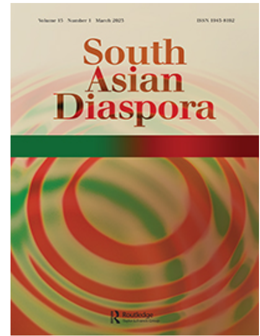

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Between visibility and elsewhere: South Asian queer creative cultures and resistance

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ABSTRACT

This article draws on existing interviews and creative material from LGBTQ + South Asians who have lived and spent significant time in the UK as part of the Cross Border Queers project. It begins by considering creative forms of diasporic activism and creativity in the UK that have emerged from South Asian LGBTQ + communities and individuals. We discuss the ways in which South Asian LGBTQ + diasporic organising was formed through a sense of shared racial and class solidarity and especially under the umbrella of political Blackness. We then move on to the role played by cultural activism to see how artists have used culture as a way to advance social change and increase the visibility of South Asian LGBTQ + communities in the UK. We place different genres of visual culture, curation, performance and oral history to evoke how South Asian queer migrants articulate a distinct form of subjectivity and aesthetic practice.

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Introduction: cruising the story of LGBTQ+ South Asian in the UK

In September 2021 a ‘rainbow plaque’ was unveiled at the location used for filming *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985). A queer alternative to the blue plaques across London to commemorate key figures in history, LGBTQ+[1] heritage trails and initiatives have increasingly begun to acknowledge the key role of South Asians, especially at the intersection of creativity and activism.[2] However, while there is a surfeit of funding, interest, and material on LGBTQ + history (especially in oral history projects and exhibitions),[3] there has been less attention on the distinct and continuous contribution of South Asians to LGBTQ + rights and communities in the UK, particularly from the 1970s onwards. Either subsumed into the margins of white-centred accounts of LGBTQ + communities or not fully accounted for in forms of Black political activism in the 1980s, LGBTQ + South Asians have a fractured presence in the history of queer and anti-racist resistance and community building in the UK.

In this article we focus on stories of resistance amongst LGBTQ + South Asian activists in the UK from the 1980s to the present day. We have a strong focus on creative forms of

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resistance to demonstrate the ways in which key forms of anti-racist activism and community building found a home through arts funding, or artistic communities, who found one another through a shared series of films, music, and texts which were beginning to visualise a distinct aesthetic and vocabulary for the LGBTQ + South Asian diaspora. At the very outset, it would be useful to examine the term creative resistance and how this offers a useful lens for this study. Malik et al. (2020) describe how in an increasingly hostile world, artistic expressions such as banners, slogans, poetry, visual art and film became tools to challenge everyday racism and racist violence. They argue that artistic expression and creativity play an important role in challenging, resisting and disrupting structures of inequality and in the production of radical hope. Similarly, our use of the term creative resistance describes visual forms of queer art and performance created by South Asian queer artists in Britain not just as a way of creating visibility but also asserting identity and resistance.

At the end of 2019, we began a project to chart some of the creative and activist histories which have created a space for LGBTQ + South Asians in the UK today. It was designed as a British Academy Network Grant, a project designed to bring academics, creatives, activists, and NGOs into a conversation about what an academic and/or community history of queer South Asians in the UK would look like. However, the project came at a difficult time, when our experience of borders was on the brink of fundamentally changing. As the UK was exiting Europe, the reported rise in racially motivated hate crime and xenophobia, underlined the uncertainty of what the legacy of the Brexit debates would deliver for minorities in terms of equality and justice. At the same time framing South Asian LGBTQ lives have been structured heavily through discussions around securitisation especially following 9/11 in the United States and 7/7 in the United Kingdom whereby LGBTQ South Asians are caught between the bind of white organisations 'saving them' from their 'dangerous communities' and 'belonging' to their communities. Puar (2007) rightly argues that to the queer liberal imaginary, the incommensurability of race and sexuality (and religion, class and caste in our context) justifies further regulation. This binary imagining obfuscates some of the creative and pragmatic ways in which LGBTQ South Asians have fostered different types of queer and anti-racist alliances and solidarities which are proleptic in so far as they work to create communities they want to imagine might be possible (Munoz 2009).

During a visit to Kolkata in December 2019 to run a workshop with queer and trans communities, we witnessed the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Bill in India (the legal change that would strip many Muslim citizens of India of their rights). In those moments, it was hard not to make the connections between the rise of different versions of populism which were literally re-writing and re-routing the right of minoritised communities to belong to the body of the nation and when Britain went into lockdown in March 2020, our project found itself on a kind of temporary hold.

