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Echoes of the teashop in a Tamil newspaper

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ABSTRACT

This essay is about how the act reading the newspaper aloud in groups among working class men has become the object of textual representation in the newspaper itself. The popular gossip column called "Teashop Bench," found in the Daily Blossom newspaper, rests on a different regime of circulation than that found in actual teashops. In purporting to represent one type of public, the Daily Blossom's "Teashop Bench" column is involved in the performative conjuring of a different type, a new Tamil public that is premised on an emergent sense of private domesticity, where the newspaper is increasingly something to be read silently.

1. Introduction

The local teashop occupies a special place in the Tamil-speaking region of southern India. In villages and small towns across Tamilnadu, these little stands which often consist of little more than a small wood and palm-frond shack, a charcoal stove, and a few wooden benches, act as a public gathering place for farmers and working class men in the mornings and in the evenings. Men will meet, sip sweet, milky tea brewed from the "dust" that remains once tea leaves have been processed for export, eat a fried snack or smoke a beedi, and catch up on happenings in town or in neighboring villages. Some young men who are unable to find work sit around the teashop all day long. Women, if they come to the shop at all, are not likely to hang about this decidedly masculine social space. A regular feature in Tamil films, the Teashop Bench is often depicted as the scene of argument and sometimes ribald humor. It is also at the teashop that many men are likely to get their news about the wider world, by reading newspapers aloud together in groups and chatting about politics.

Newspapers have been a central feature of teashop life since the mid-20th century; but it was only quite recently that representations of reading the newspaper at the teashop became a central feature in the newspaper itself. In 1997 the *Dinamalar* (Daily Blossom) newspaper began publishing a section called "Teashop Bench," in which four men exchange witty comments about politics, cinema stars, and current events in spoken varieties of Tamil. This section of the newspaper has since become quite famous and *Dinamalar's* rising circulation in urban and suburban markets is, in part, attributable to the popularity of this section. But the Teashop Bench and the newspaper it is found in are likely to be read alone, silently in the comfort of one's own middle class home or perhaps online at the office. Quite unlike the newspapers found in Habermas's 18th century London coffeehouses, which both described conversations at the coffeehouse and served to fuel them in that very same space (Habermas, 1989; Laurier and Philo, 2007), *Dinamalar* is not known to be read as extensively in the sorts of teashops that it represents as other papers are.[1] The Teashop Bench column represents a sort of looking back

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[1] The model of a newspaper that circulates and is read in the very social contexts that it describes is not limited to early modern coffee shops. See Alejandro Paz (2009) for a recent ethnography of such circulation among Latin American workers in contemporary Israel.

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onto a place and time in which reading the newspaper meant taking verbal shots at politicians while sitting on the bench at the teashop with one's friends and cousins. This picture of a rather idealized "public" space is best consumed in "private," it seems.

In this essay, I trace this movement of the daily Tamil newspaper from the working class teashop into the middle class home to reflect on the novel types of mass-mediated publics that are imagined and produced by the daily press under conditions of rapid economic change. My analysis of the relationship between *Dinamalar's* depiction of reading the newspaper at the teashop and the practice of reading a newspaper at the teashop itself offers a means of thinking more broadly about how distinctively spatialized and temporalized reading practices are entangled in variegated, mass-mediated modes of social class formation.

Such a line of inquiry was first proposed by Bakhtin (1981, p. 252–254), who argued for an analysis of the interaction between what he saw to be distinct narrative organizations of space and time or "chronotopes": that spacetime of the world represented by the (literary) text, and the heterogeneous spacetimes of the authors, readers, and listeners who may be located in distinct settings, but who are nevertheless connected insofar as they participate in the "world that creates the text." While arguing for what he termed a "sharp and categorical boundary line between the actual world as source of representation and the world represented in the work," Bakhtin also recognized a certain permeability and dialogical exchange that occurs between these two distinct organizations of time and space. He furthermore notes that this "exchange is itself chronotopic... We might even speak of a special *creative* chronotope in which this exchange between work and life occurs, and which constitutes the distinctive life of the work" (1981, p. 254). In this essay, I propose to map this creative time and space of exchange with reference to the daily newspaper, its depictions of daily newspaper reading, and the different worlds of newspaper reading itself. What is the "distinctive life" of *Dinamalar's* Teashop Bench and the worlds it both represents and belongs to?

