

**The London School of Economics and Political  
Science**

*'Desis Doing it Like This': Diaspora and the Spaces of the  
London Urban Asian Music Scene*

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## **Declaration**

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## **Abstract**

My thesis examines the complex, fractured and diverse spaces of Asian cultural production in London, highlighting the immensely creative work in this area of popular music. The creation of these spaces presents new and different ideas about the self, and, furthermore, what it means to be young, Asian cultural producers in Britain and beyond. I conducted 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in which I collected interviews and engaged in participant observation in London's various Asian music spaces - primarily at club nights, but also video shoots, album launches and music shows (large and small) throughout the city.

Through ethnographic research, this thesis challenges and adds to the existing knowledge of Asian diasporic cultural production in the UK through the investigation of lived experience of diaspora. In stressing the knowledge that arrives out of everyday interactions this thesis seeks to go beyond the textual and theoretical in understanding diasporic music cultures.

Furthermore the thesis explores how the everyday strategies produced within this Asian scene present a clear break from simplistic models of resistance that still forms the dominant reading of youth cultures. I argue that cultural production cannot be identified simply as a site for resistance or accommodation, nor are these Asian cultural producers following a strict binary model of authenticity or commodification. The findings suggest that these Asian music spaces are where young Asians actively engage in and create different and alternative ways of being that move away from 'official' constructions of Asians available in media and public debates. Moreover, Asian identities that are forged in these Asian music spaces are complex and contradictory, inclusive and exclusive. I argue that the cultural politics within the scene around representation, identity and production rely on both progressive, open, shifting and contingent definitions and boundaries of ethnic identity and forms of belonging while, at the same time, often impose or reinforce closed, exclusive, static and conservative notions of identity, nation, and gender.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Setting the 'scene'

(October, 2007)

I read about a large Asian music university tour being held across campuses across the UK. I showed up early (thank goodness) to the Kings College student union venue on a Tuesday evening, where it felt like a Friday night out. The venue was packed with laughter, drinking and people milling around waiting for the acts to begin. It looked like it was going to be an action packed show with a very young, excited crowd to cheer on the artists in the showcase. The BBC Asian Network, as the official sponsors of the tour, had their logo emblazoned everywhere. Representatives were giving away pink BBC Asian Network whistles which brought the noise level to just above deafening. Jay Sean was meant to be the headlining act and by the time he went on, the student union bar was absolutely full of people. They even had a smoke machine going with everyone swaying, clapping and jumping to the music. DJ Bobby Friction was amping up the young London student crowd. It was a sight to see.

Two years later, in 2009, I see a video for Jay Sean's new single 'Down' out on his new album, 'All or Nothing' and the single features Lil Wayne, a successful US Grammy award-winning urban artist. It was a huge accomplishment for a British Asian artist coming out of this small, underground urban scene to have been signed to a major US urban and hip hop label (CashMoney Records). The single was in the US Billboard charts for six weeks. BBC called him the most successful UK male urban artist in US chart history (Wednesday, 23 Sept. 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/8269400.stm>). Jay Sean has succeeded as an Asian R&B artist, in a field where many other UK artists looking to cross over into the US music market have failed. His ethnic background served to make him someone more noticeable within a field that is dominated by African-American artists. Jay Sean's success is a tentative step towards recognition and greater visibility within a black and white racialized culture that marginalizes other ethnic and racial groups such as Asians and Latinos. Within the UK racial landscape, while configured very differently, Asians have

been posed as the invisible 'other' within debates on the cultural politics of difference within 'Black' and minority cultural production (Hall, 2000; Alexander, 2002; Banerjea, 1996).

(May, 2009)

I was helping out at a bhangra music video shoot in which the theme of the video was to illustrate the four seasons. Being on a bhangra music set, the director and stylist talked me through how they envisioned a more 'traditional' look for the video models, whom they dressed in different coloured saris. The use of traditional 'ethnic' dress follows certain conventions in the styling and conceptualization of bhangra that reinforce the 'timelessness' of ethnic traditions, practices and beliefs.

A brief search for 'Asian' music on Google directs me to a site called 'desihits!.com' a London-based internet radio station. It features the latest hits from styles as diverse as Bollywood, bhangra and what they coined 'urban desi' songs which is a mixture of US, British and emerging Asian diasporic hip hop and urban genres. You can listen to various weekly radio shows with a set playlist either by streaming it on a media player or as a podcast. The opportunity to listen and access new music through new modes of communication provided by the internet and digital music technology has provided unprecedented access to underground music cultures (Burnett, 1996, 2010).

All the accounts above outline the many different spaces of contemporary urban South Asian cultural production that became the focus of my ethnographic project. The creation of these spaces presents new and different ideas about the self, and, furthermore, what it means to be young, Asian cultural producers in Britain and beyond. These are spaces where identities are forged through the drawing together of certain connections, particularly with other racialized groups such as African Americans and black British, creating possibilities for a sense of 'belonging in difference' (Sharma, 2010). These are spaces where they actively engage in and create different and alternative ways of being that one



move away from 'official' constructions of Asians available through media, politics and education. These spaces are also part of a wider transnational network and circuit of spaces. These spaces are contested terrain in which people have competing and contradictory ideas about the ways in which ethnicity, diaspora, self, other and dealing with difference are lived out. These spaces are not only contested areas but they are also shaped and constrained by intersections of 'race', ethnicity, class and age. Thus wider concerns of belonging, the nation, assimilation, are articulated, negotiated and conceived and enacted through the cultural politics and performance of the scene.

I conducted 15 months of fieldwork in which I collected interviews and engaged in participant observation in London's various Asian music spaces - primarily at club nights, but also video shoots, album launches, and concerts (large and small) throughout the city. It is in these heterogeneous spaces where the Asian scene is materialized; Asian cultural producers, fans, promoters, journalists and publicists, stylists and students come together to party, mingle, and network. Empirical studies on South Asian diasporic youth, identity and 'race' have looked at spaces such as school and home (Shankar, 2008; Dwyer, 1999, 2000; Dwyer and Meyer, 1995). I argue that the different spaces that are constituted through the practices within the Asian scene afford us an opportunity to view the complex racial and class politics of urban youth and young people outside of the more formal spaces of work, home or school previously studied. While there is some brilliant ethnographic work on South Asian American youth cultures (Maira, 2000, 2004; Sharma, 2010) on 'desi' remix and hip hop culture respectively, ethnographic work on Asian popular culture spaces in the UK context have not yet been as forthcoming. Despite the turn towards a celebration of creative output of diasporic youth cultures, coverage and interest has been unevenly distributed so as to heavily emphasise and centre on black cultural production at the expense of other forms of cultural production and consumption. Stuart Hall writes that construction of the political category of 'Black' in the UK often 'privileged' the Afro-Caribbean experience over that of Asians (2000:224). Thus in many public arenas, Asian presence and key contributions have often been marginalized or rendered invisible within the

larger framework of black/white race relations. Through ethnographic research, I considered it necessary to both challenge and widen our existing knowledge of Asian diasporic cultural production in the UK beyond the established textual and theoretical understandings of diasporic popular music cultures.

My project goes on to consider the complex, fractured and diverse spaces of Asian cultural production in London, highlighting the immensely creative work being done in the UK in this area of popular music. My project is concerned with the surprising and hopeful ways in which these creative expressions continue to be produced in the midst of anxieties, fears and mistrust that the war on terror and post 9/11 politics have bred.

In the following, I have listed the general research questions that have been used to guide my research:

- a. How do Asian producers and consumers make space for a London-based Asian urban music scene?
- b. How can we understand the Asian music scene in the context of the Asian club nights and the production of certain spaces through the work of both producers and consumers?
- c. How can we explore the club nights and the music scene as a set of organized social *practices* linking spaces of diaspora, space and identity?

## **Turning Toward Scenes**

Popular music studies and cultural studies have undergone a postmodern 'cultural turn' as social, cultural and economic relations have shifted towards a post-industrial 'risk' society (Bauman, 2000) marked by increasing globalization, fragmentation and instability (Appadurai, 1996). Contemporary scholars of youth studies have acknowledged that young people and youth cultures do not correspond to traditional class identities which, according to youth culture

studies within the classic Birmingham 'subcultures' school, formed the basis of collective youth identities. More recently, scholars have introduced spatial dimensions to the study of music cultures recognizing the importance of spatial interaction of music and social practices (Connell and Gibson, 2003; Kahn-Harris, 2007; Bennett and Peterson, 2004)

In the next chapter in my literature review, I discuss the development of the concept of 'scenes' within cultural studies literature. Here I want to demonstrate how literature on 'scenes' has mapped my conceptual understanding of the Asian music scene. A music 'scene' can be understood to be inclusive of all 'music making, production, circulation, discussion and texts' (Kahn-Harris, 2007:15). In this sense, the Asian musical community that has become the subject of my study operates as a 'scene'. Moreover, the concept of 'scenes' has now become the way in which scholars, as well as scene members and music journalists, have conceptualized contemporary musical communities. 'Scenes' connote a wide variety of music-related activities using more spatially oriented perspectives. Bennett and Peterson (2004) write that scenes provide the spaces where the production, performance and consumption of music and identity come together.

Will Straw (1991) introduced the 'scene' into academic literature and Barry Shank (1988, 1994) used it to discuss the interactions within the local Austin, Texas rock 'scene'. Shanks (1994) used this term to mean a geographically based music scene, which resonates with how the Asian urban scene operates. Cities such as Birmingham and London boast their own Asian music scenes and while there are some similarities, there are also many differences. This is because the scene is extraordinarily diverse in its musical styles and genres and the members are diffuse. However, Bennett and Peterson (2004) outline that the scene can also be conceptualized not just in the common sense definition of a local, geographically bounded site of production and consumption; it can also be extended towards a global or transnational context so that local scenes are also part of a larger scenic network extending to more than one city or place. I argue that the Asian scene operates on the local level as well as being envisaged

and performed on a transnational scale. While the London Asian scene operates in London, it also is linked to other scenes in other 'global' cities (Sassen, 2001) such as New York. Other major cities include Toronto and Delhi. Thus, these scenes are appropriated and remade both for a local context and they allow for scene members to recognize and actively link their local scene to the wider arena of South Asian diasporic cultural production.

Furthermore, Lee and Peterson (2004) suggest that scenes can occupy virtual spaces which have become increasingly relevant because local scenes are scattered across great physical distances. The Asian scene is also constructed through the internet in the form of blogs, forums, internet radio stations and podcasts. These spaces have also become widely accessible spaces for music and popular culture. Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace are often the first stops for fans to browse and listen to music and watch music videos, where artists will use as a small repertory of their songs on their individual page. Options to embed these songs onto other sites to share them and forward them to other people are available through Facebook pages. Further, instant communication sites such as twitter are used by fans where people can sign up to 'follow' an artist's twitter account and receive short messages or 'tweets'. Thus, the internet has fundamentally altered and widened people's relationships towards listening to and consuming music, increasingly allowing multiple ways of sharing and engaging socially with music, despite the fact that music through internet technology has become increasingly 'disembodied' (Peterson and Ryan, 2004; Miller and Slater, 2000) changing our perceptions of what music is and should be. Moreover, the internet has allowed the creation of spaces where consumers and fans of music can set up blogs and forums to share new music, discuss issues, post interviews and information about bands, etc.

The sounds of the London Asian urban music scene are a complex cross-section of the various genres that include bhangra 'remix', R&B and hip hop styles, as well as dubstep and other 'urban' sample oriented, electronic music. Thus, the scene is not limited to a single musical genre but consists of loose groupings of

musical styles. Other distinguishing factors include the fusing of traditional South Asian instruments like the tabla player, dhol drum, vocal samples and/or a South Asian language to a Western song structure and beats.

Because the Asian urban music community cannot be reduced to a genre or distinctive sound, the scene can be identified by various names, which also suggests the existence of scenes within a scene. Some refer to it as the 'desi beats' scene, or the 'urban desi' scene, or as it is most commonly referred to, as the 'Asian' or 'desi' music scene. The use of different terms indicates that there is a certain amount of ambiguity and conflict over what sounds and who counts as representative of or even part of the scene. Yet, a 'scene' must draw some boundaries to make it distinctive from some other community yet they are fluid in order to accommodate the shifting loyalties, friendships and networks that make up the scene. Thus, a key area of interest rests in how and where those within the 'Asian' scene draw those boundaries. Boundaries are maintained, regulated and shaped not just by individual interests but also reflect wider social norms and expectations that are racialized, gendered, classed and sexualized. Therefore, the mapping of these boundaries highlights the significant relationship between scenic practices to the everyday 'making' of 'race', ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class.

For example, even if there is no recognizable South Asian sound, the term 'Asian music' can include music made by South Asian artists. Deborah Wong (2004) makes a very useful distinction when she clarifies that she studies Asian Americans making music rather than focusing on 'Asian American music' (2004:4). A similar distinction can be established between the idea of there being a 'British Asian music' and British Asians making music: in other words, the Asian music scene cuts across a wide range of music genres, defying prescriptive expectations of sounds and styles. Therefore, my project on the British Asian urban music 'scene' challenges and re-directs the construction of a 'scene' away from strictly genre-based musical communities and towards the possibility of alternative groupings.

The inclusion of artists such as Jay Sean exemplifies the fluid boundaries around what counts as 'Asian music'. Despite his R&B 'sound' he is considered to be an exemplary figure of the Asian scene and a positive role model for aspiring Asian singers. Yet Jay Sean is not without his critics. He debuted with a single produced by Rishi Rich in 2003 and helped to popularize a South Asian R&B fusion style. As his career developed he moved towards a smoother, more generic R&B, soul and 'urban' sound and moved away from 'Asian' instrumentation and vocals. As is often the case with artists who develop other styles and sounds, people accused him of 'selling out' from his original Asian fan base in order to achieve greater commercial success.

Earlier on in his career, Jay Sean would have performed in smaller club venues. There are often many Asian club nights hosted by these venues throughout the city on any given night. These nights demonstrate how the scene takes up various and diverse spaces across the city. These Asian club nights are a crucial element of the music scene because they often locate the scene in a particular place so the cultural producers, consumers and everyone in between (e.g. media figures, promoters and events people) can go to meet each other, talk business and to just socialize together. This coming together demonstrates how close these networks operating within the scene are to be able to establish nights where people can and do get together. Birthday parties and get-togethers are often held at certain club nights whereas other club nights serve as an informal gathering centre for the Asian music industry.

However, there are other nights that are purely held for party and consumption purposes in which they feature British Asian music such as bhangra and desi hip hop music. These numerous 'bhangra' nights can be seen as occupying a separate and distinct sphere from the Asian urban 'scene'. Therefore, it is important to note that not all Asian club nights are directly connected to the Asian scene. Yet, networks of promoters are also connected to each other in different ways, so that sometimes a venue that would host an Asian night would also be used to launch music events. For instance, Voodoo Entertainment is a party promotion and events company that throws Bollywood-themed parties.

Many of these promoters know artists and producers within the scene and they will host record and artist launch parties in addition to their own nights. Thus, despite their differences, these consumption spaces play a part in the scene in one way or another at certain points and therefore I consider them to be (directly or indirectly) a part of the Asian music scene.

Thus, the brief outline of club nights and the Asian 'scene' served to highlight the important work of producing space for Asian cultural production as well as demonstrate its diversity and complexity. These spaces are shaped by the everyday social activities of people and they contain multiple and sometimes contradictory uses and associations (Lefebvre, 1991; Knowles and Alexander, 2005). The development of ideas related to diaspora conceptually links space, race and identity. Through diaspora, space and race are disrupted and made more complex. Territories and nations, ethnically bound up in land, are challenged by these diasporic journeys and migration (Knowles and Alexander, 2005).

### **Diaspora, Identity and 'Desiness'**

Arjun Appadurai argues that a 'diasporic public sphere' undermines the privileged placement of the nation-state as the arbiter of social change (1996:4). Cultural production forms an important part of a diasporic public sphere. Josh Kun (2005) highlights the transnational nature of popular music when he says that it is always 'a post-nationalist formation...music can be of a nation but it is never exclusively national; it always overflows, spills out...' (p. 20). The nation-state has been upheld by ideas about sameness or the 'illusory universality' of race gender class and sexuality (Ferguson, 2004). Migrating music cultures open up fissures within the smooth surface of a cohesive British national story, making it possible to think 'outernationally' (Gilroy, 1993a, b, 1994) about alternative forms of belonging. Participation within the Asian diasporic public sphere through this scene is part of an active deciphering of questions of borders and belonging during a time of profound anxiety over these very same issues of identity. Thus these scenic practices can work to de-centre the

authority of the state, media and other 'official' institutions to configure the boundaries around Britishness, 'race' and nation in particular ways. These practices suggest that there are other ways of being 'British' that do not close down other affinities. Further, these diasporic ties are not exceptional formations but the ordinary products of multiculturalism. Thus, engaging with different forms of music and popular culture creates a dialogue with 'unofficial', polysemic accounts of being that lie outside of more formal arenas of study and life (Bakhtin, 1984). Exploring the practices of popular music cultures stretches the 'sociological imagination' toward the possibilities of everyday interactions (Gilroy, 1993a, b).

Paul Gilroy (1993a, b, 2000b) writes how diaspora should be seen as an open, 'contingent and partial' process rather than an already formed category. Diasporic processes involve elements, both progressive and conservative, which challenge the hegemony of the nation-state as well as support it. Yet, while Hall (1990) points out that diaspora are born out of heterogeneity and change, it is also shaped by hierarchies of class, race, gender and sexuality (Brazier and Mannur, 2003).

Youthful cultural production has become positioned as a key site for these more open and shifting experiences and processes of diaspora. Diasporic (racialized) music cultures are often read as resistant texts or practices that signal toward the creation of transnational, fluid and deferred identities (Gilroy, 1993b). Popular music scholars and journalists have often been quick to politicize all forms of black and minority cultural production (Gilroy, 1993a). However, the production and consumption of music cannot be neatly mapped on to a politics of resistance (Radano and Bohlman, 2000). Therefore, it's important to be cautious about the political possibilities of music and to accept that music has potential to support existing power structures and inequalities. For example, music production and distribution often comes in the shape of global, corporate industries that transform music into a capitalist commodity. Business and finance considerations have much bearing on music production and consumption in terms of who gets to make it, play it, hear it, and even buy it.



Thus, looking at this music scene allows us to think about and locate diaspora in its everyday forms, which are highly specific and contextual, complex, and contradictory. While diasporic formations open up the possibilities of different forms of belonging, community and citizenship, these perspectives are not always progressive across differences of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Enacting a diasporic politics of difference certainly may encourage and open up more complex articulations of ethnicity and foster ties to a transnational or even global identity, but that may be established through the suppression of other differences such as gender and class.

Within the Asian scene, the construction of diasporic identities is an ambivalent, contradictory and contested process in which scene members embrace both dominant forms of culture as well as resisting them. Conservative, heteronormative values or what Nitesha Sharma (2010) calls 'hegemonic desiness' that reinforce the nation, patriarchy, heterosexuality and ethnic authenticity are enacted through certain practices and performances within the scene. The performance of 'desiness' within the Asian scene is exemplary of the complex contradictory process of diaspora.

The usage of 'desi' is slowly finding its way into the British Asian music scene to refer to diasporic forms of South Asian popular culture. While 'desi' has multiple meanings, it is most commonly used in the US and Canada to refer to those of the South Asian diaspora. On the one hand, the increasing reference to things 'desi' reveal how media and advertising industries have started to target advertising towards South Asian youth. For instance, Murali Balaji (2008) writes how particular conceptions of 'desi' were used to set up 'MTV Desi', a music channel targeting the South Asian American demographic (Balaji, 2008) - distinct from the overseas channels of MTV India/Asia. On the other hand, the adoption of a 'desi' consciousness within the UK signals toward the alternative possibilities of 'desiness' to describe the transnational networks of South Asian cultural production and consumption. Digital technology has changed the practices of music and cultural consumption, shrinking conceptions of time and

space so that communication is virtually instantaneous. This allows for greater access to each other's cultural output developing elsewhere in other cities. Thus, South Asian cultural production is multi-directional. While British Asians have long consumed Indian/Pakistani films and music, British Asian music and films have become increasingly popular within cities such as Delhi, where they have a growing electronica scene (Murthy, 2010).

However, while this version of 'desiness' gestures towards 'outernational' connections the making (and the living out) of British 'desi' identities are also firmly located in the everyday and local (Maira, 2000; Sharma, 2010). 'Desi' is often associated with highly specific practices such as identifying with being from the Midlands or in being Northern Indian or, even more specifically, Punjabi and Sikh. Thus, desiness is a highly contested terrain in which ethnicity, gender, and class work to create competing notions of 'authentic' Asianness, between dominant 'model minority' middle class conceptions of desiness and the counterhegemonic forms that suggest a move away from a monolithic set of diasporic experiences.

In chapter five, I look more closely at the fluid, unstable and contested meanings of 'desi' and its specific dimensions of use within the music scene. Unpacking 'desi' offers new ways of thinking about the constructions of and performance of Asian youthful identities while disrupting existing frameworks of Asians in the UK. A deeper analysis of 'desi' is a response to the ways it has been incorporated within (mostly US) academic accounts of the South Asian diaspora and popular culture without questioning its meaning or use (see Maira, 2000, 2002; Shankar, 2008; Prashad, 2000).

## **Bhangra and Beyond: Politics of the Scene, Representation and Space**

The project of performing 'desiness' is but one complex part of the cultural politics of the Asian music scene. As I have suggested earlier, the term 'Asian' itself has become a source of tension and conflict because the 'Asian' in Asian

music is often used to place all Asian music together under an ethnically determined category. The tendency within discussions of Asian cultural production is to overlook the differences that exist within distinct scenes and to conflate them together as simply 'Asian' music, flattening out many of the differences in interests within different sub scenes. However, upon further inspection, the different histories, politics, and experiences that inform different forms of Asian music production have led to the rise of various sub-scenes. Here I want to outline some of these different histories of Asian cultural production within the UK starting with bhangra music; then I move onto the emergence of the Asian Underground, and return to a discussion of the contemporary scene.

Bhangra music has a long history outside the UK, originating in the Punjab region of Northern India and Pakistan. Punjabi folk harvest songs included themes of joy, celebration, bounty and loss and were enjoyed at a variety of social functions such as at family gatherings and weddings. Bhangra music travelled to the UK with the first generation of South Asian immigrants who came to Britain in the 1960s and 70s. Bhangra music from the 1980s onwards included songs and sounds from the Punjab but it also began to take root in the UK, with the formation of British bhangra bands out of Birmingham and London, areas that were home to larger British Asian communities (Baumann, 1990; Banerji and Baumann, 1990; Dudrah, 2002, 2002a, 2007). For many South Asians, bhangra became a literal and figurative representation of the British born and raised 'desis' (Baumann, 1990; Banerji and Baumann 1990; Back, 1996; Dudrah, 2002, 2002a).

Since the 1990s, bhangra nights have been part of a growing significant practice of 'going out' for a decidedly younger, urban set of British Asians. Yet, as the now famous 'daytimer' gigs demonstrated (Dudrah, 2007), bhangra music always had a young following who could only go to shows during the daytime because they were often too young to attend night-time events. Moreover, bhangra nights became so established with university age students that Asian student organizations on university campuses across the UK often arranged group trips, including transport, to bhangra clubs. These club nights offered a

space for the construction of youthful Asian identities based around the consumption of bhangra music, dancing and socializing with peers outside of the spaces of home, school and work.

Bhangra was also part of a larger transnational youth culture of the South Asian diaspora with respective 'nodes' forming in New York, Toronto, Bombay and Delhi (Gopinath, 1995). Even though bhangra music has travelled across the span of the South Asian diaspora as a potent form of diasporic music, it is important to point out that its significance and meanings and the practices that develop around this form of cultural production were not all the same across the diasporic local contexts. Put another way, bhangra music developed distinctive meanings and characteristics as they were taken up by their respective youth cultures. For instance, Sunaina Maira (2002) characterizes the bhangra 'remix' culture in New York City as an affluent, predominantly Indian-American youth culture located in the elite spaces of Manhattan night clubs. Ashley Dawson (2002) goes so far as to point out how integral the university was in maintaining and further developing this scene through the university's cultural organizations. This differs sharply from the UK's bhangra history, which derived from first generation working class South Asian communities of the late 70s. Bhangra developed as a larger and more diverse practice involving weddings, daytimers as well as being celebrated in clubs in London (Dudrah, 2007) by university students. Moreover, within the context of a US based racialized hierarchy, Gopinath (1995) points out how bhangra remix culture posed a challenge to the black/white racialized binary that shapes American popular culture by providing an alternative site of identity for Asian Americans who were eclipsed by such strict binaries.

Yet, there were other forms of music being explored that spoke of alternative ways of being diasporic and South Asian. Sharma, et. al (1996) make the claim that previous scholars positioned bhangra music as *the* representative youth culture for British Asians and drawing attention to other forms of Asian cultural production such as the music known as the 'Asian Underground'.

Bands that were considered part of the 'Asian Underground' movement including musicians such as Talvin Singh and groups such as Fun-da-mental, Hustlers HC and the Asian Dub Foundation. The Asian Underground movement referred to both Talvin Singh's famous club night at The Blue Note club in London as well as the bands that then were signed to such labels as Outcaste Records. Often outspoken, politically conscious and rebellious, these bands articulated alternative representations of British Asianness. Many of these bands had cross-over appeal and later achieved a level of success that eluded many earlier Asian artists. In the following chapters, I will discuss in greater detail the lasting significance of the Asian Underground movement in shaping the terrain of contemporary British Asian music as well as becoming the dominant image that British and particularly non-Asian audiences have of contemporary Asian music. This has encouraged many within the Asian 'desi' urban scene to forge oppositional identities in relation to the Asian Underground scene.

The Asian music scene can also extend to other genres of music such as drum 'n' bass, and electronica: however, these genres still remain marginal to the core of the British Asian music scene so that the electronica scene is smaller and operates independently of the wider British Asian urban scene. Production is generally based outside of London and the UK, and cities such as New York and Delhi have particularly noteworthy scenes (Murthy, 2007). The Indian electronica scene has often been grouped into the rubric of 'world music' and there is as of yet, very little attempts at crossover between the two scenes. Subsequently, the Indian electronica scene is not covered extensively within my study. I briefly mention these other scenes to point to the diversity of popular music made by Asian artists.

The Asian music scene can be understood to be a thoroughly syncretic set of music practices and styles. Hip hop, itself a very syncretic and migrating music form (Gilroy, 1993a, b; Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994a, b; Kelley, 2006) has been extremely influential on British Asian urban music production. Thus, I briefly want to discuss hip hop's syncretic roots and the impact this hybridization has

had on popular urban music, and highlight the tensions within hip hop that inform the cultural politics of contemporary Asian music practices.

British Asian cultural production's link with black cultural production largely via hip hop is complex and contradictory. Hip hop's global spread and its position as a hyper-commodified cultural form makes it a ubiquitous form of music consumed within the popular sphere by young people without taking on meanings of resistance or rebellion. Often, these values incorporate hegemonic constructions of race, gender and class more so than resisting or challenging such constructions, despite the fact that hip hop still carries the mantle of being the ultimate form of youthful resistance and defiance. Yet as Paul Gilroy (1994) rightly points out, hip hop's 'marginality is as official, as routinized as its overblown defiance and yet it is still represented as an outlaw form' (p. 51).

Still, certain forms of hip hop continue to articulate a marginal, conscious politicized message which form part of the mainstream arena as well as emerge out of local, smaller 'underground' scenes. The 'underground' still provides youthful platforms for practising cultural politics and producing social critique. It has been argued that the global spread of hip hop resulted from hip hop's ability to be appropriated and reworked to speak towards local and specific histories in shaping local youth identities (Mitchell, 2001). Within hip hop music, it was particularly the representation of the African American experience that served as a source of inspiration for young Asians in speaking back towards similar experiences of struggle, disadvantage and discrimination.

In order to further illustrate Asian urban music's close but often uneasy relationship with hip hop, I want to draw attention to the Asian scene's involvement within debates about the cultural ownership of hip hop and related arguments about racial authenticity. Asian or 'desi' hip hop is sometimes viewed as a form of cultural borrowing to the extent that Asian hip hop artists are seen to be using a form of music that does not 'belong' to them. Those within the Asian urban music scene often must negotiate assumptions about the lack of authenticity of 'desi' hip hop music, because hip hop operates as a premier site

for a black 'street' authenticity (see Forman, 2002, Gilroy, 2004b; Johnson, 2003; Flores, 2000; Kelley, 2004; Bennett, 1999b). Interestingly, these criticisms of 'desi' hip hop's 'authentic' ownership and roots have been made by those outside the scene as well as its insiders. These claims often draw upon essentialized notions of culture that tether music to a singular culture and identity. In these instances, music takes on a racialized essence so that hip hop 'belongs' to a black diaspora or African Americans and music such as bhangra 'belongs' to Asians.

These ideas are supported by (often) US academic and popular writing on hip hop that claim it to be an exclusively African American cultural form. However, scholars such as Paul Gilroy (1993a, b) argue that hip hop has always been syncretic, originating from the travel and migration which took place during the middle passage of the slave trade, referred to as the 'Black Atlantic'. As a result, hip hop comes from a long tradition of black diasporic cultures, a mix of African American, Caribbean and British black musical traditions.

Thus Asian artists often have to negotiate these binary positions that reduce 'Asianness' and 'blackness' to essentialized (and separate) categories. Yet, for 'desi' artists, embracing hip hop styles, music and lifestyles works to challenge or disrupt the fixity of such binary oppositions. Sharma writes that South Asian American hip hoppers do not claim hip hop as their own but that they use hip hop to racialize themselves by drawing upon models of blackness (2010:22). Hip hop can be used as a resource that young people draw upon to dis-identify with white hegemony. While British Asians have distinct migration histories and occupy different positions within the racial order to that of the US, hip hop forms are drawn upon in order to establish ties with blacks and to move away from white normative British culture. It is an assertion that whiteness and its cultural norms are not the only or preferred modes of identification.

The diverse range and modes of South Asian cultural production over the years has offered distinct sounds and attitudes and presented new ways of being, representing and articulating Asianness to past forms of creative expression.

These polyvalent expressions within popular culture highlight the multiple, overlapping and intersecting Asian subject positions that offer alternatives to essentialist depictions of Asians as bounded, static and homogenous communities.

In this chapter, I introduced briefly some of the ideas around the making of Asian diasporic music spaces. The ways in which these boundaries are drawn and the disputes over the way the scene takes shape, who belongs and who does not demands an engagement with a wider set of debates through which these practices then acquire meaning. The space of the scene acts as a public forum through which issues of belonging, identity and difference are examined, contested, revised and disputed. The Asian music scene is about the everyday dealing with difference and diaspora and one that constantly shifts and takes different shapes. I am interested in how these spaces might articulate alternative narratives of multiculturalism, ethnicity, identity and diaspora that speak back to the anxieties and fears around integration, cohesion and identity presented in contemporary British and North American political and cultural debates.



## Chapter Summaries

In chapter 2 I will discuss bodies of literature that have helped provide the theoretical and intellectual grounding for my project. Sociological literature on youth has come in two separate strands that have not yet been bridged. One strand tells the story of youth through youth subcultures, style, and identity construction; youth as seen through *production*. The other strand deals with youth, criminality and the intersections of class and race; youth as a *problem*. I discuss how these two strands, while interrelated in many aspects, have been treated as two distinct and separate areas of study with little to no interaction. I outline the separate development of these two areas in order to highlight how Asian youth and youth cultures have been made invisible or, conversely, hyper-visible. I also discuss other relevant bodies of literature on diaspora, 'race' and ethnicity theories, especially in relation to postcolonial studies and relations.

In chapter 3, I discuss methodology and issues relating to ethnography. I will address particular issues such as positionality, not only related to the research participants, but in relation to my own positionality as the researcher. As an East Asian-American woman doing research within the gendered and 'raced' spaces of these British Asian urban club nights in particular locations within London, I continuously negotiated perceptions, status, locations and identities. Here, I argue for a more critical evaluation of ethnographic constructions of knowledge, particularly in relation to British Asian youth cultural studies and studies of British Asian popular cultures, of which little has been captured through empirical and ethnographic studies.

The key question around which I frame chapter 4 is whether there is a cultural politics being negotiated within the Asian music scene. A previous generation of Asian bands, such as those who came out of the 'Asian Underground', articulated radical and critical positions towards politics, power, racism and the state within their music. I discuss how there is a fundamental ambivalence towards a formal engagement with politics and the decline of a clear-cut Asian identity politics within the contemporary Asian music scene. Yet debates around the

issues of 'race', ethnicity and the politics of representation are still very much alive, being disputed and contested within the scene.

Chapter 5 will delve further into the production of everyday diasporic identities as evinced through the establishment of diasporic 'desi' and 'coconut' modes of being. These demonstrate the open AND closed processes of diaspora. Further, related ideas of belonging are explored through a closer inspection of the scene members' meanings of 'home'. The use of the notion of 'back home' to indicate India and the subcontinent reveals a less than straightforward understanding of nation, Britishness, and belonging. For many younger British Asians, 'home' signifies local and concrete places where connections and ties are (re)produced through visits, communication and popular culture.

Chapter 6's focus will be on the construction of various essentialized and non-essentialized 'Asian' identities within the scene produced through the performances of cultural producers at Bombay Bronx night. Artists and promoters become the cultural 'gatekeepers' of the scene by conferring authenticity to cultural practices, forms and other artists. I provide a more in-depth look at the construction of Bombay Bronx and its strategic establishment as a key space for the Asian cultural producers of the scene to come together. It forms an alternative space for the Asian scene that amalgamates and highlights the different styles and sensibilities of London's many 'indie' underground urban cultures.

In chapter 7 I spotlight the tensions and inequalities produced around the construction of particular gendered Asian identities. I introduce these issues through practices at Kandy Nights' club night in East London, which are highly regulated according to normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. I then move on to thinking about the wider scene and how certain figures within the scene have threatened the patriarchal and gendered divisions and expectations of behaviour, attitude and comportment.

## **Chapter 2:Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Arriving in London after the 7/7 bombings the city was still reeling from the tragic events that had taken place a few months prior. London was still placed on 'high alert' and fresh reports of terrorist raids made frequent headlines. I became more conscious of how certain spaces and groups of people were being constructed as either 'safe' or 'dangerous', and being used to place people into an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy (supposedly) separated by different understanding of culture, faith and ultimately 'civilization'. The panicked accusations of a 'broken Britain' in which people within communities were living 'parallel lives' leading to the 'death of multiculturalism' in the wake of 7/7 bombings suggested that questions of citizenship, the nation-state, and immigration were matters of growing fear, where one's 'culture' (code for 'race' and ethnicity) has again become the ultimate signifier of difference, signalling oppression, backwardness, and ignorance. Within political debates as reflected in both the Ted Cante Report on the 2001 Northern riots and Trevor Philips' statements after the London bombings, culture has become the primary means through which conservatives and liberals 'other' immigrants and non-whites.

The rise of violence, harassment and xenophobia targeted at Asians in the UK have led me to wonder what forms of cultural production were out there that might address these material and social concerns, and how might solidarity and ways of belonging be constructed and contested post 7/7? I wondered what impact these actions had on Londoners especially on those who were placed on the other side of the divide which belonged to 'them', between 'civilization' and 'us'.

These impact of 7/7 and 9/11 on British Asian youth can be understood by inserting these matters into broader debates on youth cultures and the 'problem'(atic) view of Asian youth within these discourses. I will outline and discuss two main traditions within sociology that have directly contributed to

the shaping of these debates. One strand deals with youth cultures and cultural studies. The cultural studies tradition highlighted the ways in which theoretical and textual analyses could lend themselves to opening up new ways of thinking about youth, youth cultures and identity; again youth through different forms of 'production'. The second tradition was centred on youth but placed it within a broader context around 'race', crime and deviance; youth as a particular 'problem'. By reviewing these two areas of literature, I draw attention to the significant gaps within these studies. My own work, influenced by postcolonial and diaspora studies, the spatial turn, feminist interventions and recent race and ethnicity studies, can be understood as a response and critique to both traditions. Thus I conclude the chapter by looking at the newer ways that identity, 'race' and ethnicity formation has been researched, and discussing how these re-accounts offer up insightful paths toward thinking about newer ways of being and living with difference.

### **'Talking About My Generation' - Youth, Consumption and Subculture Studies**

'Youth' is a socially constructed category that has taken on different meanings within changing contexts over time (Bennett et. al., 2007). The concept of youth existing as a separate and distinct social group developed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. 'Youth culture' emerged as a concept of sociological interest during and after World War II. Within the post-war period, youth-oriented markets helped to shift the focus of advertising, marketing and media coverage toward younger consumers (Hebdige, 1988; Eyerman and Jameson, 1998; Osgerby, 2004). The increase in the profile of the teenage consumer informed the development of theories on 'youth cultures'. Talcott Parsons (1942) described 'youth culture' to describe a generational consciousness marked by greater levels of consumption and leisure that developed alongside an increasingly youth-oriented market. Parsons (1942) and other sociologists at the time focused on studying American 'youth' as a whole and the ways in which their lives reflected normative, mainstream post war American values born out of prosperity, industrialization and economic productivity. Thus, American sociologists often looking through a

functionalist perspective positioned 'youth' as a 'respectable' social group who formed an integral role as part of an affluent, industrialized, peacetime society.

However from the 1950s onward, 'youth culture' as a particular analytical tool in sociology was used to study the 'subterranean' values (Matza, 1964), marginality and deviance of youth. The 'Chicago School' in particular was preoccupied with the links between deviance and youth. Albert Cohen's study (1956) of delinquent boys in small town centres provided an instructive example of tying in youth and deviance. He observed that youth delinquency was a form of collective behaviour (1955). David Matza (Matza and Sykes 1961, 1964) argued that youth was a time of rebellion, radicalism and bohemian behaviour. Howard Becker (1963) explored the rationale behind deviant behaviour such as drug-taking amongst different groups. Becker argued that deviance was a social construction, based on labelling and social perception, challenging the notion of deviance as a fixed concept.

Greatly influenced by the Chicago School's theories on youth the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) also sought to challenge their American predecessors' generation-oriented analysis of 'youth culture', which was commonly held to be the defining feature of the post-war period. CCCS argued that class, more so than youth, determined youth cultures, claiming that the term 'youth cultures' had 'as a concept had little or no explanatory power' (Clarke et al. 1976:15). They argued that the Parsonian understanding of youth cultures did not differentiate between the markets and the activities of young people, choosing to see youth cultures and teen markets as one and the same (Clarke et al. 1976).

Clarke et al. (1976) (aka CCCS) attempted to unravel the various meanings of 'youth' and 'culture', drawing from Raymond Williams' (1958) theory of culture as 'ordinary' and a 'way of life' rejecting conventional views on culture that focused on 'high' forms such as art and literature. The Birmingham school applied Marxist analysis to areas of popular culture, emphasising that the study of culture involved not only the ideas and values that emerge but more crucially,

the modes of production and material conditions. The CCCS approach interpreted youth culture as the practice of youthful resistance in a *collective*, ritualized fashion (Clarke et al., 1976). Further, youth negotiations of cultural identity were read as symbolic expressions of structural and material (class) struggles. Thus, subcultures provided solutions in an 'imaginary way' by providing a collective 'cover' or response to these very real problems (Clarke, 1975); the material constraints of dead-end jobs, low pay, and marginalization still remained. These 'covers' often took the form of dress and style: for instance, the 'expropriation' of upper class style for the teddy boys, the fetishization of detail and consumption by the mods, and the focus on territory and the use of working class masculine 'hard' looks by the skinheads were examples of 'covers'. The CCCS approach stands as a reminder that the material aspects of culture and cultural processes should be understood to be materially felt, where the choices people make have real consequences.

Informed by earlier CCCS accounts of working class subcultures, Dick Hebdige (1979) brought forward the importance of style and the practices of the body into subcultural theory, which at the time still mainly focused on the structural constraints. He stressed the importance of the *process* of meaning making, and the position of the subject, arguing that a reading of youth subcultural style as straightforwardly representing the values of a group was oversimplified. Thus his work highlighted the importance of 'signifying practices' embodied in punk style, so that what he called the 'cut n' mix' aspects of punk exemplified its contradictions. Hebdige pointed out that punk style adopted 'floating' heterogeneous signifiers, such that style is always being reassembled, constantly in 'flux' (1979). This crucial early insight into the multi-layered meanings of youth style informed many post-subcultural approaches to youth cultures.

### **'Post' Subcultures**

Influenced by the prevailing view of society's postmodern condition of free flow of capital, uncertainty and risk (Giddens, 1990; Bauman 2000; Harvey, 1989)

theorists of youth cultures incorporated these ideas of the waning influence of class into their conceptualizations of youth cultures. David Muggleton (2000) referred to this as a 'post subcultural' shift, based on Michel Maffesoli's (1996) notion of contemporary unstable social networks which he coined 'neo-tribes'. Postmodern (post-industrial) societies of the West, marked by diversification and fragmentation, have succeeded in de-centring the coherent subject. Young people were less inclined to identify with one subculture in particular and subcultural style was no longer attached to a particular social group. Instead, they were choosing from a range of loosely bounded styles and networks, mixing styles, cutting across genres and groups (Muggleton, 2000; Bennett, 2007). The 'post-subcultural' shift advocated within the literature dislodged youth identities from the fixed or stable configurations of the CCCS type model. Rather, identities, according to post-subcultural theorists, developed as self-conscious, self-made constructions that could be modified, and changed over time (Bennett, 1999a).

Tony Bennett (1999) adopted Maffesoli's (1996) 'neo-tribes' to argue that young people form associations that shape their identity but with less totalizing effect. Further, the constitution of youthful identities was also being challenged as an increasingly diverse and deferred open process. Some prefer the term 'lifestyles' (Chaney, 1996; Miles, 2000) to describe the growing link between identification and consumer goods; these goods play a key role in constructing one's style and identity.

Contemporary youth culture studies have offered competing notions of how to understand youth culture and retain its use as an analytical tool. Many current youth studies scholars argue that despite sustained critique of 'subculture' analysis, it still remains a useful point of access into the study of youth, style and politics. Some argue for the analytical benefits of retaining certain aspects of subcultures and still employ the term (Hodkinson, 2002) and others argue for the development of 'scene' perspectives (Cohen, 1991; Kahn Harris, 2007; Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004). I have discussed in greater depth the rise in 'scene' studies within my introductory chapter where I explore its relevance to my own project in highlighting the spatiality, fluidity and hyper local developments within a larger music community. The rise in

‘scenic’ perspectives often accommodates the local, national and global links made within and across a scene, thus accounting for the many changes that have been introduced to music consumption practices due to digital and communications technology (Kibby, 2000; Bennett and Peterson, 2004).

### **The elision of ‘race’ gender and sexuality in youth culture studies**

CCCS (1976) and to a lesser extent, Hebdige (1979), were criticized for concentrating solely on working class male youth cultures, thus ignoring the role of young women within youth cultural formations. Spaces they read as being territorialized by young people, such as the street corner, the local pub, and the disco, were, in large part, male-dominated spaces. McRobbie and Garber (1976) criticized the CCCS for ignoring the participation of women in youth cultures and drew attention to subcultural activities that young women engaged in within the private ‘safe’ spaces present within the domestic sphere of bedrooms.

Moreover, the CCCS approach (Dick Hebdige’s 1976 essay notwithstanding) was said to not only unproblematically consider the domain of adolescence to be male but also ‘racially undifferentiated’ (Fuller, 1982; Nayak, 2003a). The main focus of analysis for the CCCS was on ‘spectacular’, white and male subcultures. Thus, cultural studies at this time was not interested in dealing with the impact of ‘race’ structurally, nor was it interested in how ‘race’ was lived through actual people’s experiences.

The current literature on youth cultures has expanded to include work on issues of the racialization of youth cultures that highlight and render visible the invisible power of whiteness that often shapes today’s white working class youth cultures (Nayak, 2003a, b, 2006; Bennett, 1999b). However, even within the vast range of youth and music cultures studies (outside of hip hop studies) white youth cultural practices still remain a popular and unproblematic area of interest. There is a tendency to view white racial identity within youth cultures as normative, thus allowing it to remain invisible. These include studies on ‘goths’ (Hodgkinson, 2002, 2004) ‘extreme metal’ (Kahn-Harris, 2007) and



'rave' and club cultures (Thornton, 1996, Pini, 2001; Malbon, 1999; Martin, 1999), and the 'straightedge/hardcore' scenes (Wilson and Atkinson, 2005; Williams, 2006). For example rave culture was intimately bound up with white, middle class youth practices. Alongside rave culture was drum 'n' bass, rave's 'darker' counterpart, which emerged out of places that were never charted on the London Underground map but rather a part of the 'clandestine cartography' of London's 'ghettos' (Quinn, 2002). Drum 'n' bass was never awarded the academic attention it deserved, thus it is argued as having an 'invisible history' within popular culture and music studies (Quinn, 2002). Thus the place of 'race' within mainstream British youth cultures studies continues to remain marginalized or rendered invisible within other processes of social distinction.

I now turn to the ways in which 'race' has played a central, highly visible role in shaping research on youth. 'Race' and youth activities and cultures have been taken up by equally problematic and narrowly focused approaches within sociological literature. The causes of crime and the rise of certain kinds of criminality within the UK in the post-war period were focal concerns for many sociologists, particularly within the context of policing youth, youth criminalization and deviance.

### **'Rastaman' -Youth, 'Race' and Crime**

The criminalization of youth developed within the Victorian period, during which period London enacted numerous ordinances to restrict working class and homeless children from walking the streets and loitering in public places. Street children, who were usually unsupervised, were free to roam the streets and this was believed to be a significant source of trouble, crime, danger and disorder (Muncie, 1999). These ordinances legitimized middle class fears of poverty and Victorian notions of the social and moral disorder of the poor.

Ideas of working class young people as dangerous, disorderly and rebellious were often exploited by media organizations in order to sensationalize events for stories and headlines. Further, it was often working class youth who became

the scapegoats for society's ills. Stanley Cohen (1972) argued that the process of labelling youth as 'deviants' and 'criminals' led to a phenomenon of 'deviancy amplification'. Highly exaggerated accounts of conflict between the mods and rockers encouraged these two groups to later act out in ways that mimicked sensationalized media accounts of the 'wild ones'. Thus, it was argued that media amplified the deviant behaviour so labelled (1972).

Social and economic decline in the late 1970s in the UK led to the sustained brutal scapegoating of minority youth. Dick Hebdige (1979:44) wrote that the position of 'youth and Negroes are much aligned in dominant mythology'. That is, both groups repeatedly suffered from being accused of violence, criminality, and disorderly conduct. Through media discourses of 'black muggers', black youth were depicted as dangerous and threatening figures whose crimes were seen as a symptom of Britain's alarming 'breakdown of public morality' (Hall, et al. 1978). The development of such figures in the media was a result of the British public's fear of post-war black migration. Moreover, it demonstrated the struggles of an increasingly homogeneous society undergoing rapid and vast social change (Hall, et al. 1978). Policing and other institutions of social control responded by increasing arrests and implementing stricter methods of surveillance of Black and Asian communities (Hall, et. al, 1978; Solomos, 1983).

The 'moral panics' over black and youth crime captured the interest of many sociologists who developed theories as to why black youth were 'in crisis' (Cashmore and Troyna, 1982). Ethnographic studies on 'race' relations and community often centred on black male youth and the black family, validating white perceptions of the perpetual 'otherness' of black youth, forever seen as marginal and dysfunctional; educational and economic failures (Solomos, 1983; Lawrence, 1982) . Studies on 'race relations' and youth ranged from analyses of the 'dysfunctional black family structure' (Pryce, 1979), to comparisons of 'weak' black cultures to 'strong' Asian families (Pryce, 1979; Rex and Tomlinson, 1979) and the emergence of particular black youth subcultures such as the Rastafarian movement (Cashmore 1984; Cashmore and Troyna 1982, 1990). Studies exploring the rise of Rastafarianism treated involvement in such

subcultures as further evidence of black youth in crisis and 'at risk', and 'failing to integrate into British society'. Ken Pryce (1979) argued that young black men's lifestyles often fell into distinct but varied typologies he identified such as in 'teenyboppers', 'hustlers' and 'rudeboys' amongst others. The Rastafarian movement was depicted as a 'fashionable outlet for their frustration and aggression' (Woolveridge, 1976 cited in Garrison, 1979) and 'provided a cover for deviant activities in response to the social and economic malaise' (1979, p. 24). At best, sociologists such as Cashmore (1979) saw Rastafarians as part of a subcultural response against racial prejudice. At worst, they were considered part of a criminal 'cult' (Dodd, 1978; Pryce, 1979). Commissioned by the West Midlands Police Force, the infamous *Shades of Grey* (Brown, 1979) report on policing and West Indian youth in Handsworth, identified most black youth to be part of a 'dread criminal hard-core subculture'. These 'dreads' were correspondingly, violent, criminal, committing offences against the most vulnerable of victims, the elderly and the weak.

Within the literature on youth criminal subcultures of this period, the 'between two cultures' paradigm became the prevailing lens through which to explain youth criminal membership. Second-generation Black and Asian youth were discussed as living in 'between two cultures' (Watson, 1977) which then resulted in alienation and identity crises (Garrison, 1979). Scholars who used this 'between two cultures' approach (Ballard, 1977; 1994; Gardner and Shakur, 1994; Gillespie, 1995) saw this as the principal way in which differences between minorities and the 'host society' were understood. Culture was the result of an 'ethnic response' and an 'entire way of life' that encompassed 'customs, practices, beliefs, languages, diet, and leisure activities' (Cashmore and Troyna, 1990:147).

Thus immigrant cultures were presented as being monolithic, homogenous, and fixed, grounded in a view of 'race' as a set of inherited biological and cultural characteristics. Moreover, these cultures were positioned as being wholly different and incompatible with British cultural norms and values (Alexander, 2000, 2004; Brah, 2006; Hutnyk, 2006). So, for example, Asian families were

initially held up to be examples of educational success because of a rigid family structure and an insistence on keeping their 'culture' alive. West Indians, in comparison, were educational failures because they did not have a culture at all but only 'problems' (Benson, 1996). In any case, culture, which was used interchangeably with concepts of 'race' and ethnicity, was believed to be the main cause of the failures of integration, lack of success, delinquency and larger social problems.

On the other hand, the literature on 'race' that responded to ethnographic studies on black youth cultures (CCCS, 1982; Solomos, 1988) all too often focused on race primarily through 'racism'; a function of the state apparatus that functioned as a constraint on the opportunities and livelihoods of minority youth. This meant that the creative agency of black and minority youth within their negotiations of 'race' in everyday practice often went unrecognized.

In contemporary public discourse on 'race', crime and youth, from the Northern riots in 2001, to the 7/7 bombings as well as in the recent rise in knife and gun crimes, similar 'pathologies' are being constructed to explain how and why black and Asian young men are in 'trouble'. Broken homes, single parent households, or repressive patriarchs become the root causes of black and ethnic minority youth as a 'social problem', forming a substantial part of current 'youth in crisis' discourse.

Moreover, public debates on minority youth started to shift in focus from concerns over black youth criminality onto Asian youth. Past discourses on Asian youth focused on the relative 'passive' and 'docile' character of Asians and their 'strong' families and culture. However, racialized and gendered discourses on Asian youth began to construct Asian male youth as dysfunctional and criminal. Asian women were often perceived as victims of their traditional, patriarchal families (Sharma, 2006). The rise in criminality and oppression were attributed to cultural oppression and alienation (Alexander, 2000, 2003, 2004).

Asian males were pathologized as criminals through a racialized process that linked psychological traits such as aggression with inherited ethnic and cultural customs. Once considered 'docile', 'obedient' and 'well-behaved', discourse on Asian criminality focused on their degeneration into 'rebellious', 'angry' and 'disaffected' youths capable of great violence. The reversal of perception, from being considered the 'good' minority to a 'bad' one, served to cement the image of the 'Asian' as an urgent threat to the moral order of Britain (Alexander, 2000). The deployment of the label 'gang' within public discourse in Britain toward black youth became widespread. Parallels were drawn between the figures of the black gangster of the LA streets with Britain's Asian gang members. Claire Alexander (2000) concludes that 'it is no accident then, that the representation of the 'Asian gang' ...should draw explicit comparisons with African-American 'gang' subculture of ghettos, drugs, black-on-black violence' or what Cornel West (1993:14) referred to as a kind of 'nihilism'.

Discourse on Asian criminality was drawing from previous sociological research that considered Muslim presence in Britain as a 'problem' (Rex, 1992). Thus, this pathology of aggression and deviance has strong class and religious dimensions. The argument of the existence of a 'Muslim' underclass and religiously oppressive father figure serves to show how these figures become very specifically drawn. Claire Alexander (2000) writes that these culturalist explanations and the view that Muslims were a 'problem' led to the increased targeting of Muslim male youth as deviant and 'at risk'.

Since the 7/7 bombings and the failures of multiculturalism, the image of Asian, male and Muslim youth has become the subjects of new fears and anxiety. Asian masculine identities have been the target of renewed focus and panic. Mahmood Mamdani's claim (2004) of 'culture talk' within debates on religion again shows how culture becomes the way in which concerns over religion and terrorism are often articulated and defined. Even now, ethnographic studies on Asian cultures still conflate religion and radicalism and culture (Gest, 2010; Vertovec, 1998; Jacobson, 1998), point towards the failures of Asian integration (Dench and Gavron, 2006), discuss Muslim female oppression (Totten, 2003) and repeat the

idea of second generation 'in between' British Asian identities (Anwar, 1979, 1998; Barker, 1997; Hall, 2002; Roberts, 1997). Avtar Brah (1996) writes that these studies ignore the actual agency of these subjects and deny their 'concrete historical' subjectivity. Thus, empirically based studies that deal with the way in which British Asian identity is lived, but without the need to exoticize or marginalize these experiences, are needed; particularly to counter the on-going ways in which British Asians are represented within contemporary empirical work.

Further, there has been a corresponding rise in debates on migrants and minorities around securitization, often based on '(in)securing identities' (Stern, 2006). The impact of culture and identity debates on British Asians has been significant, both in the material sense of the rise in hate crimes, arrests, stop and search and detention of British citizens of Asian descent (see Ministry of Justice statistics, 2007/2008) and on the widespread and increasing practices of representations of Asians as dangerous terrorists and radicals. Further discussion of on-going debates around Islamophobia and xenophobia are discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

Thus, past and contemporary debates on youth have often been strongly viewed and analysed through specifically racialized and gendered lenses, that often pose black and minority youth as 'problematic' and offer primarily culturalist explanations that reinforce racial, class and gender hierarchies and positions. Moreover, 'race' itself was often seen primarily as a structural constraint acting on youth. Thus, the everyday practices of young black and Asian youth, individual agency and subjectivity were often ignored.

In the following section, I explore how postcolonial and post-structuralist developments have radically shifted debates around 'race' and youth cultures by highlighting the role of agency, choice and creativity within the making of youth identities. These interventions into identity, 'race' and ethnicity were made by postmodern theorists within sociology, geography, cultural studies and anthropology who opened up a critical 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996)

for the development of the subaltern subject, (Spivak, 1988), the multiple subject formations within the margins and 'borderlands' (Anzaldua, 1987).

## **Space, the Urban and Asian Scene**

### **Space, identity and diaspora**

The confluence of both space and time are important to the ways in which postmodern understandings of identity have developed. Spatialized practices have opened up crucial dialogues and new perspectives, particular within studies of identity and diaspora. Manuel Castells (1996, 1997) wrote that informational societies of our postmodern era were manifested in the global 'space of flows', the linkages and interconnectedness of spaces. Spatial analyses facilitated a deeper understanding of certain key aspects of modern social life such as in the construction of new identities. For instance, thinking through space has opened up new areas of insight around a 'politics of location' that questioned the role of power in Western scholars in speaking for other, non-Western subjects, particularly with regard to 'Third World women' (Mohanty, 1991). Doreen Massey (1994, 2005) and Liz Bondi (1990), both feminist geographers, argue that postmodernism has reclaimed a space for marginalized feminist perspectives and space.

Alongside the feminist interventions into the nature of Western representation, and authority, and in making a space for alternative voices and subjectivities, Foucault's (1986) concept of the 'hetero' in heterotopias and heterotopographies also seemed to offer up similar point of intervention into matters of difference by conceptualizing spaces as multiple, juxtaposing and heterogeneous as characteristic of the modern world (Soja, 1990). They seem to point towards an understanding of the way in which postmodern spaces of identity emphasize multiplicity and multiple modes of difference. These ideas about space and identity moved scholars towards newer ways of thinking about multiracial identity and also discovering alternative identity processes that underscored the messy, unfinished and openness characteristic of cultural identity production (Hall, 1990, 1996).

One of the most significant spatial tools to open up and challenge debates on identity, home, nation and belonging is the concept of 'diaspora'. Within the past two decades racial and ethnic difference and (dis)order have proved to be key focal points in geopolitics, and the concept of diaspora has been central to the rethinking of ethnicity and 'race' (Alexander, 2010). The concept of diaspora has been discussed and often lived out in close relation to space. Lavie and Swedenburg (1996) consider diaspora to be the site for 'new geographies of identity' formed out of a multiracial nation. Relatedly, Avtar Brah (1996) understands the 'diaspora-space' as a point of 'confluence' in which economic, social and cultural processes are occurring and where multiple subject positions are claimed and contested. James Clifford (1989) wrote about the importance of travel, movement and migration-key ideas of diaspora. He writes that one's cultural location was constituted through a 'series of locations and encounters and travel within diverse but limited spaces' as opposed to being rooted in a fixed place or home. Clifford (1989) argued further that modes of travel enabled new ways of understanding how different knowledges, populations, gender and classes are constituted and take shape.

