

# RC<sub>32</sub> NEWSLETTER

## Winter 2021

### Volume #13

#### In this Issue:

- \* President's Message
- \* Feature Article
- \* Members' News





# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear RC32 members,



**Figure 1. Dr. Melanie Heath, RC 32 President**

As we bring in the new year, we look back on 2021 to consider the challenges and opportunities we have faced as new variants of COVID have arisen, and many of us are again under lockdown with Omicron sweeping throughout the world. Global inequalities continue to structure the ways that COVID is experienced in gendered ways involving huge divides between the Global North and Global South. The important research being conducted by RC32 members to shine light on these global dimensions is timely and important. Our newsletter highlights some of this research.

A good example is our feature article by Maya Bhardwaj, a queer Indian-American PhD candidate at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. They offer an analysis of conducting ethnographic research during COVID-19 and argue for the importance of feminist insider-outsider methodologies that can nurture intimacies and kinship in diasporic queer of color spaces. Bhardwaj was an insider through diaspora and queerness but remained aware of their outsider status as a foreigner. This article demonstrates the importance of recognizing insider-outsider tensions to build queer kinship and comradeship as a means of co-producing knowledge. This kind of community-building is especially important during the times of isolation we are experiencing due to the pandemic.

As you are now aware (and I announced in our last newsletter), due to the pandemic the International Sociological Association will postpone the World Congress of Sociology, initially slated for July 2022, to take place in June 2023 in Melbourne, Australia. To make this decision, the ISA consulted widely with RC Presidents, ISA members, and the planning committee in Australia. Consequently, the ISA decided to extend the mandate of the Executive Committee and RC Boards, as elections are held during the World Congresses. I am grateful that RC32 Board members will remain for an extra year, given the exceptional circumstances we are currently living under. Our next election will be held in 2023.

Beginning in November 2021, RC32 began its series of research panels and workshop by co-sponsoring two international lecture series with the Department of Sociology, Sister Nivedita University. The first was a lecture I gave on "*Theorizing Suspect Agency: A Comparison Regulating Transnational Surrogacy in India and Polygamy in France.*" The session was chaired by Dr. Bula Bhadra, Head of Department. Dr. Dhrubajyoti Chattopadhyay, Vice Chancellor, provided introductory remarks. In December, RC32 again co-sponsored a lecture and panel with the Department of Sociology, Sister Nivedita University featuring former ISA president and RC32 member Dr. Margaret Abraham who spoke on "*Addressing Gender-based Violence: Vulnerabilities, Resilience, and Social*


*Justice.*" A panel followed on Gender-Based Violence During the Pandemic, featuring RC32 members Dr. Jeff Hearn, Dr. Diana Therese M. Veloso, and Dr. Bula Bhadra. The event offered a lively and informative discussion that included RC32 members and others from across the globe. Dr. Bula Bhadra invited Dr. Bandana Purkayastha to give talks that commenced the International Lecture Series on Sociology of Gender for the Department of Sociology, Sister Nivedita University on September 6 and 13, 2021. A special thanks to Bula Bhadra for her organization of these events.

Based on suggestions by RC32 members, I am working with the RC32 Board and members to organize two more panels in February and April. The first will consider how to support the feminist workforce in sociology in the context of neoliberal efforts that are making employment in universities increasingly precarious around the globe. The second will focus on feminist perspectives concerning decolonizing sociology. We will be sending more information in the weeks to come, and we will post information on our website (<https://www.isa-rc32.org>). With the postponement of the World Congress, the Board and Representatives will also work to provide a virtual conference in summer 2022 that will focus on research on the global South—highlighting challenges faced due to COVID-19 and global climate change. If you have ideas for panels and the conference, please email me at [rc32president2018@gmail.com](mailto:rc32president2018@gmail.com).

