

CONDITIONAL FUTURES:
SOUTH ASIAN AMERICAN CULTURAL PRODUCTION
AND COMMUNITY FORMATION, 1991-2001

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A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School—New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Program in Literatures in English

Written under the direction of
Professor David L. Eng

And approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2011

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Conditional Futures: South Asian American Cultural Production and Community Formation, 1991-2001 traces the development of a politically engaged diasporic consciousness, expressed in contemporary South Asian American literature and other media during the period between the Persian Gulf War and 9/11. This diasporic consciousness sought to challenge the assimilationist, “model minority” self-representation of a previous generation of South Asian American professionals. Responding instead to a set of transnational shifts that shaped the 1990s—including India’s economic liberalization in 1991 and the post-Cold War rise of U.S. military and commercial global dominance—contemporary South Asian American artists and cultural critics, such as Vivek Bald, Meena Alexander, Shani Mootoo, Amitava Kumar and Vijay Prashad, reframed diasporic community as cohering around shared politics, rather than shared origins. Drawing upon a grassroots archive of community organization newsletters, arts periodicals and personal interviews, my analysis reveals the multiple spatial scales of transnationalism that contextualize these artists’ and scholars’ projects:

global changes in labor and migration as a result of economic liberalization, on one hand; and a hemispheric diasporic arts activism aligned with feminist, queer and antiracist organizing in New York City and Toronto, on the other. I locate aesthetic innovation as an important response to fiscal and social reforms during the premillennial decade, as it provided a creative plane through which artists imagined “conditional futures”—modes of collectivity that did not yet exist, but could possibly evolve.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing this dissertation has been one of the most challenging, but important, commitments I've made. The enthusiasm and willingness of my committee to let me discover the shape of the project as I wrote has led to an argument that feels both intellectually honest and exciting. I thank Brent Edwards for insisting that I interview the artists and scholars on whom this project focuses, a methodological shift that immeasurably enriched my analysis. Sonali Perera offered strategic advice for highlighting the deductive framing of my argument that has strongly benefited the writing I present both in this dissertation and elsewhere. Shuang Shen and my outside reader, Sunaina Maira, provided spirited feedback and support at the crucial moments during which I began and wrapped up these chapters. Above all, I am grateful for my director David Eng's insightful feedback and unwavering belief in me and in this project. His reminder that I should always trust my instincts is one that will guide me through the rest of my academic career.

This project additionally benefitted from my participation in several courses, seminars and workshops sponsored by the Rutgers English Department. The genealogy of this dissertation can be traced back to a graduate course I took in Spring 2004 on "Cultural Criticism in the New Empire" with Richard Dienst. His radical experiment in graduate pedagogy provided the creative freedom that inspired me to bring together my community arts organizing work and scholarship for first time. Emily Bartels's Spring 2007 Dissertation Workshop helped me further develop my ideas, and a Mellon Dissertation Fellowship allowed me the opportunity to participate in Michael McKeon's Fall 2008 "Problems in Historical Interpretation" seminar. For a lively conversation

about my first chapter, I thank Michael McKeon and the members of that fellowship seminar: Colleen Rosenfeld, Sean Barry, Meghan Lau, Saladin Ahmed, Carrie Hyde, Brian Garland, Michael Gavin, Jay Kratz, Trinyan Mariano and Paul Yeoh. I also thank Cheryl Robinson, Courtney Borack, Kurt Spellmeyer and John Kucich for generously accommodating a brief, but necessary, leave; and Allan Isaac, for his expert guidance during the job market.

I am grateful to the artists and critics whose work I address in the following chapters—Meena Alexander, Vivek Bald, Shani Mootoo, Amitava Kumar and Vijay Prashad—for offering their time as interview subjects, for allowing me to access their personal community arts archives, and especially for their continued excitement and curiosity about this project as a whole.

This project is about community, and I have been lucky to be a part of several, both on campus and off. The Center for Race and Ethnicity provided an important interdisciplinary home for me at Rutgers, and introduced me to Keith Wailoo and Mia Bay, who supported my growth as a scholar in countless ways. I hope to emulate their generous spirit and intellectual energy in my own role as a professor and mentor. Thanks to a serendipitous assignment to the same working group at Dartmouth's Futures of American Studies Institute, Vanita Reddy has become an intellectual soul mate. I thank her for her friendship, as well as for her clarifying and detailed comments on my second chapter. Over the past decade, my former coworkers at The Asian American Writers' Workshop and my current fellow board members of the South Asian Women's Creative Collective have helped me understand community as a practice. Special thanks to those with whom I have worked most closely: Jaishri Abichandani, Quang Bao, Anjali

Bhargava, Piyali Bhattacharya, Anjali Goyal, Adrian Leung, Kavita Rajanna, Uzma Rizvi, Noel Shaw, Sonali Sridhar, Mathu Subramanian, Pimpila Thanaporn, Jasmine Wahi and Jeannie Wong. Last, but not least, the following friends and colleagues have buoyed me with their encouragement and ready laughter: Isra Ali, Sonali Barua, Soyica Diggs, Jeremy Glick, Suhrid Gajendragadkar, Ranita Jain, Shakti Jaising, Kelly Josephs, Carolyn Malcom, Avni Patel, Kimberly Parekh, Sheeba Philip, Shilpa Punatar, Liz Reich, Nimanthi Rajasingham and Fatimah Williams-Castro.

Another kind of community, my family, has sustained me throughout my time in graduate school. I thank Radhika and Mat Mathews, Murali Soundararajan, Nitya Ramaswamy and Tom McDonald for their love and support. My parents, Ven and Chandra Sudhakar, have done much to enable me to pursue a career based on curiosity and passion. I thank them with all my love and admiration.

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INTRODUCTION

1997: Historicizing South Asian American Arts Activism

In March 2007, Rekha Malhotra (aka DJ Rekha), a cultural producer internationally recognized for her mash-ups of Bhangra and Hip-Hop, and then artist-in-residence at NYU's Asian/Pacific/American Studies Institute, convened a panel entitled "1997: Ten Years Of South Asian Arts And Activism In New York City."¹

Commemorating no single event, as do most anniversaries, the panel instead recognized a *temporal* milestone, presenting 1997 as a year in which the New York South Asian American progressive arts community hit critical mass. 1997 witnessed the creation of nearly a half dozen arts events and organizations, including Malhotra's still-running monthly club night, Basement Bhangra, and Mutiny, her collaborative club night with Vivek Bald, who spins under the name DJ Sriraiki. This mid-point in the decade also saw the founding of the South Asian Women's Creative Collective (SAWCC), a group that offered a network of support for area women artists of South Asian descent, and South Asian Youth Action! (SAYA!), an organization in Jackson Heights, Queens that provides counseling and after-school programs to first- and second-generation South Asian American students. The panel brought together a group of academics, artists and cultural workers involved in these organizations and cultural events, including Svati Shah, Fariba Alam, Sayu Bhojwani, Madhulika Khandelwal, and Malhotra, herself, to theorize the gains of the arts activist movement and look ahead to where its interventions might lead.

Each of the panelists agreed that, aside from 9/11, 1997 represented the most significant contemporary “critical moment in the [New York South Asian American] community.” For it was both a year in which South Asian American arts organizations and events were burgeoning, and one in which the existence of these cultural activities still felt unusual and exciting. Bhojwani explained how this feeling of newness produced a unique cross-generational exchange within the city’s diasporic subculture. Then a professor in the newly founded Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program at New York University, Bhojwani recalled attending Basement Bhangra *with* her students, and remarked on how unlikely this kind of cross-generational audience might be today, given that this established fixture in the New York nightlife scene is peopled almost exclusively by youth. Shah built upon Bhojwani’s attention to the social nature of diasporic activist subculture, noting that the “interpersonal connections” among those who crossed paths in non-profit and arts spaces helped produce a “moment when something was getting consolidated.”

As Bhojwani and Shah’s comments suggest, the panelists critically lamented the loss of momentum and intensity that characterized the 1990s. Ten years later, Shah pointed out, many of the organizations and events that emerged as breakthroughs for South Asian American culture have now become institutionalized. Indeed, elsewhere, Khandelwal has described New York City’s emerging South Asian American activist movement as an “invisible college” of subversive knowledge production that brought together a diverse set of participants who, now established and dispersed, no longer overlap in quite the same way.² Part of what the panel memorialized, then, *was* the very newness of South Asian American arts activism and organizing in the 1990s, and the very

possibilities that such organizing opened up— possibilities that have since been, particularly after September 11th, reconsolidated and reimagined.

I open with the story of Malhotra’s “1997” panel because my dissertation steps in where the conversation among these women artists and activists leaves off. *Conditional Futures* charts the social history of South Asian American arts activism in the 1990s, and seeks to elucidate how this dynamic social history informs the work of a group of artists and scholars connected with this movement. It shows how Meena Alexander, Vivek Bald, Shani Mootoo, Amitava Kumar and Vijay Prashad helped theorize the new spirit and consciousness of the South Asian American cultural movement of the 1990s; their memoir, films, cultural criticism and fiction provided a language for the potentiality expressed by the “something” that Shah mentions above—a searching description of possibility that figures strongly across all of the work from this decade. Relying upon artist interviews and textual analysis, I narrate the conscious effort of South Asian American artists to engage ideas about race, diaspora and community—an effort that draws upon a stylistic vocabulary to articulate not a viable, pragmatic community based upon currently available resources, but an ideal, utopian one. Consequently, I argue that Alexander, Bald, Mootoo, Kumar and Prashad redefine diasporic community in their work. They do so by eschewing a definition of diaspora as a group of people bonded by a common language, land, or blood. Instead, they call upon aesthetics and counter-traditions of grassroots organizing to envision a heterogeneous community committed to the practice of crafting solidarity across differences.

This redefinition of diaspora responded, in part, to the overdetermination of South Asian Americans as “model minorities,” a designation that has its roots in the Hart-Celler

Act of 1965. This Civil Rights-era law relaxed previously stringent quotas on non-European immigration, and favored Asian immigrants with skilled backgrounds in technology, science and medicine.³ The resulting dramatic shift in migration to the U.S. produced an upwardly mobile group of Asian Americans. As Colleen Lye points out, this “new visibility of an Asian-American middle class was being used to support a neoconservative-led ‘retreat from race’ in domestic public policy....”⁴ Among Asian Americans, South Asian Americans, in particular, came to emblemize this conservative response to race in the latter half of the twentieth century. For the Hart-Celler Act not only increased the size of the Asian American population, it also diversified its constituency to include large numbers of non-East Asian immigrants. Doubly visible as a “new” and financially successful community, post-1965 South Asian Americans became cemented within public consciousness *as* model minorities.

The term “model minority” first appeared in a 1966 *U.S. News and World Report* article that privileged Asian Americans, over their African American and Latino counterparts, as upwardly mobile subjects driven by a strong work ethic.⁵ Because it presents social advancement as a purely individual enterprise, the notion of the model minority evacuates systemic racism. This becomes particularly apparent when we consider Viet Thanh Nguyen’s point that the original *U.S. News* article describing this new subject praised Chinese and Japanese Americans for their accomplishments, “especially considering the racism they had endured” in previous decades.⁶ Model minority identity thus posits hard work as a cultural trait and, as suggested by Lye’s above assertion, elides structural inequality by suggesting that historically oppressed groups can overcome racism through sheer determination for economic advancement.

This apolitical, assimilationist framing of minority identity extended beyond the misconceptions about South Asian Americans within the general public. It also figured in the diaspora's own self-representation, whether through community newspapers like *India Abroad*,⁷ the rhetoric of conservative political figures like Dinesh D'Souza,⁸ or through mainstream cultural production by commercially popular authors such as Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Divakaruni.⁹

By contrast, each of the artists and scholars in my study complicate the internalized "model minority" self-representation of South Asian Americans by referencing histories of indenture and anti-colonial resistance in their work. Before 1965, Indian immigrants worked as contracted laborers for the British Empire in the Caribbean and Africa, or as agrarian workers on the U.S. and Canadian west coast. These early communities fostered a number of cross-racial and labor-based alliances. Overlapping diasporic groups of Punjabi and Mexican American farmers intermarried and formed hybrid communities in California. Indian nationalists in the U.S. and Canada partook in a global anti-colonial movement by collaborating with African American political leaders and artists, and by forming diasporic arms of the subcontinent's Ghadar Party, which agitated for an overthrow of the British Empire.¹⁰

A corollary argument of this dissertation suggests that contemporary socially conscious South Asian American artists and scholars turn to these histories in order to draw attention to the anti-colonial ideal that informed both struggles for independence in India and rights-based discourse in the U.S. Vivek Bald's documentary about New York City's South Asian taxi drivers, *Taxi-Vala/Auto-Biography*,¹¹ for example, ends with a montage that juxtaposes archival footage of Satyagraha marches in India with archival

footage of Civil Rights marches in the U.S. South, a gesture meant to intervene in what was, during the 1990s, a heated debate about some South Asian cab drivers' refusal to pick up African American passengers they stereotyped as dangerous. As the implicit connection between Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. that is called up by this montage suggests, colonial-era histories additionally highlight cross-racial intimacies among Indian, Chinese and African diasporas as a precursor to the collaborative efforts of race-based organizing in the present. The continuity between pre and post-1965 histories that progressive South Asian American texts evoke thus points to the way "old" diasporas of indentured labor and colonialism might provide a model for the diverse alliances that could arise again, within the particular labor conditions that structure "new" diasporas of globalization.¹²

By attending to the way South Asian diasporic artists and scholars mobilize anti-colonial pasts, *Conditional Futures* intersects with a number of recent critiques in Asian American Studies that revisit the early life and labor of Asians in the Americas, so as to interpret and uncover alternative histories of Afro-Asian connection.¹³ It brings together textual and historical analysis to suggest that artistic innovation provided a catalyst for South Asian American artists to link anti-colonial pasts to future possibilities for diasporic community. These artists experimented with autobiography, collage form and manifesto poetics, as well as revised their ideas about community across multiple modes of media—literature, film and photography. I contend that this interplay of content with genres and media helps create an affect that amplifies, to mainstream South Asian Americans and other communities of color, the hopeful potential of cross-class and cross-racial alliances.

Where the study of South Asian American literature and culture is often structured sociologically or thematically, my dissertation resists a representational reading of South Asian American cultural production, measuring creative work not according to its truthful depiction of diasporic exile and return, but by its risky attempt to imagine what Bald describes in his film as “something new.” By organizing this study historically, I trace how theorizations of community developed from Bald’s speculative montage, which gestures towards the possibility of a reoriented diasporic historical and political consciousness, to the direct calls for Afro-Asian solidarity that we see in Prashad’s end-of-decade study, *The Karma of Brown Folk*.¹⁴ My focus on form throughout this project attempts to provide a means of accounting for the striking aesthetic characteristics of these texts that exceed the representational paradigm of the socio-political. Historicizing South Asian American cultural production thus reaffirms Timothy Yu’s assertion that “the aesthetic and the social are inseparable.”¹⁵ Because it shifted the terrain of South Asian American racialization, 9/11 provides an exemplary endpoint for this project. I therefore conclude by considering how the twenty-first century has produced a reconsolidation of artists’ prior efforts to articulate a utopian collective consciousness, and revised anew the ideals that comprise South Asian America’s “conditional futures”—modes of collectivity that do not yet exist, but could possibly evolve.

Transnational Contexts of South Asian American Arts Activism

The formation of the South Asian American arts activist movement, and its revision of diasporic community, occurred at the nexus of multiple histories and, so, necessitates a transnational lens of analysis. 1997 emerges as an ideal temporal moment for understanding the confluence of these local and global conditions. For that year also marked the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence from British colonial rule, a historical milestone that rose to the forefront of global consciousness, both within and without the diaspora. Literary and cultural institutions such as *Granta* and *The New Yorker* commemorated India's independence by showcasing its postcolonial literary production.¹⁶ *The New Yorker's* 1997 Special Fiction Issue, for example, featured emerging Indian diasporic writers introduced by Salman Rushdie. In his introduction, Rushdie floated the opinion that the best postcolonial Indian writing was being produced in English, "the language the British left behind."¹⁷ Certainly, Rushdie's brash qualitative assertion is both highly subjective and problematically self-serving. However, it conveys what was the generally celebratory—if also anxious—reception of India's entry as a major player in the Western cultural and economic world. Following its economic liberalization in 1991, the country shifted from a socialist economy to a capitalist one. This move opened the doors for foreign investment within the nation and has since led to the much-touted fact (both on the subcontinent and in international finance circles) that India is, next to China, the world's fastest growing economy. The popularity of both of these narratives—the cultural one about the superior quality of Indian Anglophone writing and the economic one about India's successful capitalist transformation—occluded the country's century-long struggle against British occupation.

At the fifty-year marker of its decolonization, India, much like the model minority figure that appeared in the *U.S. News and World Report*, was portrayed as “overcoming” colonialism through its willing assimilation to capitalism.

This move towards privatized industry across the subcontinent was one aspect of 1990s socioeconomics to which Alexander, Bald, Mootoo, Prashad and Kumar reacted, as their work drew attention to cultural forms and practices that resisted global capitalism. In presenting this point, I follow Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd’s understanding of transnationalism. Drawing upon David Harvey, Frederic Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, Lowe and Lloyd define transnationalism as “the universal extension of a differentiated mode of production that relies on flexible accumulation and mixed production to incorporate all sectors of the global economy into its logic of commodification.”¹⁸ Situating transnationalism as a structure specific to late capitalism is useful for this project for several reasons. First, it contextualizes the dramatic restructuring of labor that took place in South Asia and North America, and which I will discuss at greater length shortly. Secondly, and perhaps most significantly, it posits transnational capitalism as “like colonialist capitalism before it...produc[ing] sites of contradiction that are effects of its always uneven expansion but that cannot be subsumed by the logic of commodification itself.”¹⁹ My reading of 1990s diasporic cultural production extends Lowe and Lloyd’s reading of the subversive politics of culture; I therefore do not fetishize arts activism as purely opposition or outside of capitalism but, rather, as emerging in *critical tension* with global capital.

The effects of global capital on the diaspora are perhaps best illustrated by liberalization’s deregulation and privatization of agriculture across South Asia—a shift

that, in part, displaced agrarian workers from traditional livelihoods, and created a global service class of working-class migrants. This largely male community of laborers came to occupy new roles in the service sector of urban centers like New York during the 1990s, working as newsstand vendors, convenient store clerks and taxi drivers. South Asian immigrant labor thus became, as Sunaina Maira puts it, a “visible and integral part of New York City at the turn of the new century.”²⁰ This bachelor community of immigrants introduced class divisions, religious conflicts and regionalisms within the formerly middle-class Indian diaspora of the U.S. Their recruitment as cheap labor for a Guiliani-era New York (then experiencing its own transformation by ceding manufacturing to the finance and real estate industries in an effort to attract middle and upper-middle class investment in the city) also affected the previous communities of color who had occupied service sector positions. As Biju Mathew writes in his labor history of the city’s taxi industry, “In the case of New York, globalization has produced a whole new race and class dynamic...the arrival of a Third World immigrant labor force, the redefinition of the role of the African American worker in the city’s economy, and the reentry into the city of a white middle class, availing itself of new opportunities.”²¹ This restructured racialization of labor created deep tensions, in particular, between the city’s working-class communities and its new immigrants.

The New York within which South Asian American writers and artists met and congregated during the 1990s, then, was a cauldron of race and class issues. The glaring presence and visibility of these issues within the daily life of the city highlighted what Monisha Das Gupta describes as the “inadequacies of India-centered, elite accomodationist politics” for the diaspora.²² The metropolitan environment of South

Asian American arts activism thus profoundly shaped the cultural forms and activities that it produced. Accordingly, a look at contemporary race-based activism reveals the response of communities of color to what Saskia Sassen famously terms the “global city.”²³ These cultural organizations emerged precisely within a shadow of capital that loomed large over a globalized New York; they offered a site of resistance to capitalism’s homogenizing impulses.

In particular, it was burgeoning Asian American arts and political organizations—such as The Asian American Writers’ Workshop, founded in 1991, and the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence, founded in 1986—that created alternative sites of culture within New York and led progressive South Asian Americans from varied circles to meet and converse with one another at local community events on an increased basis. This community was, as Bhojwani pointed out in the “1997” panel, a cross-generational one. The children of the first wave of post-1965 South Asian immigrants had come of age and recently graduated from high school and college. After moving to avant-garde cultural centers, like New York, to pursue non-traditional careers in art, publishing and academia, they began to collaborate with newly arrived first-generation South Asian artists and scholars around shared interests in art and activism.

The artists and scholars I discuss in this dissertation illustrate this cross-generationality. Bald is a second-generation half Indian-half Scottish Australian, while Mootoo is a fourth-generation Indo-Trinidadian Canadian. Alexander, Kumar and Prashad all arrived from India in the late 1980s, as graduate students or professors admitted to or hired by American universities. Part of the intervention of this dissertation emerges from its attention to the way these artists and scholars overlapped in New York

and Toronto. For although theorists have discussed these artists and intellectuals individually, *Conditional Futures* is the first study that synthesizes their work as a *body* of cultural production, emerging in response to material conditions of the 1990s.

My interests in bringing this group of artists and scholars together overlap with Das Gupta's theorization of alternative diasporic community formation as a "space-making politics." As she explains, an explicitly politicized approach to collective identity reckoned with "the systemic problems of violence against women, as well as homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and poverty within South Asian communities... [O]rganizations oriented toward social change create[d] structures and resources that transform[ed] daily life into an arena of political contest."²⁴ The collective efforts of this space-making politics dramatically reshaped the landscape of Asian American arts and activism in the 1990s. In addition to the panethnic groups of which they were a part, South Asian American artists and activists founded groups like: Youth Solidarity Summer, which organized an annual week-long retreat for college-age South Asian American activists (and of which Prashad was a co-organizer); the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association; a domestic worker's advocacy group called Workers' Awaaz; and a South Asian taxi union, the Lease Driver's Coalition (at which Bald worked); publications including the radical periodical *SAMAR (South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection)*; and cultural events such as the long-running Canadian queer arts festival *Desh Pradesh* (which featured Kumar, Mootoo and Alexander) and its U.S.-based counterpart, *Diasporadics*.

This explosion of cultural activity responded, as I have suggested, to a confluence of local and global histories, of which India's emergence as a capitalist democracy was

only one. For in the same year of India's liberalization, 1991, the U.S. itself increased its military and commercial dominance following the end of the Cold War and the Persian Gulf War. South Asian American arts activism thus presented a double-voiced critique of the politics of South Asian homelands and diasporas, as well as of U.S. foreign and domestic policy. In terms of the latter, the movement responded, in particular, to debates about immigration reform that raged throughout the decade in the U.S. and Canada. This debate was fueled by a xenophobic backlash against the altered demographics of the nation, following the large numbers of Latina/o and Asian immigrants who had arrived in North America since the 1960s, and shaped both local and national policies. In New York, for example, Mayor Guiliani instituted a "Quality of Life Program" that "sought to reproduce the suburbs within the city for the new urban white middle class" by instituting strict zoning policies and police presence that specifically limited the activities of working-class immigrants and African Americans, "from curb-side squeegee boys who washed car windshields to immigrant newsstand owners," to taxi drivers, who were forced to follow a set of "Rider's Rights" that included an "English-speaking driver" and "a radio-free (silent) trip";²⁵ the latter point socially isolated drivers by disrupting their organizational system of communication (about both personal and union matters) via their CB radios.²⁶ At the federal level, Newt Gingrich proposed his "Contract for America," which advocated both an English-only policy for the nation and stricter border control.

This xenophobia bore particular impact on the Northeast U.S., where a large portion of the South Asian American population was concentrated. A spate of anti-South Asian hate crimes erupted in middle-class post-industrial suburbs in New Jersey and

Queens throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Driven by resentment of the assumed prosperity of recent South Asian immigrants, and the increasing visibility of merchant enterprises in neighborhoods once dominated by European immigrant communities, informal neighborhood gangs terrorized South Asian residents in a series of random physical and verbal attacks.²⁷ Among the most notorious of these groups was Jersey City's "Dotbusters" who effaced the diversity of the diaspora by collapsing all South Asians with Indian Hindus.²⁸ In a published letter in the *Jersey Journal* in 1987, the group threatened to "...go to any extreme to get Indians to move out of Jersey City. If [we're] walking down the street and [we] see a Hindu and the setting is right, [we] will hit him or her."²⁹

Such threats mirrored the large-scale intergroup tensions erupting with higher frequency across the country, most notably in the case of the 1992 L.A. Riots, an event that Michael Omi and Howard Winant mark as "the beginning of a new period in U.S. racial politics."³⁰ In the context of their project, Omi and Winant align this "new period" of race politics with the emergence of federal policies of neoliberalism. But considering the way in which anti-South Asian American violence, though experienced on a smaller, more individuated scale than that of the L.A. Riots, spoke to the inadequacy of binary white-black racial discourse in the U.S., the shift in race politics during the 1990s is also importantly related to local changes in everyday life. As suggested by the slew of cultural texts that featured working-class and middle-class Americans enacting their own forms of discriminatory retaliation, from Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* (1993) to Tony Kaye's *American History X* (1998), widely-propagated anxieties about immigrants'

displacement of generationally-rooted Americans often played out through localized racisms that “attempt[ed] to make sense of perceived economic and social disorder.”³¹

In New York, anti-South Asian violence produced a “reactive solidarity” on behalf of progressive South Asian American artists and activists,³² who came together to promote anti-racism and immigrant rights. In her study of Indian American identity and community, Khandelwal recalls how these incidents of violence inspired groups and coalitions such as Youth Against Racism (YAR) and South Asian Alliance for Action (SAAFA).³³ Later, in perhaps the period’s most electrifying crime, an Indo-Caribbean man named Rishi Maharaj was bludgeoned with baseball bats in a group attack in Queens in 1998; this attack galvanized a wide array of race-based organizations to coordinate a peace vigil that contextualized the attack on Maharaj within a wider history of racial violence in the U.S. (fig. 1).

The racial consciousness of this emergent diasporic community built, in part, upon the cultural and political efforts of their diasporic counterparts in Britain, who had been developing anti-racist collectives and underground arts spaces in London since the 1970s. As Jenny Sharpe has delineated, the working-class connections among formerly colonized Indian and Afro-Caribbean communities in London led them to organize in that country under the common political identity, “Black.”³⁴ In New York and Toronto, artists and activists began this work of racializing immigrant subjectivity by collectively organizing, for the first time, as “South Asian American,” deploying the term less as a cultural identity than as a critical category of analysis.