The works of Stuart Hall (1990) and Paul Gilroy (1991a, 1993a, 1993b) on Black British diasporic cultures were widely influential in establishing a 'postmodern' reading of diaspora. Both emphasize the dynamic processes involved in migratory movement, highlighting the transnational nature of these processes. Both Hall (1990) and Gilroy (1993a, b) utilized the concept as a conceptual tool to transform essentialist paradigms about 'race' and ethnicity (Anthias, 1998). Gayatri Gopinath (2005) writes that earlier, 'closed' versions of diaspora assumed migration was unidirectional, and that diasporic cultures were cultures born out of exile and 'loss', constantly looking to return 'home'. In contrast, Stuart Hall's more 'open' reading of diaspora characterized diasporic cultures as multi-directional, restless, transformative and endlessly creative. Similarly, Barnor Hesse (2000) argued that diaspora was primarily a process of transformation through 'interactions of cultural difference' leading to the formation of new identities (p. 20). These transformative moments within



diaspora occur through the establishment of 'outer-national' connections and networks (Gilroy, 1993a) challenging the privileged position of the nation as the basis for ethnic, cultural and social identities (Bhabha, 1994; Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994; Dudrah, 2004; Gilroy 1993a, b; Hall, 1990, 1999).

Within recent years, the concept of diaspora has been applied to denote dispersion of any kind, thereby becoming synonymous with the concept of an 'ethnic' and/or 'immigrant' community (Tololyan 1991; Brubaker, 2005, Alexander, 2010a,b). The widespread application of diaspora is also used to refer to other kinds of migration or dispersal such as with a 'queer diaspora' (Fortier, 2001, 2002, 2003; Wesling, 2008). This falls in line with the definition of 'diaspora' used by Kalra, Kaur & Hutnyk (2005) who argue that diaspora is about the creation and re-creation of boundaries and identities in different, new settings.

The conceptualization of diaspora has been instrumental to engagement with minority cultural production especially in music and other forms of popular culture (see Hall 1992, 1993; Gilroy, 1993a, b; Julien, 1988, 1992; Mercer, 1994, 2003, Sharma, et. al 1996). Gilroy (1993a) believes that public spheres exist in music cultures. It is in these spheres that race, gender and class politics are practised, performed and contested. Music marks certain diasporic spaces, which can be seen as both what Gilroy (1993a) calls a 'counterculture' to modernity, or what Judith Halberstam (2005) calls a 'counterpublic'. In Gilroy's formulation, music is a counterculture because it refuses modernity's separation of ethics from aesthetics, culture and politics (1993a). Scholars such as Gilroy (1993a), Dudrah (2002) and Appadurai (1996) write about the meaningful and creative production of diasporic spaces as important sites of agency and solidarity that challenge dominant social order and monolithic views of culture and the nation. Much attention has been paid towards the study and engagement with diasporic youth and their expressive, creative output linking everyday experiences with diasporic identity production towards the reimagining and remaking of Britishness, ethnicity and notions of belonging. Thus, engaging with issues and concepts of diaspora has opened up access

points into areas of black and Asian cultures beyond the public discourses of 'crisis' and 'problems' (Alexander, 2002; Sharma, et. al.1996).

While widespread use of the diaspora concept has helped to conceptualize the multiple, heterogeneous, itinerant nature of contemporary identities, scholars have also been critical of the increasingly diverse uses of diaspora, or as Roger Brubaker (2005:1) once referred to the spread of the concept as a "diaspora' diaspora' . James Clifford (1994) writes of the difficulty in clarifying the concept of diaspora because of the frequent slippage between discussing diaspora as a discourse, or a theory or an historical experience. In theory, they are not equivalent, but in practice, it is difficult to maintain as separate because diaspora is 'always embedded in particular maps and histories' (1994, p. 302). Floya Anthias (1998) examines the various claims around diaspora as it has become an 'an over-used but under-theorised' term (p.557). For Anthias, the prevailing models of diaspora suffered from the same weakness in locating the homeland as the point of origin which 'slides into primordiality' (Anthias, 1998). Further, they seem to ignore the categories of difference that cut across groups, such as class and gender.

Current ideas on diaspora tend to revolve around the assumption that there is a voluntarism within the meaning of diaspora, and it assumes a politics of location which rejects the hegemony of the nation-state (as in Brah, 1996; Hall, 1990; Hesse, 2000; Gilroy, 1993a). Yet, this positioning may not be applicable in all cases. For example, there are instances where diasporic identification upholds the notion of nation-state. Gopinath (2005) discusses the Asian diasporic identification as being one which privileges the nation, and upholds the hierarchical structure that relegates diaspora to an inferior version of the nation. As such, the concept of diaspora must include more than a theoretical perspective. Diaspora studies would benefit from broadening its scope by including ways in which diasporic lives are experienced '*within* and against' the nation (Hesse, 2000, p. 20).

Moreover, the literature around diasporic creativity relating to forms of cultural production are often uncritical of the ways in which these cultural forms are consumed and celebrated *for* their differences whilst reinforcing the boundaries around certain kinds of difference rather than challenging them. Creative, edgy, hybrid forms of music, literature and film that quite often are the products of diasporic encounters are consumed as forms of 'exotica' (Hutnyk, 2000), appealing because they offer a taste of the 'dangerous' but in a 'safe' environment at a club or bar (Banerjea, 1996; Sharma, et. al, 1996). Moreover, within the ethnic commodification of certain forms of music, difference becomes the selling point. Thus the actual cultural specificities of production (time, space, and context) are stripped away in favour of a generic and absolute representation of 'difference' for a mainstream, global audience (Sharma, 1996). Scholars have argued that there is a 'politics of production' (Saha, forthcoming) that suggest a more nuanced reading of music production in which artists are working within a more complex framework than the simple commodification versus authentic binary will allow.

### **Regulating Bodies, Governing Space**

The interplay between spaces, identities and selves is often mediated through the body because the body is often the closest space to us (Buckland, 2002). The renewed focus on the body has been influential towards advancing the study of how young people develop knowledge of themselves and shape their identities in space and 'our ways of living as bodies in space' (Grosz, 1995; Kennedy, 2000). Liam Kennedy argues that ideas of the body in space are related to ideas of the self, other and identity as coherent subjects, often located within representations of the city and urban dislocation. Elizabeth Grosz (1990) explains that the body, a mass and jumble of muscle, bones and organs, is given order and coherence through cultural and social norms and codes. Further, she argues that the city is a mode through which the body is governmentally regulated and administered.

The body also mediates and is governed by more local spaces and geographies such as the club. Fiona Buckland (2002) approaches the body in space with an

emphasis on the relationship *between* bodies themselves through the practices of clubbing to form queer 'life worlds'. These queer 'life worlds' are made material through movement-- of bodies turning, walking, and of the elements of space between bodies, distance and proximity. Thus, Buckland draws significance towards an embodied account of space and how space, as with any form of power, is mediated and negotiated.

The negotiation of power within the making of particular spaces has featured as a key issue within feminist and queer interventions on space. In providing a 'geography of sexuality' the literature focuses significantly on how many public and semi-private spaces are policed and exclusionary as spaces of heteronormativity (Chouinard and Grant, 1995; Valentine, 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Johnston and Valentine, 1995) where gays and lesbians are made to feel 'out of place'. What makes these studies particularly relevant to my project on Asian nights is in how they draw upon the regulation of unofficial, everyday spaces that include the street, places of leisure and even at home. For example, Binnie and Skeggs (2004) looked at the rise of commodified gay spaces, transformed into 'cosmopolitan' spaces that fetishize difference, enjoyed by certain groups of people and exclusive of others. They argue that class and gender become rigidly defined in these cosmopolitan spaces such that having or not having economic capital directly impacts upon one's ability to take up space and the important point is made that 'not everyone is invited to the party' (p. 525). Gill Valentine (1993b) brings to light the different spatial and time strategies used to negotiate stigma and prejudice of lesbians in public spaces of work, the family and even in private homes - highlighting the fact that sexuality, while often thought of as private, is a terrain that is political.

Particular attention has been drawn to the ways in which night-time spaces are commodified as spaces of difference to be consumed. The significance of Chatterton and Holland's research (2003) on nightlife consumption, regulation and production lies in highlighting how nightlife has come to dominate the consumption practices of young people. The breakdown of production, regulation, consumption of nightlife in cities bridges the gap between urban

studies and youth cultures studies by centring on the regulation of youth activities ('nights out') in commodified leisure spaces (2003). Unlike other studies which focus on raving culture itself and the spaces in which these cultural practices take place (for example see Massey, 1998; Malbon, 1998), Chatterton and Hollands are more broadly interested in the material economic and social conditions of exclusion and marginalization within a nightlife economy that is significant because of the centrality of leisure for youth today.

The regulation of nightlife has often been a long-standing source of conflict in many cities because of issues over noise, public disorder and crime (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). In spite of these issues night-time spaces have become key areas of economic growth in a service-oriented economy (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hobbs, et. al. 2000). Night-time spaces are key sites within urban gentrification campaigns used to revitalize urban spaces. In recent years the governance of nightlife has expanded to include both real estate developers and entertainment corporations, who have a vested interest in shaping these leisure spaces in particular ways. Sharon Zukin (1995) argues that the growth of an urban 'symbolic economy' through the development of the culture industries directly contributes to the growth of cities and towns. Increasing corporate interest, and private sector investment, in public spaces suggests that private interests play an increasingly larger role in controlling and shaping public space and culture (1995). Similarly, Chatterton and Hollands (2003) suggest that there is a rising trend towards the corporate commodification of urban nightlife and public spaces, resulting in the marginalization of alternative forms of nightlife within the urban landscape. Thus, community-based entertainment and use of social space are disappearing in favour of socially segregated, exclusive, commodified spaces.

Dick Hobbs (2000) makes a more specific argument about the growth of private securitization within the nightlife industry. He believes that while institutions of social control still remain intact, state and community led control has gradually been replaced by private institutions who have professionalized regulation such as in the 'door culture' of clubs and their reliance upon physical intimidation by

door 'bouncers' (2000). Hobbs considers how order, style, appearance, and the linking of style to behaviour, is an integral part of professional door cultures, from 'hyper-selective' door cultures to more informal ones (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). These practices, as I argue further in chapter 7, are part of how bodies are profiled and policed through the use of various informal regulatory methods within the Asian night club space.

In this section, I reviewed how the diverse literature on space and spatialized perspectives from diverse disciplines such as urban studies, feminist geography, and postcolonial studies have been instrumental in bringing together new perspectives on the different meanings and boundaries of identity, belonging and difference. Conceptions of space have extended to related areas of movement and migration. Moreover, these different interventions into space have also highlighted the ways in which space is always a negotiated through a politics of space in which differences of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class are regulated, contained and policed.

In the next section, I discuss in more detail how this work brought further interventions into thinking about culture, music and ethnicity, particularly in areas of Asian cultural production foregrounded by the work of Sharma, et. al (1996). The theoretical development of a cultural politics of Asian cultural production, particularly around popular music such as bhangra and the 'Asian Underground' movement, placed the spotlight on Asian youth cultures within cultural studies which had previously ignored such forms of expression.

## **South Asian Popular Culture**

Stuart Hall (2000) once stated that the success of 'ending the innocence of the innocent black subject' came at the expense of articulating other 'black' experiences and formations. Through the work of Sharma et.al (1996), who took on Stuart Hall's 'new ethnicities' paradigm, their critical engagement with new British Asian dance musics foregrounded Asian cultural production and emphasised its importance within cultural studies.

Sharma et al. (1996) argued that theoretical interventions needed to be made within cultural studies of orientalist accounts of British Asian cultures. The study of British Asian communities was previously limited to anthropological studies. The prevailing image of Asians as the ultimate 'other' was validated through studies that focused on topics such as kinship systems and arranged marriages (Benson, 1996; Alexander, 2000). Further, socio-historical studies of Asians in Britain of this time were heavily reliant on geographical information, and demographic data showing where Asian communities existed within the UK. What this literature does not reveal are the moments and movements of which many British Asians of that generation were a part, which could not be so easily captured through geographical data.

Sharma et al in *Dis-Orienting Rhythms* (1996) theoretically and discursively unpacked the cultural politics of the British 'Asian underground' dance music scene that emerged in the 1990s. They argued that a Western fascination with the exotic 'other' resulted in privileging the study of diaspora and migration within academia. Gayatri Spivak (1993) called this a version of 'Neo-Colonialism' which contained the 'disciplinary support for the conviction of authentic marginality by the (aspiring) elite' (p. 53). Sharma et al. (1996:19) issued a wider critique of postmodernity and post-coloniality, where difference became the 'master trope of politics'. As such, the Western academy 'has turned migrant culture [into] a tactic for accommodating and pacifying the threat of difference' (Sharma et al., 1996, p. 19).

Sharma et al. (1996) demanded that it was 'time to flip the script'. The new Asian dance musics, which included groups and artists from the 'Asian Underground' scene, emerged out of a specific time and place within British politics and culture. Many were responding to the failures of the state, policing and institutional and pervasive racism, articulating a new cultural politics that rejected the essentialisms and stereotyping through a fusion of different sounds, instruments and musical forms.

At the same time, they positioned the music of the 'Asian Underground' as more progressive and radical articulations of identity than earlier forms of Asian dance music such as bhangra. Thus, they set up a hierarchy of Asian diasporic music that privileged the voices of these artists over other diasporic Asian youth experiences. In some ways, their work established the 'Asian Underground' as the sole voice of current British Asian youth, thus mirroring the views of the British public, who thought that all Asian youth knew and listened to the Asian Underground. Thus, they created a false distinction between bhangra and post-bhangra musics even while acknowledging their links.

Koushik Banerjea (2000), critiquing the development and success of the 'Asian Underground' scene, argued that their music was often posed as 'the gateway to a mysterious, excessive unknown' (Banerjea, 2000:64). The sudden rise in popularity of British Asian dance music in the British popular consciousness warranted major concern. The 'Asian Underground' scene was a way for white British to enjoy and therefore 'experience' difference but from a safe distance (Banerjea, 2000).

Currently, because film and literature tend to be the dominant contemporary forms of diasporic South Asian popular culture production (Alexander, 2008), particular methodologies such as textual and lyrical analysis tend to be favoured within academic literature. For instance bhangra music in Britain has often generated literature that concentrates on bhangra lyrics. Gayatri Gopinath (1995, 2005) argues for a reading of bhangra music as a diasporic text that rearranges the hierarchical relationship between nation and diaspora. Rajinder Dudrah (2002) favours a reading of lyrics that consider the way in which British Asian identity formations occurred *through* bhangra music.

While these theoretical contributions are important and necessary particularly because they emerged as a response to previous ethnographic, exoticist representations of Asian cultures, the everyday practices of culture are also vital spaces that provide new ways of thinking about racism, 'race' and ethnicity, community and identity.



More recently, ethnographic accounts of South Asian American popular cultures have emerged such as with Sunaina Maira's (2002) work on bhangra remix cultures in New York and identity production, the making of South Asian American 'desi' identities in California (Shankar, 2008), South Asian Americans making hip hop (Sharma, 2010), as well as the politics of contemporary Asian electronic music production in the UK (Saha, forthcoming). Further, while diasporic cultural expression has generated interest almost primarily in the US and the UK, the academic scope on diasporic Asian popular music has expanded to include cultural production in India, Australia and Canada. Dhiraj Murthy (2007) has written about the emergence of a global diasporic-led electronic music scene in Delhi that is primarily driven by diasporic music production from Britain. According to AG Roy (2009) Singapore has become the new bhangra 'gateway' for Southeast Asia and Australia.

I have attempted to piece together areas of literature that have been both relevant and significant to my work on the Asian popular culture production, 'race' and the remaking of diasporic identities. At the same time, I have shown where these areas, however relevant, contain gaps in crucial areas and perspectives to which my work responds and challenges. By bringing in debates that focus on diaspora, migration and issues of belonging within sociology and related disciplines in this chapter, I set up a framework that helps to bridge together and challenge the binary that exists between youth subcultures on one side and youth and crime on the other. Within the next six chapters, I show how my work uses this framework and perspectives that act as a bridge and a challenge to prevailing discourse on youth, 'race' diaspora and cultural production in London.

Asian diasporic popular music has become a truly global scene of interconnecting networks. Thus further attention towards the formation of this global South Asian diasporic culture is needed. My work, as I elaborate in the following chapters, addresses this gap in the literature on the contemporary practices of the Asian music scene in London and across different cities in the

US, Canada and India. Moreover, I discuss how contemporary Asian music production makes its own spaces and how that space is always negotiated by wider discourses of Asian youth, concerns over male criminality, and amidst the growing concerns and conflation of religion and culture.

In the following chapter I discuss my research project in terms of ethnographic research design and strategies. I outline the different stages of research, describing the process by which I gathered data, through preliminary research, participant observation and interviewing. I also discuss how I negotiated the spatialized dimensions of doing ethnographic research in and through the limitations of conventional methodologies when dealing with unconventional, shifting and fluid club spaces as ethnographic 'field sites'.

### **Chapter 3: Don't Talk, Just Dance : Fieldwork in da Club and Elsewhere**

(September, 2009)

I went to a show outside London tonight, in Maidenhead, where Imran Khan was making an appearance. Afterwards we had to get to Shasha's car which was parked back at Kal's house. We were all a bit hyped up from the club which was LOUD, very full, and rowdy with black clad bouncers in the crowd. Rather than wait to get chucked out, we left. Kal was rapping along to Nas playing loudly in the car and everyone was moving along to it. I was in the backseat, sitting in between Shasha on one end and Kal on the other and it felt like we were back in the club. Later on after I got home, I realized that the club did not just end where we left it back in Maidenhead. Instead, it continued on in the car, moving along the highway on a cold, wintry night.

This chapter explores the methodological aspects of my project on the Asian music scene. I first discuss how my research question, regarding how the Asian music scene 'takes up space' in particular ways, can apply to the practice of a politics and ethics of ethnography. The shifting and changing nature of the scene, and the club spaces that act as entrance and travelling points through the scene, enabled me to conduct a kind of multi-sited ethnographic research. At the same time, these sites were not always immediately locatable through a fixed and bounded place. The focus on cultural formations such as music cultures enabled me to focus on the specific production of diasporic identities within the Asian music scene, which carried with it spatial and embodied meanings and identifications of 'race', ethnicity, class and gender. All of these spatially connected, interlocking aspects of the 'scene' and the club nights came together in different ways within my ethnographic research on the London Asian urban music scene from October 2007 to 2009. Thus, in this chapter, I question what it means to do ethnographic research when the field sites are no longer just fixed, physically locatable areas but are practice-based, imagined, conceptual, and virtual. I then move on to discuss how notions of positionality, location and

reflexivity within ethnographic research offered a different understanding of the particular spaces I inhabited.

I started my project in October, 2007. The initial stage of my ethnographic research on what I call the London Asian urban music scene was conducted by gathering any information I could about the 'scene' through online sources and other media. This took about three months in total, but was spread out throughout the full 15 month fieldwork period. BBC iXtra, and particularly the BBC Asian Network, provide rich sources of music and culture, and were my initial and constant resource for familiarizing myself with the layout of the scene, which included understanding genres of music considered to be a part of the scene (i.e. R&B, hip hop, bhangra, Bollywood). BBC Asian Network radio shows such as Bobby Friction and the Asian Hits Download also made available free podcasts that were available for once weekly download. Thus, I have amassed a year-long archive of a few key Asian music shows from the BBC Asian Network (i.e. Friction, Official Weekly Asian Download Chart). DesiHits.com, a London-based internet radio station and website devoted to British Asian music, also became an invaluable source of news and information to complement my growing knowledge of contemporary artists introduced through the BBC Asian Network.

Personal blogs, chat forums, clubbing information sites (e.g. [asianclubguide.com](http://asianclubguide.com), [chillitickets.com](http://chillitickets.com)) as well as online magazines for young Asian women (Asiana, XEHER) provided additional information and coverage of Asian club nights, artists to look out for, and additional events.

Internet spaces such as web forums and personal blogs were also vital sources of information. Much has been written about the power of the Internet in bringing about social change (Castells, 1996; Webster, 2001). Moreover, the growing presence of the Internet in all aspects of everyday life, creating a 'network society' (Castells, 1996) has significantly affected the research process and methods (see Hine, 2000; Fielding, Lee and Blank, 2005). Social networking sites such as Facebook were crucial to understanding the various networks

active within the scene. Moreover, it was a very important tool for maintaining contacts and finding out information on club nights and parties. Thus the scene was every bit conducted through online avenues as it was through the spaces of the club. For example, scenes that do not have major label distribution have often relied on different, alternative modes of music promotion and distribution. Niche and independent record shops, street corners selling mix tapes and sites such as MySpace, YouTube, iTunes, peer to peer (P2P) file sharing, as well as the proliferation of online record shops, allow for much greater access to music than was once available through traditional networks. File sharing is often the quickest and most effective route of getting your music out or offering free downloads to fans through links on MySpace, making the internet an important site providing access to music and news. Thus, online spaces were impossible to avoid because the internet has become an integral platform for music promotion and distribution.

Don Slater and Daniel Miller (2000) argue that the 'virtual' spaces of the internet should be acknowledged as a part of everyday life. In fact, the internet has been one of the most significant catalysts of change for the music industry within the last ten years. The music industry has had to make radical changes to its business model so as to adapt to current practices of music consumption in order to survive (Leyshon, 2001, 2003; Leyshon, French, Webb, Thrift and Crewe, 2005). This has meant developing a stronger web presence through MySpace and Facebook, allowing for music to be freely downloaded or legally and freely accessed through music players such as Spotify. I will discuss this in further detail later on in the chapter.

Within the second stage of my research I commenced the process of 'fieldwork'. Initially, I was convinced that the field site should be a physical and discrete site(s). Ian Condry (2006) positioned hip hop nightclubs or 'genba' in Japan as crucial to locating the hip hop 'scene' in Japan and similarly, I attended various Asian music nights in clubs throughout London. By Asian nights I mean those that featured Asian-influenced music (i.e. 'bolly mix' 'bhangra beats' 'bhangra fusion' 'desi beats' 'desi hip hop'). I soon realized that there was great variety to

these nights. Some of these were nights in large clubs that catered to a young, university crowd (e.g. Desi-licious at the Ministry of Sound or Phat Nights at the Rainforest Café), playing chart hip hop and bhangra. Other nights were catered to an older crowd, hosted in smaller, more intimate venues (e.g. Twice as Spice in Ealing, Kuch Kuch Hota in Central London). Club nights were often held on any given day of the week, including weekend nights, although weeknights were often more common.

Traditional anthropological notions of the field site do not map easily onto the geography of the Asian scene. In fact, Michael Burawoy (2003:674) writes how the concept of an isolated site discrete from other sites is 'a fiction of the past that is no longer sustainable'. Debates on the continued importance of a fixed ethnographic field site 'away' from home (Clifford, 1992; Gupta and Ferguson, 1992, 1997; Caputo, 2000; Marcus, 1995; Rasmussen, 2003) have resulted in a conceptual shift towards perceiving field sites as multiple and unstable-as part of the 'shifting world we live' of 'disjuncture' (Appadurai, 1990, p.7). James Clifford (1997) argues that nothing about the field is predetermined. Instead, the field must be turned into a social space by embodied practices. This could include not just physical locations but the virtual and the imagined. This point highlights how the notion of a distinct field site might sometimes be impossible. To further illustrate this point, club nights might serve as the local and the grounded location of this scene in London but the scene is much more diffuse and diverse than the club nights, so it made sense to refer to the Asian music scene as a 'scene'. Thus, a 'scene' needs to be located somewhere and these club nights provide that location. As I have suggested in the introductory vignette, the club night's boundaries did not even necessarily begin and end at the club (Connell and Gibson, 2003).

I drew from the experiences of Karen McCarthy Brown (1991) whose work with 'Mama Lola' or Alourdes, a voodoo priestess in Brooklyn, was not about going to a discrete location that she entered and left but her 'site' was more tied to relationship links between individuals, memories and practices. Thus, I showed up at video shoots where I did hair and make-up and sat around hanging out

with the crew. I watched a contact record her radio show on DesiHits.com and discovered who knew who. I also went to see shows with contacts and got to see how things went on behind the scenes and see what a PR person does. I went to a music video launch for a new girl band. I went to launch parties, hung out with photographers who took the time out to explain to me who people were as he was taking photos. I went to the London Mela (in 2008) and went to university tours of the BBC Asian Network. The more events and sites I went to, the more it was clear that the sites themselves were not what 'made' the scene. Relatedly, it was not the going to and coming back from these sites that was important but it was the way in which they were connected by scenic networks and practices.



Fig. 1music

video shoot in studio, 2008(photography by Helen Kim)





## **Club Sites and Fieldwork**

While expanding my ethnographic remit to include other spaces outside the club, I also was interested in achieving depth within my field sites as well as breadth. I embarked on a comparative in-depth exploration of three distinct club nights. I chose three nights that represented to me different contrasting aspects of the Asian music scene. They were the following: Kandy Nights, every Saturday evening in the Shoreditch/Old Street area; Bombay Bronx, which occurs the third Tuesday of the month, in Notting Hill; and VIP RAMP, the first Wednesday of every month, held at a club in Soho. My principal consideration in choosing these three sites was their differences from each other in terms of their audience, age limit, socioeconomic status, gender and the atmosphere the promoters were attempting to set for the night. For example, I considered Bombay Bronx's most identifiable characteristic to be an 'industry night'. Kandy Nights was the 'party night' and finally VIP Ramp I likened to a 'family affair' because it was such a tightly knit network. However, these nights are not representative of the club scene or the overall Asian scene.

Bombay Bronx and VIP RAMP are club nights at which many of the artists and producers within this scene and overlapping scenes congregate. These are spaces where they meet each other, make contacts and friends. VIP RAMP actually started in 2007 for precisely these reasons. A close-knit group of friends, Mentor (producer, DJ), Menis (MC) and DJ Pinkz (DJ) and Ameet Chana (DJ/actor) started promoting this night as a way of getting their friends and networks together under one roof. VIP RAMP was started to get a certain circle of 'industry' people to party and hang out and listen to music spun by their friends. However, the night's central location and weekday slot means that they also draw in a 'regular' crowd of non-scene members who want to party. The space is often polarized between the VIP'ers sitting and chatting to each other while sipping drinks upstairs and the non-scenesters dancing and shouting to each other over the music downstairs.

VIP RAMP is held at Club 49 on Greek Street in Soho. It is a fairly typical 'West End' club in central London in that it draws a hedonistic Saturday night Central London club crowd of young students, tourists and the so called 'bridge and tunnel' crowd from outer London and the Home Counties. The 'contemporary urban' décor that is consumed reflects a particular, West End aspirational version of urban sophistication. Their drinks list consists of wine, cocktails, champagne and even bottle service. They also offer sushi as party food. Club 49 is always busy on weekend nights despite the row of identical looking clubs dotting the same street.

Bombay Bronx at the Notting Hill Arts Club, as I will discuss in further detail in chapter 6, started out as a club night where Radio 1 host Nihal could play some of his favourite music to a small and knowing audience comprised mostly of friends in music. It grew to be much more than that and it has always had a wider remit than VIP RAMP, not to mention a much longer history (in the context of club nights which often have short runs), having started in 2005.

The Notting Hill Arts Club in Notting Hill, West London has been around for at least 12 years. It often functions more like a creative events venue or a community organization than a typical club because it often features live music and visual art performances. It draws an eclectic London (West and East London) crowd of niche music lovers who usually attend the club for a specific night, usually categorized by a genre or style, such as Japanese house/minimal beats, 'tropica'; a mixture of salsa, ska, calypso and mambo, or DJ Derek's night of reggae and rock. The Notting Hill Arts Club offers month-long residencies with regular and frequent (every six to twelve months) changes to their calendar in which club nights move on to be hosted at other venues. The basement space is small, dark, cramped and gritty with a stage and DJ booth. The bar is small but offers a wide range of imported beers, mixed drinks and liquor. The Notting Hill Arts Club signifies another particular version of the urban which valorizes the esoteric, underground and obscure niche forms of culture. Thus it could be said to project a competing version of the urban sophistication and glamour.

Kandy Nights was started by two friends: Gee, who has been a party promoter and events manager for the last five years, and DJ Mr. Kay. It was a commercial venture to promote Asian music within a different, mainstream space that catered to a young, affluent crowd who would not always count themselves as being part of the music scene. Thus, the clientele here consisted of people who were not connected to the Asian music industry (cultural producers) and considered themselves mostly casual and peripheral fans of Asian music that were connected to the Asian scene often through the regular attendance of Asian club nights but did not consume Asian music on a regular basis. Still, there were often at least a few people from the networks of producers, artists and promoters who would attend the weekly party.

Kandy Nights is hosted by the Club Piya Piya in East London which functions as an Indian food restaurant by day and a club by night. As with Club 49, the décor references a contemporary modern minimal aesthetic that projects a certain lifestyle and image of 'the city' to clubgoers who readily consume these representations of the urban club experience. These include higher drinks prices at the bar, bathroom attendants, and bottle service in the VIP area. Club Piya Piya also plays up the exotic fusion elements within their design using bright colours outside of black, red and chrome.

A typical night in the beginning stages involved a great deal of standing around or walking around the club, absorbing the physical layout of the space itself, attempting to piece together the physical space and how it may or may not be conducive to networking, and social interaction. There are some key design elements to a space that makes it more useful for public/private leisure and entertainment. The placement of the bar area is crucial, the DJ booths/stand, and of course, the dance floor within the club, such that directing the flow of traffic towards certain areas of the club, making spaces conducive to the formation of crowds and groups, all contribute to producing a very particular set of spaces. Michael Bull and Les Back (2003) write about how understanding has often been about privileging the seeing rather than the hearing; the dominance of the spectacle to how we know what we know. Yet, they encourage

us to 'think with our ears' because the emphasis on the visual has curtailed the ability to comprehend the meanings attached to social behaviour. Within the spaces of clubs and other venues at these Asian urban nights, the sonic becomes just as important as the visual in ordering and making sense of one's environment and social world. Sound regulates time and space (Bull and Back, 2003; Corbin, 2006). The tunes of the DJs mark the time and the spaces of the club. Earlier on in the evenings is when you get the hip hop and 'bashment' styles of music. Later on, after midnight is when the bhangra comes on. Sometimes, it's the other way around, depending on where you're at and what night it is. Depending on the size of the club, you'll have different rooms for different music. You know where you are just by listening to the sound of the music spinning.

The orientation of space is also significant because it is often hierarchically ordered. Thus, rather than being a shared cohesive space, the club space is distinctly marked by social hierarchies and networks in operation. For example, the Mustard bar near St. Paul's is a fairly large club in central London. On a Friday night it gathers together an ordinary mix of after-work people along with the regular weekly party called 'Sin City' hosted by Voodoo Entertainment, a party promotion team. They organize Asian club nights and special events around London on a regular basis. Through similar networks, they also get artists and producers within the Asian scene to host launch parties at their weekly night. So, within one actual physical site, one confronts many different conceptions of spaces and boundaries that are then regulated in different ways. The VIP area section is heavily and consistently regulated by bouncers and by the setting of physical boundaries with velvet ropes. However the club's outdoor spaces, doorways, and sidewalks are often more difficult to regulate as different spaces and networks start to converge. Thus, through this example it is possible to see how the organization of social practices is spatialized in very specific ways. Acknowledging this, and incorporating it into my analysis of ethnographic data, allowed me to see that these club spaces posed a challenge to conventional ethnographic methods in dealing with the field. The spaces within a space materialized progressively through an embodied practice of 'going out'.

The use of conventional methods of documentation was always something that needed to be negotiated within these spaces. Recording devices such as video and audio were often discouraged by the staff and security of the club. For instance at Bombay Bronx, official permission to video needed to be granted and, in that situation, professional video equipment would be expected if not required. Secondly, consent for video use can be difficult to acquire in a busy club where it may be hard to determine who will want to be videoed. Security staff was often suspicious of the use of these devices. I recall an incident where a bouncer checked my bag and saw the camera and digital recorder. I asked questions that I thought he would be able to answer such as the capacity of the club, and the number of guests. He responded by asking if I was working with the police. This incident brought about an uncomfortable realization that sometimes the methods of ethnographic data collection can be seen as a form of governmental, institutional surveillance or the need to engage in what Sharma, et. al (1996) call 'authoritative ethnography'. Moreover, they argue that academic disciplines such as sociology have been ideologically linked to what they called 'agency(ies) of control' that have been responsible for policing and closing down of Black clubs and the monitoring of inner city neighbourhoods (1996:2).

However, the significance of photography as a form of documentation revealed itself in important ways throughout the fieldwork period. It was not rooted in the image itself but in the practice and the collaborative effort it took to produce the image, and the relationships between the subjects and me that emerged out of the photographic approach. Les Back (2007) and others have argued that we live in an intensely and increasingly visual culture where the image and the spectacle constitute a fundamental part of who we are as social beings where images are interwoven and are 'everywhere' (Pink, 1997, 2001). Further, the increasingly visual orientation of media and digital cultures must also be considered within the context of the centuries-old view of the centrality of the visual and seeing within Western culture (see Jenks, 1995; Banks, 2001). The use of photographic equipment, whether through cameras but also through

mobile phone technology (which often comes equipped with cameras and video capabilities), has meant that visual documentation becomes an integral practice to public and social events. The photographs were not just ethnographic - as a visual recording method of the field site - they were also personal and social. Often, the only way people made sense of my role within the club space was to see me as someone who was a photographer or journalist. Taking photos (as opposed to other forms of data collection such as interviewing) 'fit' into my role as ethnographer more easily than being a researcher. The rise of internet nightlife photography (see [lastnightsparty.com](http://lastnightsparty.com) and [thecobrasnake.com](http://thecobrasnake.com)) has made the practice of knowingly having your photograph taken, usually in very specific, stylized ways that present an image of the club space as hedonistic and fun-filled, where everyone is having a great time, a very well-known practice (Richman, 2008). The stylization of such photographs has spread beyond internet photos on websites but also has been picked up and reproduced in many contemporary urban music videos particularly within the 'indie' music and grime crossover genres. The emphasis on certain kinds of lighting, background and the ubiquitous night-time space provides the backdrop for the video and shots. Further, people photograph these events for their own personal use, often posting 'party pics' on Facebook the next day. Thus, the act of photographing individuals while dancing, drinking and socializing were often acceptable and desirable actions within the club space, where people presented a particular version of the self (Goffman, 1959) in these spaces and specifically and knowingly for the purposes of being photographed. In this way, I feel that the photographs were always produced collaboratively rather than recording an untouched form of reality with both the intent of the photographer and the subject shaping the final image of the photograph. In some places, people even grabbed the camera and took shots on their own. Thus, while in many ways the ethnographer's traditional 'toolkit' of documentation proved limiting in terms of being able to capture some of the more sensory aspects of the night, these limitations of documentation also opened up new spaces of looking, thinking and doing sociological research.

Les Back (2004) noted that documentation such as writing ethnography is often done against time in an attempt to catch a hold of something fleeting. Nowhere is this observation more apt than when it is applied to the club space. Club spaces, and the practices of clubbing in and of themselves, are transient and shifting. About three quarters of the way in to my fieldwork VIP RAMP stopped running for about three months and then re-started, only to then stop running after another few months. Needless to say, this made it extremely difficult to spend a sustained amount of time in the place. The temporal nature of the sites and their unstable nature, where fieldwork sites disappear and reappear, poses a challenge to achieving a certain level of depth in participant observation because it feels as if one never gets close to experiencing the site at the 'deep hanging out' level, as Renato Rosaldo (cited in Clifford, 1997) and Clifford Geertz (2001) once called ethnographic participant observation.

VIP RAMP could only be reproduced through memory and photographic narratives. This expanded my understanding of place and space and our relationships to them because it disrupted the often privileged process of relying on written and oral histories and accounts of these spaces (MacDougall, 1997) particularly within the timeframe of the present. Allowing for a visual narrative of the club gave meaning to the ways to how many visual ethnographers argue that the visual can often better represent the 'intangible', the performative and the embodied sense of things (Harper, 2000; Ali, 2003, 2006; Pink, 2006, 2007) than just through written accounts.

## **Gatekeepers and Information Sources**

Initial access into the club space was often easily granted with little more than a door fee. However, access related issues emerged when it came to conversing with people at the next stage of participant observation. This is where getting to know certain people and working with them became increasingly important. Because ethnography is, as Harold Garfinkel (1967) reminds us, a 'practical activity' the use of representative, random positivist sampling was not going to be possible or appropriate for the small scale, in-depth study I was embarking

upon. In other words, I had to go about gaining access, finding people to talk with and getting data in a common sense, everyday way. Therefore, I approached a sampling method called 'opportunistic' sampling and 'judgemental' sampling in which I spoke with people who would speak with me as well as seeking out people I felt had specialist knowledge in this scene (Agar, 1996). Thus, my sampling was heavily weighted towards the people who came to one or more of the same club nights I attended. They were already in some way closely connected to others through the networks set up in place between Bombay Bronx, Kandy Nights and VIP Ramp.

Gaining ethnographic access to groups that researchers want to study often depends upon key contacts who act as 'gatekeepers' of the group (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Agar, 1996; Bryman, 2001; Patton, 2002). 'Gatekeepers' or what Paul Rock (2001) calls 'fairy godmothers' generally provide 'insider' contacts and introductions to other group members (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995) but they can also prevent certain forms of access as well. This held true in my case as I did gain access to scene members and interviews through some very key 'gatekeepers'. However, as is the case with any group, feuds, rivalries and competing loyalties meant that some gatekeepers were sometimes obstructive to my efforts at gaining access.

One of the first and significant contacts I made was with Gee and Mandy in October of 2007. They were promoting Gee's (then) new night Kandy Nights by handing out flyers in front of Bombay Bronx. Gee introduced me to producer Mentor who was also starting his night VIP RAMP and then granted me an interview a few weeks later. I met Arika and Surindher who were editors at XEHER magazine for Asian women at Bombay Bronx in the winter of 2008 because I saw them dancing the week before at VIP RAMP. I went up to Arika in the bathroom and told her quickly about my project and she responded enthusiastically and gave me her business card. A few days later, I made contact and made my way over to their offices for an interview a week later. We kept in touch and they invited me to other events and got me in touch with their music editor, Dishy, who introduced me to Amrita, Mandeep, a video producer who



then let me come and help out on video shoots. I was interested in the networks that formed and were reinforced at these club nights, and the practices within the scene that were part of the club nights, so I was often partial to people who inhabited both worlds and were connected to both in some ways. Thus, those who were either part of just the club night scene or the music scene outside of London I had less access to, and they provided less of a focus overall in my project. Working within these friendship and professional networks was effective in reaching a vast range of people who were actively involved in the production and consumption of music and social events, from producers of music (Mentor, D-Boy, Harry SONA) to promoters (Nihal, Dom, Gee), DJs (Mr. Kay) PR and media (Nisha, Amrita, Arika, Surindher) to consumers (Mandy, Ayesha, Jhoti). However, most of my informants and gatekeepers and interviews tended to be more involved on the production side of things but many also took on promotion roles as well.

In many cases access was negotiated through the roles I actively took on and could occupy within this scene. Within ethnographic methodological literature there is a great deal said about the role(s) and identities that the researcher takes on within the fieldwork context. Researchers are no longer conceptualized as passive, objective observers within the field (Angrosino and Mays de Perez, 2000; Clifford, 1986) and are now more inclined towards 'role making' rather than just 'role taking' (Angrosino and Mays de Perez, 2000). These are possible through the adoption of 'situational identities' in which the researcher seeks a form of membership with the community. In this sense, I did at first try and just attempt to 'hang out' but my role as 'researcher' was fairly limited and of little use within the circles of cultural producers I dealt with. Therefore, I attempted to try and volunteer my time asking to pass out club flyers, and working as a hair and make-up assistant at video shoots. These things were small, but they helped to establish rapport and trust with the people in the scene. The notion that there was to some degree a certain level of impression or 'front' management (Fielding, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Agar, 1996) meant that I often took on the role of the 'stranger who asks many dumb questions' (Agar, 1996) or the 'acceptable incompetent' (Lofland, 1971).

The problem of gaining access remains a recurring problem that never gets neatly or wholly resolved. For example, even with gatekeepers and informants, it was not always the case that access could be given and maintained evenly. Despite developing trust and rapport with certain people, the very fluid atmosphere of the club and the high turnover rate for clubs and guests contributed to a distinctly uneven level of access in the three club nights that made up the main field sites. VIP RAMP allowed me the least amount of access despite my knowing one of the club promoters.

## **Interviews**

The last four months of my fieldwork was apportioned to gathering interviews of various people within the Asian urban music scene in London. I have obtained 40 in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews in a variety of settings. I have also conducted an additional 14 short, snapshot interviews while at the clubs. I used a combination of interview methods such as face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, email interviews, as well as 'snapshot' interviews, which took place in and directly outside of the clubs where I felt it beneficial to data collection that the interviews capture a greater sense of the setting and atmosphere. The in-depth interviews took place in various informal but neutral places around the city, namely in public cafes which could provide privacy, relative comfort and safety for both parties. The in-depth interviews are between 35 minutes to 2 hours in length. I adopted a combination of interviewing strategies that allowed for the earlier stages of the interview to contain standardized questions and the latter half to be individually tailored to the participant (Patton, 2002:346). The initial questions were open-ended inquiries separated into three general sections of topics: general scene questions (what is it, where is it, who counts), and their understanding of the 'scene' and its workings, how they would describe the scene, and whether they self-identified as a scene member. I would have them discuss the relationships between different 'scenes': perhaps the distinctions between a London scene, and a British scene versus the Canadian scene. Further I explored the concept of

a 'mainstream' music industry and the tensions between being part of a niche scene and it being apart and separate from 'mainstream' music and culture.

Often these questions led into the more personal questions about their own particular role(s) in the scene. I would get them to discuss in detail their professional role as cultural producers. If they were not cultural producers, I would move on to questions such as how they got involved in the scene and learned about Asian urban music. Then I would follow with questions about the practices of 'going out' clubbing and where and how they accessed new music.

In the latter stages of the interview, I tried to take on board Miri Song's (1997, 1999) comments about understanding that stories and perspectives are not always neatly coherent and that we should not 'force' a neat story upon them if that was not the case. Therefore, I felt it important to encourage open-ended, unstructured interviews in which we could get into a more free form conversation about a diverse range of topics that dealt with broader issues of identity and music, 'race', racism, cultural politics, notions of belonging, music cultures and diaspora. This section of the interview was designed to allow people a space to direct the interview in directions they felt were important and necessary. I would often say very little and would allow them the space to speak and set the pace. This resulted in providing the most honest, insightful and thought-provoking answers. It allowed for people to produce their own connections to my work by letting them articulate what they thought was significant and relevant within my project to them.

Through the interviews I was interested in producing narratives and stories of how people describe their worlds (Silverman, 2001). This is where I felt keenly the notion that we were co-producing and co-authoring meanings and interpretations, of creating these 'positioned utterances' that move toward an understanding of ethnography as 'true fictions' or 'partial truths' (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). These interviews were as much about the ways in which they told their story as what they told. These interviews elicited most strongly the ways in which people narrate their lives and experience and particularly around

the ways in which people accounted for and themselves use and orient to norms, rules and shared meanings to account for their actions (Garfinkel, 1967; Gubrium and Holstein, 2000, Silverman, et.al. 2001). These interviews were about capturing that but also keeping in mind just how much those narratives were tailored for me and also co-constructed throughout the interview process (Heyl, 2001). In keeping with these ideas, I wanted to elaborate on the making of these fictions by acknowledging that there were these dominant narratives about being Asian that are untold, rejected or alternatively told and performed within these interviews through this process of interviewing.

I also conducted what Claire Alexander likes to call 'snapshot interviews' throughout the 15 month period of fieldwork. I have done 14 five to fifteen minute interviews in total. 8 of the interviews were with young women, all in their early twenties, and 7 were with young men, also in their early to mid-twenties. 9 were done outside Kandy Nights and the remaining 5 were conducted outside Bombay Bronx. They were difficult to conduct while onsite but rewarding in their own way because they were often so brief and very informal. Yet they extended this dynamic, mutual meaning-making process within interviewing and qualitative social research that has been extensively described (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Garfinkel, 1967). The snapshot interviews allowed space for alternative views and narratives to the ones I was receiving from the club owners and promoters about what was happening in these spaces. Thus, however brief and fleeting these interviews were in length, they provided crucial 'unofficial' insights into the activities of the night.

People were very much up for being asked to reflect on what they were doing in the moments they were doing it. This might be explained by the idea that interviewing as a method of gathering data has become a matter so routine and banal in everyday spaces. We might live in what Paul Atkinson and David Silverman (1997) calls an 'interview society' in which interviews are a key window to how we view ourselves as individual subjects, and form a constitutive part of our lives. Thus, the questions were often seemingly

mundane, but really helped to capture some of the finer details of the rich social space of the club. Questions included why they were there, what attracted them to a night such as Kandy Nights or Bombay Bronx, or VIP RAMP, what other nights they would go to, what they thought of the music, were they dancing, what were they wearing, as well as whether they listened to Asian music outside of the club space.

In this section, I have relayed in detail the different stages of my ethnographic fieldwork and research project on the spaces of the London Asian music 'scene'. I demonstrated how the ethnographic project explored the tensions and connections between different spaces of music and sociality; of the club space and the 'scene'. Through my initial exploratory stages of accessing music sites on the internet, to the participant observation at club nights, I discovered that the scene was not located in discrete sites. Instead, the scene consisted of many different spaces (and spaces within spaces) made by the practices of its members, that challenged conventions of doing ethnographic research in the 'field'. I then explained the process by which I mapped these spaces through contact with social networks via gatekeepers and informants. I concluded with an explanation of the interview process.

In the next section I move on to talking about space in reflecting on the importance of the shifting and ambiguous positionality of the researcher in ethnographic research. I examine how one's positionality is invariably linked to the politics of doing research in 'race', gender and identity. I explore how my own position was ambiguous and relational as a non-(British) Asian researcher, as the boundaries between insider and outsider status were configured in a shifting relationship to other aspects of my status such as class, gender, age and nationality.

## **Outsiders—Race, Gender and Ethnographic Work: The Politics of Doing Ethnography**

(October, 2007)

I am waiting in line out in front of Kandy Nights, here to interview Gee, the club's promoter. It is just another night out for lots of people but I am nervous because it is my first time here. The queue is long for the size of the club and the time of night – especially so for what is still a fairly new night. He knows I am coming, because out of nowhere, a bouncer appears and pulls me out of the line by asking 'You're Helen, right?' He brings me inside. The promoter must have told him something about me that distinguished me from others. When I ask how he knew it was me, he wouldn't really say except to say 'well, you looked distinctive'. He was reluctant to say it out loud but it was because I was the only one in the queue who did not appear to be South Asian. I had already felt conspicuously positioned as an outsider within the first minute in the queue. Being pulled out of the queue seemed to confirm it.

Positioning 'enables and inhibits particular kinds of insight' into social phenomena (Haraway, 1991). This awareness of the ways in which I was racialized and gendered, in different ways in particular fields, allowed me to directly engage with how 'race', ethnicity and gender were dynamically configured within the club space and the scene. I came to experience what James Clifford (1997) observed when he said that one's location in the ethnographic encounter is not a choice, but imposed upon a person by historical and political circumstances. Clifford (1997) also argued that because one's locations are multiple and cross-cutting there can be no guarantee of shared perspective or solidarity. I was surprised the first time I interviewed Gee, when he said to me 'like yourself, you're not Asian, but you like Asian music!' Having grown up in the US, I have always self-identified as 'Asian American' as a way of marking my ethnicity and more importantly, as a recognition of the shared experiences and histories of being a minority, along with Chinese, Japanese,

Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi- Americans<sup>1</sup>. Although I understood that the term 'Asian' in the UK was limited to those of South Asian origin, I felt that also identifying as 'Asian' was a point of solidarity and the start of an easy rapport with my participants. I assumed that most people would accept my answer and accept my position as I wanted to be positioned without questioning it or challenging it. I realized then that despite my own sense of identity, position and labels, there was no guarantee that I was perceived in the same way that I perceived myself.

I am mindful of Gunaratnam's (2003) point in which she stresses that although we use particular categories or terms of ethnicity such as 'Pakistani' or 'Asian' these meanings or the effects of these identifications cannot be taken for granted as stable or fixed. Instead, they are dynamic and 'situated' because ethnic identifications are also produced out of grounded experiences, political alliances and shared histories (2003). Thus, despite my own personal experiences and my knowledge of racial hierarchies growing up in the US identifying as an Asian American, I found that this did not translate into being perceived as 'Asian' in the British context. However, acceptance or rejection of 'insiderness' was never straightforward, immediate or fixed. Instead, commonality and difference resulted from complex negotiations that developed slowly and unevenly through interaction and time.

I still smart from the wisecrack of a young Asian man who yelled out 'Look, it's Jackie Chan' as I walked past him in the queue outside Desi-licious night at the Ministry of Sound. A couple of people snickered and I just kept on walking. I was shocked that my appearance was so promptly registered in a way that was meant to be humorous to them and a point of humiliation for me. I became an 'other', identified not as an individual but just the face of a homogenous group (because we all look alike). While it was painful, it was also familiar and I was able to recognize myself in that too thus there is no such thing as occupying a

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the term 'Asian-American' is itself a politically constructed identity that developed as a strategic response to racism, exclusion and discrimination in the US out of the Civil Rights activism in the 1960s (see Cheng, 2004; Lowe, 1996; Koshy, in Wu and Song, 2000) thus demonstrating how all identities are constructed, negotiated and 'in-process'.

neutral or 'objective' perspective in research. I know what it is like to feel the need to call upon someone's 'difference' in order to make oneself feel better. I am aware of the (often) unspoken popular hierarchies that operate within popular culture that place certain minorities 'below' or above others based often on whether they are perceived as 'cool'. Koushik Banerjea (1996) writes how Asians were once shunned on the playground for their 'weakness and weirdness'. Parker and Song (2006) write that while Asians' and Afro-Caribbeans' cultural presence has been acknowledged, Chinese and other East Asian minority groups have been left out of mainstream and popular culture. Thus 'Orientals' in Britain, being still a small and underrepresented minority, still suffer from being seen as 'weak and weird'. I understood that to him, I was an easy target.

I started to enter what Les Back (2002) calls the 'grey zone' of doing research in 'race' which recognizes this 'language of perspicacious contrast' in which you experience ambivalence by recognizing difference and discomfort in seeing a trace of the familiar. Moreover, I take the grey zone and being called 'Jackie Chan' to demonstrate how my position as Asian American often meant that I was harder to locate in, or to be easily inserted into, London's racial and ethnic order. It was harder for people to 'read' or easily identify and 'know' me within a set racial and ethnic context.

This ambiguous racial and ethnic 'grey zone' I occupied intensified the position of marginality often occupied by the ethnographic researcher. The ethnographer's marginal position (Freilich, 1970; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Behar, 2003) also referred to as the role of the 'professional stranger' (Agar, 1980) is where one struggles to achieve a balance on the participant observation spectrum which is neither too distanced nor too close, neither complete insider or outsider. This often meant that in many situations my multiple locations (class, ethnicity, gender, nationality and minority status) meant that certain aspects of my position were highlighted or diminished in order to position me within the research context.



For example, my nationality and the fact that I was a non-white American proved significant towards shaping interactions with participants. This meant that being East Asian-American from New York was seen as a point of commonality because I was perceived as someone who understood what it was like to grow up within a diasporic community located within a similar urban environment to London. Thus while being seen as 'other' in some ways, immediately being perceived as part of an ethnic minority meant that there was often an assumption of shared likeness in our differences. This meant that my being a fellow 'ethnic' was highlighted in these situations whereas my specific ethnicity was made to be less important to our interview context.

Certain topics within interviews more clearly reminded me of the relational aspects of my racial outsider position. For example, topics such as hip hop commonly involved reflections on 'race' and the politics of authenticity within black popular culture. Within the racial dynamics of blacks and Asians in the UK, East Asians like me were often perceived as having similar socioeconomic backgrounds to South Asians than with Afro-Caribbeans. This is not to downplay the rich and continuing connection acknowledged between black and Asian popular music and culture. The history and connection between black and Asian communities in the UK is also of course a complex, uneven and ambivalent one. Thus, there was often a great deal of ambivalence towards contemporary black popular cultures, and the relationship between blacks and Asians are mediated by their different political, economic, social and historical positioning. Many of my participants discuss in disparaging terms the notion of the young Asian 'rude boys' who imitate black counterparts, often condemning them for adopting certain mannerisms and vernacular of young black Londoners because they are thought to sound uneducated, ignorant and working class. Many were able to say these things in front of me because they perceived that I was not completely 'different' from them. Therefore, despite my lack of 'insider' status, these dynamic boundaries of my Korean American female status thus challenged some of the accepted insider/outsider binaries.

The uncertainty of these boundaries was crystallized in the moments when participants used the term 'Paki' to refer to someone else within conversations with me. For instance, there were several incidents when I would hear the derogatory term 'Paki' being used to explain someone's inappropriate behaviour, as in 'oh he's just a Paki'. The use of this term has nuanced meanings as it very much depends on who is using it, who is being referred to as 'Paki' and in what context. There were times when it was meant to be an insult traded between two people who identified with being 'Paki' in ways that also reminded me that I was not one and would never be. There were points where it was used and it was assumed that I knew that it was being used in ways that did not necessarily mean to offend the other person. I became the person who could be safely told such things without fear of being judged or misjudged. Similarly, Miri Song (1995), as a Korean American researcher with British Chinese participants, observed that she was a 'safe' person to talk to, because she was neither 'the same' nor 'totally different'. I was considered a 'safe' person in that respect. Thus, I started to understand just how fluid and ambiguous my own ethnic status was in relation to those within the scene. These ambiguities made categories such as 'ethnic insider/outsider' inadequate and overly simplistic to adequately capture my status and positioning (Song and Parker, 1995).

## **'Doing' Gender**

In coming to understand the complex ways in which I experienced myself as a racialized being I had to consider the gendered production of a 'racial' and ethnic identity. Ethnographers have written about rigid gender roles and expectations, within the field, that have impacted upon female ethnographers in terms of gaining access and building trust and rapport (Ortiz, 2005; Arendell, 1997).

In the club, dressed bodies are important sites of boundary maintenance and they act as a way of ordering and disciplining people in these semi-public spaces. Haraway (1991) observes that bodies are objects of knowledge whose boundaries materialize in social interaction. Within the club space, gender is

materialized in and through practices of the body, as I will elaborate upon in chapter 7. These practices include the implementation of dress codes that are based upon heteronormative categories of masculine/feminine appearance that imposes a heteronormative order within the club space. Women were expected to dress in ways that are considered sexually appealing to heterosexual men. This often meant preferring short, revealing dresses, skirts, close fitting tops, make-up, and high heels. In saying this, I do not mean to imply that the 'gaze' was strictly male and these women did not dress in these normative ways for themselves or for other women there. It is to say that what was worn by women in these settings fits the conventions of dressing that are usually coded as 'heterosexual' and 'feminine' and thus 'attractive' to the opposite sex.

Negotiating these gendered and sexual codes in the club have allowed me to reflect more deeply on the idea of myself as partial and positioned within the research context. Dress, appearance, and adornment are common concerns for fieldworkers (Warren, 1988). Kulick (1995) argues that fieldworkers can be 'fashioned into objects of desire by people in the field'. Thus within the club context, the enforcement of strict dress codes often meant that dressing 'up' became a significant aspect of negotiation with which I struggled, trying to fit in without feeling conspicuously (under)dressed (Friedl, 1986; Warren, 1988). Moreover, the particular ways in which I was read articulates another important way in which ideas of race, gender and sexuality come together. In many ways, despite the rigid codes of dress and behaviour that I sensed in the club, I faced far fewer sanctions for having a less 'feminine' appearance because these codes are often used to regulate and police Asian normative femininity. Therefore, being perceived as a non-Asian, I was not held to the same expectations of performing a certain kind of femininity.

Les Back (1993) and others (Arendell, 1997; McKee and O'Brien, 1983; Gurney, 1991; Ortiz, 2005) have written about gendered fields through female ethnographers' accounts of the limitations and difficulties of doing work in male dominated settings. Moreover, there has been extensive written work on the development and use of feminist ethnography (Stacey, 1988; Oakley, 1981) and

the use of feminist politics in ethnographic representation (Wolf, 1996; Visweswaran, 1994; Behar and Gordon, 1995). Here I wish to discuss how doing interviews and participant observation within the club environment as a female researcher resulted in gendered interactions which I was only able to reflect upon later after listening to recorded sessions.

The music industry and even smaller music scenes generally still tend to be male oriented, particularly within the production of music, a subject for discussion within chapter 7. Therefore, a large number of the artists I interviewed were male, in contrast to the small handful of recording artists who are women. Thus, many of these interactions within the interviews were deeply shaped by specific gendered practices (Grenz, 2005; Koivunen, 2010). For example, I expected many of these interviews to be shorter, where interviewees would need some prompting. But many of the young men I interviewed were immediately talkative, forthright and assertive where they often took the lead and spoke about subjects and ideas that interested them whether or not that was necessarily the topic or subject that was relevant to the interview. Tony Arendell (1997:356) writes that in most instances, she was apportioned the 'token' role of the supportive, nurturing female interviewer who was there 'carefully listening'. Sabine Grenz (2005) similarly discusses the widespread belief that women are good listeners and are often considered as being better suited to the task. My own experiences demonstrated that similar views were in place about women as good listeners during my interviews where I would only speak occasionally, smile and nod supportively while men talked at length.

