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16 Curating queer migrant cinema

Interview between Sudeep Dasgupta and James S. Williams¹

JAMES S. WILLIAMS (JW): How did you become interested in the broad field of queer migration, and could you define your dual approach as theorist and activist?

SUDEEP DASGUPTA (SD): The academic field was determined by my location – wherever I find myself, that’s the starting point from which my interests develop. I was struck by two things when I moved to Amsterdam from the US [University of Pittsburgh] in 1997: I had the sense of being out of place and in the wrong time. Firstly, a strange combination of xenophobia with discourses on women’s rights and gay and lesbian rights. That produced a feeling of discomfort, since one presumed that if one was a feminist or queer activist, then xenophobia was not part of one’s programme. Further, the discourse of feminism and gay rights was often articulated by the state and by institutions of the Dutch state unlike in the US, of course. The situation in the Netherlands was quite different. Here, women’s and homosexual rights were institutionalised in a way that had not happened in the US. This sense of being out of place and out of time was connected to my previous research in the US where I began my Ph.D on Hindu nationalism in India. I was in the US watching a documentary on the massacres in 1992 of Muslims in Bombay, my hometown, and finding it incomprehensible how that could have happened. Being out of place in a place one is taught to belong to and yet not really belonging in was crucial for me. The Dutch context was quite unique, coming from the US, which was that when I moved here an openly gay man was the spokesperson for anti-immigrant discourse, Pim Fortuyn, who had his own political party.² A well-known journalist and filmmaker Theo van Gogh was also articulating a very rampant form of xenophobia against Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch citizens, once again through a discourse of women’s rights.³ We have in the Netherlands a word *allochtoon*, which means someone from somewhere else [literally, emerging from another soil]. It’s a legal term, recognised by the state, so even if one is second-generation Dutch and born and brought up here, and never been to the land of one’s grandparents, one is still considered from somewhere else. When I moved here, the term was used

primarily to refer to Dutch citizens whose parents came from Morocco and Turkey (we're talking about labour migration), and later on, refugees (Syria, Eritrea, and so on). These were the groups being targeted through the deployment of discourses of sexual rights, the rights of gays and lesbians, etc. Hate speech was equated with freedom of expression. The notion of speech as an act (performative speech-act theory, or Judith Butler's work) was not recognised here as an act that harms people. The idea that you can attack anyone rests on the false assumption that we are equal. So all these issues together made me curious about how the queer and the migrant as a figure emerging in political discourse, but also about how to combat it.

JW: You haven't used the term homonationalism, but is that what we're talking about here?

SD: Yes, absolutely. The discourse of nationalism always fascinated me, starting with the work I did on Hindu nationalism, where nationalism is based on an exclusivist religious basis. In the Dutch context it's very much tied to what Gloria Wekker calls 'white innocence': once you figure the nation as an emancipatory force that has been integrally innocent, it becomes possible to then attack so-called backward people from the outside who are coming in.⁴ That's the situation now. The question of sexual rights is problematic – it is said, for example, that all Dutch people are emancipated, that they are not homophobic, which is manifestly untrue. So it is also a deliberate way of masking internal issues around homophobia or around the inequality between different genders. We have Christian parties that have always been in some form of power here. These are parties that further gender and sexual inequalities, so the situation is not one of an emancipatory nation dealing with outside threats.

JW: That's a really useful framework for our discussion and for how the International Queer and Migrant Film Festival (IQMF) is dealing with these multiple issues. Can you talk about the history and background of the festival and its primary aims?

SD: The festival was started by Chris Belloni in Amsterdam in 2015, after he had visited Vienna, where they already had a queer migrant festival. He thought of bringing it to the Netherlands, precisely because the migrant had become such a central figure in public discourse, political discourse, and pretty much in everyday life, and precisely because of this combination of the use of sexual rights as a way of being xenophobic. One of the questions became: are all migrants straight and homophobic? Chris had made a film called *I am Gay and Muslim* [2012, Netherlands], where he had interviewed young Moroccan men who were dealing with how they combined their sexuality with their religious beliefs, which got a lot of play in the Netherlands itself. That film already showed there was a place for discussion here: it was shown in schools and different other places – gay, Dutch people of Turkish and Moroccan and other Muslim