The LGBTQ + community groups which we might have met in person became online groups. The conferences and academic events that met on person, switched to zoom. Over the next year, we found ourselves navigating a digital diaspora with events geared towards a range of groups with some additional layer of affinity (younger gay men, older women, faith groups, clubbers). Part of the consequence of the national lockdown in the UK was the enabling of more South Asian LGBTQI + people to access groups in the UK that enhanced their digital presence, for example, the *Gay Indian*

Network, *Gaysians*, *British Asian LGBTI*, and *Sarbat Sikhs* to name but a few. This digital reconfiguration of South Asian LGBTQ + networking in the UK opened up a space for more engaged discussion about race across a range of digital platforms. At an online event about the legendary Gateways Club (known for its lesbian patrons from the 1940s to its closure in 1985 and featured in *The Killing of Sister George*) run in April 2021 in a partnership between *Diva* and *Queer Britain*, there were repeated speculations about how diverse the visitors of Gateways may have been. DJ Ritu (one of the panellists) pointed out that because she had been there, there must have been other Black and Asian minority people there too. And while the panel was speculating, comments were being added to the chat from women of colour who had been to Gateways. Literally and figuratively, at the edge of the frame, it was an example of how the assumption of whiteness overwrites the lived reality of minorities.

While we are interested in the absence of South Asian representation in some accounts of LGBTQ + life in Britain, we are not attempting to produce an exhaustive history of a community that has any kind of singularly or coherence. Our research stems from existing work in queer diaspora studies, which acknowledges the heterogeneity of routes, people, practices, and places at work when the terms queer and diaspora intersect. We are here guided by the work of queer scholars such as Gopinath (2005, 22), who argues ‘queerness references an alternative hermeneutic, the particular interpretive strategies that are available to those who are deemed “impossible” within hegemonic nationalist and diasporic discourses.’ We also engage in a reading practice that Puar (2007, 117) describes as ‘reading sideways’: the linking together of ‘seemingly unrelated and often disjunctively situated moments and their effects.’ We acknowledge that there is no singular way of ‘imagining’ or the heterogenous nature of diasporic South Asian communities, one shaped by class, religion and caste.

Brah, the pioneering British Asian sociologist and feminist, warned against naïve uses of community:

> As such, all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common ‘we’. It is important, therefore, to be attentive to the nature and type of processes in and through which the collective ‘we’ is constituted. Who is empowered and who is disempowered in a specific construction of the ‘we’? How are social divisions negotiated in the construction of the ‘we’? (1996, p. 184)

The question of who ‘we’ were are to represent an imagined community of LGBTQ + South Asians came up when we ran an event in August 2021 for South Asian History Month entitled ‘Desi Diasporas and LGBTQ + Activism,’ featuring Sandip Roy, Ian Iqbal Rashid, DJ Ritu, and Jasbir K Puar. The aim of our event was to touch on some of the rich histories of connections between different South Asian LGBTQ + diasporas (for example, through the *Desh Pradesh* festival in Toronto in the 1990s and *Trikone* from the 1980s). After the video appeared on YouTube, the first comment read, ‘According to this panel, “Desi Diasporas” means a Hindu- and upper case-dominated panel of speakers.’ While we would argue this statement makes too many assumptions, it does, nonetheless, act as an important reminder of the ways in which LGBTQ + South Asian diasporas are made up of intersecting lines of power and difference. The ‘we’ in the panel we may have tried to invoke was proleptic rather than a community that has ever existed without contestation. And it has to exist at the beginning of a process that

does not simply produce an account of South Asian LGBTQ + lives in the UK, but also questions the methods and processes which underpin stories of resistance and community.

There is a potential in *queering* the idea of LGBTQ + diasporas by using the emphasis on nonlinear temporalities in queer theory as tool for further unpicking the seams of diasporic thinking. El Tayeb argues for an understanding of queer diaspora, which instead of looking back to the point of collective origin, looks to the future:

> Within this broadened understanding of diaspora, the concept is transformed from a term of temporary and spatial displacement focused on the past toward one of permanent productive dislocation directed at the future – mirroring the potential of queering ethnicity as a nonessential, and often nonlinear, political strategy. (El-Tayeb 2011, p. xxxv)

Following Grewal (2005, 23), we are interested in 'transnational connectivities' that foreground how diasporas are inherently multivalent. This is most evident in creative case studies where the points of connection and collision between networks of power, and routes to belonging, become part of a distinct visual and textual aesthetic. As Gopinath (2018, 7) has argued, 'it is in the realm of the aesthetic that we can excavate these submerged comingled historied and become attend to their continuing resonance on the present as they echo across both bodies and landscapes.'

The research that underpins this article comes from several sources. We draw on a growing collection of oral history interviews we have conducted with LGBTQ + South Asians who have lived in the UK. While the project overall has around 30 interviews in total, we are narrowing our scope to 6 interviews in this article which focus on different key moments in creative and political resistance. Following scholars such as Haritaworn, Kunstman, and Posocco (2014, 5), we too use 'diverse methodologies … located within and across a range of interdisciplinary formations.' For Gopinath (2005), the category 'queer' names a reading and citational practice that can be deployed to read multiple cultural texts. Influenced by this work, this article reads across creative mediums to employ a queer hermeneutics that can situate the challenges and potential of exploring these various South Asian queer visual texts. By bringing together different mediums of texts- photography, textile making, films and performance with oral histories we can observe connections, disjunctures and political flows. We use creative forms to map some of the routes to queerness for South Asian diasporas. In *Queer Phenomenology* Sara Ahmed argues that, 'naturalization of heterosexuality involves the presumption that there is a straight line that leads each sex toward the other' (2006, 70–71). Ahmed's use of 'orientation' to simultaneously consider the special and temporal dimensions of desire informs the way we evoke 'elsewhere' in our title. 'Elsewhere' is a directional marker rather than a destination, it is a praxis of refusal which unpicks binaries of national, racial, and sexual belonging.

