Boellstorff seems to miss the fact that this dilemma never troubles gay and lesbi Indonesians themselves, who, according to the essay's own description, simply 'see themselves as part of a global community, but also authentically Indonesian'. (43)

And judging from the delineation of the dozen other emergent l/g/q cultures in Asia provided in this volume, I find none of them truly concerned with the globalisation debate as set out above. These Asian l/g/q communities are mostly equipped with a forum whose interlocutors are no strangers to the latest debates in

the West (itself obviously an effect of globalisation). However, while the local impact of globalisation is sometimes discussed, the worry is never whether it makes the local l/g/q culture *indistinct* internationally. Concerned only with the local adaptability of global influences and any possible pitfalls in their indigenous application, local l/g/q cultures basically favour globalisation because its hegemony offers facilitating resources that are hard to come by domestically. One telling example can be found in the response to Dennis Altman's pivotal article 'On Global Queering' by Philippine l/g/q activist Michael Tan, who makes it clear that he 'celebrate[s] global queering for the ways it creates space for us [the l/g/q people] in the Philippines', even though he also fears it for the 'oppressive power relations' that would form between a globalised l/g/q norm and local traditions of sexual/gender aberrations.⁴

There is also a similar discrepancy between *Mobile Cultures*' assumptions about the function played by 'new media' (or more specifically computer-mediated communication, cmc) and the actual condition as delineated in the essays. By foregrounding cmc as the most prominent aspect of globalisation, *Mobile Cultures* evidently presumes its main function to be the facilitation of a greater access for metropolitan (l/g/q) hegemony in its global influence. This is no doubt true; but, according to the research results of most essays in the volume, it is far from (to anyone's surprise?) the most significant impact of cmc on local l/g/q cultures. After examining the use of the Internet by Japanese women who are infatuated with 'boy love' and by transgendered men along with those in-

terested in them, Mark McLelland finds no 'radically new departure in Japan's sexual culture', just greater possibilities of congregation for those long-standing sexual minorities. (64) Chris Berry and Fran Martin also note that 'Taiwan and South Korea l/g/q Net space, Net communities, and Net identities ... indicate a predominantly local focus of activities'. (104) The same is true of David Mullaly's analysis of one particular Thai web site, Baden Offord's of the activist utilisation of the Internet in Singapore, and Olivia Khoo's of Malaysian 'virtual communities'. (235) Similarly, essays by Larissa Hjorth (on mobile phone decorations by Japanese youth) and Katrien Jacobs (on Taiwanese American filmmaker Shu Lea Cheang), are also, by default, set within pretty localised limits.

Even the transnational picture by Sandip Roy of cmc connecting gay South Asians living in India with those in North America and that by Audrey Yue of a cyberspace joined by Singaporean and Malaysian lesbians at home and abroad are still ones whose seeming trans-locality is confined within the existing barriers of language sharing and cultural affiliation. The only exception in *Mobile Cultures* is perhaps Veruska Sabucco's essay on the aforementioned Japanese 'boy love' subculture's Westemfandom, but the orientation of greater global access as revealed in this case is converse to that presumed in the globalisation debate.

What I am saying is that the most interesting findings of the essays do not really fit with but rather pose challenges to the polemical framework proclaimed by the book's editors. Not only do the local concerns about globalisation

differ from those hotly debated in the metropolitan forum, but also cmc defies (or rather exceeds) the role solely expected of it in the globalisation process; it is proven to be mainly *local* in its facilitation of speedier and even novel ways of activist recruiting, community gathering, and people connecting.

It is therefore time for us to go back to *Mobile Culture s'* presupposition that the recent emergence of l/g/q cultures around the world results from globalisation, and that cmc acts not just as its constitutive but nearly the single most important part. The 'emergence' is no doubt a long-term consequence of 'globalisation' if we understand it more like 'modernity' in its recent speed-up, but the eventual coming-out of various local l/g/q cultures at their particular time and place still can be better accounted for by specific local conditions. Thus I quite agree with Berry and Martin's reservation as to the presumption that Asian l/g/q cultures become public simply 'along with late capitalism, the rise of the middle class, consumer culture, urbanization, and mobility' because, as they say, 'in some cases—notably, those of many of the four "Asian tigers" ... (Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore)—these preconditions prevailed well before the rapid growth and emergence of l/g/q cultures at various point in the 1990s'. (87) (However, based on the reasons stated above, I cannot agree with their following suggestion that cmc may be the 'additional factor' that helps cause the emergence of l/g/q cultures in those areas.)

