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Lyric Recollection and the Preservation of Ephemeral and Social Elit

One of the most striking features of electronic literature – in contrast to most literature we read and study – is its capacity for interactions of various kinds. In preserving electronic works for future experience, all of those interactions should ideally be preserved and made to function in more or less the same manner. The look and sound of certain elements will inevitably change somewhat with different hardware, but the overall presentation and the points of entry for the reader should remain the same. A more challenging point is the issue of outcomes. A reader may have a selection of inputs, but in the case of ephemeral of social electronic literature works, the outcome will never be the same. While a player can open *A Mind Forever Voyaging* at any point and interact with Perry Simm, for example, one cannot simply go and interact with the characters in a Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) as one would have while logged in during the 1990s, as those were real people interacting in real time. Eventually, if you can get anyone interacting at all, it may be very different people, or even in the case of encountering the same group of people who populated the game-world before, they will approach things from different times in their lives, with new perspectives and likely developed writing styles.

Due to these complications of ephemerality, many early electronic literature experiences are largely inaccessible. In 1997, Pavel Curtis wrote of MUDs, "it is difficult to properly convey the sense of the experience in words. Readers desiring more detailed information are advised to try mudding themselves" (124-5). In some ways, it is still possible for readers to "try mudding themselves," but not in the context where it was an addictive new experience pushing the boundaries of what we could do with technology. Now, any experience operates in a context of a much bigger, more complex – though at times more limited – social Internet. People can turn

away from the world of current social media to play around in an intentionally older system. What is missing, though, from those new experiences – which a reader of Curtis in 1997 could have encountered, though even then with some distinction – is what mudding was actually, actively like for those playing them at its height. Such resignation as Curtis offers is common in writing on MUDs, which is why a more literary narrative is useful. In contrast to Curtis telling readers to just go see for themselves, Indra Sinha carefully shifts between forms to recreate the imaginative depth of the experience in his 1999 memoir, *The Cybergypsies*. This indirect look is in some ways part of the medium itself. One's personal involvement in the text of a MUD is always only a small part, and that involvement (or lack thereof) informs our understanding.

Even in most of the early scholarship on MUDs, as the writers discuss vast social, pedagogical, philosophical, and other implications of the medium, they contain their writing within something like this memoir style, grounding their analyses in personal experience in MUDs. Sherry Turkle (1997), for instance, discusses social interaction in MUDs through a discussion of what a selection of players she knew from one MUD server had to say about their experiences, goals, and self-perception. Lori Kendall's *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*, published in 2002, is structured as an ethnography of the online forum BlueSky.

In *The Cybergypsies*, Sinha makes space for the highs and lows of his online, frequently MUD-based experience as all crucially forming his imagination. The text begins, "It's 3 a.m. and I'm online to Jesus Slutfucker. JS informs me that he's typing one-handed, knuckling open a beer with the other" (1). Though starting with this, the memoir ends at an advertising awards ceremony where he received an award for his work on Bhopal, India for Amnesty International, thinking about the absurdity as he sees "Sathyu, who lived in a slum, thanking the champagne

drinkers at the Grosvenor House" (392). *The Cybergypsies* captures in detail how the social experience of MUDs – even the violent world of *Shades* he chooses – takes him from one scenario to the other.

In 1984, Bhopal was the site of a major gas leak in a pesticide plant owned by the American company Union Carbide. The leak killed thousands in the slums of Bhopal and caused ongoing medical complications. A critical gap that this current study fills is that despite significant attention directed toward Sinha's fictional writing on the Bhopal disaster in *Animal's People*, very little has been written on this earlier memoir, despite its detailing the event and how Sinha got involved. In this later novel, Sinha discusses Bhopal in terms of a fictional city of Khaufpur, for which he made an accompanying website; there is no record of the contents of the *Cybergypsies* website which Sinha links in a 1999 interview on The WELL. Rob Nixon, in his book *Slow Violence*, comments that, "Among the writers I consider, Indra Sinha is by a long measure the most digitally attuned" (43). He goes on to argue, "If the quarter-century lag between the Union Carbide explosion and *Animal People*'s appearance marks a shift from predigital to digital activism, the lag also allows Sinha to challenge the conventions of what constitutes a catastrophic event" (44). While Nixon discusses Sinha's Khaufpur website and his early ad campaigns, he makes no reference to *The Cybergypsies*. This leads to a clear reversal in an endnote: "Arguably, Sinha's professional training in the image world of advertising left him better equipped than most writer-activists of his generation to adapt his skills to the digital era" (291). As Sinha's memoir suggests, it is not that his training in advertising prepared him for the digital era; the digital era prepared him for international advocacy.