In one instance I offered an interviewee water and snacks on a very hot day in a room without air conditioning where we conducted our interview. I was told that I would make a very good wife to someone one day. I understood that this was meant to be a compliment and a sign of approval and I laughed it off but this was a case where he positioned himself as a masculine figure who was dominant, and also took steps to interpret my actions and behaviour as feminine and subordinate, setting the tone and relations within the interview right from the beginning.

Interviews conducted with women also varied but these proved to be more interactive conversations where we took turns speaking and listening, often responding to what the other person was saying (Koivunen, 2010). Many of the women asked me my opinion of things, often turning the questions around onto me, which initially surprised me when it first happened. This I took to mean that they were genuinely interested in how I engaged with the social life of the scene and its practices as well as also resisting the dominance of the researcher role onto the researched. Therefore, while men resisted or negotiated their roles within interviews through setting the tone and directing the conversation, women resisted the conventional power dynamic of the interviewer/interviewee relationship by asking and interviewing me, thus making the interview a much more interactive, collaborative and joint effort in which we both depended upon and shaped the output in more equal measures.

There were also instances where I was not read as being feminine within my interviews and participant observation but was considered an 'honorary male'; where I was expected to share the experiences these people had within the scene 'as a man' (Arendell, 1997: 356). In one example, I went out to a show with a few participants and the club was mostly young men. One of the women I was with informed me that she was grateful for my presence because it helped to reduce the amount of unwanted attention at the club from young men. I took that to mean a number of different things. She was grateful that as a woman, I would understand and also help to actively discourage unwanted attention. My presence alone discouraged men from coming up to her to talk to her. She also later commented on my 'unconventional' look and how I dressed differently from most of the women she knew. I think this was in part, a statement recognizing how men within the club saw me as someone unfeminine.

In another example there were a few instances when men would make sexist or sexual comments about women without registering that I as a woman might take offence at such statements. Feminist researchers writing in the 80s and 90s show that ethnographers have routinely experienced the denigration of women

in interviews and participant observation (Arendell, 1997; McKee and O'Brien, 1983).

There were other opportunities to see how women and their roles within the scene were devalued in more subtle ways. It could be argued that there has been a profound and increasingly common backlash against feminist views within popular culture. Angela McRobbie (2004) argues that 'postfeminism' has become the new cultural norm. These views are often shaped by popular discourses around choice and freedom, particularly around female sexuality and sexual expression, linking sexuality with empowerment. These discourses, often produced through popular culture texts, often rely upon 'undoing' feminism through the rejection of more traditional ideas of feminism and presenting feminists as 'lesbians', 'man haters', etc. (McRobbie, 2004).

Correspondingly I witnessed an increased ambivalence with regards to young women identifying as feminists or having feminist values. Young men and women's ambivalence towards feminism and the politics of gender were also marked within their views on specific women artists and issues around sexualized images of women in music videos and popular culture. These views on women were always complicated by the intersections of ethnicity and culture. For instance, there were many young men who, having grown up with ideas of feminism, were familiar with discussions around gender and inequality, and indeed probably considered themselves to be supportive of feminist ideas on equality in work, legal matters, etc. However, with regard to women artists within the scene, many subtle double standards emerged. Ideas about how young Asian women should present themselves, and particularly how women who are overtly sexual figures should refrain from doing so as *Asian women*, were often expressed. Young men and women were often quite critical of certain female artists within the scene for not being proper role models for young Asians. This echoes the argument that Yuval-Davis, Anthias and Camppling (1989) and Anne McClintock (1993) have made about women as cultural transmitters and producers of culture who are made to be the 'symbolic bearers of the nation' (1993: 62). In this sense, women are often subject to greater

scrutiny, regulation and policing in the interest of preserving one's culture (Adelman, Erez and Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003; Espin, 1998; Ahmed, 1992; Narayan, 1997).

Thus gender dynamics and inequalities were always deeply embedded in the interactions within the ethnographic field. Gender worked in conjunction with other hierarchies of difference and therefore any exploration of the politics of location and partial perspective must consider the points at which they cut across and overlap.

Within this chapter I not only discuss the fluid negotiation of ethnic 'outsiderness', but also how gender shaped ethnographic interactions - particularly within certain spaces and locations where gender was highly regulated and adhered quite closely to cultural norms. I also discussed how my position as the researcher, and my concerns of 'front management', often placed me as an outsider within this normatively gendered framework.

### **What's in a Name? Positionality and Ethics**

It has been argued that the ethics and politics of doing ethnographic research are often hard to separate (Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). Clifford points out the need to learn how to 'take responsibility for our systematic constructions of others and of ourselves through others' (1986:121). One such way of taking responsibility was in gaining informed consent while conducting research. Within social research, people being interviewed and observed must be made fully aware of, and must give explicit consent to, being involved in research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). While I was very careful to receive verbal consent for open access, and while I promised confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms in all of my interviews, it was often difficult to gain full consent within the context of the club space where I was often just one more person in the crowd and on the dance floor. In this sense, it could be said that I was engaging in some form of covert participation for practical reasons. These spaces made it difficult to be explicit about my research because the noise and

the crowds made it difficult to have conversations, and talking about research would be disruptive and would affect the way in which people would act (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). In instances where photographs and videos were taken, there was not always a way of acquiring consent in a situation where the music and the crowd are often quickly moving. Thus, operating with free and informed consent was uneven throughout the fieldwork period, and the degree of openness and consent depended on factors such as being with different sets of people, and doing research in particular spaces and times (Roth, 1962).

Within the stages of writing ethnography, Clifford (1986) argues that it is in the act of 'writing culture', or producing texts, that one can learn how to take on the responsibility for what we produce. Knowledge production becomes an ethical and political challenge in doing ethnographic research.

For example, during the process of writing I struggled over the naming and identifying of my sources. According to Tricia Rose (1994a,b) naming in hip hop and other Afro-diasporic forms is important as a form of self-definition and 'reinvention'. Names identify their personal characteristics and give them their 'claim to fame'. This applies to the Asian urban music scene in which artists, producers, and DJs give themselves hip hop names. The importance of names as a form of identity meant that it was necessary to refer to them by their professional (and for many, very public) names. Philippe Bourgeois commented that the 'selection, editing and censorship have tremendous political, ethical and personal ramifications that ethnographers must continually struggle over, without ever being confident of resolving' (2003;355). In my particular case, I struggled over whether to use the public monikers of the artists and cultural producers, because they would be instantly recognizable to anyone who knew them and anyone who was a part of the scene. Sociological studies such as the ones done by Vidich and Bensman (1958) and Wolff, et. al (1964) illustrate the negative and harmful risks involved in publishing ethnographic accounts of easily identifiable people and communities. This can result in damaging the public reputation of individuals and groups.



However, within more recent years, challenges to the strict confidentiality norms of not revealing the locations of the field sites and names of the people interviewed have arisen (Patton, 2002). In my case, without these names and without the venues that they were associated with, I would be completely erasing the significance and the historical context of these nights and the actors who participated in these nights. These nights were formed out of a very specific time in a very particular space that cannot be reproduced. The effect of the name itself could not be reproduced through a pseudonym. Further, I knew that even if I chose to use pseudonyms for all the interviewees and changed the names and disguised the location of these venues, members would still be able to recognize themselves and others (Ellis, 1995; Murphy and Dingwall, 2001). Thus, I chose to allow these names to be public and not anonymized. However, I chose to conceal the actual names of participants including the names of those who were fans and consumers of the scene in the interest of confidentiality. Thus while my interviewees were given informed consent, this did not automatically mean confidentiality (Patton, 2002).

Throughout the writing process, I was also made aware of issues of inequalities in 'race', gender and class, and the politics of representation. I was wary of slipping into the dangerous territory of speaking 'for' young British Asians and writing 'about' not 'with' a group (Nagar, 2002; Sultana, 2007). In attempting to provide what Alexander (2006) calls 'some kind of voice' to the academic community and the public, this makes doing ethnographic research on 'race' particularly thorny as it can be interpreted as a neo-colonial/imperialist desire to essentialize and control 'others'. Sociological research has had a problematic and spotty history when it comes to research on 'race' in Britain. Ethnographers and sociologists have relied upon culturalist notions of 'race' and social conditions of minorities that end up pathologizing poverty, exclusion and dysfunction and disadvantage, linking these aspects to culture, ethnicity and often 'race' (Alexander, 2004, 2006; Back, 2004; Lawrence, 1982). To go further back in time, ethnography's roots stem from the practice of an exoticist anthropology. Sharma et. al. (1996) has criticized the use of ethnography as a

tool within academia to produce work that essentializes and orientalisises Asian cultural production. Their critiques imply that the epistemological foundation of ethnography leads to a form of 'othering' (Sharma et.al, 1996).

Moreover, on a very direct political level, there are the issues that arise when Becker (1967) asks 'Whose side are we on?'. There is limited control over how information could be taken up and used within the 'public domain' (Richardson, 1996). The current sensitivity towards issues of youth, religion and ethnicity have increased visibility and misinformation around issues around gender, Britishness and belonging. This could also serve to fulfil unintended political agendas, particularly at a time when Asians have become routinely observed, policed and labelled as 'gang' members, 'dangerous' and more recently, as 'terrorists'. Bourgois discuss how the complexities of his research on some of the negative aspects of racialization within the Puerto Rican community would contribute to a 'pornography of violence that reinforces popular racist stereotypes' (2000:207). Thus, I am at times mindful of the fact that my findings go against idealized representations of Asians as the successful 'model minority'. I am further wary of the fact that discussions around ethnicity, class and gender inequalities within the scene would somehow contribute or give credence or legitimacy to the prevailing discourses that construct Asian communities as culturally 'other', 'backwards' and 'illiberal', and therefore, continuously a 'problem' (see Alexander, 2000, 2004).

Yet, Claire Alexander (2004) and Les Back (2004) remind us that we still have to allow people their right to be human in all their complexity, ambivalence and frailty. In order to fully discuss the world, experiences and practices of young Asians in this urban music scene, the ambivalence and the struggles over racism, as well as gender and class inequalities within the scene, also had to be discussed and analyzed. There were many instances where these essentialist discourses were used to characterize the scene and its members. People used these very same discourses around different axes of difference, such as class and gender, to make judgements about Asian women or Asian Muslim young men that suggested that these discourses of racialization are accommodated

rather than challenged. This demonstrates the difficult and 'treacherous bind' of working with 'race' categories. However, Gunaratnam (2003) writes that work needs to engage in 'doubled practice' of challenging essentialist boundaries of race while at the same time connecting theory through to lived experiences. This helps to ensure that categories of 'race', ethnicity, gender and class are tackled through real negotiations and dilemmas.

## **Conclusion**

Within this chapter I outlined the different stages of my project and the use of ethnographic methods within it. Throughout the fieldwork period, my exploration of the Asian scene led me to encounter challenges to the ways in which the 'field' was often understood. I discussed how I was located within the ethnographic field and correspondingly how and where I located myself. I was naively trying to locate myself somewhere politically as 'Asian', and having that location and position challenged and rejected again and again. Moreover, my positivist attempts at being 'neutral' and 'objective', and the supposed boundaries between the 'researcher' and the 'research subjects', were also challenged and blurred. Therefore, that tension between being positioned and positioning myself somewhere, and the desire for those two to meet or come closer, was what I wanted to emphasise within this project.

In trying to analyse the ways in which I was positioned and how these were continuously shifting, I wanted to show how structural forces were very much at play within the work and how I never wanted to explain away these structural mediations while at the same time acknowledging that they are not experienced and indeed taken on in the same way by all people. Instead, lived experiences and the ethnographic observation of these realities suggest that these structural forces and the broader social context are always taken on in multiple ways and that there is no one 'true' way of seeing these realities. Thus, I wanted to demonstrate how the personal and the political are never separate entities within ethnography.

Correspondingly, the ethnographic 'gaze' through which we conduct research and produce knowledge is something that always needs to be considered, because it informs the claims one makes and the position one takes. The processes of self-reflexivity that have been foregrounded within the interpretive turn in ethnographic studies enabled me to understand just how much I invested in the relics of a sociological positivist outlook, with my belief in a 'neutral' stance and attempting to stay 'invisible' in the name of research. I remained uncritical of the privilege and power of my position as a researcher when I attempted to adopt this status.

Recently having re-read Mitchell Duneier's (1999) 'Sidewalk' appendix, he makes the honest observation that within social research our positions and experiences will often lead to blind spots that we might not ever discover because we cannot even see that they exist. Moreover, very few of us get the opportunity and the luck to happen upon our blind spots the way it happened to Mitchell Duneier (2000, 2001) regarding street booksellers' lack of access to public toilets on Sixth Avenue. He stresses how this does not always work, but the first step is to be aware that position matters and to take these differences seriously. Finally, he writes how we must acknowledge and write about our uncertainties. The uncertainties in the use and application of ethnographic methods are many. In an interview with Les Back, Mitchell Duneier (2006) talked of Elliot Leibow's (1967) analogy of the 'chain-link' fence that is in between the white ethnographer and the working class black people whose lives he studied. This fence stands as a metaphor that acknowledges the divide that power and privilege brings to the researcher with the people he studies. The analogy of the chain link fence that exists between the 'observer and observed' is also taken to mean, as Duneier (2006) has explained, that the distance is never vast enough to deny partial understanding. But Duneier also makes the point that there are ways to get around that and come to understand different positions, thus enabling one to make a difference and contribute something worthwhile. I interpret that to mean that we can get beyond, or think outside of, the conventional frameworks of doing ethnography and move

outside the perspective of the ethnographic gaze, which freezes and poses the ethnographer and subjects at a certain distance from each other.

I move on now to briefly outline the next chapter. In the next section, I think about the meaning of politics, the production of different meanings of being political and what kind of politics of space is allowed within the Asian music scene in London. I discuss how the intersections of class and ethnicity work to create particular relationships and locations, which have led to the rejection of a particular understanding and engagement with cultural politics. At the same time, the practices within the scene suggest that there are alternative modes of cultural and political engagement that involve a strategic, ambivalent and evasive use of politics, that signals not resistance but a more ambivalent dissonance.

## **Chapter 4: Who Are You Calling Radical? Politics and Religion and the Asian Scene**

### **Introduction**

(Bathroom, Notting Hill Arts Club, October 2008)

Rafiq has just finished a funny, angry, insightful set in which he debuted his single entitled 'Post 9/11 Blues' as well as performed a spoken word/rap called 'People are People'. The audience was quiet, with a few cheers and laughs during the set. I took the quiet to mean that people were captivated. So, I am surprised when I go to the bathroom and two young women march in. One declares loudly, 'I don't know...he's funny but he's a bit boring going on about 9/11 and all that. It really kinda turns me off...he talked too much about politics. I think he needs to stop talking about that too much.' The other one laughs and says 'oh my god, I know. It's too much!' Before I could step in to ask them about it, they wash their hands, give a 50p tip to the attendant and walk out. I give the bathroom attendant a smile, as we both were pretending not to eavesdrop on their conversation. I tip her and I walk out.

(Dance floor, VIP RAMP, November, 2008)

VIP RAMP is packed and everyone is dancing downstairs, DJs and radio show presenters mixed in with people who have come in from the street, who see that Club 49 is bustling on a slow Wednesday night. They have no idea that the upstairs portion is an informal meet and greet area for a small circle of the Asian scene. Downstairs it is more democratic, with everyone on the dance floor, moving to popular hip hop floor fillers blasting over a very loud but precise sound system. The music sounds clean and smooth, which encourages people to dance, drink, and forget their worries. The bar is having drinks specials too so that gets people going. No one seems to care why everyone else is there; they all just want to dance and have fun with their friends. But if you look more closely, you can see that there is a politics to this space that separates who hangs out with whom; a privileged 'inner circle' of people who are friends with the DJs and promoters upstairs, who separate themselves from the random assortment of

people downstairs. Moreover, this inner circle of friends and artists are staking a claim for themselves within the 'mainstream' West End club sphere. Therefore, it seems like just another club night where people are drinking, dancing and enjoying a relatively privileged life without economic or social struggle: a scene that lacks any politics or critical engagement with wider social issues. However, the scene also presents an alternative cultural site to national 'mainstream' narratives of British Asianness. Crucially, this alternative site should not be automatically read as a site of resistance but as something more complex and ambivalent. Within this site, an informal, everyday cultural politics of 'race', ethnicity and representation are being performed, contested and debated in ways more fractured, ambiguous and contradictory than traditionally understood.

I link these two seemingly separate vignettes to demonstrate the ambivalence around the role of politics within the lives of young Asian Londoners of and around the scene. Further, I question who gets to engage in politics and if it is about location, then how is it located and understood within the scene? Moreover, I link this location of politics to the wider social and historical context and conditions out of which it has developed in attempting to see how politics is 'lived out' and practised by scene members. Finally, I uncover how scenic practices might offer alternative opportunities for critique and response to the larger cultural and political national sphere.

### **Asian/Muslim Youth as Radicalized 'Dangerous' Formations**

In chapter two, I discussed the historical and contemporary development of youth discourses around 'subcultures', fashion and music paralleled by debates on marginal youth, criminality, and violence. Within these debates I located the contrasting positions of invisibility or hyper-visibility that Asian youth have occupied within these discourses. As briefly discussed in chapter two, contemporary discourses on British Asian youth have acquired new dimensions within the media, prompting Claire Alexander to refer to Asian youth as the new 'folk devils' (Alexander, 2000). Alexander (2000, 2004) argues further that

liberal explanations for their deviant 'folk devil' status offered up structural reasons such as deprivation and lack of education for their supposed deviancy. Conservative views often focus on cultural dysfunction and 'community pathologies'. These pathologies rested upon what Paul Gilroy termed the 'Goldilocks-and-Three Bears' version of culture (1993b:89). Black and Asian cultures were constructed and judged as being 'not enough' or 'too much' respectively, whereas English (white) culture was positioned as always being 'just right'.

Contemporary discourses on Asian youth are highly gendered and distinctly separated by religion, particularly in the aftermath of the Rushdie affair which brought unprecedented attention to the Muslim Asian community (Alexander, 2004). At one time, discourses on Asians focused on Asian women, ideas of victimhood, arranged marriages and the patriarchal Asian family structure (Alexander, 2000, 2004). More recent discourses are shaped by concerns over 'gangs' criminal activity, violence and now terrorism; concerns that are linked to performances of masculinity.

Moreover, the discourse on Asian male youth is specifically rooted in conservative ideologies of a separate 'Muslim underclass' (Modood, 1997) thus creating a distinction between what Tariq Modood (1992:43) called the achievers (Indians, East African Asians, Hindu and Sikh) and the 'believers' (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Muslim).

The Muslim male profile became increasingly visible after the 2001 riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley. Following 9/11, 'seamless and almost incontrovertible' links were made between the 'rioting' Muslim communities of Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, Muslim suicide bombers and 'hate clerics' (Alexander, 2003 cited in McGhee, 2008). The dysfunctional young Asian Muslim male has now turned into the deadly 'lethal sleeper' and the 'toxic stranger' (Banerjee, 2002). Heightened anxieties over culture, community and issues of multiculturalism and integration have corresponded with a marked increase in the racial profiling of Asians. In a report issued by the Metropolitan



Police in 2007, the number of people who were stopped and searched under counterterrorism laws rose by 277% for Asians as opposed to 185% for whites. Further, since September 2001, there has been a fourfold increase in attacks on Muslim, Sikh and other Arab and Asian communities in the UK (McGhee, 2008; Kundnani, 2007). In Tower Hamlets, a 75% increase in attacks has been reported.

Soon after the tragedy of the July 7<sup>th</sup> bombings occurred, a 'chain of articulation' (McGhee, 2008) was established that linked the events of 9/11 to the July 7<sup>th</sup> bombings. Increasingly public reaction to the July 7<sup>th</sup> bombings revealed what Les Back (2007) calls a politics of 'misrecognition' of people that threatened to poison London's everyday multiculturalism. Gary Younge (2005) wrote that integration had become 'fetishized since the July bombings' so that it became 'not a means to an end but an end in itself'.

Within most recent debates on culture the focus has now moved away from discourses on 'ethnic minorities' and has shifted toward 'minority faith communities' (Fortier, 2007). However, Gilroy (2005) states that 'it is only racism that holds all British Muslims responsible for the wrongs perpetrated in the name of their faith by a tiny minority' (Guardian, 30 July 2005: 22). Thus, when we look more closely at issues around 'Islamophobia', news headlines and politicians emphasise the 'home grown' status of the July 7<sup>th</sup> bombers. These accusations again rely upon certain notions of 'culture' as fixed, and immutable. Moreover, there is further belief in the idea of a shared British liberal 'culture' that is incompatible with Muslim/Asian forms of 'culture' thus proving the impossibility of multicultural integration (Alexander, 2000; Gilroy, 2005; 1987; Fortier, 2007). Anne Marie Fortier (2007) points out that within the public debates and discourse on British Muslims, religion becomes mistaken for ethnicity so that Muslims and South Asians become one and the same. Thus, the targeting of Muslims brings risk to all members of the British Asian community (Seidler, 2007).

Thus, youth today must deal with the profoundly different political, social and economic climate of contemporary 'times of war'. Specifically, Asian youth must contend with being portrayed as problematic for reasons that are wrapped up in issues of security, democracy, and radicalism that have become a matter of geopolitical concern. Yet, theorizations on youth cultures are still stuck on ideas of youth cultures as sites of collective and individual resistance. This 'resistance' model of 'ruling ideas' that has shaped youth culture studies ever since the Birmingham school introduced the notion of 'subcultures' is far too simplistic to explain the tactics young people use in the contemporary period to deal with greater risk and instability.

Youth cultures have traditionally been constructed around the notion of 'resistance' to dominant values, both before and after subcultural theories of youth. As Simon Frith notes, contemporary theorists of youth cultures still 'hanker for evidence of resistance and transgression' (2004:176). Moreover, it is black youth cultures that are most often burdened with the notions of 'resistance'. Banerjea (2002) explains how the outsider status of Asians results from the view that many white British people have of Asians as 'not really belonging'. The persistent associations of Asians with arranged marriages and religious fanaticism has meant that Asians are constructed as profoundly anti-modern, especially in comparison to the hypermodernity of the 'Black Atlantic' (2002:575). In this sense, Asian youth cultures have always been excluded from being the 'restorative site for social relations' as white and black vernacular cultures have been presented (Banerjea, 2002:574). Thus, the progressive, postmodern diasporicity of black vernacular music expressions never quite extended to Asian music cultures (Alexander, 2002; Banerjea, 2002).

Therefore, I am arguing that at one end, the specific formations of Asian youth cultures have been ignored and at the other end, they have been overly emphasized so that Asian youth have been demonized in very particular ways. The notion of resistance that has dominated discourses on youth cultures does not adequately explain the specificities of Asian cultural production, which are much more ambivalently positioned. It should be replaced by a more nuanced

strategic dissonance towards the mainstream AND the marginal that suggests that resistance is not the only or even significant mode of youth cultures. This demands a rethinking of the conventional enactment of cultural politics.

It has often been the case that Asian youth movements have formed out of the unresponsiveness of formal institutional politics of the Left and the state (Ramamurthy, 2006; Sivanandan, 1981, 1982; Smith, 2010). Historically, Asian youth have been deeply distrustful of a formal institutional politics, but they have continued to practise and engage in a cultural politics.<sup>2</sup> Robin Kelley (1994) posits that one can no longer think about politics as being practised solely within 'official' means via institutions and the state. Instead, he argues that we need to pay more attention the informal 'infrapolitics' or the politics of the everyday (1994:8). Furthermore, the practice of a cultural politics does not automatically entail a resistance towards the mainstream music industry or mainstream views on politics. Often the cultural politics shows a resistance to the marginal and the 'alternative' which reveals complicated relationships between class, race and privilege associated with these marginal, alternative positions.

Thus, this chapter develops as a response to the construction of various discourses around Asian youth as 'problematic' within the media and popular culture. I seek to redress these issues by exploring the distinct ways in which young Asians within this scene are responding to such discursive positioning through a different practice of cultural politics that signals a new space for Asian cultural production that locates itself further towards the centre politically and culturally rather than in the radical margins. I argue that the practice of a cultural politics is rooted in what I call strategies of evasive action, rather than direct resistance. This middle ground of ambivalent evasion and adaptation breaks us out of the tiresome and simplistic 'authenticity' or commodification binary. Instead, Asians are fighting back against these 'othering' discourses

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<sup>2</sup> See discussions of Asian youth movements (AYM) of the 1970s and 1980s such as the Southall Youth Movement (SYA) which developed as a direct response to police inaction over direct racist attacks of Asians, including the killing of Gurdip Singh Cheggar in July, 1976 (Sivanandan, 1981, 1982; Ramamurthy, 2006a, 2006b).

through the practices of production and consumption. Rather than inhabiting a marginalized position, they use evasive action strategies and claim a more dominant cultural space using hip hop and urban music as a site for such claims. This is because hip hop as a globalized form of hyper-commodified culture works both within and against capitalism (Rose, 1994a; Gilroy, 1994, 2004; Negus, 2004; Sharma, 2010). Hip hop has always had a complex and ambivalent relationship towards dominant ideologies. What had once been a decidedly counter-hegemonic form of expression has now come to be an exemplary form of music as global commodity (Condry, 2006). Thus, the relationship between hip hop and the Asian scene speaks to a more complex set of interactions within the Asian scene between dominant and alternative ideologies, creating alternative narratives of identity and experience.

### **‘Fear of Small Numbers’<sup>3</sup>**

Issues of national security are often seen or positioned as being at odds with freedom and liberty in times of war. From the unlawful indefinite detention of terrorist suspects and illegal immigrants, to the widespread censorship of what may be considered inflammatory or sensitive material, the war on terror curtailed many freedoms for the sake of national security (Kundnani, 2007). Arun Kundnani writes that there are such limitations on freedom of speech that ‘hundreds of thousands of people in the UK have thereby been placed in a position where expressing their political views might be a criminal offence’ (2007:179). Increasingly, what needs to be asked is whether popular culture(s) and specifically Asian youth cultures can be seen as activities and practices that are even allowed to be ‘resistant’?

One consequence of our ‘state of exception’ (Agamben, 2005) and encroachment on freedoms includes the heightened suspicion of public figures in conjunction with the increased surveillance of public space.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Fear of Small Numbers’ refers to the title of Arjun Appadurai’s book (2006) in which he argues that global unrest, fear and uncertainties result from a fundamental anxiety resulting from globalization. The most easily identifiable face of globalization tends to be in the presence of minorities who become the misidentified target of fears and hatred.

There is a greater cost for certain people to engage in critical social and political commentary. The political and cultural climate post 9/11 and 7/7 has made it more difficult for British Asians, Muslim or otherwise, to just be. Minority artists are still burdened with the role of representing some larger community and some minorities are burdened with this more than others so that to speak as an 'Asian' artist means that you often are seen to speak for all Asians (Hall, 1993). Consequently, artists in the Asian scene have more at stake when it comes to politicizing their message through music, because they would have to consider the negative and potentially dangerous consequences of such actions to themselves, to the scene and potentially the British Asian community as a whole. Being in a position in which they are cultural producers, 'symbol creators' (Hesmondhalgh, 2007) and public figures their actions engender more suspicion by media and the state. Some Asian artists are mistakenly perceived as 'political' despite their avoidance of such sensitive topics.

For example, rap collective SONA Family found success here in Britain but also in India and in parts of the Middle East. They went on tour to India and Dubai. SONA Family had the opportunity to conduct a US tour in the summer of 2008, which was eventually cancelled because they were denied entry to the country. According to their MySpace page (<http://www.myspace.com/sonafamily>), US Homeland Security 'questioned them about their ethnic origins and religious beliefs and why they have performed in a number of politically sensitive countries.' US Immigration has demanded that they apply for approved entry into the USA every time they visit, either for business or holidays 'for the foreseeable future'. They never got to go to the US for their tour. Since then, they have disbanded and are now working on solo projects. The greatest irony here was that their music was probably the least 'political' of any music group within the scene. They made infectious 'party' dance music, fusing different sounds together, inspired by Bollywood music. This example highlights how the threat of terror evokes a fear that 'inhibits the ability to identify risk and danger', leading to moments of 'pure absurdity' (Back, 2007:145&ff). When bands like SONA Family become targeted for potentially disseminating inflammatory

material, this suggests that there is a level of 'misrecognition' that goes on in which cultural markers such as beards, or in this case, too many foreign stamps on a passport, start to take on deadly significance despite their seeming insignificance. Even the littlest thing such as listening to 'London Calling' by the Clash becomes potentially dangerous evidence of a terrorist impulse (Back, 2007).

As Les Back (2007) astutely points out, a politics of misrecognition 'licenses racism'. SONA Family was targeted because, in the eyes of US security officials, being British Asian became conflated with being Muslim. Moreover, security officials assumed that their music would be political, based on their ethnicity and supposed religious affiliation. Examples of such state sanctioned and official forms of racism damage freedoms of expression through an 'empire of fear' which has the power to suppress certain forms of cultural expression and encourage people to be cautious and less willing to take certain risks for fear of censure.

Here, Mandeep, music video director, said to me:

I don't have any personal political motives. I'm not going to make any overt political statements. It's quite tricky, it's a bit of a minefield actually. I was talking to some other producers who wanted a video done. The content of the song isn't political but there were a lot of cultural references, not religious, but cultural. But even with culture closely comes religion, especially with Indian culture. I could have picked particular colours, insignia, things like that, iconography within the video but I'd be making a statement for no reason. There are too many people who are too delicate and take offence to things as well. That's the thing, it's not political, we're too politically correct nowadays and that's filtering into mainstream society.

The fear of being marked as someone producing something potentially offensive motivated Mandeep to steer clear of making certain aesthetic choices in his music videos. In particular, Mandeep specifically discussed the use of potentially offensive religious iconography to represent various cultural references. The current political climate has made religion and culture the premier site of tension and conflict. His reluctance to use politicized religious

and cultural statements within his work suggests that there is more at stake when you are an Asian cultural producer making politicized work that might be read as something incendiary. Mandeep's opinion provides an example of how the everyday ways in which people live with difference are being profoundly affected by the fear, suspicion and stereotyping of minority groups. The renewed emphasis on a coherent national culture and a focus on the formation of a prescribed 'British' identity as a solution to terrorism and religious fundamentalism have narrowed the remit of how artists and cultural producers can express their identities.

Amneet, 25, a self-confessed Asian music fan who works in ethnic media and public relations, talked about how she was wary of Asian music artists with a political message. She worried that it would be misconstrued, exaggerated and sensationalized by audiences and by the predominantly white British media.

Helen: So you think that being political, being critical and also being a musician and Asian reinforces certain stereotypes of Asians that are bad?

Amneet: Yes, definitely. That's a good thing about Jay Sean, Raghav, HDhami, Juggy D they're easy-going, happy go lucky guys who are apolitical. They're just out there to have a good time and have a good laugh. You've got your Riz MC<sup>4</sup> and singing about 9/11 and is that really needed?

Helen: Do you not think so?

Amneet: Who is he trying to target? Who is he singing to? Is it mainly to the people that he's singing about? If so, aren't they just gonna get really pissed off with what's going on and then another backlash? Those things aren't needed. Because you can talk about the injustices and all that's going on but who's gonna listen to that? The people who are going to do it and then they are going to ostracize these people once again. It's just the whole thing with post 9/11 you know it's gonna cause controversy with the whole Bush administration and what America did

Helen: But isn't that a good thing?

Amneet: Well, yeah, but it depends on who is listening to his music. If it's just the Asian people listening to his music then they're gonna get really pissed off and think 'oh we hate the West'. These people [music artists] have so much power and I don't think they use it the right way all the time.

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<sup>4</sup> Riz MC is a well-known MC and actor. He released his debut single 'Post-9/11 Blues' in 2006 and it promptly stirred up controversy on TV, radio and newsprint. Since then he has garnered much praise from BBC Radio 1 and has released two more singles. He signed with the global dance label Crosstown Rebels which is unusual as it is known to be a dance and electronic music label. He has also starred in numerous roles in British independent films and TV shows from 2006 onwards.

Helen: Okay, but why is it a bad thing to talk about some of the struggles and issues and be critical of mainstream white culture and being a voice for British Asians?

Amneet: Because he's not projecting it the right way.

Helen: Okay, so what is the right way?

Amneet: To talk about it in the right way is to not bring up more angry feelings...It just stirs up hatred and bad feelings.

To Amneet, the political nature of Riz MC's work and his profile as a British Pakistani Muslim could only serve to reinforce certain stereotypes of Asians as 'bad' citizens and potential terrorists who seek to undermine a 'British' way of life (McGhee, 2008). While of course many would and have disagreed with Amneet's opinions about Riz MC, her reaction deserves mention because it highlights the very real sense of fear, risk, ambiguity and discomfort that many young Asians within the scene feel around the issue of threats of terrorism, and the increased targeting and racial profiling of Asians in Britain as related to terrorist threats within a post 7/7 climate. Amneet's reaction is a reminder that there is more at stake for certain groups to make political statements during a time in which they are (mis)represented as 'radical', 'dangerous' or in 'crisis'. Asian cultural producers and consumers are often hyperaware that any overt political critique during these times of war can be misconstrued as some sort of criticism against a supposedly British way of life. As Banerjea pointed out earlier (2002), British Asians have been made to feel as if they never truly belonged in Britain. Thus public debates relating to British Asian communities are often perpetually framed around issues of citizenship, cohesion and belonging that rests upon what has been argued as monocultural and racially exclusive definitions of 'Englishness' and/or Britishness (Back, 1996; Gilroy, 1993a).

Mentor and his good friend, a Canadian artist by the name of Blitz wrote a song together commemorating the deaths of 7/7 entitled 'Seven Seven<sup>5</sup>'. Here his brief explanation of the song reveals his careful hesitation in broaching the topic of 7/7 during our interview:

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<sup>5</sup> 'Seven Seven' was released on the full length album by Mentor Kolektiv (including Mentor, Des-C, A.C., Blitz, Mr. Mak) entitled 'Broke' in 2005.



Mentor: I did a track called 7/7. Um, we actually recorded, we wrote and recorded it on the day of the London bombings. We actually sent it out to the radio that day but no one even picked up on it until months later, because it was too close—it was too close to the time. And it was nothing, it was nothing negative towards the event ...just a recollection on what had happened that day, and our thoughts and feelings on the whole incident. It was nothing politically about—it was nothing political about it. It was more of a kind of...we're shocked this has happened, we pray for the people who passed away, and we pray for their families kind of thing. And there was no negative connotation to it, and it was all kind of a recollection of our thoughts and feelings about what had happened that morning....

Helen: like a memoir, almost?

Mentor: Yeah, a memoir in a way, yeah.

Mentor repeatedly reassured me that there was nothing in the song that could be interpreted as reactionary, reproachful or disparaging about the attacks or the aftermath. This reaction reveals how these suspicions of wrongdoing or political message haunt him and his work. His reaction shows how he anticipated or even expected a negative reaction in response to his explanation behind writing this song.

He chose not to release it to the public in the end. Unlike with SONA Family, he did not come under suspicion by the authorities in any direct manner but as he pointed out, radio stations refused to air the song for months afterwards because the timing was inappropriately 'close'. Their refusal to play it put Mentor in a difficult and uneasy position. As an Asian artist, Mentor's position and experiences were viewed as being uncomfortably 'close' to the subject matter that then made him suspect. His Asianness undermined his authority to speak from an 'objective' place (Alexander, 2004). Ultimately, this perception of 'closeness' limited his opportunity to speak out against this tragedy and express his grief and sadness.

Despite these constraints, Mentor and Blitz's memoir also serves as an example of the potential for creative production to challenge or circumvent racist structures. Hall (1992) reminds us that popular culture often provides people with an opportunity for dialogical engagement with social issues. Thus the very act of producing a song provided the means for Mentor and Blitz to engage with

and respond to the tragedy and its subsequent media coverage. The song voices the alternative perspectives of a British Asian MC and a Canadian Asian MC that presents a departure from the often sensationalist, inaccurate depictions of Asians constructed by the media in the aftermath of 7/7. The production, and then the eventual release of this song, articulate their strong desire to communicate their alternative message of hope, grief and remembrance to the British public. This is exemplified by their use of samples of news reports throughout the song that illustrates the 'official' versions of the events and their unofficial accounts that they offer up side by side.

The song is introduced by a sample of a news reporter's voice and the mournful wail of police sirens in the background. The sample is of a reporter stating that bombs have gone off on tube lines and buses. The contrasting melodic sounds of the flute and percussion are then introduced, forming a soothing contrast to the urgency and terror of the news soundscape. Blitz then narrates his reaction to the news reports of the bombings. Each rapper offers up his own narrative to the accounts, to which the chorus responds 'extra extra read all about it, bombs have gone off and the people are shouting' as if they too are reporting the news. In appropriating the sensationalist language used by the news media, they are mocking the authority of the official narrative. The sound bites of news reports are juxtaposed by their verses. In doing this, they speak back to and engage in a dialogue with the voices of these authoritative accounts of the bombings that have continually drawn upon the British Asian identities of these young suicide bombers.

Despite it being a sensitive issue, Mentor and Blitz eventually released their lament along with their full length album. Thus, while there are structural constraints that act to censor these artists, the song stands as a reminder that there are avenues for creative agency. These everyday creative practices offer ways to circumvent such fears, suggesting censorship is not the only outcome of the 'war on terror'. Thus, while these new forms of 'cultural' racism and Islamophobia are indeed real and affect the lives, opportunities and outlooks of British Asians, the everyday acts of creativity demonstrate that caution must be

exercised to not overstate the impact of these structural forces that act upon these young people. In fact, everyday acts of creativity are being circulated that disrupt such overly deterministic readings of the state, media and power.

Thus, within the contemporary political and cultural terrain, I argue that scene members must negotiate prevailing images of British Asians which automatically place upon them the burden of politicization. This means that, as British Asian artists, they are automatically assumed to occupy a particular political position and that their music will articulate such a position. However in the next section, I discuss how much more complex and ambivalent these positionings are, signalling a more diverse, multiply located and contradictory cultural politics being practiced. Often this is not negotiated on a clear political position, but on highly individualized associations, rooted and shaped by local identities. These positions challenge the conventional ways in which Asians have been positioned around ideas of traditionalism and 'otherness'.

### **'We're Just Like Everyone Else' - Identifying with the majority**

Popular culture has often been conceived as a site of resistance, but it is more often than not an ambivalent and contested cultural terrain. Popular music is a fluid site in which people accept, negotiate and sometimes outright reject dominant ideologies of the time, namely with certain ideas of identity, belonging, religion, 'race' and nationalism (Hall, 1996; Storey, 1999; Negus, 1999).

In the following section, I explore how popular music is often 'constructed as a discourse of protest' and how that burden shapes issues within the Asian urban music scene (Peddie, 2006, p. 18). I uncover the complex and ambivalent relationships many Asian artists and fans have with politics, that are often tied in with broader class and racialized concerns in Britain. Questions of what it means to be political for young Asians and whether the scene provides a

location for a politics necessitates looking at cultural and local specificities entangled within wider processes of consumption, global commodification and postmodern youth cultural identities.

I start out with a comment made by Ashanti Omkar, a DesiHits.com DJ, who voiced an argument commonly made about contemporary Asian urban cultural production. She explained:

Helen: One of the big distinctions between like MIA and Riz MC and they're expressing political opinions and Nitin Sawhney but they seem to be on the fringes so do you think you think that within the Asian scene there is that potential?

Ashanti: Like I said before, there is always potential but people don't seem to want to leverage that. I mean maybe with Juggy D he is saying something political but I don't understand the language. Jay Sean is just pure R&B, he's not really interested in that message. I think hip hop probably has the biggest potential but again, I would say there are only a handful who are writing conscious lyrics so there are people like Riz MC but the rest of them are only interested in the glamour and oh I'm going to wear the 'bling'. There are so many hip hop artists I've interviewed and they've never had a message to their music.

She argued that contemporary global hip hop and urban music valorized outrageous materialism and excessive consumption. According to Ashanti, it is a 'get rich or die trying' nihilism over hip hop's once counterhegemonic message that wins out with young people. The commercialization of hip hop has been a widely discussed issue, in which the 'corporate entertainment industry' turned hip hop into a 'self-conscious business activity' (Negus, 2004; Rose, 1994a; Chang, 2005; Neal, 2004a; Negus, 2004). The process of hip hop's transformation from the 'street' to the 'superstore' (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk, 2005:40) could be explained through capitalism's demands for expansion where there needs to be a constant discovery of new markets and commodities. Stuart Hall notes that a capitalist logic within processes of globalization creates a 'global mass culture' which is 'absorptive' and is a 'peculiar form of homogenization' (1996:179).

One consequence to this process of diffusion and capitalist expansion is the lack of a well-defined 'mainstream' position within music and politics as distinguished from an alternative or identifiably oppositional style, music or identity (Hesmondhalgh, 1999; Muggleton, 2000; Thornton, 1996). In David Hesmondhalgh's (1999) article on 'indie' labels and their connection with the practice of an oppositional politics that eschewed corporate capitalist interests in music, he writes that despite the adherence to such politics (which often was the original catalyst for the creation of independent distribution labels), many of them were either bought out by the major labels or adopted similar business practices, thus making them difficult to distinguish from their mainstream counterparts.

Nerm, producer and BBC Asian Network radio DJ outlined a similar process of mainstreaming that occurred with his band when independent 'outsiders' eventually became a part of the 'mainstream'.

Nerm: It's weird when you start being the establishment...We started off as punks and 'two fingers up to the establishment and we'll always will be punks, and will always be outsiders which is fucking ironic considering we're a part of the BBC.

Helen: And that's what you consider the mainstream?

Nerm: Yeah...and actually, the underground is increasingly becoming the mainstream. Rihanna Britney, they're all working with underground producers...I could reel off R&B artists working with underground producers, so in a weird way, we're becoming the norm, the centre... But yeah, there is still an establishment and in Britain there always will be. So we've tried to fuck shit up on the inside but I'm not sure how successful we were...

The significance of Nerm's statement lies in how he recognizes the process of mainstreaming that is occurring in which underground music of which he was a part started to become the 'norm' and 'centre'. Despite this shift, he still continued to position himself and the band as part of an 'underground' even though their actual position towards the mainstream had changed throughout the years. This signals how an oppositional identity often forms independently from this perception of the mainstream, so that you can identify with being 'alternative' and underground without eschewing a place within the mainstream music industry. This highlights two shifts. First, that the

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mainstream space is much wider and more diverse than it was once perceived: it could be argued that there is more than one dimension of the mainstream within contemporary cultural production. Second, it follows that because there is more than one mainstream, those formerly considered part of the 'underground' and the 'alternative' can still retain that sense within the mainstream. In fact, their appeal lies within the fact that they are valued within the mainstream as being 'alternative'. That value does not diminish when it becomes a part of the mainstream – instead, it becomes more widely shared by people than it once did.

These shifts can explain how bands such as the 'Asian Underground' continued to be perceived as alternative despite their relatively mainstream success. The 'Asian Underground' refers to a loose genre of British Asian bands. Many of the bands supported a leftist radical politics referencing a long tradition of leftist politics and punk rock. *Rolling Stone* called Asian Dub Foundation 'musical colonisation in reverse' and characterised their lyrics and music as full of 'noisy uprising'; reviewer Josh Kun remarked that it was 'impossible not to get swept up in the rush' (Kun, *Rolling Stone*, 10 Dec. 1998). Groups such as Asian Dub Foundation, Talvin Singh, Nitin Sawhney, and States of Bengal, were taking Indian classical instrumental sounds, such as the tabla player, and fusing them with electronic beats, synthesizers, thus creating and establishing new sounds, beats and genres. Sharma et. al (1996) wrote that the Asian Underground managed to 'flip the script' of normative perceptions of Asians. Instead they offered up alternative identities of being 'Asian' that disrupted the way in which Asians were perceived and represented in Britain.

Nerm was influenced by the radical politics, image and sound of the 'Asian Underground' and welcomed the Asian Underground's embrace of alternative identities. Here Nerm explained how people were working with different ideas of the 'mainstream' within the Asian music scene and how the scene became a site for the struggle between competing notions of what music production 'should' look and sound like, and what cultural values they should represent.

He said:

Nerm: I think the Asian scene is fractured because of...if it exists at all; it's because of people's mind-sets...a conservative, typically Asian mind-set.

Helen: What is the typically Asian mind-set?

Nerm: 'We must stick to our own'. Same as you get in any fucking minority, it's the same shit. The thing is with the Asian Underground-- it caught me, I was a massive fan, still am a fan. It was something that gave me an identity beyond what I've perceived was available in bhangra and Bollywood. The Asian Underground happened but then the word 'Asian' got hijacked by bhangra and Bollywood massive. And that's why we at Soundsystem Collective with everything we do, we had to run as far away from that as possible because suddenly the word 'Asian' became synonymous with bhangra and Bollywood...and a lot of stuff that was great. It was wonderful, I'm not ashamed of that but I don't feel a fucking affinity with that. I'm on a different kilter to that. Suddenly being lumped into all that was like, really, fuck, we just suddenly had a different identity and now it's been taken away from us. And I was like, oh man, I don't go to R&B clubs and get drunk and cause fights. I don't have an issue with my wife or girlfriend talking to other men. I don't give a shit. I'm not from that insecure, conservative mind-set.

Thus, in Nerm's articulation of the Asian Underground's meaningful impact on his own identity in process, he illustrates how there is a politics of Asian music production. Cultural production acts as a battleground between the Asian Underground and the bhangra/urban music scene, where what is at stake is the right to define and speak for Asians. These identities of being 'alternative' or being a part of the 'Asian massive' are constructed in the context of class and gender tensions. For instance, Rey Chow (1995) contends that women's bodies and sexuality become the sites where male rivalries are visibly staged. In fact, Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989, 1993) have argued that gender acts as ethnic markers or boundaries such that women often become cultural transmitters as well as reproducers and figures of purity and honour. Through these roles they become the 'ethnic resources' of a community. Here Nerm identifies how women's purity and honour are policed through typically male behaviour. Nerm defines himself and the politics of the Asian Underground as counter-hegemonic to these hyper masculine practices that associate with conservatism and culture of the 'masses'.

Asian cultural production and the loss of particular radical, minority oppositional stances becomes a story about the struggle between competing 'underground' and 'dominant' claims to an 'Asian' identity. Both scenes have a stake in what it means to be 'Asian' by hailing it as an identity, but as Nerm claims, eventually the urban 'Bollywood and bhangra massive' emerged as the dominant narrative to counter these alternative claims to an 'Asian' identity.

Mandeep offered an explanation as to why and how the 'bhangra and Bollywood loving massive' (as Nerm coined them) acquired hegemonic ownership of Asianness within the spaces of popular culture and music. Here he discusses how the rise of an Asian middle class in Britain fundamentally impacted upon Asian popular culture. Mandeep argued that greater affluence for many within the Asian urban scene led to a decline in oppositional identities and music and the development of a politics of 'sameness' and assimilation in which the claim 'we're just like everyone else' became the chief outlook.

Mandeep: In the eighties, that's when it was 'we're maintaining our culture' for the sake of our future generations, and then it became this political thing with ADF, Fundamental, Aki Nawaz and all that lot and then they had something to stand up for, stand up for your rights, cause I suppose that was the sort of time when the concept of the institutional racism came about, the police, the riots, and it's not just an Asian thing, it's the black community too. That's when the political term 'black' was around, was around the seventies through to the eighties. Um, so now it is more escapist, well, it's the candy coated world we're living in. There aren't any economic hardships, or political problems happening on our doorsteps...We haven't got any direct struggles in front of us, again, about the black music that was struggling out of slavery, we're not struggling out of anything to be honest, we're quite affluent, we are over-represented in education, and we do well for ourselves

Helen: So you think that feeds into the underlying desire to make music, it's about affluence, it's about taking it for granted that Asians are like everyone else. Mandeep: Yeah, well they are, like pretty much like everyone else and it's not about emulating affluence, it's about maintaining ambition...

As many adopted a middle class existence of comfort and security, they traded in their resistance to the very norms and hierarchies that 'othered' them and curtailed efforts to succeed. A sense of satisfaction with the status quo grew. Thus, Mandeep's statement reminds us that a community's link to a practice of oppositional collective politics is determined by the broader political, social and



economic circumstances of those times. Yet, it is also important to point out that this narrative of prosperity and betterment is more applicable to certain communities than to others. Here Mandeep is referring to his own experiences and that of the local Punjabi community of London.

Mandeep's perspective echoes Ballantyne's account (2006) of the rise and the end of 'black bhangra' in Britain in the 1990s. Ballantyne argues that during this time, South Asians were becoming increasingly assimilated into the British middle class:

'Greater attention was directed to the success of South Asian entrepreneurs and both mainstream and community media placed a renewed emphasis on the pursuit of material wealth and political influence, often at the expense of social justice and the protection of the community's welfare' (2006:146).

Thus, the middle class takeover of 'Asian' cultural production meant that music, too, had changed in its content. If music was meant to be an articulation or a snapshot of everyday life, these young Asians were no longer speaking from a marginalized position. Instead, they were now identifying with a mainstream politics and outlook. Thus, the marginal location of radical political movements - the location of the 'underground' - was slowly becoming less relevant and meaningful to young people's everyday experiences of living in Britain.

Additionally, Mandeep's comment serves as a reminder that these forms of cultural production are not just meaningful because they act as sites of resistance to dominant ideologies and values. That is, popular culture is just as significant because it provides pleasure, enjoyment and fun to everyday life. Cultural texts do not always have to have a deeper meaning in order to be relevant; nor do they even need to be meaningful in a cultural studies context of understanding. Asian music does not always need to be read through the framework of resistance and power.

Having said that, Mandeep's statement reflects how the relatively privileged position of some Asian groups today is a direct outcome of the collective

political movements of a previous generation in the UK. This generation of relatively affluent young British Asians, more conservative and individualised, comes out of those collective movements. To an extent, this link has been devalued or remained unspoken within the Asian communities, and is largely absent from academic literature on 'race' at the time.

In Gautum's problematic statement we can see a hint of that erasure and ignorance of a political history within Asian communities in the UK. He spoke of how conservative Asian immigrant parents just wanted their children to achieve material success without acknowledging the political history that many first generation Asians have created through collective action.

Helen: The Asian music scene now is very specifically politicized as opposed to the Asian Underground scene like Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney.

Gautum: See I would argue that they weren't part of the Asian urban music scene. I would argue that the thing with Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney was that a lot of Asians listened to them, but they were part of the art school scene. And by definition, not a lot of Asians, how many Asian kids were in art schools? Not many for all kinds of reasons for that go back to the parental pressures to go into business, law or medicine because we're immigrants and you don't want to take risks and get a stable footing and that's all reasonable but... so there were a great proportion of people who weren't exposed to experimental art or culture and that includes Nitin Sawhney by definition.

It has also been the case that those of the 'Asian Underground' who championed a view from the margins were perceived within Asian urban youth culture as producing elitist, niche music targeted towards a white middle class audience. Gautum Malkani, author of novel *Londonstani*, raised the astute point that enacting or engaging in a cultural politics of difference was often about having cultural access to the opportunities afforded to those of privileged liberal social, cultural and economic background. Artists who were seen as being on the 'margins' musically and culturally were often not accessible to young Asians at the time. This notion of access relied upon having a certain amount of (sub) cultural capital. The Asian Underground's identity became associated with an 'inauthentic', and more specifically white, middle class audience.

In academia, arts and culture, notions of the subaltern and liminality are celebrated for their creative potential and often valorized as being the exemplary space of identity and culture. Yet this emphasis on the marginal and a politics of difference as reflected in the 'experimental art and culture' of Nitin Sawhney and Talvin Singh, by and large, were inaccessible to the vast majority of people, who saw the space of the 'marginal' as a status they wanted to escape rather than embrace. Liminality and marginality can be seen as positions occupied by a privileged set of people who occupied this marginal space by choice, part of an exercise in a particular lifestyle. Thus, certain forms of political engagement became associated with a white, middle class lifestyle of privilege—a lifestyle that Mentor, rapper and producer, referred to as the 'Guardian reading chinstrokers'. Rejecting such cultural forms and embracing an aspirational form of consumerism, often valorized within hip hop, became a way of resisting or distinguishing themselves from the white middle class. Thus, a politics of difference as expressed by the experimental set became seen as less relevant and meaningful to how young Asians perceived their contemporary class, racial and cultural positions within the UK.

Gautum outlined another problematic aspect of leftist politics which has shifted ground within the last twenty years, to become a location or space that often increasingly excludes the working class and minorities. Instead, the radical margins have become a space for the privileged, university-educated middle classes. Moreover, as with post-feminist identities (McRobbie, 2004) 'new' racial and ethnic subjectivities of minority and working class youth have become constructed and accessed through 'regimes of consumption' (Nayak and Kehily, 2008).

Here Nihal, BBC Radio One DJ, and promoter of Asian club night Bombay Bronx, spoke for the uprooting of identity from the margins to the centre. Nihal gestured toward the increasing individualism of identity when he questioned the assumption that 'identity necessarily determines a particular kind of politics' (Fuss, 1990 cited in Sharma, 2006:7). Nihal argued that there needed to be a different mode and understanding of what is considered political and

‘resistant’ or subversive. In this sense, Nihal argued for there being more subversive models within the mainstream than there are in the so called ‘margins’ within the Asian scene. There has been a departure from the version of identity politics practiced in the 1990s associated with the first wave of ‘Asian Underground’ bands in the UK.

He said:

Helen: And I want to ask, is there this sense of the subversive about the kind of current Asian scene, or a kind of cultural politics within Asian music today?

Nihal: Why does there—well, my quick answer to that is why does there have to be? The Southall Riots happened before the Asian Underground. There was subversive Asian politics which was serious stuff. [Asian Underground] wasn’t lyrically subversive for start. I mean, Asian Dub Foundation were, and Black Star Liner had things to say and obviously Fundamental had a lot of things to say, they were subversive but there were lots of other bands doing that, Rage Against the Machine, Censor, Public Enemy, there was a load of bands coming out doing that. So I’m not sure how subversive it was; it wasn’t there to change the world, and it didn’t change the world, you know. It just introduced new sounds and differences. We’re not any more or less political than we were then.

Helen: With Jay Sean, who doesn’t claim a kind of politics, he’s saying hey look, I’m making R&B

Nihal: But it depends, it depends on [what] your definition of politics is. The political statement Jay Sean’s making is ‘I’m a British Asian and so what? I’m making R&B music, and I’m taking on black people, I’m not purposely taking on black people, but I’m competing with them at their own game which is black music, and I’m doing well, getting signed’...that is a stronger political statement and that is more empowering to British Asians than Talvin Singh winning the Mercury prize which didn’t mean anything because they didn’t know who he is or they didn’t understand his music. So it’s still as subversive, no, not subversive, but it’s a revolution—it’s as significant as anything that’s done before.

Nihal privileges the space of the ‘mainstream’ and believes that this is a space that Asian artists should aim to occupy. Rather than the creation of an alternative space, what is more substantial to Nihal is the incorporation and assimilation of spaces that once were the sole reserve of white artists. In other words, politics to Nihal should be instrumental towards achieving some greater goal. It does not necessitate taking on a radical position outside of the system.

Nihal's statement also brings to light the significance of the continuing politics of race that is being engaged with through an embodied form of politics. This is made evident through the example of Jay Sean. He is identified as an Asian artist within a traditionally black genre or field of popular music who, through his presentation of self, demands a greater awareness of fluid and multiple ethnic representations and identities. Nihal insisted on the need to acknowledge this as an important sign of political progress because it suggested that someone like Jay Sean can be meaningful to a cultural politics of recognition for Asian cultural production without necessarily having to consciously occupy a collective, politicized position. This embodied form of politics offers up an alternative mode of participation, an embodied participation that is rooted in popular culture, youth-oriented, and speaks to an identity shaped by practices of consumption.

Through Nerm's account and Gautum's explanation of the position of the Asian Underground in relation to the bhangra urban music 'massive', we see that both are engaged within a politics of representation: contesting who has the right to speak for and call themselves 'Asians' and determine the meanings behind 'Asianness' within cultural production. Thus, it is a struggle between the different cultural values and tastes espoused by the different social scenes. Each claims to be dominated by the other and each claims a space for themselves within the field of cultural production. Thus, who had the right to be political depended upon the different ways they understood how politics was configured by race and class relations.

The shift away from a conscious and collective politicized practice within the contemporary Asian music scene suggests that identity politics, as they were once enacted and taken up by an earlier generation of Asian artists, were specific to the circumstances and struggles at the time. The radical, politicized minority position that was carved out from the Asian Underground has given way to a messier, ambivalent space that is less 'militant', less connected to a stable collective 'Asian' identity. Yet, as with Jay Sean, there is a consciousness that their positions as Asian artists who are visible, are meaningful. Through

these modes of participation, I argue that they do contribute to these debates about the ways in which Asians are represented and constructed discursively. At the same time, I also point out this increasing individualism poses a problem in that Asian youth (at least within the scene) no longer see a space for collective, politicized action as necessary to the struggle for social justice. Moreover, the data suggests that to a certain extent, Asian youth have become increasingly more conservative in their politics than the previous generation, and the practice of leftist, radical and progressive politics has become a space for white middle classes. Finally, the individualism that marks these fluid, ambivalent and multiple identities is accessed through modes of consumption where youth, ethnicity and 'race' themselves become commodities.