RC32 sends out a big congratulations to longtime member Professor Emerita Raewyn Connell, from The University of Sydney, who has been selected to receive the third ISA Award for Excellence in Research and Practice, based on numerous excellent nominations from ISA members (including from RC32). Established in March 2013, this ISA Award is granted to a sociologist who advances and promotes sociological knowledge and practice through outstanding contributions to the discipline, the profession, and the ISA.

Finally, I have volunteered to work with the new ISA Equity Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Task Force that includes fifteen members. Two goals have been identified: 1) to develop and disseminate a member survey to identify concerns, priorities, and input; 2) to develop a statement of EDI principles to present to the Executive Committee for adoption. I have been working with RC32 member Rhoda Reddock, among others, on the second goal. Dr. Reddock serves on the ISA Executive Committee. In addition, RC32 member Jan Fritz spearheaded a campaign for ISA to sign the petition to the UN Open-Ended Working Group on Ageing against mandatory retirement of older adults as a social justice/human rights issue. RC32 was a signatory on this action, and the ISA Executive Committee has now approved it. Thank you, Jan, for your hard work on this! I appreciate the commitment of RC32 members to furthering the goals of EDI in our organization.

I am sending you hopeful thoughts for the new year. Please take care and stay safe!



***Melanie Heath***

# FEATURE ARTICLE

## Building Transnational Feminist and Queer Intimacies as Ethnographic Research”?

By, Maya Bhardwaj, Sociology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

**Abstract:** This article explores conducting ethnographic research through a feminist insider-outsider methodology during the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines the researcher’s experience as a queer Indian-American scholar-activist, building relationships with Indian South African activists and organizers and embedding with social movement groups in South Africa. In assessing the challenges of conducting embedded research during a pandemic that has isolated many people and that has enhanced risk for many social movement workers, this article argues for an insider-outsider approach that emphasizes adding rather than extracting labor and focusing on growing trust and nurturing intimacies and kinships in diasporic queer of color spaces. It argues for a form of transnational activist citizenship that both recognizes varied and divergent contexts in particular nation-states, as well as internationalist experiences of globalization, diaspora, and resistance that link feminist and queer of color activists and researchers across constructed borders.

### Article:

As I write these words, the world is scrambling to react to the spread of the new COVID-19 Omicron variant. Southern Africa, whose labs in South Africa and Botswana were the first to release reports of the new variant, is currently being isolated by travel bans across the globe, though they are far from the only countries who have reported cases of the variant (other countries include many across the Global North as well as the Global South). South Africa, where I am based for my PhD research, is currently in limbo while deciding whether to return to a lockdown in response to the new variant’s spike. The country has already been enforcing a strict daily overnight curfew and restrictions on major gatherings, but the fourth wave seems nigh, not only here in South Africa but globally. In the midst of preparing for face-to-face interviews with potential interlocutors in January and February, these are daunting conditions during which to be positioned as researchers in human-centered disciplines. The past few years under the global wreckage of the COVID-19 pandemic have increased our isolation while also expanding the pain-points of the global capitalist system that many of us study, and the proliferation of online spaces has both made many of us feel more connected globally while also more sectioned-off from human interaction than ever before.

This essay is written in response to these conditions, discussing some themes and tactics for building relationships for collaborative and human-centered academic research under the context of continuing global isolation and late-stage capitalism. Specifically, I’m interested in the realities of conducting multi-sited ethnographic research under the conditions of a global pandemic. In response, I share some strategies that I have employed to build relationships for the purpose of ethnographic research, in my case research on queer South Asian diasporic activism and

multiracial solidarities. These strategies align with feminist and queer ethnographic methods, and also draw from my training as a community organizer prior to my time in academia and my identities as a queer South Asian person in diaspora. I offer these stories and strategies to highlight both some possibilities I have encountered for conducting hybrid digital and in-person ethnographic research that leans into queer feminist intimacies in these times, as well as to underscore the challenges that nonetheless remain.