The use of the category “South Asian” is not without its controversy, however. Many studies have pointed out that the adjective “South Asian” overwrites what is,

within South Asian American criticism, an actual focus on *Indian* authors, a practice that obscures work by those from other South Asian nations, such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan.³⁵ Throughout this dissertation, I also describe the Indian American and Indo-Canadian artists and scholars whose work I analyze as “South Asian American.” However, I do so consciously for several reasons. First, I follow the deployment of this term, during the 1990s, as a political category, rather than a descriptive one. As Prashad and Mathew point out, the term “South Asian,” brings together diverse national communities under one category, importantly counter-acting the “linguistic and religious regionalisms” that otherwise splinter diasporic communities into Tamil Sangams or Jain Societies.³⁶ These NRI communities are not only culturally conservative but, as Amit Rai has demonstrated in the case of diasporic Hindu communities, also bear the danger of perpetuating and financing communalism and nationalism in the homeland.³⁷ Secondly, I position “South Asian” not as a transparent category, but as a historically contingent one; indeed, part of what this project evokes are the very debates and conversations that engendered the term “South Asian American.” I thus seek to revisit a moment when the name under which arts and political organizations were being founded was, itself, new—and, perhaps, even conditional.

As I have suggested above, both my project and the arts activism it considers foreground the complex transnational dimensions of South Asian American community formation. Lowe and Lloyd offer that one of the gains of transnationalism is its “challenge to the unidirectional and hierarchical schematic binary ‘West/non-West’”³⁸ This important intervention has produced a body of cultural criticism that attends to the cross-influences between homelands and their diasporic communities, as well as to the

RACIST ATTACK AGAINST INDO/CARIBBEAN-AMERICAN MAN

On 20 September 1998, three White men with baseball bats brutally attacked one Indo/Caribbean-American man and terrorized his family. This unprovoked hate crime occurred in Queens as the 20-year-old man was walking with his two young female cousins. This senseless, racially motivated beating occurred six blocks from where another group of White men murdered a Black man in 1992.

PEACE VIGIL

**SUPPORT THE FAMILY AND
DEMAND JUSTICE AGAINST
THE ATTACKERS**

**Thursday, Oct. 8, 1998
Queens Courthouse
9:30 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.**

(Queens Courthouse (New Building)
125-01 Queens Blvd. "E" or "F" Trains
to Union Turnpike Station)

Communities of color across
the country are outraged
and have unified in
response to this
heinous act. We will
not tolerate such violence
against our youths.

"Without feelings of
respect, what is there to
distinguish men from beasts?"

—Confucius, 6th Century B.C.

This vigil is supported by countless community members,
including the following organizations: Agenda 21, Asian American Legal Defense & Education
Fund, Asian Americans for Equality, Asian/Pacific Islander Coalition on HIV & AIDS, Commit-
tee Against Anti-Asian Violence, Federation of Indian Association, Forum of Indian Leftists,
KALI, NY Taxi Workers Alliance, Sakhi, South Asian Law Students Alliance, South Asian
Lesbian and Gay Alliance, South Asian Youth Action, South Bronx Community Justice Center,
Victim Services, & Youth Force

Figure 1. A flyer for the peace vigil held after the beating of Rishi Maharaj.

way diasporic writers destabilize the centrality of Western literary traditions. Xiaojing Zhou argues, for example, that Asian American writing has “resisted, subverted and reshaped hegemonic European American literary genres.”³⁹ My sense, however, is that this line of critique only tells part of the story.

Indeed, in order to fully contextualize South Asian American arts activism, we must consider multiple, overlapping scales of transnationalism. I thus suggest that we approach transnationalism not in terms of its trajectory between homeland and host country, alone. For this transnationalism is quite often one that, as mentioned above, privileges flows of NRI capital, or recapitulates a nostalgic homeward glance. It is for this reason that I attend in this project to the additional, inter-diasporic routes that existed between London, Toronto and New York. These routes were both ideological and material. Rekha and Bald, for example, traveled to London to purchase records that they played for audiences in New York who had not previously been introduced to Asian punk and electronica. Artists, activists, and news about their efforts also traveled often between the urban centers of Toronto and New York, as each site was characterized by unique politics but connected by geographic proximity. Toronto’s progressive South Asian community, as I discuss at greater length in Chapter Two, grew in tandem with the city’s queer activist scene; New York, as I have described in detail above, foregrounded issues of panethnicity and race-based organizing. The particular infrastructure of these East Coast cities—dense, gridded and held together by public transportation—further enabled the utopian intersections among diverse identities that characterized South Asian diasporic political consciousness in North America in the 1990s. By attending to this ephemeral, grassroots history, my project suggests that an understanding of 1990s South

Asian American arts activism requires knowledge of not only South Asian postcolonial histories and Euro-American neoimperialisms, but also of the specific social and political contexts of the multiracial U.S. and Canadian left.

This attention to the social history of arts activism enters into a long-standing debate between Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies, for which South Asian American literature and culture has been a lightning rod. The subgroup's marginalization within Asian American Studies has been a focus of nearly every study and anthology of South Asian American literature since the breakthrough publication of the 1992 anthology, *Our Feet Walk the Sky*. In that collection, Jane Singh argues that South Asian Americans comprise "one of the least studied groups in the United States...overlooked by historians and social scientists as well as by scholars of Ethnic and Women's Studies."⁴⁰ The complaint of Singh and others led literary scholars Rajini Srikanth and Lavina Dhingra Shankar to memorably describe South Asians as "a part, yet apart" from Asian America. Rajiv Shankar writes in his foreword to Srikanth and Shankar's edited volume:

[South Asian Americans] want their unique attributes to be recognized and their particular issues discussed; and some of them want this to occur, initially at least, within the Asian American paradigm, for they think that they must surely belong there. Yet, they find themselves so unnoticed as an entity that they feel as if they are merely a crypto-group, often included but easily marginalized within the house of Asian America.⁴¹

These efforts to draw attention to South Asian Americans' marginalization have produced important institutional benefits by expanding and diversifying Asian American Studies scholarship and programs. However, their focus on belonging has also sustained what Srikanth calls in a later text, a "crude differentiation" between Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies. She recounts the generalizations about these fields of study as follows:

...[P]ostcolonial studies requires an understanding of the *global* forces of neocolonialism and global capitalism that affect any single nation's economic, political, and social reality. Ethnic studies, while acknowledging the importance of understanding the forces at play beyond U.S. borders, is based on the idea that what is ultimately important is the reality within the nation state: the condition of people of color, the resources denied them, the opportunities withheld."⁴²

In other words, postcolonial studies is perceived as highlighting the way South Asian American history and culture is shaped by a dislocation from homeland, while ethnic studies is seen to highlight the way this history and culture is shaped by the socioeconomic conditions of the U.S. By triangulating South Asian diasporic cultural production, activist social history and aesthetics, I extend Srikanth's critique of this binary division. I show how South Asian American literature frustrates, rather than supports, the critical binary described above, by engaging a complex negotiation among issues of race, ethnicity and diaspora. Indeed, as the social history I have charted above suggests, South Asian American art and arts organizing developed in active dialogue with Asian American art and activism, not simply as an addition to its panethnic schematic. It is my hope that a historicized approach to South Asian American cultural production might thus offer an alternative reading methodology that complicates the lenses through which we interpret diasporic literature, film and criticism, by recognizing postcolonial and ethnic lenses as working in tandem, rather than at odds, with one another.

The Temporality of South Asian American Aesthetics

In the previous section, I have laid out the historical contexts that inform South Asian American arts activism and argued that this social history points to the necessity of approaching progressive diasporic community formation through multiple scales of transnationalism. This project does not take as its *focus*, however, a social history of

South Asian American arts activism. While it is deeply indebted to the growing body of cultural studies that has begun to explore the politicization of South Asian American identity and community in the 1990s, it parts ways from these studies by examining the *creative work* that was produced within this movement.⁴³ I read this cultural production less as a complementary program of a larger political agenda, than as an integral site for exploring and disseminating new political ideas. For the 1990s was a moment in which progressive South Asian Americans, along with other communities of color, were equally interested in material and representational politics. Much of the activist efforts of these communities thus confronted issues of access and reception that resulted from the struggle for inclusion within the predominantly white gallery, theater and publishing scenes of New York and Toronto.

Part of the gain of attending not only to the historical plot of these community efforts, but also to the aesthetics of work from this period is that it allows us to see how artists and critics reflected upon and theorized the community-building practices that were taking place through arts and political organizing. Where activism created new spaces for community (recalling Das Gupta's concept of a "space-making politics"), it was in the reflective act of art-making that this community was defined and amplified to a wider audience. It is thus in these creative projects, extending out of arts activism, that we might trace the imminent connotation of "becoming" that characterizes Stuart Hall's now famous formulation about diaspora and cultural identity. As he explains, diasporic cultural identity

is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' *It belongs to the future as much as to the past.* It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power.⁴⁴

I open out Hall’s attention to the future-making practice of cultural identity and production. I present in my study a multi-media, cross-generic framing of contemporary diasporic writing and film to identify how artists and scholars used form and style to express the “continuous play” of politics that was developing within activism on the ground. In this way, the multi-media nature of this project itself evokes the community that emerged during the 1990s; it represents the multiple, overlapping forms of creative expression that circulated within and without the diaspora. I seek to convey how cultural production provided a site of exploration for artists and critics of the 1990s by tracing the evolution and intersection of their ideas as they travel and transform across media, and across genres.

My interest in form and media builds upon a recent turn in Asian American literary and cultural studies towards aesthetics. Over the past decade, scholars such as Rocio Davis, Xiaojing Zhou and Timothy Yu have reclaimed genre and form not as distanced from the sociopolitical, but as complementary and in dialogue with it.⁴⁵ Davis explains:

Asian American literary criticism at large has been slow to extend the analysis of the constructedness of human-made categories and institutions to include the examination of Asian American literary works as aesthetic objects—objects that are constituted by and through deliberate choices in form, genres, traditions and conventions.⁴⁶

Davis’s attention to authors’ conscious engagement with form and genre is particularly relevant to my study, since questions of aesthetics seem to be most often sidelined when texts are overtly political. Bald’s documentary, *Taxi-Vala/Auto-Biography*, for example, directly engages the genre of autobiography and is comprised of highly stylized and

distorted imagery; the handful of analyses of this film, however, discuss the film's critique of class divisions without ever mentioning how the film *looks*. This particularly literal example of critical oversight suggests the importance of attending to artistic issues as carefully as we do social ones.

Of course, arguments for “renewing” or “reclaiming” the aesthetic often arise as part of a reactionary discourse against the critical interventions of fields like Postcolonial Studies, Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies; in such polemics, scholars seek a return to universal interpretations of art and literature. By contrast, in this project, I am not on the defensive about the need to return to the aesthetic, a position that bears the danger of calling for “an uncritical appreciation of the aesthetic as the ahistorical, universal standard by which artistic production should be measured.”⁴⁷ Rather, I share Davis's interest in the critical valence of the aesthetic. As I show in the chapters that follow, the form and style of texts is an irreducible aspect of their political meaning. I thus suggest that an attention to genre and style reveals the way progressive South Asian American texts push back against the burdens of authenticity and representation that are often imposed upon immigrant literatures and subjects.

Conditional Futures suggests that texts escape this burden of representation in several ways. The first is through their support by self-publishing or alternative and academic presses, which allowed for a freedom of expression not provided by the mainstream publishing industry. Though all of the artists and writers I discuss here are now well-established (Mootoo, in particular, enjoys a relatively wide commercial audience), they were, during the 1990s, just starting out. In fact, the texts I discuss were ground-breaking and, in several cases, debut works for these artists and critics. Each text

garnered the attention of the South Asian diaspora in North America because it strongly impacted the critical conversation about diasporic identity and community, by introducing questions of multiple migrations, class, sexuality, indentured history and cross-racial alliances.

These texts additionally challenge expectations around diasporic representation by exceeding the mode of realism. Where political literature is often aligned with the mode of social realism and its spare, grim depiction of social conditions, progressive South Asian American artists and scholars worked especially with experimental forms and non-representational aesthetics. These stylized forms of collage, montage, magic realism and the manifesto reach beyond the present, and towards what Ernst Bloch has described as the “not-yet-conscious.” In *The Spirit of Utopia*, the German Marxist theorist considers the unique function of art as its ability to express “not only hope for a better future but also illumination toward the realization of this goal.”⁴⁸ Recently experiencing renewed interest, Bloch’s theorization of art and utopia, along with that of other, more often cited figures from the Frankfurt School, such as Walter Benjamin, provides a helpful vocabulary for reading the searching and speculative depictions of diasporic community that appear in Alexander, Bald, Mootoo, Kumar and Prashad’s work.⁴⁹ By harnessing the affect of utopian possibility, and by demanding active interpretation, rather than presenting verisimilitude, these texts encourage in their readers and viewers a self-reflective and politicized diasporic consciousness. These works thus embody Bloch’s sense that art and literature are not only canvases upon which reality is faithfully depicted but, also, vehicles through which to imagine and enact social change.

I further suggest that the aesthetics of these texts intersect with a future temporality. I call this future temporality “conditional” for several reasons. On one hand, the cross-racial alliances for which radical South Asian American texts called were, in practice, at times ephemeral, or even unrealized. Prashad attests to this challenge in *Karma*, arguing that solidarity is not a social necessity but, rather, “a desire, a promise, an aspiration.”⁵⁰ Here, I invoke the connotation of “conditional” as that which is tentative—promising, but uncertain. On the other hand, because such alliances eschew bonds based on national origin or phenotype, they complicate the representational framework of identity politics. “Conditional” thus also cites the necessity of developing a new vocabulary and conceptualization of diasporic community before making viable the full potential of cross-racial solidarity.

My understanding of the conditional is indebted, in particular, to Lisa Lowe’s theorization of a “past conditional temporality” in her recent essay, “The Intimacies of Four Continents.”⁵¹ In this piece, Lowe revisits colonial archives of housing and labor records, which reveal the lived and emotional proximity of Asian, African and native peoples in the colonial Caribbean. Highlighting the overlooked figure of the Chinese coolie, who was central to Britain’s racial management of labor after the abolishment of slavery in Trinidad, Lowe “supplements forgetting with new narratives of affirmation and presence.”⁵² She reads, within the spaces of the colonial archives, what historian Stephanie Smallwood describes as “what could have been.”⁵³ For Lowe, the ability to “imagine alternative knowledges” about the past intervenes in what she describes as the “emergence of the now”: present-day assumptions that liberalism renders freedom universal.⁵⁴

The texts upon which this dissertation focuses are, similarly, interested in recalling histories of resistance and alliance for their impact on the present. But I also see them as imagining future visions of diasporic community. For as scholars like José Muñoz have recently asserted, the future is an important temporal site for marginalized communities, as it is not bound by the pragmatist politics of the present. In particular, the future orientation of the works in this dissertation extend forward the pre-1965 histories that Lowe finds so compelling—histories that are, as the figure of the Chinese coolie, but also the Indian coolie, reminds us, increasingly forgotten and obscured by post-1965 narratives. Together, the texts in this dissertation thus illuminate what Kumar describes in *Passport Photos* as the force of cultural production that engenders solidarity. The power of culture to transform the social lies, Kumar argues, with “a political aesthetics that has the swing, the agility of history itself.”⁵⁵

Discourses of Community

In addition to transnationalism, temporality, diaspora, race, and aesthetics, the final critical theme with which this dissertation is in dialogue is, of course, that of community. I parse its significance for Asian American and South Asian diaspora studies, here, for any project that engages community as a critical concept must be careful to unpack the term’s ideological baggage. As Miranda Joseph suggests, community is often romanticized and taken for granted as a necessarily positive group formation. She explains:

Community is almost always invoked as an unequivocal good, an indicator of a high quality of life, a life of human understanding, caring, selflessness, belonging. One does one’s volunteer work in and for ‘the community.’ Communities are frequently said to emerge in times of crisis or tragedy, when people imagine

themselves bound together by a common grief or joined through some extraordinary effort. Among leftists and feminists, community has connoted cherished ideals of cooperation, equality, and communion.⁵⁶

The latter point is especially true for Asian American Studies, for which community has been, since the field's founding as a student-led grassroots movement, an ideal. My project thus productively complicates the critical conversation about the idealization and ideal of community within Asian American Studies by tracing its conscious—and conflicted—expression within South Asian American progressive art, criticism and activism.

The most popular paradigm of community within Asian American Studies is that of panethnicity, which describes the coming together of multiple ethnic groups under a single political identity. While this paradigm has created the foundation for the field, it has also prompted a number of revisions by scholars who have weighed the challenge of unifying varied national and ethnic populations. Yen Le Espiritu's foundational study, *Asian American Panethnicity*, establishes the way in which “pan-Asian ethnicity involves the creation of a common Asian American heritage out of diverse histories.”⁵⁷ Later scholarship has put pressure upon the assumption that this “common heritage” requires groups “unrelated in culture and descent [to] submerge their differences and assume a common identity”—a narrative that echoes the impulses of multiculturalism to contain differences.⁵⁸ In her field-shifting critique, *Immigrant Acts*, Lowe, for example, highlights the plurality, rather than the commonality, of Asian America: “...[I]t is...important to underscore Asian American heterogeneities—particularly class, gender, and national differences among Asians—to contribute to a dialogue within Asian American discourse, to point to the limitations inherent in a politics based on cultural,

racial, or ethnic identity.”⁵⁹ As the field has turned further away from its cultural nationalist roots, the figure of the panethnic subject, itself, has increasingly been written under erasure. Kandice Chuh’s *Imagine Otherwise*, for example, extends the discussion of the limitations that Lowe references in her statement above; Chuh deconstructs Asian American Studies as a “subjectless discourse,” one whose subject of reference is not ontological, but epistemological.⁶⁰

My own approach to community in this project builds upon the work of the Asian American theorists above. I extend their discussion of the hazards of community—and their critique of panethnic Asian American identity—by considering how heterogeneous South Asian American communities have been imagined and theorized through literature and film. The writers and artists I discuss consciously explore, in their work, how to form and define diasporic community, and how to contextualize this community within “a framework of contemporary movements for social change, social justice, and social struggle.”⁶¹ This framework produces an unmooring of diasporic group identity from its rooting in a common homeland; in progressive South Asian American cultural production, community instead becomes an incomplete and contradictory endeavor. Collectively, the texts that I discuss reach for an asymptotic ideal group formation—that which exists beyond the horizon of the present. They use the vocabulary of form and style to articulate, recalling Svati Shah’s formulation, “something” that “was getting consolidated.” I have returned to this word—“something”—throughout this introduction, because it recurs across creative and critical discourse from the nineties, and connotes the tenuous and speculative nature of the community that artists, activists and scholars both enacted and envisioned.⁶²

As I show, the autobiography, film, fiction and criticism produced during the premillennial decade moves beyond binary questions of whether South Asian diasporic community formation is “postcolonial” or “ethnic.” Eschewing such categorical questions, progressive cultural production seeks to narrate and illustrate the way that diasporic community is comprised of shared and overlapping histories—particularly those of colonialism and racism. This approach destabilizes the logic of roots or shared origins that shapes diasporic collectivity, and reaches across lines of difference to create a space of dialogue regarding the political and social tensions within the South Asian diaspora: class divides, sexism, homophobia, etc. As Joseph explains, this attention to difference is precisely what allows communities to offer an alternative site of belonging from capitalism. She explains: “the work of community is to generate and legitimate necessary particularities and social hierarchies (of gender race, nation, sexuality) implicitly required, but disavowed, by capitalism, a discourse of abstraction and equivalence.”⁶³ Joseph’s point highlights the way in which the paradigmatic form of community for the South Asian diaspora—the national assimilation of the model minority—remains complicit with capitalism, not only materially but also ideologically: the capitalist logic of upward mobility “is the very medium in which community is enacted” for much of the South Asian diaspora.⁶⁴

Speaking back to this community, the texts in my study push not only for Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans to come together under the more heterogeneous formation of “South Asian America”; they also insist on reaching beyond the diaspora to call for solidarity with other minority groups, particularly African Americans. The basis of this striving for Afro-Asian solidarity was, in large part, a critical refusal of the anti-

black racism that underwrites model minority discourse. As Prashad asserts, the success of South Asian Americans does not position desis as “simply a solution for black America but, most pointedly, a *weapon* deployed against it.”⁶⁵ Calls for solidarity countered this antagonistic social positioning, as I suggest in the preceding sections of this introduction, by recuperating the common link of resistance to British colonialism that was shared by African and South Asian diasporas.

While framing this solidarity through a conceptualization of difference positions it in tension with capitalism, doing so also bears the danger of producing another form of romanticization—one in which discrepant racial histories are collapsed. In other words, cross-racial alliance carries the same challenge as pan-ethnic solidarity: how to foster strategic solidarity, while preserving differences? Cultural production offers an important venue for wrestling with these challenges, for as Lowe insists, “it is only through culture that we conceive and enact new subjects and practices in antagonism to the regulatory locus of the citizen-subject....”⁶⁶ By bringing together a cross-generational and diverse set of artists and scholars, I seek to give full voice to the wide-ranging, multivalent conversation about race, belonging and justice that took place across progressive South Asian American literature, art and criticism in the closing decade of the twentieth century.

In closing, here, I should note that the chapters that follow are invariably inflected by my own participation in the progressive diasporic arts community of New York City. This project, after all, developed from an interest in theorizing the arts organizing with which I was involved as a Public Programs Director at the Asian American Writer’s Workshop, and which I have continued to engage as a Board Member of the South Asian

Women's Creative Collective. My experience with these organizations reaffirms the claim I put forth in this dissertation that community is a contested and evolving endeavor. My hope is that *Conditional Futures* opens up further possibilities of bringing the insights of material practices of organizing and activism to bear on ideas about community and community formation. I thus envision this study not as an esoteric exercise, but as actively dialoguing with the very community whose art and activism it seeks to capture and reflect, so as to foster intellectual exchange between the public and the academy.

Chapter Summaries

The transformation of the South Asian diaspora in New York City during the 1980s and 1990s, from a mainly middle-class population of Indian professionals to a community that included new migrants who took up visible roles in the urban service sector as taxi drivers, construction workers, and convenient store clerks, directly impacted the diasporic imagination of progressive South Asian American artists and writers. Accordingly, Chapter One: *City, Mirror, Self: The Urban Autobiographies of Vivek Bald and Meena Alexander* explores how socioeconomic diversification informs Alexander's *Fault Lines* (1993), a memoir that narrates her migrations across India, Sudan, England, and the U.S.; and Bald's *Taxi-Vala/Auto-Biography* (1994), an autobiographical documentary that explores his relationship to South Asian cab drivers with whom he works as a labor organizer. Bald and Alexander experiment with illustrations of city travel that I term "kinetic aesthetics" to narrate the dynamic transformation of their self- understanding as they intersect with New York City's

immigrant and racially diverse communities. Rather than represent diasporic subjectivity as produced by any single experience of dislocation, these autobiographies approach that subjectivity from street-level, as a *speculative* process dialectically shaped by urban routine. Alexander's lyrical language helps name these speculative politics, while Bald's conscientious attention to material differences underscores the class elisions in Alexander's work.

Where Meena Alexander and Vivek Bald embrace urban cosmopolitanism in their autobiographies, queer Indo-Trinidadian novelist Shani Mootoo complicates assumptions about the transformative promise of metropolitan space and mobility in her prose. A migrant to Canada, she questioned the ability of Toronto's South Asian arts activist community to fully comprehend or accommodate the radical difference of her diasporic subjectivity, which was strongly informed by the epistemological violence of Asian indentureship in the Caribbean. Chapter Two: *Queer Intergenerational Community in Shani Mootoo's Cereus Blooms at Night* thus turns to the novel that Mootoo was writing in the 1990s to explore how she advances a non-identitarian strategy of community building from within an identitarian movement. The anti-realist narrative of *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996) theorizes community as ephemeral and incomplete. Its fictive reimagining of Caribbean colonial history sheds light on Mootoo's rejection of a political identity like "South Asian American"; it reveals, as an alternative, a queer intergenerational dialogue—one that acknowledges and attends to the historical and cultural differences that threaten the very coherence of diasporic communities.

Chapter Three: *A Poetics of Solidarity: Aesthetics and Affect in Amitava Kumar's Passport Photos and Vijay Prashad's Karma of Brown Folk* moves to the end of the pre-

millennium decade to consider an interconnected pair of South Asian American left “manifestoes”: Amitava Kumar’s *Passport Photos* (2000) and Vijay Prashad’s *The Karma of Brown Folk* (2000). Considered seminal critiques in Asian American Studies for their advancement of Afro-Asian solidarity, *Karma* and *Passport* are generally read as secondary, critical texts. These books, however, contain a number of creative quirks—an interwoven mixture of poetry, prose and photographs; an oratorical tone; and structural imitations of significant texts related to race and nation: W.E.B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and the passport. I read these characteristics as producing an affect that asks us to supplement the material practice of coalition with collective historical consciousness and shared acts of imagining. These two texts develop and hone Bald’s and Alexander’s earlier interest in theorizing a socially utopian future. Moreover, they elaborate upon Mootoo’s attention to Caribbean histories of indenture by turning to Trinidad’s culturally and religiously mixed South Asian community as a diasporic ideal. Balancing its attention to the visionary spirit of this collection of texts, this chapter puts pressure on their romanticization of the heterogeneity of diaspora, a move that obscures more conflicted, complex relationships among overlapping diasporas, as well as South Asian subjects who are not—and cannot become—diasporic.

In the conclusion of this dissertation, *Postscript: Post-9/11*, I map the changing landscape of South Asian American cultural production in the early twenty-first century. Post-9/11 South Asian American cultural production enlarges the cross-racial paradigm of the 1990s, by aligning with the history and experience of Arab and Muslim Americans. My chapter illustrates this expansion by discussing Suheir Hammad’s poetic narration of Jason daSilva’s documentary, *Lest We Forget* (2003), which presents the World War II

internment of Japanese Americans as a cautionary lens for viewing post-9/11 homeland security policies. This collaborative project generates opportunities for a comparative ethnic approach to Asian American Studies—one that adapts the field’s “transnational turn” towards diasporic and global contexts as a means of tackling domestic questions of race and rights.

Endnotes

¹ The panel was held on April 9, 2007 at the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Institute and moderated by Deepti Hajela, a founding member of the South Asian Journalists Association. The panelists were: Madhulika Khandelwal, Director of the Asian/American Center at Queens College; Sayu Bhojwani, founder of South Asian Youth Action!; Geeta Citygirl, artistic director of SALAAM Theater; filmmaker Fariba Alam; and queer scholar and activist Svati Shah.

² Khandelwal writes in her acknowledgments: “By the mid-1990s I was part of an ‘invisible college’ of South Asian academics and activists in New York and elsewhere, including the historian Sucheta Mazumdar, the sociologist Margaret Abraham, the poet Meena Alexander, and the journalist Somini Sengupta.” This amalgam of creative writers, scholars and journalists signals the way in which such circles crossed in ways perhaps less likely today. *Becoming American, Being Indian: An Immigrant Community in New York* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002) xi.

³ Signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, the Hart-Celler Act extended Civil Rights legislation by equalizing immigration. It abolished the 1921 National Origins Formula, which imposed strict quotas on non-European immigration, and allowed for an unlimited number of Family Reunification visas for immigrants of any national origin.

⁴ *America’s Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005, 2.

⁵ “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” Reprinted in *Asian American Studies: A Reader*, Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu and Min Song (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000) 158-163.

⁶ *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002) 146.

⁷ *India Abroad* is a weekly periodical that is circulated mainly to diasporic homes across the U.S. It regularly features and focuses upon business and educational achievements of Indian Americans.

⁸ D’Souza was a staple on political talk shows throughout the 1990s, and a vociferous critic of affirmative action, an issue that he addressed in several books he published during the decade, including *Illiberal Education* (1991) and *The End of Racism* (1995). I further discuss the way he operates as a political foil for Vijay Prashad in Chapter Three.

⁹ As Tamara Bhalla writes, the fiction of authors like Lahiri and Divakaruni “often evoke[s] a particularly middle and upper class sensibility.” *Between History and Identity: Reading the Authentic in South Asian Diasporic Literature and Community*, Diss, University of Michigan, 2008, 17.

¹⁰ The Ghadar Party was a militant nationalist political group based in India and with branches across the diaspora. Its diasporic members garnered financial and political support for the overthrow of the British Empire. For a detailed history of Ghadar activity on the west coast, see Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1994).

¹¹ *Taxi-Vala/Auto-Biography*, dir. Vivek Bald, VHS, 1994.

¹² Here I reference Vijay Mishra's terminology. He defines old diasporas as those shaped by contracted labor migration under colonialism. "New" diasporas are those of "late modern capital." These are "largely a post-1960s phenomenon distinguished by the movement of economic migrants (but also refugees) into the metropolitan centers of the former empire as well as the 'New World' and Australia." Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 235.

¹³ See Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Andrew Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh, eds., *The Afro-Asian Century*, spec. issue of *Positions* 11.1 (2003); Bill Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2004); Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen, eds., *Afro-Asian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics* (New York: NYU Press, 2006); and Bill Mullen and Fred Ho, eds., *Afro Asia: Revolutionary Political and Cultural Connections between African Americans and Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008).

¹⁴ *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009, 2.

¹⁶ *Granta 57: India! The Golden Jubilee* (Spring 1997) and *The New Yorker* (June 23 & 30, 1997).

¹⁷ Rushdie, "Damme, This is the Oriental Scene For You!," *The New Yorker* (June 23 & 30, 1997): 50.

¹⁸ Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, "Introduction," Lowe and Lloyd, eds., *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital* (1997), 1.

¹⁹ Lowe and Lloyd, 1.

²⁰ Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002) 2.

²¹ Biju Mathew, *Taxi!: Cabs and Capitalism in New York City* (New York: New Press, 2005) 117.

²² Monisha Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism, and Transnational South Asian Politics in the United States* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006) 9.

²³ Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991).

²⁴ Ibid, 9.

²⁵ Mathew, *Taxi!*, 121.

²⁶ Vivek Bald, "Appropriating Technology," interview with Alondra Nelson and Thuy Linh N. Tu, Nelson and Tu, eds, *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life* (New York: NYU Press, 2001) 88-99.

²⁷ See Richard D. Alba et al, "Neighborhood Change under Conditions of Mass Immigration: The New York City Region, 1970-1990," *International Migration Review* 29.3 (Fall 1995): 625-656.

²⁸ An unexamined aspect of the Dotbusters campaign is its particularly gendered expression of xenophobia, as the "dot" against which attackers directed their outrage references the *bindhi*, a religious symbol worn on the foreheads of married Hindu women.

²⁹ Letter to the *Jersey Journal*, September 2, 1987. Quoted in Deborah N. Misir, "The Murder of Navroze Mody: Race, Violence, and the Search for Order." *Amerasia Journal* 22.2 (1996): 55-75.

³⁰ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States From the 1960s to the 1990s*, Second Ed. (New York: Routledge, 1994) 145.

³¹ Misir, 60.

³² Here, I borrow Yen Le Espiritu's term, which describes pan-Asian counter-organizing in response to acts of anti-Asian violence. *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992) 134.

³³ Khandelwal, *Becoming American, Being Indian: An Immigrant Community in New York City* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002), 160-180.

³⁴ Jenny Sharpe, "Is the United States Postcolonial?" Transnationalism, Immigration, and Race." *Diaspora* 4.2 (1995): 181-99.

³⁵ See Naheed Islam, "In the Belly of the Multicultural Beast I Am Named South Asian," *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993) 242-246.

³⁶ Mathew and Prashad, eds., *Satyagraha in America: The Political Culture of South Asians in the U.S.*, Spec. Issue of *Amerasia Journal* 25.3 (2000): x.

³⁷ Political parties such as the Vishwa Hindu Parasad, which was founded in 1964 shortly after India's independence, presented a right-wing nationalist platform that centered Hinduism within Indian culture and history. Capitalizing on rising communal tensions between Hindus and Muslims on the subcontinent, the party gained considerable ground in elections during the 1990s and, as Amit Rai argues, also draws online support from diasporic populations invested in preserving Hindu tradition in their homeland and abroad. Amit Rai, "India On-Line: Electronic Bulletin Boards and the Construction of a Diasporic Hindu Identity," *Diaspora* 4.1 (1995): 31-57.

³⁸ Lowe and Lloyd, eds. *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, 3.

³⁹ "Introduction," *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature*. Xiaojing Zhou and Samina Najmi, eds. (Seattle: U. Washington Press, 2005) 4.

⁴⁰ Jane Singh, foreword to *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Women of South Asian Descent Collective (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993) vii.

⁴¹ Eds. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth, *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America* (Pittsburgh: Temple UP, 1998) ix-x.

⁴² Ibid 42.

⁴³ See Biju Mathew and Vijay Prashad, eds. *Satyagraha in America: The Political Culture of South Asian Americans*, spec. issue of *Amerasia Journal* 25.3 (2000); Bakirathi Mani, "Destination Culture," *SAMAR* 14 (2001); Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005); Monisha DasGupta, *Unruly Immigrants: Rights, Activism and Transnational South Asian Politics in the U.S.* (Durham: Duke UP, 2006); and Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).

⁴⁴ "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed., Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990) 225, emphasis added.

⁴⁵ See Zhou Xiaojing and Samina Najmi, *Form and Transformation in Asian American Literature* (Seattle, UW Press, 2005); Rocio G. Davis and Sue-Im Lee, eds., *Literary*

Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006); Josephine Park, *Apparitions of Asia Modernist Form and Asian American Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008) and Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry since 1965* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁴⁶ “Introduction,” Davis and Sue-Im Lee, eds., *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006) 2.

⁴⁷ Ibid 4.

⁴⁸ Jack Zipes, “Introduction,” Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, Trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) xii.

⁴⁹ Bloch has also been taken up by José Muñoz in his recent project about the relationship among queerness, art and futurity, which I discuss at greater length in Chapter Two. See *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

⁵⁰ *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 197.

⁵¹ In *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, Ann Laura Stoler, ed. (Durham: Duke UP 2006) 208.

⁵² Ibid 207.

⁵³ Ibid 208.

⁵⁴ Ibid 208.

⁵⁵ *Passport Photos* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2000) 236.

⁵⁶ Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2002) vii.

⁵⁷ *Asian American Panethnicity*, 17.

⁵⁸ Ibid 3.

⁵⁹ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 68.

⁶⁰ Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian American Critique* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003) 9.

⁶¹ Russell Leong, “The Momentum of Struggle: South Asian Movements in the United States,” *Satyagraha in America: The Political Culture of South Asian Americans*, spec. issue of *Amerasia Journal* 25.3 (1999/2000): v.

⁶² Part of the impetus for this speculative approach to community arose from the experiences of community-based organizing itself. As Das Gupta recounts in her study of South Asian American social justice organizing, friction frequently arose among leaders of groups as their organizations evolved. Community activism was thus less consistent or constant than organic, splintering and personality-driven. Das Gupta, *Unruly Immigrants*, 9.

⁶³ Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community*, xxxii.

⁶⁴ Ibid, xxxii.

⁶⁵ *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 7.

⁶⁶ *Immigrant Acts*, 22.

CHAPTER ONE

City, Mirror, Self: The Urban Autobiographies of Meena Alexander and Vivek Bald

In the spring of 1993, poet and novelist Meena Alexander published her memoir, *Fault Lines*, through the Feminist Press. Developed during Alexander's position as a writer-in-residence and faculty associate at Columbia University's Center for American Culture Studies, *Fault Lines* interweaves childhood memories with scholarly reflection, incorporating several essays that Alexander presented at Area Studies and Ethnic Studies conferences.¹ It is partly because of this multigeneric character that Alexander describes her book as a series of "fragmented landscapes"; her memoir project recalls memories of her youth in Kerala and immigration to the U.S., focusing especially on her relationship to her American hometown of New York City.²

Over the same period that Alexander was developing her memoir and participating in critical symposia, independent filmmaker Vivek Bald was gathering phone numbers from New York's South Asian taxi drivers with whom he came into contact, in preparation for his experimental documentary about "newer immigrants from South Asia."³ Unlike the South Asian immigrant professionals who settled in U.S. suburbs during the sixties and seventies, this new wave of South Asian immigrants arrived in the 1980s, on the heels of major shifts in the global economy, and sought out service-sector jobs in newsstands, construction sites, restaurants, and the taxi industry. Interested in the experiences of this working-class community of immigrants, Bald turned to the small stack of scrap paper he had amassed over the past few years, and began calling back and interviewing the drivers he had met. Following three years of

production and editing, Bald's completed film, *Taxi-vala/Auto-biography*, premiered at the Whitney Museum's 1994 Fall exhibit, "From India to America: New Directions in Indian American Film and Video." Despite its dissimilar media form, and the fact that it sought to tell a story that deviated from the middle-class narrative that characterizes Alexander's reflections, the urban preoccupation and thematic content of Bald's film surprisingly resonates with the memoir that Alexander had published just a year before.

This chapter purposely compares these two South Asian American texts, which are often read independently due to their distinct generational positions and styles of representation. For the shared interest between Bald's and Alexander's work in diaspora, placelessness, class and race suggests the kinds of political intimacies that were fostered in metropolitan diasporas through a proximity among intellectual and aesthetic innovation and social justice efforts during the 1990s. By placing these two artists next to each other in my chapter, I do not suggest that they collaborated or worked directly together in New York. Instead, I position Bald's film next to Alexander's memoir so as to open up an innovative analytic approach that attends to their common engagement with self-reflection and the autobiographical mode. My juxtaposition of Bald and Alexander is thus neither meant to run comparisons between Alexander and Bald, nor to celebrate one artist's politics over that of the other; instead, my chapter uses one artist to illuminate the shadowed issues in the other's work.

In particular, I argue that Alexander and Bald each reframe their self-representation by self-consciously employing metaphors and images of visual record and reflection. In their autobiographical documentary and memoir, Alexander and Bald play with film, still images and mirrors to engage questions of both how one sees oneself, and

how one is seen. The pair's shared interest in visibility and reflection thus engages not only a connection across their differing media forms, but also a convergence through genre. This move might be understood through Walter Benjamin's delineation, in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," of an interconnected relationship among film, consciousness and the realm of the visible. Film's recasting of our familiar environment in relative close-up, he argues, explodes the boundaries between work and home space that order and determine the "prison-world" of industrial routine.⁴ This produces, by consequence, two striking effects for modern consciousness: "on the one hand, [film] extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action."⁵ Adapting Benjamin's points about film, we can read the texts' visually-framed meta-commentaries on the practice of autobiography as, in turn, making "visible" the systems of power that shape diasporic subjectivity, while also drawing attention to resistant and unexpected social and historical bonds that agitate against these systems.

Bald's and Alexander's interest in self-representation draws upon and responds to their attention to everyday life in New York City. By casting their self-reflections across the dynamic, moving "screen" of New York, at a time when South Asian Americans were caught in the crossfire of a simultaneously racist and xenophobic political backlash,⁶ Bald and Alexander locate their self-perceptions as necessarily reshaped following their engagement with the city's overlapping diasporas. By exploring daily encounters that make them aware of the politics of embodiment and sight, Bald and Alexander produce a "way of seeing" that illuminates not a ghostly past,⁷ but projects a conditional future, a "what could be." Consequently, rather than read Bald's or Alexander's self-

representation as animated by an individuated model of cultural identity or personal memory, I see them as highly *speculative* forecasts of the political possibilities for South Asian American identity and identification—ones that reveal what Benjamin might describe as “entirely new structural formations” of the South Asian American subject.⁸ In this way, I read their work as not just autobiographical, but also as *auto-critical*, as rethinking South Asian American community from within.

A self-reflexive documentary that explores the lives of the South Asian working-class, *Taxi-vala* weaves together voiceovers addressing Bald’s second-generation, multiracial identity (as half Scottish Australian and half Indian) and interviews Bald conducts with New York’s South Asian drivers. Because of its journalistic interests, some of the film remains in keeping with what we might consider to be conventional documentary representation: driver interviews, footage of a union-organized 1993 anti-violence demonstration, and images that represent iconic New York City spaces at the moments that they are mentioned in driver interviews (fig. 2). The majority of the film’s visual content, however, is more abstract and distorted, consisting of blurred and jostled footage of New York’s streets and taxis, and occasionally, Bald himself. Bald describes this stylized aesthetic approach as driven by an effort “to capture [the] sense of being in the city as a driver...constantly moving through [New York’s] urban landscape.”⁹

Certainly, the film’s repetitive visuals convey the sense of a driver’s well-treaded route, repeatedly passing across the bridges that connect Manhattan, as a space of work, with the surrounding boroughs in which most drivers live. In this way, the motion of the film is “constant” in that it is both mobile and fixed, returning again and again to what



Figure 2. Journalistic footage of a driver in Bald's *Taxi-Vala/Auto-Biography*.

seem to be the same city sites. But literally presented at the speed of a moving cab, Bald's footage of streetscapes and bridges is also consistently disorienting—generally placeable, but defying the impulse to identify exactly which street, neighborhood or highway is featured on screen.

We might begin to think of *Taxi-vala*'s visuals, and their depiction of the driver's relationship to the city as a worker, as directly resonant with a point that Benjamin makes in his work on the shock cities induce through their overstimulation of the senses.¹⁰ As he suggests, film and labor are connected practices, in that they, like the city, feature "shocks" as a structuring principle. "That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of repetition in...film," he states.¹¹ Benjamin's attending point, that film produces a newly perceiving, but

anaesthetized and distracted, viewer aptly characterizes Bald's film. As a recent student audience noted, the film's kinetic aesthetics make it literally difficult to watch since viewers are required to balance their focus on the driver's commentary and Bald's voiceover narration, even though these narrative voices do not always correspond with what we see on screen. As my discussion of Bald's work will show, however, it is precisely *within* this disjuncture between the film's autobiographical narration and its self-conscious aesthetics that its politics lie.

Autobiography, Obscured

Once he began work on *Taxi-vala/Auto-biography*, Bald became involved with New York's South Asian taxi worker's union, a project of the Coalition Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAAAY) known as the Lease Drivers' Coalition (LDC). Bald served as an assistant to the then head organizer, Saleem Osman, working closely with Osman's efforts to unite a diverse group of South Asian men around the issue of workers' rights. As one of the organizing members of the LDC, Biju Mathew, explains in an early essay, the organization's imperative to speak across the national and religious differences of their mass base offers a provocative model for refiguring immigrant identity politics. For Mathew, the union's launch of a trilingual magazine, *Peela Paiya* ("Yellow Wheel"), in English, Urdu and Bengali, best illustrates this refiguring, tying together Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian drivers through a discussion of "material cab driver problems," such as discrimination, police harassment and intergroup racism.¹² As Mathew explains, *Peela Paiya*'s attention to racism and collective worker interests signaled a "dual trend,

of inward consolidation of identity (South Asian) and a simultaneous movement outwards toward other groups.”¹³

Taxi-vala picks up on the broad class-based approach adopted by the LDC and its magazine, grounding Bald’s self-reflections against the challenges of forging a sense of community with the drivers. In particular, Bald’s autobiographical voiceovers stage a series of self-reflections that situate the taxicab as a mobile node of intersections among race, class and immigration. Eager to understand South Asian working-class experience in New York, Bald begins his filmmaking process by viewing himself and the drivers he interviews as comprising a shared diasporic community, despite their differences. “I won’t admit,” he confesses in a voiceover describing his first meeting with a driver named Ahmed, “that while my mother and Ahmed share a birthplace, Ahmed and I may not share anything at all.” As Bald’s documentary proceeds to make clear, the seemingly straightforward nature of his project—to meet and connect with drivers—is sharply undercut by a range of differences between himself and his film’s subjects, not the least of which is the constitutive obstacle of class difference.

I present class as a “constitutive” obstacle in *Taxi-vala* to indicate the way it profoundly reshaped the reflexive nature of Bald’s film. As Bald has explained in interviews, *Taxi-vala*’s focus on class influenced his autobiographical approach because it caused him to realize “just how much I was tangled up in the story I was trying to tell.”¹⁴ More closely aligned with a middle-class community of South Asian Americans than the recently arrived working-class subjects of his film, Bald found it necessary to depart from standard journalistic documentary approaches and “address my own position of power in terms of representation.”¹⁵ This process-based approach is reflected in the

content and trajectory of Bald's voiceovers, which less tell his own life story, than periodically rethink both his complicated relationship with the drivers he interviews, and his consequently altered conception of community.¹⁶ Indeed, the voiceovers only make mention of Bald's personal life and family ancestry as they figure into his conflicts and miscommunication with the drivers. Nor do we ever see an image of Bald speaking into the camera, or speaking about himself while holding the camera, as is otherwise typical of autodocumentary style.¹⁷ Instead, we glimpse a few fragmented and distorted shots of Bald's face appearing from behind a taxicab partition, or while walking on the street and turning toward the camera, as if he has just been made aware that he is being filmed.

As becomes clear through this fragmentation, the autobiographical impulse of Bald's film is as unconventional as its documentary impulse. One might even say that *Taxi-vala*'s self-definition as an "autobiography" is a false one. First, there exists a generic impossibility imposed by the medium of film itself, which forbids that "the same person can be both the figure on the screen and the one whose consciousness is registering that figure."¹⁸ Film's distortions of the traditionally literary genre of autobiography are not the only reason Bald's self-reflection is unconventional, however. As his process-based approach makes clear, *Taxi-vala*'s autobiographical framing provides a *strategy* for representing conflicts that arose around the politics of the drivers' work—those related to race and gender in particular—without presenting racism and sexism as somehow particular to the working-class. Bald's self-critical voiceovers, then, name the challenges Bald faced during the making of the film, and also seek to present these very challenges as the location of the film's politics. He states: "I felt the best way for me to address all of [these conflicts] was to personalize [each] issue and take it on my

own shoulders, and to talk about some of the moments when I had participated in racism, or had participated in silences around it.”¹⁹

That Bald’s voiceovers attempt to do a lot of work, addressing not only his personal relationship with the drivers but also issues that cut across the South Asian community, is apparent in Bald’s introduction into the space of the film itself. Where the film opens with drivers’ voices, Bald’s first speaking moment raises embodiment and representation as central issues in his complicated negotiation of diasporic community. About five minutes into the film, clips of drivers speaking about their decision to leave their countries of origin cuts to a slow motion, close-up shot of a taxi dashboard, foregrounded against blurred stoplights and oncoming headlights visible through the windshield. Bald announces, “It’s 2 a.m. I flag down a taxi to go back uptown to my apartment near Columbia University. I get in, looking as usual at the name on the hack license up front—Ahmed Khan: I make a guess he’s from Pakistan.” If the driver in this scene is generally identifiable to Bald as Pakistani based on his appearance and name, Bald’s Indianness is, by contrast, initially *illegible* to the driver because of his appearance. Prompting the driver to “turn all the way around to look at me” by asking him a question in Urdu, Bald narrates his appearance for his audience from the driver’s perspective: “I’m sitting in the back seat with my shaggy dark hair, light skin and eyes, American clothes, voice, mannerisms, speaking in Urdu, and he asks me how it is that I know this language.”

The visuals accompanying this voiceover frustrate the viewer’s impulse to see Bald on film, a point emphasized by the fact that Bald does not edit this voiceover over a shot of him actually sitting in a taxi’s backseat (a shot that comes later, when Bald

addresses gender conflict). Instead, as Bald narrates his encounter with Ahmed, the image on screen is a close-up shot of the glowing red LED display of a taxi's meter, hovering in the lower left-hand corner of the screen (fig. 3). The details that Bald reports sharing with Ahmed—of his mother's birth in Lahore, his interest in making a film about non-professional immigrants from South Asia—are supplemented by the visual confrontation of the meter, its fare ticking higher and higher, a reminder of the class-based distance between Bald and Ahmed. Bald highlights this distance in his voiceover, dramatically emphasizing Ahmed's reaction to his documentary idea by cutting away from the meter shot after he states: "Ahmed is not impressed or enthusiastic—more than anything, he seems suspicious." By thus framing his first encounter with a driver as one marked by misrecognition and suspicion, Bald sets up the running narrative of his film as engaging the negotiations of difference that Brent Edwards terms the "practice of diaspora."²⁰ *Taxi-vala's* narrative, then, lies neither with the lives of the various drivers or Bald's own story alone, but within the conflicted space of their relationship to one another.

The backslash that marks the film's title gestures toward this complexity, positioning the labor-based identity of the drivers as simultaneously connected to, yet differentiated from, the autobiographical quality of Bald's project. At the same time, the hyphenated self-reflexive "taxi-vala" (which translates as "taxi driver" or, more colloquially, "taxi guy") mimics the hyphenation of "auto-biography," a move that emphasizes the latter as both a genre marker and a kind of pun, signaling the film's literal attention to the work-related biographies of drivers.



Figure 3. "...separated by a taxi meter and a Plexiglas partition."

What Bald jokingly refers to as the "dashes and slashes" of his title invite yet another layer of meaning, however—to see Bald's autobiography and the drivers' "autobiographies" as *both* reframed in the process of making the film. In other words, to consider the drivers' own identifications and positionality as deconstructed and refigured in response to the constraints of their labor. As Mathew insists, this approach lies at the heart of the production of political alliance across difference: "the material condition of existence is what produces the possibility for a speculative politics of identity."²¹ In making clear the importance of the film's formal technique for its political meaning, this reconsolidation of identity is expressed not directly, but rather through the discrepancies

between the film's narrative and its visuals—a discrepancy realized not only in the film's first voiceover, but from the very moment of its opening sequence.

Framing a busy landscape, *Taxi-vala*'s initial scene features the Brooklyn Bridge stretching beyond the hood of a moving taxi. Alternating between color and black and white, this peripheral image portrays the city skyline overlaid by a web of suspension wires. The light and shadow of the cityscape flash on screen in two-second intervals, evenly interspersed with the film's title sequence: a series of black screens across which the film's title and Bald's name appear in simple white letters. When the film cuts back from Bald's name to its establishing shot, the iconic arches of the bridge loom, in full color, above the taxi's hood, and a driver—the first speaking voice we hear in the film—begins to describe the back-story to his arrival in New York: “I’m the eldest one, and I was supposed to take care of the family. But in my country, there was very less chances I could do that, so I decided to leave my country.”

During the driver's opening statement about his decision to leave for America, his voice remains displaced from a conventional “talking-head” shot of him speaking, and is visually associated instead with the image of the bridge itself. As a result, the “I” of the driver is tied as much to his urban space of work, as to his personal story of migration. In thus referencing the drivers' own complex narratives, the “autobiographical” quality of Bald's film simultaneously foregrounds and obscures Bald as a subject. This intermixed representation of Bald and the drivers begins to stage the film's self-reflexive movement from a singular subject (“I”) to a collective one (“we”), as I will discuss shortly. The resulting incongruity between the visual and narrative references to movement in this scene (the driver speaks about “leav[ing] my country” while we watch a taxi approaching

Manhattan) figure a reassociation of migratory movement, such that Bald and the drivers begin to be connected within the space of the city and across their differing histories. If diasporic movement is conventionally thought of as taking place among a series of geographic nodes or switching points,²² then Bald's film addresses what Rajini Srikanth describes as the "too glib" assumption, espoused by Arjun Appadurai and other scholars studying contemporary global mobility, that "individuals possess few ties to specific geographies and sites or exhibit no deep-seated commitments to particular civic spaces."²³ Drawing our eye to the issue of travel *within* the postnational node of New York, Bald positions diaspora's transformational mobility as a continual and daily occurrence, happening not just across national borders, but also at street-level.

If the city as a material, shifting landscape makes legible the shifting "I's" of Bald's film, critics' focus on generational diasporic frameworks have, by contrast, fixed the autobiographical thrust of the film as an interest in a more static representation of identity. Though otherwise attentive to aesthetic nuance in her capacious study of South Asian American literature and film, Srikanth reads *Taxi-vala* at the level of plot, as "a search for insiderness [that] is ultimately thwarted."²⁴ Acknowledging the difficulty of his identification with the drivers, she argues, leads Bald to forego an attempt "to bridge the chasms [between them] because he comes to realize that they are too wide."²⁵ If Srikanth's reading situates Bald's voiceovers as personally motivated, S. Shankar's further overlooks the performative nature of Bald's narration, presenting it as, at best, a commendable exercise in navel-gazing. "What saves Bald's sometimes overly involved self-portrayal," he argues, "is the honesty of the presentation, the willingness to uncover naiveté and ignorance."²⁶ Though these readings identify qualities that aptly describe

Bald's self-reflection (its painstaking—and sometimes painful—tone of diplomacy and complicity), their focus on the film's narrative, at the expense of its visual complexity, leads them to misread Bald's voiceovers as personally representative rather than strategically speculative. As I contend in this chapter, an aesthetic attention to Bald's autobiography is therefore necessary to elucidate the film's projective, rather than introspective, voicing. In order to better understand this point, it might be helpful to turn to the genealogy of the film's aesthetics, one that derives from Bald's own activist history.