Correspondingly, in the next section, I examine more closely certain practices of consumption within the scene, and the claim that forms of consumption can be linked to the erosion of a cultural politics within the scene. Young people's rejection of an active politicized practice of resistance, particularly through the practices of consumption, necessitates a closer examination of the ways in which 'race' and ethnicity have become particular commodities through which young people engage in culture. However, scholars also claim that consumption is an active process that involves agency, negotiation and creativity (O'Sullivan et al., 1994; Miller, 1997; Ho, 2005; Skeggs, 1997). Many also signal the blurring of the lines between practices of consumption and production. Thus, I will also explore how consumption might yield new opportunities for young people, whose engagement with local and global forms of youth culture as creative cultural resources can also signal the shaping of new political possibilities.

## **The Power of Consumption**

The perception that young Asians suffer from a lack of political consciousness was first introduced to me via an early interview I conducted with Nav,<sup>6</sup> in the

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<sup>6</sup> Nav is Head of Productions at DesiHits.com, an internet radio station devoted entirely to 'desi' music (urban, bhangra and Bollywood genres). Nav also is a long-time DJ and radio host in which he plays a range of humorous, tongue-in-cheek, fictional characters on these shows.

DesiHits.com recording studio out in Ealing, London on a sunny afternoon in July, 2007. Towards the end of the interview, he made the remark:

The ones that hide behind the ADF [Asian Dub Foundation] kind of thing, they gotta water it down, because kids aren't political, they don't even know who they're gonna vote for. Are they gonna vote for Obama or the other guy? They don't read the papers, they're watching MTV all day. They're on our website, hopefully, they're just doing popular culture stuff, so if you drum down all these big words down their throat then they're not really [going to get it].

Young people's political apathy is often perceived as a negative outcome resulting from the increase in youth consumption of goods and lifestyles. Thus practices of consumption are often devalued or derided for being meaningless or signalling apathy, laziness or ignorance towards a wider understanding of political and social events occurring in the world. The common perception tends to be that practices of consumption are ways in which people distract themselves from what is going on in the 'real world'. Greater levels of consumption are often presented as a necessary consequence of globalization, and consumption often is seen as the inevitable outcome of the shift towards post-Fordist service economies of the 'overdeveloped' (Gilroy, 2005) West. Debates on globalization have also focused on the formation of so-called 'postmodern' identities that emphasise the multiple, shifting and the fragmented (Jameson, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1990). The role of consumption plays an increasingly significant role for young people in constructing and experimenting with self-identity (Nayak, 2006; Giddens, 1991; Fiske, 1989) and the practice of politics is no longer centred around a traditional awareness of political parties and institutional politics. Moreover, consumption practices amongst young people suggest that the immediate link between identity and consumption is no longer as straightforward as matching a 'punk' identity to a particular style of clothing. Rather, consumption (as well as production) has become subject to a process of 'bricolage' (Hebdige, 1979) in which objects, especially pertaining to subcultural style, have taken on more fluid, fragmented and ephemeral significance. This means that subcultural styles are no longer fixed to a static and collective 'subculture' but that subjectivities are formed out of a hyper individualistic process which results in people

embracing a whole range of styles without tying them to the expression of a single identity (Muggleton, 2000).

Nerm<sup>7</sup> identified this postmodern process of consumption when he said:

The way people consume music...The era of tribes are dead some people would say so that you're just as likely to consume guitar based music as much as dance music or you know, suddenly get into classical as much as pop music, the latest manufactured brand.

Nav's earlier point out about the need to 'water down' the *language* of politics in order to communicate effectively to the world weary young consumer provides a contrast to Nerm's statement above which suggests a more positive take on youthful processes and the politics of consumption. Nerm's statement seems to imply that young people who are indeed very savvy consumers are strategically dissenting from being pigeonholed by the market.

Certain practices of consumption can be argued to be a powerful way for young people to voice an opinion. Moreover, young people's popular culture consumption practices are often how young people are introduced to a cultural politics and how they can develop a political consciousness. The recent phenomenon of the strength of the 'brown pound' has caused people to sit up and take notice of young Asians as a powerful segment of the market that had previously been overlooked. Again and again, I heard stories from cultural producers who discussed how often white record labels discovered how Asians were an untapped market.

Mentor recalled:

I went with him [Jay Sean] to the signing like at HMV and Virgin, like all around the country and there were hundreds and hundreds of kids turning up and the staff at HMV were like 'wow look at the size and it's like hundreds of Asian kids standing up there like 'whoa, you see this is his market'. So you've got to respect

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<sup>7</sup> Nerm is part of punk electronic collective called Soundsystem Collective. They consider themselves part of the greater London electronic scene. Mohan is a DJ and hosts a popular electronica and dance music radio show on the BBC Asian Network



the fact that there is a market out there and people will go on and support it if they really back their artist and if they believe in the artist. If your people are behind you, they're behind you all the way.

Scholars such as Angela McRobbie (1989), Daniel Miller (1987), Paul Willis (1990) and Dick Hebdige (1979, 1988) have insisted on the sophistication and the agency of consumers rather than supporting the view that they are passive dupes. Material culture studies have emphasized the meaningful connections between objects, values and lifestyles. They recognized that popular culture becomes an important site of struggle between dominant and alternative ideologies. Nerm recognized the more complex and nuanced use of music as critique and as a mode of struggle.<sup>8</sup> Thus, he stressed not the decline of politics within popular culture but the emergence of more complex positions by unorthodox people who happen to be creative artists.

Helen: Right so when you look at Lady Gaga or Prince, they aren't considered political because they're not necessarily talking about resistance like Bob Dylan and stuff. But you're saying that we need to look deeper and stuff.

Nerm: Right, right. So when Prince first talked about AIDS, no one heard of that shit before. And the whole 'Darling Nikki' in her pants, Tipper Gore and PMRC [Parents Music Resource Center]<sup>9</sup> went ape-shit. That's politics! That's the political to the core and there's the more sort of, obvious way like Asian Dub Foundation and stuff. But I think you can politicize things without turning off an audience. That's critical, that's crucial. The stuff I'm saying to you is not stuff I would say to a journalist. I would never talk about orientalisng Asians and stuff—well, I never used to, maybe I should now. As I've said, I'm in a state of flux at the moment. In the past, I've tried to de-orientalize Asian and us and de-orientalize the word Asian and the association with us. It's like fuck, I don't want to just be Asian, I want to be fucking an artist or a record label owner and be of something of value to everyone. That's critical. If you do that through pop music or not, then that doesn't matter. I mean, if music can be throwaway and enjoyed by everyone and have a subtext then great.

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<sup>8</sup> Moreover, Nerm's example echoes many of what scholars of postmodernism and post structuralism were advocating in the 1990s regarding the blurring of distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture.

<sup>9</sup> The Parents Resource Music Center was a US based organization formed in 1985 by then Vice President Al Gore's wife, Tipper Gore as well as three other 'Washington wives'. The idea for the committee was born out of hearing artist Prince's song 'Darling Nikki' which appeared on the soundtrack to *Purple Rain*. 'Darling Nikki' referenced sex and masturbation. The PMRC recommended that the recording industry provide a rating system and guidelines similar to film ratings. The PMRC also went on to recommend further action such as printing lyrics on the covers and pressuring stores to hide explicit album covers.

However, because of the unstable and multiple identity positions opened up by postmodernity, globalization and advances in technology, views articulated within popular music sometimes challenge but also collude with dominant ideologies rather than always taking on a counterhegemonic position. Nerm conveyed this ambivalent position when he stated that he was in a 'state of flux'. He would rather be strategic about his cultural politics and he finds that his ability to use tactics in order to entice a larger audience very important to the politics of doing music. To state a particular position publicly he risks becoming tokenized as the marginal 'Asian', with a specific message and set of politics, and that is a position he is mostly unwilling to accept. Moreover, his own sense of whether people may be able to gather a more serious 'subtext' to certain forms of music is something he is ambivalent about as well.

As Nerm pointed out, popular music is a site that allows both meaningful critical and counterhegemonic practices as well as music that is de-politicized and void of political meaning. Moreover, Russell Potter (2006) writes that in the age of post-mechanical reproduction, the distinction between production and consumption has virtually been dissolved. Within this small scene where producers and consumers operate more closely with each other, this can lead to tension between what cultural producers want to say and what they think audiences and fans want to hear.

This tension between what cultural producers claim they want to produce, and what consumer tastes are perceived to be, is present in what AG Dolla recounts to me when he says he must adopt a softer approach to his message, combining it with 'party' sounds so that people are more likely to listen to it, enjoy it and learn from it.

First of all, the general public, I would say, they don't listen to music and those that do, they don't buy it. A lot of people are like, especially the Asian industry, actually the Asian industry don't want anything deep, they're want la di dadi, let's party sort of stuff, and I gave it to them in 'Rap Deep', but I gave it to them in such a way that it was like, you know what, this is something different, but it's simple so they understand it.

This view of an Asian mass culture that demands to be entertained rather than educated is often a smokescreen for the strategies that cultural producers often use, for their own tactical engagement in a cultural politics that neither fits into the authenticity or commodification binary that exists. Artists like AG Dolla and (as we will see below) Riz MC count on a sense of authenticity about their positions as conscious artists who engage in social critique through their music. They cannot necessarily afford to show how strategic or calculating these choices are without disrupting or making transparent these calculations.

Riz MC admitted that there is a negotiation that occurs between being able to speak that message AND being able to get that message across to as many people as possible. Here he explained how one has to strike a careful balance between the two goals in order to be most effective.

On one level, I am like, kind of, covertly throwing the fist up and representing... maybe I am on some level but the way to do that is to have that fist in your pocket, you know. It goes much further and makes much bigger changes, hopefully and take it somewhere new and more inspiring... Like the thing I was most proud of about that was the fact that my single because it was humorous in its tone, people listened to it that wouldn't—it wasn't just people who were more into me that were listening to it, and people who were already pre-disposed to listening to political hip hop, you know, um... it kind of graduated beyond that, so it was like, people listened to it because it was funny, and then you've snuck in some politics into that. I mean, I could easily write a whole album all about the Bradford riots, Zhareed Mbarak's killing in prison, I know lots of the ex-Guantanamo Bay inmates. I'm heavily involved in Amnesty and this stuff is always bubbling up in me, and I could write a whole album on it because this is probably the stuff I'm most passionate about but that would be self-defeating. I think because only a certain type of person would listen to it. If I was like singing about politics, politics, social, social, I think it would ghettoize it. It's what it's about now, trying to walk the line, pick my battles a bit more...

In one sense Riz's careful and deliberate masking of his politics reveals an awareness of the fact that he is aware of and does take into account that politics just does not sell in the same way that humour does. He does care about whether his music is commercial enough to appeal to a certain number of people. In another sense, Riz recognizes that communicating a particular message is not a straightforward process. Instead, it is always unstable based on what the producer's 'preferred' message is and the way it is 'read' by the

audience (Hall, 1980). It comes with the recognition that audiences are not passive but that there is indeed an active process of negotiating meaning. Riz is suggesting even that the very process in which his songs are being 'read' or understood is in itself a political act.

Riz is using the medium of popular culture as a tool to articulate an awareness of, and challenge to, current social and political injustices in a more inclusive and democratic manner. He sees that popular music opens up a space for such a challenge through other means such as humour, wit and parodic performance, which has historically been a popular form of subversion of dominant structures (Bakhtin, 1984). This view of popular culture credits this type of cultural engagement by acknowledging its importance as an everyday practice of critique.

For example, Nav has created two alter egos who are the radio personalities for urban music shows on the DesiHits.com internet radio. One figure is Terri Mardi and the other is Ghetto Guru. Here is how Nav explained both their characters.

Terri Mardi is really important to me, I mean, in most-many ways, Terri Mardi is more me than Nav is me. Terri Mardi, means 'your mama' in Punjabi. Now who am I saying Terri Mardi to? It's a private joke, I'm saying it to the ignorant white [kids who once made fun of me]. It's like a sneaky little under my breath joke inside joke, and all the desis in the world who get the joke and all the non-desis who find out what it means, they're in on the joke. When Tommy Hilfiger stood up a few years ago and said 'if I'd known that black people would buy my brand, I never would have started it in the first place' do you remember that? [yeah] I got offended by that. I went and burned it. I was like 'fuck you, I do not want to wear your clothes and I'm not going to make your brand any more successful than it already is.' I decided I wanted to create a brand called Terri Mardi and a character called Terri Mardi that was gonna be like FUBU, 'For Us, By Us'. So Terri Mardi stands for a two- finger salute to oppression...It's kind of like Rebel with a Cause, but it's got a South Asian thing, because it has a double meaning, Terri Mardi, I tell this to Punjabis. So I wanted to really put this idea out there amongst the youth that you know what? Be funny, be out there, be shocking, really stand out in society, really be whatever you want to be and I have this desi circus, because anyone, all the freaks out there, the outcasts, the people with you know, the ones that are nerds, the emo kids, all the kids that aren't a part of this douchebag society, yeah, there's a place for you.

Terri Mardi's 'story' is that he is a circus ringleader who is meant to be English and speaks with a 'proper' Queen's English upper class accent. Yet his name which is a rude pun in Punjabi undermines that stuffy, English authority. In this way Terri is an absurd and ridiculous character and a satirical figure.

The potential for practices of consumption and production to become deliberate political acts are outlined within Nav's reaction to the controversy around clothing designer Tommy Hilfiger's racist comments about black people's consumption of the brand. Nav's decision involved creating a fictional Asian character whose name is a sly 'inside joke' who parodizes and subverts the racist structures that would allow for a fashion designer to make such claims. Terri Mardi is the result of a willingness to engage in a cultural politics that utilizes forms of popular culture and the communication medium of radio to offer alternatives to how and what young 'desis' consume.

Tommy Hilfiger, as with other luxury leisure brands such as Ralph Lauren and Abercrombie and Fitch (for the younger set) constructed his brand around an aspirational image of clean cut, sporty American upper middle class life. These brands problematically rely upon images that are almost always exclusively white. Thus, Terri Mardi's 'desi' circus becomes significant as it is meant to be open to all those who are not determined by the market as desirable and who do not fit particular norms of attractiveness and desirability.

Nav's other alter ego; Ghetto Guru operates as a distinct character who is less obviously parodic. Here is how Nav describes how he considers Ghetto Guru significant as a social commentary.

So if Terri Mardi is the British Asian, or the British fool Ghetto Guru is-let's go back to India. Let's go back to something more Indian than Terri Mardi and let's make him rule his roost, and let's make him ignorant. So Ghetto Guru is the messenger that says today's the day that you're gonna understand what it means to be desi, or of the South Asian diaspora or a part of that, which is what desi is. Why does Ghetto Guru wear hip hop clothes, why does he wear a hoodie with bling, and a big fat watch? Yet, on his feet, he wears sandals. That to me is very symbolic. He wears sandals, jeans, bright colourful socks and hip hop clothing, bling, Adidas, but all fake, he wears fake Adidas, sometimes Gucci, GG,

for Ghetto Guru. The reason why it's fake is because all the fakes, even the real stuff, the fakes are made in the East. No one's gonna turn around and say 'Hey man you're like wearing our clothes' because he would say 'Fuck you, made in India, not yours, understand?' Why the name Ghetto Guru? Because we know that hip hop is the fastest growing music in the world and has been for a reason and it's all encompassing and all inclusive of white kids, black kids, Asian kids, desis and it happens to be where British Asian culture, urban and hip hop nightclubs we talked about, stemmed from, so ghetto, let's go back to the ghetto.

Being an internet radio station, they can have a much wider visual presence online and desihits.com has taken advantage of that by visually developing some of these characters and their histories. Therefore, knowing what Ghetto Guru looks like and how he wears certain clothing is integral to knowing his character. Thus we can see that Ghetto Guru wears 'fake' designer clothing and people might interpret some significance from such an act. His love of 'fake' designer clothing, often produced in developing economies such as China and India, points to the unevenness and unequal relations of power of processes of globalization. Ghetto Guru subverts some of these hierarchies of 'fake' and 'authentic' designer through his reasons for loving to wear 'fake' Adidas or 'Gucci' belts because they are made in India and because the 'Gucci' trademark double 'GG' logo stands for the initials for 'Ghetto Guru'. These brand meanings become re-imagined and re-territorialized as something Indian and subaltern rather than being held up as exclusive prestigious goods of a European luxury brand designed for moneyed elites. Thus, these brand names lose their 'aura' and their prestige when they are not recognized for being the expensive, exclusive commodities they are branded to be.

Correspondingly, Ghetto Guru's ignorance towards Western popular culture stems from a similar attitude he holds towards luxury brands. His 'ignorance' is really about being unimpressed and indifferent towards these forms of power, stardom and wealth. He shows up the way in which most people uncritically consume Western (especially American) popular culture and how it has become a form of globalized culture by remaining ignorant of it. Nevertheless, Ghetto Guru's love of flashy jewellery or 'bling' is also indicative of how forms of culture migrate. The specific reference to hip hop through the use of stylistic markers such as the 'hoodie' and the use of the term 'ghetto' in his name

suggests a critique of such markers of an authentic hip hop status. The ghetto is commonly valorized within hip hop as the site of an 'authentic' blackness. Yet, Ghetto Guru's ignorance of its significance but his use of such a symbol shows how the ghetto often, within hip hop, acts as an imagined space, particularly for those who hail it and refer to it outside of the US (such as desis in the UK who have not experienced the ghetto). In other words, it calls into question the validity of authenticity of cultural production as a standard to judge the aesthetic quality of music.

Both characters offer up a humorous critique of the dominant values of capitalism and the market that shapes taste and style within popular culture in Britain. Through humour, parody and the exaggeration of certain characteristics such as one's accent or ignorance, they are creating a carnival-esque parody and critiquing established power structures. Through these characters, Nav means to make more transparent the unequal and often exploitative processes of cultural production and consumption established by the centre towards the periphery. He is critiquing the assumed hegemony of Western cultural production over South Asian cultural production as well as the exploitation of these markets for the purposes of expanding Western influence. Meanwhile, and in direct relation to this, Asian cultural production becomes commoditized, fetishized, and repackaged as a new form of orientalism for Western consumption. The figure of Ghetto Guru confronts the orientalizing impulse by visually enacting some of the absurd forms that it takes on, through his bumbling mix and matching of sandals to gold chains.

At the time I interviewed Nav in 2008, 'The Love Guru' was just released in theatres. The movie stars comedian Mike Myers who plays Guru Pitka, an American who was raised in imaginary Havemakheeta, India until he returns to America to try and best Deepak Chopra from his #1 spot as America's top guru. Images of the 'Love Guru' included stereotypically exoticized and ethnicized images of Mike Myers sporting a long full beard and wearing a kaftan/punjabi like garment, adorned with flowers and prayer beads. Thus, it is difficult not to draw comparisons between the two characters as they do share some

superficial similarities. However, Ghetto Guru's character exists in large part as a critique of the 'Love Guru' image, amongst others, of Asian mysticism and exotica by drawing attention to the fact that these processes are banal and mundane, flipping around the colonial relationship, thus exoticizing and fetishizing the familiar, and making the familiar strange (Geertz, 1994a, b). Ghetto Guru's insistence on all things Indian-made, be it the global name brands whose means of production are dependent upon Indian labour and South Asian labour, or the cultural production of Bollywood, reverses the focus and direction of migrating cultures whereas the Love Guru's actual journey and the focus of the narrative is Western, specifically the US. Thus, Ghetto Guru is exemplary of the opportunities and spaces within the scene to engage in a critical dialogue with the political and cultural issues circulating within popular culture that affect Asian youth. Humour, and the performance of parody, are used in order to make a deeper and more substantial critique of the ways in which Asians are represented and stereotyped as the orientalized, exotic and mysterious figure or as the violent and alienated religious fundamentalist. These stereotypes are both founded upon the notion of Asians as 'other'. However small the listenership of the radio station and seemingly insignificant its presence on the web, it still represents an important political act because it points to how the small, everyday practices of cultural consumption and production question and challenge meanings of cultural texts and encourage the cultural engagement and critique of their young listeners.

In this chapter I argued that cultural production cannot be identified simply as a site for resistance or accommodation, nor are these Asian cultural producers following a strict binary model of authenticity or commodification. The everyday tactics (de Certeau, 1988) produced within this Asian scene present a clear break from this binary and from simplistic models of resistance. For example, these explorations into the everyday interactions of young Asians through their involvement with popular cultural forms highlight the fluid, provisional and ambiguous spaces they occupy and the complexities they navigate in an increasingly fragmented post-9/11 world. The aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7 has precipitated a heightened awareness of difference and the



increased profiling and scrutiny of British Asian Muslims, and consequently all Asian communities have come under greater scrutiny and misapprehension. This has shaped the practices of cultural production in various ways within the Asian scene, in which certain artists have developed and articulated critical, alternative positions against increased profiling, growing sentiments of Islamophobia, and the state's draconian measures against terrorism. Others within the scene have shied away from the spotlight, choosing to develop a profile and image that in many ways rejects the automatic politicization of cultural production.

Moreover, young people are responding to a shifting and fluid space of political engagement within production and consumption that has resulted from global and technological advances. The supposed decline in political engagement by young people stems from a local shift and a redefinition of politics and performance: one that arises out of specific local contexts and contingencies. It needs to be acknowledged that different diasporic histories, geographies and identities of Asian communities in London have contributed to how a strategic politics is practiced and performed. Within the 'desi' scene, the children of Punjabi immigrants tend to be more affluent, less politically and culturally marginalized, and more 'assimilated' to white, middle class norms than the previous generation. Many problematically believe that the struggle to win representation, and gain material and cultural success, are mostly over. Thus, the 'militant' nationalism and 'conscious' message of a previous generation of the Asian Underground bands, which signalled a commitment to a radical, oppositional politics closely linking music production to the practice of an identity politics, is no longer deemed culturally relevant. The radical, politicized minority position articulated in the music of the Asian Underground has given way to an increasingly individualized space that conforms to normative perceptions of 'race', difference and forms of belonging. The embrace of these forms of individualism suggests the closing down of potentially liberating cultural politics for Asian youth.

Finally, I argue that the ambivalent and strategic forms of political engagement are also joined by unofficial and everyday practices of dissonance and critique. By providing access to alternative voices and views that are conscious, critical and engaged in a cultural politics than is usually given credit, the radio characters on [desihits.com](http://desihits.com) are good examples of how humour and insider jokes are used within South Asian cultures to deconstruct and subvert the stereotypical 'orientalized' trope of the Asian other still prevalent in Western culture and entertainment. This occurs on an internet Asian music radio station that caters to a young, 'desi' London audience. These characters are well known and popular, thus many young people are given access to these alternative viewpoints, giving them an entry point into a practice of cultural politics.

In the following chapter, I consider how multiculturalism as practiced and lived out complicates notions of 'home' for young members of the Asian diaspora. I discuss how notions of a shared 'diasporic' outlook brings about a struggle to determine who gets to speak for the Asian diaspora and the concerns over what constitutes a proper level of Asianness, which often manifests itself in the practice of labelling people who lie outside of these normative notions of 'Asian' as 'coconuts'. Theoretical explorations of 'diaspora' focus on its radical potential to de-centre the nation and to challenge notions of ideas of identity and belonging that are tied exclusively to the nation. However, Ien Ang (2001) warns that the 'discourse of diaspora' as part of the contemporary moment is often too uncritically celebrated. Diasporic notions of belonging as practised and lived out, according to my respondents, were often about investing in and imposing prescriptive, homogenizing standards of Asianness onto others. Thus, the disjunctures between theoretical and experiential notions of diaspora were explored in depth.

## Chapter 5: Diasporic Dealings

Sukhdev Sandhu (2003) asks the question 'do Asians belong in London?' This question intrigues because it facilitates a discussion of how Asian cultural production has carved out and claimed a particular space in London. I think about how different aspects of belonging get mapped onto spaces and places. 'Home' is often not necessarily where you live but where you develop a sense of connections and belonging. Notions of place, space and how they add up to a 'home' are multiple, complex and spans what is imagined to what is physical and material.

Questions of belonging, the search for 'home', rootedness, origin and territory in the context of diaspora are central to this chapter. Notions about who belongs where have re-emerged within the contemporary political atmosphere of post-9/11 Britain. Within academic circles, transnational migrations and diasporic movements have been placed as central to our postmodern condition (Hall, 1990; Appadurai, 1990; Chambers, 1994). Despite the perennial associations made of diaspora with movement, diversity and transnationalism (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk, 2005), scholars such as Paul Gilroy (1993, 2000, 2005) and Anne Marie Fortier (1999) remind us that just as often, the other side of diaspora is concerned with origin, fixity, rootedness, place and commonality. These associations have been generally associated with the study of particular diasporic groups, such as with the South Asian diaspora in the UK. That is, studies relating to the South Asian diaspora have often been more concerned with anthropological perspectives and historical accounts; whereas the more creative, 'postmodern' elements of diasporic formations have been centred mainly on black diasporic youth cultures (Alexander, 2002).

In this chapter, I use Sadhu's question 'do Asians belong in London?' to open up a discussion of how people within the Asian music scene with whom I have spent time--artists, producers and consumers--think about and negotiate diaspora, belonging, and notions of 'home' in and through their relationships with the music scene and London. Within the first section, I explore various

kinds of diasporic identities using different tools to do so. These tools, such as the use of labels such as 'desi' and 'coconut', describe a fluid and changing but distinctly diasporic set of concerns. Throughout my time within the scene, I noticed that people would use concepts such as 'desi' to articulate diasporic, transnational and syncretic outlooks and practices. By exploring the meanings of 'desi' I reveal how the making of these diasporic youthful identities is shaped by class, regionalism, and gender differences. I examine how the 'desi' construction reworks narratives of belonging that cut across and bring together local and global spaces so that one belongs to neighbourhoods, to London, to the nation as well as to the wider transnational networks that span across oceans.

Within the second section, I look even more closely at the production of diasporic identities and in particular, I focus on the darker side of the production of diasporic identities present in the practices within the Asian scene. Gayatri Gopinath (2005) contends that a diasporic politics is not automatically progressive on all fronts. Instead, diaspora is often lived out as an essentialist, heteronormative, patriarchal, and politically conservative set of beliefs and practices. Thus, diasporic identities are often much more ambivalent, in that they both challenge and support existing frameworks of inequalities that give shape to them, such as gender, race, youth and class. Thus, in this section, I take the opportunity to discuss how a colloquial term such as 'coconut' becomes used as a means of policing racial and ethnic boundaries for the young people I interviewed. Popular culture becomes crucial to setting up the markers of borders between what constitutes a genuine Asian identity from a 'fake' one. Music often is the primary site onto which people project notions of culture and tradition onto meanings of identity. These markers are indeed fluid, and the borders are fuzzy and constantly subject to change.

Gilroy (2007) has argued that the modes through which a diasporic identity enacts itself are made possible through identifying oneself as a citizen of the city, as opposed to a nation-state. Identifying as Londoners reveals the complex interconnectedness of local, national and global links that shape and rework concepts of 'home' and belonging for those within the scene. I conclude my

chapter with a final section in which I explore further how notions of 'home' have multiple locations as well as multiple meanings connected to their relationships with London and the urban within the British Asian context.

## **Diasporic Dimensions**

James Clifford (1994) and Avtar Brah (1996) argue that there is a difference between theoretical conceptualizations of diaspora and historical experiences of diaspora. However, as Avtar Brah admits, it is not easy to avoid conflating the two. Theoretical conceptualizations of diaspora opened up an initial space in which to think about difference through travel, movement and displacement. Avtar Brah (1996) makes the argument that diaspora works as an interpretive frame in which to understand particular histories of migration of people, culture, commodities and capital. However, in thinking about second generation British Asians, the immediate experiences of migration are less of a focus than the creation of a positioning and space in Britain (Westwood, 1995). Thus this interpretive framework serves to open up an access point into the experiences of the production of diasporic identities and the understandings of identity formation as a continual process. Brah wrote that '[diasporic identity formations] highlight the point that identity is always plural and in process even when it might be construed or represented as fixed' (1996:195). This falls in line with how scholars such as Gilroy and Hall position diaspora as a process of identity (Gilroy, 1993, 2000; Hall, 1990, 1999). Thus, the thing to stress within the diasporic is not about capturing a particular experience or a theoretical perspective, but in understanding that they work together in tandem, both processes informing the other.

Avtar Brah (1996) argues that the concept of diaspora space is marking and is marked by the complex web of power through class, gender, sexuality and racism, so that that the diaspora space is not always transgressive and open. Instead, diasporic spaces can also be exclusionary spaces. Scholar such as Paul Gilroy (2004a) write that often diasporic experiences show us that people continually desire stable, national and 'authentic' identities which are often a

long way off from the open, multiple and rhizomatic, alternative and politically conscious identities that once were thought to be the identifying characteristics of diaspora. Gayatri Gopinath (2005) points out that narratives of the Asian diasporic experience have often overlooked or silenced the marginalized experiences of Asians who were perceived to lie outside the normative framework set up by a privileged few. Internal differences in class and religion have also been used to further marginalize certain groups and enable other groups to have the lion's share of dictating what it means to be British Asian (Modood, 1992; Alexander, 2000, 2003). Thus it is clear that a diaspora politics does not automatically challenge or disrupt normative constructions of gender, 'race' and nation. Attention must be paid to the experiences of diaspora as a contradictory and ambivalent space that should not automatically be celebrated as open and free.

Theorists such as Gilroy (1993a, b, 2004, 2005) and others (see Sharma et. al, 1996; Weheliye, 2005) have often thought through conceptions of diaspora by grounding it in specific experiences within popular culture production. Areas such as popular culture and music have always provided alternative perspectives and outlets for commentary and exploration of issues of culture, ethnicity, identity and belonging. When Gilroy asks, 'how is music used to specify general issues pertaining to the problem of racial authenticity and the consequent self-identity of the ethnic group?' (1993a:76), his question reveals the importance of music in constituting identity. Simon Frith (1992) observes that 'music probably has the most important role in the mapping of social networks...music is in many respects the model for their involvement in culture, for their ability to see beyond the immediate requirement of work and family and dole' (1992:177). Of course, it is important to note that popular culture is often conceived of as *youth* culture and envisioned as being generationally specific. This is evident when Sunaina Maira (2002) contends that popular culture remains the privileged arena in which negotiations of ethnic identity take place because cultural production often challenges monolithic versions of ethnicity. As I have stated in the previous chapter, youthful cultural production is automatically read as an act of resistance. But in many instances, sites and

forms of cultural production offer much more complex positionings that offer counter-hegemonic readings of culture as well as reaffirm dominant ideologies. Forms of cultural production act as (sub)cultural capital (Thornton, 1996) that mark people as scene insiders or outsiders based on their competence and (sub)cultural knowledge. In this way, music becomes the site in which ethnic identities are enacted and performed, where a politics of belonging is actively and often contradictorily negotiated.

Thus, the bringing together of lived experiences of those within the Asian urban cultural production help to explode some of the conventional theorizations of diaspora as continually progressive, open and liberal, beyond the progressive and open spaces that they were once were thought to be. The ways in which diaspora is often imagined and practiced in everyday life where notions such as authenticity, purity of culture, as well as privileging the nation within questions of belonging suggest that diaspora is experienced as something more ambivalent and contradictory than it is presented as being. By thinking about different forms of Asian identities that are commonly referenced and played around with, my aim is to locate the local experiences and politics within the Asian scene within broader debates around dealing with ethnic and racial difference in a post 9/11 and post 7/7 Britain; and to situate them within debates about diaspora and diasporic identities. The resurgence of panic and concern around 'culture', integration of different cultures, and attitudes and values around a so-called singular collective British or Western set of values has made the interventions of diaspora politics seem more important and timely than ever. Many of the conversations and discussions within the scene parallel the questions and views that are circulating within public discourse after the 'death' of multiculturalism and the re-inscription of difference amongst Asians in Britain. This relates in particular to differences around 'race' that are implicit in discussions over religion and culture (Alexander, 2000; Gilroy, 1993a, b; Mamdani, 2004). These conversations and discussions are often responses to the ways in which people are dealing with difference, racism and a kind of return to nationalism and parochialism on an everyday level.

## **How 'desi' is 'desi'? Constructing a 'desi' identity in the UK**

The term 'desi' exists as a term that literally means 'of the homeland', originating from the Sanskrit word 'desh'. It has been used to refer to the Asian diaspora in parts of the world such as the USA, the UK, Canada, and Australia. In this instance, anyone who can claim Asian ancestry can be a 'desi'. Sunaina Maira defines 'desi' as the 'colloquial term for someone "native" to South Asia - one that has taken hold among many second generation youth in the diaspora of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan or even Indo-Caribbean descent' (2002:2).

The term 'desi' is most commonly used amongst younger South Asian Americans whose parents arrived within the post-1960s wave of immigration. Thus, 'desi' is most commonly considered an American identity construction that has been imported to other South Asian diasporic communities. 'Desi' as an identity has been adopted in circles as a means of asserting or reclaiming a sense of pride in being Asian-American, particularly in the face of racism, discrimination and stigmatization of Asians in the US. Maira (2002) argues that by constructing a strong 'desi' identity, Asian Americans are rejecting normative representations of Asians as strange, exotic 'others'. Calling oneself a 'desi' invoked a collective notion of identity through an imagining of community that goes beyond the nation, class and religion. Instead, it imagined South Asian Americans as a wider community that bonded over their shared experiences of being part of an Asian diaspora in the US, regardless of caste, class or religion.

In the UK, the practice of referring to British Asian cultural forms as 'desi' is common. Shows such as 'Desi DNA' featured on BBC and BBC Asian Network cover all areas of current British Asian popular culture including film, music, and the visual arts including fashion and style. Club nights that feature Asian music such as bhangra and hip hop, as previously mentioned, are often billed as 'desi' nights. The internet radio station DesiHits.com, rivalling that of BBC Asian Network in cultural significance as well as in the number of young Asian listeners, plays all the current Asian hits, which allows one to browse online by



artist and by genre, listing them under categories such as 'desi beats', 'Bollywood' and 'hip hop'.

However, the question remains as to whether 'desi' offers meaningful associations to British Asians, as it does for South Asian Americans. 'Desi' as a label or particular form of identity is an unstable and contested construction to use among British Asians. Some openly embrace it, seeing the potential for establishing a wider network and identity with other diasporic Asians. The practice of viewing certain forms of cultural production such as Asian music, art and literature as 'desi' suggests that cultural forms may provide access points towards a transnationally or even globally imagined diasporic community. Yet there are many within the Asian scene who view 'desi' with scepticism and ambivalence. Many see it as either a cynical marketing ploy used to tap into an increasingly affluent young Asian demographic, and also as evidence of the global spread of Americanized popular culture in which 'desi' only serves to recognize and validate a particular set of Asian (American) experiences.

In this section, I explore the nuanced and complex production of Asian diasporic identities using the fluid and unstable meanings of 'desi' as a tool to help illuminate these differences. It is in and through these spaces of music and cultural production that people self-consciously construct a 'desi' collective identity that is in no way stable or fixed but mutable and an always open process which changes with time and space. The ways in which 'desiness' is determined for the people within this scene are not the same ways their parents or even their siblings would determine such things. Thus, differing perspectives on desiness are heavily influenced by generational experiences, as well as by class, nation and region.

Gilroy writes how music, specifically within black vernacular cultures, 'reflect[s] the doubleness...which is often argued to be our constitutive experience in the modern world: in the West but not of it' (2000:135). Similarly, Asian diasporic music such as bhangra music or 'desi beats' has that ability to articulate doubleness. Music can be powerful and potent within the context of identity

production because it provides individuals with the means to create alternative worlds in which there are different models of how to interact with others and how to be (Gilroy, 1993a, b 2000, 2010; Goodman, 2009).

### **'I'm Reppin' 'Desi'**

Nav, who is Head of Productions of internet radio station DesiHits.com, speaks excitedly about the potential of 'desi' within musical expression to articulate a sense of diasporic identification that goes beyond national and local borders. Nav's remarks about the meaningfulness of the 'desi' term demonstrate his optimism about consumption and popular culture as potentially emancipatory and powerful tools for mobilization and change. Nav sees the 'desi' term as a claim that is distinctly diasporic by pointing to being in a 'state of limbo'. This state of limbo allows for 'desi' to be reclaimed as an identity that does not have to follow the same old rules and limitations over who gets to be 'desi' so that it really 'ain't about where you're from, it's where you're at' (Erik B. and Rakim, quoted in Gilroy, 1991a).

Nav said:

We've created this new brand, desi. [It's] a new movement, and it's a sense of ownership and territory... this is the new movement that's coming that I foresee and it's like 'yeah, I'm desi and I'm proud' if you're desi and you know it clap your hands, and non-brown people are joining it, and it's like wow! Mike Myers is joining it, 50 Cent is joining it, Amitabh Bhachchan in it, like it's all mixed, everyone's desi, suddenly when everyone's in your club, everyone, then you don't have to be hostile anymore, there's nothing to protect. I see good things coming...

Nav really identifies with the potential for 'desi' to become a diasporic identity that does not have to be exclusively for Asians but rather gathers its strength from being inclusive. He talks about how other people who are not Asian are also becoming 'desi' which suggests a reading of 'desi' as more of a stance, position or outlook, analogous to the ways in which diaspora has often been conceptualized (see Hall, 1990; Gilroy, 2000b; Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk, 2005). Thus 'desi' seeks to locate a sense of belonging in the multiple and blurred spaces of the transnational, the 'in-between' or the 'interstitial' spaces (Bhabha, 130

1994) more than in the fixed definitions of identity based on monolithic versions of nation and ethnicity. When someone such as 50 Cent - an African American rapper - wants to and can be 'desi', this vision of 'desi' then disrupts the stability and the fixity of an essentialized, monolithic version of Asianness. Thus, 'desi' can work to destabilize such versions of Asianness.

Further, Nav goes on to explain how these shared connections are made and re-made through a *translocal* identity that is informed by a 'desi' consciousness. Nav explained it like this:

So we've got to piss on our ground, mark our territory, and uh, Dubai became a new place to do it. Germany, London, Birmingham, Sydney, Adelaide, Melbourne, take some places in the States, California, Houston, New York, and we start pissing on our territory and marking our spots as a generation, yeah, this is us, little India, just like the Chinese do, wherever they go, they make a Chinatown. So this is us now—our generation-- I rep NY or I rep London, that's my turf and I happen to be desi.

So this particular reading of 'desi' provides a distinctive and generationally specific, urban based view of community and modes of belonging that is rooted in the translocal spaces of cities. That is, rather than the Asian Underground's call for a 'militant nationalism' (Dawson, 2007), the 'desi' connections that are being heralded revolve around an 'outernational' framework (Gilroy, 1995) that involves a constellation of global cities where South Asian communities have settled. As Gilroy (1991, 1993a, b,) has previously argued, identifying as Londoners (or New Yorkers, or from Sydney) as opposed to identifying as British circumvents the nation state- defined parameters of belonging and identity. Global cities such as London allow a specific mode of identification that cannot be easily subsumed under a national identity. Being a Londoner does not necessitate being or feeling British. Moreover, it opens up translocal, more inclusive modes of identification that enable the formation of a wider, imagined interconnected network of global city citizens. Relatedly, when Nav makes the point about 'repping' London or 'repping' New York, this remark also works to illuminate the inclusive mode of 'desi' identity-making because one recognizes

that in 'repping' London one's identity involves a great deal more than a racial or ethnic identification.

Further, Nav discusses how it is distinctly a generational experience because it is the second and third generation who feel 'desi' and seek out connections and envision a shared space with other 'desis'. Desiness is also further cultivated and maintained through the spaces of popular music and culture. For examples, Nav's own [desihits!.com](http://desihits!.com) internet radio station is a 'desi' popular space that focuses on music content that is urban, youth-oriented and diasporic.

However, there are many who would disagree with Nav's perhaps overly celebratory reading of the 'desi' potential to bridge certain internal differences within Asian communities. While it may signal a more open and inclusive understanding of diasporic identities, if, for instance, someone like 50 Cent can be 'desi' then how might there be something meaningful in being 'desi' and Asian? When a term such as desi can take on so many meanings, there is the risk of it becoming emptied of a history and a specific location that erases part of its significance as to how it has become a popular term with Asian youth in the first place.

Further critique of the application of 'desi' comes in the form of a conversation with Adz, owner of online urban records shop, who like Nav, grew up in Hounslow but is at least ten years younger. Adz describes how he understands 'desi' to be a mode of identification for people a few years younger than him.

Helen: So you don't think desi applies to British Asians at all? I mean, like Desi DNA or whatever, do you think that's a term to sell products or is there something meaningful to it?

Adz: No, that's just a term of culture. I might be this is my opinion, young British Asians, I'd say

Helen: Younger than you

Adz: No, no my age, but it's [desi] is more for the Asians of a younger generation, that vibe, that look

Helen: So you don't feel like that applies to you?

Adz: Nah nah, I'd say I'm British Asian

Helen: What's the distinction, between listening to desi music and being British Asian?

Adz: yeah, I hear you, I guess it's just different terminology

Helen: I'm from America, and a lot of Asians there use the term desi to refer to themselves but here it's not a big thing

Adz: Yeah, I hear you. I agree with you, here it's more defining the music, it's not a race sort of thing, it's more about the music

Nevertheless, Adz's analysis of the meaningfulness of 'desi' shares a similarity to Nav's outlook on 'desi' in that they both agree that age becomes crucial to how this term acquires certain meanings. Adz observes that those who are younger than he is (he is 23) identify with the term. Homi Bhabha (1994) wrote that terms of 'cultural engagement' are always produced performatively so that difference is never based on pre-set or essential meanings. 'Desi' can vary greatly in meaning because it is made to exist through the performance and practice of contemporary youth. It can be meaningful to a younger set of people, and taken up as part of a youthful practice within a given scene, in ways that are not relevant for even a slightly older group. With the increase in ties to a global media, opportunities to see how Asian diasporic cultures are produced in the US, Canada and Australia emphasize the connections shared between them. Thus, it may be the case that even just slightly younger Asian scene members might be more willing to see themselves as part of a larger transnational community.

Moreover Adz acceptance of the 'desi' term to signify a music genre suggests that he can concede to the idea that there are shared connections, particularly around cultural forms and products that can connect different Asian communities across geographical spaces. At the same time, Adz's reluctance to see it as a relevant term to describe his and others' identities suggests that while music can be transnational, inclusive and diasporic, travelling across geographical and imagined boundaries, the material realities of bodies and borders are far messier and less easily mobile. It's often easier to accept that cultural forms such as music can be made up of more than a singular national or ethnic culture and can be multiply located. Yet, that multiplicity sometimes is harder to extend to bodies, people and identities.

Nisha, owner of Asian PR firm Sahdev Media, identifies as 'desi' because she associates the term with a Midlands Asian identity and set of experiences. Nisha

is owner of her own Asian music PR firm and is originally from outside of Birmingham. For Nisha, being 'desi' has less to do with class but more to do with regional differences in how one views and practices culture. This mapping of a Midlands inflected set of shared experiences speaks to how Britain's Asian communities have vastly different histories and relationships with the past, with Britain and with a sense of 'home'.

Helen: Earlier, you referred to people who were really into 'culture' as being desi. Can you explain this further? Why would you use it in that context?

Nisha: Yeah, I'm gonna start generalizing the two people, but basically, people from Birmingham are very, very much in touch with their roots... whereas in London, lifestyles are different, people are busy, families are scattered around... Birmingham is just a lot more Indian and traditional, and I'd say probably 60% of the kids here [London] are more into their various music type whereas in Birmingham, people would say 'we love bhangra and that's it!'

Helen: Okay, would you ever refer to yourself as desi?

Nisha: Oh yes, 100%.

Helen: Okay, when I talk to Londoners, of our generation, they don't like to use the word 'desi' because it has certain connotations.

Nisha: Oh no, I'm 100% desi, but again I'm from the Midlands, I was born and brought up in the Midlands. I have a very big family background there and we were born and brought up listening to Indian music. You know, I am very much up for tradition and the festivities that we have, and I try and do them here even though I'm alone. So I would say I'm 100% desi and I do feel that the Londoners our generation, in general, not just the bhangra industry, do shy away from that word.

Nisha speaks about the Asian communities in Birmingham as a singular community and of being from India, so she conflates a sense of being 'desi' with Indianness specifically. She links the Asian communities in the Midlands with the bhangra industry, which is concentrated mostly amongst the Punjabi community (although of course it must be pointed out that many Asians who are not Punjabi or Indian can participate in and enjoy bhangra). However, according to Nisha, to be 'desi' is to be Indian. Conflating desiness with Indianness and moreover, referring to the Asian community as 'Indian', shows how a collective pan-South Asian community and identity is easy to conceptualize but much more difficult to put into practice. The term 'desi' can become a terrain of struggle between different and competing claims to the ownership of the term, for instance between a Punjabi Indian Sikh majority

versus a Punjabi Pakistani Muslim minority. Thus, the boundaries that are drawn re-inscribe the often unspoken internal tensions around nation, ethnicity, religion and regionalism that simmers beneath what may be perceived as a cohesive, tightly knit British Asian community.

In this next conversation, Mandy and Ayesha, both self-professed fans of Asian urban music and avid clubgoers, demonstrate that their own sense of identity is wrapped up in what is and is not 'desi' in these next excerpts, and they see 'desi' not only as a set of diasporic material relations but also acknowledge that they are also imagined.

Helen: This term desi even, isn't that a literal translation of the something like 'of the homeland?' Does that make sense to you?

Ayesha: It does. Cos we've got two terms, there's 'desi' which is from home, and there's 'pardesi' which is from outside. We're 'pardesi' because we're from here and yet, I'd much rather be both [laughs] do you know what I mean? [yeah] It's like...you-you think you're both whereas you're not.

Mandy: Yeah, it's like that mixed insults make you think oh where do really you belong?

Ayesha: It does make you think—

Mandy: It's like an identity crisis

Ayesha: But I don't have an issue... I don't have a problem with my dual nationality, for example.

Mandy: You don't have a dual nationality, you're British!

Ayesha: I have both, I have both passports...Now they're converting it. It'll no longer be a Pakistani passport. It's gonna be an ID card and that's where I get stuck. Basically in Pakistan, it's not on your own identity, it's a man's...that's where your identity card gets made.

Mandy and Ayesha both use this question of what constitutes a 'desi' identity as an opportunity to think about where those lines are drawn in relation to themselves and their own identities. 'Desi' is discussed as having a dual meaning, which is significant because it points to the often overlooked tensions between the 'diasporic' Asian community and the 'native' Asians (Song, 2004:66). The Asian diaspora and Asians in South Asia are discursively produced as two distinct groups, separated by the notion of 'home' as defined by a singular place and territory. This definition of 'home' and 'nation' becomes the criteria used to judge who counts as 'desi'. While Ayesha states that 'desi' is inapplicable to her because she is a part of the diaspora, she also articulates a deep desire to be

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considered 'desi', because it would affirm a sense of belonging to Pakistan and a Pakistani identity. Ien Ang (2001) and Miri Song (2004) both note the often painful ways in which 'native' Asians have drawn 'ethnic boundary keeping' distinctions between the 'native' Asians and diasporic 'Asians' based on notions of ethnic authenticity. Mandy and Ayesha's comments demonstrate that these forms of exclusion and boundary keeping are very active in the notion of 'desi' and correspondingly, their comments hint at the pain this form of exclusion can evoke. Their comments demonstrate how their notions of 'desi' relate to different boundaries and conceptions of Asianness that include both others' understandings of Asianness and their own. Thus, 'desi' is always subject to negotiation, shaped not only by their own sense of identity and meaning, but also externally validated.

Mandy points out how this separation between 'us' and 'them' takes the form of what she calls 'mixed insults', that illuminate her difficult position of being in the middle somewhere; someone who is forced to choose between two nations. Mandy recognizes that being 'desi', part of the diaspora, demands a less than straightforward mapping of ethno-cultural background to one's identity. Hence, Mandy must negotiate and at times, was forced to question her own location and sense of belonging.

Ayesha's response, however, challenges that observation in denying that one's identity has to be placed within such a binary. Her dual nationality illustrates how she navigates identities by allowing herself both options rather than having to choose one. Ayesha conflates identity with citizenship by pointing to the possession of a Pakistani passport as evidence of a dual identity. However, she also understands that ties can form outside of formal state sanctioned ways, so that despite the new rules that strip her of possession of an ID card, her identity and feelings of having dual nationality will still exist without such a card.

### **Dissing 'Desi'**

Then there is Amrita, an Asian music fan and music blogger, who, having grown up in Southall her entire life, sees 'desi' as a negative and altogether inaccurate



description of her experiences, outlooks and background, both ethnically and in terms of class. Amrita sees 'desi' as something temporally (then versus now) as well as geographically (rural versus urban) located. Therefore, 'desi' is not only a term for people who have lived in a village outside a Western framework and lifestyle (so perhaps for recent migrants from rural parts of India and the subcontinent) but not applicable to someone who was born and brought up in Britain. So she sees 'desi' as something that marks her as being 'of the homeland' in a way that she finds stultifying because she feels that it does not recognize her diasporicity.

Helen: This whole desi term, do you relate?

Amrita: Desi, nooooo.

Helen: Tell me what you think about the term?

Amrita: It's a term that's used to describe somebody from a very rural village or someone who sings—like, you know, Des-C [bhangra fusion artist] his music is very 'desi', you know. He sings bhangra music in that very raw, yeah, folksy voice. That's 'desi'. It's like being very, very colloquial. That's what I see being 'desi' as.

Helen: That's interesting, because I feel like everyone's got a different definition of 'desi'.

Amrita: I feel like in America, they use it more often. I feel like if someone called me desi I think that's offensive, but that's just to me, whereas other people wouldn't be offended by it. But for me, I'm far from it. My mum's parents live in Delhi, I love Delhi, and I go shopping, and I go clubbing, and they're mainly Europeans who go to these clubs there...

Amrita's comments about 'desiness' show that the distinctions drawn between 'native' and 'diasporic' Asian communities as discussed earlier are undertaken by diasporic Asians to create a reverse hierarchy in which to distinguish themselves from the 'fresh off the boat' Asian 'immigrants'. In this sense, these comments challenge the view that Asian immigrants are a homogenous group. This characterization is also used to differentiate British Asians from Asian immigrants, whose background, history and position differ widely from each other. However, Amrita also relies uncritically upon Western notions of cultural and economic superiority in supporting these claims, so that her statements contradictorily rests upon certain stereotypical views of Asian rural immigrants as 'backward', uncultured foreigners.

On the far end of the spectrum lie Riz MC's views on 'desi' and its meaningfulness within the British Asian context. Here Riz MC, hip hop artist and actor, discussed his take of the adoption of 'desi' as a term for British Asians:

Before people started pretending that this whole thing [Asian music scene] was called desi--like, no one fucking says that, no one says that, that's a media term. No one calls anyone a desi. It's like a comfortable, you know, catch-all newspaper phrase that—fair enough, I'm sure some people use it, but I don't know really who, I've NEVER used it or had it used by myself or my friends

Riz points out how people 'pretend' that desi has become meaningful to them. This highlights the artifice of all forms of identity construction and the way in which identity is a social and cultural project that relies upon people's willingness to invest in these ideas. The active and deliberate production of identities requires people to go through a process of 'pretending'.

Moreover, Riz's highly charged comments on the fakeness of a 'desi' identification demonstrates that how an identity such as 'desi' is given meaning depends on how these histories and experiences affect your ability to invest in such a project. Collective identities are shaped by vastly different trajectories and histories. In Riz's case, his identity as a Londoner who also identifies as being British Pakistani does significantly affect his sense of being able to invest in the 'desi' sense of identity. Riz's fierce scepticism unravels the illusion that 'desi' is a uniformly meaningful and positive term across the Asian diaspora.

Riz talked about how the desi term is constructed through the media. This discursive practice of constructing a 'desi' identity is conducted by people who are given a more authoritative voice in determining such matters. Riz's comment suggests that the desi identity is contested terrain and how an elite group of people in the media, people who are connected to powerful institutions, seek greater input into what or who is authentically Asian through the deployment of this term.

In the following, Riz comments on the American construction of a 'desi' identity. Rather than just being the site of a highly local identity, here we see that using 'desi' in everyday language to describe an Asian identity highlights a significant distinction between a British versus an American Asian diasporic identity. Riz shares his views with me on the intersections of class and religion on the meaning of 'desi' and how that has impacted on the ways in which the British and the American viewpoints diverge on the subject of 'desiness' and its meaningfulness.

Riz: The desi thing in America is weird, don't you think? Have you checked it out?

Helen: For me, that's what I grew up with, you know what I mean, cause I'm from the States

Riz: To begin with, it's just a completely middle class experience the whole desi thing and they use the word 'desi'! It's because everything's received, they started this once it had already been packaged and became...broadcast, and that's the format in which they digested it...and so I feel they're aping something second-hand and it doesn't--it's not raw in the way that it was before, but actually, it's just...less Asian. All their Asian club nights have like, completely mixed crowds, and that's because there's less of a massive Asian community... And you have a lot of people distancing themselves from their Asian roots, and I think you have more of that in America, you know. I just think they're just...much less proud, I just think they have a much less proud heritage of like, you know, American South Asians, or whatever they call it, 'American desis dude'. They can't say, yeah, we fucking rioted, and you know what, we've been here from day one--we built this country from day one, they're all rich kids, they're all—you know, it's just—I don't have a high view of it.... yeah, it just doesn't seem that wired in to any grassroots, street level Asian...thing in America.

Riz sees the particularities of 'desiness' as also sanitizing certain Asian experiences. Adopting a generic 'desi' identity requires a flattening out of differences, erasing the distinct migration histories and tensions amongst the different communities of British Asians. The desire to sanitize and to make neutral certain experiences is read as a particularly middle class vision of the Asian 'experience' that seeks to erase or make marginal stories of hardship, poverty and resistance. These versions also fit in more neatly with the myth of the hardworking immigrants achieving the American dream, and bolster the 'model minority' image many have of Asian Americans. Thus, 'desi' becomes to

Riz a term for the privileged and the comfortable that leaves out the messy, painful and chaotic experiences of the disenfranchised and poor.

So 'desi' signifies differences in class, religion, and region as well as reinforcing differences in nationality. One might associate 'desi' with American geo-political and cultural hegemony, a result of American corporate multiculturalism and branding. While the 'desi' experience is partly about symbolizing a distinctly American outlook on ethnicity and identity constructions, it is also mediated by class distinctions. The British Asian experience stands as the 'authentic' 'street' and 'grassroots' that contrasts greatly with the high-tech suburban comfort that marks many South Asian American lives. Riz sets up a hierarchy here where he privileges the position of a working class 'raw' grassroots' outlook versus one that is middle class, 'second-hand' for 'rich kids'.

Importantly, Riz rejects the idea of there being a meaningful connection between these 'middle class' Asian Americans and himself because he critiques the idea that he should feel some connection with someone through a sense of shared origin or blood. Instead Riz discusses how it is often the more immediate shared and local experiences that determine a sense of community and belonging. When he refers to 'heritage' he means the connections forged out of 'fucking riot[ing]' that refers to the specific local histories of British Asian immigrants and youth movements that came together to fight the National Front, police brutality and negligence, and state racism. Thus he locates a sense of collective belonging within these very specific political experiences. Therefore even while Riz does not make much of the 'desi' connection, he draws attention to the ways in which there are other meaningful and perhaps less exclusive or essentialized connections that have been and continue to be made in a specific geographical and experiential context.

Similarly, Nerm, dance/electronic music DJ and producer, refers to the term 'desi' as a marketing ploy and he vehemently denies any affinity with the term.

Helen: Okay, what do you think about the term desi? Does it apply to you?

Nerm: Fuck it. The whole notion of British Asian as well. Fuck it. The whole idea of desi is a marketing term attached to everything Asian. Is everything Asian all grouped into one? Is all music the same? It's like saying 'right let's take all black music and group it into one and call it a token' ...Bullshit, there are different genres and different attitudes and different scenes. The whole notion of desi is a waste of social life. It's just a brand and it's another form of orientalism and I don't like it. The same with British Asian...fuck it, it's got nothing to do with it.

Helen: So you don't see anything real to it.

Nerm: No, I'm sure it's real to a lot of people, but not personally to me.

He suggests that the term is offensive because he thinks it essentializes culture and people through a fetishization of the exotic; a form of 'orientalism' that aims to present Asians as a desirable, homogenous 'other'. It remains unclear whether Nerm uses this term because he thinks that ultimately, powerful institutions such as record labels, or advertising companies that are white dominated, impose the 'desi' label onto Asian consumers: or if he thinks that Asians who adopt and identify as 'desi' are engaging in a form of self-imposed orientalism. In any case, calling something or someone 'desi' implies that they can be reduced to a 'token' Asian set of characteristics that render them distinct from other groups but remain internally homogenous.

Nerm is also referring to an issue that relates specifically to the politics around 'Asian' music and the very problematic ways in which non-Western music gets categorized, labelled and marketed. One such way is being lumped into the generic category of 'world music' (Hutnyk, 2000). The orientalist critique is particularly pertinent when talking about how 'world music' plays to the binaries constructed around other/West, authentic/modern, and primitive/contemporary in music. World music places all non-Western music in the category of the 'other' while simultaneously depicting all non-Western music as an undifferentiated mass. Thus the 'world music' framework flattens out the differences within non-Western music and the framework cannot account for the cultural mixing that occurs in most contemporary music.