**Figure 2. Maya Bhardwaj**

During my first week in South Africa in September 2021, while the pandemic was still brewing and most gatherings were masked but in-person events were still possible, I attended a protest in Braamfontein, Johannesburg. This protest was in support of a group of cleaners in student housing affiliated with the University of the Witwatersrand. These cleaners, like so many others during the global COVID-19 pandemic, who were on strike to demand fair pay and just working conditions from a corporation that made huge profits while the workers completed essential work that kept students and residents healthy and safe. When I arrived, the protest had not yet started, and alongside the cleaners, who were conducting a preparatory meeting outside between the primarily Zulu-speaking workers, were a group of mostly young non-Black students handing out flyers about the strike. I walked up to one of the students, a young Indian South African, to

introduce myself and to learn more about the protest and the cleaners' demands, and we began chatting. I shared that I had supported similar struggles during my time in worker solidarity organizing in the UK, and we spoke about our mutual experience with student and community activism.

When I mentioned I was also looking for long-term housing as I had just arrived in South Africa to study social movements here, the student told me that they had recently moved into a shared flat in Newtown as they had moved out of their parents' house after coming out during Pride month in the prior year. This divulging, seemingly out of nowhere, floored me. I hadn't told this student that I too identified as queer, or that my research was specifically on queer South Asian activism in the diaspora in multiracial and Black-led organizing spaces. When I shared this information with them, a sort of intimacy born out of recognition emerged. It was as if we had just divulged childhood secrets that put us in context for each other. This divulging located us similarly, not only at the juncture of queerness and Indian and South Asian diaspora, but also in shared multiracial struggle and solidarity against racial capitalism and cis-heteropatriarchy. In this moment of meeting, we recognized each other as comrades, and in some ways, as kin.

This serendipitous meeting moved me, but it was by far the first time that such an exchange had occurred. I have had similar chance encounters that reveal kindred spirits in diaspora across the UK, the US, Mexico, and more. Each time these encounters happen, I find myself wondering, "How did I not find these people before?" Sasha, the director of a pan-Asian organizing group in NYC, called this the "oh, you too?" moment. Leaning into this methodology of "oh, you too?" has been at the center of ethnography for me during the pandemic. In many of the movement-building projects I've been engaged in – spanning the US, India, Mexico, the UK, Central America,



Argentina, Cambodia, and now South Africa – I’ve seen queer feminists of color and from the Global South disproportionately represented at the forefront of internationalist projects. These organizers and activists seem to be reimagining movement-building as relationship-building and creation of alternate worlds, rather than simply wars fueled by rage against the injustice of the status quo. Echoing Gopinath’s (2005) seminal articulation of femme South Asian femme queerness and kinship across diasporic representations, the movement workers I have been building towards are themselves striving towards shared dreams of a transnational, queer, liberated future. These observations are what brought me to my current research on queer South Asian diasporic leftism and multiracial solidarity. This work is deeply personal: as a queer diasporic person myself with deep relationships spread across many countries and continents, many of the social movement workers that I speak to for research are friends, comrades, or organizers whose work I have admired and been connected to from afar. Leaning into these relationships and into the sense of an international community struggling for justice and transformation has deeply enriched my work as a researcher, in ways that interrogate the boundaries between researcher and data, between academia and movement-building, and between the self and the communities with whom I engage.

The past few months have been filled with navigating the norms of interactions in a country still racked by COVID-19. Beyond run of the mill stranger danger, the risk of interacting with a new person in the midst of a pandemic has often created barriers between myself and the movement spaces that I study. But embodying a queer feminist research ethic has required vulnerability and persistence. When attending protests and speaking to attendees, when messaging potential interlocutors on Instagram and Twitter, when sending emails andWhatsapps to friends of friends who don’t know me, sharing about myself and emphasizing our parallel stories of navigating identity, culture, queerness, and movement work has allowed me to build deeper relationships. I participate in the organizing spaces that I study, from joining online meetings to participating in marches and direct actions, to writing drafts of my analysis in journals that my interlocutors and activist comrades run. In these spaces, I am both an insider through diaspora and queerness, but an outside as a foreigner. Embracing these tensions and navigating them through building queer kinship and comradeship has allowed me to prioritize co-production of knowledge as an insider-outsider with fellow activists, echoing Brah’s (1996) research and Wilson’s (2006) work with diasporic South Asian activists and community members. Sharing my history of organizing and activism work, and offering my labor to the movements with whom I research and collaborate in countries that are new to me, has offered a praxis of research that is *with*, not *on*, my peers in other countries to whom I am linked through diaspora and queerness.