Philip Leonard offers the one serious account of Sinha's memoir. In *Literature After Globalization*, he analyzes the text as part of addressing questions of globality and scale,

particularly as done in the 1990s when the sense of online community as a distinct

countercultural potentiality was still strong. Leonard writes, "Inhabiting the unruly margin of the

connected world, these groups do not allow the emergence of a universally transcendent

consciousness and cannot produce a coherent social order. Going online for these communities

becomes a renouncing of the universal and a detachment from the global" (45). Leonard

connects Sinha here with various theoretical ideas, but engages with *Cybergypsies* very little as a

literary text.

Leonard offers a useful starting point for thinking about *The Cybergypsies*, but leaves

much of its literary construction and context untouched. The end of the chapter briefly discusses

the literary qualities of the work, but only in the span of a page. Leonard notes how Sinha's work

troubles memoir's generic distancing from fiction (59), showing instead how such early online

experiences of community existed largely as fiction and writing (60). He comments,

"Structurally, Sinha's text is built around intrusions, interruptions, elisions and narrative

resequencings which prevent it from sliding into the naturalism that typifies the memoir as a

genre." Sinha notably incorporates lengthy passages from De Quincey's *Confessions* as a series

of interruptions into his own narrative, but Leonard does not make this connection clear. Earlier

in the chapter, he references Sinha's nod to Coleridge and De Quincey as expressing a similar

sort of "enchantment" and "delirium" as Sinha presents as part of our relationship to technology

(broadly defined, including language) (37). Here at the end of the chapter, though, Leonard

suggests that *The Cybergypsies* "should be placed in the quasi-literary legacy of the fictitious

memoir: Defoe, Goldsmith, Miller, Angelou, or Eco – this text rejects the masquerade of pure

reminiscence and instead embraces writing as both a generic demand and an opportunity to

trouble memory's inscription in an act of sterile or uncorrupted recollection" (60). Though

referencing earlier works, Leonard misses the obvious connection to De Quincey. The earlier quoted paragraph even references the figure of Bear in *Cybergypsies* as the "pseudonymously-named advertising-copywriter who acts as Sinha's textual persona" (37), an act which parallels the use of such personas in the world of Romantic-era London magazines in which De Quincey was writing. When Leonard concludes with reference to Sinha's inclusion of the jumbled typography of a corrupted file, a Romantic reading of the text could connect this to De Quincey's idea in *Suspiria de Profundis* of the brain as palimpsest, in which no memory is ever fully lost but only written over. Sinha quotes De Quincey's discussion of that idea explicitly (372-3).

This sort of layering of memory and experience is part of what drives Sinha's view of online communication and imagination. He introduces Lilith, who makes a clear distinction between online and offline experience, while Sinha insists on a sense of continuity. As Leonard notes of *Cybergypsies*, "this text is as much a chronicle of the growth of online activism and mobilization as it is a story about a craving for contact through cables and over airways … a medium for gathering and disseminating material that was not visible to the informational mainstream at that time" (44). Relatedly, the seeming invisibility of the Bhopal disaster, and its surrounding material, is a recurring imaginative concern of the text. Sinha's process of working through that is grounded in his experience of MUDs, which for him was focused primarily in a game more violent than the norm.

Though violent, *Shades* presented the same core values and challenges as other MUD experiences. An ad emphasized it was "More than a game!" and says "Meet people. Make friends." Similar to how *A Mind Forever Voyaging* leveraged the human intelligence of its player to establish the advanced AI of its player-character, the ad questions the reader, "Can YOU outwit the brains of real human opponents rather than a pre-programmed computer chip?" Unlike

a computer-driven game with clear rules and limitations, the foundation of *Shades* in social text inputs meant the action could be expanded infinitely. While it still had a core selection of commands that allowed for both socializing and combat, the purpose of playing in a MUD over a computer-driven game is explicitly the player interaction, and so players would not simply put in the minimal inputs necessary to win a fight, but would instead craft a character and maintain that character over an extended period of time. Sinha's memoir records people interacting in-game, out of game but still online, and sometimes in real life. An interaction which combines the first and last of those gives a strong sense of how Sinha understood the game and its typical player.