backgrounds talked about it afterwards with school children and other groups in civil society, and that generated a lot of discussion about this question of being both Muslim and gay. So clearly this film showed the impact films can have in generating discussion and making visible what is already there but not (deliberately) talked about. IQMF emerged therefore as an occasion where films could be screened, and panel workshops, masterclasses for filmmakers, and public discussions held. Chris also made *The Turkish Boat* [2013, Netherlands] about the first Turkish boat at Gay Pride (or Canal Pride as it's called in Amsterdam) – a film also partly made possible by IQMF.⁵ It has evolved over time: more and more activities are being added on as part of the festival; it's not only limited to once a year. During the year, films related to the topic are screened in different locations. The films circulate around four other cities at different times (The Hague, Haarlem, Rotterdam, Utrecht), but Amsterdam is where the main festival happens. Everything is spread out and networked these days – one event has got different offshoots at different times and places.

JW: Did the festival have a stated remit to different communities (queer, migrant), or was it set up by the state and local agencies as an autonomous organisation?

SD: It was not set up by the state at all. It was established through the initiative of a small group of really hard-working young people like Chris and others as part of the Stichting art.1 (or art.1 Foundation). Every year they go through the laborious process of applying for funding from the Dutch Ministry of Culture, Amsterdam town council, and other bodies. So it is partly state-helped but not state-initiated – it emerged from civil society. There is no state presence in the actual functioning of what films can be shown or the sorts of discussions held. There are issues around who has the right to speak for whom, both as festival organisers and as filmmakers within the festival itself. How does one situate and justify oneself in relation to the community one is addressing? What is one's relation to that community of queer migrants?

JW: Can you describe your role as a member of the selection committee and your shared criteria for choosing the programme?

SD: I'm part of a programming committee comprising six or seven people; the two main flags we have when we review the very large amount of material submitted on-line are literally 'queer' and 'migrant'. We also mark out if it's a fiction or documentary, as the programme is not thematised ('love' or 'violence' or regional divisions). What 'queer' and 'migrant' means is given shape by first watching the films which change, of course, our idea of thinking queer and migrant, and second by thinking about the audience. 'Queer' could work very much in terms of how sexuality might reformulate a sense of cultural or national identities. Given our location, it might be important to emphasise how sexuality connects with cultural difference since we have an international

audience. In terms of ‘migrant’, there are two issues that come up: first, migrancy from the hinterland to the city, so that it may not have to be a transnational movement but within a country. Another issue is the importance of highlighting South-South migration which is the majority form of migration. Due to financing mechanisms and technological access, North-South migrations remain much more visible in film than migrations within the South, for example, Argentina to Brazil, and within Brazil from the rural hinterland to São Paulo. It’s very important for us that these forms of migration are covered. We also include films that may not be explicitly about migration but are interesting because they expose the dynamics of sexual politics in parts of the world not very well known in the West. The minds of our audience need to migrate a bit to think about how sexuality is lived and thought in countries they might not know much about. That’s how the two frames ‘queer’ and ‘migrant’ come into play.

JW: So there’s no sense of a quota, for example, that you must have two panels at least covering a certain type of migration? It all depends on what is submitted?

SD: Yes, absolutely. One practical thing we do have to keep in mind is length. So a film that is being maybe a little too adventurous about the notion of queer may be interesting if it’s a short film, but if it’s a feature we can’t give that much space to something that may not directly relate to the theme of the festival.

JW: I’m assuming the festival is conducted wholly in English?

SD: Yes, and all non-English film material has to be subtitled in English. That’s because we don’t want to target only a Dutch audience (in the Netherlands everyone is already pretty much fluent in reading English) – we want very much to involve people from the many migrant communities in the audience and discussions, so English becomes the common language.

JW: How long does this process of selecting and programming take?

SD: We have a rolling series of deadlines. The last deadline is around now, the middle of September. Every film is reviewed by at least two people. We then meet as a group several times to discuss the films. In the case of ‘maybes’, another person is assigned to watch the film for input. We all have access via the festival’s FilmFreeway website to the comments of everyone else. The final stage in the selection process (deciding whether there is space to programme five or seven shorts, for instance) is made by a small team including Chris as Director of IQMF and Antonij Karadzowski as Vice-Director.⁶

JW: How are the masterclasses conceived, and how do they work?