This article begins by considering creative forms of diasporic activism and creativity in the UK that have emerged from South Asian LGBTQ + communities and individuals. We discuss the ways in which South Asian LGBTQ + diasporic organising was formed through a sense of shared racial and class solidarity, and especially under the umbrella of political Blackness. We then move on to the role played by cultural activism to see how artists have used culture as a way to advance social change and increase the visibility of the South Asian LGBTQ + communities in the UK.

Solidarities

In an article entitled, 'Photography, Sexuality and Cultural Difference' (Gupta 1991), Gupta's first footnote reads

> Black is used here in its current British usage to denote 'people of non-European origin' who reside in the UK. The main two groups are African and South Asian, although a number of people of African origin have come from the Caribbean and a number of South Asians have come from Africa. (Gupta 1991)

In his summary of this 'emergence' from the 1970s, Gupta highlights the significance of the Greater London Corporation (GLC) and its Ethnic Minority Unit for funding-creative initiatives and community-building forums for gay and lesbian ethnic minorities. However, while the influence of the political left within the GLC created the possibility of funding for minoritised groups, Gupta is alert to the tensions within political solidarity:

> Having won our spaces the unspoken tension between the races under the Black umbrella then began to simmer. Funding was inadequate, groups like *Autograph* existed by the skin of their teeth, across the art forms Black groups found a lack of skilled administrators.

Writing in 1991, Gupta looked hopefully to the forming of the EU in 1993 and the potential of 'Black European' identity formation.

While it is easy to reflect on the barriers to this now, it is a reminder of how significant 9/11 and the legacy of state-sponsored Islamophobia has been for disaggregating solidarities within communities that historically found the basis of an alliance under the umbrella of political Blackness. During one of our interviews for our project, a prominent South Asian creative who had migrated from East Africa summarised his feelings about racial solidarity in the 1970s in the following way:

> We were all people of colour […] most of the Black Community was Caribbean and it's changed since […] There was a real sense of kind of unity amongst many I might be romanticizing it, but it felt that way to me. (Transcript, IR2)

But in another summary of 'Asian gays' in 1980s Britain, Sunil Gupta comments,

> Asians are caught between Black and White. Various surveys indicate that only half of us identify with being Black. It's very difficult to identify with the dominant culture and with the everyday icons of homosexual desire. It's relatively easy for lighter skinned and assimilated Asians to pass for something other than Black/Asian. (Gupta 1989)

Here, Gupta points to one of the many forms of embodied privilege which have continued to fracture senses of solidarity between South Asian communities in the UK. From class, to colourism, to caste, the potential for solidarity was continually undermined by issues of privilege and hierarchy common across the South Asian diasporas.

Whilst caste has not been widely discussed in the context of South Asian queer spaces especially the diaspora we are very aware of the role caste privilege plays in the uneven power differentials that exist amongst South Asian communities. Indeed more recently in India, there is an important debate about Dalit queer resistance in opposition to caste Hindu- dominated popular cultures. Chatterjee (2022) describes how Bollywood and other forms of popular culture have actively imposed upper caste values often disguised as caste neutral to obfuscate and obliterate the violence of caste structure in South Asian

societies. Dhrubo Jyoti in his chapter 'A Letter to my lover(s)' for the pioneering collection, *Eleven Ways to Love* (2018) provides testimonies of how caste intersects with queerness. Jyoti narrates how mainstream Indian culture has trained us to know what good looks and good queerness looks like- upper caste, Brahmin and upper class with the ability to speak English. In one heart-breaking passage, Jyoti says – 'I knew I couldn't be gay and lower caste together' (Jyoti 2018, 9). When it comes to representations of Dalit queer narratives both within South Asia and the diasporas there is a real paucity of creative work. Ved Prakash (2023) discusses the work of Jayan Cherian whose films *Papilo Buddha* and *KA Bodyscapes* are representative of a very small body of cinematic work looking at the intersection of queerness and caste. Prakash argues that there is a culture of silencing when it comes to Dalit representation, and this becomes even more disempowering when it comes to queer Dalit voices facing casteism and homophobia. Prakash discusses the spectre of violence that haunts queer Dalit people and the need to centre caste oppressed people when talking about queer identities. Elsewhere Jyoti (2015) argues – 'we bring caste up because caste is everywhere and in my everything … caste is in my sex.' Whilst not explicit we can see the obfuscation and silence around caste in South Asian queer spaces in the diaspora too have permeated since the 1980s to contemporary times especially on issues of hierarchy and politics of representation.