Before coming to film, Bald developed his aesthetic and political sensibility largely by experiencing the experimental film and music scene in his hometown of Santa Cruz, California. Both a major stop on Jamaican reggae tour circuits and a key punk/post-punk center, Santa Cruz exposed Bald to the politics of musical technology. Through the Third World liberation messages of seventies reggae artists and punk's DIY ("do it yourself") approach to cultural production, Bald developed an appreciation for cultural media's ability to politically engage a wide audience using borrowed and appropriated resources.²⁷ The punk filmmakers whom Bald avidly followed underscored this approach, with David Markey's and Don Letts's shaky, lo-fi concert footage resonating with the grainy photographs Bald was himself producing and developing at the time.²⁸

This aesthetic, represented in *Taxi-vala* through Bald's use of Super 8 film, supplements Bald's narrated self-consciousness about the political implications of his film-making process. The choice to incorporate Super 8 into the documentary, and mix it with video, formed what Bald calls his "most conscious aesthetic decision."²⁹ Because

he loved the look of the form, Bald borrowed cameras and coordinated with friends in the film industry to periodically “take a cab for twenty minutes around the city and shoot B-roll footage” on film.³⁰ As with the use of this film format in Markey’s and Letts’s work, Super 8 produces, in *Taxi-vala*, an energetic and gritty aesthetic evocative of old home movies. In this way, the incorporation of Super 8 into the documentary draws attention to the medium of film itself; during the moments of Super 8 footage, you are especially aware that you are watching a recorded image, as opposed to the relative transparency of the video footage, which presents a clearer “live” image. Cutting and interspersing these two forms, Bald juxtaposes his own narration with that of the drivers, with driver interviews themselves spliced and re-edited to present the diversity of driver perspectives regarding the challenges and benefits of their job. The combined video and film footage that comprises *Taxi-vala* not only represents a diversity of opinion, but also works to recall DIY’s anti-establishment practice of compiling fragments into an idiosyncratic, collage-like whole.³¹

If *Taxi-vala* traces the movement between Bald’s conflicted distance from the drivers he interviews and his “transformed understanding of community,”³² then the practice of mixing video and film speaks to the dialectical process by which Bald comes to this transformation. During the aforementioned taxi meter scene, Bald follows his narration of Ahmed’s suspicious response to his project with clips of drivers describing the ways in which they are judged by middle-class suburban counterparts: “They think we’re illiterate, right?”; “They think they’re better than us, more American.” As the voiceover cuts back to the ticking taximeter, we understand these driver interjections as themselves supplementing and complicating Bald’s narration. Even as he attempts to

move towards a “we” in his film, then, Bald acknowledges, through his editing, his place in the drivers’ “they.”³³ “As I start to shoot, I want to believe [Ahmed and I are] connected,” Bald comments at the end of the voiceover, “though we grew up in different nations, religions, histories, and here in New York, we’re separated by a taximeter and a Plexiglas partition.” I read these two symbols of economic division not as announcing a failure of Bald’s project to connect to a working-class community that he feels will politicize him, but as marking the reorientation of that politicization, such that Bald begins to imagine building together “something new” across the South Asian diaspora.

Something New

The center point of *Taxi-vala*, and what I read as a turning point in the film in accordance with the interests of this chapter, is not a video/film collage but a long voiceover narrated over a three-minute sequence of black and white shots of passing storefronts and side streets. In the voiceover, Bald revisits his connection and difference with Ahmed, while the visuals physically draw the viewer’s eye toward the rapidly-moving landscape at the frame’s periphery. The narration, following drivers’ own tales of arrival in New York, presents Bald’s wish to move to India as parallel to Ahmed’s own hopes of diasporic return. Both men came to the city, Bald explains, with plans to stay temporarily and “return” to the subcontinent:

When I first came to New York, I only planned to stay for two or three years. Since I was eighteen or nineteen years old, I had planned to go back to India, where most of my mother’s family still lived. Yes I was born in the U.S., but I didn’t want to call myself American. In my mind, America stood for violence, arrogance, hypocrisy, and greed. So ignoring my birth here, my whole childhood here, and a much-loved side of my own family, which was from California, Australia, and before that Scotland, I chose India as my ‘place of origin.’ I imagined India as America’s polar opposite. I saw it as the place of my true roots,

my true politics, my true home. So all I had to do was ‘go back’ and everything would be all right.

After a brief beat, Bald describes Ahmed’s story as a mirror of his own:

When Ahmed first came to New York, he also planned to stay for two or three years. He tells me every movie, magazine and rumor seemed to say the same thing—that all he had to do was come to America, work hard for a while and he could become rich. He could return to Pakistan in just a couple years with dollars in his pocket, then open his own business there, start something solid, and everything would be all right.

The narrative parallel between these two stories suggests the way in which they are, as Bald says later on, “two sides of the same myth”—that of a transformational endpoint (and in Ahmed’s case, a throughpoint) in a trajectory of diasporic migration. But Bald’s mirrored pair of stories also enables him to signal the way in which he and Ahmed “intersected, collided, in this city.” Marked not only by a common myth, but also by a shared disidentification from the U.S. as a country that does not signify a “place of origin,” Bald and Ahmed’s collision produces a revelation about community for Bald. For though both hoped to “return” to India, Bald notes that “now it’s five years later and we’re both still in New York. There was no magic India, no miracle America. So the question is: what are we making here in this place to which we’ve come?”

Perhaps the first thing to notice about this comparison between Bald’s and Ahmed’s temporary exile in New York is its elision of the differences in their positions of power regarding mobility. For Ahmed, his remaining in New York is part of a cyclical condition of global labor, in which, as another driver in the film explains, one has debts or financial needs at home that require one to work abroad. Yet, because global laborers are rarely able to earn enough in the U.S. to be able to return permanently, they become trapped in a cycle of making temporary and periodical visits to family back home.

Mathew describes this condition as a consequence of the privatization of New York City's Taxi and Limousine Commission under Mayor Giuliani, a move which "reinvent[ed] the yellow cab with the global city's white middle-class comfort as its main goal."³⁴ Bald's continued residence in New York, untied to any comparable financial obligation is, by contrast, a personal choice (he moved to New York to pursue a graduate degree in film). So why does Bald, in a film that otherwise makes its consciousness about such power differences explicit, construct this parallel?

The response to this question picks up on my earlier point about the film's narrative travel from "I" to "we." Throughout preceding voiceovers, Bald consistently uses the "I" as his self-referent, signaling his differentiation and individuality apart from the drivers he interviews. In other words, his previous voiceovers are conventionally reflective in that they meditate on his personal process as a filmmaker. In this voiceover, however, the "intersection" that Bald narratively stages produces a discursive expansion of the reflexive subject of his film: "what are *we* making in this place to which we've come?"

Accordingly, the scene's passing cityscape, whipping by on the periphery, does not represent Bald's narration of being "stuck"—in fact it conveys the opposite: a fast-paced traversal of the city's streets (fig. 4). Thinking back to Benjamin's sense of the shock of film as anesthetic, such a reading especially applies here. As we listen to Bald's story, we watch the city, but only in a distracted way, not paying close attention to exactly what neighborhood or type of store and brownstone we're seeing on film because of our focus on Bald's narrative. However, the moment of Bald's pronouncement of "we" and "this city" causes a brief break in this distraction, such that you are made aware

of the images you see on screen—what might be called a moment of alert consciousness or revelation. The passing scenery of New York works with Bald’s narration, then, to figure Bald’s articulation of a communal self—a “we”—as an eruption that appears in a moment of danger—a flashing vision of a possible future.³⁵

In keeping with the emergent character of the “we,” Bald’s narration quickly retreats back to the I. “Or maybe the question I have to ask,” he concludes, correcting his prior point about his and Ahmed’s shared responsibility, “is whether I’m seeking the same authenticity I once sought from India in a community of working South Asian men in New York, or whether I’m trying to create something new.” Notably, Bald breaks out of his otherwise pensive, evenly-cadenced tone when speaking this sentence, emphasizing, in particular, the phrase “something *new*.” This emphasis suggests that it is



Figure 3. “What are *we* making in this place to which we’ve come?”

indeed the latter point towards which Bald's film, and his thinking about community, leans. As I have been suggesting, Bald's effort to think across his and Ahmed's class and labor-based differences is framed vaguely, as "something new," because of its speculative nature, the fact that it gestures towards a future for which we have, as of yet, no language.

Though this speculative gesture—what Mathew calls a "reaching outward"—is based, within the context of the LDC, on a class-based politics that recognizes the racial formation of labor in the U.S., Bald's phrasing also implicates his own process of filmmaking.³⁶ For the very instabilities of subjectivity that attend the translation of autobiography from the medium of writing to that of film effect a subversion and revision of subjectivity in *Taxi-vala*. As Elizabeth Bruss puts it, the dissociation of the speaking "I" from the body (and in Bald's case, an obscured displacement away from that body and onto the city) produces "a new, articulate assemblage, a fresh construction of elements never before juxtaposed...the whole diffuse and fuse again into yet other configurations."³⁷ Bald seeks these effects of instability as essential to his project of establishing a new community, as we see in the latter half of *Taxi-vala*.

Sideview

During the making of *Taxi-vala*, the taxi was not only a personally resonant locus of intersections across race and class, but a publicly resonant one as well. With anti-immigrant violence on the rise, driver attacks and deaths became a regularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In response, a select group of drivers, picking up on stereotypes of black pathology, began to lobby for the right of "rider refusal," a regulation that would

allow them to pass up any passengers who they believed looked dangerous.³⁸ Frustration and outrage on the part of black and Latino communities clashed with that of drivers, with the yellow taxi becoming a racially-charged symbol that signified a frustrating inaccessibility to basic resources.

In response to this rising tension, one that undermined the LDC's speculative politics of alliance, the organization coordinated an anti-violence demonstration in October of 1993, which reframed anti-driver violence as stemming not from a stereotype of black criminality, but from police brutality and irresponsibility. Himself a victim of a false arrest during his youth, in which he was jailed and later tried for a crime he did not commit, Bald identified with the drivers' frustration with harassment and injustice. This implicit connection is referenced in the title of Bald's production company, "Mistaken Identity," a name that speaks both to Bald's light-skinned appearance and an event that he describes as "the single most formative event for my politics and political engagement in the years that followed."³⁹ By connecting the trauma of his arrest to the political dimensions of *Taxi-vala*'s attention to racial conflict and police brutality, Bald produces a *psychically* resonant self-reflection within his film. Saleem Osman acknowledges this connection during his interview, commenting, "I know it happened to you when you were seventeen," before detailing his and his fellow drivers' experiences with injustice. Osman, however, is careful to insist on the difference between Bald's false arrest and the drivers' absorption of economic and violent risks within New York's neoliberal economy.⁴⁰ As he says, "this happens to us *everyday*."

Osman's differentiation between the systemic injustice drivers face and Bald's singular experience anticipates one of the ending sequences in the film, in which Bald

presents a series of silences and complicities that challenge his sympathetic engagement with the South Asian immigrant drivers he interviews. Over the course of the sequence, Bald tells the stories of three encounters that either he or his girlfriend Kym experience with South Asian taxi drivers, with each story narrated over the same looped footage of a taxi's passenger-door sideview mirror, extremely close-up and reflecting a receding nightscape. In the first of these stories, the sideview mirror appears in real color. The voiceover relates the story of a conversation Bald and Kym have with Aziz, a former driver who has opened a Pakistani restaurant on their block. Aziz teases Kym about finding him a girlfriend, saying that he would date "any kind of woman, except a black woman. He says he cannot trust black women." Kym, herself part African American, turns to Bald who, as he confesses, remains silent, "trying to think of the words in Urdu to respond to what Aziz has just said." Bald's predicament—not knowing the words in Urdu—is a peculiar one, and calls up the gendered implications of his quest for community. On one hand, Bald displaces sexism onto himself, here, in order to subvert assumptions that drivers come from cultures or classes of patriarchy (both through their national backgrounds, and the working-class labor of taxi-driving itself). But if we recall his first meeting with Ahmed, it becomes evident that Urdu provides a language of brotherhood and intimacy with the drivers that Bald, here, seeks to preserve. In this instance, Bald's silence signals a doubled loyalty: to his girlfriend, and to Aziz, who he does not want to embarrass by challenging in English. If Urdu thus becomes the sign of an all-male diasporic community in *Taxi-vala*, this scene signals the way in which the majority of Bald's racial and other conflicts with the drivers cohere around the issue of gender.

In an earlier voiceover, Bald recalls a driver asking him if he has a girlfriend, and proceeding, when Bald uncomfortably evades the question, to complain that American women are “promiscuous, that in America South Asian women become spoiled [and] need to be restricted.” Again, Bald confesses that he “[doesn’t] say a thing—not a word of argument, not a word of protest,” in response to the driver’s comment. During this scene, we see the partial view of Bald mentioned before, in which his face peers from beneath the brim of a baseball cap, half-hidden by the Plexiglas partition that served as a symbol of class difference in his first voiceover (fig. 5). This play with the distorted representation of what Bruss calls autobiographical film’s “unowned image of the body” acknowledges Bald’s complicity in the driver’s sexism. It also signals the way Bald appears in the film—and indeed, within the community of drivers as a whole—*because* of his legibility as male (versus, for example, what I described as his biracial “illegibility” as Indian).⁴¹ As we will see in Alexander’s memoir, the choice to suppress or evade the politics of one’s gendered embodiment is an impossibility that structures her feminist approach to questions of affiliation across lines of difference.

The last two stories in the sideview mirror sequence continue to speak to the friction of intergroup racism within South Asian diasporic community formation, and are connected to each other visually, with the sideview mirror shot re-edited to appear as a negative, brightly saturated by white light and sharp blue tint (fig. 6). In these narratives, Bald tells, first, of Kym’s experience of being threatened by a taxi driver who distrusts



Figure 4. Bald, obscured.

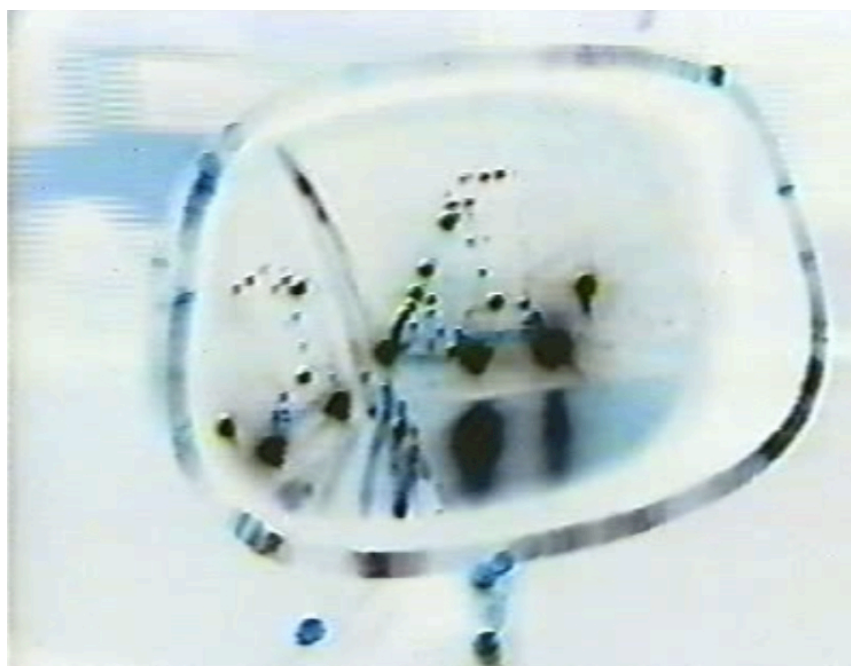


Figure 5. "Saleem explodes in anger."

her ability to pay the full fare for her ride uptown, and then of his ensuing conversation with Osman about the discrimination against African Americans and Latinos that cuts across the taxi industry. Over the extreme whiteness of the city streets, and black splotches of streetlights reflected in the sideview mirror, Bald reports, “Saleem explodes in anger. He says I’m in no place to speak. He says I can stand behind my camera or sit comfortably at my desk and call him and his friends racist, but until I drive a cab on the streets seven days a week to support my family, I don’t know a thing.”

The story’s visual complement—the looped revision of the sideview mirror—emphasizes the audience’s participation in Bald’s self-reflection. Conveying on one level Bald’s troubled relationship to the drivers as a filmmaker (by turning the mirror on himself), the mirror also names a technology of *altered* reflection. Here I am thinking of the cautionary statement associated with sideview mirrors (“objects in the mirror are closer than they appear”), surely called up by the the mirror’s appearance on screen, and also of the editing of the shot to appear unnaturally brightly-hued and entirely encompassing of the screen’s frame. The sideview mirror may actually reflect a cityscape, but its centrality as a negative image within the shot’s frame necessarily disrupts the audience’s position as “an all-perceiving spectator.”⁴² With the screen-as mirror literally figured *as* a mirror, turned towards her, the viewer is called upon to occupy the place of the other, the figure of the “not-I” who she has been watching on screen. By forcing the viewer to at least become temporarily conscious of her own act of looking, Bald structures points of entry for his audience to critically engage their own relationship to the issues in the film. As Bald explains about the voiceover sections that address questions of intergroup racism, questions of audience were formative for his

narrative decisions. “I felt I could bring the issue [of racism] into view, but talk about my own complicity in a way that I hoped would lead the viewer to think about their own complicity.”⁴³ As I will show shortly, *Taxi-vala*’s ending resonance with *Fault Lines* frames this self-consciousness as the key point of Bald’s film.

Reinventing Memory

Though more unabashedly self-focused than Bald’s purposefully adumbrated self-representation, Alexander’s memoir is, like that of *Taxi-vala*, critically positioned.

Widely read and acclaimed, *Fault Lines* recalls the multiple migrations that have marked Alexander’s life history, from her childhood shuttling between Khartoum (where her father, an engineer, was “seconded” following India’s postcolonial alliance with Sudan) and her maternal grandparents’ home in Kerala, to Britain, Delhi and New York.

Seeking the memoir to not only relate stories from her childhood, but also “witness and document” her life as a postcolonial immigrant in America, Alexander renders herself from a distance in her narrative, “configure[s] [her] ‘I’ as Other” (2).⁴⁴ Not simply a critical description of autobiography (in which all “I’s” are necessarily rendered “Other”)

I read Alexander’s interest in witnessing and documentation as signaling her attention to the yoked issues of visibility, embodiment and identity. As she suggests in *Fault Lines*, immigration disrupts the postcolonial subject’s sense of identity and place in the world, thus requiring a self-reinvention in which “race, ethnicity, the fluid truths of gender are all cast afresh.”⁴⁵ It is this self-reinvention that *Fault Lines* documents, critically revising Alexander’s relationship to the past with each interjecting episode of her encounters in

New York, and by consequence, articulating the historical contingency of her racialized diasporic subjectivity.

As Alexander explains in later writings, *Fault Lines* served as an attempt to “lay claim to [her] right to America,” a right which felt precarious due to the sharp sense of dislocation Alexander experienced upon first moving there in 1979 following her marriage to historian David Lelyveld.⁴⁶ Calling up a common narrative of immigrant acculturation, Alexander introduces New York as a place that emphasizes her dislocation from homeland. At the same time, however, the city provides the only source of a viable material rooting for Alexander and thus becomes a necessary environment to which she must turn in her attempt to understand her place in the world. As she insists about this attachment to the local, “I cannot think without involving myself in a reflection that adheres to the surfaces of things that are near at hand and can allow me some minimal sense of familiarity.”⁴⁷

Alexander’s reflection in “the surfaces of things” is literally represented in a lengthy city scene, halfway through the memoir, which describes her experience of picking up dinner for her children. Rushing down the few blocks between the fast food restaurant she has stopped into and her home, Alexander glimpses her reflection in a storefront window:

Fingering the white paper bag with the children’s dinner in it, I speed past Love Pharmacy. For an instant I stare at the neon-lit window and catch myself—a scurrying thing packed in coat and leather hat, a Gujarati shawl, white with black tie-dye dots, covering her upper body for extra warmth, face plump in a flat white light, cheeks a soft brown, hair parted and messy. The feet are covered in soft leather boots the same color as her skin, a ripe brown (184).

Like Bald’s brief, partialized appearances on film, Alexander’s glimpsing of herself in motion (as she “speed[s] past Love Pharmacy”) casts back an image that presents a “new,

articulate assemblage” of self that Alexander describes as itself rushed and haphazard, as “hastily put together” (184). Yet, Alexander’s meticulous detailing of her dress does not convey a moving image, but one that she “catch[es]” as she puts it, in the store window. The window itself thus becomes both a mirror and a sort of freeze-frame, enacting the disunification of self and subject with which *Fault Lines* plays. The grammatical slippage after the em-dash in Alexander’s description, from the first-person “I” to the third-person “her,” precisely at the moment when Alexander becomes the object of her own gaze, further underscores this move. As Alexander performs in this anecdote, her glance in the window of Love Pharmacy is a transformative moment in which she recognizes herself as a stranger—“a Broadway thing” back-lit by neon (184).

That Alexander’s recognition of herself as the object of her own gaze focuses especially on her skin (“a soft brown” and “a ripe brown”) suggests that her self-perception as Indian American is less about what Gayatri Spivak rightly critiques as the “national-origin validation” of cultural identity⁴⁸ than a political consciousness that coheres through racial embodiment. In her essay collection, *The Shock of Arrival*, Alexander cites how “one is marked by one’s body” in particularly racialized ways in the U.S.⁴⁹ Outlining a series of encounters with strangers, Alexander frames the shifting quality of her self-perception as emphasized through the persistent misreading of herself and others like her: from other immigrants’ curiosity about Alexander’s background (as Latina or Guyanese or Trinidadian) to two of her South Asian students’ experience with condescension (“What wonderful English you speak”) and violence, when a Muslim student is assaulted by a group of skinheads who “called [her] Hindu.”⁵⁰ These questions and confrontations “in the street” shape Alexander’s relationship to her identity and body.

“Ethnicity can draw violence,” Alexander comments. “And this is part of our postcolonial terrain, part of the sorrow and knowledge of our senses.”⁵¹

Alexander’s self-recognition as a racialized “Other” produces a concomitant figurative reflection, cast back from the faces of those whom she knows little about, but who comprise her daily world. “I live here now at the edge of Broadway,” she begins. “My familiars in the street, like the old pavement dweller, the girl in the Burger King, the newspaper vendor, a fine-boned lady from Suarashtra who braves the cold in a shack, piled up in front with copies of the *Voice* or *Mirabella*, none of us have a name for each other. We gather for our business in the marketplace, buying, selling, scurrying in the cold. We try to survive ourselves” (184). The problematically easy alliance Alexander draws between herself and New York’s poor of color marks what is her consistent practice of eliding class differences. While informally, this perspective has caused South Asian diasporic and postcolonial scholars to dismiss Alexander’s work as not “political” in the same sense as Bald’s, I am interested in the way she nevertheless advocates for a similarly “new” configuration of identity and community. Perhaps we can describe the inclusive coalitional visions represented in Bald’s and Alexander’s work as a bourgeois self-reflection, as much as one based on material efforts to organize across difference. For in identifying herself with a disparate multiracial community that coheres through uneven acts of capitalist exchange, Alexander acknowledges the commonalities among their racialization as diasporic subjects living and working in America. As she explains in an interview, her sense of the “shock of arrival” is located precisely at this intersection: “It’s that process of transformation, of self-transformation, of knowing not only how to live your life in a place where you can invent yourself but also how to live your life in a

place where, ethnically, you're racialized. You have to understand which possibilities are and aren't available to you."⁵²

Alexander's attention to transformation also intervenes in the way critics have positioned *Fault Lines* as "a powerful emblem of the diasporic" that exists not in conversation, but in tension, with U.S. racial discourse. These critics have held up Alexander as a figure whose complex history of migration illustrates the difference between postcolonial studies and Asian American studies. As Samir Dayal argues, Alexander's diasporic dislocation and history of multiple migrations undermines what he presumes to be the "unproblematically 'American' identity" that structures the "fashionably multiculturalist" category of Asian America.⁵³ The assumption that Asian America is a field complicit with, rather than critical of, multiculturalist discourse is perhaps one sign of the heavy-handedness of such arguments. But more importantly, such a reading suggests that the extra-national exists only outside national borders, rather than with the space of the city, which Alexander reveals as an important metropolitan "home" for diasporic subjects. Indeed, Alexander's work demands that we make space for two landscapes in our mind: Kerala and New York City, not disavow one for the other.

To Dayal's point, the mobility that *Fault Lines* traces does begin as expansively global, with Alexander migrating between her home in Khartoum and her mother's ancestral home in the Keralan town of Tiruvella, during the summers. "Back and forth, forth and back, I went as a child," Alexander writes (56). The bulk of the memoir follows this trajectory, recalling Alexander's memories of particular experiences in Khartoum and Tiruvella in a somewhat haphazard, associative fashion, resulting in what

is “less a linear autobiography than a collage of memories.”⁵⁴ Alexander’s digressions from or, as one reviewer puts it, “interruptions,”⁵⁵ of her memories with reportage of her location and emotional response to New York thus seem to support the critical consensus that Alexander’s memoir “explores the need to re-create a past, to use it as a healing bedrock for the onslaughts of life in the present.”⁵⁶

If we closely examine the moments in which Alexander evokes her urban surroundings, however, we begin to see a more complex interaction between her childhood memories and her life in New York City. For the moments in which Alexander digresses from her stories of childhood and calls up her experiences within New York’s city space are always presented as moments of recognition and clarity. Recalling her decision to change her name from Mary Elizabeth (her baptismal name) to Meena (her family name) during her high school years in Khartoum, for example, Alexander cuts to a 1990 conference at Hunter College for which she organized a reading featuring the poets Audre Lorde, Kamala Das and Claribel Algeria. As the women look over the program brochure, Lorde notices that their names—those of “the three Third World poets”—are missing (74). “They want to suppress our names, Meena, they want to scrub us out,” Lorde declares (74).

Operating on multiple levels, this doubled story, of Alexander’s liberation from the “colonial burden” of an English name and the racist institutional suppression of the poets’ names, come together in a flash, as Benjamin would have it, in dialectical form. Both subverting a misrepresentation in varying types of public record (a birth certificate and a program brochure), these narratives together respond to a central question that animates Alexander’s entire memoir, “What does it mean to appear, to be allowed to

appear...?” (74). Not, then, just a move that recalls the past as a “bedrock” for the present (an argument that inadvertently reifies India and Sudan as stilled spaces in time), Alexander’s juxtaposition of her memories from Tiruvella and Khartoum with memories and experiences in New York think these experiences *together*, momentarily suturing the fault line between the what-has-been and the now.

In the conclusion of Alexander’s story about the poets’ suppressed names, she notes that word of mouth and leaflets passed out by women students manage to draw a sizable crowd to the reading. Remarking on the thunderous applause and reception the poets receive, Alexander comments that she is reminded of the attentive reception of a mushaira poetry gathering: “the listeners entering into the rhythm of the lines, hearing their own longings voiced, *transfigured*, in the syllables of poetry” (75, emphasis added). This receptive practice itself offers an analogy for Alexander’s narrative approach, in which resonance and recognition across time and geographical space becomes a site of transformation and revision.