SD: The filmmakers who attend a masterclass are those that have applied and been accepted, so it’s very much a closed setting and not a public event like the panel discussions after screenings. My own role is to translate some of the academic questions that I discuss at the university,

for example, the burden of representation on minorities that plays out in terms of visibility. One issue indeed that has come up over the last couple of years is: what is your position as a filmmaker in relation to the group, or the person that you see as representing a group, that you have chosen as the topic of the film? Is proximity a crucial factor or not? Many people felt strongly that this question of speaking from a position of closeness to your topic was important because too often certain groups have been represented by others from a distance. Other people, however, were much more willing to accept that distance, because it opened up many more perspectives than they had expected, because they came with stereotypes and were surprised by what they found. Maybe one of the middle-ground positions which also came up is that you think you know a community about which you are going to make a film, but the process of filmmaking reveals hitherto unknown issues. This is not just an aesthetic question but also about the filmmaker/activist's position with the group.

JW: How large is a masterclass?

SD: It's quite intimate, around 30 people, and part of a broader programme called 'The Academy' where they also get classes in the practical side of the filmmaking process, for example, how to market a film, how to increase its visibility. My masterclass is more concerned with bringing up intellectual issues which meet with their practical situations.

JW: Could you perhaps give a recent example and say how the session was composed?

SD: They first introduce themselves and I note down the different backgrounds and what they have worked on. I then introduce myself and pose initial questions to them such as: what motivates you to make the specific kind of film you chose to make? What was your relationship to the topic? This opens up the topic of who speaks for whom, leading to discussion of whether one feels silenced or has the right to make these sorts of films. I provoke responses and they then engage with each other. What I try to do is synthesise the various conversations, for example: Is this a matter of combatting stereotypes? Can they be used in different ways? The session lasts around two to three hours and takes place the day before the festival opens.

JW: Following on from this, can you talk more generally about how theoretical critique and activist stances can come into conflict with the lived reality of the asylum-seekers, and how you deal with that at the festival?

SD: A panel was organised on the sexual objectification of refugees and people of colour after the screening of Bruce La Bruce's expectedly provocative film *Refugee's Welcome* [2017, Spain/Germany]. On the panel were migrants and asylum seekers with some experience in the Dutch context. People in the audience and on the stage – migrants and refugees – talked about being approached as sexual objects during meetings where asylum seekers and refugees are brought into contact with those in the

neighbourhood of the asylum and detention centres. These were very heated and emotionally charged discussions. Many felt that the refugee has become – and I agreed with this – the new commodity in the market of sexual exchange. However, someone on the panel who works in these centres emphasised that due to changes in the law, the possibility of getting Dutch residency permits increases if you have a Dutch partner. This results sometimes in a ‘competition’ to get the ‘right guy’, i.e., a financially secure Dutch citizen. What he said made manifest a difficult situation whereby often a personal and theoretical critique of white privilege can slip very quickly, and paradoxically, into a condemnation of the people they claim to support, the refugees, who are accused of playing into white privilege. What this raised was that the asylum seeker is caught between on the one hand the changes in the laws of the state which open up some possibilities of security in a very vulnerable situation, and on the other hand an unnuanced activist stance which fails to recognise that asylum seekers are negotiating structures of power from vulnerable positions that open certain possibilities and shut down others. Their situation is one of constantly negotiating in very vulnerable situations – psychically, materially, and financially – with the state, and the state, through its changing regulations, regulates – the most intimate dimensions of their everyday lives. The discussion was revealing because it got us out of talking about individuals with their own privilege, and bringing up the question of state institutions, shifts in laws, the situations in asylum centres, and the place of the refugee.

JW: In situations like that, is your position as an academic helpful to you by providing a certain distance?

SD: I think it helps in two ways. I thematise specific contributions more broadly so that it might be more applicable to other people in the audience. On the other hand, I bring myself into the discussion as well as a person of colour and a migrant (though not asylum seeker or refugee). What they were talking about in terms of class privilege that also goes into the objectification of the other is something I went through as well, and I could relate to that. So there is proximity.

