

# “Analoging” the Digital, Digitizing the Analog: Contemplations on Communities of Production and Virtuality

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## INTRODUCTION:

**W**hat might cyberfeminist e-commerce from the “bottom-up” look like? Is such a contradictory “e-commerce” at all possible? What are the collaborations, connections, and issues that might emerge? Recognizing that the “local” is very much tied in with the “global” and vice versa in present day economic practices, how do we negotiate complicity and resistance, silence and speech within various communities of production and practice in an increasingly digital economy? In addition, the digital economy and associated communities of practice and production situated within the so-called “global” practices and configurations of power feminizes certain types of labor. Therefore a “cyberfeminist e-commerce” at a transnational level is as much about feminized *male* labor as about women’s labor. A transnational cyberfeminist e-commerce, then, would not only be critical of transnational corporate practices, but also of theory, and academic information flow located within various Westernized spaces of the world (these are not always geographically situated in the West, however), including mainstream liberal feminist discourses about its Other, the “third-world-woman.” A critical transnational cyberfeminism thus would balance on the edge of a blade that does not allow for

victim-hood, self-pity, complacency, individual celebration of victory, or a lack of constant self-reflexivity.

The present essay is a speculative exchange between two women who attempt to engage and articulate theories and practices of (im)possible critical transnational cyberfeminisms. One of us, Annapurna Mamidipudi, works with a non-governmental organization (NGO), trying to “revive” the old technology of vegetable dyeing and cotton handloom weaving in a few villages of South India. The other, Radhika Gajjala, is an academic whose work examines cross-cultural dialogue and the expression of women’s identity among “virtual communities” and diasporic/postcolonial/transnational subject formations. She engages in the production and maintenance of web-based and e-mail list-based interactive e-spaces. Both are situated within an increasingly digital and transnational economy.

*Annapurna Mamidipudi (AM):* As the train in which I travel moves from the modern port of Vishakapatnam, towards interior Andhra—past historical Vijayangaram and Srikakulam to the small weaving village of Ponduru, time seems to slow down. It is almost as if each of these cities has taken a different route to modernity. What has this quasi time-travel meant to the people who weave their route through these various cities, acting as story tellers and interpreters to each other...drawing circles of various sizes and representing one circle to the other? How have these people affected different communities of people?

*Radhika Gajjala (RG):* When does community happen? How are social relations shaped? In addition to communication and cultural identity, what are the factors that lead to the formation of community? Indeed how do prevailing definitions of “communication,” “culture,” and “identity,” influence how we approach notions of community? In my quest to understand the possibilities for the creation of dialogic online networks, I am faced with questions related to the definition of community. Most discussions of community in relation to online networks—virtual community—tend to focus on the discursive, cultural and communication aspects of being a community. Most often these are placed in a “cultural” sphere that is implicitly separated from the material practices

of economic production and power negotiations that arise therein.

*AM:* For the weavers in Ponduru, the meaning of the word community has not changed much in the last two hundred years. Here in this little village, cotton fabric is being woven even today in the same manner in which it has been woven for centuries. The tools used are simple, but achieve fabric of the finest counts, aesthetically perfect as well as fulfilling quality parameters in longevity, dye absorption and low cost maintenance. The cotton grown on the nearby hills is perennial, it does not need the unsustainable input of fertilizers and pesticides that hybrid cotton crops need. The spinning, unlike the weaving is done by women of all communities or villages, a tradition that was revived by the Gandhian nationalist movement to achieve freedom from British rule. Originally, in most of these communities, the weavers, farmers, and potters were linked economically and socially, the social interactions facilitating the economic. Many of these interactions have mutated, with cotton farming being supported by the government *khadi* [handspun yarn] commission, the less skilled Devangula community weaving and innovating, with the Pattusaali preferring to educate their children and enter mainstream occupations.