Real Places

The issues of transformation and revision raised in Alexander’s story about the reading at Hunter College get to the heart of the argument about the speculative politics of subjectivity that I want to make here. Alexander was strongly influenced by her time at Columbia University’s Center for American Culture Studies, an interdisciplinary research institute where she worked with a vibrant array of artists and scholars, such as Sekou Sundiata, Cornel West and Kimiko Hahn, to discuss and explore the politics of American culture. As part of her residency, Alexander organized panels and discussions

on the intersections of memory, migration and the female imagination. A feminist attention to issues of mobility was thus foremost in her mind when she began *Fault Lines*, and served as a supplement to the feminist activism with which she had been engaged in India, and continued to engage in New York. As Alexander explains, her affiliation with spaces such as the Center's, and with feminist organizations both within and without New York's South Asian feminist community, made the nineties "a very exciting time" to be writing. "I think it was within that sort of cauldron [of political and cultural activism] that I produced a whole body of work," she states.⁵⁷

This interest translates in *Fault Lines* through Alexander's grappling with a process of identity formation that takes seriously the nonformal models of community and belonging that she encountered in 1990s New York City. In particular, Alexander's documentation of daily conversations and encounters with friends and strangers (as suggested by her attention to her motley neighborhood community) transcribes, within the space of the memoir, Alexander's "provisional" approach to selfhood (196). Like the conflicts that animate and revise Bald's self-understanding in *Taxi-vala*, the encounters that Alexander experiences in the city map out her relationship to the communities with which she was most involved—New York's multicultural feminist and Asian American circles. Over the course of these conversations, Alexander revisits and revises her response to the question that opens her memoir: "What would it mean for one such as I to pick up a mirror and try to see her face in it?" (2). As I seek to argue, the response to this question necessarily engages a combination of global, national and local gazes.

As Alexander explains in the preface to the first edition of her memoir, several of its chapters emerged out of seminars and symposia addressing Asian American identity

and “the live issues of a usable past, of race, gender, self-identity” (xi). The memoir thus at times lapses into a philosophical tract, a musing about the politics of identity and identification. This is particularly true of one of the most quoted chapters in the memoir, “Real Places or How Sense Fragments: Thoughts on Ethnicity and the Writing of Poetry,” which first appeared as an essay entitled, “Is there An Asian American Aesthetics?”⁵⁸ Ostensibly, the chapter presents a conversation Alexander has in a city café with an anonymous listener. But as the preceding chapter explains, the conversation is entirely made up: “Once for the purpose of an essay I had to write, I made believe I had met Talal [Asad] at Caffè Pertutti and conducted an elaborate conversation,” Alexander informs us (190). “Real Places” thus begins with a conceit about speaking and listening, such that we get the sense, as one reads, that Alexander is working out her thoughts about migration, place and aesthetics by talking out loud and writing down her words. This structure not only highlights the extemporaneous quality of Alexander’s discussion of identity, but also alludes to the trajectory of the chapter itself, in which Alexander’s self-reflection is positioned not as inward orientation, but as a public address.

Over the course of her imagined conversation, Alexander describes the effect of her arrival in America on her poetic production:

‘It’s as if in all these years as a poet I had carried a simple shining geography around with me: a house with a courtyard where I grew up in Tiruvella....And this picture was something I would pick up and turn to the light and pick up and set out for myself in times of trouble, as if to say, ah, there, there it all was.

And because it was, I am whole and entire. I do not need to think in order to be. I was a child there, and here I am, and though I cannot find the river that brought me here, yet I am because that was’ (197).

Alexander’s interlaced prose tracks a transfigured metaphor of her mother’s ancestral home in Tiruvella as a “geography” that becomes a “picture.” Described throughout the

remainder of the chapter as a “*shining* picture,” this image bears multiple meanings (201, emphasis added). It could be read as literally shiny, like a glossy photograph or painting, or as “shining” because it presents a reflection. In other words, we could read this “shining picture” as a mirror that Alexander can “pick up and turn to the light” in order to see an image of a fixed and locatable home. This latter reading is supported by Alexander’s depiction of the act of looking at her past as producing the effect of a mirror gaze: “because it was, I am whole and entire.”

As she continues her imagined conversation with Asad, Alexander suggests that her “simple shining geography” has been irrevocably broken. “That picture I spoke of? It’s all shattered. Into tiny little bits. It doesn’t work anymore, not even as a backdrop. In any case what is there to drop back: inside/outside, mind/body, East/West. I don’t understand that stuff any more. What is, is all around. Here. Now” (200). The instability caused by her picture’s shattering is immediately registered in Alexander’s wording. Her play with language frames her reliance on a “backdrop” as a futile retreat (a “dropping back”) to polarities that have themselves been shattered. As a consequence of her shining picture/mirror’s breaking, Alexander own self-understanding is splintered and “reassembled” through her prose, as if in a mosaic (201). The “real places” of her Tiruvella home’s grove of guava trees and courtyard become a place in the imagination—not bedrock, but “just words”—and seem painfully immaterial next to the viscosity of daily life in New York (201). As a result, Alexander states that she must “figure out a new way [to go on], a way that I share with lots of others here” (200).

As Alexander faces this “new way,” an embracing of Indian American identity and multiracial alliance, she specifies New York’s materiality, symbolized here through

its iconic form of public transportation, as making her aware of her gendered racial body. Recalling a moment when she got stuck in the subway doors—“one foot in, one out, bisected by the rubber-padded metal”—Alexander presents this quotidian accident as an analogy for her split identification between her past and present (198). “I felt I was cut down the middle,” she insists (198). Where Bald situates gender “off-camera” in *Taxi-vala*, tangentially addressing the constitutive nature of gender conflict in his film, Alexander presents it as the “sticking point” in her memoir that determines the transformative way in which she is seen (202). “Appearing in the flesh, I am cast afresh,” she describes, “a female of color—skin color, hair texture, clothing, speech, all marking me *in ways I could scarcely have conceived of*.”⁵⁹

Alexander’s story about getting caught in the subway doors performs her newly conceived reading of her body. As she notes about the effects of that jarring experience, “I realized with a brutal shock the real place I am in” (201). Though Alexander consistently describes her writing itself as a textured space and a home, she positions the materiality of otherness as its own “real place” as well—one that she shares, as she states above, “with lots of others here.” Because the issue of Alexander’s fit within panethnic Asian America has been so contested, I should make clear that in suggesting Alexander’s affiliation with Asian American and cross-racial politics, I do not intend to imply that Alexander only, or primarily, categorizes herself as an “Asian American.” Such an argument would overlook her highly idiosyncratic positionality (informed by the postcolonial nationalisms of both India and Sudan) that complicates Alexander’s singular identification with a U.S.-based ethnic or racial framework. Instead, I am interested in the ways Alexander figures herself as moving *within and among* multiple communities,

and draws from localized movements in creating “a home in language” through her writing.⁶⁰

Appearing where her shining picture lies broken, ethnicity provides Alexander with “multiple anchorages” to a diverse group of “Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Mexican Americans, Jewish Americans, African Americans [and] Native Americans,” while refusing the commonplace image with which multiculturalism is so often associated in American discourse, the “mosaic” (202). Faced with her “dark female body,” ethnicity may arise as a “play of surfaces,” Alexander notes, but must resist a sense of effortless reinvention (202). Drawing upon what Yen Le Espiritu describes as a political understanding of ethnicity that “interact[s] between assignment and assertion,” Alexander positions ethnicity as less rooted in culture than in political coalition.⁶¹ In this way the “past” that Alexander grapples with bringing into the space of her present is one of a resistant *literary* history—a “postcolonial heritage” that connects “the sense of English I got from Sarojini Naidu in India in her struggle during the Nationalist years, or more recently Ngugi wa Thiong’o in Kenya” with “the bitter, fierce words of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Toni Morrison and Audre Lorde” (199).

Alexander’s reading of global Anglophone and African American literature as sharing an anti-colonial consciousness positions her self-reflection as not formed “independent of [her] surroundings,” but as reoriented towards a communal sensibility that deeply engages her immediate environment.⁶² Like Bald, Alexander’s poetics also moves from an “I” to a “we,” a move Alexander emphasizes when she returns to the question of Asian American aesthetics in her chapter, insisting that “*our* song must also

be a politics” (195, emphasis added). As Alexander clarifies elsewhere, this politics engages a “consciousness of unselfing” that produces space for “lateral holdings that take the place that a tradition might in a more continuous art form.”⁶³

On one hand, the “lateral holdings” that Alexander names here recall the international alliance of the resistant literary cadre she deems as formative for her own relationship to the English language. Alexander’s insistence on the “sticking point” of her “dark female body,” on the other hand, suggests an intersection of colonial history and U.S. racialization. Less citing the limits of ethnicity, as critics and reviewers tend to argue, Alexander’s embodied “sticking point” presents a critical revision of ethnicity that frames it around the non-white body (202). Replacing cultural tradition with shared politics, Alexander anticipates what Vijay Prashad has recently termed polyculturalism, which, in contrast to liberal multiculturalism, is “grounded in antiracism rather than in diversity,” and draws affiliations with others on the basis of common oppressions under systems of white supremacy.⁶⁴

Building from this expansive affiliation, Alexander substitutes her broken picture of the past with a multivalent “struggle for social justice” that “comes with rage” (203). Located with her embodiment, as well as with the related issue of human dignity, Alexander figures aesthetics based on social justice as taking a disruptive and discontinuous form:

It is shaped by forces that well up out of us, chaotic, immensely powerful forces that disorder the brittle boundary lines we create, turn us towards a light, a truth, whose immensity, far from being mystical—in the sense of a pure thing far away, a distance shining—casts all our actions into relief, etches our lines into art (203).

Where the shining mirror-like image with which Alexander opens her chapter casts back a reflection of a “whole and entire” self, the “light” of a socially-just aesthetics perhaps

illuminates the breakage of nostalgia's "brittle boundary lines."⁶⁵ It seems then, that the very disorder that informs Alexander's new way of seeing herself presents a concomitant reading practice for her audience. In both, we are asked to balance disorder, to preserve it rather than schematically manage it. It is perhaps for this reason that Alexander so insistently returns to the material of her own life story, not only in her memoir, but also in her larger body of work, for the idiosyncratic nature of her migrations and relationship to place structure her critical approach to subjectivity. As her coda to *Fault Lines* will show, this critical disruption is based on an inevitably continuous process of revision.

Dark Mirror

In a recent interview, Alexander describes the task of writing as less about closure than a kind of Sisyphean reenactment: "When you complete a work, you breathe deeply and think, 'Oh yes, I've done it!' But then you have to start again."⁶⁶ Perhaps nothing in Alexander's oeuvre makes the necessary work of "starting again" clearer than her revision of the tenth anniversary edition of *Fault Lines*. In expanded form, the 2003 reissue of the memoir includes a second section entitled "Book of Childhood" that is composed of twelve additional chapters. Described as a "coda" and a "book contained within a book" by Alexander, the section consciously revisits her original memoir in both form and content (229). Several chapters of the coda, for example, bear the same titles as chapters that appear in the memoir's first edition, and revisit and revise their eponymous and characteristic symbols, such as the "Dark Mirror" or the "Stone-Eating Girl." But what is especially interesting about this coda is the way its very *composition* required a process of restarting. Beginning as notes for a section that would detail Alexander's

discovery, in 1997, of the repressed trauma of her sexual abuse by her maternal grandfather, Alexander's conception for the coda changed following 9/11. Shortly after September 2001, when Alexander began to actually write "The Book of Childhood," she incorporated, alongside her narration of personal trauma, the experience of living in New York City in the aftermath of the World Trade Center's collapse.

Considering Alexander's sense that *Fault Lines* bore witness to her "extraordinary sense of return to moments in my childhood and adolescence," Alexander's previously inaccessible history of abuse could be read as the primary driving force behind Alexander's preoccupation with her past and its relationship to her "living body" in the present.⁶⁷ Such a reading certainly accords with Alexander's own sense of what she insists all writing works towards: that which "cannot enter our consciousness"⁶⁸ It also helps to make sense of her description, early on in the original edition of *Fault Lines*, that writing her memoir felt like facing a backless "dark mirror." The act of thinking back to childhood, Alexander explains, caused her to live as a "crooked creature," with one arm reaching into "a ghostly past" and the other "feel[ing] out a space for [her] living body" by grounding herself within an urban present: "rough bricks...on the wall at the corner of 113th Street and Broadway in Manhattan..." (7). That Alexander figures her turn to childhood as a haunted one, a journey into the looking-glass of her own unconscious (the backless "dark mirror"), is also conveyed in her narration of the "flashes" of abuse that erupt during her 1997 therapy sessions. "He was tall. He was in a white kurta....He is there above me. All I can see are his legs and thighs. He is very close to me....It [is] like a scene in *Frankenstein*, in the movie version, when the child is plucking flowers and the monster comes and finds her" (239-240).

Given Alexander's pairing of her recollection of abuse with her experience during 9/11, however, it is immediately clear that *Fault Lines* must be read as more than a suppressed confession of Alexander's history of abuse. Indeed, in the first chapter of the coda, Alexander cautions against reading the addition as a "corrective" to her original memoir, which broadly lauds her grandfather Kuruvilla for his intellectual mentorship. "My aim is not to cross out what I first wrote [in *Fault Lines*]," Alexander insists, "but to deepen that writing, dig under it, even to the point of overturning one of the most cherished figures I created" (229). For Alexander, the act of digging and deepening cites the limits of memory, the way remembrance must be excavated, rather than easily called back. At the same time, to "not cross out what I first wrote, but to deepen that writing" suggests an interest in expanding and extending the motivating interests of the first edition of *Fault Lines*.

With this in mind, Alexander's juxtaposition of her experience of sexual abuse with that of 9/11 locates her coda as thinking through the way a politics of subjectivity, like writing, requires a process of redoing, of starting again. Already grappling with the challenge of revising her relationship to her childhood, Alexander presents 9/11 as similarly unmooring her from a sense of place in New York. "I think 9/11 and the aftermath in terms of the backlash against South Asians was very deeply disturbing to me because I had thought, in some ways, that I could have a home in Manhattan—that I could be at home," she explains.⁶⁹ Doubly displaced from her memory of a safe (if vacillating) home space of childhood and from a sense of security in New York, Alexander begins, in the coda, to once again rethink her relationship to her body and the city.

Alexander's response to the shock of her paired private and public traumas involves two particular acts of seeing. In the first, she describes traveling to Ground Zero and standing, "as close as I could get, making returns, a pilgrimage, the site a graveyard for thousands..." (285). The practice of looking at Ground Zero, so often described as a wound, and a site of absence, is less about Alexander's facing herself (as with her experience with the subway doors, for example), than facing history. Connecting this image of a "graveyard for thousands" with the bombing of Afghanistan, Alexander notes, "Both are places real. I live in one, I reach out to the other. Disjoined in space, they coexist in time, in a molten present" (288). By recasting these geographically disconnected places through her writing, Alexander creates a means of stitching together the fragmented violences with which we live, while highlighting their political interconnections. This practice of writing while keeping "torn ends visible" is precisely what frames the coda, as it works to connect both 9/11 with Alexander's self-perception, and 9/11 with her childhood trauma (3).

As Alexander conveys in her reportage about the experience of living in New York immediately following 9/11, her grief over the "devastation of this island city we love" is informed by hate violence (280). Describing a meeting for the Asian American Research Institute that she attended in October of 2001, Alexander recalls:

It was the sort of gathering to which I would wear a sari without thinking twice, but now something nagged at me. Two of my South Asian students had encountered trouble wearing salwar kameez, men yelling, one throwing a paper bag with an empty bottle inside. A friend of mine...told me how a man had yelled and spat at her. There was a pall of suspicion extending over Arabs and beyond to South Asians, brown people who looked like they could be Arabs (287).

Deciding to carry the sari with her and put it on in the relative safety of the CUNY Graduate Center building, Alexander invokes the act of looking at her reflection, as she did years earlier in the Love Pharmacy window. “In the fourth floor ladies’ room I slipped out of my slacks and put on my sari. I watched the silk fall to the tiled floor and stared at my face in the mirror. How dark I looked, unmistakably Indian” (287). This act of recognition produces for Alexander another, yet different, moment of racialization. Recognizing her hesitation about calling attention to her Indianness in a time of heightened xenophobia, Alexander’s self-reflection also resparkes a politics. “I needed to think through my fear,” she states (287).

Composing, in response to this experience, a lyric poem, a poetic form that provides her an immaterial “location to reflect on the world,” Alexander reframes the violence of the Trade Center bombings as directly informing her rearticulated positionality in the U.S.: “Sparks from the towers/ fled through the weave of silk” (288). 9/11’s violent rewriting of Alexander’s relationship to her Indian body, in turn, connects to her painfully revised relationship to her gendered body following her grandfather’s betrayal. Revisiting her grandfather’s death and burial through her coda’s focus on the mourning of 9/11, Alexander positions “The Book of Childhood” as both an extension of the 1993 edition of *Fault Lines* and a closure for her history of sexual abuse. But like all forms of haunting, the graveyard space of personal memory and public memorial retains a hold that accompanies Alexander (and her readers) into the future. Responding to a recurring dream that marked the recovery of her memories of abuse, Alexander states:

Closing the book of childhood I feel the dream dissolve in the dark waters that surround the island of Manhattan, passing away with the burnt fragments of flesh, mess of plastics and papers, torn wood and wire and stone. And above us all, in

the north winds, the souls of the dead, wings tipped with fire, *still whirling* (313, emphasis added).

Broken Mirror

In the culminating minutes of his film, Bald presents a sequence that viewers might also describe as a coda. Though not the film's last scene, this montage of archival footage is anomalous given the contemporary footage of city streets and drivers that characterizes the rest of *Taxi-vala*; visually, and in its affective sensibility, the sequence stands out as heightened and discontinuous. Cross-cutting between black and white images of civil rights marches in the U.S. and satyagraha marches in India, Bald structures a mirrored comparison between these two historical struggles by juxtaposing shots depicting people in the same formation or experience across both movements. For example, Bald edits an image of a U.S. police officer beating an African American protestor next to an image of a British officer beating an Indian anti-colonial protestor; and an image of African American marchers, with faces turned towards the camera (fig. 6), next to an image of Indian nationalists protesting British colonial rule, captured in similar poses (fig. 7). These images flash in quick succession, adopting a rhythm highlighted by the rising sounds of a tabla performance by Zakir Hussain and Ustad Alla Rakha. Over this montage, Bald concludes:

Every new immigrant group that comes to the United States is taught that the first step towards success in this country is the step away from—or on the backs of—other people of color. We are not taught the histories that have transpired here before us—histories to which we are connected, histories which we share...So whose American Dream is this? What kind of Americans are we expected to become? Who are we expected to ignore, and betray? And who is it who gains when our communities fight against each other in this country, instead of fighting side by side?

As demonstrated by 1920s Soviet filmmakers Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, montage embodies the cinematic principle of juxtaposing different images in a non-continuous narrative in order to create new meanings. As Eisenstein clarifies, montage does not place two opposing images beside one another, such that it suggests an organic sequencing; instead, montage proposes an enforced superimposition.⁷⁰ It is thus the *conflicted* relationship between juxtaposed images that produces meaning in montage.

There exists a tension, then, between Bald's voiceover narration, which instructs viewers to read his archival images "side by side," and the layered way in which we perceive them. It is for this reason that I suggest we consider this montage not as a coda differentiated from the body of the film, but as a continuous extension of the film's collage aesthetics. Though seemingly out-of-joint with the rest of *Taxi-vala's* cityscape and driver interview footage, this sequence picks up on and emphasizes the fragmented collisions that structure Bald's urban aesthetics. Like the stylized visuals of streets in motion, and the film's setting of video against Super 8, the shock-engendered form of Bald's culminating montage visually practices what Bald wants his audience to do all along: locate South Asian American community politics within the transitory gaps that, as Edwards suggests, articulate the very diversity that constitutes diaspora.

The montage's narrative shift, practicing an expansion from "I" to "we," further broadens this sense of plurality, subtly slipping from signifying a collectivity of South Asians ("we") to the mutual resonance of the phrase "our communities" for both South Asian *and* black populations. Bald's insistence that we think African American civil rights history and Indian anti-colonial nationalist history together is thus less about a commonality within a historical record (though the immediately obvious tie between



Figure 7. “So whose American Dream is this?”



Figure 8. “What kind of Americans are we expected to become?”

Gandhi's nonviolence movement and that of Martin Luther King, Jr. is certainly much of what Bald had in mind here), than an effort at a reoriented consciousness. As Alexander might put it, this effort is not about a simple visual realization of previously unrecognized similarities amongst gestures of bodily movement, but about a conscious and compassionate "stitching" together of overlapping, but discrepant histories.

As Bald himself notes, this aesthetic and rhetorical move might now be thought of as idealized.⁷¹ However, I think the notion of idealization might be precisely the place to go to enunciate the politics of Bald's film. Giving visual and narrative form to what Muneer Ahmad eloquently describes as "a shared citizenship outside the bounds of subordination," Bald depicts a space in the political imagination which we, given continuing intergroup tensions and post-9/11 conflicts around racial profiling and xenophobia, have yet to reach.⁷²

My linking of this climactic montage with the tentative and troubled treatment of community formation in Bald's film thus positions the sequence's mirrored visuals as neither prescriptive nor descriptive. Instead, I read the sequence as self-consciously piecing together fragments from history, in what Alexander cites as a politically-grounded aesthetic practice of constructing a "*recasting* that permits our lives to be given back to us, fragile, precarious" (289, emphasis added). Recalling Bald's collage approach to autobiographical documentary, the montage's recasting of histories strongly resonates with Alexander's insistence on self-reflection as the practice of seeing oneself as Other—and as connected, through resistance, *to* others. Similarly evoking the necessity of a pluralized gaze, the palimpsest of histories Bald presents here is less a coda, than a broken mirror in which we must strain to see ourselves.

Endnotes

¹ As she explains in her memoir's acknowledgments, Alexander served as a writer-in-residence and as a faculty associate at the Center for American Culture Studies in 1988 and 1991, respectively. She presented Chapter 8 ("Language and Same: Reflections on My Life in Letters") at the South Asian Seminar at the University of Chicago and Chapter 12 ("Real Places or How Sense Fragments: Thoughts on Ethnicity and the Writing of Poetry") at the Symposium on Asian American Identity at Cornell University, basing her subsequent revisions on student feedback (xi).

² Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1993), xi.

³ Vivek Bald, personal interview, 19 January 2007.

⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 236.

⁵ Ibid 236.

⁶ Here, I reference the series of high-profile incidents of anti-South Asian violence in the northeast, concentrated in Jersey City, Hoboken and Queens in the late 1980s, that began to challenge South Asian Americans' identification as "model minorities" held at a remove from U.S. race politics. For a critical reading of 1980s and 1990s anti-South Asian violence, see Deborah N. Misir, "The Murder of Navroze Mody: Race, Violence, and the Search for Order," *Amerasia Journal* 22.2 (1996): 55-75.

⁷ I borrow the phrase "way of seeing" from Avery Gordon. For her, this phrase describes a sociological imagination that recognizes everyday material life as affectively disrupted by the "hauntings, ghosts and gaps, seething absences, and muted presences" of history. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1997, 21.

⁸ Benjamin states: "The enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject" (236).

⁹ Vivek Bald, personal interview, 19 January 2007.

¹⁰ Keya Ganguly also cites Benjamin's shocks as naming capitalism's effect on the everyday life of South Asian immigrants in her work, *States of Exception: Everyday Life and Postcolonial Identity* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2001). Her project, however, parts ways with this chapter through its focus on the cultural negotiations of middle-class suburbanites.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 175.

¹² Biju Mathew, "Peela Paiyon Ki Nayi Unmeed or Reshaping Immigrant Identity Politics," *Sanskriti* 6.1 (25 December 1995), <http://flowers.insaf.net/resources/sanskriti/dec95/biju.html> (accessed March 19, 2007).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Bald, personal interview, 19 January 2007.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ In this sense, we can read Bald's narration as partaking in the tradition of the confessional autobiography.

¹⁷ See Jim Lane, *The Autobiographical Documentary in America* (Madison: U. Wisconsin Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Elizabeth W. Bruss, "Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film," *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 308.

¹⁹ Bald, personal interview, 19 January 2007.

²⁰ Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Boston: Harvard UP, 2003).

²¹ Mathew, "Peela Paiyon Ki Nayi Unmeed."

²² Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1996, 171.

²³ *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2004), 67.

²⁴ Ibid 162.

²⁵ Ibid 162.

²⁶ S. Shankar, "Cultural Politics Amongst South Asians in North America," *Satyagraha in America: The Political Culture of South Asians in the U.S.*, eds. Biju Mathew and Vijay Prashad, special issue of *Amerasia Journal* 25.3 (1999/2000): 155.

²⁷ For a more detailed discussion of Bald's involvement in Santa Cruz's punk and reggae scenes, see his interview with Alondra Nelson and Thuy Linh N. Tu, "Appropriating

Technology,” in *Technicolor: Race, Technology and Everyday Life*, eds. Alicia Headlam Hines, Alondra Nelson and Thuy Linh N. Tu (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

²⁸ Bald explains that the lineage of his films, in particular *Mutiny* (2003), which presents the history of the 1980s British Asian music movement, were “music documentaries” whose aesthetics and “engagement with both music and film has been really influential.” (personal interview). For more on American filmmaker David Markey, see George Hurchalla’s *Going Underground: American Punk, 1979-1992* (Stuart, FL: Zuo Press, 2006); on British filmmaker Don Letts, see John Robb’s *Punk Rock: An Oral History* (London: Random House, 2007).

²⁹ Bald, personal interview.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ The effects of this editing practice produce a rhythm in the film that embeds the idea of movement within the film’s process, as well as its visuals. Drawing upon his background in drumming, honed while playing in punk bands and studying tabla as a teenager, Bald invokes a percussive sensibility in *Taxi-vala* that, on one level, forms the film’s soundtrack: a variety of tabla sets by Zakir Hussain and Ustad Alla Rakha that fade in during his voiceovers. This rhythm, in turn, highlights Bald’s editing style of aligning cuts with moments of motion. “[E]diting at that moment where there is movement in the frame just gives a certain naturalness and flow to the cut,” he explains. This practice led Bald, as he comments, to think of editing as a “visual rhythm.” (personal interview).

³² Bald, personal interview.

³³ Kenneth Warren names this practice of “speak[ing]...contradictions in a single voice” as a constitutive ambiguity of diaspora. “Appeals for (Mis)recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora,” *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds. (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 405.

³⁴ Biju Mathew, *Taxi! Cabs and Capitalism in New York City* (New York: The New Press, 2005) 106.

³⁵ As Benjamin famously remarks, “To articulate the past historically...means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 255.

³⁶ Mathew, “Peela Paiyon Ki Nayi Unmeed.”

³⁷ Bruss, “Eye for I.”

³⁸ See Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 196-203.

³⁹ Vivek Bald, email to the author, 18 March 2007.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 3 in Mathew, *Taxi!*

⁴¹ Bruss, "Eye for I," 319

⁴² The phrase "all-perceiving spectator" is from Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (London: Macmillan, 1982).

⁴³ In terms of audience, Bald explains that he sought to keep multiple audiences in mind during the making of his film. "On one hand, one of the audiences was drivers themselves; another was a kind of smaller, progressive South Asian community; the next audience was a broader South Asian audience; and then, beyond that...was a broader audience of color." Personal interview.