Similarly there is also a need to centre race when discussing the South Asian queer diasporic experience in the United Kingdom as so many of our interviewees pointed out. It would be important to point out that whilst political Blackness and Black activism provided a space for South Asian activists to group together under an umbrella of shared oppression this was to critique capitalism and class oppression but more often than not remained silent on sexuality. Sivanandan writing about immigrant labour and exploitation said:

> Everyone made money on the immigrant worker- from the big time capitalist to the slum landlord- from exploiting his labour, his colour, his customs, his culture … He had been paid for by the country of his origin- reared and raised, as capitalist under development had willed it, for the labour markets of Europe. (1976, p. 349)

There was, however, a distinct interaction between Black political activism and feminism, especially lesbian feminism, which gave a space to a group of South Asian women from the 1980s. In the following interview with a prominent figure in youth and social work in London, the layered connections between her own awareness of movements across Empire (which she describes earlier in the interview) are activated in new ways through connections with other kinds of anti-racist resistance. Here she describes moving into youth work with minority groups:

> SG: So I got the job in the apprenticeship scheme, and it was amazing because we were also their lectures, but also their managers as well. So we had 12 young people. All different, you know, Asian, as well as white, you know, Eastern people and Black people, Black Eastern people as well.
> KR: So that worked quite well in terms of the politics of the day, the political activism of the day, being under the Black political umbrella making those political alliances … to be stronger to challenge racist organizations like the National Front.
> SG: It was, I mean, this was a scheme that came out of Chicago, right. It was about taking young people from the community and training them up to work in the community. So

> that's what we were doing and that's what happened, yeah. So it was 18–25 year olds. Yeah. And all of them got jobs in the community afterwards, in different communities, but also there as well. (Transcript, GS 2)

During the course of our interviews, we were in touch with over a dozen women in their 50s-70s who had identified as Black, lesbian, and feminist through the 80s. Notably, they had all been involved in different kinds of community work, whether youth work, volunteering, or equalities-related work. The challenge to whiteness and heteropatriarchy was heavily influenced by an anti-capitalist class politics which considered radical forms of redistributing wealth, knowledge-making, and power across society. An example of this activism can be seen in *Lesbians Talk Making Black Waves* (1993) by Valerie Mason-John and Ann Khambatta, who interviewed radical lesbians from across a variety of ethnic backgrounds in the wake of the first *Zami* conferences (1985 and 1989). They challenged the marginalisation of Black women from lesbian spaces and the marginalisation of lesbians from Black spaces, but most importantly, they acknowledged that the solidarity required to challenge white heteropatriarchal was a process and politics based on optimism and desire rather than reflected in real structures of community and belonging: 'Identifying as Lesbians of Colour will not heal the rift, but at least it might enable us all to be admitted into the same space together' (Mason-John and Khambatta 1993, 35). This reflection is part of why we have combined a consideration of creative work alongside creative resistance. bell hooks' essay, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness' (1989) points to the potential for revolutionary power, especially in creative work. In the next section, we consider how South Asian artists have worked to queer relationships with mainstream LGBTQ + identities in the UK, and how they have explored anti-racist praxis in their work.

Queer cultural resistance

In this section, we discuss the role of cultural activism to see how South Asian queer artists have used culture as a way to advance social change and increase the visibility of the South Asian queer community. We use queer in this section given that is how the artists under discussion describe themselves.

We want to start off with evoking Pratibha Parmar's (b 1955) short documentary film *Khush* (1991). Parmar uses her background in feminist and anti-racist organising to explore the realities of being a queer woman of South Asian origin in Britain. Pratibha Parmar's films brought queer South Asian women to the silver screen for millions of young people. Pratibha Parmar, who was born in Nairobi and moved to the UK in the 1960s, uses her background in feminist and anti-racist organising to explore the everyday realties of South Asian queer women. Her documentary *Khush* (1991) and her debut feature *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (2006) capture the experience of being South Asian and queer in Britain. Khush – an Urdu word meaning 'happy' – traces the formation of homophobia within the Indian diaspora to colonialism. In a landmark collection *Queer Looks* (1993), Parmar notes:

> I do not speak from a position of marginalisation but more crucially from the resistance to that marginalisation.

Gayatri Gopinath in *Impossible Desires* (2005) references the film to note how the work traces an emerging South Asian diasporic queer movement whereby Parmar uses

Bollywood tropes to allow queer diasporic spectators to 'lay claim to the home space of the nation.' As we have argued earlier work of artists such as Parmar is especially important to disrupt the erasure of racialised and indigenous histories from white queer archives that create narratives of resistance that begin and end with whiteness. Films such as *Khush* perform an important role in documenting the diverse ways in which South Asian queer communities used creative ways to form support structures, resistance movements and celebrate South Asian queerness.