In emphasizing feminist ethnography and co-production of knowledge, I think of the methodological foundations of many queer and feminist scholar-activists, particularly those of color, who come before. I have particularly been drawing from Minai and Shroff’s (2019) exploration of queer feminist South to South conversations through research as a destabilisation to the impossible expectation of impartiality in academia. Drawing from South Asian languages for this framing, they write that “*yaariyan* (friendship), *gupshup* (a mode of speaking), and *baithak* (a mode of space) [are]...queer feminist care as research practices...affective, conditional, and communal practices.” While conducting my research, I think back to the question that one community organizer and trainer asked me in response to my interview questions: “who is asking you these questions?” In response, by sharing my own story with my interlocutors in sites that are unfamiliar to me, and by revealing the questions and tensions I held about the organizing that we both do and the identities that we both hold, I sought to open space for queer and feminist

intimacies in research. My conversations always begin with sharing my own story of identity and activism, and then lead into asking participants to share these. This also echoes the methodology of the one on one, a tool used frequently in leftist movement-building (Ganz 2010) which emphasizes a ratio of 70-80% listening and 20-30% sharing and questioning by the interviewer. These one on ones are framed as conversations that build a relationship and grows space for collaboration through intimacy, truth-telling, and sharing common experiences. Thus, by echoing this style of conversation geared towards relationship building, and by integrating questions not only from myself but that I had heard from other interlocutors, I have been attempting to weave the interviews together by creating a wider conversation with multiple threads. In this way, my interlocutors were asking me the questions as much as I was asking them.

I have also been drawing deeply from Shah's (2017) exploration of feminist ethnography, particularly in the form of participant observation, as "a potentially revolutionary praxis" (2017:46) that "question our ideas of the world by engaging with those of others; revisiting and revising the questions that we enter the field with, often making our initial ideas redundant" (2017:49). Shah argues that through ethnography, through living and being embedded with our people, by becoming part of these communities rather than researchers who live apart, we can encounter a type of scholarship that "enables us to literally turn things on their head" (2017:56). For me, turning things on our heads means finding shared experiences between South and North; identifying shared stories and points of conjuncture; seeing interlocutors not as data points but as friends and comrades who tell their own stories. Thus, while I am a newcomer and an outsider in South Africa, I am also a transnational activist with prior experience who is here to support local movements as much as I am here to learn and research.

Naturally, these practices haven't resolved all the difficulties in conducting research in the time of COVID. Especially as cases surge, I've found meetings no-showed, organizing activities cancelled, and interest in online gatherings waning after a long two years. As a person with little social credibility in a new country, it is always easier to cancel a meeting with me than with a close comrade or friend. But by continuing to show up as my full diasporic, queer, activist self, by offering labor and sharing research in the spirit of collaboration and feminist transnational relationship-building, I've found this persistence to yield results. Instead of extracting information, I continue to begin my conversations with asking, "who are you and how can I help?" Instead of emphasizing the divergences in our experiences between North and South, I have centered my experiences as a transnational comrade, as kin in diasporic queer of color spaces. Last week, a queer South Asian diasporic artist collective that I have been following led a conversation on the impact of indenture, and I brought three new comrades and potential collaborators and interlocutors with me, all queer Indian South African activists themselves. Seeing them vibe and think with each other was an illustration of what transnational queer feminist kinship can look like: sometimes it's as simple as sharing biriyani over a zoom call, or taking down our masks for a moment to take a joyful picture together. Across the impacts of globalized neoliberalism, we find the points of convergence in our experiences in South Africa, the US, the UK, and elsewhere. In breaking bread or marching together or making art across zoom screens, we find spaces to build our shared dreams of a different future. Despite the isolation of the pandemic, by leaning into transnational kinship, we are able to locate the moveable feast of queer diasporic home.