⁴⁴ Center for American Culture Studies, "Interview with Meena Alexander," *Dispatch: The Newsletter of the Center for American Culture Studies, Columbia University* (Spring 1988): 26.

⁴⁵ Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival* (Boston: South End Press, 1996), 1.

⁴⁶ Alexander, "Diasporic Writing: Recasting Kinship in a Fragmented World," *Hitting CRITICAL MASS* 6.2 (Spring 2000): 33.

⁴⁷ Ruth Maxey, "Interview: Meena Alexander," *MELUS* 31.2 (Summer 2006): 36

⁴⁸ Spivak, "Teaching for the Times," *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 1997), 470.

⁴⁹ Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival*, 64

⁵⁰ Ibid, 64.

⁵¹ Ibid, 7.

⁵² Zainab Ali and Dharini Rasian, "Meena Alexander," Interview in *Words Matter: Conversations with Asian American Writers*, ed. King Kok Cheung (Honolulu: U. Hawaii Press, 2000), 86.

⁵³ Dayal, "Min(d)ing the Gap: South Asian Americans and Diaspora," *A Part Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, ed. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998), 236.

⁵⁴ Nalini Natarajan, rev. of *Fault Lines*, *MELUS* 20.1 (Spring 1995): 143.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ketu Katrak, "South Asian American Literature," *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1997), 207.

⁵⁷ Meena Alexander, personal interview, 3 May 2007. Alexander also noted the particularity of her 1990s work in our interview, commenting that her 2002 book of poetry, *Illiterate Heart* (Triquarterly Books/Northwestern University Press) "inaugurates a distinct, yet powerfully related set of issues I am still grappling with."

⁵⁸ Alexander, "Is There an Asian American Aesthetics?" *SAMAR: South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection* 1: 26-27.

⁵⁹ Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival*, 66.

⁶⁰ Alexander, "Poetry: The Question of Home," *Poets.org*, <http://www.poets.org/printmedia.php/prmMediaID/19032> (accessed March 16, 2007).

⁶¹ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992), 7.

⁶² The "Biography/Criticism" section of Alexander's entry in *Voices from the Gaps* summarizes *Fault Lines* as a book that "revolves around the theme of establishing one's self and forming an identity independent of one's surroundings." http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/alexander_meena.html (accessed September 10, 2007).

⁶³ *The Shock of Arrival* 128.

⁶⁴ Vijay Prashad, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), x-xi.

⁶⁵ Alexander, "Is There an Asian American Aesthetics?" 26.

⁶⁶ Ruth Maxey, "An Interview with Meena Alexander," *The Kenyon Review* 28.1 (Winter 2006).

⁶⁷ Srikanth, *The World Next Door*.

⁶⁸ Roshni Rustomji-Kerns, "In a Field of Dreams: Conversations with Meena Alexander," *Weber Studies* 15.1 (Winter 1998).

⁶⁹ Alexander, personal interview.

⁷⁰ Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (New York: Harvest Books/Harcourt, Brace & World, 1949), 49.

⁷¹ Bald, personal interview.

⁷² Muneer Ahmad, "Homeland Insecurities," *Social Text* 72.3 (Fall 2002): 112.

CHAPTER TWO

Queer Intergenerational Community in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*

Although her peers widely hail queer multimedia artist and writer Shani Mootoo as one of the key voices of the South Asian diaspora in North America, Mootoo recalls her own place within that community as cautious and conflicted. Displaced from the subcontinent's languages, religions and cultures as a result of her family's indentured migration to Trinidad, Mootoo has often asserted a sense of critical alienation from the South Asian diaspora—including the radical cohort of artists, writers and academics who were working together in the 1990s in the U.S. and Canada and who are the focus of this dissertation. Mootoo writes in the journal *Thamyris/Intersecting*:

As a resident of Vancouver, I found myself in the early nineties lumped into the category of South Asian for political reasons. At events like *Desh Pardesh*, the festival of the arts and labour, in Toronto, in the days when the audience was made up of mostly diasporic Indians, I found myself resisting a pan-Indian identity. I resisted any notion of universal Indianness—the *sari* or *bindi* as signifier, the clicks [sic] that would burst into laughter around phrases in South Asian languages spoken in their homes. I ended up being excluded, though I needed so hard to participate in the very few venues and festivals that recognized the existence of people of colour as artists or performers. I felt...that even in that crowd I was marginalized and invisible.¹

Mootoo's complaint might strike those familiar with her resistance to categorization as unsurprising. "I make my art...to complain that I don't fit in—but don't try to fit me anywhere—I'm comfortable being uncomfortable," she insists.² But Mootoo's contrarian response to the South Asian diasporic community is more, as I will demonstrate, than an artistic resistance to being pinned down. Mootoo's persistent

refusal of a category that is so often used to describe her work reveals how her texts often wrestle against the very frameworks that scholarship applies to them.

Rather than create a problem of “categorization,” (in other words, a problem of whether Mootoo should be identified with “South Asian,” “Caribbean,” or “Canadian” literatures) Mootoo’s resistance presents an important intervention for metropolitan discourses of diasporic community formation. These discourses, as I have suggested thus far in this dissertation, present racial minoritization as a critical vocabulary of alternative national belonging. Vijay Prashad and Biju Mathew elaborate that the motivation for this focus on race arises from the experience of second-generation youth, who “find themselves rearticulated into an identity politics rather than a politics of competing nationalisms. The difference is that while the latter is always about the ‘homeland,’ the former is about one’s place in the socio-political map of the U.S.”³ South Asian identity was similarly “rearticulated” in Mootoo’s host country of Canada, and shaped, in particular, by that nation’s management of diversity through the institution of multiculturalism as state policy.

This chapter argues that while Mootoo felt the necessity of participating in race-based spaces that supported work by artists of color, she used her writing and art to theorize an alternative model of community formation—particularly in her 1996 novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*.⁴ This novel highlights the challenges Indo-Trinidadians face in relating to homeland. As a result, the narrative presents community formation as cohering not around a common racial identity tied to a geographic origin (as South Asian American) but, rather, around a common history of indenture. This reading opens up an additional contribution to queer diasporic scholarship on *Cereus*, by revealing the way

community coalesces in that novel through a process I call queer intergenerationality: an incomplete recuperation of history that takes shape via family history and rumor. By framing my textual analysis with Mootoo's resistance to the inclusive impulse of the South Asian diaspora, I more broadly argue that we can use her novel to complicate the racialization of diasporic identity that formed the basis of a South Asian "new left" in North America⁵—and to see how Mootoo's interest in ephemera, intimacy and dialogue advances a non-identitarian strategy of community building from within an identitarian community movement.

Cereus Blooms at Night is Mootoo's first novel, released after her acclaimed 1993 debut collection of short stories, *Out on Main Street*.⁶ A gothic antirealist narrative, the novel travels back to the colonial era of a small island town, Paradise, Lantanacamara, during its occupation by an empire called, in a clever evocation of Britain's damp, cold climate, the Shivering Northern Wetlands. As is typical of gothic narratives, a mysterious and psychically troubled home haunts the narrative: that of the Ramchandins, an Indian family whose patriarch, Chandin Ramchandin, left his family's path as indentured field laborers to work with and be educated by the local Christian missionary, Reverend Thoroughly. Though Chandin revels in his status as a chosen child of Empire, he soon realizes, when the Reverend balks at Chandin's developing love for the Reverend's daughter, his separate and inferior status. The pain and frustration of this revelation shapes the household and family Chandin goes on to build, and on whom he wreaks emotional and sexual abuse.⁷

The central plot of *Cereus* follows one of Chandin's grown daughters, Mala, whose traumatic childhood has caused her to retreat from the town around her. Living in the house in which she grew up, Mala is cast as a postcolonial figure reminiscent of Bertha, the "madwoman in the attic" from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.⁸ Nearly mute, except for incoherent mumbling, Mala is content to commune with the animals and insects that populate her home, which has become overgrown with plants that infiltrate its walls and windows. Because of Mala's unusual behavior, she is viewed as a frightening recluse by her fellow townspeople, who either avoid her entirely or taunt her by pelting her home with stones as they pass by. As the novel opens, Mala has been moved from her house after it burns down due to a mysterious act of arson, and placed in an alms house, where she is cared for by the only nurse willing to approach her, a gay man named Tyler who feels a strong sense of affinity for her.

Over the course of the novel, Mala brings together a wider and disparate group of strangers who care for and visit her at the alms house to which she has been committed. Hoping to piece together the full story of Mala's troubled past, the group, which consists of Mala's nurse Tyler, as well as her narcoleptic childhood love Ambrose and Ambrose's transgendered son Otoh, recall their own contemporaneous life stories in order to confirm and fill in their gaps in knowledge about Mala's history. By narrating the interwoven pasts of her novel's characters via a series of subjective forms of communication—circulating letters, family memories and rumors—Mootoo portrays the group's shared project of historical knowledge as mobile and dialogic, for the letters, recollections and gossip that recur throughout and collectively structure the novel never come together as a single, complete, reliable narrative.

Queer diasporic scholarship has approached the nonlinear temporality and structure of *Cereus* as a critical response to colonialism, postcolonial nationalism, and the social form of family. In a succinct elucidation of such an interpretation, Gayatri Gopinath explains how the novel presents alternative communities that trouble identification with the nations of both Trinidad and India. As she argues, the asynchronicity of *Cereus* pointedly “resist[s] the logic of blood, patrilineality and patriarchal authority.”⁹ In her reading, Grace Hong presents the novel’s “aesthetic of contingency, unknowability, and...deferment of resolution”¹⁰ as a challenge to Trinidad’s postcolonial nationalism, which has consolidated the heterosexual family as a state model and norm. Criminalizing non-procreative sex under the 1986 Sexual Offences Act, Trinidad links the legitimacy of the postcolonial nation to women’s reproduction.¹¹ Because it exceeds the bonds of the familial, the affiliation among Otoh, Ambrose, Tyler and Mala thus also signals for Hong an alternative to nationally sanctioned expressions of group identity and community.

Mootoo certainly positions sexual and social estrangement as a key analytic for undoing the heteronormative fusing of “household/community/nation” within colonial and postcolonial histories.¹² Yet her novel does so in a way that is mediated by, rather than opposed to, family and generation. Interestingly, then, *Cereus* suggests that while generation need not be preserved in the conjugal sense, where “values, wealth, goods and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next,”¹³ it might exist as a productive site of exchange that allows for the narration of an alternative historiography.

Indeed, the subversive bond of alterity among the novel's central group of characters—one that Mootoo notably calls a “shared queerness”—accretes via an intergenerational discourse about family history. As I suggested above, the group's remembrance of Mala's past and their relationships to her invites them to also revisit their own subversive family relationships and histories in the novel, such that Mala's story become the conduit for a much broader collection of stories, family rumors and revisions of parent-child roles. Through this alternative historiography, children, parents and elders in *Cereus* engage in what we might consider, borrowing from Sandhya Shukla's phrasing, a “cross-generational intimacy”—an alternative to the more common diasporic literary trope of generational conflict.¹⁴ In the novel, characters born on either side of Lantanacamara's colonial era grapple with the meaning and shape of their connection to the past and to each other. My reading of *Cereus* thus brings *together* concepts of generation and queerness by seeing the novel's “impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of diaspora”¹⁵ as taking the form of a queer intergenerationality.¹⁶ This concept produces two distinct processes in *Cereus*: the first of which, as I describe above, offers a mutual inheritance of colonial histories and postcolonial futures; and the second, which I will elaborate upon shortly, involves the addressing of absent others.

The importance of relying on generational exchange to flesh out diasporic history relates directly, as I have suggested above, to material conditions of racial labor management under Caribbean indentureship. For as scholars working on Indo-Caribbean history and culture have shown, one of the key legacies of colonial indenture is the loss of cultural knowledge about homeland among the Caribbean's diasporic populations. Tejaswiri Niranjana, for example, explains that the British Empire's contracted

recruitment of sugar plantation laborers from Northern India in the latter-half of the nineteenth century created a diasporic population of Indians in Trinidad who were aligned by the “remoteness of India” in their emotional and political lives.¹⁷ There thus exists less to pass down from one generation to another within Indo-Caribbean families, than a shared absence around which to cohere.

This inaccessibility of homeland is, indeed, a major preoccupation of Mootoo’s œuvre, as demonstrated by a recent eight-line poem, “All the Hindi I Know,” a playful and sarcastic commentary on how linguistic knowledge is often a signifier of diasporic identity and community. In the piece, Mootoo strings together a brief list of basic and unconnected Hindi phrases (“Acha,” “Chalo,” “Hai,” etc.—which translate to “Okay,” “Let’s go,” and “Yes”) that frustrate readers’ desire for a coherent narrative.¹⁸ Refusing the idea that homeland histories and cultures are recuperable, Mootoo’s poem presents Indian culture and language as accessible only through subjective and arbitrary recollection. For her, unreliability, conditionality and lacunae become the stuff of which cultural and historical knowledge is necessarily made.¹⁹

In *Cereus*, this conditional nature of historical knowledge is foregrounded through the affiliative bonds Mootoo’s characters feel for one another—a connection based not on common origin or ideology, but on a shared commitment to discovering and recovering a fuller, more complex knowledge about Lantanacamara’s colonial history. Because this process of discovery can never be finished, Tyler, Otoh, Mala and Ambrose comprise a community in *Cereus* that is *almost* realized, but not quite. This reading revises what has been the general critical reception of the novel as representing a fully formed and utopian oppositional community.²⁰ For as I suggest through my attention to Mootoo’s interest in

the time-space of generations, *Cereus* highlights a deferral of closure as productive in that it defines community as cohering around intersecting, unfinished histories. Rather than revert to biological or cultural categorization, then, Mootoo approaches community formation as an ephemeral and incomplete process. Like Mala's contrarian housekeeping, in which she compulsively stacks chairs and tables atop one another in a precarious tower formation, only to undo the entire structure the next day, *Cereus* continually builds and deconstructs its own narrative. In this way, community is less celebrated or achieved in *Cereus*, than revised and rescripted.

Mootoo draws particular attention to this notion of community as process by structuring *Cereus* as a frame narrative. In a prefacing reader address, Tyler explains that he has reconstructed Mala's life story in the form of a book in the hopes of reuniting her with her missing sister, Asha. Having long fled Lantanacamara, and the sexual abuse she and Mala experienced from their father as teenagers, Asha is invited by Tyler to "chance upon this book, wherever she may be today and recognize herself and her family" (1). By the novel's end, Asha has yet to make her diasporic return. Tyler, though, remains hopeful. Now affectively bonded not only to Mala, but also to Ambrose and Otoh, he implores Asha to fulfill the anticipation felt by his new cadre of social outsiders: "We await a letter, and better yet, your arrival. [Mala] expects you any day soon. You are, to her, the promise of a cereus-scented breeze on a Paradise night" (249). Forever proximal, Asha's imminent arrival comes to represent both the impetus and always possible, but as-yet-unseen, realization of Tyler's story. This frame narrative engages the second way I understand queer intergenerationality in *Cereus*: it offers a model of community that includes and invokes lost or missing figures.²¹

I will return to a fuller reading of this fascinating closing moment in the novel towards the end of this chapter. But I mention it here because it illustrates how the queer intergenerationality of *Cereus* opens onto a temporality that looks towards the future as much as the historical past. This final aspect of my re-reading of *Cereus* builds upon Jose Munoz's recent study of queer futurity, *Cruising Utopia*.²² *Cruising Utopia* is, in part, a response to Lee Edelman's *No Future*, in which Edelman argues for a queer politics that does not look towards the future, precisely because of its association with heteronormative structures of biological reproduction and family.²³ Munoz posits, by contrast, the *importance* of the future as a site of hope and possibility, particularly as a utopian alternative to the pragmatic and presentist focus of LGBT politics on normative inclusion in social institutions like marriage and the military—a bourgeois political agenda that David Eng describes as “queer liberalism.”²⁴ Munoz's study applies recent theories of queer time and space to aesthetics by arguing that queer art “is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”²⁵ Forms and practices of queer art embody this sense of potentiality by representing that which Munoz argues, based on the theories of Ernst Bloch, is “not-yet-conscious.”²⁶ Different from the historicist edict for the colonized and formerly colonized to “wait,”²⁷ queer temporality turns to the past to intervene in the present. As Munoz puts it, queer futurity is “a critical methodology that can be best described as a backward glance that enacts a future vision.”²⁸ Read in this way, the queer lens of *Cereus* turns towards the past of colonial history in order to look ahead towards what Munoz describes elsewhere as the “possibility for another world.”²⁹

In my previous chapter, I argued that the kinetic aesthetics of Vivek Bald's and Meena Alexander's autobiographical texts activate these artists' interest in a speculative collective identity—a "we" that extends from the "I" around which their memoir and film are centered. *Mootoo*, while deviating from the urban cosmopolitanism of Bald's and Alexander's texts (as I will discuss in the following section of this chapter), also locates her theorization of community in the productive tension between her novel's antirealist content and circular form. As I have been arguing in this dissertation, this attention to the interplay between form and content is necessary for understanding the ways in which South Asian American artists committed to social justice theorize alternative formations of South Asian diasporic community.

Mootoo's experimentation with aesthetics further builds upon Munoz's own understanding of the relationship between aesthetics, politics and temporality. As he points out, it is very often aesthetic form and structure that allows texts to escape what he calls the "quagmire of the present." He explains, "Often we glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic. The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity...queer aesthetics map future social relations."³⁰ The central question around which this chapter turns is thus how our understanding of *Cereus* might be enlarged were we to read it not as a critical perspective about the colonial past alone, as is typical of antirealist or magic realist narratives,³¹ but also as a blueprint for the future.

Because of its setting and focus, the future with which *Mootoo*'s novel is concerned might most readily be understood as that of Trinidad, on which Lantanacamara is based. However, the transnational approach that I take in this dissertation extends the

focus of prior analysis of the novel on the postcolonial nationalism of Trinidad. It does so by situating *Cereus* within multiple geographies: the Caribbean whose history the novel engages, as well as its contemporaneous scene of production, the broader South Asian diasporic arts community in which Mootoo was writing and presenting *Cereus*. By locating *Cereus* at the locus of its conceptual interventions and material circulation, I follow on Anne Cvetkovitch's suggestion that the novel be read not only in relationship to colonial history, but also "as embedded within a[n]...ephemeral archive of individual and collective life experiences, political events, and informal social activities."³² I thus read, in Mootoo's engagement of Trinidad's colonial history, echoes of what is "not-yet-conscious" not only for the postcolonial nation of Trinidad, but also for the racialized diasporic communities within which Mootoo circulated in 1990s North America.

Diaspora Beyond the *Desh*

Despite figuring herself as an outsider in the quote that opens this chapter, Mootoo was an active and valued contributor to South Asian diasporic events and publications, including *Desh Pardesh* and the Canadian arts journal *Rungh*, for which she wrote throughout the 1990s.³³ Given this fact, we might consider Mootoo's singling out of *Desh Pardesh* as an exclusionary space, in her comments that open this chapter, as a symbolic gesture. By this I mean that she offers less a direct rejection of *Desh Pardesh* (which she acknowledges elsewhere as a "vital" space for art production), than rhetorically hails it so as to reference its identity-based model of diasporic community formation.³⁴ Mootoo's mention of the festival is additionally strategic because of its central position in the cultural memory of South Asian American arts activists. Over its

decade-long run from 1990-2001, *Desh Pardesh*, more than any other gathering, metonymically expressed the goal of arts and community activism within the South Asian left in the 1990s, and became the central venue for a pan-ethnic group of gay and straight emerging and now-established artists—including Mootoo, Michael Ondaatje and Pratibha Parmar—to reach a receptive South Asian audience. Indeed, each of the artists and critics I discuss in this dissertation participated in and presented at *Desh Pardesh*, and recall it as an ideal site of diasporic counter-culture. As its title suggests, the festival calls up the memory of a “home away from home,” a uniquely diasporic space of belonging for its participants, who felt a part, but apart from their South Asian nations of origin.³⁵ Amitava Kumar, whose work I discuss in the following chapter, described the festival in precisely these terms, recalling that it immediately felt like “home” to him.³⁶ Mootoo’s anti-idealistic view of the festival, by contrast, complicates the social history of diasporic community formation this dissertation traces, by raising the limitations of the metropolitan diasporic subjectivity around which the South Asian American cultural movement emerged in 1990s New York and Toronto.

Desh Pardesh took place among a spate of arts and cultural events that sought to pluralize the meaning of race and to promote a racial identity—“South Asian”—that would encourage coalition and inclusion, rather than splinter the diaspora into linguistic or religious regionalisms.³⁷ As Ketu Katrak explains, the then-emerging political identity responded, in addition, to “a peculiarly North American multiculturalism (as practiced in both the United States and Canada), replete with state policies, immigration quotas, and academic curricular battlefields” by highlighting the work of “peoples of color struggling to make a ‘home’ within mainstream hegemonies, institutional or on the streets” (193).

Katrak's reference to "streets" is not incidental to the urban framing of the progressive South Asian diaspora, which modeled community formation—as reflected in Bald's and Alexander's autobiographies—on everyday, unconventional intersections among people from different backgrounds. This model of community engendered productive crossings among multiple identity-based groups in New York City and Toronto, and an ability to counter both the U.S. and Canada's pluralist multicultural discourses through strategic coalitions among artists "working actively and consciously against the racism that [they] experience[d] in the West."³⁸

Desh Pardesh reflected its roots as an arts and labor festival that formed at the intersection of Toronto's progressive South Asian diasporic community and LGBT community,³⁹ advocating for a "queer, anti-racist and activist South Asian collectivity."⁴⁰ Given this radical positioning, *Desh Pardesh* participants and organizers were equally invested in destabilizing the heteronormative "Indianness" to which Mootoo points in her comments.⁴¹ And ironically, Mootoo and her work served, in part, as a short-hand for the efforts of South Asian arts events in the U.S. and Canada to represent the diversity of the diaspora. But Mootoo's cranky outing of the Indocentric "cultural signifiers" that bonded festival attendees reveals that, despite creating a crucial space for queer South Asian artists, *Desh Pardesh* retained India as its unconscious cultural referent. Even as it outwardly sought to counteract the cultural fixity of institutional multiculturalism, it was thus not "immune from forms of cultural nationalism."⁴² While the unification of diasporic artists and activists under the political identity of "South Asian" in the 1990s importantly recognized a unique racial experience for a formerly colonized "brown" population living in the U.S. and Canada, Mootoo's self-distancing from South Asian

identity highlights the simultaneous and inevitable elision of minor or idiosyncratic histories when grouped under an umbrella category.

Mootoo was not alone in her frustration with South Asian categorization. South Asian American scholars often acknowledge the “tenuous reality” of South Asian America.⁴³ Encompassing numerous languages, religions and nations, the sheer diversity of the diaspora has long posed theoretical challenges for those who write under its name. In response, scholars read the unity of the category as held together—however “tenuously”—by dual histories of oppression and management: British and Portuguese colonialism on one hand, and North American racism and multiculturalism on the other. However, internal critiques punctuate this consolidation of subcontinental group identity. Bangladeshi American writer Naheed Islam, for example, has strongly challenged the Indocentricism of South Asian American activism and scholarship. India’s hegemony within the category not only marginalizes diasporic populations from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh, she argues, but also occludes uneven structures of power within the South Asian region. In response, Islam advocates a more historically and politically focused approach to identity: “Ultimately, the fate of a coalition depends on the struggle of each community to voice their issues and on the commitment of Indian Americans to examine their own hegemonic role in the region and in the U.S.”⁴⁴ In a later essay, Lavina Dhingra Shankar examines the tension between South Asian Americans’ association with postcolonial versus Asian American categories, and how this association shapes the reception of South Asian American scholarship and writing. “To what extent are names...a precondition to identity formation?” she asks. “Is South Asian Americans’ act of self-naming a response to a preassigned identity, or is the act itself the process of

performing and, hence, constituting a new identity merely as an arbitrary attempt to close real or imagined gaps between South Asians and the rest of Asian America?”⁴⁵ Islam’s skepticism and Shankar’s attention to the act of constructing identity anticipate Kandice Chuh’s concept of subjectless discourse. In this deconstructionist paradigm for Asian American Studies, Chuh resists the need to “resort to some version of identity for intelligibility” of a given subject; instead she presents the subject as “always also an epistemological object.”⁴⁶

In her work, Mootoo takes up this epistemological approach to diasporic subjectivity, situating identity formation through collective historiography. In her artistic practice, however, where the other writers and critics I examine in this dissertation focused on rethinking and redefining South Asian American political subjectivity, Mootoo turned towards an alternative community of Asian artists interested in queered, gendered approaches to Asian and Caribbean diasporic history. These artists, including Tanzanian-born Indian Muslim artist Ian Iqbal Rashid, Trinidadian Chinese video artist Richard Fung and Chinese Canadian writer Larissa Lai, intersected with Canada’s community arts scene (Rashid, in fact, was one of the founders of *Desh Pardesh*). However, their work and interests extended far beyond the metropolitan centers of New York and Toronto to the complex formations of diaspora that resulted from multiple migrations engendered through indenture.

In addition to underscoring the importance of dialogues about history for Mootoo’s work, the diversity of these artists’ backgrounds illuminates, I believe, how the Caribbean’s history of cultural mixture informed Mootoo’s coalitional politics. In particular, Mootoo’s political imagination was shaped by her teenage years in 1970s

Trinidad. There, she was “an impressionistic spectator”⁴⁷ during the uproar of the island’s Black Power movement, and hoped that the alternative national movement would be “a stepping stone to destroying notions of home countries, of India, of Africa, China, England, Spain, France, and that we would move toward a unified notion of us all being Trinidadian, as naïve, as indefinable as that [notion] was then to me, and in truth still is.”⁴⁸ A contestation of anti-black racism, Mootoo’s interest in Trinidadian national unity rebelled against an Indian cultural nationalism that elevated, both socially and economically, Indo-Trinidadians over their Afro-Trinidadian counterparts.⁴⁹ On the basis of this history, Mootoo’s contention with South Asian diasporic identity becomes more legible. She insists, referencing Fung, “The truth is a gay Trinidiadian, say, of Chinese origin...probably has more in common with me than most South Asian dykes outside of Trinidad....”⁵⁰ Mootoo’s implicit self-association, here, with a cohort of queer artists who relate to legacies of indenture, rather than a queer *diasporic* grouping, models community not on the basis of a common racial background, but on the basis of mutual histories. This attention to the crucial difference of Caribbean histories of indenture within the South Asian diaspora disrupts a spatio-temporal model of diaspora that charts a shift from “old” diasporas of colonial-era capital to “new” diasporas of late modern capital⁵¹ (which ironically ossifies the notion of historical time as marking a cultural distance between East and West).⁵² In fact, Mootoo’s work reveals the occlusion of histories of indenture by the heightened focus, both within and without the diaspora, on post-1965 South Asian and Asian American identity. In other words, Mootoo’s work demonstrates the critical impact of island histories for present-day metropolitan diasporic formations.