2. Chronotope production under conditions of mediatization

Asif Agha (2007, this issue) has recently elaborated on the suggestions first formulated in Bakhtin's important essay on the chronotope, with added attention to the participation frameworks and "figures of personhood" that are both commonly presupposed and creatively entailed the process of exchange between representing text and represented world.[2] He furthermore argues that "mediatization," a special case of the more encompassing category of mass mediation, links this process of exchange to the commodity form, transforming participation frameworks of communication by linking them to frameworks for commodities. In this respect, Agha's intervention might also be read as an elaboration of Benedict Anderson's (1991) insightful study of nationalism linking this particular modern sense of spacetime and belonging to the structure of "print capitalism," the primary difference being that Agha takes interest in the "modes and moments of participatory access to the model itself... and forms of alignment to *that* model" (2007, p. 322). As we will see below, the questions of access, forms of participation, and alignment are critical to the effect of chronotope production in question.

In Anderson's study, readers will recall that the newspaper serves as that quintessential mediating commodity that would align senses of time over vast spaces, enabling the emergence of horizontal social bonds among people who would never meet.[3] Among the several problems with Anderson's vision, however, is that he seems to assume that these "one-day bestsellers," are necessarily read "in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull" (1991, p. 35). Indeed, the sense of a disembodied, solitary, private imagination of some sort of national public that is produced through reading the newspaper in this fashion is not trivial to Anderson. This is an important part of his argument about the textual generation of "confidence of community in anonymity" (Ibid, p. 36; cf. Spitulnik 1997). If reading the newspaper silently at home is certainly a common mode of consumption, this fact must not blind researchers to very different modes of circulation in cases where people do, in fact, meet in face-to-face interactions to read and discuss newspapers together (Bate, 2002, p. 324n5; Cody, 2009). As my very brief introduction to the Tamil teashop above indicates, the silent mode of reading a newspaper in solitude is not at all the norm for many rural and small town men.

Ethnographic emphasis on *variation* in participation frameworks, and unevenly distributed forms of uptake opens the way for an investigation of the distinct spatialites, temporalities, and socialities produced in mediatized forms of mass mediation. The sort of sociality premised on a participant framework in which consumers of mass-mediated texts should necessarily be unknown to one another, a form of stranger sociality that sits at the core, not only of Anderson's theory, but also that of Jürgen Habermas's (1989) "public sphere" of rational critical debate and Charles Taylor's (2004) "modern social imaginaries," it seems, is a special case that bears further scrutiny as such.[4] It is furthermore the case that, even when read silently at home, newspapers do often provide the intertextual stuff of conversation among friends, family and other intimates, thereby shaping communication in that sphere that is often relegated to the "private" realm by social theorists.[5] The uptake of

[2] See Silverstein (1993, 2005) on the interplay of presupposition and creative entailment in processes of entextualization.

[3] In a study of North Indian newspapers Akhil Gupta (1995) borrows from this line of argument to argue that the Indian state itself is imagined as an encompassing unit of association through reading about and discussing corruption charges.

[4] Among these theorists, it seems that Habermas is the most clear in emphasizing that this sense of stranger sociality rests on a contrast with bourgeois privacy. See Carolyn Steedman (1999) for an extended meditation on the role of a gendered bourgeois interiority in the theory of writing that animates this vision of stranger publicity.

[5] Susan Gal (2002, 2005) has been among the most forceful critics of the place of a stable public/private binary in these theories through her studies of the recursive nature of its deployment in interactional contexts.