The weaving castes, the Devangula and the Pattusaali wove cotton *sarees* using handspun yarn. The Pattusaali were higher up in the hierarchy, they were more skilled. In the village of Ponduru there has been a Devangula street and a Pattusaali street, from the time that Krishna Rao, a weaver of the Devangula community remembers; every house has had a loom. Local women spun in their leisure time, chatting together in their backyards. Spinning was not caste or community bound in Ponduru. It was as much part of their lives as the skill of drawing water from the well. Cotton was grown locally; it was a perennial crop and was available in all seasons. Strong links of economics wove the farmer, the spinner and the weaver communities into their cultural spaces.

To enable warping and sizing—the pre-weaving processes which give the *ponduru* fabric its particular fine texture—houses in the weaver localities are built in rows, back to back. Four families had to work together to warp a single length, which made up five *sarees*. It took the better part of three days in the old days; today the Pattusaalis who are the harder workers have mostly quit

weaving, their children go to school and eventually become teachers and clerks. But that means the Devangulas had to learn the superior weaving techniques of the Pattusaalis, as the market for the Pattusaali product was better. Krishna Rao chuckles though, when he owns up “We Devangulas don’t like to take the hard way, one of us learned that the sizing solution for the warp can be made thinner and the three day process shortened to one. Of course we don’t know if that change in process is reducing the quality of the product.”

Once, his customers, the now old women who had been wearing his *sarees* since childhood, would have told him that his *saree* did not drape as did the old, even though it took the same amount of wear that the older *sarees* did. Today the communities that were his customers are not bound by ritual to wear only Ponduru *sarees*. My mother-in-law who continues to buy the *sarees* through a circuitous marketing route could, but what she says about Ponduru *sarees* remains a personal opinion, and does not constitute ‘market feedback.’

But the market feedback worked in wonderful ways. Yarn produced from hybrid seasonally cropped cottons took over the rest of the handloom world, and products changed everywhere else. But a famous Telugu actor continued to order and wear the Ponduru *dhoti* [men’s wear] in his personal life and when he became an icon, in his movies. This kept the product in its original form, all the wannabe Akkineni Nageshwar Raos, and the wannabes of the parts he had played, like the honest politician, the dignified patriarch, the poor but self respecting farmers...they all continued to buy the product. Other things changed. Some of the weavers who could not upgrade their skills went a different route. Though hand spinning was not common anymore—as women preferred to watch TV and they did not consider spinning a true leisure activity—mill yarn was now available everywhere. But these weavers were all able to weave low- grade reject mill yarn, as they were used to weaving hand-spun yarn that is not uniformly strong. Their product was consequently cheaper than most other weavers’ and so developed markets in far away cities as a cheaper version of the popular Ponduru product. According to Krishna Rao, twenty thousand families in and around Ponduru depend on weaving to provide their livelihood even today.

For Krishna Rao, his community is still tied up around his home and with his neighbors, who are mostly also the same caste as he is, and engaged in the same economic activity as he is—weaving. But Krishna Rao is also the manager of the Handloom Co-operative society of Ponduru, and is a government servant. He travels regularly to the cities and interacts with the new communities of suppliers, market and traders which modern economics has engendered. While working with non-governmental organizations like the one I work for, that are trying to teach him to survive in a hostile market in which he does not negotiate from a position of strength, he dialogues and learns and translates—color, texture, technology, economics and culture.

*RG:* My research and inhabitation of cyberspace has thus far engaged in what is often viewed as the “cultural” side of producing virtual communities. Yet looking all over the Web, I see no getting away from the economic dimension of virtual communities. Diasporic postcolonials, seeking community through a medium of bytes and pieces, are using tools of work as tools of play, sometimes even obsessively. They invoke the presence of “home” in co-constructed imagined communities of nostalgia and memory; sometimes indulging in mere apolitical and uncommitted emotional and intellectual masturbation as the medium allows for connections and re-connections, disappearances and invisibility, while not demanding continuity, commitment, responsibility or accountability. Community is not nurtured, not sustained. Yes indeed it is the digital dollar here that shapes community and meanings. Cultures cannot be separated from economies, and neither of these can be removed from politics. Community building, whether online or in geographical space, is not an individual act and is always context-based. Communities are shaped by production processes, actual histories. As Carolyn Marvin has argued, the history of electronic technologies “is less the evolution of technical efficiencies in communication than a series of arenas for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life: among them, who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed.”<sup>1</sup> Yet on the technical side I produce and re-produce opportunities for varieties of “data” collection—sites for engaging, sites where sometimes all I “hear” are silences, and all I “see” are absences.