This attention to the elusiveness of origins informs Mootoo's critique of *Desh Pardesh* and her repeated insistence in her interviews and personal essays that "[i]t is totally against my politics to suggest any kind of pan-South Asian representation."⁵³ By stressing the difference of Mootoo's Caribbean positioning, I do not intend to forward an exoticizing binary that reads the Canada and the U.S. as developed nations that might benefit from a mystical Caribbean anti-modernity. Instead, I pick up on Caribbean critiques of post-nationalism and hybridity by pointing out how, as Shalini Puri puts it, the discourses of hybridity "central to the Caribbean's political culture" present "important cautionary lessons" for metropolitan diasporas to think historically about their community formations.⁵⁴ Mootoo's critique moves beyond now familiar calls to either de-center India within the field, or to better represent South Asian America's heterogeneity through an attention to differences of national origin, generation, or class.⁵⁵ Rather, her focus on the epistemological violence of Asian indenture recognizes the uneven nature of the migrations that shape the diaspora. In her creative work and arts activist practice, she makes visible the widely differentiated, and at times incompatible, relationships to the very system of British colonialism that are seen to bound the category of "South Asia."

Crossing Generations

It is perhaps Mootoo's 2004 autobiographical essay, "This is the Story You Must Write," that best exemplifies the strategies of deferral in relation to community that we see in *Cereus*.⁵⁶ Like much of her work, the essay, published in the queer online journal *Lodestar Quarterly*, navigates the fractured and suppressed histories created by

colonialism. It begins with Mootoo's surprising revelation that her family's understanding about their Indian ancestors, "contrary to all official information in history books," is that they were *not* employed as indentured laborers of British sugar estates in Trinidad.⁵⁷ Five generations removed from her family's migration to the island, yet critically aware of the deep-seated race and class prejudices produced by Britain's colonial management of African, Indian and Chinese labor, Mootoo treats her family's idiosyncrasy with "a modicum of healthy doubt." "If not as indentured workers," she wonders, "what made our ancestors leave India in the nineteenth century to come so far away?" Mootoo's subsequent queries produce only vague responses from her relatives: "Put it this way...one branch of the family did come to Trinidad on one of those ships of recruits. But, no, they never actually worked as indentures. Well, yes, they were recruits, but they weren't indentures. Well, maybe they were, but only for a few weeks. Less than a month really. Nothing to talk about."

Provocatively evasive, these responses set up the framing problem of Mootoo's essay—that there is a story she "must write" which is, simultaneously, "nothing to talk about." They also speak to Mootoo's central interest in the mediated, narratively constructed nature of history and identity. Because stories are neither official record nor entirely verifiable, the act of story-telling allows Mootoo to unpack her family's insistent silence, while enabling her to have a place in the very history she seeks to discover. Accordingly, Mootoo comes to understand her family's story not via historical record, but through an interwoven compilation of local newspaper clippings, her aunts' porch tales, and her own childhood memories.

The titular directive of Mootoo's autobiographical essay references an eagerly

awaited moment in which her grandmother, Bas, offers to tell her about an important journey Mootoo's Nepalese great-grandmother once took. "“You want to be a writer?” she taunted, ‘Then this is the story you must write.’” Anticipating answers to her long-held questions about her family's past, Mootoo eagerly attends a tale about first-generation arrival. The story, however, remains untold, as Mootoo's grandmother passes away before she is able to share it. Visiting her great-aunt Jess several years later, Mootoo again seeks out the secret her grandmother carried with her to her grave, and is finally met with a willing raconteur. Claiming to know nothing about Bas's story, Auntie Jess instead explains the reason behind the Mootoos' non-indentured history, informing Mootoo that when her great-grandfather Misir Bulaki was discovered to be a Hindu pundit, he “was taken out of the workforce by estate owners, and pressed into religious service.” This anti-climactic revelation disappoints Mootoo, inspiring her aunt to offer what she considers other, more titillating stories about family marriages, divorces and affairs.

In a surprising move for someone so invested in learning about her ancestry, Mootoo cuts out for long lapses as Auntie Jess enthusiastically recalls their family history, repeatedly distracted by her own personal associations and imaginings. Learning that one of her great-aunts married a white man from the U.S., for example, Mootoo interrupts to comment, “How much I missed of the story that followed I don't know, for I thought of Richard, the White boyfriend I had when I was 15.” After relating the details of an ensuing confrontation she had with her parents, Mootoo quietly switches back to her Auntie's story-in-progress: “Auntie Jess was saying....”

Mootoo's interjections portray her family history as a discontinuous, interrupted

narrative. Indeed, Mootoo visually reflects this discontinuity in the structure of her essay, with her narration punctuated by long block quotes that indicate Auntie Jess's speech. The cut-and-paste appearance of Mootoo's prose, and the digressive character of her fictional imaginings and memoried associations thus suggest a larger effect of her essay; it illustrates that diasporic familial history less involves generational transmission, than intergenerational collaboration. By structuring an essay about her Indian heritage as alternating snatches of oral history and private memory, Mootoo asserts her displaced generational position not as inauthentic, but as *constitutive* to an understanding of her Indian ancestry. In doing so, she intervenes in a linear teleology that reads homeland as a site of cultural authenticity and diaspora as a "mirror" that reflects—poorly—a distant origin.⁵⁸

This disjunctive approach to history and memory foregrounds the appearance of similar themes in *Cereus*. The resonance of Mootoo's autobiographical essay with her semi-fictional novel helps elucidate how Mootoo harnesses queer futurity—perhaps, as I have suggested, more than the magic realist mode that interpretations of her novel often raise⁵⁹—as an alternative site of potentiality. For the transgressive content and form of Mootoo's memories recall what Beth Freeman terms "erotohistoriography," an act of history-making grounded by "a politics of unpredictable, deeply embodied pleasures that counters the logic of development."⁶⁰ This affective approach to history has been similarly taken up by queer writer Minal Hajratwala, in her discussion of her own family's dispersion from India to Fiji, Africa, and North America. Her family history reveals what Hajratwala describes as an "intimate history" of diaspora: one that not only

“privilege[s] sociopolitical/economic causes, [but factors that] migrants themselves rely on such...as coincidence, impulse, and destiny (karma).”⁶¹

Hajratwala’s definition of “intimate history” highlights the way erotohistoriography harnesses affect to produce a nonlinear narration of history. Accordingly, following the spontaneous associations of Jess’s stories of desire and frustration, Mootoo theorizes an uneven temporality that begins to imagine a conditional future, as suggested by the title of her essay. While the body of the essay presents a collaborative and hybrid narration, the title reminds us that the story Mootoo is instructed to write—Grandmother Bas’s—remains untold and unknown. Like Asha’s imminent arrival, Bas’s yet-untold story becomes both the premise and unmet promise of Mootoo’s piece. In her conclusion to her tales of transgression, Auntie Jess signals that the deferral of this story’s delivery is perhaps the very point of Mootoo’s project, commenting, “There are more stories to tell, but there are always more, aren’t there...And how much does one tell, anyway?”⁶² As this brief reflective essay illustrates, the “mutual inheritance” of queer intergenerationality is never entirely recuperable, and so offers a model of community formation that necessarily turns its ear to listen for the voices of absented others.

Short Story Long

Like Mootoo’s lapses in her essay, distraction characterizes the narrative of *Cereus*. In his preface, Tyler acknowledges that these digressions are crucial for his own self-assertion:

...I cannot escape myself, and being a narrator who also existed on the periphery of the events, I am bound to be present. I have my own laments and much to tell

about myself....Forgive the lapses, for there are some, and read them with the understanding that to have erased them would have been to do the same to myself (3).

Building upon this claim, I re-read the scene of “shared queerness” that has so captured scholarly interest in *Cereus* to illuminate more fully Tyler’s central role in bridging generations by hearing absent others.

One of Tyler’s major moments of “departure” from Mala’s narrative is actually an odd return, in which he recalls the first time he heard rumors about her. The foundational plot of *Cereus*—Chandin Ramchandin’s unrequited love for his benefactor Reverend Thoroughly’s daughter Lavinia—is thus revealed via Tyler’s story-within-a-story. Tyler recalls having heard this story “long before arriving in Paradise to work in the alms house” (24). As a result, the other anecdotes that circulate in the novel, those traded amongst alms house and Paradise residents about Mala’s unfortunate past, sound to Tyler like “elaborations of what I had heard many years ago when I was too young to pay attention” (24). The resonance of the rumors Tyler hears about Mala as echoed repetitions of a legend he has already heard, “many years ago,” highlights the ephemeral means by which historical knowledge circulates in *Cereus* via repetition, echo and rumor.

The first person who reveals Mala’s story to Tyler is his grandmother (whom he calls “Cigarette Smoking Nana” in differentiation from his more disciplinarian “Bible Quoting Nana”). Over the course of their talk, Nana relates a fascinating chronicle about the Ramchandin family that Tyler, as a young boy, listens to and, as an adult remembering the story again, reflects on and repeats for his audience of readers. The distinction Tyler draws between his two grandmothers as he begins to recall Nana’s story indexes Mootoo’s curiosity about the possibilities of nonnormativity that exist within

dominant social structures. As Tyler explains, his paternal grandmother, Bible Quoting Nana, was someone “whom I couldn’t bring myself to get too close to, nor she to me since I was not turning out to be boyly enough for her church-going satisfaction” (24). He and his maternal grandmother, though, pass time together “in the back of our house” (where Nana ostensibly hides out to smoke), a spatial detail that locates the pair at the margins of familial regulation (24).

Like the collage structure of “This is the Story,” this perspectival disorder opens up space for the contradictions and interruptions to which Mootoo consistently attends in her work. Acknowledging that both her “art making and writing are studded with contradictions,” she remarks in a recent talk that “[i]t is in contradictions and not in the precarious solace of...neatness that stories and poetry and life reside.”⁶³ Accordingly, although analyses of *Cereus* rarely mention Nana, she is actually crucially intertwined with the “shared queerness” that structures Tyler’s bond with Mala. As does Mootoo with Auntie Jess in “This is the Story,” Tyler prompts Nana to share what she knows about the Ramchandins by asking her about “the specifics of family relationships” (24). Where Mootoo’s aim is to inquire about familial history, however, Tyler’s interest lies with the overlapping familial roles produced by incest. “Nana, can your Pappy be your Pappy and your Granpappy at the same time?” he asks (25). In response to his question, Nana gives not an immediate answer, but begins to explain the intricate relationship among Mala’s father Chandin, Chandin’s missionary sponsor Reverend Thoroughly, and the Reverend’s daughter Lavinia. Notably, the narrative voice slips repeatedly during Nana’s story, jumping from Nana’s first-person narration to Tyler’s first-person narration to Mootoo’s third-person narration, offering the reader details about the Thoroughlys’

house and Chandin's emotional state that Nana, as a continuing resident of the indentured barracks that Chandin had left behind, could never have witnessed.

Mootoo's interest in this kind of narrative impossibility is reflected not only through the form of Nana's story, but also in a series of key plot-level doublings. When Reverend Thoroughly discerns Chandin's early interest in Lavinia, he calls him into his study and attempts to "correct" the logic of his attraction: "If I have performed as your father and my wife as your mother, what is the relationship of my daughter to you?" (36). Convinced that, contrary to the reverend's suggestion, Lavinia is not really his sister, Chandin begins to resent the reverend's management of his desire, vowing to "hide it away so well that no one would be able to trace it" (37). Years later, when the reverend reveals news of Lavinia's engagement, Chandin is shocked to discover that she plans to marry her cousin, Fenton Thoroughly. Probed by Chandin to explain, Reverend Thoroughly states, "He is not truly her cousin. You see, my brother married a woman who had been married once before and brought with her a child—Fenton....but as you can see he is not a true relation" (45). The ironic mirroring of Fenton's position as an adopted "cousin" of Lavinia's with Chandin's own position as her adopted "brother" is not lost on Chandin. His realization that the reverend's racist fear of miscegenation determines his ineligibility as Lavinia's suitor partly informs, Mootoo implies, Chandin's own trauma, eventually manifested through his nightly act of raping Mala.

Nana, however, refuses to reveal the details of these incestuous practices to Tyler, cutting her story short after she tells him about Chandin's reactionary decision to marry, on a whim, an Indian woman who was Lavinia's best friend and a fellow convert at his school. Nana concludes:

‘So Chandin Ramchandin married this Sarah and she made two children, two girl children,’ she said. ‘And well, you know, Tyler child, one thing lead to the other and, well, to make long story short, Chandin pick up with the older daughter. Now she never had any children with him but it could have happened. That is the thing. It could have happened, yes! Now if the daughter had made a child for him, that child would be his—’ (47).

Interrupted by the appearance of Tyler’s mother, who she knows would disapprove of her telling this story, Nana leaves her tale narratively “pre-empted,” as Tyler puts it (47). But Nana’s comment that Mala’s impregnation “could have happened” also presents a second way of interpreting pre-emption. In keeping with the novel’s semi-fictional sensibility, the highly likely possibility of Mala’s impregnation by her father never occurs. In this way, Mala also refuses the unspoken possibility that is grammatically represented by the em-dash in the quote above, emerging as a non-reproductive figure in the novel.⁶⁴

Indeed, through her fascination with the plants, insects and animals that surround, and eventually overtake, her childhood house, Mala consistently becomes associated with decay in the novel, with the odor of what Mootoo describes not as death, but “of life refusing to end...the aroma of transformation” (128). To see Mala’s excusal from reproduction as aligned with an act of transformation and deferral—a “refusing to end”—suggests that Nana’s story of what “could have happened” produces a narrative about alternative social possibilities. The narrative of *Cereus* at large expands out from this premise, articulating the affinities that Nana edits out from her story—in particular the transgressive desires of Chandin for Lavinia, and of Lavinia for Sarah.

By making her “long story short,” Nana was, as Tyler notes, “in the end, unable to tell me everything” (47). Tyler’s effort to, in turn, make Nana’s short story “long” over the remainder of the novel thus sutures together Mala’s story with this childhood moment on the back porch. What interests me, in particular, about this complex triangulation is

the way Mootoo's palimpsestic narration of Chandin's story complicates a distinction between Tyler's affiliation with Mala and the normative structure of family, a point Tyler himself makes in thinking about the story's significance for him:

Reflecting now on the story that Cigarette Smoking Nana had begun to relate to answer my boyish query...I often want to call out to Nana up in the heavens...and say, 'You were right, you were right! There was indeed a Chandin Ramchandin. But there is much more to that story!' *It was as though Nana had introduced me to Miss Ramchandin, and Miss Ramchandin had confirmed Nana for me* (46, emphasis mine).

Nana, it seems clear, is central to the "shared queerness" between Tyler and Mala, a point that Mootoo emphasizes in even more direct language a few pages later. "The relationship between nana, my Cigarette Smoking Nana, and me, her Peculiar Grandson, was special, for we both had secrets from my mother, her daughter" (48). The parallel between Tyler's relationship to Nana and his relationship to Mala is forged around the idea of their common bond at the *edge* of a community. Tyler feels bonded to Nana's subversion of Christian morality and to Mala's traumatic history because both are, like Tyler's homosexuality, unassimilable and unspeakable within Lantanacamara. Because this seemingly tangential cross-generational story presents generational difference as a vehicle for marginal alliances, it circumvents familial regulation and its reproduction of dominant ideologies of normalcy and deviance. We might thus read Tyler's "speaking back" to Nana by finishing her "long story" as the novel's key illustration of the way queer intergenerationality defines historical knowledge as disloyal to linear temporality.

Trespass

Otoh more forcefully conveys what we might consider the productive intrusions of such disloyalty by appropriating his father's role as Mala's suitor. At first, Otoh is

introduced as a side character whose main contribution to the novel's plot is to help Tyler "fill in gaps and make sense" of Mala's mumblings (102). Together, Otoh and his father assist Tyler to collectively author Mala's story by cross-checking her erratic ramblings with Ambrose's own memories of their childhood (99). It is through this process that Tyler begins to develop feelings for Otoh; as the resulting resonance between Mala's language and Ambrose's memories buoys Tyler's belief in the possibility of locating Asha, it also sparks his "growing fondness" for Otoh. In fact, Tyler's desire for Otoh becomes expressed *through* his excitement about piecing together Mala's story: "You can...imagine my giddiness when Mr. Mohanty and the uncommonly lovely Otoh related tales in which the very same gramophone, spider bird or snail [that Mala mentioned] were featured," he exclaims (102).

Otoh, however, is soon revealed to have served as an actor who once substituted for his inactive father, who has fallen into a traumatized state of stupor after accidentally witnessing Mala's sexual abuse by her father. Save for the basket of food he prepares each month for Mala, as a sort of passive devotion and penance, Ambrose sleeps, much to the frustration and dismay of his wife Elsie. It is Otoh who surreptitiously places the baskets Ambrose prepares at Mala's doorstep, an "inherited task" that sparks Otoh's curiosity about "the woman who controlled the lives of both his parents" (111, 141). Dressing up in his father's clothes in an attempt to finally meet Mala face-to-face, Otoh sets out to hand-deliver one of her monthly packages. "You see," he comments about his plan, "you could say that I am courting her" (149).

Otoh's borrowed costume builds upon a layered narrative about misrecognition and gendered flexibility that codes his entire encounter with Mala. Born "Ambrosia," a

girl, Otoh's gender exploration becomes triangulated with his parents' combative relationship; consequently Ambrose and Elsie "hardly noticed that their daughter was transforming herself into their son" (109). And because Otoh behaves like an "authentic boy," Elsie "soon apparently forgot that she had ever given birth to a girl. And the father, in his few waking episodes, seemed not to remember that he had fathered one" (110). Otoh's gendered duality, Mootoo suggests, informs his imagination, which is consistently able "to imagine many sides of a dilemma" (110). Nicknamed "Otoh-boto" for his characteristic manner of weighing possibilities—by pairing the phrase "'on the one hand' with 'but on the other'"—Otoh is gifted with a multiple positionality that, like Tyler, allows him to access "the full story" of his father and Mala's past (110, 48). And as with Tyler, and with Mootoo in "This is the Story," Otoh does not passively receive an understanding of this past, but uses it to intervene in and revise his present.

Seeing Otoh dressed in his old suit, Ambrose comments, "You are indeed a reincarnation but not of a person per se, merely of a forgotten memory. You are a perfect replica of me in my prime. I have never seen you look so stunningly like myself before" (144). Where Ambrose recognizes his son as a "replica" of himself from another era, Mala misrecognizes Otoh entirely when he leaps over her fence and drops into her yard. Thinking that Ambrose has returned to her, Mala implores Otoh to stay, inviting him to see the body of her father, who she long back killed in self-defense, as proof that the elder Ramchandin is no longer a danger or threat. Terrified by the sight of Chandin's decomposed body, sealed up in Mala's basement, Otoh re-enacts his father's earlier abandonment of Mala by bolting from her house. Collapsing in delirium on the street outside, he mumbles to passers-by who stop to help him that there is a body inside. For

Ambrose, this announcement is an extension of Otoh's strange "inheritance": "It was your duty, my unfortunate son," he proclaims after hearing the news, "to be the man who unleashed the business of an ugly, lurking phantom" (170). Yet what Ambrose reads as duty, Otoh perceives as a mistake he must correct. Refusing to repeat the cycle of his father's complacent passivity, Otoh returns to Mala's house once she is taken in by the police and sets fire to it, destroying any evidence of Mala's murder.

Otoh's experience with Mala figures as not just an encounter but as a transgression of history. Mootoo interweaves her narration of Otoh's approach to and meeting of Mala with flashbacks that recall Mala's memory of a favorite childhood practice. As a girl, she slipped out of her house and crossed the lawn to break into others' houses, navigating neighbors' halls before walking out the front door, leaving "no hint of a stranger's presence, no trace of entry" (159). This nonviolent trespassing acts as a balance to the violation Mala endures from her father; afterwards, she feels "avenged" (159). Where Cvetkovitch has usefully pointed out the way Mala's "fantasy of power and agency wards off the intrusion of traumatic memory," I also read it as connected to the novel's larger interest in alternative historiography.⁶⁵ Paralleling Mala's recollection of her past intrusions, Otoh comments repeatedly upon seeing Mala in person for the first time, that he "felt himself a trespasser," that "he was trespassing on this woman's land" (155). Otoh's mirroring of Mala's spatial transgression performs what Mootoo theorizes as a dialogic interconnection across generation that creates productive misrecognitions. What does it mean, Mootoo seems to ask, to enter another's history?

Of any character in *Cereus*, it is perhaps Otoh's mother who provides a response to such a question. As attuned as Ambrose is checked out, Elsie "sees" Otoh, much to his

surprise. Talking with him about a woman he has been dating, she asks, “She know you don’t have anything between those two stick legs of yours? Don’t watch me so. You think because I never say anything that I forget what you are? You are my child, child” (237). Elsie’s chiding reminder that she remembers Otoh’s biological sex is, as she explains, connected to her acknowledgment of colonialism’s legacy of mimicry. “You grow up here and you don’t realize that almost everybody in this place wish they could be somebody or something else?” (238). Because it recalls Chandin’s careful transformation from the Hindu son of an indentured laborer to the prized Christian pupil of a colonial missionary, Elsie’s comment circles back to the ostensible problem that set the Ramchandin family on its tragic course. But her commentary is less a complaint than an insistence on a critical way of reading the world. “...[I]s not easy to tell who is who,” she notes. “I does watch out over the banister and wonder if *who* I see is really *what* I see” (238).

To hold in tension one’s embodiment and one’s signification—who we see versus what we see—is the lesson that I believe *Cereus* casts out for the formation and practice of the South Asian left community amongst whom Mootoo felt excluded. Orienting diasporic community around epistemological practice rather than significations of authenticity, Mootoo insists that the work of community formation requires the work of historiography. That we trespass, as it were, into one another’s pasts, and see ourselves as strangers rather than as bonded by a common homeland. For if spaces like *Desh Pardesh* assumed a thread of commonality across a group of peers who comprised a left South Asian diaspora, then Mootoo’s circular, mobile narrative subverts the possibility of that coherence, always pushing at ways in which community is ephemeral, discursive and

not easily assumed or represented.

By resisting the consolidation of diaspora with racial commonality, the “queer logic” of *Cereus* plays with narrative temporality and cross-generational dialogue to refigure the relationality of its characters in unexpected ways. Anticipating Munoz’s concept of queer futurity, Freeman expounds on the possibilities of such a move in a recent *GLQ* roundtable on “Queer Temporalities”:

The rubric of time...seems to offer the possibility of unmaking the forms of relationality *we think we know*. Implicit in much of this is Foucault’s suggestion that homosexuality is a way of inaugurating, creating, proliferating, shifting social relations. In this sense, might homosexuality (let’s call it queerness) itself be a form of future-making, of re-creating the social, though perversely enough, not in the name of the future? (emphasis added 188).⁶⁶

I am intrigued by Freeman’s suggestion because what I am calling the queer intergenerationality of *Cereus* illustrates that the historical engagement necessary for thinking beyond conventional assumptions about diasporic belonging is, in fact, future-minded. It presents forms of collectivity that do not abide by a linear temporality. Yet, where Bald and Alexander freeze and fragment moments in time using collage form, Mootoo extends them—as the following section, in particular, will illuminate—in a continuous, regenerating loop. While *Cereus* circles back to revisit Lanatanacamara’s history, after all, it does so in the service of looking towards and anticipating the possible return of Asha. The novel’s cross-generational discourse thus not only reveals affiliations among subjects who have been exuded from society, but also understands this affiliation as rendering coterminous the past and the future.

Undelivered

The conclusion of *Cereus* locates alternative historiography Mootoo with a poignant epistolary trope: the undelivered letter. Asked by Ambrose to help reunite Mala with her beloved sister, the judge who dismissed her murder trial for lack of evidence and sent her instead to the Paradise Alms House discovers a box letters from Asha in the back room of the Paradise post office. After learning that the mailman refused to approach Mala's mysterious, overgrown house, the judge, himself a childhood tormentor of Mala who now feels a personal sense of remorse, promises "to look into the matter of the undelivered mail" (143). Sent over the course of a decade and tracing Asha's diasporic movement, from Lantanacamara's northern region to the empire of the Shivering Northern Wetlands and eventually to Canada (the only real geographical location mentioned in the novel), Asha's letters begin with a tone of urgent instruction and dwindle, in later years, to a tone of resignation, having all gone unanswered.

Within the bounds of the novel, these undelivered letters certainly reflect the dual nature of Tyler's narrative—not just a story, but also a diasporic missive, a circulating public letter that physically "reaches" people abroad each time its cover is opened. The letters, however, also appear as a particular site of counterhistory within the novel, a point made more legible by comparing *Cereus* to another novel about Asian indentured history, Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*. In this novel, Lowe, a cross-dressing Chinese immigrant who runs a small store in Jamaica, tells the story of his gendered transformation by writing a letter to his daughter, who remains unaware that her father is actually her mother. Continually beginning this letter, but discarding it, Lowe reveals details about his history by starting again, repeatedly. "Ask anybody," he says to his

daughter in the novel's last lines, "I been writing you this letter for years."⁶⁷ Like *Cereus, The Pagoda*'s partial epistolary form becomes less about a reciprocal exchange of letters delivered in sequence, across time, than an undelivered compulsion, necessitated by colonial histories of migration, to rewrite and retell.

The continual loop that structures the narrative of *Cereus* differentiates it slightly, however, from narratives that explore the historical possibilities of colonialism. David Eng locates such possibilities in Monique Truong's imagining of the life of the Vietnamese cook of Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein in her novel *The Book of Salt* (2003). Truong's complex portrayal of Binh, Eng argues, "opens up space for thinking 'what could have been' in the 'what can be known' of historicism."⁶⁸ This claim builds upon Lowe's critique of discourses of modernity and freedom in "The Intimacies of Four Continents." As I discussed in my introduction, Lowe explores the labor-based and domestic proximity of Asian, African and native peoples in the Caribbean; colonial archives of housing and labor records thus imply what Lowe describes as, after historian Stephanie Smallwood, "what could have been."⁶⁹ The queer intergenerationality of *Cereus* connects to these projects by imagining, as I am suggesting, what could *be*.