This looks like I am espousing a localist rather than globalist framework of understanding to be applied to local l/g/q cultures around

the globe. Yes I am, if that means to view any sexual cultures as structured predominantly by their own contexts, of which global influences (no matter how strong) are nothing but a contributory part. Yet the present age of globalisation has laudably inspired a dissatisfaction with local differences simply remaining incommensurable with one another. This sense of deficiency is articulated by the editors of *Mobile Cultures* as the problem with 'traditional anthropological and sociological work on sexual cultures', which they say 'tended to emphasize the "cultural difference" of the "other" culture under investigation, projecting a discrete "cultural identity" and paying little attention to potential for intercultural communication and appropriation between contexts'. (5–6) Indeed. Given the increasingly globalising trend that more and more engages the whole world in such acts of 'communication' and 'appropriation', the isolationism of a 'diversity approach' clearly does not suffice any more. However, a truly 'global' framework that could bring together those seemingly incommensurable local cultures is neither a ready-made nor an easy project. For it has been achieved in the past only within such teleological frameworks as colonial appropriation (as noted at the beginning) and the much nearer paradigm of 'development theory', which uses the metropolitan condition as the yardstick to measure that of l/g/q cultures around the globe as 'undeveloped', 'underdeveloped' or (at best) 'developing'.⁵

The present metropolitan interest in global l/g/q cultures as exemplified by *Mobile Cultures* has of course come a long way from either of these paradigms, for it is well prepared by the

convergence of queer studies with postcolonial critique, which I consider to be a positive ideological advancement corresponding to the accelerated globalising process whose material dimensions are integrating the globe more and more into a whole.⁶ Capable of purging any frameworks of the pitfalls of teleological homogenisation, this preparation still leaves us with the difficult question of how to construct a truly 'global' platform (that is, not always centred on the West but multidirectional and egalitarian) that is capable of involving l/g/q cultures around the world into real communicative dialogues with one another in spite of their individual uniqueness. My tentative suggestion is to inform local research or, more ambitiously, to undertake collective efforts with an inbuilt comparatism that always takes other l/g/q cultures into consideration, especially the non-metropolitan ones for one another and for the metropolitan centre.

For until (or despite?) the recent interest in global l/g/q cultures, the metropolitan hegemony always has a tendency to look only at itself and make others look at it, thus distracting our attention from a truly useful comparative perspective that not only will throw light on ourselves but also will enable a mutually enriching alliance between l/g/q cultures around the globe. As one experienced practitioner eloquently put it:

To see ourselves as others see us can be eye-opening. To see others as sharing a nature with ourselves is the merest decency. But it is from the far more difficult achievement of seeing ourselves *amongst*

others, as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds, that largeness of mind ... comes.⁷

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1. Of course, the Australian origin of this book should be noted, as the editors and most of the essayists are either based in or from Australia, which some may regard as not part of 'the metropolitan' and as entertaining interests of its own in studying Asia. However, I want to draw attention to the fact that this book is brought out by a prestigious metropolitan publisher.
2. Since the monographs are too plenty to be listed in full here, I merely name two such collections to supplement those already mentioned in the introduction to *Mobile Cultures (7)*: Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV (eds), *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, Sexual Cultures: New Directions from the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies, New York University Press, New York, 2002; and *GLQ*, vol. 8, no. 1–2, 2002, special issue on 'Queer Tourism: Geographies of Globalization'.
3. For an overview of these precedents, see Rudi C. Bleys, *The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behaviour outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination 1750–1918*, Cassell, London, 1996, pp. 207–65.
4. Michael Tan, 'A Response to Dennis Altman from Michael Tan in the Phillipines', <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/emuse/Globalqueering/tan.html>>; Dennis Altman, 'On Global Queering', *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 2, July 1996, <<http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-July-1996/altman.html>>.
5. A lucid example of the l/g/q application of development theory is Stephen O. Murray, 'The "Under-

development” of Modern/Gay Homosexuality in Mesoamerica’ in Ken Plummer (ed.), *Modern Homosexualities: Fragments of Lesbian and Gay Experience*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 29–38.

6. For the convergence of queer studies with post-colonial critique, an early collective effort is *Social Text*, no. 52–3, 1997, special issue on ‘Queer Transixions of Race, Nation, and Gender’.
7. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, Basic Books, New York, 1983, p. 16 (my emphasis).