Sneja Gunew has said that women’s writing is no longer an absence. But is this only some women? And in some genres? And how is our presence articulated? Women’s writing can break distinctions, explore dichotomies, give new perspectives, question boundaries. As Anne-Marie Sauzea-Boetti points out: “The actual creative project of woman as subject involves betraying the oppressive mechanisms of culture in order to express herself through break...Not the project of fixing meanings but of breaking and multiplying them.”<sup>2</sup>

in  
finite  
absences in the spaces we construct

the absences are made visible by the spaces we reconstruct

build—and no one comes  
the silences  
speak volumes

the gaps are visible

like grave yards  
the links that go nowhere  
never lead elsewhere  
silent graveyards built in impossibilities  
rip  
through the speech  
ancient URLs  
...  
virtual ashes  
bytes unto bytes

I live the isolated life of a self-styled programmer and list-owner, Web-“master” in diaspora. I live the life of a “colored” woman in the Western academy. Producing virtual communities in isolation, often with no idea who the other people are—invisible programmers, infrastructure, software designers, etc. I write for academic audiences in virtual space. To gain access to masculine modes, a woman must be isolated from communities of support. But does this justify a discourse of victim-hood? To gain access, this woman was historically privileged to begin with. The virtuality of the academy, situated within a

Western(ized) power-field, and virtuality of the digital economy cannot be separated. One is complicit with the other. Meanwhile narratives of identity politics and victim-hood—even feminist discourses—are re-appropriated by the consumer culture, like it or not.

cyberdiva has left.

cyberdiva has arrived.

cyberdiva drops homi\_bhabha.

cyberdiva activates gayatri\_chakravorty\_spivak.

gayatri\_chakravorty\_spivak says, “Let me ask you how do \*you\* see issues of identity?”

cyberdiva activates homi\_bhabha.

homi\_bhabha says, “Gee thanks for waking me up! I must have dozed off...”

gayatri\_chakravorty\_spivak says, “[to cyberdiva] You are most welcome!”

homi\_bhabha says, “[to cyberdiva] You are most welcome!”

cyberdiva scrutinizes homi\_bhabha’s key word list...

cyberdiva activates donna\_haraway.

donna\_haraway says, “I also remember the dreams and achievements of contingent freedoms, situated knowledges, and relief of suffering that are inextricable from this contaminated triple historical heritage. I remain a child of the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment, and technoscience.”

donna\_haraway says, “[to cyberdiva] Challenging the material-semiotic practices of technoscience is in the interests of a deeper, broader, and more open scientific literacy which we will call situated knowledges.”

cyberdiva teaches donna\_haraway a new word.

cyberdiva teaches gayatri\_chakravorty\_spivak a new word.

cyberdiva teaches homi\_bhabha a new word.

cyberdiva scrutinizes homi\_bhabha’s key word list...

cyberdiva teaches homi\_bhabha a new word.

cyberdiva teaches gayatri\_chakravorty\_spivak a new word.

cyberdiva teaches donna\_haraway a new word.

cyberdiva teaches homi\_bhabha a new word.

cyberdiva says, “hi again!”

gayatri\_chakravorty\_spivak says, “[to cyberdiva] Hello there! How’s it going?”

donna\_haraway says, “[to cyberdiva] Hello there! How’s it going?”

homi\_bhabha says, “[to cyberdiva] the subject matter at hand is...”

gayatri\_chakravorty\_spivak says, “[to cyberdiva] Subject position is something that we in fact cannot ourselves declare. It is something that should keep us careful because a subject position is assigned, and the word there is “sign”; it is that which makes itself visible through our textual productions in language and action. It is therefore given over to readers. There isn’t \*a\* subject position.”

donna\_haraway says, “[to cyberdiva] Whoever and wherever we are in the domains of technoscience, our practices should not be deaf to troubling interruptions. Interpellation is double-edged in its potent capacity to hail subjects into existence. Subjects in a discourse can and do refigure its terms, contents, and reach. In the end it is those who mis/recognize themselves in discourse who thereby acquire power, and responsibility, to shape that discourse.”