Artist Sunil Gupta speaking about his work recounts the progressive policies enacted under the Greater London Council, which awarded several grants to artists and projects supporting minority groups. Gupta, who is an Indian-born Canadian photographer, migrated to London in the 1980s and began making and documenting work 'responding to the injustices suffered by gay men across the globe.' In his prolific body of work, which spans almost 50 years, Gupta documents significant moments of LGBT history: gay liberation in New York; HIV/AIDS; Section 28; and queer activism in India. Work such as Pretended Family Relationships (1988) commented on the infamous clause 28 which was passed by the Thatcher government to restrict 'promotion' of same-sex relationships. His co-curated exhibition and publication *Ecstatic Antibodies* (1990) was a powerful exploration of the AIDS crisis. At a time when the British media was savagely attacking people living with HIV/AIDS through the construction of a 'monstrous' gay identity, the artists and contributors to the exhibition and book affirmed the persistence of love and desire, highlighting the need for alternative forms of cultural representation to respond to the challenges thrown up by the epidemic.

Gupta's work is stepped within the biopolitical and necropolitics of the State which determines liveability and survival of queer bodies especially queer bodies of colour. Hailing Mbembe, we want to interrogate the classic biopolitical and necropolitical questions of who gets to live, and who must die for new queer lives- those being moulded through global capital restructuring to survive.

In their introduction to the exhibition and book project *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology* (1990) Sunil Gupta and Tessa Boffin declared that as artists and cultural producers they found a need to intervene in the cultural arena to not only keep AIDS in the public eye in the midst of a homophobic backlash but to also interrogate the politics of representation in terms of the visibility/invisibility of certain communities-namely Black and Asian people. Through the active encouragement of different forms of cultural practices which included video, photography, installation there was an attempt by artist activists to address questions of sexual difference and race from a cursory acknowledgement to the very centre of the debate.

How much have things moved 30 years since? Gupta who we interviewed as part if this project says – very little. In fact, as he argued, there was little discussion about 'what came before' and the legacies that queer artists of South Asian origin have left with each generation trying to 'reinvent the wheel.' Gupta's photographic work has chronicled many of the difficulties faced by British South Asian queers navigating racial and homophobic hostility. Pratibha Parmar calls this aptly as being 'internal exiles' noting:

> The idea that many of us have our own self-defined sexuality is seen as subversive and threatening by the dominant white society in which we live as well as by the majority of the Asian

> community. Within our communities our existence as Lesbians and Gays continues to be denied or is dismissed as a by-product of corrupting Western influences. (Parmar 1993, p. 6)

Gupta's most recent exhibition *Black Experience* (2021) at Hales Gallery in Bethnal Green is a retrospective of ten works which were originally commissioned for the pivotal 1986 exhibition *Reflections of the Black Experience* which opened in Brixton. A social and political commentary about living in Britain during the Thatcher era, Gupta's works include photographs taken of South Asian families, anti-racist activists, newly arrived migrants, scenes from South Asian 'cornershops' with a self-portrait of himself with his lover in front of a theatre screening *My Beautiful Launderette* (1985) (Figure 1).

For Gupta, placing his own queer self within the wider context of the South Asian diaspora was not just challenging the 'impossibility' of queer desire within the South Asian diasporic imagery but to borrow Gopinath's words 'installing it at the very heart of the home' (Gopinath 2005, 192). Gupta also uses his work to document his own queer body and the effect of HIV/AIDS. In *Love Undetectable*, for example, he discusses his own HIV diagnosis in 1995 and its effect on his personal life and those around him as he lost countless friends and lovers. Gupta is one of the very few openly positive South Asian queer artists who uses his art as a form of disclosure and bringing South Asian queer art into the necropolitical. Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco (2014, 4) note that queer necropolitics 'refer to regimes of attribution of liveliness and deadliness of subjects, bodies, communities and populations and their instantiation through performatives of gender, sexuality and kinship, as well as through processes of confinement, removal and exhaustion.' Gupta, in his interview, discusses how thinking about his own body and mortality helped him reimagine new forms of intimacy and question the reactionary nature of global gay assimilation politics which situates certain voices as worthy of celebration and veneration whilst others confined to isolation and 'slow death' to borrow Berlant's (2007) term.

Whilst several spaces such as Shakti and Naz Project London was set up in the 1980s and 1990s to address the issue of the South Asian queer isolation and providing a pace to socialise and organise, Gupta feels some of the new discussion spaces that are being run