Much of the first third of the memoir builds up to an "immortals only" party – referring to a class of skilled, frequent players who have broken a certain points threshold – at which an "assassination" "would spark off the First Wyrd War" (23). Once we actually get to this event, Sinha comments, "The 'real' people in the room were never invited to this party. They're here on sufferance, mere emissaries of the real guests: it's the personas who are meeting here" (103). Sinha's own sense of values always comes from this remove, which is slightly disillusioned by the internal logic of such games, but what he records here is his sense that, while these people were interested in being social and making friends through *Shades*, they really value the personas crafted online, with no interest in moving outside of that frame. To capture different levels of understanding of what is happening, Sinha shifts into various forms and styles at different times. The most prominent mode of the memoir is a series of short, prose accounts of events, sometimes from different perspectives, but he also includes various materials as needed. In some cases, Sinha's narration is simply the series of text inputs and outputs which would appear on a monitor during a series of virtual actions. In shifting between modes, Sinha makes clear the different levels of what is going on: expertise in quickly crafting inputs, imagining scenes, the

social understanding of larger events, and so on. Where Sinha will sometimes simply include a line such as ">g brick" to narrate a character picking up (getting) a "broken paving brick" (71) – in contrast to which the usual prose descriptions more clearly reflect the addition of imaginative work – his description of the assassination utilizes a different approach. After one player sneaks away from the party and logs into an alternate account to start a fight with another player present at the party, the two end up both online and engage in combat. At the party, a crowd watches the event unfold on the monitors, and Sinha records the virtual activity in narrative verse which serves to give weight to the actions (111-3). Understanding these different meanings and the stakes of such online activity will later support Sinha's advocacy where he is tasked with making people see, and care about, an invisible, long ago gas leak.

In *Cybergypsies*, Sinha refers to the brain needed to craft and read such advertisements as the "Coconet" (117). This, which "runs on a human brain" and is contained in a coconut-like skull, he suggests is "the most powerful computer net in existence." He goes on to say, "The limitless energy-filled space it generates has been known to explorers since the first sapient dawn: it is the human imagination." Sinha's comments here contextualize the events of the party where the "real" world becomes entangled with the "cyber-world." To this distinction between "real" and "cyber," Sinha corrects, "Dozens of worlds collide daily in our lives, unnoticed. We compartmentalize experiences. Some, we say, are 'real', the rest 'in the mind'. What we constantly forget is that experience is *all* in the mind." He soon after records learning this view of the "real" from Luna, who asks how much of our "real" lives he thinks is "lived in the imagination" (127). In response to his guess of "Sixty percent," Luna corrects, "One hundred percent." Sinha's and Luna's comments connect conceptually back to the Romantic interest in not just nature itself but the interplay between the mind and nature, where the main interest is in

our own imaginative perception. It is in this context that Sinha brings in Coleridge and De Quincey in order to promote the distinct value of something like MUDs. In *The Cybergypsies*, Sinha experiences first virtual murders, then explores the lively dissonance of Bhopal to express in a way effective for advocacy work.

The selection of Coleridge and De Quincey as Sinha's points of reference is partly due to the comparison between opium use and cyberspatial experience, but these two Romantic authors also have more distinct contributions. The conflation of cyberspace with drug use is standard in cyberpunk, one of Sinha's contemporary contexts. Additionally, the idea of "cyberaddiction" is central to the memoir and its initial reception. In a 2000 study in the field of management information systems, Ritu Agarwal and Elena Karahanna cite *Cybergypsies* passingly as an "anecdotal report" describing video game addiction (667). Similarly, in a 2013 study, "Diving Too Deep: How Cognitive Absorption and Group Learning Behavior Affect Individual Learning," the authors (Massimo Magni et al.) take Sinha's memoir as a critical example of absorption wherein a disconnect can cause computer users to focus on "the process rather than on the activity itself" (52). An early review in *The Guardian*, titled "Darling, it's me or the modem," refers to the work as "a cautionary tale, a dark parable of what can go wrong when you submit yourself entirely to a realm of stylised fantasy." In an interview on *The WELL*, Sinha notes, "When I say addicted, I mean at least five hours a day/night online," totaling costs of approximately "Fifty thousand pounds" over a ten-year period, as well as suggesting in *Cybergypsies* that a friend would suffer "withdrawal symptoms" if offline too long (82). This element of the memoir then also inspires the graphic novel *The Surrogates* by Robert Venditti, which dramatizes the idea by depicting a society where one can pilot a robotic surrogate body for professional or personal use, causing dependence on this technology. Venditti explained the

influence in an interview with the *Orlando Sentinel*, stating he had read *The Cybergypsies* as a graduate student at the University of Central Florida. There he described Sinha's memoir as a research project more than a literary work: "Sinha studied people addicted to the Internet. Obsession with alternate reality was causing divorces, people were losing their jobs."