The development of a 'desi' identity discussed here reveals the tensions surrounding the possibility of a common or shared 'Asian' identity in Britain. Instead, we learn that 'desiness' takes on meaning through the specificities of

experience particular to certain Asian communities in the UK. Despite the perception that it stands to include all Asians, 'desi' can be used as an exclusive category although the boundaries are never fixed. Within articulations of 'desi' different boundaries are drawn around class, nationalism, religion and sexuality. It can exclude certain groups such as those who are working class, non-Indian, Muslims; and it can sometimes take on hyper-local meanings, for example as particular to the Punjabi community settled in Birmingham.

At the same time, the exclusivity of a 'desi' label is challenged and contested by those who reclaim it as a positive step for a new British Asian identity. Through music and popular culture, they see that 'desi' does not have to be something disparaged or negative, but can instead be seen as an identity that allows for old tensions and differences to be overlooked in favour of a distinctly youthful, British Asian identity that relies on shared experiences of being diasporic, young and urban. Therefore, we see that the process of creating 'desiness' allows room for manoeuvring, negotiation and adaptation.

So while we have seen how 'desi' identity can be interpreted as 'fake', generic, and altogether insufficient and without much integrity, we can also see that these understandings of 'desi' are also contested by those who see future possibilities for the forging of new local, translocal and transnational identities, through the sharing of popular music and culture. Popular music migrates, gets taken up, re-appropriated and re-imagined. Through a constant engagement with Asian diasporic popular music and other forms of culture, 'desi' can articulate a transnational diasporic trajectory that embraces a more global pan-Asian ethnic identity, extending beyond religious, class and cultural differences.

Therefore, different and contested understandings of 'desi' support the idea that there are multiply located local and global articulations of identity (Nayak, 2003). These questions of 'desi' as a meaningful term are often shaped locally and nationally alongside ideas around what it means to be a West/East/South Londoner inflected by wider ideas about Britishness. Further, the boundaries around these identities are also increasingly connected to a wider

understanding of identity and space, as I have mentioned earlier, stretching beyond those boundaries of nation and state, and incorporating understandings of what it means to be part of a transnational South Asian diaspora. Thus 'desi' becomes a way of articulating the ambulatory and the ambivalent that marks our contemporary experiences of identity and belonging. Therefore, it is, perversely, both backward- and forward-looking in its actual practice. It often still takes on localized meanings at the same time as establishing a wider connection to people and practices beyond the local. Anoop Nayak has written about the 'local-global nexus' that has helped to create new subject positions for young people (2003a: 4). There is always the recognition that Asians who live outside of the same town, city and country might recognize and share similar experiences. Thus an exploration of desiness suggests that at the core of belonging and identity is the sense that there is ambivalence around stable and fixed notions of belonging and identification. This reflects how there are ways in which people bond and form ties with each other that require us to look beyond traditional notions of 'community' and shared ethnic ties, but that links are often formed in ways that speak to their experiences of being Asian in the UK. Thus these ties are often born out of the local and experiential, rather than a pre-set idea of origin.

### **We call them 'coconuts': Music, Identity and Authenticity**

Anxieties around desiness and who or what counts as 'desi' stem from an underlying anxiety over a sense of authenticity and culture. As I have discussed earlier in the chapter, the literature on diaspora and hybridity tended to focus on and celebrate the creative cultural practices and forms that have generated 'newer identities' of home and nation (Alexander, 2010; Song, 2004). In contrast to this literature, I intend to explore the dark underbelly of diaspora through a closer look at the 'coconut' figure and status used by and against the participants within the 'desi' music scene. The 'coconut' marker is used to reinscribe and reproduce narrow, essentialist and reductive understandings of home, nation and belonging, demonstrating the ambiguity, uncertainty and conflict of identity production. The 'coconut' figure signals how diaspora is often

lived out and practiced (Brah, 1996; Brubaker, 2005) not as an absolutely fixed state of being but a process (Alexander, 2010; Gilroy, 2000) that is at times reductive and regressive and other moments, progressive and open.

The 'coconut' and the 'desi' are both similarly embodied and discursively performed modes of being that specifically relate to both youthful and diasporic concerns around nation, community, religion and ethnicity. So for instance, the figure of the coconut looms large within narratives of diasporic identities. In literature and films, in turns both playful and serious, the figure of the 'coconut' is often deployed to humorously represent the 'confused' and 'lost' diasporic Asian.<sup>10</sup> Vijay Prashad argues that such a term is 'wielded against the next generation, who are forced to feel culturally inadequate and unfinished' (2000:131).

The topic of the 'coconut' first came up in my interview with Mandy and Ayesha in the winter of 2007 on music and clubbing. Since then, it has been discussed with various others in interviews. It is a term that is part of the popular vernacular, although is often only used among British Asians and South Asian Americans. However, other ethnic groups have adopted similar culinary terms to depict acts of 'ethnic betrayal' (Mannur, 2010:2). It is not unlike the term 'Oreo' applied to someone who is black or a 'twinkie' for someone who is East Asian. These labels often make use of physical characteristics such as skin colour as a shorthand, assuming skin colour corresponds to a set of culturally defined characteristics, 'brown on the outside, white on the inside'. Mannur writes that food is used within narratives as an 'intractable measure of authenticity' (2010:3). The term is most often used in the form of an insult to describe an Asian person who does not understand, invest in or exhibit characteristics normatively understood to signify Asian-ness. Just as importantly, it describes Asians who are seen as rejecting normative markers of Asianness in favour of adopting values associated with *whiteness*. Therefore, the

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<sup>10</sup> Films including 'ABCD' (American Born Confused Desi), made in 2001, 'Dude Where's the Party' (2002), Mira Nair's 'Monsoon Wedding' (2001) make reference to the 'lost' and confused Westernized/Americanized diasporic Asian figure. Jhumpa Lahiri's (2004) 'The Namesake' features a more complex rendering of such 'lost' figures.



'coconut' not only 'betrays' or rejects his cultural origins and community but does so in order to fit in and embrace the hegemonic values of 'white' culture.

The 'coconut' figure, as with any cultural term, is a slippery formation with fuzzy borders that change depending on who is using it and why. For example, Mandy and Ayesha disagreed on the terms in which the 'coconut' label could be used to describe an individual. Ayesha perceived it as part of an intentional act of disavowal. This is crucial to how 'coconut' can then be directed as an insult or offence to the person labelled as such. If 'coconut' becomes either something that one is fully aware of cultivating and enacting, then the person must accept full responsibility for opting out or eschewing the norms.

In contrast, Mandy was more sympathetic to the idea that a 'coconut' does not necessarily reject his or her 'culture' nor is it always an intentional act of denial or repudiation.

Helen: This notion of a coconut—what does that mean to you, when do you use it, and why?

Ayesha: I only use it now if I really find someone is trying to deny where they come from, and it doesn't mean that I'm offended because they're trying to deny where they come from, it just means that you can quite obviously tell—

Mandy: I don't think it means it's whether they're denying it, it's when people are ignorant of their culture—because they might not be aware of it.

Later however, Mandy's ambivalence became more apparent when she stated:

Mandy: I see someone as a coconut who I suppose makes a definite point of not having—it's like 'oh I'm definitely not Indian, because I was born and brought up here, I don't listen to any Indian music, I don't wear the clothes, I don't eat the food'

Ayesha: Yeah, it's the saying 'I'm not', rather than 'I am' English, it's the 'I am not Indian' or 'I am not Pakistani' and you think, well, what's wrong with it? Because of the rest of the people who are these things, you're trying to put them down. It's because I'm quite proud of my culture and I'm quite proud of the culture here and I can mix both. I get the best of both worlds whereas people who say 'well, I'm not Pakistani, I don't do that' well, the rest of us do, so what are you trying to say?...

Mandy: It doesn't have to be in a bad way to use the word coconut. You could just use it, I mean we could just say, like if someone had no idea if someone has

no idea about any music...It's just it could be used in a jokey way, it doesn't have to be so serious.

Mandy's last comment introduces the relevance of context within the multiple meanings around the 'coconut' term. She discussed how at times it could be light banter, without having to convey all the baggage of culture, the 'authentic' and identity. Mandy's statement rather than proving that the 'coconut' term can be innocuous, demonstrates that it can be even more harmful when expressed through humour. When the coconut is deployed as a means of teasing or joking with someone, the humour provides a 'context which defangs the insult' so that the 'aggression gets both expressed and blunted' (Neu, 2008). Humour is the medium through which insults like 'coconut' have the power to cause injury and effectively communicate underlying attitudes of hostility through its doubled meaning (Mannur, 2010). The person who is using the term can be free of shame, guilt or embarrassment when using the term and can cause injury without having to deal with the repercussions of overtly insulting someone.

Despite Mandy's claim that the coconut figure is not always seen as negative but can be humorous and light, Gautum Malkani's following statement contradicted this by stating that the coconut was always the 'outsider', the one who always remained undesirable and disliked.

You have an insider or outsider group, right? The in group, rude boys or desis, whatever there isn't an agreed term for that. But there is an agreed term for the out group: coconut, right? You don't want to be a coconut, you don't want to be seen as a coconut, neglected. My dissertation was called chocolate flavoured coconut milk because the definition of coconut keeps changing. At certain times, you're deemed to be a coconut because you're not religious, at other times, it's because you don't speak your mother tongue....

Mandy's and Ayesha's contradictory statements regarding what constitutes a 'coconut' highlight the remarkably slippery boundaries that make up the 'coconut' status. This very inability to stabilize the meaning of the 'coconut' is also what gives it widespread appeal because it can be re-shaped and made specific to the situation. Thus this confusing 'chocolate flavoured coconut milk' is never made up of a fixed set of criteria: its meanings are always relational

and contested. It may be based upon requirements such as speaking the correct language, and being the correct religion, class or gender, and, as I will elaborate further in the next section, enjoying the right music, films and books. Thus, the basis on which the description is used is ‘moulded to accommodate the ends of the person employing the criteria’ (Wilkins, 2004).

### **Music, Popular Culture and ‘Coconuts’**

One of the most significant ways to police the norms of Asianness, and consequently, someone’s status as a ‘coconut’, is through valuing tastes and participation in youth music scenes. Ayesha identifies with a certain type of music and that identification becomes a marker of her own genuine Asian identity. As Simon Frith (1987) notes, one takes for granted how ethnicity and sound are often connected. Thus, it is such a common practice yet the point is that it should not be taken for granted here. Knowledge of bhangra music, for example particular song names or knowing the names of bhangra artists, signals the central position music is given in expressing one’s Asianness. Certain genres or styles of music are racially and ethnically coded as ‘Asian’ or ‘white’ based on various factors including audience participation. For example, bhangra, to many young Asians, is the quintessential ‘Asian’ music whereas ‘rock’ and ‘indie pop’ often get categorized as ‘white’ music.

Ayesha said:

I go to a couple [nights]. Yeah, I prefer that thing [Bollywood nights] but I’m very into bhangra as well....I know a lot of Asians who don’t listen to any bhangra and they’re just into sort of, their English music but we call them coconuts...yeah coconuts. They’re sort of Asian, but they’re trying to act—brown on the outside, and white on the inside. Yeah, that’s it really.

Ayesha’s description of someone being ‘sort of Asian’ as a ‘coconut’ betrays a kind of ambivalence about what it means to be a ‘coconut’ because she recognizes that these culturally coded markers of Asianness are arbitrary and unstable and that these markers are not the sole criteria of Asianness. Moreover, the coconut label reinforces a belief that being Asian is not so precarious so that

it can be shed, or taken away. Thus while not knowing or participating in normative ways does make you less 'authentic', her use of the coconut label also implies that she invests in the idea that one can never really escape one's identity, history and status as Asian, despite attempts to do so.

Mandy admitted to relying on bhangra music as a benchmark for Asianness when she remarked:

We could be talking about bhangra and if someone had no idea, we'd say 'oh, you're such a coconut, you have no idea, you're such a coconut!'

Bhangra music's widespread popularity in the UK in cities such as London and Birmingham reflects the impact specific communities such as Punjabi Sikhs have made in the UK. Thus, while bhangra music has become more widespread and has become adopted by other Asian communities, Mandy and Ayesha's experiences of being young British Asians are still largely shaped by these particular connections and communities.

Moreover, it is deeply significant that it is bhangra music that defines Mandy's and Ayesha's experience of authentic Asianness because it indicates just how syncretic, immediate and locally formed these benchmarks are. Bhangra music is a truly hybrid music form. It has been continuously re-mixed and re-imagined for a British Asian audience despite the perception that it has remained a 'pure' and intact expression of a nostalgic past. Bhangra music as a benchmark involves developing criteria outside of the older generation's standards that prove to be less relevant to the immediate lives of second generation British Asians. In other words, bhangra music is a criterion for a distinctly *youthful* British Asian identity, although Sanjay Sharma (1996) quite rightly points out that bhangra was never entirely representative of British Asian youth culture and that there were many diverse forms of Asian cultural production. Thus, I am by no means making the claim that bhangra is the criteria for all or indeed most British Asian youth. However, both Sharma (1996) and Rajinder Dudrah (2002) concur that bhangra presents a site for British Asian youth culture. Moreover, it has to be pointed out that British bhangra, despite earlier scholarly accounts

(Banerji, 1988; Banerji and Baumann, 1990; Baumann, 1990; Gillespie, 1995) and popular perceptions of it as representative of cultural continuity and authenticity, is more accurately a syncretic, multiply located music shaped as much by black British and African American sounds as it is by Punjabi folk styles. Thus, it is deeply significant that it is bhangra music that defines Mandy's and Ayesha's experience of 'authentic' Asianness. That reveals the extent to which everyday life for young British Asians is experienced as heterogeneous and dialogic, even if it may be thought of as homogenous and unchanging.

The syncretic and intertwined lives that young British Asians lead, articulated through bhangra music, can also be seen through the adoption of hip hop culture. Hip hop culture becomes an important site for the production of a youthful, urban British Asian identity, something I will discuss in much greater detail in the following chapter. However, here it is enough to say that hip hop has come to signify a version of an authentic youthful Asianness. Artists rely upon the associations with hip hop culture and solidarity with blackness by taking on black cultural markers as symbols of an 'authentic' Asianness. In doing so, this has come to be understood as an effective and airtight defence against being a 'coconut'.

Gautum said:

You define it [being Asian] with your sense of style, your fashion and music. That's all you need to do because subculture stands for ethnicity....But because of the desi music scene, we find a sure-fire way to not be a coconut. It's a part of subculture...

Amrita confirmed this by explaining how people who have often called her a 'coconut' in the past are also the very same people who use aspects of hip hop and R&B culture as proof of an authentic youthful British Asian identity. Amrita pointed out the contradictions that are made when certain hybrid presentations of self and behaviour are deemed acceptable and others not:

Do they know where they come from? They don't know if they're black or if they're Asian, they speak in patois. It's like who are you, what are you? Because

you're not black, you don't have Jamaican roots, what are you trying to portray here, and how can you turn around and call me a coconut? I know where I come from, I don't have to speak patois to prove that I'm Asian...Asian music is not Mumzy [British Asian R&B artist]. He might have an Asian beat thrown over one of his tracks, but predominantly he's got this whole patois, Sean Paul accent thing going on, and he sings R&B in a NeYo [African American R&B artist] voice, he's literally mimics NeYo in his 'One More Dance' video... They talk about being Asian and raising the flag for Asians and I don't think they know what being Asian is entirely so for them to turn around and call me a coconut for not, for not being into the whole black Asian thing, well it just shows how intelligent they are...

Similarly, Nerm bristled at the mention of how people might (and have in the past) labelled him as being 'inauthentic' based on a prescribed way of being 'authentically' young, urban and Asian which draws influence from hip hop music and style. So while he did not specify who had labelled him in the past in his heated reply, he did refer to the hypocrisy of 'urban' artists who claim a sense of realness seemingly without an awareness of the translatory and dialogic process that producing 'urban' music entailed:

Yeah, it's like what are the real Asians? Are you trying to ape black people, trying to ape Jamaicans, trying to be true? Am I not married to an Indian woman? Do I not tour India every year? Am I not playing to my kith and kin back home every year? How many urban artists can say that? So who the fuck is the real Asian then? Do you know what I mean? That's what I say.

Inasmuch as music is given the power to determine one's authentic status, in the following example, Amrita demonstrated how she utilized her choice to listen to certain kinds of music as a method of challenging prescriptive Asian categories of identity.

If I don't want to listen to Punjabi music, I don't have to. I can listen to...I like listening to Asian music in terms of Sufi, it's old yes whatever, but I enjoy that. I like listening to classical, classical mixed with drum n' bass, Asian Underground, the classical fused with the drum n' bass, or chill-out music like Karsh Kale, classical Asian with amazing vocals. That, if you want to talk about Asian music, that's what Asian music is.

As I have briefly mentioned at the beginning of this section, while adopting what are considered 'black' cultural markers of identity is seen as positive and wholly

authentic for Asian youth, adopting what are seen as 'white' practices, language and style warrants the use of the 'coconut' label. Therefore, what it means to be 'authentically' Asian has as much to do with *not* being white. The logic behind the 'coconut' label is based on the belief that identity is based on a strict 'white' vs. 'non-white' binary rather than a 'white' versus an 'Asian' identity. This binary of 'white' versus 'non-white' reflects the specific histories of alliances forged between Asian and black British communities and the formation of an inclusive 'Black' identity in the 1980s. The constant musical dialogue with black musics also formed part of the articulation of this inclusive Black identity (Sharma, 1996; Kalra and Kaur, 1996). Despite the return to an ethnically based identity around 'Asian' and the abandonment of the signifier 'Black', these alliances grew out of shared experiences and perspectives. Moreover, Sharma (1996) pointed out that despite the fragmentation of the 'Black' movement in the 1990s, this did not rule out other opportunities to create new alliances. These new alliances did result from the on-going dialogue with black musics, resulting in the formation of a 'desi' urban identity. Thus, the politics of being a 'coconut' is about understanding 'Asianness' as a complex process that relies on reductive ideas of culture as well as acknowledging the heterogeneous, transformative connections that make up contemporary identities. Amrita echoed the complexity and contradictions that emerged with the use of the 'coconut' term and the indeterminacy of a supposedly fixed Asian cultural identity:

I'm not trying to be white, I don't know how to be white. I just know how to be myself, how to be a decent citizen...I know how to...I know what my interests are and I don't force my interests on other people. If they want to listen to bhangra, I'm not going to turn around and say oh well, I think you should listen to the Kooks [English 'indie' rock band] instead. And I think my whole image, and the way they see my lifestyle, which they know nothing about, I think it's the image they see that makes them intimidated or you know, "oh she's totally lost it, she doesn't know how to be Asian." Being born and brought up here, of course I will merge with different cultures and stuff.

While the 'coconut' signals a more complex relationship to concepts of 'race' and ethnicity, the reference to skin colour and certain symbolic foods also suggests that the body becomes a principal site in which to determine boundaries of

'race', ethnicity and belonging. Therefore, the emphasis of particular physical differences points to how other differences mapped onto the body are made to matter within the 'coconut' make-up. It follows that the 'coconut' often takes on gendered and sexualized meanings that cannot be divorced from its racialized context. Thus, the coconut is often portrayed as acting white, but also as weak and effeminate within the British context in contrast to the aggressive hyper-masculine figure often valorized within 'desi' and black popular culture. This reading of white masculinity as 'weak' and black masculinity as normative reverses the order of racialized gender norms.

As is often written about hip hop, some forms of hip hop, particularly what used to be called 'gangsta rap', imposed a highly gendered view on authenticity. Often, preoccupations with authenticity take on a masculinist focus. Hyper-masculine forms of hip hop were about establishing and enforcing ideas about an authentic black *masculinity*. Robin Kelley (1992) writes how gangsta rap's misogyny was deeply ingrained. However, most mainstream forms of hip hop, while not always misogynistic, do support unequal gendered hierarchies and uphold the view that an authentic black masculinity is centred around power and aggression. For instance, again here is Gautum who stated similarly:

One thing that comes out of the thesis that comes out in the book a little bit is that the boundary between coconuts and a kind of authentic Indian often enforced by women as well as guys. [This is] because coconuts were seen as geekish or gay. Obviously, if Indian women...if hot Indian girls were seen as going with coconuts then that boundary wouldn't...wouldn't imply geekishness or homosexuality by definition, would it? So I think there's definitely a role that women play in the sense that a lot of guys are responding to what they think women find attractive. If that were to change, then the definition of what they think an authentic Asian is would also change. Um, I think that's important. You don't find many Indian women with a thing for skinny guys. Therefore lots of Asian guys go to the gym.

Thus, not only is the inauthentic Asian male seen as effeminate but his sexual orientation as a heterosexual comes into question. So here Gautum presents the idea that women act as the boundaries between what makes a coconut and what does not. So, the specific characteristics of masculinity that are desirable to women are then taken as being authentically 'desi' and those that are seen as



undesirable are then seen as being part of the 'coconut' make-up. So, the coconut figure depends on an intractable view of Asian masculinity. The heterosexual imperative makes women's bodies and their desire the boundaries between the desi and the coconut.

The 'coconut' figure remains relevant and commonly used as a term within diasporic Asian communities across North America and the UK. The reason for such investment lies within the continuing investments in monolithic and fixed versions of culture, identity and belonging and the return to sealing borders, both physical and imagined, around communities and countries. Maintaining and preserving some sense of a shared culture and values becomes a source of comfort and stability.

'Coconuts' remain figures of derision because they destabilize that framework and are reminders that culture is messy, unstable and always subject to change. Thus, there is the fear that the 'coconut' exists in all of us. Reflecting on the popular figure of the 'coconut' within the Asian urban music scene highlights the precarious performances of Asianness that constantly necessitate re-enactment and reinforcements in order to maintain the illusion of fixity.

Throughout this section, I showed repeatedly how the 'coconut' relates to particular concepts and understandings of diasporic relations among young British Asians. The coconut features as one of the darker components of a contemporary diasporic Asian identity. As such, the use of the coconut is always contested and contradictory, and made to mean many different things depending upon who is using it and who is being labelled a 'coconut'. Moreover, the ways in which 'coconut' takes on certain common meanings with regards to being seen as 'white' on the 'inside' suggest that the coconut label, as with its more inclusive 'desi' identity, emerges from the 'Black' collective identities in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s. In this way, multiple and competing meanings of 'desi' demands a more complex understanding of Asianness that acknowledges the heterogeneity and difference that make up the everyday lives

of British Asians, and yet also relies on notions of tradition and cultural continuity.

In this next section, I continue mapping the ambivalent, contested and negotiated practices that make up the diaspora process. These complex practices involve the use of fluid and changing boundaries marking belonging and exclusion. In this next and final section, I discuss how shifting and divergent notions of 'home', or what Avtar Brah (1996) refers to as 'homing' and the sense of belonging produced amongst different local, national and global spaces (Alexander, 2010a, b), are indelibly shaped through the terrain of Asian diasporic youth culture.

### **'Home and Away': Thoughts on the location of 'Back Home'**

In this section, I would like to discuss the question of whether we can think past ideas of home as a rooted and stable place. Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk (2005) identify the relationship between home and away as forming diasporic understandings. Notions of home and belonging are discursively constructed as stable, rooted, physical, geographical sites. Too often, questions of Britishness closely relate to definitions of 'home' and place in that the preservation of a sense of Britishness often depends upon certain assumptions about what kinds of people (should) consider Britain 'home'. After the 2001 Northern riots and the 7/7 bombings the prevailing assumption was that British rioters and bombers did not feel like Britain was their 'home'. For instance, after the 2001 riots David Blunkett, then British Home Secretary, within a series of reports, passed a law legalizing British citizenship test in order to gauge how people should 'integrate' into British society. Citizenship tests, calls for the preservation of British values, and the tightening of borders have led to increasingly exclusive definitions of Britishness and greater policing of its boundaries. People are expected to prove their sense of Britishness, even if no one can quite define what characterises it. Both political and common sense discourses on multiculturalism, and questions over British identity, rely upon prescriptive notions of an identifiable coherent Britishness based on a

homogenous monolithic set of cultural values and community. However, these claims do not take into account the contingency and negotiation that is part of the fluid production of a culture (Werbner, 2005).

Like Pnina Werbner (2005) I argue that an active and multi-layered negotiation of belonging is practised and is made evident in contemporary definitions of 'home' as used and understood by scene members. In this section, I discuss how 'back home' points towards 'here' as well as 'there' for this generation of British Asians, many of whom have lived only in Britain. The notion of 'back home' frequently comes up within conversations in which the idea or the topic of going to South Asia to visit family or to live there for some time. Most of my participants have gone to visit family in South Asia at least once in their lives, although most go more frequently. Often however, the notion of 'home' is used dually to imply both India/subcontinent and Britain. That is, the widely understood meaning of home as a place of belonging and comfort is used to describe or include more than one place or space.

As Sara Ahmed (2000) argues, the borders around home are constantly being reconfigured through encounters with 'strangers within' and through staying put, arriving and leaving. Establishing a connection with a place 'back home' is an active process of negotiation between competing visions, which range from conservative views to more fluid notions of culture, community and identity. It reveals a complicated and ambivalent relationship towards a strictly British identity. Various scene members discuss the importance of having a diasporically mediated sense of location that encourages different perspectives from the dominant discourses on home, place and belonging. For British Asians who conceive of a 'back home', these definitions and conceptions are constituted not only through memory but through a far more concrete reality of multi-directional frequent travel in which one returns again and again to Asia. Their practice of saying 'back home' constitutes multiple and fluid meanings: rather than being a place of origin, it becomes more distinctly about something more immediate and materially felt, a part of a distant past as well as the future.

## **Belonging, Place and 'back home'**

In pondering his usage of the term 'back home', Mandeep illuminates the extent to which 'home' is a site of contestation, struggle in which a politics of belonging is always present, fought over and negotiated. The ability to have non-white British call themselves 'British' and call Britain 'home' represents not only an active political resistance to the racism that people faced in Britain but the colonial history and legacy which brings to mind the powerful phrase 'we are here because you were there' (Frankenberg and Mani, 1993). Therefore, to be able to call Britain 'home' is a significant political and social achievement. This again speaks to the work that is involved in reclaiming space as one's own, especially when these spaces are exclusive, only seen as 'home' for certain people. It called for a politics of location in constituting what Avtar Brah (1996) argues as a 'homing desire' in being able to 'feel at home', or safe within different spaces.

Helen: Why do you use the term 'back home'?

Mandeep: In the UK, we've had a constant contact with the homeland, and there's always people coming and going. It's part of the former British Empire, so we're used to having the British with us as well as us being over here...but maybe not as workers in the 60s and 70s. But the way I look at it, if you can come to our country we're allowed to come to yours. We've re-built your country after all your working labour died in the war.

Not only does this conversation suggest different homes but that in also determining different spaces as 'home', this acts to stretch and disrupt the very border around a notion of 'home' as Ahmed (2000) argued, thus making those borders unstable and subject to revision. This then suggests that the very definition of home as a place of belonging or comfort must be questioned or challenged. Instead, 'home' is not just about where one feels at home. Instead, the very fixity of the definition of home itself also becomes more fluid, taking on different meanings beyond origin, belonging, and safety.

Mandeep's next statement illustrates just how complex, multiply located and highly nuanced notions of home can be and further, how different diasporic communities have developed different relationships to 'home'. Here it is

possible to see how home is not just a ready or pre-given concept but that it is 'made' and re-made through various practices of production, and consumption. These forms of cultural production and consumption are dependent upon notions of space and time. Technologies have deeply influenced these practices of cultural production and consumption by bridging distances, time and space. We can see this in the following statement by Mandeep when he explained that his notion of back home was reinforced through cultural production and mediated by technologies which instilled a sense of India's geographical location, time and place for him in different ways.

If you look even within the Asian diasporas, the Asian diasporas in like, Trinidad or the West Indies, once they go, that's it—maybe a letter here or there. There's no contact with the homeland. There's maybe a lesson here or there, but in terms of the cultural values as well, whereas we have—we get sent, even in the 80s, we used to videotape Indian TV, and get it sent over here to the video-shops. We used to go and inquire at the video shops, old Indian TV serials...and then the films always keep coming over. Now the films are in the mainstream. I can go over to the Uxbridge Odeon and watch an Indian film. There's always a connection there, that's why there's still always that back home notion...Like I said, I still call it 'back home'. I don't have like a mad desire to run around in fields and cut sugarcane like my ancestors do but when I'm there, I like it there. It's like, that is a part of me. Now that I've been to Bombay, I want to live there because it's a balance between being in India and being in a metropolis. So I guess it's that, having continual contact with the homeland, only a phone call away, and you can have shared cultural experiences. My mum will phone her sister up in India saying have you seen this film because they're both released at the same time in different parts of the world. It's commonality of experience, that's what it comes down to, that's why we call it 'back home'.

Mandeep narrated his changing and fluid relationship to 'home' within a framework that distinguished the practices of diasporic Asians from the Caribbean (e.g. Trinidad, Guyana) from the practices of British Asians with respect to maintaining connections with India and the subcontinent. Thus, not all diasporas are the same in terms of whether they choose to maintain continuous ties to India and the subcontinent, and thus, they have different ideas of 'home' and different ways of positioning South Asia into these definitions of 'home'.

Moreover, Mandeep pointed out how the practice of viewing cultural products from 'back home' in India underwent a major transformation from his earlier years to more recent times. When he was younger, Indian cultural products such as older television shows and films were made available through video cassettes which came by way of mail, thus informing his sense of geographical distance. The fact that one could only get 'old' Indian television serials as opposed to current shows, as they were hard to source, reinforced that sense of distance and separation. Yet, in time, satellite TV, cheap and readily available flights and the internet have radically altered conceptions of distance, space and home such that it blurs and makes less distinct and separate concepts of 'global' and 'local' (Nayak 2003). For example, cultural products such as movies that are simultaneously released in the 'home' country and elsewhere collapse conceptions of geographical distances. Moreover, the role and use of media, cultural production and consumption has grown much larger and wider so that young people's lives are highly mediated by the visual such as films, television, and the internet. Mandeep's descriptions of nostalgic versions of India are exemplary of the ways in which this occurs.

The use of certain technologies that have disrupted traditional notions of time have led to the disruption of the meanings of 'home' as a location of the past and have brought 'home' firmly into the present. Thus, technologies that allow for India to be just 'a phone call away' demystifies India as a place of 'mythical return', particularly as part of a temporal past, which is critical to traditional narratives of migration and diaspora. Thus Mandeep constructs India as a destination, as something to represent both the present and the future rather than the past.

Mandeep was quick to point out that his sense of 'back home' was not informed by what he called 'running around in fields and cutting sugarcane'. This is a knowing reference to the stereotypical scenes used within numerous Bollywood film that depict a verdant, fantastical vision of the Indian countryside. Yet films made in, and about, India provide an important link to the 'homeland' that not only provide representations of the country but serve as constant reminders of

its actual presence. They speak to a nostalgic desire, but also to the material, constantly reinforced connections between India and Britain. 'Home' becomes not only the imagination of a 'homeland' but also serves as a reminder that it exists as a real place.

In the conversation I had with Arika, co-editor of Asian women's magazine XEHER, her imaginings of 'home' were shaped by the fact that India and Pakistan were real places. Her statement below demonstrates a complex awareness of the shifting nature and meanings of home when she briefly surmised how she adapted to wherever she was living, thus being able to make a home and feel 'at home' wherever she was. Arika's perspective illustrates how home does become a 'counter narrative' to a static definition of home as where one belongs, because she feels belonging in many places.

When we say 'back home' it's a cliché way of saying the continent. I say that unconsciously, but for me, Britain is my home. I'm not Indian, I've lived in India for two years. I'm Pakistani, and I've lived in Pakistan for two years...For me, it's about having the best of many worlds where I'm quite adaptable living in Britain or Pakistan.

Arika's statement displays the various entanglements that make up her conceptions of home. She identifies the term 'back home' as a figurative phrase that is commonly understood to mean India and the subcontinent, thus recognizing the way in which it is used to mean 'home' in the imagined, diasporic sense of the word. 'Home' is more than just a place; it also carries with it the formation of national or cultural identities. Yet despite living in Pakistan as well as India, she considered Britain her 'home', thus also demonstrating how notions of home travel with you, rather than remaining rooted or fixed, thereby disrupting the one-to-one connection between physical location and 'home'.

Mandy explained that she finds the process of making a home is not straightforward but involves mixing and matching people, ideas and values to make these different connections with each other. The different connections themselves provide the basis for a home.

Yeah, I have connections [in India] but my main connection is my family and my culture. You know, cause the way my home is, like the lifestyle. The cooking, speaking the language, just like...small things. Like, I suppose the way we have weddings, it's just the way, you know, we do certain things. That culture comes from India and then like, as you grow up around here, you try and bring a bit of British culture into it, so it's kinda all mixed up a bit and because it's so mixed up, I can't say, oh I've got no ties in India or oh I've got no ties here because you know, it is important and I am proud...

Ayesha explained her use of the notion of home similarly in pointing out the very real connections to family and relationships nurtured there. The splitting of home is also made real by the mention of having a house there that symbolizes the establishment of roots.

I say 'back home', yeah, a lot of people pointed that to me, but then again, I know I'm more cultured than other people of my generation---no, it's not that, I'm cultured yeah. Um, and I think maybe because I have a lot of ties back home, my fiancée is back home, half my family is back home. That's why it's home as well. I live there, when, when I go abroad, we have a house there, so it's not like—I may go for a holiday period but holiday for us is like, four, five weeks over the summer, we go for five, six weeks at a time.

Yet, Ayesha also mentioned the differences that she knew to have existed between her and other Pakistanis. This suggests she does not feel entirely 'at home' there and so she recognizes that she uses the term 'home' for Pakistan in a way that remains distinct from how she views Britain and her everyday life here. Her insistence on calling Pakistan 'back home' again tells us that home does not mean belonging to a place of origin but that in actuality, belonging is more complex, floating and de-territorialized, 'where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native' (Brah, 1996:209).

I don't wear English clothes when I'm in Pakistan...You just avoid standing out but you do feel yes, I've been in a different country for some...although I call it back home I know I'm not from there, otherwise there wouldn't be that difference, I wouldn't have to try and fit in with them, and dress like them.

Avtar Brah (1996) discusses how a second meaning of home suggests a much more local definition of place in which the experiences of the everyday shape



the meaning of such a space. Here Mandy invokes that meaning of home to how she sees Britain.

Helen: Home is here?

Mandy: Home is definitely here. Just like what you were saying, you know the roads, you're familiar with all of London. You know. If I—If you were to say to me, like, oh where could I go for a good coffee, I could say well you know, oh here, here here, you know I could suggest places to go, and I can't do that in India because I don't know it well enough. I go there for like, a couple of weeks, just to visit my grandparents, just do a bit of shopping, and just you know, to enjoy the sun, and everything-- that is it. That's the only reason why I go. I can't associate with the same way I associate with things here. I've got much more, there's like family ties over here, you know, there's like, just general comfort. I suppose it's a comfort thing isn't it.

Mandeep below talked about locality and its importance to the notion of home. He discussed how the notion of home ties in and also challenged a straightforward relationship to being British. Instead, being British Asian required a complex negotiation of place, space and identity that de-territorializes identity from the nation-state. For instance, Mandeep talked about how he had the 'right postcode' but this was mitigated by being of a 'different origin' which complicates straightforward relationships of place and racial or ethnic origin in Britain.

I'm of Indian origin, I don't know which one specifically, Indo, Aryan or Mongoloid or whatever it is over there, but uh, there's a midway point, so I've got the right postcode and I've got a different origin so that's how I'm self-defined as British Asian.

### **'Homing' London**

Sukhdev Sandhu (2003) writes that London is an 'untidy' and 'inchoate sprawl' whose 'borders and boundaries are ill-defined'. I argue that the paradoxes, messiness and sprawl of London helps to create alternative maps of belonging for the Asian Londoners I have spoken with who consider London to be 'home'. The emphasis on the fluidity of boundaries and borders and the messiness that is inherent to London helps to make sense of how London is a multicultural paradox, a 'place to explore the pleasures of freedom at the same time...a city

divided by hatred, neuroses and phobias' (Back, 2007:52). Diasporic understandings allow people to construct more complex models of belonging, and means of living with difference in which people are able to create a 'home' space for themselves within the city despite tensions, conflicts and differences.

Here Riz talked about growing up in London and how he sees London as a place that is mixed up, without clear boundaries or any sense of segregated communities. Riz discussed how identities and communities are configured differently in London than they are in other cities with significant Asian populations, such as up North in Bradford or in the Midlands of Birmingham, where ethnic communities aren't seen as necessarily rooted to one particular area for generations. Further, the mixing suggests friendships and relationships are determined by elective affinity rather than a rigid ethnically defined sense of community alone.

I don't know what, just from what I see, like, to some extent, I think like, North London, South London young kids are more mixed up than ever, ethnically and like, you know, you see group crews of like, Bengali kids with black kids with...and I think to some extent, not entirely, to some extent, East London and Hackney, Arab kids.....as well, all mixed up...But I think in London, to some extent, there's always gonna be, like, I don't know, like more mixed up and not as, you don't have that massive density of like Asian communities that have been there for four decades in one spot, and like, own all the real estate in an area and at, every level of society...

Riz underlined how being from London makes his sense of being 'British' remarkably different from those who grew up in other parts of Britain. In focusing on the multicultural of London's neighbourhoods, he elucidated how Londoners' experiences articulate a 'British' identity that brings into relief the complex histories of colonialism, migrations and settlement within Britain. Thus being a Londoner stretches one's identity beyond nationally drawn boundaries and extends it towards a wider amalgamation of syncretically configured local, national and 'outernational' connections.

Here Nihal, who is a Radio 1 presenter and Bombay Bronx promoter, waxed poetic on the topic of London's diversity making it unlike any other city in the

world. Here in London it is the way in which people ‘clash together’ that makes it significant and inspiring.

Helen: Yeah, so what do you think are the musical developments in London that are most exciting or the most, maybe also innovative?

Nihal: London, London’s always exciting, I think it’s always exciting...London’s one of the most creative cities in the world. I love London, I love the heartbeat of London, I love the energy of London, I love the passion, I love the attitude, I love the ignorance, I love the intelligence, I love all that stuff, and it all clashes together on a daily basis because we are genuinely a mixed society. There are a lots of countries which have a lot of immigration but no one really mixes, and people are stuck in their ghettos, and there are ghettos here, no question about it, there are ghettos here, but we mix more I think than any other place on earth. I’ve been to Shanghai, I’ve been to Tokyo, Nairobi, I’ve been to Beirut, I’ve been to some—I’ve been to Bombay, I’ve been to New York, Los Angeles. London, Paris, but London is such an incredible city, it’s my favourite place on earth, I mean--

Helen: Yeah, yeah, and—and how in what way are these connections like musically mixed?

Nihal: well, I mean--you can’t- the soundtrack to London is immense. You know, cabdrivers driving past playing...you know, Bollywood, then driving past a shop maybe playing techno out of it, and then uh, a guy on the street corner busking with African drums and that’s just a part of life, I mean, how could that not affect you in some way?

The very London ways in which people ‘clash together’ underlines Riz’s astute observation about how people saw themselves as ‘part of Britain’s story’, often mediating this through having a Londoner identity. Moreover, Riz connected this idea of being part of Britain’s story through to his personal realization of his own complex and multiple affinities, loyalties and connections that make up his understanding of ‘home’ identity and belonging. Riz chronicled how he discovered his ambivalent ties to an ‘elsewhere’ and how he resolved that when realizing that this ambivalence and uncertainty was constitutive of a diasporic set of experiences. Sometimes one feels neither one or the other, but one is also allowed to feel both.

But we’re making a new one [identity] here [London], maybe, that’s the thing because the thing is like... it has just moved along. I don’t think it’s just because I’ve grown up and I’ve dealt with these issues. ... it has moved along. When I was a teenager, it was a big—you know, are you British or are you Pakistani? We’d ask each other that question and you know, they’d have newspaper spreads about it, and ‘ooh, what are these people’ and we didn’t fucking really know

really, and it was always Pakistani, I'm a Pakistani. I feel like there's something much more vibrant, and urgent and just genuine, like about how identities are made over here, from like, grassroots up...But growing up, I wasn't sure, so like on Eid, we'd walk up and down on Southall Broadway waving the Pakistani flag. [But then] you'd go to Pakistan and be like 'what the fuck is this place really, this isn't me at all', and I struggled with that, and I realized that what I was shouting for, when I was shouting Pakistan, having not been there. It wasn't Pakistan but Pakistanis here, it was us, it was these underdogs, it was, you know...us lot over here... Yeah, so...I'm British, I say that now, but I'm British, and right now, I have to qualify that, on my own terms, but I have this idea that in five years or ten years, I can just say that and everyone go 'yeah obviously'. But I think that it has moved along a bit, like in terms of like, kids these days, I don't think there's much of a British Pakistani [identity] in London. In the Midlands and up North, it's a totally different kettle of fish, you know, it's totally still like...but that's because you've got to get to that place, where they feel like that their story is part of Britain's story.

Riz mentioned how identity politics has moved on, especially in London, where identity is no longer defined so much as a binary nor are diasporic identities always seen as being 'in between'. However, you also need to be made to feel like you belong and as Riz pointed out, there are parts of Britain where people are less accepted as really and truly British. Therefore, the process of developing a sense of belonging and identity is about understanding the diversity of your connections in tandem with the structures of inclusion and exclusion.

For example, Nav talked about growing up in London in the 1980s on a council estate in London where there was a large National Front following. Growing up in a dangerous space, where home was not always a place of comfort or safety, radically alters one's perspective and understanding of 'home' space. Judith Halberstam (2005) writes that this is precisely what makes cities and urban spaces queer spaces, because queers moved away from their small towns and 'homes' of danger to seek refuge in the anonymity and liberalism of big cities. For Nav, this physically and emotionally dangerous space left an indelible mark. It led him to become a DJ, start websites and an internet radio station devoted to British Asian cultural production. He took a defining moment and 'ma[de] bearable what might be otherwise unbearable' (Back, 2007:52). Nav used his story as inspiration to create a new space for Asians, literally, in creating a

resource ('Brasian' Magazine) for young Asians to showcase their abilities musically and culturally.

I grew up in an area, initially, when I was a lot younger, went to primary school was mainly white kids, and at the age of eight, I was shot by a group of National Front teenagers in the leg, for being a Paki. ...And then, 11, 12 years old, you got to secondary school, I went to secondary school in Hounslow and by the way, this incident happened in Feltham, right in Sparrowfarm Estate. Sparrowfarm estate, my dad did not realize, was where National Front headquarters were, bought a house right opposite. I went to Sparrowfarm Junior school, right in the 80s, from 85-89. Anyway, at 89, I became 11 years old, and I went to Eastland Secondary School in Hounslow, and it was spot the white, you couldn't see a white kid for shit. I didn't realize until a couple of years ago, that that single incident of racism was what formed me and drove me to then become Brasian after that with Moise.

Sukhdev Sandu (2003) argues that Asian writers such as Hanif Kureishi marked out their identity as Londoners in writing about their versions of London. Kureishi, as Sandhu points out, portrayed London as a muddled, messy, chaotic place of pleasure and discovery. His characters always originated from the suburbs of England. In moving to London, they found themselves arriving 'home'. This portrayal of 'home' as a destination rather than an origin resonates with how these scene members constructed their ideas of 'home'. Often, 'home' and a sense of belonging was something that young Asians could not take for granted but always actively negotiated and deliberately constructed so as to make a space for themselves even when it was hard to do so.

An exploration of the usage and meanings of 'home' opens up different ways of defining 'home'. In the examples provided, one can see that 'home' shifts from habitat and abode to a sense of safety and comfort. In these instances, home becomes what Les Back explains 'a way of centring a sense of place in this world' (2007: 69). However, we also know that 'home' can be a space that is imbued with both safety and danger, particularly for young people of colour growing up in multicultural and 'multiracist' London.

What emerges out of these stories of 'home' is the use of multiple scales of home and belonging being used simultaneously. The 'multi-scalar character' of

London offers diverse terrains and domains (Sassen, 2007). Growing up as diasporic Asians in London demanded a more complex vision of home in which what defines 'home' as 'home' is not necessarily place, territory, citizenship, and other fixed markers of belonging. Instead, 'home' is made and re-constituted through a sense of belonging. This is shaped by the different connections, affinities and relationships made locally within neighbourhoods and postcodes, but also on a wider scale, across and beyond borders of neighbourhoods, cities and nations.

Finally, the discursive practice of the term 'back home' amongst the scene members within conversations precipitated a section about multiscalar and multiple definitions of home, the city and belonging, rootedness and movement. This practice of a 'back home' is significant through its generational specificity. Within academic work on diaspora, the notion that young British Asians are referring to India or Pakistan 'back home' seems contradictory to academic or theoretical understanding of diasporic identities as rootless, unstable, and unfixed. Yet, academic views on what it is to be diasporic within Britain in the contemporary period are challenged and contested by these everyday ways in which diasporic identities are lived and practised.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I tied together different constructions of 'becoming' and belonging in relation to the space of the Asian music scene. In this chapter, I looked at how these attempts at creating a home and a sense of belonging occurs amongst the scene members within my project. This chapter was about exploring some of the different scales or dimensions through which the concept of diaspora is filtered and experienced. These matters of belonging and home were explored at the micro-level of local practices and discourses of what it means to be 'desi', and under what conditions could the term 'coconut' be used to brand someone a 'fake'. My discussion of 'desi' and 'coconut' aimed to conceptually link these processes together to highlight the production of

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diaspora as a material, active, everyday contested process that resists categorization in absolute terms. Thus, the 'desi' and the 'coconut' identity serve as examples of how diaspora is always a negotiated process that is as much about negotiating ideas of cultural continuity, tradition, borders and exclusion as it is about freedom, contingency, self-definition and difference.

Discussions regarding the multiple practices that shape 'home' to these young people within the scene open up opportunities to look at how diasporic concerns and commitments are shaped and articulated through popular culture and the city, often mutually reinforced through each other. Both the music scene and the city demand different, alternate ways of making connections with people that can be hyper local and at the same time, translocal, and transnational. Thus, through the discussions of 'desis', 'coconuts' and 'back home' I point out how people are challenging, contesting and also reaffirming ways of belonging within a community that help them to gain a sense of their 'place' in this world.

In the next section, I move on to discuss space and place making in the context of making Bombay Bronx, the Notting Hill Arts Club Asian music night hosted by Radio 1 DJ Nihal. I use the space of Bombay Bronx as a launch pad to discuss wider issues of cultural production and performance within a politics of representation, in which Asian cultural producers such as Nihal and others are actively staking out an alternative 'mainstream' space for Asian music within the London 'urban' and hip hop scene. This new space is about representing Asians in different ways from before; ways that are seen to be more 'true' to a particular Asian experience. It has sparked debate within the scene over matters of authenticity, 'coolness' and the position of Asian cultural production holds within popular culture.

## Chapter 6: Bombay Bronx, Cultural Producers and the Asian Urban Scene



Fig. 5 'Bombay Bronx' logo projected onto the wall at the Notting Hill Arts Club  
(photograph by Helen Kim)



Fig. 6 Performance at Bombay Bronx night, Notting Hill Arts Club, 2008  
(photograph by Helen Kim)



## Introduction(s)

Sometime after midnight on a cold, clear Tuesday evening, I emerged from the dark basement of the Notting Hill Arts Club, a small and somewhat rundown venue in the midst of an upscale west London neighbourhood. Inside, a packed club night called Bombay Bronx<sup>11</sup> was in full swing. I was approached by a young man who held out a glossy flier advertising 'Kandy Nights', a new Saturday event held across the city in east London. The flier's smooth finish and tasteful colours suggested a more upmarket, 'mainstream' R&B night starkly different from the DIY 'indie' mix of Bombay Bronx. As it turned out, the young man, Gee, was the principal promoter of this new night. I introduced myself as someone doing research on the Asian music scene and clubs in London. Gee nodded, saying, 'Yeah, Bombay Bronx – good place to meet people in the scene. This is where everyone hangs out.' He then said, 'Listen, you gotta talk to this guy'. He shouted out to someone behind me. A man loped over, and Gee introduced him as one of the 'biggest producers of Asian hip hop music in London.' He was polite, shook my hand and said his name was Mentor. I handed him my card and he got in touch with me a few days later.

In the span of five minutes, I had met two important figures within a group of artists and producers who saw themselves as part of the London Asian urban music scene. It was no accident that I met them at Bombay Bronx. As Gee said, it was the central meeting place for members of the scene.

On another Tuesday night, I spotted Nihal and Dom, the promoters of Bombay Bronx, in the latter area. Wearing flat baseball caps and shiny trainers, they epitomised the impeccable west London hip-hop style, at once playful, casual and expensive. The two promoters were never alone but rather constantly surrounded by people. They greeted women with polite handshakes and offered male friends the hip-hop hug, clasping hands, pulling each other in close and slapping backs. Nihal is the chief promoter of the Bombay Bronx night, but also

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<sup>11</sup> Bombay Bronx night shut down in October, 2009. There has been some suggestion amongst regular attendees that the club night will resume but to date, it has remained closed. Thus, any discussion of Bombay Bronx is written in the past tense.

host of a primetime radio show featuring new British Asian music on BBC Radio One. He is perhaps the most recognisable face within the UK Asian music scene. I recognized at least three artists who sought him out for conversations during the course of the evening. Dom is a London promoter of hip hop and special events as well as the front office manager of the Notting Hill Arts Club. He has been involved in the entertainment and music industry for over twelve years, and has become a recognised figure on the London urban music and club scene. Together with Nihal he has created an important club night in Bombay Bronx.

In the last chapter, I dealt with diasporic understandings of a 'desi' identity and I analysed in detail the ways in which scene members were exploring the tensions around dominant and alternative understandings of Asianness through discursively establishing boundaries by using terms such as 'desi', 'coconut' and 'back home'. I discussed how a sense of belonging was actively negotiated through individual experience but also through structural and material formations. Explorations on the active remaking of a British Asian youthful identity continue in this chapter, in and through the construction of new spaces for the Asian urban scene as exemplified by Bombay Bronx, and in making claims to a hip hop identity.

Bombay Bronx night represents the cutting edge of the Asian urban music scene, and a meeting place for cultural producers whose work is informed by critical discussions about the links between music and identity. This chapter is about the making of spaces of cultural production as they unfold through the cultural producers who gather together one Tuesday a month at Bombay Bronx. The 'cultural producers' of this scene are based primarily in London, and are the artists, DJs, MCs, producers, and club promoters who produce the music, create the texts, and thus are what David Hesmondhalgh (2007) refer to as the 'symbol creators' of the Asian music scene and industry.

In this chapter, the venue acts as the starting point for an exploration of the broader scene, and in particular how members of it negotiate issues of identity, representation and 'authenticity'. The authenticity here introduces a much more

complex rendering of identity production in that it speaks to how certain ideas of 'realness' within the scene are partly derived from a sense of an ethnic authenticity that is both essentialized as well as seen as multiple and syncretic. This signals how ambivalently these artists are positioned when it comes to a politics of identity within music and cultural production which has no straightforward process. Moreover, I look more closely at how these areas are interrelated and what sort of relationships are configured between these the club night, the Asian scene and the wider music industry. These issues are mediated through the narratives of some of the cultural producers who gather together each month at Bombay Bronx, as well as through my own ethnographic observations. Ultimately, the chapter aims to explore the processes of cultural production of 'Asianness' through this Asian urban music scene. I look closely at how Asian cultural producers, through their music and networks and promotions, are re-imagining their own different and distinct space for Asian popular culture. This space is not without conflict. Very often, these cultural producers are making many claims to an Asian authenticity and they take on roles representing Asians. Therefore, what is really at stake within this field of cultural production are ideas around what it means to be young and Asian and British, particularly around who gets to speak for Asians and represent them.

Minority cultural producers have ambivalent and contradictory positions that 'are often dislocating in relation to one another' when it comes to representing their fellow marginalised subjects (Hall, 1993:31). Asian artists, while negotiating for a wider and more complex understanding of ethnic identity, also feel the equally strong pull to reinstate essentialist notions of what constitutes Asianness and diasporic identity. What is particularly at stake and up for grabs within the Asian scene is the construction of a 'real' and authentic Asian identity articulated through the music and the public image of artists and their cultural output. Asian cultural producers thus are creating new sites that present more diverse versions of Asian identities. Yet these new sites often revisit and recycle 'authentic' notions of 'Asianness', that might include the valorization of particular class locations, heteronormative relations, and gender divisions. Thus, within these different, open sites a politics of identity is being enacted and

negotiated: what it means to be an 'Asian' artist and make 'Asian' music is open to continual contestation. Nevertheless, cultural producers ultimately occupy a position of power and can speak for and represent others who are located in subordinate positions.

Further, there is a wider struggle over the representation of 'ethnic' artists within the wider 'mainstream' music industry. The mainstream is where many Asian artists want to be, although they understand that it is not often open to them. Many musicians are aware that the label 'Asian' often signifies a certain set of stereotypical 'Orientalist' images, sounds and brands – difference reified for the purposes of mass consumption – and that anything beyond these symbols is largely ignored as it does not fit into mainstream structures of identification (see Sharma, 2006; Sharma, et. al, 1996; Saha, unpublished; Murthy, 2007). Hall (1993) warns us that the struggle to move beyond a singular framework of fixed identity is never neat or easy. Asian artists negotiate these stereotypes in a variety of complex and ambivalent ways that involve the use of 'strategies of authenticities' that contest as well as appropriate these stereotypes (Kalra and Hutnyk, 1998). As Michael Herzfeld (1997) points out, the use of stereotypes is not limited to the powerful. Those who are in marginal positions often use them as 'on-the-ground essentializing' strategies that simultaneously and ambiguously manifest both oppression and resistance.

These strategic essentialist strategies are also used to negotiate and acquire cultural capital. Music cultures, as with any form of cultural production, are subject to hierarchies of taste. Cultural producers have developed a nuanced understanding of different levels of tastes. Bourdieu writes that 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.' Thus, people are classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. (1984: 6). Things and people take on meaning in and through others. It has been established that musical

tastes function as a form of cultural capital (Carter, 2003; Thornton, 1996; Ross, 1989).

In Sarah Thornton's (1996) appropriation of the concept, subcultural capital depends less on class bound adaptations. What constitutes the right cultural resources to be converted into cultural capital is context- and sometimes group-, specific, so that the worth of such capital varies across different social situations (Carter, 2003). This also rings true for 'coolness'. Thornton makes the point that what constitutes 'coolness' does depend on the field of production and thus, there are different versions of 'coolness', rather than one singular understanding of coolness as shaped by the dominant classes.

The first section of this chapter will be devoted to an exploration of the Asian scene and, in particular, rooted in the space of Bombay Bronx. I will show how the night is a showcase for and provides a particular 'industry' space for the cultural producers who attend. I explore the history and the development of Bombay Bronx as a diasporic space, as a space of encounters (Brah, 1996). The diasporic space produced corresponds to a particular way of 'mainstreaming' Asian music, in which Bombay Bronx becomes the site to stage an encounter between the music and wider industry and audiences.

I will discuss how the Bombay Bronx space becomes an important and, in many ways, an exceptional site for the development of the urban Asian scene. It is looked to as a way of educating the taste of the Asian scenesters who come by every month. I argue that Bombay Bronx is a particular site within this sub-field of the Asian music scene that has acquired 'indie' cultural capital through its association with the Notting Hill Arts Club and through using careful, deliberate strategies to position itself as 'cool' amongst the mainstream music industry and media.

I will then move outward and look at how the scene defines itself against some of its predecessors within the Asian Underground movement of the mid to late 90s. I will look closely at how the scene's conception of itself, as contrasting that

of the Asian Underground, opens up discussion of the contradictory ways in which members of the Asian scene contend with issues of identity and representation. The scene seeks to establish a sense of cultural authenticity while simultaneously rejecting the reductive essentialist depictions of Asian identities that Asian artists continually face within the wider music industry in Britain.

Moreover, in order to understand how and why Bombay Bronx has become a distinctive night for the Asian scene, it becomes important to grasp how important the notion of 'cool' is to the scene, in which people within the scene struggle to develop awareness of such a fluid and contextual concept, and negotiate boundaries to gain and maintain coolness. I explore how Asian cultural producers have struggled in their lives, both personal and professional, with prevailing and persistent notions of Asianness as pejorative and linked to the 'uncool'. We see how these cultural producers have resisted some of the constraints against such roles for Asians while, at the same time, remaining invested in some of the same standards and codes that seek to exclude Asians from access to coolness.

## **Cultural Production and Bombay Bronx**

The club is a bare basement space devoid of the usual outdoor signs indicating its whereabouts. Inside it is small and dark, split into two main sections by a wall and staircase. The section behind the wall includes a dance floor, stage and a DJ booth tucked away in the corner. When the club is packed and the dance floor full (as is common) people take to the stage to dance. While movement in the club is often quite fluid, the dance area tends to be a space for people who enjoy the music and company but who are not professionally linked to the scene. The other main section incorporates a round bar, usually a bustling hub of activity, a lounge area including booths and chairs, as well as a standing area where people can mingle and talk. This is where those who are part of the Asian 'industry' network.

Nihal briefly stated how Bombay Bronx came into being:

To me, Bombay Bronx grew out of a hobby four and a half years ago where I spin all kinds of things really, things I like...

Bombay Bronx was intended from the start to be a space that kept abreast of what was current, in vogue, and to reflect the immediacy of the moment within music. It was inspired by certain historical moments, like the birth of hip hop, that have become part of a collective memory or nostalgia within mainstream Western popular culture.

D-Boy, an urban music producer who produced two hit singles in 2009 for a well-known British bhangra artist, often attended Bombay Bronx. He characterised the club night as the creative meeting centre for the London Asian urban music scene's cultural producers:

Bombay Bronx would be the...hub of Asian 'creatives' in London, be they filmmakers, or music producers, and even [visual] artists. It's a centre of where...a key figure within the music industry promotes a night to bring together everyone within the music industry under one roof...