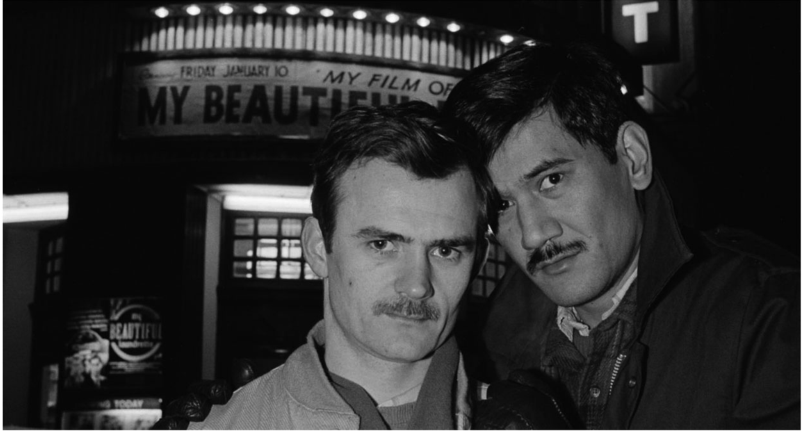

Figure 1. Black Experience (1986). Artist: Sunil Gupta. Available at: https://www.artrabbit.com/events/sunil-gupta-black-experience.

for South Asian queer people could be more ‘problematic’ than before. He identifies, for example, the ways in which South Asian queer artists like him could identify themselves as Black and work within this category to address the issues of shared disenfranchisement and oppression this has started to break up. In fact, he cites recent meetings which employ a ‘victim narrative’ without really addressing the concerns that South Asian queer migrants like him face. For example, there is little discussion on the role played by Hindutva politics in India and the repercussions this has had on solidarity movements amongst South Asian communities living in London. Gupta’s own exhibition *Sun City* which opened at Alliance Francaise in New Delhi to enthusiastic response was forcefully closed in 2012 by the police due to anonymous complaints of obscenity.

The entanglements between nationalism, Hindutva politics and sexual subjectivities in India is of immediate concern with wide repercussion on the diaspora. Framed through the lens of neoliberalism and necropolitics, the good Indian citizen is a dividend-earning consumer citizen of upper caste who is entrepreneurial and embedded a Hindu religious imaginary (Dasgupta and Dasgupta 2018). Recent Supreme court judgements in India, for example, and the antecedent mobilisation of queer activists demanding inclusion within the nation-state is a slow move towards a hegemonic national normativity.

In recent years whilst Gupta’s exhibition might have been vandalised several queer activists in India have ‘come out’ in support of the present Hindu nationalist government in India demonstrating how queer bodies are being folded into the new nationalist neoliberal India. Within our own research within South Asian diasporic groups and communities in the United Kingdom, we have seen, for example, ‘Indian queer groups’ being mobilised in opposition to ‘Muslim groups’ where Indian of course stands for Hindu and mostly upper caste male.

One of the criticisms of the kind of work that emerged during the 1990s and going all the way up to 2000s was also the lack of certain specific kinds of South Asian queer identities that privileged gay men and often excluding trans and non-binary people.

Raisa Kabir’s exhibition *In/Visible Spaces: Reflections on the Realm of Dimensional Affect, Space and the Queer Racialised Self* which opened in 2014 in Rich Mix situated in Brick Lane was one such work to challenge that narrative and provide a more multidimensional view of what it means to be Queer and South Asian in contemporary Britain. Kabir’s use of the slash or dividing bar in the title of her exhibition is in some way an echo of Roland Barthes (1974) use of the sign in his seminal text S/Z, which is central to his structuralist account of cultural signs. The slash in Kabir’s title is both a way of defining a paradigm and also stating the oppositional nature of the two words-visible and invisible, which are so closely associated with queer representation and queer communities of colour in the United Kingdom. The slash speaks to the prolific possibilities enacted by the unification of queerness, racialisation within the realm of the normative and non-normative providing disparate understandings that emerge through the productive encounter of these categories.

What Barthes articulates and what Kabir’s title of the exhibition demonstrates is the collision of the two words-visible and invisible. The slash in Kabir’s exhibition title indexes this paradigm of signification and the possibility of the various ways through which the slash makes possible and legible the various registers of visible and invisible existence that South Asian queers in the United Kingdom embody (Figure 2). Kabir describes the motivation for the exhibition as follows:

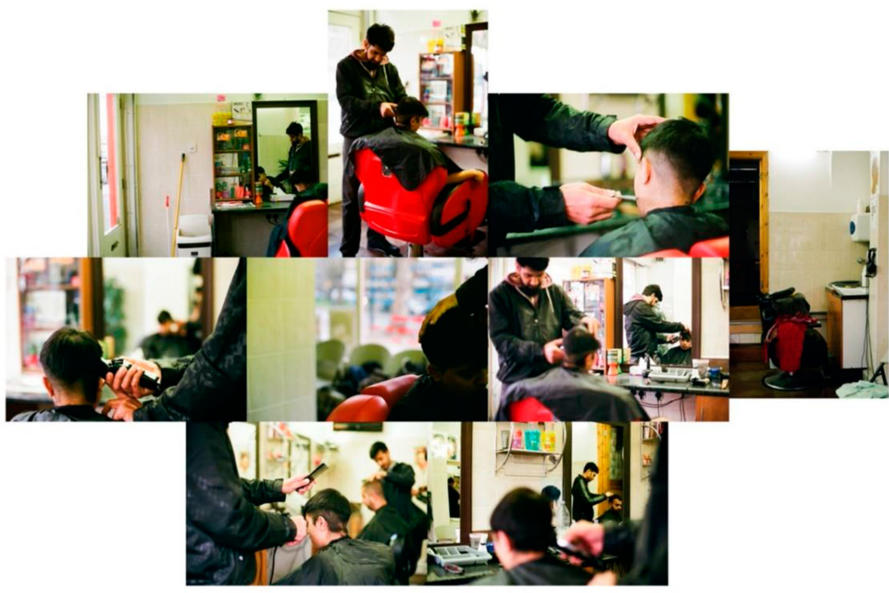

Figure 2. Sita. Artist: Raisa Kabir. Available at: https://www.in-visiblespace.co.uk/photography.