JW: I saw on-line that you have a closing party/get-together, and there is clearly a social aspect to the festival that is very important, and which potentially can bring together everyone who has participated or attended the screenings.

SD: The social dimension is very important. We have a refugees’ dinner the night before the festival begins, and there’s a closing party. The people who come for the masterclass, from all over the world, are hosted in a hotel together, so a community forms quite quickly during the festival which works at multiple levels. The social and educative functions are very much linked, so we have an art exhibition, discussion panels, and other related events.

JW: If I understand correctly, the International Queer and Migrant Film Festival is just one of the activities of the art.1 Foundation of which you are

also currently a board member. Could you describe some of the projects you are personally involved with relating to sexual minorities in different countries, notably in the Balkans region? In particular, can you talk about your recent experience of going to Kosovo in July 2019?

- SD: IQMF programmed four nights of screenings as part of the Pristina film festival, Prifest, as well as panel discussions around trans issues, police protection of sexual minorities, etc.. The first film, *I am Sofia* [2019, Italy, dir. Silvia Luzi], is about a transwoman in Italy. The screening was followed by a panel discussion with the filmmaker and others. The award for Best European Film went to a Slovenian film about gay male harassment programmed by IQMF [Darko Stante's *Consequences* (2018)]. The foundation is involved with LGBT activists in Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, and Slovenia. A four-day filmmaking workshop was also held. Kosovo is a country not recognised by everyone, and certainly not by Serbia.⁷ It is strongly marked by the war in 1999. There were EU and American flags everywhere. The people I met had come to Pristina from other parts of Kosovo that suffered from the war. The importance of family became quite evident: there is a sense of gratitude to the family and to the village because that is what saved you. But now coming into adulthood and becoming aware of their gender and sexual identity, they flee their villages and come to Pristina since that is where they feel more safe. So there was a split between a sense of faithfulness to their location and family unit and the need to flee it because of their gender and sexual orientation. The second is the question of the transnational reconstruction of Kosovo. EU and US aid has been very instrumental in the establishing of a justice system there. A so-called 'Academy of Justice' has been set up, funded by the EU, to train judges and improve jurisprudence within Kosovo. This is very important for LGBT people. Harassment, sexual assault, and murder is something they are dealing with directly. It's an odd, queer situation: you don't go to your national institutions because the national courts are not national – they are being trained and funded by international help. In that context, there is a dilemma. To take one example: in May 2019, the European Commission report on Kosovo and its accession to the EU devotes 30 (out of 110) pages to the justice system on issues of freedom and non-discrimination. Only two pages broach sexual harassment and LGBT issues (there's one paragraph on Gay Pride). The rest of the document (around 70–80 pages) is concerned with economic freedoms, the free movement of capital, and customs duties. Some of the activists I spoke to said they felt let down by the international organisations funding the justice system because gay rights, in particular concerning violence against gays and lesbians and transgender persons, is not seen as a priority. Either the police do not respond to complaints, or people don't go to the police for fear they will not be taken seriously. Judgements are delayed for so long, and there's a lack of transparency.



Figure 16.1 A panel discussion after the screening of *I am Sofia* (2019), which opened the IQMF Queer Film Days at the 2019 PrifFest in Pristina: (from left to right) Sudeep Dasgupta, Chris Belloni (IQMF), the film's director Silvia Luzi, the Dutch Human Rights Ambassador Marriët Schuurman, and Kosovan-American filmmaker Erblin Nushi

Source: Courtesy of Antonij Karadzosi.