**Author bio:** Maya Bhardwaj (she/they) is a queer Indian-American researcher, community organizer, facilitator, trainer, musician, and artist. She has worked transnationally in queer and people of color-led movements and activism for the past 10 years, including in the US, India, the UK, and Mexico. They are currently a PhD candidate at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, and holds a Masters from SOAS, University of London, UK. Maya can be contacted at [u21769118@tuks.co.za](mailto:u21769118@tuks.co.za) and/or at [mbhardwaj225@gmail.com](mailto:mbhardwaj225@gmail.com).

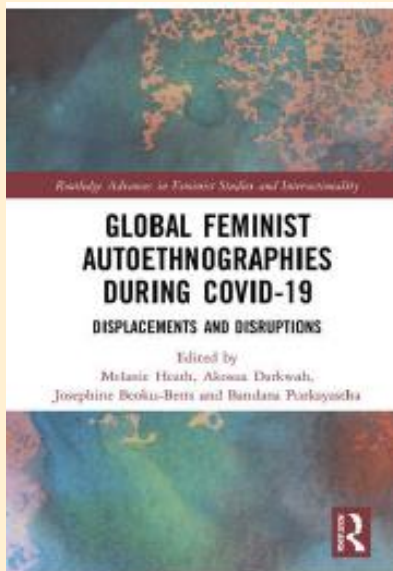


# MEMBER NEWS

## Books:

Global Feminist Autoethnographies During COVID-19 Displacements and Disruptions: Edited by Melanie Heath, McMaster University, Canada, Akosua Darkwah, University of Ghana, Ghana, Josephine Beoku-Betts, Florida Atlantic University, USA and Bandana Purkayastha, University of Connecticut, USA, Routledge, 2022

Series: Routledge Advances in Feminist Studies and Intersectionality



Global Feminist Autoethnographies bears witness to our displacements, disruptions, and distress as tenured faculty, faculty on temporary contracts, graduate students, and people connected to academia during COVID-19. The authors document their experiences arising within academia and beyond it, gathering narratives from across the globe—Australia, Canada, Ghana, Finland, India, Norway, South Africa, the United Kingdom, the United States along with transnational engagements with Bolivia, Iran, Nepal, and Taiwan. In an era where the older rules about work and family related to our survival, wellbeing and dignity are rapidly being transformed, this book shows that distress and traumas are emerging and deepening across the divides within and between the global North and South, depending on the intersecting structures that have affected each of us. It documents our distress and trauma and how we have worked to lift each other up amidst severe precarities. A global co-written project, this book shows how we are moving to decolonize our scholarship. It will be

of interest to an interdisciplinary array of scholars in the areas of intersectionality, gender, family, race, sexuality, migration, and global and transnational sociology.

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### *Blogs:*

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### *Announcement:*

Jeff Hearn is trying to find a suitable feminist/gender library as a home for all his many books and papers after he dies. Please be in contact if you have any possible ideas on this, email: [hearn@hanken.fi](mailto:hearn@hanken.fi)

Dear RC32 Members and readers of this newsletter,

I hope that this newsletter finds you well!!

If I haven't already done so in personal emails to you, I thank each and every one of you for your contributions and for making this newsletter possible year after year. Please also stay tuned for the call for our summer newsletter for 2022. In the meantime, please take care, stay well and stay safe!

From your newsletter editor – Shweta Majumdar Adur,  
Associate Professor, Department of Sociology,  
California State University, Los Angeles.