> It came out of my need for community and South Asian queerness. I was 22 and was experiencing isolation whilst finishing my BA in Textiles at Chelsea College of Art. I felt that specific kinds of queer South Asian identities at the time were really not very visible in contemporary art practice – I didn't see images of trans, queer, lesbian, bisexual transgendered non-binary people that didn't focus on gay men. Through my art practice I began to question what does a multidimensional queer South Asian identity mean. I felt the world that I was seeing and feeling at the time was not being reflected, and this project was a way for me to engage with my own trauma of being in a predominantly white art institution, being of Bangladeshi South Asian diaspora, with a disability and identifying as a queer femme. (Kabir et al. 2018)

The exhibition featured a series of photo montages to challenge the invisibility of South Asian queer persons in Britain. It challenges the idea of 'brown' or 'ethnic' spaces being constructed as homophobic. In her montages Kabir challenges the stereotypes of the incompatibility between religion and sexuality. Kabir's photographs are important in establishing the ways in which queer South Asian diasporic identities are inextricable from the continuing histories of colonialism, racialisation and Islamophobia in Britain. In the photo above titled 'Sita', Kabir photographs her participant in their local barber shop. Kabir explained that as a masculine presenting lesbian of South Asian origin getting a buzz cut within a predominantly heterosexual, Pakistani and male dominated space gave Sita a sense of solidarity and familiarity. Despite the widely held view of such 'brown' spaces being seen as homophobic for Sita felt safer here than in white queer spaces. Not feeling like an 'outsider' is especially important because as Kabir explained, it dispels the notion that being visibly queer within a Muslim barbershop could lead to a homophobic encounter. Far from it, Kabir challenges these views in her work.

Whilst the nation does not implicitly exist within Kabir's work, unlike Gupta or even Parmar; young artists like Kabir are pushing beyond thinking of their queerness as

implicitly tied to the nation and diaspora. Instead issues such as class and racial solidarity gain far more prominence. Even in a more recent work such as 'নীল. Nil. Nargis. Blue. Bring in the tide with your moon … ' a performance piece, Kabir brings attention to the issue of occupation, one intimately tied to colonialism. The colonial project as Priyamvada Gopal (2020) aptly puts it was a process of 'making the globe and colonised people suitable for the spread of capitalist freedom.' Artists such as Kabir challenges the notion of queer liberalism one imbricated through colonialism and capitalism. David Eng (2010) describes queer liberalism as the emergence of rights and empowerment through consumer cultures and capital through the erasure of race. Kabir's work in fact bridges the ways in which South Asian as a queer category emerges. Rather than focusing on the fractures dealt with through the violence of colonial divide and rule, Kabir uses her work to focus on how younger South Asians growing up in the diasporas challenge divisions and focus on bringing together their commonalities. In an interview with Dasgupta and Begum she says:

> Many South Asian queer people, tend to use the term South Asian as a political stance to resist the ways we have been divided by ethnicity and religion within colonial violence, though it is of course important to acknowledge our distinct cultures, languages and communities, it is also felt imperative to forge political solidarity through the term South Asian, as a way to actively resist the tensions that come with being Diasporic South Asians and our respective differing ethnic communities, where perhaps our parents might have pit each community against each other. Instead younger South Asian queer people finding each other, can be like creating new families, where there is a desire to celebrate the crossovers of our cultures rather than the divisions because that community is so small to begin with. (Kabir 2018, p. 87)

Another area of South Asian queer performance that has received little attention is drag. Over here, we turn to Asifa Lahore who calls herself United Kingdom's first out Muslim Pakistani drag queen. Lahore first came to prominence as a South Asian sexual health worker for Naz Project London after which she ventured into hosting queer parties for Urban desi, Club Kali and others. After appearing as Asifa for the first time in London Pride, she started performing and releasing a number of music videos on different social media platforms. In an opinion editorial Asifa claimed that she was censored on BBC Free Speech when she spoke about being Muslim, gay and a drag queen. The controversy pushed her to national fame giving her a platform to discuss issues such as sexuality and religion, which alongside making her a key figure of the South Asian queer 'scene' in London also lead to threats of violence. The drag figure of Asifa is temporally and spatially situated as a hyphenated in-between within the global diaspora where South Asian-ness is celebratory as well as contradictory. Asifa's chosen surname Lahore also situates her geographically as she celebrates her place within a global South Asian queer space. Asifa's drag performance in videos such as 'Punjabi Girl' and 'You and I' offer visibility to a kind of queer femininity that has often been sidelined on queer social media spaces. At the same time, the popularity of these videos are also testament to how digital media is being harnessed to offer an effective space for South Asian queer drag performance. In Asifa's performance, a certain kind of femininity and queerness is harnessed to provide resistance to hegemonic frameworks of South Asian gender expectations. Queer drag performance can be a transformative experience, as scholars such as Khubchandani (2020) have noted (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Asifa Lahore. Available at: https://wearencs.com/connect/all-eyes-asifa-lahore.