The important position of the night is in large part due to Nihal's role as a facilitator and intermediary: he brings different creative people together, and identifies new and interesting artists, sounds and talent. Nihal is what Bourdieu (1984) would call a 'tastemaker' because of his power to influence people's tastes in music through a range of means, from 'underground' live nights to 'mainstream' radio.

Bombay Bronx was a fluid and dynamic space with an ever changing roster of music.

Dom observed:

We've tried to incorporate more bands, we've tried to incorporate more in [making quotation marks with his fingers] 'real' music, and less straight hip hop and that appeals to a broader range of people. When we started it was the sort

of the middle of that bhangra moment that Asian music was happening and we were starting to see American hip hop sampling traditional Indian music forms and there was a couple of big American tunes and the bhangra scene was very strong. And now, Bombay Bronx pretty much plays modern Asian R&B and hip hop because that's what the Asian audience is interested in.

Bombay Bronx moreover has a pivotal position as a showcase for new talent within the Asian urban music scene; indeed Jay Sean, a popular British Asian R&B artist, launched his long awaited single there. In short, Bombay Bronx was an extremely successful night for the Notting Hill Arts Club. Dom confirms this when he says 'It's probably got the widest, it's the most known it's ever been now, Bombay Bronx. It's probably by a long way our busiest Tuesday.'

Not only does Bombay Bronx aim to reflect what was of the moment within urban music, but it also aims to capture the hybrid, diasporic urbanness of contemporary Asian music. I interviewed Nihal during a particularly noisy session in the stairwell of the Notting Hill Arts Club. Shouting over the music he said:

Just walking the streets of London...Someone once said that the absolute precursor of creativity is diversity. If that's the case, then London must be the most creative city on earth...the diversity is there; you can't live in a bubble. Listen to that [live music playing in the background] there's an Indian guy playing a reggae song in a London club to mostly Asians.

Bombay Bronx's description of its night invoked a sense of the oscillating tensions between 'roots' and 'routes' within Asian urban music.

*'There's a clash going on as Asian bad boys and desi divas blend Asian flavas and New York City swagger. As rap beats smash against each other, tabla players weave in and out of the beats. Bombay Bronx is the home of the brown funk, the black beats and the Asian lyrical diaspora'*<sup>12</sup>

This tracing of diverse, migrating trajectories show how people's sense of belonging and identity can involve much more than 'roots' in a place, including also the 'routes' (Gilroy, 1993a) by which it was reached. These 'routes' are

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.nottinghillartsclub.com>



signalled on the one hand through African-American elements such as hip-hop music and terms ('flavas') and on the other hand through Asian components such as the tabla. The reference to 'brown funk' is especially indicative of the connections being established between African American music and South Asian identity. Bombay Bronx's promoters and publicity mapped London's multiculturalism – its diasporic populations and migrating music cultures – onto Bombay Bronx, positioning it as the entryway to the messy, cacophonous and pleasurable dissonance of London's streets and neighbourhoods.

Yet Nihal and Dom had differing opinions on what elements of the Bombay Bronx night they considered most important, and this reveals variance in how they thought about difference, multiculturalism and conviviality within the spaces of the club, particularities that probably reflect their own professional goals and obligations. They had different concerns over the direction of the club night and particularly the clientele to which they catered. Nihal was interested in fostering an 'alternative' space oriented to people who were part of the London Asian urban music scene. For instance, in an interview with Sunny Hundal of *Asians in Media* magazine in 2005,

Nihal was quoted as saying:

'I've wanted to do a rap night that reflected Asian-ness, that played bhangra and R&B but in a different environment, and the Notting Hill Arts Club is the perfect place for that.'

However, Dom, as manager of the Notting Hill Arts Club, is uncomfortable with having a predominantly Asian crowd at Bombay Bronx. He said:

He [Nihal] just wants to play that music, it's his music, it's what he wants to hear and it's what he wants to party to, but I have a sort of wider remit, you know, my role is promoter of the club, and I want it to broaden out and like I said before, appeal to a wider range of people and I want their music to be exposed to a wider range of people, you know. If you just play Asian music to Asian audiences, then you're going to be stuck on a never ending treadmill.

His remarks suggest that he wanted to capitalise on Bombay Bronx's Asian 'hybrid' aspects by not limiting the night to an Asian crowd. His position as a club manager means that he faces the practical challenge of encouraging as many people as possible to come to the club, which means greater profit for it through the increase in sales of alcohol, door fees, and coat check charges.

Nihal, Dom and the Notting Hill Arts Club website presented Bombay Bronx as a cutting edge, hybrid space of postmodern urban culture, yet in doing so arguably they engage in a form of diasporic commodification. While a thorough discussion of commodification requires a much deeper analysis than space allows here, it can be remarked that Bombay Bronx's hybrid space might be understood as one of the routes by which Asian music moved 'from the street to the superstore' (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk, 2005). I am mindful of John Hutnyk's (2000) critique of the export and commodification of 'exotica' made in relation to the overly celebratory accounts of South Asian cross-over 'hybrid' sounds. Stuart Hall (1992) reminds us that within the contemporary conjuncture difference is celebrated and fetishized. Commodification turns Asian music into re-packaged cultural artefacts made palatable for mass consumption (Sharma, et. al 1996). So, for instance, in 2006, Universal Records India released a Bombay Bronx compilation album that promised the 'phattest desi hip hop bhangra blast' re-positioning Bombay Bronx as a brand to promote the album. This compilation arguably attempted to appropriate certain characteristics of Bombay Bronx and repackage them as an attractive commodity for a global market, insofar as it used the name of the popular night and its principal promoter, Nihal. Sanjay Sharma (1996) argued that when major labels repackaged the work of Asian artists such as Bally Sagoo in the late 1990s they effectively stripped away the specificities of South Asian production in the interests of appealing to a global consumer market. It is unclear whether the album contextualizes the songs in relation to the club night, but without providing specific links between the music and the club night, these songs might become reduced to generic 'party tunes'. If this were the case this might dilute the political and social significance of the Bombay Bronx night in contributing to the growth of London Asian cultural production.

In chapter three I briefly discussed the dissolution of a fixed 'mainstream' identity in regards to the relationship between music and politics. Alternative or 'indie' music once signalled not only a type of independent music production but also an accompanying political identity, carved out of opposing 'mainstream' or dominant cultural values. Debates around the 'mainstream' in music have often revolved around the process of co-optation and accommodation of music from the margins to the mainstream, which is often viewed as negative (see Hutnyk, 2006; Swedenburg, 2004). Yet, this assumption rests on the fact that the mainstream as a location is somewhere to be avoided by those belonging to an oppositional culture. However, within the Asian urban scene, and indeed for many music cultures, the mainstream is no longer a stable fixed position, nor one that is necessarily eschewed in favour of a marginal or 'oppositional' location.

For example, most common sense understanding and usage of the term 'mainstream' refer to the existence of a mainstream audience, and the production (corporate) distribution and recording labels such as the big four labels, currently Universal Music Group, Warner Music Group, EMI and SONY/BMG. In the context of the Asian scene, the mainstream then refers to a set of networks and practices that are not part of the Asian scene, which generally relies on 'independent' networks, usually artist-owned and operated, that lie outside of the big four groups. However, there is an increasingly blurry distinction between a mainstream and an alternative or 'independent' scene within the cultural industries, because independent labels have often been bought out by the major labels. Further, labels outside of the four can also have large complex structures that very much resemble production and marketing processes like the big four, thus being very similar to the bigger labels (Hesmondhalgh, 1998, 1999; Kruse, 2004; Negus, 1999)

The 'mainstream' is conceived of in different ways by the cultural producers within the Asian music scene. It is difficult to offer a fixed or concrete definition of a 'mainstream', because it can be used to refer to an entire industry of

cultural production, manufacturing, distribution and marketing (Hesmondhalgh, 1999). Sarah Thornton (1996) reveals that the mainstream is conceptualized as a crowd or area that lies outside and in opposition to the clubbers she interviewed. Thornton argues that the mainstream becomes a 'disparaged other', operating as something negative to distinguish 'them' from 'us'.

Thus despite the fact that the term 'mainstream' holds such diverse interpretations, it is a useful concept to explore further, because it is used as a framing device to contrast the Asian scene to the wider music industry. Further, the concept of mainstreaming is often accompanied by other significant issues Asian artists must contend with, such as access, visibility and recognition, or the lack thereof.

Mentor, producer, DJ said this about the scene:

It's a scene that was developed within the Asian community and will stay within the Asian community. It might influence other people's music or you might even, you know you might get a track here and there that will come into in the mainstream but it's always been an independent scene. And I think, the amount of negative light that Asian people have in this country definitely, definitely affected the way Asian people are perceived in general, and that will transcend over to the music as well because, you know, uh, mainstream culture don't want to know what you know, if Asian kids are making music, because they don't generally have the same opinion of Asian people...

Mentor is confirming that there are real limits to being an Asian cultural producer in Britain. Mentor is making the point that within the larger music industry, Asian music is associated only with Asian producers and consumers. Thus, the Asian scene will always struggle to become mainstream. Mentor uses the term 'independent' to mean isolated. It does not have the same cache as being 'indie', cool or chic. In this sense, Mentor is using this term to mean isolation and a lack of interest in Asian cultural output, or as Claire Alexander once said of current Asian cultural production, it remains 'untouched and undesired' (2002:557).

My discussion with Mentor brings us to the point where we can see that the mainstream is a space that Asian cultural producers, more often than not, want to occupy. To them, it is not about maintaining independence, but like most artists, mainstream means perhaps an actual record deal, real income, and perhaps a chance at something steady, and perhaps some actual recognition and eventual fame.

Therefore, we see how club promoters have used the Bombay Bronx space to push representation away from the marginal spaces where the 'other' always seem to be relegated, and bring Asian music into a wider arena, inching closer to mainstream channels of the music industry.

Dom said:

If you want your music to succeed, if you want to release...uh, something and you want it to succeed and if you gauge success by sales, obviously you want to sell it to a broad, wide range of people. You want to access the widest demographic as possible. Um, the Asian scene traditionally, uh, operates within itself so as far as I can see on that level, it's, uh, limiting itself and limiting its sales and the accessibility of the music. On the other hand, if you're trying to integrate Asian music into the common...zeitgeist, the common...arena, then I think you have to make it appeal to white people and black people and other demographics and you have to, you know, unghettoize it and make it feel, um, accessible.

While Sarah Thornton's (1996) observations of the 'mainstream' still hold true to the extent that the 'mainstream' does lie outside of the Asian scene, the mainstream that is conceptualized by members of the Asian scene is generally positive. It is a position or location or status that is considered deeply desirable within the Asian scene, and holds symbolic and concrete capital. Thornton (1996) overlooks the significance of racial difference and its ability to shape how youth cultures find meaning in concepts such as the mainstream. In fact, while she argues that the mainstream is the trope that young people employ in order to imagine themselves in the social world, to 'assert their self-worth' in claiming 'subcultural capital' against the mainstream, in this case the ways in

which this happens shows the reverse to be true. Mainstreaming is a sign of acceptance and approval, and to emphasize a connection to the mainstream is to establish legitimacy; it adds value and competence.

Thornton discusses how the mainstream is often understood by youth cultures to work in conjunction with the media and music press. In other words, the mainstream media becomes a symbol of the mainstream. Similarly, Bombay Bronx acting as a platform or conduit to the mainstream music industry relies heavily on its connections to the media, so that Nihal's position as a media figure becomes particularly important to the success of the goals of Bombay Bronx. Nihal's role is to be the public face of Bombay Bronx. Nihal gets positioned as the chief promoter because of his connections to the media, and it is important to have such a figure connected to the night.

Nihal says:

What I do is I'm a shop window, I'm a facilitator, I don't create the art, all I do is vend it, I put it in a shop window so people can walk past the shop and see it. We all play our part, you know you play your part by writing about it, DJs play their part by playing it out. We all play our own little part.

Dom concurs when he mentions how Nihal's media connections were important from the start to the start of Bombay Bronx:

Yeah, um...Nihal at that stage, was a DJ and a...media savvy person and worked in the general media, and now he's got to a point where he's doing one Radio 1 regularly, he's got his own show, [yeah] and he's now covering for a lot of other people, and it looks like he's going to get a very good slot on Radio 1 and he's kind of put the kibosh on all the television stuff and sticking to radio stuff, which is interesting... and good.

Nihal displays a careful modesty in downplaying his role as a cultural tastemaker, even though his description of being a shop window quite accurately describes his role as a cultural intermediary. Nihal's statement reveals what Will Straw explains as hipness's 'controlled economy of revelation' where one 'has a sense of how and when things are to be spoken of' (1997:9).

This modesty indicates his possession of 'indie' cultural capital and facilitates his coolness.

Dom's statement also reinforces the careful selection process that goes into Nihal's career and image when he mentions how Nihal made a deliberate decision to stay with radio rather than branching out towards other media channels such as television. This decision suggests that Nihal is careful about overexposure within mainstream channels; both he and Dom place value in keeping his image within certain limits because it is often seen as being much 'cooler' to remain within a certain niche and to engage in a form of 'selective silence' (Straw, 1997:9) to gain 'cult' status rather than becoming a household name. Nihal keeps his cool, youthful and 'underground' image intact in this way.

In the next section, I look more closely at this concept of 'coolness' and its role within the making of Bombay Bronx. I look at how the development of 'cool' is articulated through Bombay Bronx. I also explore how the night forges a new 'indie' space between the 'Asian' scene and the conception of a 'mainstream' space through this careful cultivation of coolness.

## **'It's not like other nights' Bombay Bronx and Cultivating Coolness**

### **Coolness versus Asianness?**

Despite the 'Asian Underground' millennial success, other forms of Asian popular music have remained resolutely underground and independent scenes. As evidenced by Mentor's earlier statement, this is a very salient and often discussed topic within the scene. The general perception within the scene is that Asian cultural production has often occupied a low position within the hierarchy of music and coolness among London's music scenes. This positions Bombay Bronx as a performance and a set of practices that holds much significance and power in trying to change that orientation. The development of Bombay Bronx as an Asian industry night for the last five years has centred on the construction of 'cool', and the acquisition of 'subcultural capital'. Bombay

Bronx emerged as a night in order to challenge some of the stereotypical notions of what constitutes a 'typical' Asian night in the city and it works to undo the binary between what is 'cool' and 'edgy' and what is 'Asian' and 'traditional'.

Throughout the conversations I have had about the night with various artists, and people within the Asian scene who have a stake in the scene and the night, what comes out of the conversations is the setting up of various positions and distinctions of taste, which I will elaborate further with each specific conversation. Taste itself is what Bourdieu refers to as 'social orientation' which gives someone a 'social sense of one's place.' (1984:466).

First I want to establish some of the historical context for why and how Asian music within Britain has been positioned in very particular ways. I want to analyse how scene members negotiated this positioning and their own 'cool' status based on their knowledge of popular culture. Through this examination I aim to explore how music is racialized and how that then is a key aspect in gaining and retaining 'cool' status.

What constitutes 'coolness' is difficult to define. It is partly determined by many factors such as age, socio-economic circumstances, region, class, ethnicity, gender, temporality and space. The notion of 'coolness' as a set of cultural resources can be linked to Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1984), or the elite tastes and values of the dominant, mainstream group. Sarah Thornton's (1996) adaptation of the concept, named 'subcultural capital', is what Matthew Bannister (2006) calls in essence, 'hipness', and what is also referred to as 'non-dominant forms of cultural capital' (Carter, 2003; Lareau and Lamont, 1988).

Unlike Bourdieu's definition of capital (1984) which is based on class distinctions, I will show that the making of distinctions within the Asian scene is often based not only on class but also set within the boundaries of ethnicity and gender. Similarly, Sarah Thornton (1996) argues that class had less to do with the creation of 'subcultural capital' than other forms of distinction. According to



Thornton, what constitutes the right cultural resources - that are then converted into cultural capital - is context and group specific, so that the worth of such capital varies across different social situations (1996). Thornton makes the point that what constitutes 'coolness' does depend upon the particular field of production and thus different versions of 'coolness' are established rather than the existence of a single form.

Cultural difference can often be perceived as 'cool' (Alexander, 2002; Hall, 1992; Sharma, 1996). Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us that the moment in which we live is obsessed with difference. He says, 'there's nothing that global postmodernism loves better than a certain kind of difference: a touch of ethnicity, a taste of the exotic' (1996:467). Trace amounts of difference are acceptable, 'cool' and desirable. The extent to which difference can be viewed or packaged as desirable, posing no threat to the dominant order, is a significant factor.

Koushik Banerjea writes that in the 1980s, the prevailing opinion of Asians held by white British emphasised these values, 'odour, passivity, squareness, weakness and weirdness' (1996:113). The point here is that blacks and Asians have been racialized in radically different and uneven ways across different fields and at different moments. This is particularly evident if we look at the divergent attitudes toward black and Asian cultural production (Alexander, 2002; Song, 2003). Banerjea and Barn write that 'white masculine discourses around 'cool black subjectivity' rarely attempt to hide their distaste for perceived Asian 'effeminateness' and in fact are reliant upon such absolute conceptualisations for their legitimacy' (1996:200). Thus, 'coolness' is deeply racially and culturally coded. Often, 'coolness' and 'culture' have a kind of inverse relationship. Asian artists are marked as having 'too much' culture, and this is often perceived to work against the acquisition of 'coolness' or subcultural capital. Asian cultural production is still outwardly perceived, according to mainstream UK standards, as being 'traditional', culturally 'backward', and pre-modern. It is accordingly not awarded cultural capital. In contrast, US and UK black youth culture is thought to be 'global, creative, cutting-edge, infinitely marketable culture-of-desire' (Alexander, 2002). Thus,

many young Asians, aware that other kids considered hip hop cool, learned that by adopting hip hop mannerisms, dress and outlook, they too could invest in and gain some cultural capital.

Hema, an R&B and pop singer, confessed:

It's a battle, isn't it, as an Indian...We're not a cool demographic, it is like, to be African American. There are certain hardships but there's a cool edge with hip hop and stuff. And the Indians are not a cool kind of demographic. I know I've definitely gone through a stage of being embarrassed by it, just wanting to be like my friends, like the other English girls.

Cultural capital is both embodied and material. Mannerisms, style, as well as objects themselves make up cultural capital. Thus, things that denote or symbolize difference can be seen as detrimental to achieving capital. Nav, said of growing up:

We were quite embarrassed of that side of our culture, we'd sort of...it'd be like 'oh no, Sunrise Radio' or you know, Radio Excel, if you were up in the Midlands they played this on medium wave. They played this really bad signal Bollywood music which would make us cringe when our friends were around, cause like, high pitched vocals and all that, you know, wasn't cool at the time. So you know, that was the case since we were kids, since the late 70s, throughout the 80s and the 90s, this is something that lots of British Asians, sort of experienced, they'll all tell you the same story, god, it's so embarrassing.

As Nav pointed out, a lot of British Asians have had shared experiences of recounting those moments of being conscious of those markers of difference, in this case, symbolized by the singing style of Indian playback singers.

Hema said:

I think most of us go through a phase where you're just totally embarrassed by it. You know, even down to things like if your house smells of cooking, the curry or anything. You just always you know you're different, in a sense, so I think that's the main thing for me, having just always been aware. Just feeling different, say, from like my white friends next door, I've never-- there's always a difference.

These markers of difference be it sound or smell, are viscerally felt, and experienced. Words too, such as in the use of derogatory terms to describe someone as being Asian, were also recalled in some of my interviewees experiences. The performative power of such words has material consequences. Koushik Banerjea writes how Soul singer Ranjit Johalji never 'progressed any further...because no matter how hard he tried he could never quite forget the playground taunts of 'Paki'...' (1996: 110).

The term 'Paki' develops discursive power through repetition (Butler, 1990) and regulation. It constructs an impermeable barrier between those who are 'Paki' and those who are not. It signifies absolute, irreconcilable difference, fixing Asianness forever outside the normative frameworks of white Britishness (Banerjea, 1996).

AG Dolla, rapper, pointed out:

As for the kids, the youngsters, yeah, they were brought up here and what happened was, they would walk outside the house wherever they're from, and they would feel inferior because they weren't cool, they didn't feel cool. You all know the word 'Paki'. The kids, I think they feel this inferiority complex.

The linking of coolness (or the lack thereof) to the derogatory taunt of 'Paki' makes clear the racially inflected coding of coolness present in the deployment of the term 'Paki'. Racial taunts illustrate the banal ways in which power structures the everyday spaces of the playground, school, and the workplace, and also such arenas as popular culture. The awareness of absolute otherness that 'Paki' is meant to evoke acted as a very real burden that shaped the lives and the opportunities of young British Asians.

Even now, Asian cultural production is still outwardly perceived, according to mainstream UK standards, as being 'traditional', culturally 'backward', and pre-modern, and thus not awarded with cultural capital. The ways in which taste classifies and labels people within the Asian scene strongly point to the fact that

coolness and 'race' are very much intertwined, and that 'race' works as an important 'apparatus' of social distinction in music subcultures.

Interviewees pointed to the use and engagement in forms of popular culture in an attempt to narrow the distance of difference and where they were positioned. Interviewees often mentioned that it was through forms of popular culture that young people would often seek to redress the imbalance of certain stereotypes of Asians. For instance, Nav here called attention to the ways in which these young Asians understood the importance of acquiring knowledge of popular culture, and how that becomes a currency and a platform in which to barter insider status and acceptance from white British counterparts.

So, you know...this realization and this kind of acknowledgement that there are kids out there suffering...feeling inadequate, feeling disconnected from their peer groups...you know, they wanna know what's on Eastenders, they just wanna fit in, they want to talk about popular culture...you know, they don't know anything, they're just kids, they're not trendsetters, they just want to fit in.

Popular culture, via television, radio, and print, through music such as hip hop and through shows like Eastenders, became a way of democratizing coolness by opening up alternative opportunities to become cool. Thus, to be able to speak of such things with knowledge and aplomb meant that Asian kids were able to take part in culture that 'normalized' and made 'regular' their position within white, British society.

Dom made a similar observation:

And I think Asian people feel discrimination in this country, and they feel marginalized in this country and they'd like to be able to overcome that through something sexy like hip hop music...

In a later section, I will return to this discussion of hip hop as a form of cultural capital for the Asian scene, in which the alignment with US and UK forms of black cultural production further illustrates how values and tastes within popular music and culture are racially configured so that black cultural forms become arbiters of coolness. Moreover, these links elicit a complex racial and

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class politics of identity and representation in setting up an authentic Asian identity.

As Thornton (1996) and others have made clear, music has long been positioned as a key form of cultural capital. This is because the value of 'good' and 'bad' music is often just as much about having certain tastes rather than just about skill and craftsmanship. The history of popular music has often been marked by opposition to new forms of music, regarded as 'bad' or 'inferior' to older forms for various reasons (Bennett, 1993). Further, I would argue that music, particularly 'underground' and the 'urban' genres, have now become the most accessible and popular source of (sub)cultural capital amongst London's youth because it is, ultimately, *popular* music and therefore more widely recognized and accepted as a form of capital. Increasingly, as I have stated before, 'underground' music scenes becomes easier to recognize and access through the internet. Moreover, popular music has become increasingly linked to other forms of cultural knowledge and capital such as fashion and even the visual arts. Music as a form of cultural capital, particularly around certain genres of music ('indie' genres), is a highly gendered set of practices (Bannister, 2006). The performance of certain 'alternative' masculinities has been expressed through displaying knowledge and competence of music (collecting rare, imported and unreleased music, zines, writing music blogs). Thus, as Dom says, music is a key way to overcome uncoolness or to gain cultural capital. This leads me to a discussion of the ways in which Bombay Bronx has harnessed the 'cool' image and status of certain forms of music and cultivated them in order to raise the profile of Asian music within London's music scene.

### **Bombay Bronx Cool**

Nihal and Dom, who have aims to be at the forefront of the London urban music scene, have carefully built up Bombay Bronx as a purveyor of cool taste. Bombay Bronx and in particular, Nihal, construct and enact taste culture, and Nihal is very much positioned and positions himself a tastemaker of the London Asian urban music scene.

One of the significant things about Bombay Bronx and its promotion is the extent to which the promotion is explicit about trying to change ideas about taste within the Asian scene. They have tried to shift ideas about what is considered 'cool' within the scene by bringing together various types of networks, music, style and tastes.

Dom said:

I think one of the main reasons why Bombay Bronx is an important thing for the Asian scene is that, I might be typecasting here, but most Asian nights are pretty much a glitzy, sort of high-end clubs, and they try and go for the high-end R&B look. As far as I am concerned, [snorts] we are very, very different to that, we don't aim to be that, and um, and it provides a different... networking, sort of scene, do you know what I mean? It kind of allows...it's a different aspect of the scene.

Here Dom's statement hints at a less than approving attitude toward standard Asian nights' aesthetic of luxury and status-oriented practices of consumption. Instead, Bombay Bronx rejects the reliance on an overt urban style often associated with dominant, commercial hip hop and R&B styles that guide 'typical' Asian club nights. Their choice to go against such typical aesthetic choices poses a challenge to the way that Asian night club promoters often reinforce very particular notions of conspicuous consumption, embracing the presentation of aspirational lifestyles of designer labels, extravagance and luxury. Thus in sharp contrast to the high end R&B glamour of other Asian nights, Bombay Bronx is housed in the small, gritty basement space of the Notting Hill Arts Club. The Notting Hill Arts Club is known for being a site that showcases local independent bands, and supports rarefied tastes and underground music scenes. For example, every month they host a night of obscure Japanese trance dance music. Dom stated:

We had lots of celebrities come down, and we were kind of the hangout. As that music [indie rock] grew in popularity, more clubs opened, and we were on top for a while and then it gradually started to diminish and now we're kind of on the upswing again where it's becoming uncool to be into rock again and all these other clubs have come and gone and we're still here and we're kind of seen as

the sort of... we've been seen as being around for ages, and people kind of trust that so we're on the way up again

By showcasing live performances and offering a range of different artists outside of the standard hip hop and R&B genres, Bombay Bronx is considered a space to introduce a predominantly young Asian London crowd to a distinctly different set of practices and dispositions that emphasize alternative or 'indie' values.

As I have briefly mentioned, 'indie' once stood for 'independent' in reference to music production that was independent from corporate music industry labels (Hesmondhalgh, 1998). 'Indie' music has always implied a lifestyle, or the staking out of an oppositional position against the mainstream, corporate ownership of music and cultural production (Kruse, 2003). Yet, increasingly, 'indie' has become more diffuse, meaning not only a political position but also a fashion style as well as a term for a genre of rock and pop based music. However, the many definitions of 'indie' still rely upon a hierarchy of values within music that privilege certain characteristics over others. Hesmondhalgh writes how indie proclaimed superiority over other genres for its authentic relation to youth who made it and listened to it, remaining 'untainted' by corporate music practices (1988:40). Live performances with instrumentation rather than the use of a sound system emphasizes the importance of 'authenticity' and sincerity (Bannister, 2006). They stressed a down-at-heel approach to consumption because the practice of consumption was seen as a sign of 'selling out' and supporting the dominant capitalist way of life (Hesmondhalgh, 1988). Thus even today, 'indie' is often associated with individualism, sincerity and a lack of pretension. Bombay Bronx is positioned as a place that is separate and distinct from other nightclubs and places of entertainment in décor, taste and how people are expected to consume their entertainment. Bombay Bronx sets out to give Asian music an 'indie' make-(under), emphasizing other aspects of clubbing beyond hyper-commodified forms of consumption.

Dom emphasizes this 'indie' outlook and values in this statement when he talks about the differences in practices of consumption between other clubs and

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Bombay Bronx. The concept of education becomes part of the discourse surrounding Bombay Bronx, in which an attempt to educate those who come to Bombay Bronx is part of the mission of the night. For instance here Dom talked about the crowd at Bombay Bronx and the incongruity of such practices as ostentatious spending and drinking with the ethos of Bombay Bronx and the Notting Hill Arts Club itself:

We have these guys every week. I don't even know if most of them drink and every week, they order the most expensive bottle of...brandy. They have a table in the corner, and they love having this bottle of brandy there and they give the drinks to the girls. That wouldn't be so weird if we were Chinawhite, we're not anything near it. In fact, we're probably one of the most low-down scummy places in London, we're a fucking mess! It's not a place to show off, but they wanna do it and it's part of their whole thing. They love it. They think that's the way to behave and it's up to us to educate them as that's not the way to behave and as much as I'd like them to spend that money on booze, I don't want them to do it in that way because that's not where it needs to be. That's not an entirely good proposition. I don't think it reflects very well on people when they do that either.

Dom exhibits a fair amount of disapproval for the brash and overt displays of wealth and consumption of goods. The notion that there is a 'right' and 'wrong' way to consume is evident in Dom's self-righteous tone and in the actions of the club staff who regulate these men, in subtle or perhaps not so subtle ways to discourage them from engaging in these extravagant, 'un-indie' practices within the Bombay Bronx space. Dom's moralistic tone hides how the club works hard in appealing to certain tastes in order to maintain its 'indie' credibility and it does so in part by regulating people's behaviour in particular ways. Of course, it is not unusual or uncommon for clubs to do this as it is often the case that clubs use different tactics to ensure that they attract the 'right' guests who 'fit' in in terms of appearance, style, taste and behaviour.

Bombay Bronx is also attributed the power to educate in terms of exposing their Asian members to the dispositions, practices and positions of other crowds and scenes, from the 'indie' hip crowd who frequent the Notting Hill Arts Club to the urban grime kids who gather there on a very popular night called YoYo. Nihal



uses his influence to bring well-known DJs and figures from London's hip hop scene to Bombay Bronx:

D-Boy stated:

Nihal, you know, he wants non-Asian DJs to come on, like Tim Westwood or Mr. Jam to come along and to enlighten the Asian crowd. Actually I think it's an educational night for the Asian people, because I was speaking earlier about comfort zones, Asian people definitely get into the comfort zones and never get out of it, and Bombay Bronx is a way of *trying* to get them out of it. So, it's educational...

'Coolness' is in part developed by establishing a sense of quirky individuality that remains distinct from what Dom referred to earlier as the ubiquitous Asian R&B themed nights. Having built this as an identity for Bombay Bronx, people who come to Bombay Bronx come because they find this sense of individuality an attractive feature of Bombay Bronx. Thus, Bombay Bronx brings together a different understanding of objects of capital, such as music and clothing; and also mannerisms, lifestyle choices of others, such as those 'indie' rockers embracing these forms of cultural capital to make them 'cool' for the Asian scenesters who attend Bombay Bronx.

One example is D-Boy who stated:

I like the ideology of BB. First of all, it doesn't have a typical Asian title. It's got the word 'Bronx' and 'Bombay' those are two happening cities that are not in London. I think the concept of it came from Nihal, the Radio 1 DJ whose night it is, who went to New York and loved the scene there, and was obviously in Bombay and wanted to kind of make a mesh of the Asian scene here. So it's more of an artistic and eclectic choice which for me, is appealing because I like diverse things that allows for artistic creativity, and that's why I go to Bombay Bronx...

The pursuit of coolness and one that fits with the 'indie' Notting Hill Club shabby basement aesthetic is maintaining the illusion of an effortlessness and lack of pretension, eschewing conspicuous wealth, effort and money. This extends to their attitudes in showcasing music. That is, the Notting Hill Arts Club presents itself as a venue that cares more about bringing good music to people than they

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do about profit. Therefore, many of their nights have been long running and are not immediately profitable. Most are obscure and have small followings.

The night's promoters are actively attempting to introduce other ways of being 'cool', particularly valorizing attempts to exhibit a sense of effortless taste, and the idea of not trying 'too hard', or at the very least, not overtly displaying such attempts at trying.

Dom agreed when he stated:

Well, like most nights at the club, we always want to represent the music honestly and unpretentiously, and without all the baggage that goes in a lot of places. We want to do it without the pretension and actually represent a genre of music at that point in time.

Nihal confirmed this lack of concern for profit or commercial gain, and makes it clear that his goal for the night is about reflecting his love of music. He stressed the goal of doing something 'different' from what other club nights were doing:

What I'm interested in is putting on music, which is different and has a different energy to it. That's interesting to me. Look, I don't care if...I don't do this night for money. I may make a hundred pounds tonight, you know...fine, whatever. I don't do it for that. I do it because I've been doing it for four and a half years. It's a passion. I need to do it, you know.

Dom here talked about how Nihal was not promoting the night for the money, but out of his love for good music:

It's difficult because Nihal has plenty of work to do and doesn't need to be running a nightclub every month in a basement in Notting Hill, he really doesn't. Financially, it might [be] a nice couple of hundred quid, but he's way too generous with the door money anyway, so he doesn't make much money off it anyway, but he just wants to play that music...

Thus, these attempts to inject other decidedly more 'indie' forms of cultural capital into the Asian industry scene are accomplished through the emphasis in the construction of an effortlessness, an 'unpretentiousness' and a 'DIY' ethos (Bannister, 2006) which gives the illusion that there is no real effort or planning,

research or work involved in the running of the night. However, behind this performance a great deal of planning and work does go into the maintenance of the club, as Dom once admitted:

It's the most known it's ever been now, Bombay Bronx. We spend a lot of time working with conceptualizing nights and working with concepts and getting press because we don't advertise so all, everything comes through press, so we work hard on that, I spend a lot of time doing that.

Nihal and Dom also represent two different attitudes to coolness as it relates to Bombay Bronx, revealing their very different roles to the success of the night. Dom's role is generally focused on the work that goes on behind the scenes, and he can strategize and think of publicity in a way that serves Bombay Bronx best. Thus, Dom can speak more openly about what it takes to be considered a cool and successful night, and all the planning that it involves.

On the other hand, Nihal as the public face of Bombay Bronx, must attend to his role more carefully in not appearing overly concerned with image, status, and 'coolness'. Here Nihal did not appear concerned about achieving coolness because he was already aware that the night was considered to be 'cool'. Nihal's blasé attitude and nonchalance toward achieving 'cool' status is part of the act, so to speak. The less he cares, the cooler he and the night are perceived.

I don't give a fuck about whether anyone thinks I'm cool or not or whether Bombay Bronx is cool or not. It's not about them, and I'm not interested. I've never printed a flier for Bombay Bronx in four and a half years. I've never sent out a press release to a newspaper for Bombay Bronx. I'm not interested....

This illusion of ease and 'naturalness' that accompanies such thoughts of coolness is also seen to be something that comes 'naturally' to Nihal, so that even though it takes work to construct an image of cool, the idea is that it should not take such effort but that it happens without trying at all. Thus Nihal's statements are in keeping with Bourdieu's construction of 'habitus', defined as a set of dispositions that determine such practices and the material aspects of cultural capital (1984). The habitus is a 'feel for the game' as the 'social game embodied and turned into a *second nature*' (Bourdieu, 1984: 63, emphasis mine).

Further, Bourdieu elaborates by saying that habitus is 'a predisposition to the 'rules of the game'...and furthermore, doing so in a way that appears 'entirely natural and effortless' (Grenfell, 2008:106). Thus, Nihal's admission reveals the rules of the 'cool' game and how it is played in that in order to acquire 'cool' one must give others the sense that he/she is unaware and unconcerned about having this status.

In D-Boy's eyes, this notion of habitus as a set of predispositions has enabled Nihal to unconsciously inject a sense of himself, his tastes, and his vision of what is 'cool' into Bombay Bronx.

Helen: Do you think that [doing something different and innovative] was done on purpose? Like you said, even the name, and stuff, bringing different things together, bringing moments together...

D-Boy: I don't think it's entirely intentionally done in that way, it just *is* that way because of the organizer's...and he is obviously cosmopolitan, London born, into hip hop and it's a reflection of who he is as well. I think that was done on purpose but also reflects the organizers' mentality. The organizer is not trying to do anything but just does what he feels represents the new London.

Cultural producers are aware that they have the power to influence taste, and to establish certain rules or aspects of taste and distinction for consumption. Thus, they are what Bourdieu calls 'tastemakers'. Bourdieu writes of tastemakers that they must 'occupy a distinct, distinctive position; they must assert this difference, get it known and recognized, get themselves known and recognized (make a name for themselves) by endeavouring to impose new modes of thought and expression...' (1993:58).

D-Boy's comment about Nihal's 'cool' credentials highlights how Nihal has become an important 'tastemaker' within the scene using Bombay Bronx as a vehicle to develop this position. As a tastemaker he wields a great deal of power and influence in creating and establishing what he considers to be the 'new London', organized through music and performances on a night that most people understand to be very important to the Asian music scene in London.

Nihal acknowledged his own power as a tastemaker:

There's a catalyst, and there are catalysts happening all the time. And hopefully, if I can be, and Bobby [Friction] can be and Punjabi Hit Squad can be, catalysts, and all the other DJs, DJ Paathan, Nerm and D-Code if we can all be catalysts to help something move along a little bit quicker, then I think we've contributed perhaps in that way.

In this section, Bombay Bronx is explored as a space that has acquired prestige and cool capital within the scene by reaching out beyond the Asian scene. This is, in one sense, an example of how the Asian scene is growing, and increasingly becoming more mainstream and no longer so niche and marginalized. Bombay Bronx functions as a leader within the Asian scene, educating and guiding young Asians on how to be 'cool'. It provides these Asian scene members with the confidence that being Asian is not unhip. The Asian scene needs a place like Bombay Bronx to be the tastemakers, providing a platform that says to others that it is okay to be edgy, different, and individualistic, and it appeals to them not as cultural dupes or consumers but as discerning individuals. Thus, the fact is that a place like Bombay Bronx exists is to say that Asians are not 'just like everyone else' but that they can be distinct and 'cool'.

### **Breaking Ties: Claiming The Asian (Under)ground**

I move on now to provide a discussion of the wider context of Asian urban cultural production and how Asian cultural production both positions and is positioned by the wider social formations of class and race in Britain, through the associations made with the 'Asian Underground' and with hip hop. Earlier I discussed racial hierarchies of 'coolness' and the ways in which Asian cultural producers within this scene negotiate a politics of representation in struggling to overcome prevailing orientalist stereotypes of Asians. Thus, scene members are intent on creating alternative spaces for Asian popular music and culture. I discussed how Bombay Bronx was one example of an alternative space and the important role given to Nihal as a tastemaker. Within this section I explore further how cultural producers as tastemakers such as Nihal and others have constructed a different alternative space and position of the Asian urban scene

by constructing an oppositional identity to earlier 'Asian Underground' punk bands.

The Asian Underground genre of bands has had a lasting influence on the bands and groups to come out of the Asian scene since then. While the bhangra and urban scene have remained relatively 'underground' at least until quite recently before R&B artist Jay Sean signed a deal with US CashMoney Records and became a top selling artist, Asian music was still strictly 'niche' music. The Asian Underground, including quite well-known figures such as Nitin Sawhney and Talvin Singh, received a lot of attention for their musicianship, winning music awards.

For those who are often ignorant of the nuances between the different scenes, the Asian Underground often becomes the only kind of Asian cultural production that people are familiar with. Therefore, people often make the mistaken assumption that Asian hip hop is in some way still connected to the bands of the Asian Underground era. Nihal stated that this should not be the case because for him, the Asian Underground represented the past, now irrelevant.

It's dead, [Asian Underground] finished, it's over. No Asian wants to be described as the Asian Underground...

He added:

Nihal: I think it's worth understanding that the majority of Asians didn't know anything about the Asian Underground. Asian Underground wasn't FOR Asians, it wasn't really.

Helen: But of Asians—

Nihal: It was FROM Asians, but it was, it was a niche. Talvin Singh made abstract dance music, he didn't make three minute pop songs...you know. It was very highbrow, you know, it wasn't street music, it was highbrow, I think it was anyway, you know. The majority of people that you meet that made that music, they were middle class people, they're not working class people, they're not hood rats, they're not ghetto kids... So, it's this assumption I think often that the Asian Underground meant that, you know, all the Asian people were listening to Nitin Sawhney, Black Marsh & Shri, Joi, and they weren't, because I worked for Outcaste Records, right, so I saw who we were selling records to and who we were targeting and we weren't targeting Asians.

Nihal is critical of the Asian Underground's bid for appeal outside of the Asian 'majority', by which he meant a wider (whiter) and middle class audience. Nihal invokes a distinction between the 'authentically' Asian working class audience, forgotten in the Asian Underground hype, and the white middle class audience that comprised the main market for their music. He invests in the notion of an 'Asian music for Asians' (Sharma, 1996; Saha, unpublished), offering an alternative definition of 'Asian music' in which the term refers to music made *for* Asians, not just by them. Nihal's distinction between 'for' and 'from' is a significant way of drawing boundaries around what constitutes Asian music, and notably excludes the bands and artists of the 'Asian Underground'. Nevertheless there were musicians such as Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo who emerged during this period and earlier, who achieved success but do not fit so easily into the authentic-inauthentic binary. Les Back (1996) has written about the significance of these musical fusions to an 'intermezzo' culture of intertwined diasporic connections.

Meanwhile, Nav, a DJ, radio host and head of productions at internet radio station Desihits.com, was of the opinion that:

You only need to go to a Nitin Sawhney concert to realise that if you can find more than 10% of the audience being Asian then there's obviously something's changing. Every Nitin Sawhney, Talvin Singh – Talvin Singh's slightly different, but any Nitin Sawhney and even Talvin Singh, I've gone to see that guy, and I know him...it's all white people, listening to that music. It's all very Hoxton, Shoreditch, Shepherd's Bush Empire, you know, Cargo, these kinds of venues, not traditionally aligned with the British Asian scene.

He links Asian artists such as Nitin Sawhney and Talvin Singh with a white, middle class audience, counter posing their 'boutique' niche tastes with those emerging in the British Asian urban scene. He suggests that many Asian youth tended not to identify with the picture of 'Asianness' presented by the bands of the Asian Underground.

As Nav points out, the Asian Underground audience was overwhelmingly non-Asian, in areas of the city that were not considered as typically catering to Asian crowds. Instead, the British Asian 'scene' was informed by a very different set of tastes, style, and audience, and had come out of different areas in London. It is interesting to note that Nitesha Sharma (2005) commented on the relative rarity of South Asian American rappers. She wrote that it was often uncommon to hear about 'Indian rappers' devoted to a black musical culture particularly when their class and ethnicity provided such different experiences and perspectives. Yet, amongst my participants within this scene, claiming a hip hop identity from an early age was very much a part of the 'story' of the scene and its origins.

For instance, Nihal made a similar remark in which he downplayed the importance of the Asian Underground and highlights the importance of black popular music to the sounds and style of Asian urban music:

You know, I had this argument with someone the other day and they were saying to me that without the Asian Underground, Jay Sean and Raghav and all those guys wouldn't have had the opportunities and I—I think that's wrong, I don't think that's the case. I think it was black music that brought those acts through and a growing confidence.

Furthermore, he positioned Bombay Bronx as the site of this innovation by using the story of hip hop's origins across the Atlantic as a metaphor for Bombay Bronx's own syncretic 'birth'. The night became the central site in the Asian urban music scene by fusing different elements, in much the same manner as contemporary Asian music is constituted by drawing upon a variety of transnational syncretic practices. Nihal said:

So to me the whole idea behind Bombay Bronx was me imagining what it was like to be in New York in the 70s when hip hop went from being an uptown thing to be a downtown thing, mixing with the art crowd, and it became this kind of weird mixture...It's that whole mixture of a thing and that's what Bombay Bronx, that's why I called it Bombay Bronx, because it's like Bombay meets the Bronx, the Bronx being the birthplace of hip hop and Bombay being the centre of Bollywood and so much music that comes out of India...



## **Hip to the Hip Hop: Establishing New Identities**

The Asian urban music scene often draws connections and similarities of experiences between UK blacks and Asians, as both share historical and social histories of being ethnic minorities who were discriminated against by white British. Further, hip hop and black music has a huge and lasting impact on mainstream popular culture, informing many genres and scenes (see Gilroy, 2010; Mitchell et. Al, 2001, Neal, 2004b; Bennett, 1999b; Kalra and Kaur, 1996).

In many cases scene members talked about how they grew up with the sounds of hip hop. It was hip hop's distinctly urban outlook that offered these members an alternate mode of identity. They could participate in a larger hip hop community that offered a sense of solidarity more meaningful to them than the ethnic affiliation they shared with the Asian Underground. Many of the cultural producers interviewed cited hip hop as an early and enduring inspiration. Nihal explained:

Hip hop is just part of my growing up. Hip hop music was part of me, the first real music that I got into was hip hop music.

Mentor, an Asian urban music producer and DJ from London, who is a radio host on urban channel BBC 1 Xtra, talked about his first love, which was hip hop, and how it informed his own career:

I grew up with the West Indians so I used to hear a lot of reggae music, and obviously hip hop was big back in the early 90s as well when I was growing up, when I was a teenager as well, and for me that was a big influence. You know, a lot of the American stuff, and the UK stuff too.

Here Nav spoke of a similar process by which he identifies an urban demographic of Asians who aligned themselves with a youth culture inflected by hip hop. Nav explained:

When I first created the Br-Asian stage at Glasto [Glastonbury Festival] in 2004, guess who I called: I called the Asian Underground guys [but additionally] I took the hip hop acts, I took them [the hip-hop acts] in, because for a long, long

time...the general British public, their perception of Asian stuff [was] either the Asian Underground sound or Bollywood and cheesy, Cornershop stuff, right? I needed to change that because I wasn't happy with that. There's a whole demographic that they're missing. You go to Birmingham, Manchester, London, Glasgow, Coventry, Leeds, even some parts of Bristol, and you see this whole urban crowd.

Nav goes a step further than Nihal not only by drawing upon the imaginary of the working-class urban Asian audience but also by claiming that hip hop is the authentically representative site of this audience. The opinion that the Asian Underground was not *for* Asians is a loud declaration that not all Asians are alike. It furthermore reclaims 'Asian' for a decidedly less highbrow audience, construing the Asian Underground not only as 'middle class', but additionally as inauthentic insofar as it colludes with white middle-class tastes. By defining themselves in opposition to the Asian Underground, cultural producers assert that they are countering white, middle class, hegemonic space. They resoundingly reject the Asian Underground's representations of Asians in favour of different narratives that incorporate stories they feel have been drowned out by the Asian Underground's fame and success.

On the other hand, these new narratives bring their own limitations because they reflect an investment in the idea of a particular version of Asianness, or a particular set of Asian experiences, that are more worthy of representation: namely working class, urban perspectives. The Asian Underground's ideology and politics are rejected not because they happen to reflect just one version of being Asian, but because they are seen as inauthentic depictions of British Asian diasporic life.

Nevertheless, cultural producers regard the Asian investment in hip-hop authenticity with some ambivalence: they consider it problematic in part because hip hop has long been characterised, including by African American scholars, as an expression of an 'authentic' and exclusively African American expressive music culture (see Gilroy, 1993b, 1994; Mitchell, 1996, 2001). Even when it is not seen as something African American, it is often perceived as a musical genre to which blacks have a primary claim. Thus Asian hip hop artists

continually confront the belief that hip hop is a form of expression that they cannot 'properly' appropriate for themselves.

The idea of the black ownership of hip hop is underpinned by the belief that culture comprises reified objects and entities that can be owned and 'copied'. Some cultural producers seem to perceive a lack of authenticity in Asian hip hop owing to racial and class differences: they suggest that hip hop is a site of black, *working class* authenticity. Here is how Dom characterised Asians' relationships to hip hop:

I see a lot of connections between the black struggle and the way that Asians are trying to do it, but it ...feels less sincere, I think, because it's not their music. Hip hop is not their music. The way that Asians, uh, first generation Asian immigrants approached this country, they have a different approach and they value education very highly, and they value hard work...and I think this generation of Asians, the third and fourth generation, are very well off, well-educated and very media savvy. And they would like some of that rebel spirit of black people to rub off on them... They want to tap into an anti-establishment struggle for acceptance but in an attractive, appealing way.

Dom's explanation reveals his own ambivalence about what he considered a form of Asian cultural appropriation of a traditional black music form. He perceived certain 'inauthentic' uses of hip hop both within the Asian scene and on a broader scale. He implied that the comfortable class position that many London Asians occupy makes them 'inauthentic' as hip hop artists, and that this devalues their contributions to musical culture. All of this suggests that cultural producers lay claim to hip hop authenticity with some trepidation. Despite the efforts of some artists to align themselves with London's hip-hop scene, there is no guarantee that people will consider them as aligned in this way.

The oppositional stance of much hip hop music, coupled with the presentation of angry young black masculinity, is seductive. Banerjea writes that the ways in which blacks, whites and Asians are racialized has led us to understand that black popular culture holds much fascination for white 'voyeuristic' fans who seek to know and experience the thrills of an extreme sense of difference between blacks and whites (1996). Bell hooks (1992) writes that the

consumption of hip hop and black cultural forms is a result of the desire of whites to reconstitute their identities, however, the important point is that whites never desire to become black. Instead, the pleasure lies in the consumption of the 'other' and that consumption is 'directly and (paradoxically) related to the replication and magnification of 'authentic' difference' (Watts and Orbe, 2002:3).

Asian scene members' relationships with hip hop and black cultural forms, whether US or British, displayed this ambivalence. While many claimed that hip hop *was* an inspirational form of music, and spoke of dimensions of hip hop culture with which young Asians could relate, it is simultaneously the most successful form of global commercial music. As Watts and Orbe once noted, 'African American cultural forms are still the standard bearer of pop cultural fashion' (2002:6). Moreover, hip hop and black urban music are not always appreciated for their subversive potential or critical social commentary, but rather because they are current, edgy and might help Asian kids acquire greater respect from white, black and other Asian youth. There is a knowing-ness to this 'copying', an understanding that hip-hop authenticity is part of a performance. This echoes my earlier point in the chapter where I discussed how knowledge of popular music and culture, in particular hip hop, became instrumental for young Asians to gain social status amongst white and black peers.

Yet, the ways in which hip hop is ascribed coolness, through its associations with dangerous black urban masculinity, suggests that coolness is problematically associated with particular associations of minority 'others'. In other words, black youth become positioned as the arbiters and purveyors of coolness within popular culture. Further, it could also be argued that Asian musicians seek to gain access to the mainstream music industry through a commodification and commercialization of hip hop in order to establish cultural 'cool' capital. Put another way, it is important to examine how these claims to a shared connection link Asian cultural production to forms of black (African American and Afro Caribbean) popular culture. Issues around cultural ownership, authenticity as determined by race and class positions (Johnson,

2003), and commodification of music all emerge from such claims that are made for and against Asians and hip hop.

Nav's opinion underscores such a view when he noted:

Helen: But do you think there is, I mean, there is that connection between hip hop and uh, British Asians?

Nav: It's a very fickle connection, it's fickle. Western sounds didn't have to be urban, Western sounds just had to be what was cool, it just so happened that urban was cool. No one, actually, the masses don't listen to the lyrics of hip hop, that's why they love 50 Cent, because there aren't any lyrics, it's just bullshit lyrics, Candy Shop, oh big hit, drop it in an Asian club, go to a Birmingham club The Works, drop that in the middle of your set, because it's popular, desis revolve to it, desis revolve to it. British Asian kids would always want to fit in. They never fit in at work, never fit in at school.

Similarly, in Amrita's case, she stated:

So there was this new thing, when I was about 15. Jay Sean and his collective, and it became BritAsian because it had this Asian element to an R&B vocal, and that was, that became very popular around then...But I always felt like I was never fully into R&B and hip hop. I'd listen to it, because I wanted to fit in. Oh my god, I really wanted to fit in. I started listening to Snoop Dogg, and Jay-Z, well, I still like Jay-Z, but Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent, I'd be like yeah, I'm into it, and meanwhile I'm thinking, this is shit, this is not good music! This is because I didn't want to be laughed at or picked on, and I suppose, at that age, you're image conscious.

In her study of South Asian American youth practices, Maira (2002) constructs these polar opposites of 'cool' and 'South Asian culture' as a dialectic, in which people and practices that are 'cool' remain fixed and stable. However, creating such a binary of 'cool' versus some notion of cultural nostalgia or Asianness is an over-simplification of a messy, uneven and ambivalent process that depends on context, situation and space. Amrita's example also suggests that hip hop was certainly perceived as cool by other British Asians. Hip hop was used as a way of marking the boundaries between being properly Asian and not. Thus, this binary of 'cool' is not practised as a binary but instead, Amrita's comments suggest that something altogether different was going on. A sense of young Asianness became linked to this notion of participation in black urban youth

culture; you choose to express your Asianness and your membership through the appropriation of hip hop style and culture. Thus it was about learning how to *become* British Asian in that space, context and time. There was no neat separation between Asian culture and also being hip hop and 'cool'.

### **Insider Versus Outsider-Who is more 'real'?**

Discussions amongst cultural producers demonstrate how critical it is not only to identify and determine who 'real' Asians are, but also to position oneself as a legitimate representative who inhabits qualities determined to be authentically 'real'. These cultural producers' public personae rely upon the cultivation of a 'realness' that is again often rooted in particular configurations of class and privilege. So, for instance, Nihal's description of Riz MC characterizes him as something of an anomaly or outsider given his educational and class background. In doing so, Nihal may have been suggesting that he and others like him were more legitimate representatives of the Asian scene:

Nihal: So, I mean, for instance, now you've got someone like Riz MC, who's does a track which is lyrically, the most subversive thing I think a British Asian artist has ever done, because as well, it's a really good song. And, it created a lot of hassle, it got on Channel 4 news, you know. I think the sum amount of attention he got for that, it's probably more attention than Fun-da-mental got in their whole career.

Helen: I guess, yeah, I mean, in interviewing Riz MC, you know, he's quite vocal and very articulate in his political views—

Nihal: He went to a private school, he's educated at Oxford, he's not a working class boy—

Riz MC, on the other hand, called into question the connectedness and of Asian cultural producers with prominent positions in the media. In doing so, he positioned himself as more authentic than people such as Nihal (whether or not he had him in mind when he made the following statement).

I guess like, there's different kind of Asian scenes, at different levels, I mean at grassroots level to like the media elites. There's a large extent to which the London, the London scene, insofar as it's a visible scene, is driven from a more top-down thing, by like, more people in the media and a certain cabal... there's the top down thing, there's the thing of it being passé, there's the thing of it

having changed, it's not as raw and...there's too much self-awareness about the whole thing...

Riz MC's comment draws on constructions of the scene that oppose small, underground, grassroots, unself-conscious music practices to a formal, institutionalised mainstream. And thus the two cultural producers draw upon different ideas of 'real': as grassroots in one case and working class in the other. There is of course some overlap between a grassroots, organic scene and one rooted in working class marginalisation.

Still, however important grassroots connections are to an artist's 'realness', independent means of distribution can only go so far. What is worthy of note in this case is that well-placed media figures of the sort Riz identifies in the preceding quote have played an important role in his success as an artist. Nihal and Bombay Bronx supported Riz and gave him his first opportunity to perform live. Further, Nihal supported Riz's debut single on his show on the BBC Asian Network when Riz was a struggling artist who was not yet signed to a distribution label. Initially radio stations banned the airplay of his single because they considered it 'politically sensitive'. Later, after the support of the Asian Network and Nihal, he was invited to perform on the BBC Electric Proms and he has since gone on to become a successful actor. Thus, despite the suggestion that media figures are out of touch with 'on the ground' music practices and cultures of young Asians, the influence and connections of at least one such well-placed person played a central role in the publicization of his music.

On the other hand, Nihal's role as a key figure within the scene is also inflected by his role as a DJ and radio host of a mainstream Radio 1 show. Because he is the face of Asian urban music to a wider 'mainstream' audience, Nihal's connection to a 'real' working-class Asian audience can be called into question. Media figures bring attention to new artists and get them airplay and access to record labels. Nihal's role in giving this scene greater exposure means that he has become instrumental in the 'mainstreaming' of British Asian cultural production. In doing so, he and others have helped to transform what was, at

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first, an organic music scene into a more formal, organised business industry. Indeed, although the scene may have originated in response to the middle-class affiliations of the Asian Underground and its apparent orientation towards a white niche market, its own audience is growing older and taking up middle class lifestyles, habits and values. In 2007 the BBC Asian Network conducted a UK 'university' tour with R&B artist Jay Sean as the headlining act. Prestigious universities such as King's College London provided venues. A significant fan base for new Asian urban music seems to be emerging amongst elite university-educated students, and this perhaps undercuts claims regarding a 'real' Asian working-class audience.

While both Riz MC and Nihal make some investment in the concept of working-class Asian authenticity, they both seem to employ essentialized notions of identity when it suits them, and shift meanings around to suit their needs. As performers they must take on the 'burden of representation' (Mercer, 1990; Julien and Mercer, 1988; Hall, 1992), whether or not they resist it. What is interesting is that, as cultural producers within a scene constructed around particular narratives of urban marginalisation and poverty, they advance claims that may not necessarily coincide with their own social backgrounds and circumstances.

In this section, I have suggested that the Asian urban music scene has emerged in opposition to the bands of the Asian Underground, particularly such artists as Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney, in part because of their perceived connection to an 'inauthentic' white middle-class music culture. The contemporary London Asian urban music scene in contrast pursues connections to the worlds of hip hop and R&B. Nevertheless, here too, participants in the scene raise questions about authenticity: namely whether Asians or middle-class people have a right to appropriate genres that many associate with black and working-class identities. Contemporary Asian cultural producers thus participate in a politics of identity and draw upon contested concepts of class identity and racialized perceptions of 'white', 'black', and 'Asian' music and culture in their discourses.