- JW: Do the LGBT activists you met see themselves as both proudly Kosovan and part of a larger region? You mentioned Serbia, which is in constant tension with Kosovo, but it does, of course, currently have an out-lesbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić.
- SD: Awareness of the larger world is something very much there, and yet many of the young people feel trapped. Kosovans, unlike, say, Macedonians, cannot travel outside the country without a visa. Like the Albanians, a lot of them have family abroad, so it means that their connection to the world is very intimate, as it has to do with many family members who are abroad, in Italy and Canada. I did not sense a closed form of nationalist isolation at all. They're aware of their history of the war, but not obsessed with it in an isolationist way. Kosovans are officially primarily Muslim, as in Bosnia, but in Pristina, pork and beer are served in restaurants. The people I met are very open, but physically they are trapped. On the other hand, there are, though, nationalist leaders still revered by many. The head of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), Hashim Thaçi, leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo, is a hero for some.
- JW: Do you think that the Kosovan situation you describe 'queers' the notion of Europe and European borders? And if so, how might this be theorised? Is it possible (even desirable) to talk here in terms of 'queer' and 'European' identity?
- SD: The building up of the institutions of the nation-state on the basis of financial and other forms of support from other countries and international organisations is a very queer thing. Hence the startling amount of flags of other countries flying all over Pristina. The link between the nation and the nation-state came via the transnational. Kosovans also intimately identify with a country outside it, Albania. The Albanian flag was flying next to almost every Kosovan flag I saw. Albanian is the national language. So firstly, the transnational is crucial for the nation to become a nation-state, and second, the country identifies so closely with another country. And third – and this relates to the history of Yugoslavia – you see that the national emblems of Kosovo, the monuments of the nation, are integrally linked to the monuments of another country, Albania. Skanderbeg, who is seen as the warrior-hero who formed Albania, is also the national hero of Kosovo. The Skanderbeg statue in Skanderbeg Square is in Tirana, capital of Albania; the biggest statue in the main street of Pristina is of Skanderbeg. At the other end of the street, you see the huge cathedral to Mother Teresa. Skopje claims her in Macedonia, Tirana claims her in Albania, Pristina claims her in Kosovo.
- JW: Do you think that the particular 'queerness' of the Kosovo situation will be changed if/when it enters the EU? Part of its queerness is precisely this interim stage and its newness and border nature. If it becomes part of Europe, would it still retain its capacity to queer our notions of Europe?

SD: If and when Kosovo becomes part of the EU, it will probably be the first majority-Muslim country within the European Union, and that could be quite significant, in a good way. It would be really important and positive for the European imaginary to recognise the significantly long history we have had with Islam in different forms, and how it is lived in everyday life. It is striking that the EU demands that Kosovo formalise and stabilise its relations with another country outside the EU: Serbia. In other words, the potential inclusion of belligerent nation-states into the EU – the possibility of an inter-European war – frames the further expansion of Europe. The third thing that interests me here is this: how do you be a part of the EU while enjoying hopes of being part of a larger Albania? Is this a desire for culture and commonality, or rather a desire for political union? This would be very odd for Europe, since Albania is not a potential candidate for accession to the EU; it's an aspiring candidate.

JW: Such a situation would radically rewrite the traditional idea of the European nation-state.

SD: Yes, don't go to war with one non-EU country (Serbia). But also: what do you want with this other non-European country, Albania? When I asked the people I met in Kosovo why they have the Albanian flag flying everywhere, they said it was because we feel part of greater Albania. There I am in Pristina with their old mosque at one end of the main street, and on the other a massive cathedral to Mother Teresa. And no one sees a contradiction there. (It reminded me of the co-presence in India of multiple religions, now under threat by Hindu nationalism and the state). I think that would be a new model for Europe, a queer way of imagining Europe, where Islam still gets read as an alien presence.

JW: How might one relate such *queering* to the forms of queer relationality you explore theoretically in your critical work?

SD: Édouard Glissant writes about the right to opacity which, of course, one can understand in a psychoanalytic perspective, but also in an historical and embodied way. This is not about someone who says 'I know myself but I won't express it to you transparently'; rather, the self is marked by all sorts of experiences that have not been worked through yet. Glissant writes about the Abyss of the boat where they die shackled below, the Abyss of the sea into which they are thrown overboard, the Abyss as something you are moving towards without knowing what it is. So opacity is about an experience of inadequate knowledge that is very historically specific and embodied by the enslaved as they traverse multiple abysses. In the case of Glissant, the Caribbean is the space of relationality – Stuart Hall talks of the Caribbean as a space of the African, European, and American presences, for example. So one can only think of oneself in terms of the relationalities that have formed one. Relationality is not between subjects who are completely present to themselves or to others. Opacity is crucial to me for understanding