Asifa tells us:

> You know I am in a career that I am really happy in. I have a good relationship with my family but the thing is whether I like it or not my career itself is political and to become a successful drag artist from a South Asian and Muslim background in the UK is activism in itself and that is what I have come to realise. We have a lot to deal with- fight barriers of language and explaining ourselves to our older generation through their language.

Asifa's work pushes against the boundaries of respectability politics within the South Asian community and at the same time using her heritage to point towards the hypocritical nature of liberal politics itself which has seen increased Islamophobia and racism within the mainstream gay community which continues to invisibilise South Asian queer performers. Asifa's use of drag and media activism is part of her personal and political resilience to the hostility that South Asian queers face within an increasingly xenophobic Britain exacerbated through government policies and homophobia. Performers such as Asifa perform a distinctly hybrid form of drag, which infuses Bollywood and Punjabi music with disco and RnB. Whilst her name Asifa Lahore inscribes her within a distinct South Asian/Pakistani heritage, similar to Kabir (albeit in a different way) she pushes against her identity of being within a nation-state. As she herself mentions in her interview her work is not just about performing and bringing representation for South Asian queers but also creating spaces of solidarity and community making through her cultural activism.

Coda: In Lieu of a conclusion

We started this article evoking *My Beautiful Laundrette* and how it was a pivotal moment in telling the story of South Asian queer representation in the United Kingdom, it would

be befitting to also end with that. When the blue plaque commemorating the film was unveiled in 11 Wilcox Road, it deliberately moved away from the traditional rainbow colour to the 'Progress Pride' colours which incorporates Black and brown colours to particularly draw attention to the role people of colour and trans people have played in the Queer movement who are often marginalised in the wider narrative. The film was not just a queer story, it was also a story of immigration, interracial love and the impact of Thatcherism on working communities. In telling the story of South Asian queer migrants and evoking the idea of 'elsewhere' we have tried to similarly recover hidden stories but reject totalising gestures and evoke the rich cultural archive of South Asian queer lives in the United Kingdom.

Spatial imagining of the 'elsewhere' is in some ways intrinsic to queer lives of colour. Within prevailing narratives, South Asian queer lifeworlds are often represented as hard to reconcile with utopian queer imaginaries of belonging. Such lifeworlds might most often be analytically or politically located within imaginaries of repressive community and family; this being linked to the social pressure and psychodramas that militate against the realisation of full, modern, self-identifying sexual subjectivities (Boyce and Dasgupta 2017). This kind of imaginary of queer life-worlds as realisable elsewhere has been intrinsic to queer utopian imaginaries- one that is challenged as the stories we narrate demonstrate.

Many of those we have interviewed also evoke what Ahmed (2010, 121) calls the 'melancholic migrant' – the pressure that queer immigrants face in 'forgetting' the racism of their surroundings to comply with the happiness of the queer scene. Ahmed identifies that the legal rights and recognition given by the state to queer citizens often act to obliterate and disguise the class and racial struggle of diverse queer worlds situated elsewhere.

In this article, we have deliberately placed different genres of photography, curation, textile making and oral history in the same frame to evoke how a distinct South Asian queer subjectivity is articulated in contemporary Britain. Queer diasporic subjectivity is framed through structures of racism, colonialism, heteronormative nationalisms and global movements of capital and labour (Puar and Rai 2004). The various texts taken together offer a multifaceted view into how queer racialisation works in the United Kingdom and the various ways through which belonging is constructed through art and performance as a way to reconcile sexuality with faith, race and ethnicity and in the process challenging some of the attitudes which sees queer sexuality incompatible with one's racial/ethnic and religious identity. What is important to recognise is how intercultural variances and lived actualities demand new forms of imagining and reimagining new modes of queer diasporic belonging.

Notes

1. In this article, we are using LGBTQ+ to refer to individuals and communities who have identified in a spectrum of ways during our interviews and research. Some participants definitely rejected 'queer' as a political term that did not apply to them. We use queer as an umbrella term for theoretical work and practice emerging from the intersection of diaspora studies and sexuality studies, and for individuals who choose to identify as queer.
2. Another notable example is the plaque for Club Kali to celebrate the South Asian LGBTQ+ club night co-founded by DJ Ritu in the 1990s.
3. See, for example, Queer Britain and Pride of Place.

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