## Conclusion

Stuart Hall speaks of the importance of popular culture because it is a site where 'collective social understandings are created' and where there is always a 'politics of signifying' that is enacted (2006:3). For British Asian participants within the London Asian music scene, popular culture proves to be an important field in which to conduct such a politics. I focus on a few spaces of the London Asian urban music scene. I start out with Bombay Bronx, and then discuss how scene members are fighting for a new space outside of the Asian Underground and into the 'mainstream'. I highlight how cultural producers negotiate their roles as artists and cultural producers, developing strategies that widen and make visible Asian creative expression without reducing their work to a singular set of ethnic experiences.

In the making of new spaces, some of the key issues that cultural producers have to negotiate are being labelled and categorized in very particular ways as 'Asian' cultural producers. This corresponds to the continuing marginal status of Asian cultural production in the UK. However, I look to how Bombay Bronx created an alternative space for the Asian scene, pushing and realigning the boundaries around the perceptions of 'Asian' artists and cultural production. I explore how it offered a distinct space as an 'industry' night, creating stronger ties to 'mainstream' institutions such as the BBC, thereby increasing exposure of the Asian scene and its various artists and music. I then move onto how Bombay Bronx carefully constructed a 'cool' space for the Asian scene, one that defied some of the expectations and perceptions of how Asians should represent and align themselves. It rejected these stereotypes and tried to create new connections with 'indie' music and audiences. Cultural producers understand that they produce more than just songs or albums or mixes. They are the tastemakers and the educators who have the power to shape and mould discourse, people and practices.

Coolness and the acquisition of such a status is a code within popular culture for respect, power and access to resources. Dominant culture presents the white, middle class, heterosexual and masculine British values as 'universal' 'natural'

and 'normal', thereby marking others as subordinate and inferior to the 'normal'. The acquisition of the 'right' cultural resources, which can be converted into different forms of capital, allows for these Asian cultural producers to undermine established racialized hierarchies of cultural production, and poses challenges to the dominant culture.

I continue with issues around the politics of representation by highlighting the tensions between claiming hip hop as an early influence, and rejecting some of the more official or dominant perspectives that credit the earlier 'Asian Underground' bands as an important musical influence. The discourses and narrative around the scene emphasized the deeply rooted hip hop influences of cultural producers and the imperative of dis-entangling Asian urban music with those of the Asian Underground in the 1990s. This splintering of the category of 'Asian music' indicates that cultural producers are serious about changing the perception that Asians are a tightly bounded, homogenous group.

Yet, the claiming of hip hop as a form that Asians adopt, appropriate and identify with shows how British Asian youth experienced shared racialized histories with blacks in Britain, and the political and class alliances that once formed the basis of a unified 'Black' identity between Asians and blacks in the 1980s have not completely eroded. However, the claims to ownership of hip hop have also created new tensions within the scene, where internal differences of class, history, and generational experiences create tensions around what it is to be 'Asian' within the scene. Within hip hop, it has been discussed by others how the black working class street is held up as the standard for the authentic black experience. This has a great deal of bearing on how Asianness gets to be represented and on who can speak for others as 'Asian' artists and cultural producers. These views provide the basis for the development of a particular view of Asianness that supports seeing culture and identity as well defined, neat and discrete categories. That approach corresponds to the dominant understandings of culture, ethnicity and identity as homogenous, bounded and essentialist formations, instead of the partial, multiply positioned and messy processes that they often are. The path towards acceptance of the complexity

and nuanced process of deferral that is identity production is difficult, and Stuart Hall (1990) reminds us that there are 'no guarantees' for the future in such identity work.

Despite witnessing the 'end of innocence' of the essential black subject, within Asian cultural production, the notion of the essential Asian subject is still very much active, both within the scene and within British popular culture. However, the ambivalence and the tensions around cultural production that arise out of the interviews conducted indicate that the end of the innocent Asian subject is nigh. The battles over different positions of identity, representation, authenticity and coolness are staged, fought, won and lost in such arenas as the Asian music scene, and in such spaces such as Bombay Bronx. It is evident that the cultural producers interviewed in this chapter are producing a space for Asian cultural production that allows for those difficult issues to be worked out with all the nuances, complexity and ambivalence that questions of production bring to issues of identity and belonging. Thus, Asian cultural producers, through multiple strategies, are communicating the sense that being Asian, being an artist, being both, is never straightforward and unproblematic as it once might have been depicted.

Both Bombay Bronx and Kandy Nights provide different connections and are distinct sites of the 'desi' urban scene. Thus, a discussion of Bombay Bronx then necessarily precipitates a closer look at the inner workings of Kandy Nights. They both appeal to a different section of the London Asian music scene and therefore were working to achieve and communicate different images and representations of Asian popular culture: therefore, they were engaged in very different practices. While Bombay Bronx was a 'cool' space for cultural producers, Kandy Nights has often been more concerned with developing a strictly 'classy' and mature consumer base for their weekly parties. Therefore, it was not an industry night, and it was less connected to the core Asian cultural producers within the scene.

Thus, in the next section, I continue with the focus on the club nights by discussing more closely the issues that Kandy Nights throws into stark relief. As I did with Bombay Bronx, I make Kandy Nights the central focus and let the particular aspects of the night set the themes for the chapter. Kandy Nights brings up particular issues around gender in both regulating masculinity and femininity in particular ways through behaviour and dress. In doing so, they impose particular normative views of gender onto the guests which guests also resist, negotiate and accommodate in various ways under different circumstances. I then look more closely at gendered relations practised within the wider context of the Asian 'desi' scene as a whole, through discussions of the constructions and representations of femininity as it relates to female artists, as well as their regulation.

## **Chapter 7: Kandy Nights: Setting the scene**

### **Introduction**

The glossy flyer for Kandy Nights provides a window into the upscale, upmarket aesthetic of the club that hosts Kandy Nights in East London. The club is located right off Old Street, which starts from Clerkenwell and stretches down as the main artery of Shoreditch. This area of East London is known for its nightlife, with every block lined with bars, clubs and restaurants. On weekend nights, Old Street becomes a hedonistic play area for many young people in London.

From the outside, a subtle sleek neon-lit sign with Piya Piya spelled out in pink letters gives a vague clue to the brisk and lively party atmosphere inside. On Saturday evenings, starting from around 9 pm, smart-looking, well dressed men and women start to show up, stand in the queue, and wait to enter the club. A red velvet rope keeps people in line and separates the 'partyers' from the average person on the street. Inside the venue, the décor is sleek dark and shiny, with black leather seating lining the walls. Leather booths line the windows overlooking the city street. Curious onlookers can catch quick glimpses of people mingling and they hear the sounds of the bass spilling out on to the street. To the right of the booths is the extensive bar, which wraps around half the club and is just off to the left of the entrance. Expensive designer alcohol bottles are prominently placed on the shelves behind the bar. Behind the bar is a large dance floor, with a small DJ booth set up at one end. Giant speakers are pumping out incredibly loud hip hop and it fills the room. Once the music starts, it is so loud that you cannot do anything but dance in such a space. It forces you to concentrate on your body and it obliterates any coherent thought.

Kandy Nights is for a young, well-heeled London Asian crowd who go out on the weekends and celebrate in a comfortable, intimate, upscale, and stylish venue. It has been running for nearly two years, and it consists of three club promoters, two who DJ regularly at this night. Gee is their chief promoter and oversees the door staff. He often personally oversees entrance into the club and is usually seen standing outside the club for the better part of the night. DJ Groovemaster

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Chaz and DJ Kay are also part of the promotions team at Kandy Nights but they remain in the DJ booth, rarely coming out to mingle with the guests or stand outside the club.

(Bank Holiday Weekend, 31st May 2008 Kandy Nights, 10pm)

It was a bank holiday weekend, and the start of the summer. Everyone seemed to be in a holiday mood, with the size of the crowd outside Kandy Nights more than double its usual size, even at this relatively early hour of the night. The queue to get in was the longest I'd ever seen outside Kandy Nights. The smoking crowd and people waiting to get in were mingling, laughing and joking around with one another. So far, so good. Just another start to a Saturday night out! Waiting to get in, for the first time that year, I was 'padded down' by a bouncer, which surprised me. He was matter-of-fact about it and efficient. There was an extra male bouncer standing guard outside, pushing the number of black-clad bouncers outside up to three. Flanked outside the doorway to the club, they were an intimidating rather than reassuring presence.

Once I made it inside, I could feel the club atmosphere was tense, hot and sweaty. To add to that, the hip hop music was being played extra loud. The tension was starting to become uncomfortable. People were brushing past each other with more contact than was necessary. Young men, dressed in smart shirts and jackets, looking 'all dressed up and nowhere-to-go' were bored, hot and cagey. The uncomfortable heat, the crowd and the frequent bump and push of body contact, gave everyone in the place a short fuse. Everyone was waiting for the night to start, the atmosphere to lighten up; the party to really *begin*. With almost a two to one ratio of men to women, there were very few women in the club. Perhaps women who might have been there earlier felt intimidated and uncomfortable with the uneven ratio of men to women and left. Perhaps it was just too uncomfortably hot. For the rest of the night, it remained a male dominated space.

(12: 10am)

The bar is seeing brisk trade. The sound of shouting and broken glass punctuate the even din of chatter and music. Faces appear angry and then the pushing and shoving starts to happen in earnest. Bouncers immediately swarm in on the tussling pair and pull them outside. The fight is over before it ever even started and people quickly resume their places and continue to drink, chat and dance.

(12: 35 am)

Standing around outside, Gee approaches me, looking visibly angry and stressed out. He tells me that a mutual acquaintance attempted to let his friend in without first asking Gee's permission. This friend did not have to queue up, which angered guests who were waiting patiently, and what was more, Gee did not know this person and therefore had no idea if he was someone whom Gee would let in to the club. With all that he had to think about, this just seems like one more thing on his already full plate. Before I could ask any more questions, Gee walks away, having to take care of another door issue.

In the previous chapter, Bombay Bronx became a point of access and discussion into some of the wider tensions and issues within the scene regarding identity production and representation, particularly regarding cultural producers' competing visions and ideas about what it is to be 'Asian'. They use their roles as producers to present their versions as the authentic version of Asianness. Gender adds a crucial dimension to the tensions above in which 'authentic' ways of being Asian are established through the policing of boundaries of gender norms and expectations. The power to speak and shape the space that is often claimed by young men in this male dominated scene is exercised in club spaces such as Kandy Nights. Thus, in this chapter, I focus on the production of gender norms and divisions that shape the scene in various ways, and I highlight the ways in which gender norms are accommodated, challenged and resisted by young women and men within the scene, starting with Kandy Nights as a specific site and then moving outward towards other spaces of the 'desi' scene.

In the first section, I present the ethnographic work I have done in and around 'Kandy Nights' in East London to open up questions and discern how club nights are contested sites between producers and consumers, specifically when it comes to regulating consumers' gendered behaviour, attitudes and appearance. These regulations both rely upon and impose dominant gendered and classed regulations onto the guests. However, people do not just succumb to such regulation without contesting these regulations, negotiating and at times, re-defining these 'disciplinary practices' (Foucault, 1977). Therefore, I explore how these struggles between external forces and internal agency play out within the spaces of the Kandy Nights club night.

In the second section, I move on to explore the important links between modes and practices of Asian club nights to club goers' identities, by exploring in greater depth the historical and personal context of 'going out' to Asian club nights in and around London. My participants saw 'going out' to Asian club nights as a particular set of practices through which they could articulate their youthful identities. Moreover, I place special importance on young women's accounts of going out because they open up new ways of thinking about young people's practices and point to how knowledge of young people's practices are too often shaped by male accounts. Meanwhile, young women are going out, offering up different meanings and creating specific modes of identification with the pleasures (and pains) of the night. These accounts reveal crucial perspectives on young Asian women participating and engaging in youth cultures, that pose a challenge to ideas of feminine passivity. Further, I use this to argue that the gender specific ways in which young people approach 'going out' are often overlooked because male accounts tend to be taken as representative of experiences as a whole. Young Asian women were very much present and actively participating in these activities, although they are often labelled as 'masculine' practices. This chapter responds to other (often racialized) accounts of youth culture that still privilege male accounts of youth cultural activities and reinforce male dominance of the public sphere.



In the final section, I move on to think about how gendered inequalities are performed and practiced not only on the dance floor but in the music scene with regard to people's attitudes and perceptions of Asian female artists. Women are often further regulated and limited, not only on the dance floor, but also within modes of cultural production. For example, within the heavily male dominated scene gender inequalities are quite apparent and work to mould performance of identities of female artists in distinct ways. Different criteria and values of legitimacy are imposed upon female artists within the scene. The adoption of dominant uncritical perspectives of women informs how certain female artists are viewed, valued and read within the scene.

Within this chapter, I bring to light the ways in which distinctions of class and gender are significant to the construction of boundaries of Asianness. However, I must note that the religious dimension also plays an important part in the production of Asianness. Very often, these constructions of Asianness are also just as much about reinforcing boundaries that are seen to exist between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims. These practices of going out involve activities such as consuming alcohol, which does limit certain practices to those who can and will drink.

At the same time, the way in which religious differences structure these interactions is also highly ambiguous and, at times, not a determining factor. This is the case particularly when interactions involve such highly specific youth cultural activities such as bhangra nights which involves a more specific Punjabi identity construction that cuts across religious boundaries (Punjab after Partition exists both in India and Pakistan and the region is home to Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs and Christians). Thus, while I acknowledge that religious differences shape interactions within Asian club spaces, these spaces were also religiously diverse and religious identities were often not enacted within these spaces. Therefore, I do not want to over-emphasise the presence of religion within these spaces.

Fig. 7 Kandy Nights in full swing, at Club Piya Piya, 2008 (photograph by Helen Kim)



Fig. 8 Kandy Nights' flyer at Kandy Nights (photograph by Helen Kim)



Fig. 9 Kandy Nights' flyer (photograph by Helen Kim)

## Gender and Youth Cultures

At any given Asian club night in the city, at least half of the guests there are young Asian women. As Angela McRobbie (2004), and Nayak and Kehily (2008) observe, young women are now positioned as the new subjects of consumption in the postmodern economy. Consumption is an active social process by which young people make sense of the world and their own positions within it (Nayak and Kehily, 2008; Miller, 1997). So consumption needs to be understood in the context of being an important means by which young people negotiate gendered meanings and identities through the engagement with different cultural forms. Moreover, while gendered meanings are developed and engaged with through these cultural forms, they are by no means limited to young women. Young masculine identities are also highly oriented around consumption, and cultural texts in circulation including magazines are geared toward young men. Of course, young men and women are reading different magazines and these magazines are often specifically geared towards male or female readers. The overall argument here is that popular culture and cultural forms of consumption are both readily available sources for young men and women.

Yet in much academic literature, particularly in relation to popular culture and youth cultures, young women have traditionally occupied a very marginal place (McRobbie, 1990; Brill, 2008). The marginal place of women within studies of popular culture practices often linked to the positioning of the 'feminine' as subordinate, trivial and of lesser value. Irene Gedalof writes that models of agency, norms and truths and the subject itself are 'always appropriated by the masculine' (1999:11). Gilbert and Pearson (1999) argued that culture is shaped by the continuing imbalance of power between men and women, thus culture privileges the masculine over the feminine.

McRobbie and Nava (1984) challenged the close association between the categories of 'youth' and 'masculinity' in subcultural studies. Young women's activities within the domestic sphere of the bedroom were overshadowed by the 'spectacular' nature of these subcultures conducted at the pub and the street

corner. This effectively closed off women's involvement in subcultural activity, seen as less interesting, more frivolous and passive (McRobbie and Garber, 1976; Pini, 2001). Often, they were seen as not actively resisting the conditions which structure their lives, nor were they 'winning space' from dominant society. In fact, Angela McRobbie (1990) once argued that the subcultural activities of men in their peer groups were based on a 'collective disregard for women'. In this sense, youth culture studies were often about 'writing girls out' or rendering them invisible. That is, there is a sense in which women's youth cultural activities were seen as meaningful and therefore not afforded visibility (Pini, 2001). Michelle Wallace (2005) very eloquently argues for the explanatory power of gender relations in saying that gender is needed to understand how invisibility has worked historically in all fields of visual production.

Stuart Hall (1997) argues that feminine identities can be negotiated through cultural production through which audiences engage in a dialogue. Spaces such as neighbourhood become a site of the production of gender for young people, as are other institutions (official and unofficial) including spaces of consumption, leisure and play, such as the club. Cultural products and texts, such as music itself, have often been a terrain which has been categorized as masculine or feminine. Rock has always been viewed as masculine whereas dance music has often been associated with the feminine (McClary, 1991; McRobbie, 2000; Frith, and McRobbie 1990) because dance was 'always something where girls were always found in subcultures. It was their only entitlement' (McRobbie, 1994 cited in Gilbert and Pearson, 1999:96). This divide, and the discourses that separate and gender the spheres of influence, still proves instrumental in distinguishing contemporary youth cultures. Dance as a cultural practice was not seen as an active mode of popular consumption, and did not provide sufficient cultural capital (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999).

Moreover, youth culture studies came under fire for ignoring or silencing race within these studies (Amos and Parmar, 1984). To date, young Asian women are doubly ignored and marginalized within youth culture, popular culture and

sociological studies for being young, Asian women. In feminist and ethnic studies literature, Asian women are often not given credit as being active innovators and negotiators of culture, nor actual producers of culture. Rather they are often thought of as passive consumers and inheritors of cultural values (Parmar, 1982; Bhachu, 1993). Ethnographic studies of young women and popular culture focus on the 'passive' elements of popular culture such as Marie Gillespie's (1995) study of the role of young Asian women's television viewership in the formation of their ethnic identities.

Asian women are also placed within a double bind as the 'victims' of religious and cultural oppression and positioned as the carriers of tradition, family and community (Brah, 1987, 1988; Mani, 1990). The discursive constructions of Asian women as tradition and religion bound, trapped in their ignorance, bears great resemblance to Chandra Mohanty's (1988) view of white women feminists' rendering of 'Third World women'. They are also made 'other' by the fact that they are categorized and conceived as being so separate from young Asian men. Concerns of a growing 'angry' and 'dangerous' Asian masculinity have occupied the public sphere, and women have been once again relegated to the private sphere of the home and family (Alexander, 2000). Thus the 'deadly' crisis of Asian masculinity, particularly in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7, has overshadowed concerns over a 'repressed' Asian femininity, and also eclipsed interest in what young women are doing, saying and learning.

Beverly Skeggs (1997) writes how class, gender, sexuality and race are 'read onto bodies' and how femininity could be read through class, especially as based on appearance. That becomes the basis not only of a feminine identity but morality and behaviour (Nayak and Kehily, 2008). Working class women embody a style of feminine excess of abundant sexuality. McPherson (2003) writes about the policing of white femininity in the American South through films such as *Gone With the Wind* in which she argues that white femininity has 'everything to do with class' so that true femininity cannot be achieved either by black female slaves nor lower class white women. Thus, it is through both race and class hierarchies that the boundaries of femininity are regulated and



maintained. Not only does this happen within representations of femininity, but it is often enacted within certain cultural spaces such as the club. Dress codes exclude, not only through the policing of gender, but also through deploying classed notions of proper gender norms, which I will outline in greater detail in the next section.

### **Tale I: 'We Don't Want No Trouble': Asian nights, exclusion, regulation, and the 'right sort of people'**

In the 'postmodern' city, spatial exclusion tends to be the most recognizable form of social exclusion (Lash and Urry, 1994). Consumption spaces are often celebrated as open play spaces for young people which can offer new practices, forms of negotiation and self-expression. However, what often becomes sidelined are the ways in which they are also exclusive sites of regulation. Here in this section, I aim to demonstrate how spaces of consumption are exclusive along crisscrossing lines of difference. As a crucial space of consumption, clubs become the sites where particular groups of people, based on a variety of social factors such as age, class and ethnicity, are marginalized and excluded. Clubs generally try and attract a crowd of a certain age, and often, the very young and the very old are explicitly or implicitly excluded in almost all clubs. Nightclubs that cater to a younger crowd are usually considered downmarket, associated with the massive 'cattle market' atmosphere of excessive drinking, top 40 hits, and tacky décor. These nights are often the focus of media scrutiny and public concern over young binge drinking, violence and public disorder. Hobbs et al (2000) argue that in the postmodern city and a post-Fordist economy, nightlife and consumption of leisure spaces has become central to the shift towards a service economy. 'Cattle market' nights make up part of what Hobbs et al refer to as hedonistic 'zones of liminality' within British city centres that are sanctioned and encouraged by businesses and local government.

Some club nights distinguish themselves from these 'mainstream' clubbing spaces by aiming for a more 'mature' and discriminating night-time crowd. 'Kandy Nights', which maintains a strict age policy (21 years old and over),

communicate their preference for older guests by not only stating the age requirement as 'over 21' but also by claiming that the night is 'for mature clubbers' on their flyer. Age and 'maturity' are conflated in this context and both seem to mark practices that are seen as distinct from younger more 'mainstream' club spaces. The desire for an older, more 'mature' crowd within the Kandy Nights club space reminds me in part of the critique made by Koushik Banerjea (2000) who wrote that Asian dance music club nights at the time appealed to a 'middle class constituency' who are shown a version of the sanitized Asian 'other'. These nights, despite claiming a radical agenda, conform to the standards of white cultural hegemony. In the case of Kandy Nights, maturity is used euphemistically to refer to a whole set of positive attributes belonging to the ideal consumer. Maturity carries with it associations of civility, politeness as well as a greater sense of responsibility and awareness of oneself and others.

Gee, club promoter of Kandy Nights said:

Well, we cater towards anyone that's...that's over 21. The kind of, the professional crowd, the people who want to come and have a great time. The people that just want to enjoy themselves and wanna alleviate their stress of the week—you know, just let it out.

The age of 21 years becomes an important marker of 'maturity' and civility despite being an arbitrary age cut-off, especially in Britain where the legal drinking age is 18. This age cut-off falls in line with middle class perceptions of 'adulthood' where at the age of 21, most people have graduated university and have steady employment on their way to becoming career 'professionals'. So Gee identifies and creates a space specifically designed to appeal to a very specific and primarily middle class clientele.

Further, the aspirational standards that Gee identifies as being 'professional' or 'upper middle class' are articulated and reinforced in a number of different ways throughout the experience of the club. High door and drink prices, bottle service and VIP tables, bathroom attendants and smart dress codes indicate that



these nights are very much distinguished by class and gender divisions (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001; 2003).

Moreover, middle class standards of conduct are also reinforced through the strict and often vigilant policing of disorder and 'uncivil' conduct. The target of such policing is young men who are often explicitly recognized, labelled and singled out for negative attention. Kandy Nights invests a great deal of manpower and advertising in trying to prevent trouble and fights. The flyer clearly warns guests that as a door policy, 'all male groups' will be turned away at the door. Kandy Nights prominently issue a statement saying the following 'strictly 'no hoods, caps or trainers' on their flyers underlined by the warning 'M.R.R.A', which is the acronym for 'management reserve the right of access'. This gives bouncers and the door staff the right to remove people or reject admission at their discretion.

While not explicitly mentioned here in Gee's statement, the hard work that occurs in deterring violence is apparent in the form of their door policies. Thus, the fact that Kandy Nights operates a strict policy of no 'all male groups' does make explicit the linking of Asian masculinity to concerns over violence - if not overtly the fear or expectation of Asian male violence. Claire Alexander writes that racialized depictions of Asian male youth have in recent years become a most 'potent symbol of disorder' in urban Britain (2000:3).

Gee said:

What we don't want is, we don't want people who come here for, just like a, a kind of trouble...we're not here for trouble, we don't want no trouble. We work very, very hard to stop people from...that want to cause trouble from coming in. We're very strict for that reason.

Gee used the euphemism of 'trouble' to mean the possibility of physical altercations and aggressive behaviour. This policy of turning away male guests because of the expectation of 'trouble' is something that Gee himself has personally experienced. He acknowledged that it is a widespread and common

practice in London clubs to expect Asian men to be troublesome and therefore deny them entry into some of these spaces. He said:

Gee: We go everywhere...we do loads of things but it's hard because we're a group of Asian guys and you can't get in anywhere.

Helen: Why not?

Gee: We're seen as troublemakers and they're not wrong because many times we are, but a lot of people aren't there to cause trouble you know. They're there to have fun and they need to learn and understand, I suppose.

Gee is conflicted here and his statement reveals that he understands and experiences being on both the giving and the receiving ends of this practice of labelling Asian men as 'troublemakers'. Gee, as the promoter of a popular club night, invests in these essentialized notions of aggression and criminality in order to justify the use of exclusionary door practices and high security at his own club night. However, through his own experiences of being excluded he understands these discriminatory regulations are inaccurate, and potentially harmful. There is a rupture or a disconnect between his personal experiences and his professional practices as a club promoter. He may understand what it feels like to be unfairly excluded because he is an Asian man but ultimately, these experiences do not affect his own club's policies on excluding Asian men for the same reasons.

Dom, Notting Hill Arts Club manager and promoter of Bombay Bronx, admitted to hiring extra bouncers when hosting Asian nights because of the greater ratio of men to women on these nights in general, and more specifically, because this larger group of men are Asian.

On the one hand, Bombay Bronx is busier than on most Tuesdays, so we need the extra guy just for crowd control or what have you...but also, the Asian crowd does tend to be male heavy so um, we work bloody hard on keeping the balance 50/50 male female in the club but it's difficult on a night like Bombay Bronx especially because 80% of the people are on the bloody list and I know most of them anyway. Um, and of course, if you have a male-heavy crowd it tends to get a bit...testosterone-y, and the Asian crowd has a reputation, rightly so, for being aggressive, testosterone heavy and bolshie—they love to argue...the Asian crowd can be a fucking nightmare to be honest.

Similar to Gee's description of his night, Dom also made a reference to the labour intensive work that needs to be put into securing the club on nights when they anticipate a largely Asian crowd. Gee and Dom's assumptions about young Asian male aggression allow for them to institute strict (sometimes draconian) door and security policies on certain nights when they anticipated trouble. Dom's comments illustrate the difficulty in determining whether there is any actual evidence that Asian men are more 'aggressive and bolshie'. Dom stated that Asian men had a 'reputation' for troublesome behaviour which suggests that he too was not clear about whether that aggression ever actually takes place or whether he is just relying on stereotypes. Further, the defensive statement that the Asian crowd is a 'fucking nightmare' goes a long way in exhibiting how justified he feels in instituting these policies on Asian nights.

Instituting harsher methods of surveillance and security on Asian nights creates a vicious cycle that not only reinforces the perception that Asian men are dangerous and violent but 'amplifies' such stereotypes (Cohen, 1972). Beginning with the perception that Asian men are troublesome and aggressive, this encourages promoters to enact greater regulation on Asian nights and hire more security staff, bag checks, and metal detectors which shores up the suspicion and fear of young Asian men in such night-time spaces. These practices also feed directly into the wider political and popular discourses that have constructed Asian male youth as dysfunctional and dangerous (Alexander, 2000; 2004), which I will discuss in greater detail later in relation to the imposition of dress codes.

Moreover, in each economic period systems of discipline are created and especially suited for the environment in which they are meant to regulate, for the maximization of profit (Hobbs et al 2000; Hobbs 2003). The creation of a 'night-time economy' within the last decade is marked by a new industry of social control, consisting of the privatization of security within these club spaces, such as in bouncers and door staff. The club space as a specific part of the 'night-time' economy, designed to make profit, means that there is a greater incentive to tighten regulation of undesirables, because undesirable people within the

club will drive away customers (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hobbs, 2003). Thus, this creates only greater incentive to label certain individuals and groups of people as 'undesirable' in public or semi-public spaces and allow for their increased regulation, surveillance or exclusion.

In her essay on criminal discourses constructed around hip hop music and the panic surrounding hip hop concerts at large scale venues, Rose writes that young black rap fans often face 'heightened suspicion and hostility by concert security forces' when attending hip hop shows held at these venues (1991:278). She points out that the institutional policing at large scale music venues of African American concert goers has long been part of the complicated history of law enforcement and the African American community, part of the 'complex network of ideological and economic processes that attempt to justify the policing of rap music, Black youth and African Americans generally' (1991:279). A similar process of greater scrutiny and hostility towards Asian and black young people exists in the UK and there is a long and complex history to the institutional racism and discrimination of young people and in particular, of young people of colour (Alexander, 2000; Bowling and Phillips, 2002, 2003; Gilroy, 1987; Hall, et. al, 1978; hooks, 1990; Lipsitz, 1990; Messerschmidt, 1986).

Rose's (1991) own ethnographic account of standing in a queue waiting in fear to be padded down by a security guard and being regarded as someone who might be potentially dangerous echoes some of the observations made here in this section regarding such gendered and racialized notions of security. It reflects my own discomfiting experience of waiting in a queue in front of the club on Saturday night, having my bag searched as standard practice, and watching people get turned away for various reasons.

Another example of the negotiation of consent is evident in Dom's explanation of the adoption of the 'clubscan' machine. Dom stated that there were ways of being proactive in deterring 'troublemakers' entrance to the club. Here he provided an example of how clubs are often subject to pressure from the police and local authorities to take more active and intrusive measures to ensure

security and order within the club space and the neighbourhood, particularly in well-heeled, residential neighbourhoods. It is notable that technology has been used to facilitate such security measures in the private spaces of the club. Further, this technology comes with an endorsement from the local police and authorities as an effective deterrent for crime. This suggests an uncomfortable overlapping of police matters, security and business interests, supporting Hobbs' observations about the privatization of security and the development of an industry of social control (2003).

Dom: 'But my philosophy has always been if you have that message on the door...you try and pre-empt problems of course. We have recently started using this machine called a clubscan, which is a serious subject for debate. I talk for hours and hours a week with customers and people about this bloody scanning machine. The long and short of it is that the police 'highly' recommend that we use it, and when the police commissioner for Kensington and Chelsea highly recommend that you do something, you just do it because we want to be proactive, we want to be seen as being on their side by them and by the public! Basically what this clubscan machine does is it reads people's IDs and stores them on file and then if they've caused a problem in the club, we know who they are and we know how to contact them. Thankfully we haven't had to do that since we've installed the machine and I think that's largely because if you are about to cause trouble or if you are a troublemaker, then you're not going to be handing over your ID.

Helen: So it acts like a deterrent?

Dom: It acts as a deterrent. And, it's in the worst case scenario, it's a chain of...you have a retrospective chain you can follow.

As is evident in Dom's statement, however, the clubscan machine provokes much discussion and debate between the door staff and customers. The use of the clubscan was also met with active resistance by some customers. Here Dom stated how the Bombay Bronx crowd does not accept the use of the clubscan machine readily, and in fact 'like arguing about this'.

But you know, it's a very contentious subject. And the Asian crowd, my god, do they like arguing about this! We have a lot of lawyers coming down to Bombay Bronx. It's a very highly educated crowd at Bombay Bronx-probably the highest educated crowd we have. They do like an argument on the door. And they feel like, a lot of people feel like it's an infringement of their personal rights.

The questioning of such technology being used to keep track of their customers is indeed something that would provoke anger and resistance. Many do question the validity and the right of clubs to collect information. Arguing about these matters does mean that the club promoters are forced to come up with resolutions, either by not allowing the person to come through unless they submit their IDs, or in most cases, allowing people to come through without having their IDs scanned in order to keep the line moving and fluid and business steady. Dom says that he knows most of them anyway, and in the same way that people negotiate any number of things at the door, this too can be negotiated.

Therefore, despite the harsh policies put in place, my conversations with guests outside Kandy Nights illustrate that there is often a negotiation of security that occurs on these nights and actual situations are far messier and more complicated than promoters like to present. For instance, security only works in large part due to the cooperation and the patronage of guests. The guests do have a significant part in determining whether a policy instituted will work or whether they put up resistance to such measures of security. At the same time, guests are also invested in classed and gendered notions of exclusivity and the regulation of these ideals through dress codes, security checks, entrance fees, drinks policies and so on. Consumers are often attracted to the sense of exclusivity and are complicit with, and accommodating to, the different modes of exclusion club security and promoters utilize. Therefore, what emerges is a dynamic and complex account that reveals how regulatory practices are negotiated by the consumers they are meant to classify and coerce. Further, these accounts chart the often competing interests and an uneasy, ambivalent relationship between club owners and consumers as well as conflict amongst consumers. There are points where owners and consumers have crisscrossing interests, in which case it is interesting to see how consumers accept these regulations.

## **Tale II 'Put Some Clothes On!' Asian Nights, Self-Regulation and Manoeuvring**

Standing outside of Kandy Nights, I talked to Mike an equity trader:

Helen: And why are you here tonight [Kandy Nights]?

Mike: Just meeting up with a few friends. Um, it's an upper-class, uh, supposed to be an upper-class trendy event. It's my first time here.

Helen: What do you think of it?

Mike: It's not too bad. It's not the best place, but it's not too bad. It's nice.

Helen: What do you mean by upper class?

Mike: You get many venues where there's a lot of say, youngsters trying to be pretentious. Young uni students trying to be who they're not, and they're not, really and uh, it's—here, it's not a bad event. A lot of people are similar, say background or-- they're here for a good time.

Helen: What do you normally do when you go out to clubs?

Mike: What do I do—normally just speak to friends, and dance and that's it!

Helen: Why do you dance?

Mike: Why do I dance? Stress relief I suppose. Stress from work, and yeah, you've got energy built up in you, and you want to release it in a kind of....controlled environment.

Mike's explanation of the 'upper-class' characterization of the event where he wants to party and let out steam in a 'controlled' environment resonates with how Chatterton and Hollands define 'mainstream' club nights as being increasingly gentrified and stylized environments. They argue that mainstream clubbers tend to prefer 'sanitised environments' with general 'up-market appeal' which 'meet the style aspirations of white collar workers including young professionals, graduates and service employees'. They argue that these aspirations 'signify an increasing desire for safe, risk-free consumption environments' (2003:87).

Mike stated that he felt comfortable and secure in his choice of dress and style at a place like Kandy Nights, where his sense of dress is determined less by a particular aesthetic than by other standards such as the setting and what would be considered 'appropriate' to wear or look.

Helen: How do you normally dress when you go out?

Mike: Dress smart, you should dress accordingly. You should dress accordingly to how you feel comfortable. I feel comfortable like this, um, I don't need to dress in a hoody because it's not who I am. Um, so dress accordingly, and if the company don't [sic] appreciate it, then be it so. But I feel we're dressed accordingly – smart, it depends on how you see smart – yeah, we're smart casual.

Mike's comment also suggests that there are other ways the dress code could be read. For instance, Mike points out that he dresses 'smart' not because he is forced to but because donning smart attire is part of an outward expression of his identity. He further makes the point that one should dress not to impress others or the staff and promoters at the club but to fit your comfort level and if others do not like it, 'then be it so'. Therefore, Mike presents his dressing smart as an individual choice rather than the result of a dress code. Yet, Mike can present this casual attitude towards dressing smart because he has the means to do so without feeling uncomfortable, so it could be said that there is less at stake for him in looking a certain way.

Mike's claim of a sense of ease in his 'smart' clothing at the club exemplifies the claim that Nayak (2006:817) makes when he speaks of the shift from 'coalmining to clubbing'. While masculine bodies were once historical markers of physical strength and industry, economic restructuring and a decline in heavy industry have brought forth changes in consumption, echoed through the practices of drinking, clubbing and going out. That is, masculinity can be defined by how you go out and 'handle yourself' at the bar or the club. Correspondingly, Mike's statement gives us a better understanding of how club dress practices reveal important links between bodily practice, gender and consumption. Dressing 'smart' reaffirms and valorizes a controlled and powerful 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1995) and so the club becomes a site that offers up to young men an ideal model of masculinity and opportunities for 'doing' and performing these versions. Therefore, if we examine the regulations and discourse of dress codes, I would argue that men are regulated and penalized for their dress just as often as women, but in very particular and different ways – and this is linked to the ways in which young Asian men are demonized as dangerous and troublesome youth 'in crisis'.

For example, Mike's casual mention of the 'hoody' is not so casual upon further examination of the significance of the hoody in popular and political discourses on youth, crime and anti-social behaviour. The 'hoody' has become a pervasive



symbol of 'dangerous' youth and working class masculinity, and comes with an entire set of discourses that link youth with marginality and criminality (Muncie, 2009). The intense focus on an article of clothing means that the 'hoody' has become a synecdoche for youth, but specifically for masculine and working class youth. Gilbert and Gilbert (1998) call masculine forms of dress 'the embodied reality of masculine practice'. As such, what one does to the body, and through the body, is immanent as material, bodily practice. Beverly Skeggs argues that 'the body is the most ubiquitous signifier of class' (1997:82). Further, Nayak (2006:817) states that the bodies of working class men can be seen as 'troublesome' and characterized by resistance. Trainers, hooded sweatshirts, caps and casual sportswear are strongly associated with a subordinated, oppositional form of working class masculinity, aggressive and dysfunctional. The image of 'hoodies' have become so closely linked with dysfunctionality that there have been numerous appeals for a public ban on young men wearing hooded sweatshirts in public spaces, such as in shopping centres. Public officials have even attributed to hooded sweatshirts the power to enable anti-social behaviour, such as petty theft, vandalism and violence. Images of US 'gangsta' rappers wearing similarly hooded apparel fuels certain expectations of similar 'gangster' behaviour and comportment of Asian male groups who turn up at the door in 'gangs' wearing the dreaded 'hoodies'. Hence, the decision to deny young men who are wearing casual sportswear entrance into certain clubs is not just a practice limited to the club, born out of what happens inside (fights, verbal abuse, illegal activities) but is mediated and produced by existing wider discourse around masculinities 'in crisis', as well as stemming from more specific concerns around the 2001 riots and the 'rise' of Asian gangs. These perceptions are then recycled and reinforced when put into practices in the spaces of the club.

In contrast, women's dress codes are much vaguer. They are not provided a list of prohibited items of clothing such as the one that warns men 'no caps, no trainers' will be allowed. For instance flyers for Asian night VIP RAMP suggest that men should look 'smart, and that women should 'look good enough to walk the ramp' (VIP RAMP). Another club flyer for a more recent Asian Bollywood

and bhangra club night ('Bollyfunk') advises that women should look 'glamorous and sophisticated', wearing 'dresses/evening wear/traditional clothing'. Meanwhile men should look 'smart and suave' wearing suits/blazers/jeans/shoes.

Moreover, people are encouraged to use the club space to express their status and level of maturity. Being 'on display' is often primarily accomplished in these instances through dress. The instructions for women on the club flyer for women use aspirational adjectives such as 'glamorous' and 'sophisticated'. Here, Amrita described how those expectations of feminine dress at Kandy Nights and other Asian nights are imposed upon her by various people within the club setting:

Amrita: Last year, I went to a club, for a friend's birthday, and all these guys harassed me for wearing my geeky glasses, until I took them off. Why are you so in my face about it? 'You should have gone to Specsavers' and all this crazy stuff, and it's like, that's really not on. These guys are like 28, 29 years old, and they're picking on me, picking on a girl. This is what bothers me about people in general. It's just like why do you have an issue, I'm the one wearing it!

Helen: Why do you think these guys were picking on you?

Amrita: I don't know but I did not look like every other girl in there. I don't have to look like them. Have you been to Piya Piya [Kandy Nights venue]? How do you feel?

Helen: I don't know, what did you think?

Amrita: how do I feel about Piya Piya [Kandy Nights venue]? I don't think it's that nice. The girls, some of them were pointing and laughing, but some of the girls in the bathroom were saying 'oh my god, I think you look amazing' but the guys were full on, it's like if you don't have anything nice to say, don't come up and say anything to me because I'm not interested. Oh man, the girls will be wearing their little cocktail dresses, not even like nice ones or anything. I saw a girl there, and I just thought she looked absolutely insane. She was wearing this dress that maybe Mariah Carey could wear, it was just two straps of cloth covering her ninnies, and then like, it was completely backless and the rest of it was like this tiny skirt and it was in a bright colour so your attention goes to it. It looked absolutely hideous and I just wanted to throw a jacket over her. Like put some clothes on!

Earlier, I had mentioned that restrictive dress codes were often aimed at young men by listing items of clothing prohibited within the club space. In contrast, women were not subject to an explicit dress code. However, Amrita's comments indicate that feminine appearance, dress and the female body are still very

much subject to regulation within the club space; but through self-regulation and through the regulation and surveillance of others.

In the club setting, where hierarchies of difference are being created and maintained, Amrita's story suggests that women are often subject to more severe punishment for transgressing or jettisoning the compulsory heterosexuality of the club space in favour of creating alternative looks or styles. This suggests that often, dress codes are not just set by the club promoters or owners, but that the act of regulating and maintaining these dress codes are taken on by the guests who monitor, judge and regulate others' appearance based upon hegemonic gendered and sexual codes of dress. Thus, as was evident in Amrita's case, a compulsory heterosexuality was expected. Her attempts at circumventing or ignoring it was read by some of the men in that space, and it was met with male derision and attempts to regulate and punish her behaviour.

At the same time, Amrita also finds it difficult to not internalize and redeploy these standards towards other women, as evident by her own criticism of the dress practices and appearance of these other women for their failure to adhere to certain physical ideals that are linked to notions of an excessive femininity, sexuality and overly suggestive dress.

However, despite the harsher penalties for not dressing to impress men, Amrita went ahead and dressed how she wanted to look and managed to receive positive feedback from some of the women in the club. Therefore, despite the consequences in not looking typically feminine or conventionally attractive, there are also instances where dressing outside of those concerns can be done and is encouraged and affirmed by other women.

As Foucault (1977) would argue, power is not only negative or enforced from above, but also productive, self-regulated and self-generated. Judith Butler (1993) argues further how discursive meaning is established and maintained through repetitive performance. These conversations with Mike and Amrita

reveal that regulatory norms are kept in place through self-regulation and through the repeated performance of dress and behaviour as well as being enforced by each other's criticism and scrutiny, as evidenced by Amrita's comment 'Put some clothes on!' So, women are instructed to look 'sexy' but also fear being labelled as excessively sexual. Amrita's statement betrays a class-based appraisal of the femininity on display. As stated earlier, working class women are subject to the regulation of their sexuality, often read as excessive sexuality that also takes on moral overtones (Skeggs, 1997; Wilkins, 2004). Hence, an excessive sexuality is often regarded as looking 'cheap' and 'slutty'. Sue Lees (1993) argued that the power of being labelled a 'slag' acts as a divisive measure that categorizes women into 'good girl' and 'bad girl' categories that are infused with class and racial overtones. The fear of being labelled 'slag' constrains young women's desires and freedoms. On the other hand, young men are also negatively stigmatized. While a controlled, 'smart' and clean-cut masculinity is valorized, an excessive masculinity read as 'troublesome' and aggressive behaviour is strongly prohibited.

Yet, Amrita and Mike have also shown that they do not always fully accept these definitions of masculinity and femininity imposed from above. There are ways in which they can and do evade and challenge outright these gendered codes of dress, even if it means incurring insults or criticism from other guests. Thus, there are gaps within these regulated spaces for different modes of articulation and opportunities to express ways of being outside of hegemonic standard of feminine and masculine ideals.

Despite the vast efforts to impose restrictions, such as stringent dress codes and the right to turn away large groups of men, Kandy Nights can still become a 'liminal' space of hedonistic aggression and behaviour. Sanctioning activities such as drinking means that transgression of rules can and will happen and are, to an extent, encouraged (Hobbs, 2000, 2003). Technology such as the internet has also become a space for the advertisement of such nights, and networking sites such as Facebook often have groups which you can join, which allow for comments and pictures of fun nights out, thus making it part of a greater

‘aesthetic process’ that encourages excess with regards to drinking (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007). Amrita commented on these practices and how they were also made evident by postings and pictures on Facebook.

Helen: So you were saying earlier, at Piya Piya, the guys will go out and get drunk and hit on girls, do you think that’s their objective?

Amrita: I think that they want to go out and have a nice time and everything but when you’re wasted, you don’t know whether you’re having a nice time or not. The next day, they put up pictures on Facebook and are like ‘I’m so hung over’ like it’s the coolest thing in the world, and you’re so not cool!

These postings suggest that the use of technology such as Facebook facilitate what Nayak (2006) refers to as ‘body-reflexive practices’ such as drinking, fighting and having sex. These practices symbolize a set of social relations and, thus, contain meanings that help to ‘bind’ people together, creating collective histories (Nayak, 2006). Thus, the documentation of these body practices on sites such as Facebook reaffirm these performances of gender and class.

Mike, mentioned fighting as a common occurrence amongst Asian partygoers:

Helen: Okay, and do you feel like when you go to these mixed events, there’s less trouble?

Mike: To be honest, right, we see trouble, but it’s not something we’ll ever get into. But here, for example, this event at Piya Piya, we can’t see any scope for any trouble, due to the nature of the people here, um, but I mean, again, it’s early into the night, security and the door staff is strict on their policies. It seems like a good, controlled environment—to maintain a good environment.

Helen: And that’s important to you.

Mike: Yeah, it is, yeah.

Mike’s statement illuminates how ‘trouble’ is often a notion and a problem for security, promoters and staff. They go to great lengths to avoid and prevent fighting, but it often does not impact on the guests as much as they think. Often, the ‘trouble’ is prevented in order to keep the police and residents happy, but partygoers often understand that on a Friday or Saturday night, scuffles and arguments are bound to happen often enough in a variety of venues. Further, Mike here explains his view of security as being there to deter troublesome behaviour, so in large part, their presence is only felt inasmuch as they are a

preventive measure against 'trouble' coming in to the club. Mike's belief that trouble does not affect him or any of his friends is based on his characterization of trouble as being something that only certain types of people are subject to, based on their positions of class, age and profession. Kandy Nights is a safe place because the crowd has already been pre-selected based on taste, background, ethnicity, and gender.

In another instance, an anonymous post on a website, that lets customers post reviews of club nights they've attended, demonstrates that security is an exchange for some rights or privileges in return for giving up others.

'I would recommend it as a good night to my friends and the reason I have returned there twice after is because we didn't get harassed, treated like kids or belittled, granted the security is tight but I would rather have that than have a fight every 30 seconds' (web address and date accessed) <http://www.viewlondon.co.uk/clubs/piya-piya-lounge-userreview-archive-16144.html> (accessed 26/09/2010)'.

The consent to tight security onsite is enabled by what is seen as an exchange for what they get in return which is the hostility, lack of respect and suspicion that security in clubs often dispense liberally. Ultimately, this reviewer understands that as a consumer he has the freedom to just walk away and go somewhere else, or to give negative reviews which gives him some room to manoeuvre and negotiate his demands in exchange for his consent. Additionally, it seems as if he is saying that there are ways in which club security can be strict without being overly aggressive or hostile. Therefore, the notion that authority is passively accepted without critical reflection is challenged by what is said within this account.

Rob Shields (1992) makes the argument that, contrary to the idea of leisure spaces as spaces of freedom, they are in fact zones that are regulated and legitimated; places where social control still remains in place. These legitimations come through in various ways, linking style, dress, youth (age), gender with behaviour and attitudes. Night-time spaces such as clubs make up a significant part of the dominant spaces of leisure within the postmodern and

post-Fordist economy of the city. As the accounts in the chapter indicate, this sense of the permitted and the regulated permeates and structures the experiences of the crowd at Kandy Nights in central London. Bouncers, age limits, dress codes, club fees and drink prices are mechanisms used to limit and control practices and experiences at Kandy Nights along class, ethnic and gendered dimensions. These work both as practices that are imposed upon by the club owners, promoters and staff as well as practices that are regulated and reinforced amongst clubgoers.

However, in presenting two halves of a 'tale' of going out, I aimed to highlight the ways in which there were often multiple and contradictory interactions within the club space. Club owners and promoters have different agendas and views of the club space, and they work to promote their own interests. In other words, depictions of the club space by club promoters suggest a preferred reading of the club space, a space as it ought to be; whereas clubgoers often have a radically different understanding of the space, and they interact with it differently in having their own separate purposes and interests. Therefore, there are points where these clubgoers resist these preferred understandings of the space and recode what is to be regulated, permitted and legitimated within these spaces. Moreover, the different readings bring up the tensions and clashes between the owners and the guests. This indicates how the burdens of security, dress codes and other exclusionary and regulatory practices are often subject to a process of negotiation, rather than being met with straightforward acceptance by the club members.

In the next section, I look beyond the limits and impositions of such regulations. I reflect on and explore some of the ways in which young women have laid claim to and re-territorialized public consumption spaces such as the club space, and made them part of a youthful Asian feminine set of practices and dynamic mode of social interaction. Kandy Nights and other Asian club spaces then can be seen to offer an important resource and site for the construction of youthful Asian feminine identities and to offer up alternative connections, stories, sights and sounds of diasporic experiences and identifications.

## **You Go Girl! Kandy Nights, Gender and Asianness**

Public spaces such as clubs are often seen and treated as predominantly male spaces, from the work of the Birmingham school (1976) to more recent studies of race, youth and masculinity (Skeggs, 1997; Nayak, 2003, 2006). Particularly for Asian women, practices of going out are rarely mentioned, or discussed only within the context of being something that 'conservative' Asian families would consider a strictly forbidden activity. However, even within youth studies literature, the occasional mention of young women in public spaces suggests that young women, although largely invisible, were present from the outset. For example, with the bhangra 'daytimer' gigs, young women were very much present at these events, and indeed this has been acknowledged. In fact, daytimers were often established as such because promoters recognized that many young Asian women were also fans of bhangra and would come to these shows but were often too young to go out in the evenings (Dudrah, 2007). Therefore, I want to draw attention to the emergence of stories of young women's participation and active engagement within the scene in a way that considers the effect of young women's consumption practices in shaping the scene in particular ways.

The previous section discussed the tensions between the freedoms and limitations available for consumers within these club spaces. I discussed how hierarchies of difference in gender are often reinforced and maintained by owners, promoters and amongst the consumers. However in this section I want to demonstrate how these limitations and regulations around hierarchies of difference are also not over-determined. Amy Wilkins (2004) writes how young women experience structural limitations as both pleasurable and constraining. Thus, there are gaps where enjoyment, pleasure, shared connections are not written out in young people, in particular young women who are able to negotiate an experience of pleasure and enjoyment in activities where these limitations are put into place.



So I begin this section by exploring how and when my participants, both men and women, developed the practice of 'going out' to Asian club nights. I attempt to show how 'going out' meant something meaningful personally and politically during a crucial period in one's life. Thus, the notion of 'going out' developed out of a very specific time, space and place and history in the UK that developed across gender and class.

Then I explore how this claim of the transformation of once heterosexual 'male' spaces happen within the context of Kandy Nights. For many of the people at Kandy Nights, their presence at Kandy Nights is the result of a complex set of choices that are formed after considering many aspects of the Kandy Nights night. Many things are considered, including music, the crowd, friends, as well as one's identification with certain aspects of Asianness. Choosing to go out to an Asian night is a significant and meaningful choice to make on any given night in central London, given the sheer variety and access to clubs and bars.

### **Asian Nights As Cultural Practice of 'Going Out'**

Sunny Hundal, creator of Asians in Media online magazine, spoke in great detail here about how developed and organized the Asian club scene was in London but also in other parts of the UK, particularly around university towns where there were significant numbers of Asian students. Sunny situated the practice of 'going out' within the broader context of an Asian 'subculture' marked by the transposition of music from their bedrooms and family weddings to the wider public space of the clubs, bars and university student unions within and across the UK.

Helen: How did you get into the scene?

Sunny: I guess at school, there was a lot of bhangra—so, at school it was really popular...we use to go out with friends and listen to the music, especially at weddings and stuff like that, and other sort of parties and I really, got into it big time, when I got to university, around '95—that was the sort of an explosion—that was the first year, a massive explosion of like...Asian club scenes. Literally, there were coaches from my university, Brunel, to Central London every day. You know, we'd go take a coach to Leicester, Nottingham...people would just go up and down the country in big coaches, and we had the numbers to fill those coaches too, you know. It was quite lucrative as well, for a lot of people who did

that in those days. So I used to go out a LOT, you know and partied all the time. It sort of died out-no, actually it sort of carried on until the end of university. I didn't go out as much, obviously the last year of university, I was working a lot more, but it sort of opened my, sort of, whole Asian subculture...you know... that was developing in the UK. And before that, I just felt that...that subculture was sort of a more outward exploration of...um...of culture. It was primarily based around weddings and people just listened to music at home on tapes and stuff like that. But now this was exploding, into like uh, around the country just the club scene and that sort of thing.

As 'subcultural' communities, they shared features with other types of clubbing cultures that have been discussed and perceived as 'subcultures' (see Buckland, 2002; Malbon, 1999; McRobbie, 2000; Rief, 2009; Thornton, 1996). The existence of such Asian student clubbing scenes, confirmed by the accounts included here, throws up a challenge to conventional academic perception of clubbing cultures as primarily 'white' homogenous spaces for middle class young people.

Arika and Surindher, co-editors of XEHER Asian women's magazine, and frequent clubbers, both discussed the process by which they got involved in going out to Asian nights. Both talked about being introduced to Asian nights where they played specific genres such as Bollywood and bhangra through first being exposed to other popular urban dance music nights such as 'garage'. At the time, there were many links and cross-overs between genres such as 'garage', 'drum 'n' bass', and bhangra and Bollywood remix. Both Surindher and Arika discussed how their exposure and liking for Asian music were locally inflected. They crucially linked growing up in East London to their knowledge of and appreciation for bhangra and Bollywood music.

Helen: I know for myself that growing up in NYC had so much of an influence on what kind of music I listened to.

Surindher: Yeah, yeah, yeah

Arika: Well, like from college up to university I was complete Bollywood. And then it was only when I came out of university and I went to Bombay itself that my-my tastes in music kind of like, anything and everything for me now. If I like the sound of it, then for me...um, But there is that whole kind of thing, like, you know when you're brought up in the East, there is the particular type of music you SHOULD be listening to, like bhangra or-

Surindher: There are phases. It starts off with garage...

Arika: Garage, or

Surindher: But living in an area like where I live in East London, with Asian nights, you get sucked into like Bollywood music or bhangra.

Certain genres of music act as 'gateways' to other kinds of scenes and genres, and what they are is heavily dependent on where in the city you live, your friends, school, and after school. From university nights with busloads of Asian students, to the practice of going out on with friends to different Asian music nights, these activities symbolized a significant part of a young Asian person's experience of London nightlife throughout different parts of the city.

For Mr. Kay, DJ and promoter of Kandy Nights, going out to Asian nights marked a rite of passage in his life from adolescent to mature adult. This is consistent with other sociological accounts of how going out marked a 'boundary crossing' between childhood and adulthood (Osgerby, 2004; Valentine, 2003). Moreover, for many, the waning of their desire to go out to these massive Asian nights marked a significant transition to adulthood, in achieving more mature, worldly, cosmopolitan tastes of mixed crowds, and a more diverse range of music on offer. Beyond signalling a transitional phase, 'going out' to these Asian nights throughout the city captures a historically specific moment in which night-time consumption was less accessible to young people and particularly young people of colour. The wealth of choices that young people are offered now was not available then and there were even fewer hospitable places to go to if you were young and Asian. The way in which nightlife is consumed has also changed rapidly within a short period of time. Consuming nightlife has never been so easy and accessible and accepted as a part of everyday youthful life (Hollands, 2002). Nightlife spaces are intimately tied to the cultural economy of a city, and are key aspects of many urbanization and regeneration processes throughout major cities (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998). Until recently there was less diversity and fewer Asian nights out to go to; young people just had fewer choices about where they could go. Young Asian men and women were less likely to get into white dominated clubs.

Mr Kay stated:

Yeah, well, the thing is right, with the mentality being a British Asian thing, having the new Asian thing was at one time, wow, look, you're having an Asian night, whereas as people grow older, you know their attitude changes, and their mentality changes. It's like okay fine, maybe we won't just do an Asian night, let's not just go on to an Asian night, let's just go to an n—you know, a mixed night. As you grow older that's what it comes down to, but when you're younger you know, you're just experiencing things, that's what it comes down to, it's just like an experience in your life, you know.

Similarly, Mandy referred to her past clubbing days as something that was a product of her youthful preferences. As she grew older, her tastes matured, moving her towards less ethnically and musically homogenous nights:

Helen: What is it about going out to an Asian club night that specifically that appeals to you, assuming that you think is a good thing?

Mandy: When I was younger, actually, when I was younger, I would have loved it, but now I would probably like a bit of funky house in there. You know, a bit of R&B, just to like mix it up a bit.

Mandy, in the following statement, referred to going out to Asian nights as something she participated in when she was at university age, particularly when it happened outside of London. Her relationship with these nights was contingent on the fact that they were harder to come by as they were not in London. Like Mr. Kay, Mandy highlights the novelty of such nights as key to their appeal. Significantly, these nights were viewed as positive discoveries made at a developmentally crucial stage in people's lives, that helped to give them a sense of identity and belonging in common with other young Asians from all over different parts of the UK, occupying public/private night-time space of the club which was rarely done in the past. Clubbing, as many people have argued, has rapidly become an important means through which young people form and express their identities (Malbon, 1998; Skelton and Valentine, 1998). This is echoed in Mandy's statement about Asian nights as special and extraordinary events that compelled her to attend—so much so that this meant 'dragging' her non-Asian friends along with her.

Helen: So do you go out a lot? What do you do?

Mandy: Yeah, I mean, I do go out clubbing a lot. Umm, I used to go out a lot when I was an undergraduate. Umm, like about three times a week, just going out. And when I was like in Canterbury then, the area, there's hardly any Asians, so they used to have like, a one-off Asian night, and I was like 'oh I have to go' and all my friends are like English, Turkish, not Indian, so I dragged them along with me 'yeah, let's go' so it was good. I used to appreciate it much more when I was outside of London, but when I come into London, it's all everywhere. Yeah, I think that's quite interesting, but I don't bother now.