relationality outside definitional categories. My thinking here has been informed partly by psychoanalytic notions of the self, the unconscious, the role of fantasy, desire, etc.. But opacity is also related to something else, and this is where the aesthetic comes in: you might be going through sensory experiences at the level of the body whose significance one does not know yet. So how do you affirm either yourself or your relation to the other when this process is going on continually? Bracha Ettinger [Israeli-born French artist and theorist] has had to forge a new language to articulate both opacity and relationality. I'm thinking of her early work, the Eurydice Series in particular, where she replaces 'witness' with 'withness'. If I witness to you what I have gone through, then it's not witnessing, but 'withnessing'. That's how she articulates relationality. How that relationality is formed – its contours, its processes – is very specific. Something gets revealed through the relation that one didn't know of even if one sensed it. Rancière quotes Hölderlin: a fragment is not a ruin that lies there as a dead remnant of something else. Rather, it generates something like a seed, like pollen, so that we are dispersed and germinate elsewhere, and this germination becomes the condition for generating forms of relationality with others. If I think about a migrant body: what would it accumulate as it moves through many different experiences? It is accumulating a series of experiences that perhaps cannot be fitted neatly with each other, but is continually transforming migrant subjectivity, and those fragments that come together are an opportunity for generating more relationalities. I remember talking to a teenaged asylum seeker from Syria whom I met in Berlin: we were talking in broken French, and he was telling me how the French spoken in Morocco is different from the French spoken in Mali, Senegal, and Lebanon – he was charting not only different ways of speaking French, but charting a journey and the people he has met on that journey. These are fragments that accumulate in a person and form a kind of knowledge and establish a form of connection, a kind of knowledge. So relationality in a very segmented, embodied way forms a person. Relations also means the possibility for discomfort – the possibility of uncertainty, the potential for disturbance. Ettinger talks about it in terms of co-presence: with these others that are as opaque to me as I am to them, because we are formed through developing relations, things might become less opaque and other forms of opacities open up: opacity, relationality, co-presence together in very specific historical circumstances. Relationality harbours the promise of a kind of destabilisation of the self in a productive way: one has to keep rethinking where one stands and in relation to whom.

JW: How 'real' are these presences?

SD: They are absent presences. I love walking the canals of Amsterdam and seeing the lop-sided houses next to each other in this beautiful space, but I know the grand ones belonged to slave-owners and traders, so I

will sense presences, and that is very enriching to me because it makes that location the site for many different things connected to each other, and it productively destabilises me through my contradictory reactions to where I find myself. That's fine, and necessary, because these forms of relationality are often being denied: you either don't talk about the history of Dutch colonialism and slavery, or else you talk about it in such a dismissive way – 'Haven't we heard all this already?' – so that you don't *really* have to talk about it. In that context, it's very important for me to think relationally as the possibility for disturbance, for undermining oneself and one's relation to one's location. I have called it in one article the 'politics of indifference', which means acknowledging difference but refusing to categorise that difference and know it completely.⁸ I think with sexuality it's also very important. When Foucault was asked: 'What should gay men do?', 'What is the most radical way of being gay?', he answers 'Friendship'. This is what political activism could mean for gay men: the capacity to form relations in unlikely places with those one is not expected to feel close to. This is very threatening to a closed notion of gay identity as well as to homophobes.

Notes

- 1 The interview took place in two stages on 31 July and 15 September 2019.
- 2 Fortuyn formed his own party, 'Pim Fortuyn List', in 2002, but was assassinated the same year on 6 May in Hilversum, North Holland.
- 3 An outspoken figure, Theo van Gogh was shot dead by a 26-year-old, Dutch-born Muslim in Amsterdam on 2 November 2004.
- 4 See Wekker (2016).
- 5 *The Turkish Boat* is a docudrama centred on two Turkish-Dutch gay activists.
- 6 A grant of €1,000 is awarded for the best pitch in the 'Impact Your Doc' programme. This is part of the festival's Awards Programme, which also includes prizes for Best Short Film and Best Feature.
- 7 Kosovo is a self-declared independent country. Although the US and most members of the EU recognised its declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, Serbia, Russia, and a number of other countries – including several EU members – did not. Owing to this lack of international consensus, Kosovo was not immediately admitted to the UN.
- 8 See Dasgupta (2016), a study of *Wild Side* (2004, France, dir. Sébastien Lifshitz).