While the memoir culminates in Sinha's greater understanding of this online world and his relationship to it, most of the text involves him obsessively immersed in that world. Early on, he comments, "fighting in Shades is an art in itself" (57). This comes with no explicit comparison to De Quincey's presentation of murder as a fine art, but given the recurring role of De Quincey in the overall text, there is an inescapable relevance. Sinha starts with discussing the historical murders of Jack the Ripper and pursuing a trail of relevant locations (68). In this context, he writes, "A weird fantasy starts inventing itself in my mind," leading into an earlier quoted series of text commands and brief descriptions of effect which would play out in a violent scenario such as in *Shades* (71). This sequence of commands is then returned to at the start of a section titled "The art of death" (77). In the process, Sinha has shifted from the historical Ripper to a program named "Ripper" which is used to automate some elements of fighting on *Shades* (79). The value of the program is that everything in the game is text-based and playing out in real-time with other writers, and so, "The problem with all these fine tactics is that they must be typed and if you're a bad typist, you are dead." Such automation, however, is a form of absolute detachment and removes any sense of passion. For most players, Sinha suggests, "Killing one's friends is as natural as breathing. One murders daily with a song in one's heart" (78). These lines intentionally sound horrific when removed from their proper context, but make sense within the idea of (virtual) murder as fine art. In this text-based medium, effective killing means skillful reading, skillful typing, and an artful sense of what one can do in this virtual environment as well

as what this other person is doing. Though such artistry manifests as virtual violence, the danger is ultimately a tool to increase one's rapid engagement with another person online.

At one point in the memoir, Sinha comments that "what we imagine, we make true." For Sinha, depending on how responsible one is with one's imagination online, one can either create new horrors or something like the "Anatomy of a crime against humanity" appeal for support in Bhopal that manifested in the construction of an actual medical clinic in Bhopal, India – not something simply described in cyberspace. The possibility of real-world action is suggested from the start in *Cybergypsies*, even before Sinha makes clear what "real world" impact could mean: "It is a computer-generated mirage, a cloud castle, a Fata Morgana, yet real people meet here and start things which ricochet into the real world" (5). Just as Sinha eventually becomes involved in real-world projects, some of the people he encounters online are already involved in projects and organizations, and so this global network offers potential for productive connections. Sinha finds global connections populated instead by "the cybergypsies": "the explorers of cyberspace. Theirs were the first camps in cyberspace. They mapped it and made its links. They named the constellations of its night sky" (8). Sinha's text is in part about recording this history which was already beginning to be forgotten, while he also extends this history further: "generations of graffitists have left messages of the utmost puerility … Some older scratches further back in the cave: a date, 1781, and initials which look like S.T.C." – the initials of Samuel Taylor Coleridge (19).

Sinha's interest is not simply in the personal narrative of getting involved in the online world as an adult and applying lessons to advocacy work, but the more fundamental dynamics of online sociality and imagination which make up the environment in which younger generations might then grow up. The discoveries in cyberspace which may appear shocking to Sinha could

simply be assumed by a future generation. In this way, the models for online reading and writing matter, and Sinha looks in part to Coleridge and De Quincey. At the same time, Sinha's image of Sathyu at the awards ceremony marks a crucial divide. As Shashi Tharoor describes, "You can tell the rich from the poor by their Internet connections. The dividing line is not just the poverty line but the fiber-optic and high-speed digital lines. The key is the keyboard. Those who do not have one risk marginalization; their imagination does not cross borders" (88). The Romantic lineage in early electronic writing is a line of inquiry addressed toward such problems. Through his reflective mode, Sinha provides a clear vision of why this line of influence is valuable. Sinha comments early on, "Being inside someone else's computer is like wandering round their house" (5). As Gaston Bachelard writes about houses in *The Poetics of Space*, "If we cannot imagine, we cannot foresee" (xxxiv). The history which separates us from this early electronic literature will always remain a point of difference between the visions of these writers and what we have now, but they can still inform our reading and writing practices moving forward. Among more formal archival efforts, in imagining a long literature history of electronic literature for the future, lyric narratives – particularly in incorporating instances of the computer text as in Sinha – will inevitably play a significant role in how future generations experience ephemeral and social elit works.

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