For these respondents, going out to Asian clubs when they were younger served as a set of practices and rituals of their youth and marked their entry as young adults within a particular life stage. This student 'uni' scene does give credence to Simon Frith's claim that age is a very important indicator to music use (1978). Often this was the time in which young people were given the opportunity to explore their identities in ways that were not available to them beforehand, especially once they went off to university in a big city such as London, where Asian nights were much more available and accessible.

The accounts that I have presented here illuminate the ways in which Asian student nights were experienced and made meaningful, particularly drawing attention to how young women were intrinsic to the scene of 'going out' in ways that are not often discussed and highlighted in youth culture studies. In fact, Asian women's participation in the scene poses a three-fold challenge to dominant perceptions of gender, ethnicity and popular culture in the UK. First, because youth culture studies so often focus on the production/consumption binary that corresponds to male/female dichotomy. Masculinized spaces of production are seen as more desirable, active and engaged in relation to the feminized practice of consumption (Pini, 2001). Further, feminine spaces, such as the privacy of the bedroom and the home, were considered distinctly 'lesser': within them, women were not engaged in the active creation of spaces of consumption. Secondly, Asian women were even more marginalized because of their gender and ethnicity. They are often presented as oppressed by their culture, religion and family, unable to make their own choices (Alexander, 2000). Finally even within Asian youth culture research, there is scant mention of women and what they do.

### **Kandy Nights - Performing Gender through Ethnicity; Performing Ethnicity through Gender**

This section concentrates on my findings, through interviews and participant observation, about the ways in which gender and ethnicity take root and inform club-going practices in various ways. In this section, I look closely at how the gendering of club spaces is marked through the performances of ethnicity, revealing how these two phenomena work in tandem to be 'made' (Knowles, 2005) through specific bodies in and through the club space.

Often, gender did not actually come up within the interviews or in participant observation, whereas the discourse around going out to Asian nights including Kandy Nights frequently contained discussions linking a sense of belonging to shared ethnic identifications and space. Moreover, discussions of personal interpretations of the practices of clubbing often did not make explicit or acknowledge a gendered set of practices. Therefore, most often, narratives around clubbing practices were presented or understood as gender neutral even if gender did work to shape and constrain these activities in particular ways.

The experience of club nights ostensibly is about music, as the nights centre around the playing of and enjoyment of certain types or genres of music. Simon Frith (1996) argues that music plays a key role in the constitution of identities, and young people in particular use music to position and orient themselves historically, culturally and politically.

In the following statement from Mandy, they discuss how music is felt and understood in different ways within the club, such as through the body (i.e. dancing). Her statement clarifies how music can transform and transport one beyond the dimensions of the club, with its powerful associations with local and more global diasporic community practices. Gayatri Gopinath (1995) writes how bhangra music works within a 'spatial economy' in which it presents an

alternative geography to places. Dancing in a crowd to bhangra tracks in the club virtually transported Mandy to a different place.

It's actually interesting, because last Saturday when I was at Kandy Nights, there were quite a few bhangra tracks in a row and I went to my friend, 'I feel like I'm at a wedding'. I really feel like I was just dancing at a wedding [laughs] because of all the Asian people, and just dancing to bhangra.

Remixed forms of bhangra was part of the backdrop of 'growing up' Asian in the 80s and 90s in the UK, as I have discussed in the previous section. Bhangra's ubiquitous presence within the Asian night-time scene can be read as both very specific to the UK - in cities where many of the UK's Asian Punjabi immigrants came to settle - as well as shared by other Asian diasporic communities across the Atlantic for example. Gopinath (1995) writes how bhangra functions as a 'performance of community' and helped to develop a sense of shared 'Asianness'.

Ruby's statement below highlights the meaningfulness of the Kandy Nights space in making available a site for diasporic young Asians in which they are allowed to express and experience being young and Asian in a pleasurable and playful context, outside of school, work, home and the street. Kandy Nights allows through music and atmosphere a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) where they can experience and articulate certain desires that would be uncomfortable or unacceptable in other circumstances because of parents or because they would be in inter-ethnic groups in school or at work. Thus, Kandy Nights and other Asian spaces provide a site for young women to affirm their sense of place, belonging, and identity:

Helen: Okay, um, and so what do you do when you come out to Kandy Nights?

Ruby: Umm, well I just want to be out with friends, have a couple of drinks, dance and then go home.

Helen: So would you say that you like going out to places where there are other Asians around?

Ruby: Yes.

Helen: And why is that?

Ruby: To meet new people and the music impresses me.

Helen: So do you consider yourself a fan?

Ruby: Yes. I like the fact that no one else listens to it. Just our little group.

Helen: No one else meaning?

Ruby: The people at work. I work, mainly with white people and they have no idea about it at all. I like that.

Through sharing the experiences of the music of this night she, along with her friends, can feel a special connection to each other. Maffesoli (1996) argued that this form of 'being-togetherness', and that collective sense of belonging to social networks and groups through consumption, constitute contemporary identities. For Ruby and her friends, going to club nights such as Kandy Nights allows her to revel and take pleasure in these associations, and helps to reaffirm her identity.

Mandy and Ayesha discussed how music and club nights are spaces where ethnic and religious differences are made less important and cast aside in order to share their enjoyment of the music. By way of being 'all under one roof', Ayesha recognized the fact that the space itself is acknowledged to bring people together.

Ayesha: With music it comes together. I think that's the one place music is the one place where it comes together. We're all under one roof, dancing to the same sort of tune and religion doesn't come into that.

Mandy: And you always notice on the flyers, it'll never say 'see, oh Indian night or Pakistani night' it's always an Asian night.

While there are aspects of the club space where differences in class, region and religion are temporarily forgotten, relations are never as easy and uncomplicated as Mandy and Ayesha have portrayed. A sense of a collective ethnic identity does not always elicit feelings of closeness and conviviality. Collectivity is enabled through certain performances of dancing or singing together. One must know how to dance the same steps or know the words to a song, or be able to recognize a popular song. Achieving closeness requires that one performs in all the ways that count as being members in a group. Thus the collective space created within the club can also magnify and draw boundaries around difference.



The conversations I have explored so far have demonstrated that often, issues of ethnicity trump gender when it comes to discussing practices of going out to Asian nights. These young women often discussed or narrated their experiences of going out clubbing through the lens of race and ethnicity rather than gender. Yet as Sunaina Maira remarked, the spaces of youth culture are not only about constructing ethnic subjects but also creating gendered and sexualized ethnic subjects (2002:150).

In a conversation with Ruby, Rina and Pinky, three young women I met and interviewed at Kandy Nights, I tried to indirectly ask whether there were any issues of safety and comfort in the club space with regards to gender differences. They in turn, interpreted safety through this notion of being there together in an ethnically homogenous Asian space. Both the music and the crowd express this sense of shared experiences and ties to a wider community.

Helen: Do you feel safe, you feel safe enough to dance?

Ruby: Yeah.

Rina: No she's gonna get stabbed!

Helen: No, no, no, I just mean, sometimes you feel uncomfortable if there are certain people around...[depending on who's around]

Rina: Yeah, I feel comfortable,

Helen: Why do you feel comfortable?

Pinky: Maybe because it's all her own people

Helen: What do you mean by all her own people?

Pinky: And it's music we listen to, and it's something we can associate with.

Ruby: It's like a white person going to a dance club, it's like that, isn't it?

Pinky: Yeah

Yet often these points of difference work in tandem with each other and serve to reinforce each other's boundaries, and it is difficult to parse out or untangle these processes from each other. Gender often forms or marks the boundaries around ethnicity and conversely, what it means to be a proper woman is raced and classed.

Helen: You were saying that you did go out to these Asian nights when you were a student, and what was your reaction in general?

Hema: If I'm with my friends, external stuff doesn't matter, there's a strength within that because you're with your people. But I think it depends what it is, because like I've said, I'd feel that divide where I'd feel more out of place at certain Asian things than in an all-black club because of that whole North thing. I was expected to be a certain way. I didn't know the songs they were talking about, I didn't watch Bollywood, I barely knew anything. And a lot of people here, especially guys, didn't think I was Indian upon looking at me...

Hema, a young British singer whose parents are South Indian, experiences feeling out of place at Asian events which suggests that the flattening out of some differences between Asians in clubs does not always mean that all differences are erased. Sometimes, closeness is extended only to certain people at certain moments so that the boundaries that are set or erased are often tenuous, shifting and mutable. Some differences are felt on multiple levels. On one level, Hema feels that there is a north/south divide in having parents who are from another part of India. Another division consists of not 'being a certain way' in not knowing the shared pop cultural references such as in watching the latest Bollywood movies and songs. The third level consists of not being recognized or acknowledged as being ethnically Asian and in thinking that people have misrecognized her. Hema's experiences of feeling more connected at 'all black club' than at Asian events has led her to come to the conclusion that there is more than one way of feeling a part of or separate from others in the space of the club.

Hema's account also clearly demonstrates that women often are seen as markers of the ethnic and national projects (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1993). Sunaina Maira (2002) argued that the setting up and conforming to dominant ideals of masculinity and femininity within the NYC desi remix party culture of her project highlighted the material practice of ethnic authenticity. Idealized notions of feminine sexual behaviour revolved around either traditionalism or modernity. Here, similarly, multiple differences are mutually reinforced through gender and ethnicity. Hema makes the point that it is often the men who identify her as being someone who does not 'belong' because she does not look Indian. This implies that her sense of femininity and a sexualized subject hinges upon

her 'looking' and acting typically 'Indian'. Therefore, belonging within Asian circles in these instances is often performed through a 'proper' and 'typical' Asian femininity. This demonstrates how gender boundaries are entangled with racialized and ethnicized markers of Asianness. Style, presentation and looks are very much tied to expressing an outward, recognizable and coherent youthful 'authentic' Asianness.

When the topic of romance and sexuality is raised within interviews and conversations, the young women tend to use gendered terms to describe and explain their experiences. Any night out in London does always bring with it the promise of meeting new people, especially intriguing when it comes with the potential for romance and sex. Kandy Nights is promoted as a space that is playful and sexually charged. Kandy Nights, as is true for most mainstream dance and club spaces in central London, is a strictly heteronormative space. Promoters actively encourage and support a heterosexual framework of sexual relations.

Amrita pointed out the games and ritualized practices that women particularly feel they must play in order to receive male attention.

The girls often go to these events, the girls, especially Asians have this thing about looking hot and like the guys wanting them and they always want the guys to ask them out so they can be like 'no'. It's all about the attention, it's about standing out, but the funny thing is that they don't stand out because they all look the same.

It has been argued that women walk a fine balance between adopting a desirable and attractive femininity and appearing too sexually available and too provocative or what Lees calls being seen as 'too tight or too loose' (1993:29). They are often compelled to control and manage their desires by showing interest but still adopting a passive femininity.

At the same time, these expectations and concerns are not always negotiated or taken into account in the same ways. How these concerns become managed can be different depending upon things such as space and location. Lois Weis and

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Michelle Fine (2000) point out that certain locations provide specific tools for the active negotiation of gendered and raced subjects. The club space as public, night-time space becomes one such location to offer strategies of evasion and dissidence.

For example, Ayesha stressed how unimportant the crowd is to her, and privileges dancing and creating her own space to move freely in relation to the music playing.

Ayesha: For me personally, I go for pure dance, because I choreograph in my spare time. Umm, I love dancing. I've been dancing since I was about five, six. And...for me, I don't care about the crowd is like, I'll just go, I'll do my thing, and I come home basically. That for me is a good night.

Helen: Do you go out with friends?

Ayesha: Yeah, I go with other girls, at all dancing levels. It doesn't matter, I just go for a good time, I don't go to pick up guys [right, right] so for me, the guys isn't—it is nice to have a bit of scenery, a bit of talent to look at while you're dancing but if it isn't there, then fair enough.

Within the sexualized atmosphere of the club, Ayesha asserts her rights to the dance space and club to be made enjoyable, not according to the dictates of the heterosexual imperative to find a partner and a mate, but to dance and to bond with her friends. At the same time, she is not engaging in a discourse that rejects her sexuality. She asserts her sexual power by subverting the male gaze and her role as the feminine object to be looked at, by talking about how she likes to look and takes pleasure in looking at attractive men on the dance floor.

In another example, Mandy and Ayesha discuss how Asian nights increase the likelihood to meet potential partners because certain risks of finding unsuitable partners are often minimized. Mandy's explanation of Asian women going out and finding someone desirable suggests that the passive femininity that Amrita pointed out is always how young women perform and express desire within the club context. Here the account of an Asian woman going out to a club to meet men is narrated not as a passive performance but is read as a practice that women actively undertake and are free to engage in openly. Mandy suggested

that expression of sexual desire is acceptable, even if it is not within the confines of marriage, romance and love.

Mandy: I think the reason why a lot of people go [to Asian nights] is to pull. At the end of the day, to put it bluntly...Asian girls look for a potential marriage partner.

Ayesha: yeah, but who wants to go and pick up a guy at a bar?!

Mandy: No, no, you get girls who do or even just to flirt. So you go to an Asian night, they all dress up you know, and go find the guy and flirt with him. Maybe not marriage, I suppose. There's gonna be more chance of you finding a guy who you fancy, who you like in an Asian night cause you're drawn to Asian guys than if you go to say an R&B night, where it'll be a mixed crowd.

Ayesha: Because then you worry about what your parents are like—

Mandy: Because then you might not get noticed or you might not find someone you like.

Thus despite the ways in which women's sexuality is policed and regulated, there are also gaps in these regulations that then offer up alternative ways of acting, expression and 'doing' femininity. The club site can be a more transgressive and 'safe', open site for the performance and the expression of female sexuality - although only in certain instances where sexual desire is tied to romantic ideals, monogamy resulting in marriage. Thus, as Amy Wilkins (2004) points out, while carving out a sexual space of greater freedom for women within these individual instances should not be underestimated, this does not undo heterosexual men's power and privilege and place within gender hierarchies.

Yet, it is also important to consider the distinct and specific ways in which ethnicity and gender are made meaningful depending on the individual club space. Mandy mentions how the alternative to an Asian night might be a night with a 'mixed' crowd, which changes the racial dynamic by introducing new risks and concerns that are less relevant within the Asian club night context. One would have to negotiate not getting 'noticed' by men or not finding someone you like. This is noteworthy because it does suggest that going to Asian nights like Kandy Nights also relies upon the notion that ethnicity becomes more of an invisible and taken-for-granted category when the crowd consists of peers of like ethnicity. It suggests that at mixed events, ethnicity

becomes a much more salient category of difference, where one might be made to feel invisible, unattractive or undesirable because one is not the 'right' ethnicity, or 'race'.

Moreover, within these sexual interactions within the club space, other forms of social distinction such as religion and nationality can become more important and significant to the choices people make; and these can make the shared ethnic or 'racial' connections less significant. For instance, as Ayesha and Mandy stated earlier, the divisions that exist between being Indian or Pakistani do not matter when it comes to club nights. Yet, being Pakistani or Indian, Hindu, Muslim or Sikh can be made to matter when it comes to romantic interactions in clubs. The extent to which they do matter is debatable, particularly in terms of immediate interactions on the dance floor. This conversation highlighted how social and spatial practices are situated acts that make gendered and ethnic relations meaningful in very specific ways depending on the specific club space. Further, not only do they work in tandem with each other, but issues of gender and ethnicity also highlight how other social distinctions such as religion are at work within that space.

Contrary to popular culture and sociological studies that focus on masculine youth practices or relegate young Asian women to the private spaces of the home, young Asian women do go out and claim space on the dance floor in bars and clubs. These experiences of going out are posed as significant expressions to how these young women constructed their youthful Asian identities. Despite the lack of research on young Asian women in these and other night-time leisure spaces, to further explore these journeys and experiences in more detail, young women are actively present within these spaces and their presence is treated as banal and ordinary fact of everyday life as a young person.

Through interviews and participant observation, the mundanity of young women's going-out practices is often articulated by the lack of awareness of gender differences and hierarchies which constrain and shape their club interactions. These young women often do not construct discourses around

going out through gender, whereas they are more likely to see their experiences of going out as a performance of Asianness. However, when the boundaries around what is shared become challenged or disrupted we discover how these nights coded as 'Asian' nights also affect and shape notions of gender and the performance of proper femininity. Therefore, this section shows us that although the club site and the practice of going out are not spaces that are wholly determined by the structural concerns of gender and ethnicity, they are often ambivalent and contradictory sites where issues of gender, sexuality and ethnicity are being constantly negotiated.

In the next section I intend to show how women's roles within the scene beyond the club context are constrained by gender hierarchies that contribute to a space that is sexist, masculinist and often patriarchal. Women's contribution as artists and cultural producers is often devalued and delegitimized in various instances and I look at how women artists are made highly visible because of the relative lack of female artists within the Asian urban music scene. Women artists must negotiate the very thin line between a desirable and appropriate femininity and a dangerous, threatening or unfeminine presentation. The representations and roles that are afforded to women are narrowly defined.

### **It's a Man's World: Asian Women in the Scene**

(Video Screening for 'S' July 2008, Central London)

We're standing at the bar, along with about 50 others, sipping drinks, in a small theatre right off Piccadilly Circus, on a hot summer evening. While it wasn't quite an album launch party, it was their first video so it was their debut for all intents and purposes. I was excited to see their debut because it's rare to see girl groups within the Asian scene. We were able to get a quick interview with them, have a drink and then get ushered into the screening room, along with about fifty other friends and family to see this new video. Afterwards, I asked the people I came with (two women and one man) what they thought and they were quite critical of their clothing, their hair, their dress, and mannerisms, calling it 'lackluster' and 'boring' and the 'same old stuff, nothing different.' I was taken

aback by the biting criticism aimed at this young all female group. I realized that they faced an enormous struggle ahead of them within a male-dominated scene.

In this section, I move on from the club space and look more broadly at how the Asian urban scene becomes mapped through the production of gender differences and hierarchies. I also look at how a politics of gender operates and the ways in which young female scene members negotiate these hierarchies within the scene, looking at how they support dominant hierarchies of gender and also explore other strategies that can at times, displace or overturn these structures.

Here I want to draw attention to the reaction Amrita had given within a discussion of the girl group Rouge, who were the first British Asian all female urban group to form in the Asian urban scene. Their first single 'Don't Be Shy' became a hit.

Amrita: And then there was Rouge, the all-girl group Rouge, oh my god! It was so vile!

Helen: Why was it so bad?

Amrita: It was just...so cheesy, and it was so boring...It was like, this is not fun to listen to. The beat was quite interesting for a bit, and then you'd be like 'can we put something else on'? Also, the way they portrayed themselves, I thought they looked cheap. They didn't look like stars. It was like a typical tank, short shorts, and slutty heels, and it was blatantly from Primark.

Nav, Head of Productions at internet radio station DesiHits.com, had this to say about girl group 'Rouge':

Later on, there was Rouge, the first British Asian girl group. They had one famous song, but had massive success with it, because in a guy led industry, for the men, a bit of eye candy is always welcome. Any chance of getting a girl on a stage and watching them dance is always welcome in the bhangra fraternity!

Amrita's and Nav's comments highlight how dominant tropes of masculine and feminine sexuality within popular culture are accepted and reinforced. Their comments demonstrate how this 'girl' group were judged mainly for their appearance, style and attitudes and simultaneously derided for their lack of



creative output in only being able to produce one 'famous' track. It can be argued that female artists within the music industry are often represented and their worth determined more often through their sexuality than male artists. If we expand our field of vision outwards to include the ways in which entire genres of music are gendered, it could be said that the pop genre itself is coded as feminine and 'artificial' whereas rock music is read as masculine and 'authentic' (Coates, 1997; Bradby, 1993; Durham, 2002). Thus, gender works on multiple levels within music, where music becomes a 'technology of gender', constructing masculinity and femininity in and through these genres of rock and pop (Coates, 1997:52). Thus, to locate Rouge through a discussion of their sexuality is to re-inscribe the notions of femininity formed in and through music back onto the bodies of these women. Equating their worth to their sexuality serves to 'put them in their rightful place', as the first female group within the Asian scene who might threaten the stability of a male dominated scene.

Nisha, who owns her own PR firm and works for a number of Asian artists, discussed how she has thought up a marketing strategy for a female artist she has been hired to promote. Nisha discussed how this artist has not been marketed in the 'right' direction. Here Nisha's comments about Gita's new image contain a very common strategy within popular music to link representations of femininity with a certain degree of sexuality. Nisha knows that music production is one site connected to a vast web of links within the music and entertainment industry, and that the artist must consider other aspects of the entertainment industry such as the market and tastes. This is true not only of the music but also with the artists' image. The 'right' direction is undergirded by the notion that there is a recognizable and 'correct' manner in which to represent femininity. The 'right' direction is one that allows for Gita's image to be intelligibly feminine. Judith Butler (1993) argued that through utterances, mannerisms, and other practices, gender identities are brought into being and made intelligible. Nisha outlined the performative acts below. She stated:

Nisha: There's Gita who's a singer, and she's coming back with her first album for herself, because she's always been singing but never been pushed in the

right direction, and so hopefully, I'll be working with her and pushing her in the right direction.

Helen: How do you want to push her in the right direction?

Nisha: Gita has totally changed her image now, from what she used to be. She used to be the girl next door. Yeah, so Gita has totally changed her image, so it'll be a lot more fashion based, interviews a lot more raunchy stuff and shows her image off

Helen: Okay, so more mature, and sexier

Nisha: Definitely, [she'll be] looking hot...

While these hierarchies exist in constraining and regulating femininities within the scene, in recent years, it is significant that there are other models of femininity that exist which displace and rework traditional and dominant views of proper femininity. One figure who fits the bill is an artist who calls herself Hard Kaur. She has been an artist in the scene for the past fifteen years. She started out in the bhangra scene and now has made the crossover to urban music. She has engendered a number of strong reactions within the scene for her attitude and frank discussions of her sexuality and refusal to conform to traditional notions of femininity. She is outspoken, likes to drink and has been known to get into arguments with people at clubs. She has also gained much success in India. She is currently on tour in India and resides there.

Harry, part of hip hop group SONA Family, and producer, worked with her to produce a famous single that has become a hit. It has played often on the BBC Asian Network charts and then became popular in India. Harry attributes her success not to her talents and skills but to her 'antics' and to his own skills as a savvy producer who knew what song she 'needed'. Here, the gendered dynamics of their relationship are such that there is a clear binary that is being enforced here in which she takes on the role of the passive female vocalist who is then shaped and created by an active male producer. Her talent is subordinate to his own, so she fails to receive credit for creating her own success. Instead, she only merits becoming a passive 'imitator' of Harry's talented creativity.

Harry explained:

I don't think people get threatened by Hard Kaur's status. The reason she gets attention is through her own negativity. She's quite a rude person. She generally has a rude persona and she gets drunk, smokes weed, gets so high. She gets into fights or ends up shouting at people, that's how she gets more known and those antics...Amy Winehouse didn't take off musically until she was seen with Pete Doherty getting shitfaced and doing stupid stuff and coming in and out of rehab. It's the same thing with Hard Kaur because she didn't really have an impact. She tried for years, for ten years she tried to do something and then she did one song with me and then she hit the big time because I gave her the song she needed even though she hated it. And then with her other songs, they basically copied it because she never thought to do it that way before.

Having said this, Harry still somewhat grudgingly articulates his respect for her ambition, goals and focus. This reveals his own discomfort with who Hard Kaur presents herself to be, because it does not fit into a model he understands or approves befitting a woman. Thus, his acceptance of her talents takes the form of likening Hard Kaur's ambition and her drive to succeed to his own desire to succeed. This act of creating parity indicates how this analysis relies on established gender binaries that attribute characteristics such as ambition, pragmatism and 'politicking' to being masculine. Hard Kaur becomes masculinized, or looked upon as having qualities that make her 'one of the boys'. This masculinization is typically placed onto women who do not straightforwardly fit into a model of femininity. In this sense, it is far easier for Harry to 're-gender' her persona rather than to rethink his gender coded analysis (Rose, 2004a):

One thing she is very good at is self-promotion and politicking with people and getting somewhere, getting places. And because there's a billion people there [India], you have to be together to get to the top which is something I do commend her for because she's got the most drive I've ever seen in anyone and she'll do anything and everything to get where she needs to go and that's what I like about her. So many people said to me 'don't work with her, don't work with her' and I was like no I like the fact that she wants to do stuff cause that's what I'm like...

In an interview with Bhoj, who runs an internet blog devoted to Asian and diasporic Asian music, and who is also a student radio station DJ, he discusses what he think of Hard Kaur. He said:

Helen: Do you like Hard Kaur?

Bhoj: She's too arrogant—for me. The way... she appears in her video, the way she dresses, the way she talks. I mean, I've seen a couple of interviews of her and there's no interview without her swearing. She's breaking the Indian stereotype of a good girl who studies and is well educated. She's more in-your-face-I-don't-care-what-you-think. I'm not saying she's being more Western or American but she's not being Indian in any way, so that's probably something she needs to think about. She's overturning the good girl image.

Helen: And you think that's a bad thing?

Bhoj: Obviously... if I was a mum and I saw Hard Kaur on TV and my daughter wants to be just like her. She's being too arrogant, too showy, and she's overdoing it. She should just stop it. Does she want to see every Indian girl look like her or close to her, because I'm sure I don't want to!

Helen: Are you saying you don't want to because you think she's arrogant, or you think that's not...the kind of girl you...

Bhoj: That's not the kind of people we are. Obviously, I don't want see like an Indian girl who never looks up at you, is just too shy who's a housewife, and she's not educated or anything like that, but yeah, she's not being Indian. She's being someone completely different.

Bhoj is conflicted in terms of what to make of artist Hard Kaur and her image as a strong, feisty woman who projects an image of tough self-confidence. Here Bhoj compares her against the stereotype of the good Indian girl, which he thinks is more than just a stereotype but an accurate description of what he thinks (or imagines) Asian girls to be like. He also believes that this 'good girl' image is a positive representation of Asian women despite this being a set of essentialized characteristics. Bhoj is concerned with Hard Kaur's contribution towards the creation of 'bad' stereotypes of Asian women. Her rejection of the stereotype threatens to disrupt his faith in the existence of the 'good' Indian girl who projects the 'right' image of Asian femininity. Moreover, the 'arrogance' and the 'showy' manner that she takes on is disturbing because she is seen to embody typically masculine and therefore 'wrong' characteristics. Hard Kaur's persona not only threatens the singularity of a 'correct' femininity but also challenges the 'right' way of being Asian. Bhoj invalidates her position by taking

away her right to be identified as an Asian woman in saying that it is just not 'who we are'.

Yet, in the following statement Bhoj acknowledged that her presence as an Asian artist might be presenting people with different and new ideas of how Asian women are, even though he admitted that he does not find it appealing. He is receptive to the fact that she presents an alternative to tradition or convention which he admitted can be 'good'. Therefore, Bhoj does not just automatically close down the possibility of alternative identities and representations of Asian women.

She's also different in a good way in the extent that she-she's being experimental, she's trying something new and you know, disproving that every Indian either has to be a doctor, or a lawyer or an engineer.

However Bhoj then contradicted himself when he compared Hard Kaur to another Asian female artist by the name Ms. Scandalous. Sumita Chakravarty has argued that men's anxieties over policing female sexuality for the 'guardianship of communal norms and values' have led to particular idealizations of women (1993:150). Hard Kaur does not exhibit any interest in taking on the burden of upholding a traditional version of Asianness.

I'd say Ms. Scandalous is doing a similar job but slightly better because you know, she's more repping the Asian woman rather than showing off about it, and saying that, I'm Indian, I'm in the scene, look at me, I'm completely gangsta, I'm in your face, I'm not that nice girl next door.' Ms. Scandalous I think, is doing a better job than her, although Ms. Scandalous is probably isn't so popular or doesn't have as many tracks under her belt as Hard Kaur does.

Nisha was also quite critical of Hard Kaur but not for her image so much but for her seeming lack of talent.

Helen: What do you think about Hard Kaur, especially her continued success within a male dominated industry?

Nisha: I think she is doing well for herself. Personally when it comes to talent, I don't think she's the most talented we have at all. I don't think she sings and her rapping is very brash. I think she's lucky, because she's female and she's edgy and people in India like that, and think she's quite cool and that's why she's

done well out there, but in terms of talent, she's not really the most talented person I've met in my life.

Helen: But she's also significant because she's also been in the scene for quite a long time.

Nisha: Yeah, she's pushed a lot of boundaries. She's always been one to say what she thinks and I think that's why people have taken a liking to her, some people have loved her, some have hated her

Helen: Yeah, she seems to engender extreme reactions

Nisha: Yeah, there's no liking with Hard Kaur. She's doing great stuff in Bombay. She just needs to keep her head strong and focused and she'll do well. She's very easily led astray.

A common claim is that there have been other reasons for her success. In Nisha's account, she suggested that one of the reasons Hard Kaur is popular is *because* she is a woman. This implies a sort of 'reverse discrimination' in practice within the entertainment industry, that allows more women to achieve success than men because of the application of a different, unequal set of standards. There is also the implication that Hard Kaur is able to use her femininity and sexuality to manipulate others into doing what she wants.

Many of Nisha's criticisms reflect popular common-sense views that are part of a wider discourse on women that invalidates or marginalizes women's roles within cultural production. The most common claim tends to revolve around women artists' supposed lack of talent. They are not considered 'real' artists who concentrate on making good music but imitators who spend more time being visually remarkable. This makes women's contributions invisible to the scene because it trivializes women's contributions, so that their work is delegitimized and made less meaningful.

Here is what Nihal said about up and coming artist, Bishi, who has already garnered recognition for her innovative music practices as well as her music. She is known for taking traditional instruments such as the sitar and using them in different and innovative ways.

Nihal: But I don't know, I don't really get Bishi.

Helen: Yeah, I mean she's really, very much--

Nihal: It's visual. I think she was born like twenty-five years too late. She would have been amazing during Studio 54...she and Andy Warhol would have been

the best of friends. She's like a kind of just like, out there, you know. She gets a lot of people excited, you know, a lot of people find what she does very different. Helen: I saw her at a pub, and she just played her sitar...

Nihal: --like a guitar—

Helen: As it was like a guitar, and I really liked this kind of attitude around it.

Nihal: But that's what people like. But me, personally, I'm about the songs. I need to be emotionally touched. Music cannot touch me visually. It has to touch me here [pointing to heart] and here [pointing to head] so you may look amazing, but like, you know, some great artists didn't look amazing but they were amazing. Aretha Franklin does not look amazing but she's made some incredible songs.

Here Nihal's comments about Bishi relies upon the notion that many women artists are not 'authentic' musicians but savvy negotiators who fashion a particular 'look' or personality and rely on that to see them through. The implication here is that she cannot truly be a good or 'genuine' artist. Instead she is little more than someone who 'dupes' people into thinking she is doing something different.

Another way to think about the ways in which women are treated as artists within the scene has been to talk to aspiring women artists, to get them to articulate their experiences of the Asian scene and narrate some of their hardships in working with people within a male-dominated industry and scene. Here, the band members of 'Serese' and Sudamani reveal how they each navigate the gendered dynamics of the Asian music scene and Britain's larger urban music industry. They discuss how additional expectations and pressures are placed upon them as young Asian women working within the scene.

The three young women of 'Serese' who are Jassi, Anjana and Astrid stated in an interview:

Helen: What obstacles do you think you have faced?

Anjana: 5 million, 50 million, seriously we face so many. And I think one of them is just being girls in the Asian industry, straightaway before anything, you'll be looked down upon and segregated, always kept as separate and not with the best.

Astrid: What we've come up against particularly within the Asian industry, it's almost like a gang mentality. There's like a gang of people in the Asian industry

who are at the top of their game in the Asian industry and they kind of don't want to let anyone else in.

Helen: Why do you think that is?

Anjana: I think it's a bit of intimidation because they're three of us and we're very strong characters and we're talented and I think some people might see that as a threat

Astrid: I think people might find it irritating because it's just our music and they're a bit like, okay...where's the bhangra?

Jassi: Exactly where's the bhangra and where do you fit in the industry?

The entertainment industry rewards certain genres, sounds, practices that fit into existing categories and does not acknowledge music that can be less easily categorized (Negus, 1999). In the case of female artists within the Asian music scene, women who do not fit the mould of being in a particular genre such as bhangra music are less likely to be recognized and given support. Further, the reluctance to accept women artists outside of performing in particular genres attests to the idea that this makes these women unintelligible as women, and the act of displacing such boundaries is read as threatening. Therefore women artists are far more limited in how they are able to articulate their gender identities within this scene.

Sudamani, an R&B female solo artist, spoke to me at VIP RAMP talks about the deeply rooted sexism within the Asian scene and how that affects the way in which she is received and positioned as an outsider due to her gender and due to the fact that she does not fit their definition of femininity. She says:

I think that's why you've got so many Asian males making it, relatively making it in the Asian industry whereas you have hardly any females because the Asian culture demands us to be submissive. We should be refined, almost like second class citizens. I think if boys can do it then I can do it. I never thought I was below or felt like I should act a certain way because I'm a female. It has been really weird and I think a lot of Asian men on the scene find me quite intimidating actually almost like oh god, she's a bit too much for an Asian girl but hey, that's who I am.

Despite the numerous obstacles that these young women face within the scene from processes of production, promotion and distribution, fans also play an influential and active role within the scene. They provide support, community, and ultimately, they can determine the extent to which artists could gain a



foothold in the scene and move on to greater success. Here, the group members of Serese talked about the support they have from fans:

Helen: We were just talking about an article asking why he's the only Asian star, Jay Sean. I think the man thing helps too.

Jassie: he's been very lucky because he's a man!

Helen: The man thing can help for sure. Did you ever get negativity from other women in the scene?

Anjana: No, and we were really shocked. We get more support from the girls. I think they're all thinking it's about time. I mean, it's often that the boys get their claws out...

Artist and producer D-Boy discussed how powerful these followings are to an artist's success within the scene and the entertainment industry. Niche scenes such as the Asian music scene must rely on the support of fans in order to gain recognition and entry into the mainstream industry. To an extent, all artists rely on their fans to ensure their success but the process between their fans becomes much more diffuse. Fans play a much greater and much more direct, active role in shaping an artist's career within the Asian scene because of the smaller networks that exist. Therefore, the core fan base might be people the artist knows personally to the ones who are only separated by a few circles of people.

Helen: I get a lot of people who say that young kids just don't know how to be fans because they don't put the time in. They don't go record shopping, because of YouTube and downloading and stuff, what do you think?

D-Boy: Well, I agree and disagree. I think there is still a huge groupie sort of cult that is more popular now...it's still there. You've got all these rock and pop and small hip hop and R&B groups that they now create a small following...Imran Khan has never had a groupie in the UK until he's got a record signing tour. He's got to be the most rising, fastest pop artist this year, to get that kind of following, going into the record shops, go the signings, girls mostly, who want to know more about his 'Amplifier' which is his single

There is evidence to suggest that a significant portion of Asian urban music fans tend to be young Asian women. There is no quantitative research or industry figures available that would suggest that more Asian women buy Asian urban music as there seems to be a lack of interest within market research on the earning and buying potential of Asian women. Yet the empirical evidence

gathered within my project suggest that more women are consuming music and paying for it, going to concerts and shows, particularly live events as well as a significant portion going to support clubs and Asian music club nights.

Rapper AG Dolla stated:

Women are part of my fan base as well. When I go to these little clubs, the girls there always scream for me. Nah, I mean, guys like me as well, but mostly the girls, they're my fans.

As discussed earlier, women have always been positioned as consumers of music, but the role of consumption too has shifted dramatically within the last twenty years (Hebdige, 1988; McRobbie, 2000; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Thornton, 1996) in which consumption, identity and lifestyle have become deeply intertwined. Therefore, the greater role consumption plays in determining who we are at a particular point in time does mean that the way in which people consume, as well as what is consumed and who consumes, all matter.

Asian lifestyle magazines mainly target urban British Asian women. The growing phenomenon of the 'brown pound' is in large part due to the increased success of Asian women in the labour market, their surpassing men in higher education and delays in marriage and bearing children, as supported by the figures in the UK. (Bhachu, 1993; Abbas, 2003).

The rise in young women's participation within the Asian scene as consumers and fans may provide a substantial incentive to change expectations for women artists within the scene. Artists such as Hard Kaur, Bishi, MIA and Nicki Minaj are providing alternative versions of femininity and providing different access points into a critique of normative feminine attitudes, behaviour, style and beauty. However, women seem to fulfil fewer of the dominant roles even as artists and producers. They are often de-legitimized as artists possessing genuine talent and skill with regards to making music of their own. Their skills are often acknowledged as sexual, or in being savvy negotiators who can 'sell'

themselves. However the continued rise in young Asian female fans may usher in changes to the gendered hierarchies that hold in place male dominated practices within the scene. At the same time, there is also the risk that young women will continue being perceived as passive consumers who will still support the existing hierarchies and unequal gender roles still firmly rooted in the scene.

This chapter has been about the particular relationships and practices that are produced in very specific, local ways generally around one particular night within East London from autumn 2007 to the summer of 2008. This is not to say that 'Kandy Nights' is unique in many respects as a club space operating within Central London. Indeed, it is a space that offers many of the same features and suffers from many of the same problems as other clubs and bars. At the same time, there are some very specific features of the night that touch on issues relating specifically to the identities and positions of British Asians in the UK and the struggle between Asians' external representations and people's inner identifications (Alexander, 2000). Within the multi-layered space of the club, dynamics of 'race' are always at play, but they are also intersected by gender and class to create a complex, fluid, and contested party space. What is at stake in the process is different for each person, so that promoters and owners are interested in keeping the space trouble-free. That means excluding many people, and in many ways, keeping the crowd homogenous in terms of ethnicity but especially controlled in ways of class and gender. However, we can see that these ways of excluding and controlling the night-time space are challenged by the guests in various different ways, from exchanging consent with courtesy and respect, and from outwardly arguing and negotiating against mechanisms of surveillance as with the Clubscan machine at the Notting Hill Arts Club. It can also mean choosing next time to go elsewhere, where the crowd might be more 'mixed', and the drinks less expensive and the dress code less formal.

I open up 'Kandy Nights' for further analysis to detail not only how an Asian 'party space' is constructed, but also to demonstrate how these spaces exist as part of the wider existing social landscape that shape our everyday lives.

Increasingly, theorists argue that spaces of consumption and leisure become the premier spaces to discover ourselves and who we are (Featherstone, 1991; Giddens, 1990; Maira, 2004; Miles, 2000; Thornton, 1996). Ultimately, the club space is a space that is formed not just by the temporary and fleeting dynamics of the dance floor but also shaped by everyday interactions with ethnic, cultural and gender difference. Current concerns around ethnicity and difference within the Asian context have to do with social cohesion, integration and multiculturalism. These come up in various ways throughout the narratives of 'going out' to 'mixed events' versus 'Asian events' as well as in the discussions around security and perceptions of a 'dangerous' Asian masculinity and policing Asian femininity. Therefore, Kandy Nights signifies not only a celebratory space that acts as a respite from the worries of work, home and school, but a contested space that is more problematic, multi-layered, and at times fraught with tension and anxiety.

Within my final conclusion I discuss how two years on from the end of my fieldwork, recent economic and political changes have dampened the rosy vision of the future of the scene. Belt-tightening under the guise of neo-liberal policies of rationalization has signalled the end of major institutions within the cultural industries which have long supported 'underground' scenes and creative cultural production. Along with the end of institutions comes the disappearance of alternative spaces that nurture 'underground' music production and consumption that might challenge certain racialized dominant forms of culture. What is left is just one less opportunity for a convivial creative outlet and a further eroding of everyday multicultural and plurality.

At the same time, I consider whether the shrinking field of underground music production and the shutting down of crucial institutions due to budget cuts does mean the slow death of an Asian urban music scene. The music industry has undergone enormous changes throughout this period, and it has developed new strategies to adapt to the hostile climate of music production in the face of digital technology and increasing piracy. One major shift has been in the breakdown of the mainstream and the 'indie' or underground binary which has

led to increased exposure of niche genres such as electronic music and urban music, especially in London. The ubiquity of digital technology within music distribution and access points such as MySpace and Spotify has meant that music has become much more accessible, particularly within genres that were once extremely limited when it came to distribution.

The role of religion and religious differences within the Asian music scene has not unfortunately been investigated in much depth within these chapters. Religion has always been the subject of tensions and the source of certain cleavages within the Asian communities in the UK. Within the last ten years, the political climate after 9/11 and 7/7, and the rise in the profiling of Muslims, have greatly increased tensions formed from religious differences within Britain's Asian communities. These tensions have created deeper fissures within Asian youth cultures. At the same time, religious differences, particularly around the Muslim/non-Muslim distinction might not be as pronounced as people might assume. While the Asian music scene's urban artists are mainly young Indian Punjabi Sikh men, there is a growing number of young male Bengali and Pakistani Punjabi Muslim artists who are emerging, whose fans are not Muslim women but identify as Hindu, Sikh and Muslim.

## Conclusion

A few months after my fieldwork had officially ended, in November, 2009 I heard from a friend who worked part-time at the Notting Hill Arts Club. She told me Bombay Bronx had abruptly ended their long run at the club because the night had become too popular and widespread, and had out-grown the club's small 'underground' space. Apparently, Nihal was planning on re-starting it somewhere else with the idea that it would be 'bigger and better'. To date, there has been no sign of a revival of Bombay Bronx and the shutting down of this important space to the Asian urban scene seems a fitting topic to conclude with. In many ways it signalled the end of an especially prolific and creative cycle of British Asian 'underground' music production.

The closing down of Bombay Bronx forces the re-examination of the original research question that precipitated this project because it gives new meaning to how we might envision an Asian scene and it offers a different picture of the ways in which these urban Asian cultural producers and consumers make a space. As a critical and central space for the Asian urban music scene, the closing of Bombay Bronx has significantly altered the space of the Asian scene within London's wider underground music culture. The Asian urban scene occupies a marginal place within the London music scene, often overshadowed by better known and more widely recognized black underground music scenes such as grime, funky house and hip hop. However, as I have argued in chapter 6, Bombay Bronx was successful in bridging different local urban scenes and artists through Bombay Bronx's promoter, Dom's, strong links to London's wider hip hop and urban scenes. Moreover, London's 'underground' Asian urban artists were introduced to traditional, mainstream institutions such as the BBC through Bombay Bronx's chief promoter Nihal who hosted a BBC Radio 1 show. Further, the night's success relied upon certain ideas of an edgy everyday urban multiculturalism brought in and articulated through a musical melange of styles. The amalgamation of different musical styles that became a prized feature of Bombay Bronx then made the night a hub for diverse scenes, where the Asian urban music crowd could mingle with London's 'indie' pop, rock and electronica circles (who generally formed the mainstay of the Notting

Hill Arts Club clientele). Thus, Bombay Bronx served an important function in being a conduit and platform for Asian urban artists and their move towards a more mainstream position within London's music scenes. It also developed wider areas of interest and association that revealed the music's more syncretic background. With the shutting down of such a site of production, the London Asian music scene has lost a crucial material and symbolic affirmative space for the scene.

Moreover, another blow to the Asian underground scene occurred last year, in March 2010 when the BBC announced that it would be shutting down national broadcast services of the digital radio station BBC Asian Network. The shutdown would mean access only to medium wave radio on a part-time basis to areas of London, Birmingham, Manchester, Leicester, and West Yorkshire only. Interestingly, in the same week, news had leaked that BBC were also planning on axing alternative music radio station, BBC 6 Music which eclipsed news of the Asian Network. In the following days, the reaction to the shutting of 6 Music created a storm of protest in which major celebrities, including David Bowie and Gary Numan or what one presenter called the 'rock aristocracy' (Plunkett, Guardian, 6 March, 2010) spoke out against the cuts. In contrast, while protest at the shutting down of BBC Asian Network garnered support from Jay Sean, MIA, director Gurinder Chadha, and even Sir Mota Singh QC, the highest ranking Sikh member of the judiciary, members of the 'rock aristocracy' were silent on saving the BBC Asian Network. However, both Facebook campaigns and flash mob protests followed in the wake in the hopes to save the network. Despite such efforts, the BBC Trust announced that it would be shutting both stations as well as some others. For many, this sounded the death knell for the support of alternative, underground and unsigned artists and music that had traditionally been ignored within mainstream music outlets. However, in July, 2010, the BBC Trust decided to save BBC 6 Music from closure but recommended that the Asian Network be closed.

These national stations were often aimed at a younger, urban and perhaps less 'white' target audience. The nature of the alternative and niche content of many of these radio services has meant that understandably, their listenership will be

much lower than a mainstream service such as Radio 1. The closing down of these national services thus meant that alternative outlets that catered to and addressed younger, urban, Black and Asian listeners were being removed to make way for older, more affluent, and more 'mainstream' listeners.

However reports had also shown that the number of listeners of the BBC Asian Network had reached its peak in 2008 and have steadily decreased since then. This might suggest that amongst Asian audiences, there had been a growing lack of interest and decreased relevance in their programming. Thus while the Asian Network provided a crucial platform in showcasing unsigned talent and furthering the growth of local scenes many people within the scene have viewed the existence of the BBC Asian Network as problematic to the goal of mainstreaming Asian cultural production. That is, the BBC Asian Network was often seen as a limiting platform because it constructed and then continually reinforced a boundary that identified and then positioned as separate 'Asian' music from other music genres. Thus, the existence of the Asian Network as separate and distinct from the rest of the BBC stations contributed to the marginalization of Asian music as 'music for Asians by Asians'.

As I have discussed in chapter 6, urban Asian artists often struggled with overturning the 'ethnic' perceptions of Asian music that many outsiders often associate with timeless tradition, 'culture' and roots. In contrast, urban and hip hop music is often associated with youthfulness, creativity and above all, is seen as cutting-edge. Thus, cultural producers employed certain strategies of representation at Bombay Bronx, and within the scene, to combat the still prevalent associations of a fetishized hybridity of the 'Asian Underground' or the timelessness of 'traditional' Asian music such as bhangra. Establishing or emphasising a strong connection to British and US hip hop culture becomes an oppositional identity that counters or challenges existing stereotypes of Asian artists. Black cultural production and identities are accessed as a cultural resource in which hip hop and black popular culture problematically come to stand in for coolness and the contemporary. For instance, many young Asian artists identified with the African Americans and black British experiences of racism and hardship chronicled in hip hop. Yet, as I have argued, hip hop has



gone from being an oppositional youth culture to a global cultural commodity par excellence. Therefore, hip hop culture's once marginal status and position has now expanded to become the dominant form of popular culture, particularly in the US. Increasingly, hip hop artists have started to occupy more mainstream positions of privilege, wealth and ease and hip hop values have come to reflect this by embracing normative cultural values versus the oppositional, marginalized and often critical positions against racist white capitalist structures. Thus I argued that while most readings of the global spread and appropriation of hip hop have focused on hip hop's black oppositional politics and appropriation as a point of inspiration, the appropriation of hip hop betrays a more complex and ambivalent relationship to practices of consumption and capitalism. Hip hop has often less to do with a particularly black or US/UK set of experiences or positioning but can be taken up as a way to distinguish themselves from Asian 'coconuts' or from other British 'Asian' identities. Therefore, adopting hip hop styles articulates constructions of a local, urban London *Asianness* as much as it has come to signify certain forms of blackness. In reinforcing or building a sense of Asianness through forms of hip hop culture, it makes meaningful hip hop's dominant position by seeing it as part of an assimilatory process that signals a shift towards the mainstream and the 'norm'. Hip hop serves as an access point into a British mainstream.

Thus, in chapter 5, I discuss how the construction of a 'desi' identity accesses hip hop markers of racial and class authenticity which are then reworked to police the boundaries of an Asian 'desi' urban identity. I argued in this chapter that the appropriation of these now mainstream hip hop values often bring up the darker side of the politics of cultural production and identity. For instance, the commodification of black popular culture as well as debates on the cultural ownership and authenticity of black or Asian music suggest an exclusive and often reductive reading of culture as an object to be bought, sold and owned. The construction of 'desi' identities reveal how these essentialist ideas of culture are applied to seal up the borders between the 'desi' and the derogatory figure and status of the inauthentic 'coconut' as someone who takes on another culture other than his 'own'. Therefore these ideas of around 'desiness' and the

opposing 'coconut' figure present the 'Janus-faced' sides (Alexander, 2010) of the practice of a diaspora politics in that they rely on both progressive, open, shifting and contingent definitions and boundaries of ethnic identity and forms of belonging while at the same time, often impose or reinforce closed, exclusive, static and conservative notions of identity, nation, and gender.

Thus, the removal of the Asian Network might signal to people that Asian music no longer needs an alternative platform designated specifically for Asian listeners and that Asian cultural producers can compete within the mainstream. To an extent, this could be true in that Asian artists such as Jay Sean and MIA have risen to become major pop stars and perhaps have opened doors for others to achieve similar levels of success. Of course, in order for others to achieve success many would argue that cultural intermediaries might be necessary in order to bring underground artists to light (no pun intended) and that would mean stations such as the BBC Asian Network and Bombay Bronx. One would argue that for artists who are up and coming such as Riz MC and Jay Sean, they would never have gotten as far as they did without the initial support from Bombay Bronx and the Asian Network, both institutions heavily supported and nurtured them.

The removal of BBC 6 Music and Asian Network might suggest that the extent to which the mainstream can support 'alternative' or independent music scenes has grown in more recent years which might have made these institutions obsolete and redundant to listeners who no longer engage in such music practices that limit their music to 'mainstream' or 'alternative' genres or categories. Widespread access to music and the continuing success of the 'alternative' music press have meant that a national platform for independent music might no longer be necessary. This level of access has also displaced and radically amended definitions of a 'mainstream' and 'independent' streams of music in that it further problematizes on what grounds any kind of music could be seen as 'mainstream' if distribution and access are no longer the primary modes of differentiation.

The mainstreaming of independent streams of music parallels and reinforces some of the issues that I discussed in chapter 4 on the decline of a collective practice of politics and the rise in the individualism connected to increasing levels and activities of consumption. The increase in 'niche' forms of popular culture and the decline in importance of politicized collective action both arise from increasing individualism, the de-centring of the subject, and the fragmentation of identity and politics that has marked the postmodern age. On one hand, the increasing nuanced understanding of Asian subjectivities as multiply located, fragmented and shifting is evidence that interventions into identity that theorists such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy and others have succeeded in bringing about recognition and understanding of difference. However, on the other hand, as Claire Alexander (2010a, b) has pointed out, these specific interventions into race and difference have also been used by the conservative Right to defend the increasingly narrow conceptions of Britishness, identity, culture and belonging.

The decline of a politicized identity within Asian music production is also related to the decline of feminist politics and the emergence of new femininities that often are based upon the rejection of older versions of feminism in favour of the pleasure seeking and sexually liberated models of femininity represented in magazines and the fashion and beauty industry.

My final chapter, chapter 7 on gender within the scene discussed the impact of these newer post-feminist discourses on the gender politics within the Asian scene and the role of Asian women who act as the consumers who buy the work of Asian male artists within the scene. At the same time, women artists within the scene are often denigrated for being 'too' sexy or not sexy 'enough' or they are limited to the performance of certain genres such as 'bhangra' music or certain forms of R&B. These ideals of femininity still buy into or uphold these normative and dominant perceptions of heterosexual femininity that do not challenge the status quo and are not critical of the continued gendered and sexual hierarchies that exist within the scene. At the same time, I also suggest tentatively that there are alternative modes of femininity that are being constructed such as through the rise of Asian female artists such as MIA and US

hip hop artist Nicki Minaj that can provide a cultural resource for young Asian women to access different modes of femininity.

Therefore the shutting down of alternative music platforms with the slashing of budgets then takes on even greater significance in light of some of the ways an engagement with music and the consumption of popular culture have become such important resources for young people in providing access to a critique of existing forms of power. Thus, one struggles to remain optimistic and not attribute the shutting down of under-producing services to wider neo-liberal processes that seek to rationalize all forms of cultural output through economic efficiency and profit. It is difficult to analyze these cuts apart from the government's wider moves to slash funding to the arts and humanities. It is hard not to think that what is happening is part of a wider initiative to get rid of anything that might be considered as having 'no public value' because it does not support or reflect the 'majority' tastes and opinions. In this sense, there are fewer avenues for the alternative, marginal and less popular within cultural production to have a voice and perspective outside of the dominant and the hegemonic.

Finally, these changes also attest to the fluid and temporal nature of music and scenes. As with all popular forms of cultural production, music cultures are ceaselessly inventive, restless and changing. Music is always tied to a particular spatial and temporal context so that what exists today in its current form will adapt, grow or fade away. Other areas of entertainment and consumption such as club nights also appear and disappear. Such is the cycle of production and consumption that new artists will emerge, other artists will fade, club nights will be formed and others shut down.

Further, Asian cultural production and artists within the scene continue to release new albums, hold launch parties, go out to clubs and produce music videos. Internet radio stations such as [desihits!.com](http://desihits!.com) while also cutting back, still manages to produce shows and podcasts. Thus, despite the fact that institutions such as the BBC Asian Network will no longer offer a platform for these

activities, to an extent, it could be argued that the London scene was never reliant upon these national institutions in order to maintain and develop its artists and fans but used local networks and media to do so. Thus, the scene does still remain largely independent and 'underground' and perhaps that is its strength as well as a weakness. As Paul Gilroy (1993b) once said, it takes enormous courage to continue making music that envisions a better future than what exists in the present. In light of the changes and cutbacks the remaining, undaunted Asian music scene still continues to make 'phat' beats speaking to and envisioning a better future for 'brown' boys and girls everywhere.

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## Appendices

### Interview List

| Name               | Age | Gender | Occupation                                 |
|--------------------|-----|--------|--|
| Adz                | 23  | M      | independent record shop owner              |
| Amrita             | 23  | F      | blogger/music critic                       |
| AG DOLLA           | 26  | M      | rapper                                     |
| Ashanti<br>OMKAR   | N/A | F      | journalist/editor                          |
| Arika              | 26  | F      | editor of Asian women's lifestyle magazine |
| Ayushmen           | 19  | M      | student/music fan                          |
| Amneet             | 23  | F      | music fan/PR coordinator                   |
| Anusha             | 21  | F      | clubgoer/music fan                         |
| Anita              | 22  | F      | artist                                     |
| Anu                | 22  | F      | artist                                     |
| Ayon               | 22  | M      | clubgoer/music fan                         |
| Ayesha             | 23  | F      | clubgoer/music fan                         |
| AZ                 | 20  | M      | dancer/music fan                           |
| Benny              | 27  | M      | bartender at Bombay Bronx                  |
| Bhoj               | 19  | M      | blogger/music fan/student                  |
| Dandan             | 25  | F      | door staff at Bombay Bronx                 |
| Dhan               | 21  | M      | musician                                   |
| Dina               | 20  | F      | clubgoer/music fan                         |
| D-Boy              | 30  | M      | music producer/artist                      |
| DJH                | 30  | M      | DJ/music producer                          |
| Dominic<br>Prosser | N/A | M      | front manager at Bombay Bronx              |
| Flex               | 20  | M      | dancer/music fan                           |
| Gautum             | N/A | M      | novelist/music fan                         |
| Gee                | 30  | M      | head club promoter of Kandy Nights         |
| Harry Sona         | 30  | M      | music producer                             |
| Hardeep            | 21  | M      | artist/music fan                           |

|            |     |   |   |
|------------|-----|---|---|
| Hema       | 25  | F | artist  |
| Jassie     | 22  | F | artist  |
| Koushik    | N/A | M | academic/music fan                                |
| Kristin    | 27  | F | staff at Bombay Bronx                             |
| Mandy      | 23  | F | door staff at Kandy Nights/music fan              |
| Mandeep    | 26  | M | music video director                              |
| Mentor     | 29  | M | music producer/DJ/rapper/promoter of VIP RAMP     |
| Mike       | 23  | M | clubgoer  |
| Meena      | 17  | F | music fan   |
| Mina       | 19  | F | clubgoer  |
| Mr. Kay    | 26  | M | DJ/club promoter of Kandy Nights                  |
| Nav        | 31  | M | Head of Productions at DesiHits!.com              |
| Nerm       | N/A | M | artist/music producer                             |
| Nihal      | N/A | M | DJ/radio host/promoter of Bombay Bronx            |
| Nisha      | 27  | F | PR Manager  |
| Pinky      | 22  | F | artist  |
| Raxstar MC | N/A | M | rapper  |
| Raghav     | N/A | M | artist  |
| Raj        | 25  | M | youth worker/music fan                            |
| Ruby       | 23  | F | artist  |
| RizMC      | 25  | M | rapper/actor                                      |
| Surindher  | 26  | M | editor of Asian women's lifestyle magazine        |
| Sebastien  | N/A | M | bar staff at Bombay Bronx                         |
| Sheila     | 27  | F | music fan   |
| Sudamani   | 23  | F | artist  |
| SOFLY      | 21  | M | dancer/music fan                                  |
| Sonia      | N/A | F | Head Coordinator of ADFED Music Education Project |

## **List of Club Nights/Venues**

'Bombay Bronx', Notting Hill Arts Club, Notting Hill, London

'Kandy Nights', Club Piya Piya, Shoreditch, London

'VIP RAMP', Club 49, West End, London

'Desi-licious', Ministry of Sound, Southwark, London

'Phat Fridays', The Rainforest Café, West End, London

'Bolly Party', Café Chai, Ealing, London

Club Kali, The Dome, Tufnell Park, London