Transcript

Queer Survival

for: Building Pedagogical Futures in the Present: Dispatches on How to Imagine and Design an Otherwise and submitted on May 26, 2022

Dr Kush Patel, Faculty Member and Head of Studies (MA in Technology and Change)
Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design, and Technology, MAHE, Bangalore, India

Slide 1: Hello everyone! My name is Kush Patel, my pronouns are they/he, and I come to this convening "Building Pedagogical Futures in the Present: Dispatches on How to Imagine and Design an Otherwise" as a Savarna queer feminist educator and public scholar from Bangalore, India. "Savarna" is a marker of individuals with caste privilege that is sustained by Hindu social structures both in India and among members of the South Asian diaspora. My provocation structures an actionable otherwise around the question and politics of queer survival.

Slide 2: I will begin with the image on the left of this slide. Running from the back to the front of this zine, it reads as follows:

> This zine of archival metadata connecting the personal to the structural via the institutional is co-produced by members of the Office of Anti-Inequity and Anti-Exclusive Excellence from February 28, 2022 to March 25, 2022. It is one of the three core forms of representing and translating the structuring questions of the working group Scaffolds within the Interlude theme of 'Inhabiting Learning: Under Construction.' Over the past four weeks, we have centered storytelling in three acts with a shared goal to further discourse on equity, inclusion, and justice at Srishti Manipal Institute and other participating peer institutions.** In Act I, we—student and faculty participants—collectively, critically, and structurally unpacked personal archives as well as publicly accessible institutional vision statement(s), affirmative action commitments, and non-discrimination policy (if any) in relation to national, state-level, and comparable higher education policies in India. In Act II, we produced a set of questions with which we engaged each of the other thematic groups to access our unpacking work-in-progress and share their reflections on ongoing discussions. In the final Act III, we jointly and concretely synthesized annotations, discussion notes, and questions from each of these movements to produce a set of public materials, including this zine. We share this zine with you in trust to carry forward this conversation with us and within and beyond your institutions, whilst honoring our Office protocols of always speaking for your own experiences and not generalizing within and across affinities and communities.[1]

Throughout the length of this project, as I listened to students and faculty peers, I found myself referencing a term that I first encountered in the writings of Audre Lorde: survival. In her 1978 poem "A Litany for Survival," Lorde positions the concept of survival as an imperative to keep alive the legacy and promise of queer Black futurities; an imperative to refuse the notion of safety in a racist, sexist, and queerphobic system; an imperative "to speak

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[1] Text running from the back to the front of the zine co-produced by members of the Office of Anti-Inequity and Anti-Exclusive Excellence on March 25, 2022: Aishwarya Das, Akshay Prakash, Athena David, Chinmay Gheware, Gayatri Shanbhag, Hamna, Kush Patel, Neeraja D, Nithya Kirti M, Rupali Gupte, Santhosh Jayakumar, Tanvi Karia.

/ remembering we were never meant to survive;"[2] and an imperative to build something else, an otherwise for co-liberation.

> For those of us
> who were imprinted with fear
> like a faint line in the center of our foreheads
> learning to be afraid with our mother's milk
> for by this weapon
> this illusion of some safety to be found
> the heavy-footed hoped to silence us
> For all of us
> this instant and this triumph
> We were never meant to survive.[3]

The Office of Anti-Inequity and Anti-Exclusive Excellence was one such attempt to name the politics of survival, and specifically queer survival, in and for the future academy. The Office was our response to the Interlude theme of Scaffolds and its orienting questions as follows:

> As both *in-situ* forms and pedagogical supports, scaffolds draw attention to the making, maintaining, and repairing of structures that render the experience of learning possible or even deliberately impossible for people. How might we conceive of new institution-ing scaffolds and its labor to achieve the desired goals of a cooperative, just, and liberatory design education not just temporarily but also ongoingly and digitally?[4]