On the poetic/creative side I seek connections and dis-formations in virtual technologies. The virtuality of this poet, situated within a Western(ized) discourse and the virtuality of the digital economy cannot be separated. One is complicit with the other. In narratives of mothering, periods of long-distance mothering, there is constant yearning, seeking family, extending emotion. Communities of production, both monetary and professional (which comes first?) shape family structures, shape community and culture through histories of dominant cultures’ appropriations and re-appropriations of exoticized Others.

...

I remember when I was eleven or twelve, during the wedding season we had to weave trousseaus. The women and men of the bridal households would come to our houses and place orders for items of daily utility as well as the formal wear. It was not only about work and economics, it was about mutual respect between them and us. —ODELLU, aged 33, weaver and dyer, Natural Dyes Resource Persons Meet, Dastkar Andhra, Hyderabad, 1998

*AM:* The memory of the very hot summers of Hyderabad affects people in different ways. In government offices it means that the air conditioning in the managing director’s chamber is turned on very high all through the year. But for cooling the lowly offices of the *peshi* [the receptionist], there are no air conditioners, here the desert coolers and fans whirl almost sleepily. This is an office I visit very frequently, as most of the state support for artisans is channeled through these offices, whether it is marketing, credit, or welfare schemes.

For weavers in the handloom sector today there are not many options. While in some places the traditional community based structures exist, there are very few places where the weaver is in a position of strength, and capable of dealing with either his raw material suppliers or his customers. Most of these interac-

tions are handled by traders who exploit the situation to their benefit; the only other option for the weaver being the state-sponsored corporations or the co-operative societies.

When the community based traditional production modes seemed rudderless in the light of modern industry, the vacuum was filled by the definition of them as the working class: The co-op society was presented as the weaver organization that would give him an identity in the changing world. The co-op society structure was part of the communist movement of the 1920s and '30s, in fact some of the weaver societies in Andhra are pre-independence. Very early on, procedures were set for the production chain, within the co-operative society—from yarn purchase to dyeing, warping, sizing, weaving and marketing. In their heyday in the 1950s and '60s the big co-operative societies were servicing thousands of weavers with centralized yarn depots, dyeing units and also their own retail outlets. The big co-operative societies were also supplying to the apex marketing organization Andhra Pradesh Co-operative (APCO) on their own terms. The societies' activities ranged beyond production. Some were able to tap into government and institutional support and provide housing and welfare perks like health care and schools to the members.

The 1960s and '70s saw a decline with local government politics entering the co-operative structure. To a great extent the weavers were now being governed by the government officials or government appointed office bearers under the supposed guidance of the elected board, who had no interest in either developing the institutions or working out economically sustainable models of production. These centralized government outlets have proven to be unsuccessful at marketing since the government order guarantees no haggling on rates, and eventually the payment is made. The weavers supply the material ordered, taking the endless wait for payments and the buying of the lower orders' favors as a necessary but unpleasant part of the transaction.

Just as they were not allowed to sit in air-conditioned comfort, the lower order officials kept their clients standing outside in the hot waiting area where not even fans whirred. But as a field worker in an NGO that was acting as a consultant to the state corporation—a liaison between them and the weavers—

my job was simple: Whenever any file had to be moved up for payment, one of the group of weavers would come to the corporation and wait outside while I asked the relevant officer when the file would be passed. All the documentation would be gone through and the officer would be forced to commit to a date by which time the bill would be paid. If the payment was not made by that day, another weaver would come up all the way from his village. I would receive another call. Once again while he waited outside I would repeat the same procedure. Usually after a couple of such visits, the file would be moved up and the checks issued.