For me, the work of the Office began with the question of the archive, the personal archive, and how digital humanists might reconsider the archive through an anti-colonial lens. "Traditional archival methods," writes Chicana feminist scholar Maria Cotera, "often nourish an invisibilizing feedback loop in which one's access to power determines one's presence in the archive, and one's presence in the archive shapes historical knowledge, which, in turn, informs the system of valuation that structures the priorities that govern collecting and preservation in institutions."[5] That absences in the archive are constructed and sustained by "the feedback loop between archives and historiography,"[6] remained an important lesson for me and my co-participants as we came together to build something else, a much more hopeful place for activating lived theory in institution re-building. We turned to our respective memories as a resource for what Cotera calls "primary materials"[7] or materials that included for us memoirs, a video recording, out-of-print books, government issued disability certificates, letters, postcards, a tote bag, a sketch, a button, a lapel pin, and scholarly texts. Together, these materials represented a form of resistance across voice and difference through which each of us had come to inhabit the academy. Indeed, as students, co-faculty, and I centered and reflected on these memories, a new space of agency and questioning came into view, which we included in the zine as a call for collective action, or what I have come to

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[2] Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," in *The Black Unicorn: Poems*. New York: W.W.(1978): 31. Norton, 31.
[3] Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," 31.
[4] These orienting questions marked the beginning and continuing life of the Office project from February 28, 2022 to March 25, 2022.
[5] Maria Cotera, "Invisibility Is An Unnatural Disaster: Feminist Archival Praxis after the Digital Turn," Special Issue, ed. Lisa Disch, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, no. 4 (2015): 785.
[6] Cotera, "Invisibility Is An Unnatural Disaster," 786.
[7] Cotera, 786.

recognize as a praxis of survival.[8] The digital and hybrid nature of this project enabled us to mobilize lived knowledges across student, staff, and faculty positions at the university or "to imagine," in Cotera's words, "a 'porous' site of exchange in which scholars, practitioners, students, and community members could come together to form new knowledges and new ways of seeing the world,"[9] and to that I add, even building a new academy.

One of my two archival metadata, the image on the right in this slide, included a set of annotations and reflections on Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House."[10] A self-described "Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet," Lorde's poems and writings on Black queer feminism have "traveled with me through academic programs, institutions, cultures, and some of the most intimate spaces along that spectrum—my connections to people and collectives–in the last 15 years."[11] Her critique of "the master's tools" in the potential project of emancipation, and why "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" is one of the most powerful reminders of how we might come together to establish an explicitly anti-oppression relationship with those tools; a relationship that may also help to constitute and mobilize analytical descriptions of self in and as theory for achieving the desired progressive change. This particular object, a piece of text, and an example of Lorde's life-writing was useful for our discussions at hand because it allowed me to critique mainstream institutional techniques of affirming gender and sexuality in feel-good speech and visual form, which can themselves be the tools and simulacra of the master, and to better organize ourselves around structural questions of queer survival within and in relation to the institution.

In closing, as we come together to frame an actionable otherwise of building co-liberatory worlds around queer survival, I invite you to hold on to the material discussed in this presentation and reflect on questions that also came up at various points of my collaborative project:

> What does institutional change with affirmative action feel and look like? Where and how do "I" fit into this process of change-making? At what scale might this change be registered? What are the institutional defaults that mark both structures and boundaries of oppression? And what kind of toolkit might we produce in the end that's not just an exhibition of works, but also an actionable compendium of texts, contributions, annotations, and materials produced by us and for us to travel with and to continue to connect around and make dents into those very structures that we are complicit in and those that we continue to challenge as educators, researchers, and designers?[12]

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[8] Kush Patel, "Queer Disclosures, Queer Refusals: Notes on Survival Praxis in Architecture and Academia," in *Gender and Academic Leadership in Architecture in India Proceedings*, edited by Kush Patel and Soumini Raja (Calicut: Avani Institute of Design, March 2021): 119.

[9] Cotera, 789.

[10] Audre Lorde, "Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House," Comments at "The Personal and the Political" Panel, Second Sex Conference, October 29, 1979 cited and included in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (2007 edition): 112.

[11] Kush Patel, "Queer Disclosures," 119.

[12] Discussion questions at the "The Office of Anti-Inequity and Anti-Exclusive Excellence" Scaffolds project for *Inhabiting Learning: Under Construction Interlude*, Bengaluru: Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design, and Technology, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, March 1, 2022.

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