My power, in the weavers' eyes, was literally my ability to move up the pecking order, to gain access to the hallowed air conditioned room and remind the official that there was a certain weaver who needed to be paid.

My role then was only to give them access, to give them a position of strength to negotiate within the hierarchy. In fact, that was all I could offer them, and more important, that was all they needed. Access then is the key: Access to information, access to technology, access to markets, access to financial institutions, access to people and access to power. However, as the vision of the new equalizing tool of the new world, the access to the Net is filling our eyes, the promise of a new pecking order that does not seem to operate on old hierarchies is being built up in our minds, I wonder, will it really constitute true access?

*RG: What do terms like "Race" and "Gender," "Ethnicity" and "Nationality" mean in the context of cyberspace/cyberculture? How are diversity and multiculturalism defined within an increasingly global digital economy? For that matter, what is perceived as global and what is perceived as local? We have always been global and local (glocal) in various ways through history, as people traveled, colonized and migrated—why is there such an emphasis at times, on the globality of the world? Questioning the uneven power relations involved in the global circulation of material and discourse, I reiterate a question asked by Gayatri Spivak (1998), "In what interest, to regulate what sort of relationships [material, social, political and cultural] is the globe evoked?" Similarly, what sorts of relationships—material*

*social, political, personal and cultural—are being regulated within current hegemonic definitions (whether implicit or explicit) of diversity and multiculturalism—whether IRL or in cyberspace.*

*If, as the famous New Yorker cartoon says, “On the Internet no one knows you’re a dog,” why bother with theories of culture and difference when discussing computer-mediated-communication? One of my co-travelers in cyberspace has the following signature file attached to his email messages:*

*>New Yorker Cartoon (Internet Savvy Dog):*

*>“On the Internet, no one knows that you’re a dog.”*

*>Art McGee (Internet Ignorant Dog added to cartoon):*

*>“What’s wrong with being a dog?”<sup>3</sup>*

*This signature file questions the need for us to disguise who we are. Indeed, why should it be assumed that it is wonderful for “dogs”—women, colored people, and people on the periphery of the Westernized logic of consumerism—to be able to hide who they are and to be able to disguise their gender, race and culture in favor of passing as white? ...I also wish to raise the question of where “cyberspace” as a cultural concept can be separated from “cyberspace” as situated within an economic system.*

RG: As you speak of being an “access point” for the weavers my mind wanders back in time to look at personal access points in my journey as a transnational/diasporic postcolonial subject. Immigration offices, airport terminals, and passport officers are points of access and discrimination. Being transformed from a subject of material and cultural privilege into one who is marginalized (as the process of “Othering” worked on me), then turned again into a subject of material and cultural privilege who is tokenized and re-appropriated. Knowing that the limits of my resistance lie in necessary negotiations as well as witting and unwitting complicities, I resist consumption and being a representative native informant. Transnational subject formations cannot be reduced to simple binaries of us and them, insiders and outsiders. Neither is physical travel the only condition for the formation of transnational subjectivity, for I see you and the weavers you work with—located geographically in

Hyderabad, located in remote weaver communities—as transnational and negotiating the global structures of hegemony. And yet, as we discussed in previous exchanges, without the local there can be no global.

We must ask: Access at what cost? Do we become access points for locals to become consumers of the global? Or do we become access points for locals to re-empower their indigenous producer communities? How might it be possible to provide access to the indigenous producer communities so that they can insert themselves as actors within the global arena and prevent their re-appropriation and consumption even as they are exoticized and marked as the analog Others of a digital economy?

Date: Thu, 06 Jul 2000 06:16:23 -0400

From: radhika\_gajjala & ltradhika@cyberdiva.org>

Subject: (no subject)

how can absences be articulated  
by the presences?

how can the present  
not  
silence  
the absent

re-presenting absences  
does  
not  
make the absent  
present

but  
re  
presents

absence



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- 1 Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
  - 2 Anne-Marie Sauzea-Boetti, personal e-mail communication.
  - 3 Art McGee first made this statement at the “Computers, Freedom and Privacy” conference, San Francisco, 1995.