Even in Mootoo's "This is the Story," the letter appears as a medium of transgressive historical knowledge. Some time after her conversation with Aunt Jess, Mootoo's mother mails her a newspaper clipping detailing the story of one of her uncle's secret interracial affairs, of which Mootoo herself was unaware. The lifestyle piece from which this clipping is cut is itself written in a tone of confession, and features a Creole woman named Tant Ferguson admitting to a life-long romance with Mootoo's Uncle Sankar, a relationship that was carried out in secret due to Mootoo's family's

disapproval. Seeing Tant pictured next to her daughter, “a mixed race woman, with skin fairer than her mother's, high cheekbones and bright, smiling almond-shaped eyes,” Mootoo realizes that Tant, and Tant and Sankar’s daughter, were “not part of Auntie Jesse’s repertoire.” Struck that her mother would fill in this elision and indirectly contribute to Mootoo’s project of uncovering her family’s past secrets, Mootoo marvels at the slow pace and unexpected forms through which suppressed details of the past surface. “I find it curious—which stories are told, and which are not, and where the story lines are drawn, both in the privacy of our families and in the glare of the public.”⁷⁰ The act of pushing to expand these story lines, the bounds of what we know and reveal, as this chapter has attempted to argue, is at once a crucial issue for colonial historiography and a necessary model for the practice of progressive diasporic communities in the present, so as to move beyond a collectivity loosely based on visible minoritization.

I think that the suspended and deferred states of *Cereus* (a book that is an unreceived letter) and “This is the Story” (a story that is yet-untold), further frame the discursive practice of queer intergenerationality as an act of writing for an absent addressee. This stance produces a particularly nuanced reading of Asha, a character who either goes unrecognized or overdetermined in critical readings. Cvetkovitch, for example, argues that Asha, “the lost sister who leaves a family marked by violence and trauma to make a diasporic path” is a character through which Mootoo critiques “her own position as a diasporic subject.”⁷¹ And while Mootoo has certainly attested to the resonance of Lantanacacara with Trinidad, and the necessity of her leaving Trinidad to develop her art,⁷² I believe it is important to resist equating Asha with Mootoo’s biography. Instead, I want to acknowledge Asha as a figure who addresses us, but who

cannot be recovered by readers or by Tyler's historical project. To my mind, she stands as a symbol of impossibility—an absent presence—in the novel.

In keeping with the novel's function as erotohistoriography or "intimate history," this impossibility is mapped through desire in *Cereus*. Continuing their practice of meeting at the alms house, Otoh and Tyler, and Ambrose and Mala, now pairs of lovers as much as a cadre of social outsiders, court each other while they hope for Asha's return. Noting that the novel's titular cactus plant, "an unruly network of limp, green leaves" planted in the alms house garden, is nearing the time of its annual flowering, Tyler implores Otoh to resist consummating their relationship until the impending bloom of the cereus, "in just another few nights" (248). Both Tyler's request and the cyclical appearance of the cereus bloom generate what the novel calls an "excitement," a palpable arousal "diminished only by the fact that there is still no word from Asha Ramchandin" (249). The erotic affect of the novel's conclusion (the cereus is known for its heady, aphrodisiacal scent) speaks to the way in which the collective consciousness of Tyler, Otoh, Mala and Ambrose is energized less by any aim for inclusiveness, than by an open sense of anticipation.

That the novel stops just short of full circle further expresses this open attitude towards incompleteness. For despite the present tense of the novel's title (*Cereus Blooms at Night*), the blossoming of the cereus flower is perpetually anticipated but never realized; so even that key symbol in the novel tilts toward a future tense. At the end of the novel, then, we are left occupying the meantime between history and a possible future, a condition articulated by Tyler's furtive whisper to Otoh: "Can you wait?" (248). Taken literally, this question is about Tyler and Otoh's deferred consummation;

symbolically, it references the group's eager hope for Asha's diasporic return. Within the larger framework of this chapter, however, the question also resonates with Mootoo's own sense of marginalization within radical South Asian diasporic circles. We might thus use Tyler's question to read South Asian American arts activism as experiencing its own "meantime" during the 1990s—as not yet a fully realized or ideal community but, rather, one partially assembled by multiple, conflicting voices. Mootoo's anti-teleological narrative suggests the need for a continual reckoning with the limitations of diasporic community, articulated most clearly by those subjects who belong differently, who have been invited, but have not yet answered the call.

Endnotes

¹ “Dual Citizenship, Elsewhereness, and the Sources of Creativity,” *Thamyris/Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race* 8.19-20 (2001) 24.

² “I’m Comfortable Being Uncomfortable...” *Caribbean Tales.org* (March 2005): 2.3, web, 20 Feb. 2008.

³ “Introduction,” *Satyagraha in America: The Political Culture of South Asians Americans*, spec. issue of *Amerasia* 25.3 (1999/2000): xiv.

⁴ *Cereus Blooms at Night* (New York: Avon Books, 1996). Hereafter referred to as *Cereus*.

⁵ By associating this movement with a “new left,” I acknowledge the way its attention to queer, anti-racist and feminist politics departs from the economic determinism of an anti-colonial “old left.”

⁶ Shani Mootoo, *Out on Main Street and Other Stories* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books/Press Gang Publishers, 2002).

⁷ Chandin’s story opens up questions of psychic trauma that I am not able to pursue fully in this chapter. Anne Cvetkovitch provides an astute reading of the psychic dimensions of the novel’s portrayal of familial trauma in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).

⁸ The phrase “madwoman in the attic” is from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s feminist rereading of *Jane Eyre* in their *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979).

⁹ Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 34.

¹⁰ Grace Hong, “‘A Shared Queerness’: Colonialism, Transnationalism and Sexuality in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 7.1 (2006): 76.

¹¹ See M. Jacqui Alexander, “Not Just (Any)Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas,” *Feminist Review* 48 (Autumn 1994): 5-23.

¹² Gopinath 34.

¹³ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005) 5.

¹⁴ *India Abroad: Diasporic Culture of Postwar America and England* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003) 240.

¹⁵ Gopinath 34.

¹⁶ In her dissertation on anti-capitalist black feminism, Alexis Pauline Gumbs also develops the concept of “queer intergenerationality.” In her project, the term names her engagement with 1960s and 70s-era black lesbian feminists as charting a “queer diasporic relationship to time, self, community and survival.” *We Can Learn to Mother Ourselves’: The Queer Survival of Black Feminism*, diss., Duke University, 2010, 18.

¹⁷ Tejaswini Niranjana, *Mobilizing India: Women, Music, and Migration Between India and Trinidad* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 34.

¹⁸ Shani Mootoo, *The Predicament of Or* (Vancouver: Polestar Book Publishers, 2001) 96.

¹⁹ One of the more fascinating aspects of Mootoo’s complex subject position is her challenge to metropolitan South Asian diasporic community on one hand, and the relative privilege of her critical relationship to Trinidad from the vantage point of Vancouver’s and Toronto’s metropolitan diasporic spaces, on the other. See Mootoo’s interview in *Literature Alive Online*, in which she comments, “In terms of my connection to Trinidad, Trinidad is so present in my work. In all my work. There’s no denying it. The two novels that I’ve written are both set in places that, they’re fictionalized spaces but they are home. You know they are Trinidad right? At the same time I cannot work there. I cannot be there and work there and I’m so, you know I feel, I feel I’m quite distant from there.” 2 Feb. 2008

<http://literaturealive.ca/images/stories/html/Audio_html/Shani_trini_in_her_writing.html>.

²⁰ See especially: Hong, who reads *Cereus* as “a record of the alternative forms of affinity and affiliation—distinct from that of nationalism—that must emerge out of these unruly histories [of British colonialism and the post-independence nationalisms of Trinidad and Tobago].” “‘A Shared Queerness’: Colonialism, Transnationalism and Sexuality in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 2006, 7.1, 79; Vivian May, who argues that “Mala/Tyler’s remembering and retelling are part of crafting a different collective memory, an oppositional community consciousness to resist the rigid mores and violent rationalities of empire, heteronormativity, and social domination.” “Dislocation and Desire in Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37.2 (Fall 2004), 114; and Heather Smyth, who sees the novel’s setting as “invok[ing] a utopian Caribbean space for gay and lesbian subjects, us[ing] utopics in a way both emancipatory of and resistant to homophobic and colonial structures of power.” “Sexual Citizenship and Caribbean-Canadian Fiction: Dionne Brand’s ‘In Another Place, Not Here’ and Shani Mootoo’s ‘Cereus Blooms at Night,’” *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 30.2 (April 1999) 146.

²¹ A productive corollary line of analysis that I have not had the opportunity to fully explore in this chapter is the absence of Mala and Asha's mother, Sarah, from the narrative; her absence is neither mourned, nor mentioned, to nearly the same extent as Asha's.

²² José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

²³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004).

²⁴ David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).

²⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) 1.

²⁶ Ibid 3.

²⁷ As Dipesh Chakrabarty succinctly puts it, historicism turned history itself into a kind of waiting room. "We were all headed for the same destination...but some people were to arrive earlier than others....This waiting was the realization of the 'not yet' of historicism," *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 8.

²⁸ Ibid 18.

²⁹ Ibid 1.

³⁰ Ibid, 1.

³¹ In her recent work on postcolonial magical realism, Kumkum Sangari locates what she calls "the politics of the possible" with the nonmimetic mode of narrative itself. Postcolonial writers like Salman Rushdie and Gabriel Garcia Marquez use distortions of the "real," she argues, to "insist that the epistemological problem is itself a historical one"—that is, knowledge about history is shown in these works to be *itself* historically contingent. *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narratives, Colonial English* (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2001) 4.

³² Cvetkovitch, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003) 133.

³³ See for example Mootoo's essay, "Off Colour: Not Just an 'Other' Screening" in *Rungh* 2.4: 11, as well as earlier issues of this same periodical that report on *Desh Pardesh*.

³⁴ Personal Interview, 20 April 2008.

³⁵ Here, I reference the title of the anthology *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, ed. Rajini Srikanth and Lavina Dhingra Shankar (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998).

³⁶ Personal interview, 16 April 2009.

³⁷ Among the major South Asian diasporic cultural and political efforts the 1990s witnessed were: Diasporadics, ArtWallah, Youth Solidarity Summer (YSS), Mutiny and Basement Bhangra. For a discussion of YSS, Mutiny and Basement Bhangra, see Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002). For an analysis of the differences among Diasporadics, Desh Pardesh and ArtWallah, see Bakirathi Mani, "Destination Culture," *SAMAR: South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection* 14 (Fall/Winter 2001): web, 20 Feb. 2008.

³⁸ Punam Khosla, "Desh Pardesh 1991 Opening Address," reprinted in *Rungh* 1.1-2 (1991): 5.

³⁹ The Clara Thomas Archives of York University, which houses the Desh Pardesh archives, provides a comprehensive administrative history for the festival: "The organization's mandate states: 'Desh Pardesh is lesbian and gay positive, feminist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist and anti caste/classist. Desh exists to ensure that the voices and expressions of those constituencies in the South Asian community which are systematically silenced are provided with a community forum. In particular: independent artists, cultural producers and activists who are women, lesbians and gays, people with disabilities, working class people and seniors.' Founded in...late 1989, the festival was originally conceived as 'Salaam Toronto!' and administered by Khush, an association of South Asian gay men in Toronto. This day-long festival was held at 519 Community Centre in May, 1988. The Khush committee later developed into a coalition-based organizing committee to administer the newly named Desh Pardesh, which was held in March 1990, and was co-sponsored by Khush and The Euclid Theatre. Desh Pardesh was incorporated as a non-profit organization on April 7, 1994. In addition to organizing an annual summer conference and arts festival (featuring film screenings, workshops, issue-driven seminars, spoken work and literary readings, music, dance and performance art pieces), Desh Pardesh also hosted periodic arts development workshops, community outreach seminars, mini-festivals, art exhibits, and film retrospectives. It also served as a resource centre and referral service to various South Asian community groups and artists, cultural organizations and activists. In later years, Desh Pardesh worked in close collaboration with SAVAC (South Asian Visual Arts Collective). The Desh Pardesh festival and its administrative body closed in 2001 due to a financial crisis." Online inventory of the Desh Pardesh fonds, The Clara Thomas Archives at York University, 18 August 2010 <<http://archivesfa.library.yorku.ca/fonds/ON00370-f0000522.htm>>.

⁴⁰ Bakirathi Mani, quoted in Sharon Fernandez, "More than Just an Arts Festival: Communities, Resistance, and the Story of Desh Pardesh," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 31.1 (2006) 31.

⁴¹ For a specific discussion about de-centering Indianness at Desh Pardesh, see "Signifiers, Saris and Samosas" *Rungh* 1.1-2 (1991) 22-25.

⁴² In her discussion of queerness and diaspora, Jasbir Puar cautions against Gopinath's suggestion that queer diasporas offer a more heightened challenge to state power and national belonging, insisting that "[o]ne cannot assume that this combination [of queerness and diaspora] heightens any particular oppositional potential in relationship to the state" (409). She briefly references Mootoo's experience with cultural nationalism at Desh Pardesh to illustrate this point. My own analysis occupies a space in between these two positions, for I see Mootoo's work as neither unraveling the thread of queer diaspora entirely (Puar), nor as emblematically embodying the possibilities of queer diaspora (Gopinath), but rather, as reimagining the left South Asian diaspora from within. "Transnational Sexualities: South Asian (Trans)nation(alism)s and Queer Diasporas," *Q & A: Queer in Asian America*, eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (Philadelphia: Temple UP 1998) 410.

⁴³ Rajini Srikanth, "Introduction," *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America*, ed. Lavina Dhingra Shankar and Rajini Srikanth (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 2.

⁴⁴ Naheed Islam, "In the Belly of the Multicultural Beast I Am Named South Asian," *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993) 242-246.

⁴⁵ Lavina Dhingra Shankar, "The Limits of (South Asian) Names and Labels," *A Part, Yet Apart: South Asians in Asian America* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 49-66.

⁴⁶ *Imagine Otherwise: On Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke UP 2003) 9.

⁴⁷ Mootoo, "Dual Citizenship, Elsewhereness, and the Sources of Creativity," 19.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 19.

⁴⁹ As Viranjini Munasinghe notes, racial tension between Trinidad's Indian and African communities is a legacy of colonialism that has continued to grip the nation, escalating in the 1980s and 1990s, the period leading up to the election of the nation's first Indian Prime Minister, Basdeo Panday. See "Redefining the Nation: The East Indian Struggle for Inclusion in Trinidad," *Journal of Asian American Studies* (February 2001): 1-34.

⁵⁰ Dipti Ghosh, quoted in Puar, "Transnational Sexualities," 416.

⁵¹ This concept is from Vijay Mishra, *Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁵² See Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

⁵³ Dipti Ghosh, quoted in Puar, "Transnational Sexualities," 416.

⁵⁴ Shalini Puri, *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism and Cultural Hybridity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 2-3.

⁵⁵ I draw my definition of heterogeneity from Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996) 67.

⁵⁶ Mootoo, "This is the Story You Must Write," *Lodestar Quarterly* 9, 2004, 23 April 2004 <<http://www.lodestarquarterly.com/work/188/>>.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ The concept of diaspora as a mirror of homeland is from Amitav Ghosh, "The Diaspora in Indian Culture," *Public Culture* 2.1 (1989) 78.

⁵⁹ Mootoo herself resists the association of her novel with magic realism, commenting that "Perhaps...new terminology could be imagined for the work of people like myself in Canada who write...out of another specific location, time and set of concerns [from that of "magic realism"]—immigration, longing, displacement, queerness, etc." Personal interview, 20 April 2008.

⁶⁰ Freeman 59.

⁶¹ Minal Hajratwala, "Intimate History: Reweaving Diaspora Narratives," *Cultural Dynamics* 19 (2007): 301

⁶² Mootoo, "This is the Story You Must Write."

⁶³ Mootoo, "Recipe for the Making of a Writer: A Pinch of Dissident, a Hint of Citizen, and a Pound of Thesaurus," 16 February 2006, *Gaywire*, CJSR, Alberta, 2 February 2008 <<http://www.cjsr.ualberta.ca/newsmp3s/gaywire/SMootoo.mp3>>.

⁶⁴ I thank Lisa Lowe for this observation. Personal conversation, 22 February 2008.

⁶⁵ Cvetkovith, *An Archive of Feelings*, 148. See also Vivian May, "Dislocation and Desire in Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37.2 (Fall 2004).

⁶⁶ "Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman et al. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A

Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ* 13.2-3 (2007): 188.

⁶⁷ Patricia Powell, *The Pagoda* (Orlando: Harcourt Books, 1998) 245.

⁶⁸ David L. Eng, “The End(s) of Race,” *PMLA* 123.5 (October 2008): 1485.

⁶⁹ In *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Ann Laura Stoler, ed. (Durham: Duke UP 2006) 191-212.

⁷⁰ Mootoo, “This is the Story You Must Write.”

⁷¹ *An Archive of Feelings*, 150.

⁷² <http://literaturealive.ca/images/stories/html/Audio_html/Shani_trini_in_her_writing.html>

CHAPTER THREE

Aesthetics and Affect in Amitava Kumar's *Passport Photos* and Vijay Prashad's *The Karma of Brown Folk*

In 2000, just prior to the realignment of South Asian American and Arab American racialization following 9/11, South Asian left scholar Vijay Prashad published *The Karma of Brown Folk*,¹ a critique of both U.S. Orientalism and the conservative nationalism espoused by many South Asian Americans. In her later study of queer South Asian diasporas, Gayatri Gopinath proclaimed *Karma* to have “inaugurated [a] new body of scholarship... that...intervenes into both South Asian and Asian American studies” by redefining diasporic subjectivity as historically and politically, rather than regionally, located. Prashad “links the current category of ‘South Asian American,’” Gopinath writes, “to prior histories of anticolonial struggle in South Asia, as well as to the labor migrations precipitated by British colonialism in Europe, North America, East and South Africa, and the Caribbean.”² Indeed, *Karma* links diasporic histories among Africans and Asians in the U.S. in order to challenge the complicity of South Asian “model minorities” in antiblack racism.³ In this way, *Karma* elaborates on a larger debate around the importance of cross-racial solidarity that was taking place at South Asian progressive events in New York and the U.S., like *Desh Pardesh* and South Asian Student Association (SASA) conferences, where Prashad first shared his work.⁴

But *Karma* only tells part of the story of how ideas that had circulated informally within progressive South Asian events and activist organizations became consolidated as a critical narrative of race and diaspora at the close of the 20th century. For Prashad's critique intersected with another path-breaking work published in 2000 by his colleague

and fellow South Asian public intellectual, Amitava Kumar. A reflection on postcolonial immigration and race politics in the U.S., Kumar's *Passport Photos* travels among Mexico, the U.S., South Asia and the Middle East to document the "real lives" of postcolonials who "we encounter in newspaper columns as abstract, often faceless, figures without histories."⁵ In using the category of the postcolonial, Kumar seeks to challenge both the nation-state and the academy—as institutions that place an imbalanced burden of representation on immigrants and people of color. Speaking back to these institutions via personal reflections, the imaginative and introspective mode of *Passport Photos* does not advance as materialist and historical an argument as *Karma*, which methodically traces U.S. Orientalism and South Asian American conservatism from the 19th century to the present day. But Kumar's commentary overlaps with Prashad's by referencing a shared archive of Asian American activism in New York City, and works to contextualize Prashad's discussion of U.S. race politics within a global vocabulary of border-crossing. As I will argue, the resonances between these two texts are not coincidental, but stem from Prashad's and Kumar's collaboration on several early projects of the South Asian left, in particular the Forum of Indian Leftists (FOIL).

By bringing together *Passport Photos* and *Karma of Brown Folk*, this chapter repositions these texts from secondary critiques to primary objects of study for the South Asian American left, and explores the way Kumar and Prashad see diaspora as a site of possibility for "a new poetics and politics" of collective protest (Kumar x). In many ways, the texts extend and flesh out the promise of cross-racial and diasporic solidarity symbolized by the "broken mirror" within which Vivek Bald asks us to see ourselves in the concluding montage of his film *Taxi-vala*. Chronologically, then, this chapter

highlights the asymptotic endpoint of the contemporary South Asian diasporic left—whose project became partly frustrated, and partly reconsolidated, following 9/11—and conceptually, brings full circle the discourse around race, diaspora and community that connects the texts of this dissertation.

Manifesto Poetics

In his *Village Voice* review of *Karma of Brown Folk*, Andrew Hsiao calls Prashad's book a "love/hate letter to his fellow desis, or South Asian immigrants."⁶ Even though Hsiao's phrasing is tongue-in-cheek, thinking of *Karma* as a public missive makes sense in that the text speaks, as does *Passport Photos*, primarily to a South Asian diasporic audience, with a more general audience "listening in" on that conversation. In fact, as publicly written and publicly addressed declarations for a diasporic community who Prashad and Kumar seek to simultaneously identify and inspire, *Karma* and *Passport Photos* could well be read as manifestoes for the South Asian American left—extending out of and upon the ideas and activism that circulated within the radical South Asian American movement of the 1990s. Reading these critiques of South Asian diasporic politics as manifestos highlights their intertextuality—the echoes that appear both within and across these authors' individual *œuvres*, each of which draw upon a shared historical memory extending from Afro-Asian alliances and cultural crossings to contemporary South Asian American activism and organizing.

Each consciously take up the language and gestures of the manifesto in their own way. The concluding chapter of *Passport Photos* is actually presented as a manifesto entitled "Against Solitude," and *Karma* partly builds on ideas that Prashad had floated in

1995 in a short manifesto he wrote for the New York-based progressive South Asian magazine, *Sanskriti*. In that piece, “ROOTS: A Manifesto For Overseas South Asians,” Prashad calls for diasporic South Asians to relate to a shared past not via national or religious holidays, but “by commemorating events such as the expulsion of Asians from East Africa and the racism of the British State in its wake.”⁷ Doing so produces an imagined homeland that offers an alternative to an authentic homeland, one located not in South Asia but instead “stretch[ing] from Jackson Heights to the Ghadar Party, from the rallies against Dotbusters to the Komagata Maru, from the 1965 Immigration Act to Devon Street.”⁸ For Prashad, the imperative of diaspora is to challenge the selective amnesia that, as Benedict Anderson reminds us, makes up the “imagined community” of the nation.⁹

Extending his critique of cultural nationalism to address the racial responsibility of South Asian Americans, Prashad describes his 2000 book as “a set of *sutras* (aphorisms) of the *karma* (fate) of desis, who must now imagine ourselves within the U.S. racial formation and seek to mediate between the dream of America and our own realities” (viii). Together, Prashad’s and Kumar’s manifestoes highlight the importance of challenging the American individualism that informs model minority discourse, so as to think more collectively. As Kumar insists in his concluding manifesto to *Passport Photos*, “our South Asian writing in the diaspora must simultaneously invent and embrace its public. This has to be a writing against solitude” (236). In addition to the clear political message of these statements, their plural reflexive diction—“desis who must now imagine *ourselves*” and “*our* South Asian writing in the diaspora”—signals the

way *Karma* and *Passport Photos* function not only as scholarly critiques, but also as calls for political and social change within the South Asian diasporic community.

Of course, because they are published by university presses, and thus meld academic frameworks with public scholarship, *Karma* and *Passport* are tonally different from the manifestos previously penned by radical Asian American movements or groups, such as the anticolonial Ghadar Party's "Jang Da Hoka" (Declaration of War) or Frank Chin's, of the *Aiiiee!* collective, cultural nationalist polemic against assimilationist literature, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake."¹⁰ Indeed, partly because of their hybrid position as leftist cultural activists and institutionally-sanctioned scholars, the styles of Prashad's and Kumar's argument are more polite and beguiling than the fervent narratives of the Ghadar Party or Chin—even as Prashad implores his desi audience to commit "model minority suicide" (179).

Despite their departure from the impassioned, epigrammatic style typically ascribed to manifestoes, the model of the manifesto remains important for thinking about Kumar's and Prashad's texts, not only because they differ from the traditional academic monograph, but because the genre of the manifesto opens up questions of history, form and style that centrally define *Karma* and *Passport*, and their treatments of political consciousness. In her study of the way manifestoes contest democratic universalism, Janet Lyon suggests that we read manifestos not taxonomically, but more openly, as texts whose declared projects of political and social action challenge dominant systems of power:

What the dominant order calls 'progress,' the manifesto aims to expose as aberrancy or mythopoesis or hegemonic opportunism; to what the dominant order relies on as 'the real,' 'the natural,' 'the thinkable,' the manifesto counters with its own versions of 'the possible,' 'the imaginable,' and 'the necessary.' Thus the

manifesto both generates and marks a break in history: it is both a trace and tool of change.¹¹

Here, Lyon describes the manifesto as simultaneously representative and agentic: “both a trace and tool of change.” She thus locates the action of the genre precisely with its speculative gesture, the social change that it insists is and must be possible.

The performativity that Lyon ascribes to the manifesto also informs Martin Puchner’s rich study of the genre. In his *Poetry of the Revolution*, he writes, “Political manifestos are texts singularly invested in doing things with words, in changing the world. They are ideal instances of performative speech in the sense used by J. L. Austin.”¹² Puchner situates the genre historically as a “central icon of communism”; this anti-capitalist form certainly holds appeal for Kumar and Prashad, whose activism and intellectual work is consistently motivated by a critique of bourgeois diasporic identity.¹³ By linking the Marxist tradition of the political manifesto with the arts-based avant-garde manifestos of Dadaism and Surrealism, though, Puchner insists on reading manifestoes not only through their politics, but also through their poetics—what he describes as “an analysis of their makings and doings.”¹⁴

I extend Puchner’s attention to poetics by arguing that the critical force—and possible limitations— of *Karma* and *Passport Photos* are elucidated not only through their political contentions, but also through their acts of aesthetic improvisation—by the very form and style in which they reimagine diasporic community. Building upon Gopinath’s attention to the historical trajectory of these texts, I consider how the manifesto provides a medium through which to recuperate histories of indentured labor as an alternative past with which South Asian diasporic subjects can identify. The characteristics of the manifesto—its imperative, performative, repetitive style of

expression—affectively impresses upon Kumar’s and Prashad’s readers the importance of resituating South Asian American political consciousness as one grounded by histories of labor, rather than by a privileged relationship to capital. Drawing in part from the ideas developed through Asian American activism and emerging programs of ethnic studies and postcolonial studies with which both were engaged, Kumar and Prashad imagine a historical archive that makes visible the interconnections among the dominant orders of Orientalist ideology, the academy, the state and postcolonial nationalisms.

My framing of Kumar’s and Prashad’s texts as manifestoes builds upon my previous analysis of the “conditional futures” articulated in the work of Vivek Bald, Meena Alexander and Shani Mootoo. Bald and Alexander point to anti-colonial alliances between African and South Asian colonial subjects as a model for South Asian diasporic subjectivity, so as to argue for a future in which South Asian American identity and consciousness might exist not in distinction to, but in solidarity with, other minority groups in the U.S. Mootoo, by contrast, is interested in a conditional future that exceeds the political identity “South Asian American.” By turning towards the imagined intimacies of Caribbean indenture, she offers, as an alternative, a queer intergenerational dialogue that acknowledges and attends to the historical and cultural differences that threaten the very coherence of diasporic communities. Where Bald, Alexander and Mootoo use self-reflective and imaginative forms—the experimental autobiography and antirealism—to project possibilities for the South Asian diasporic community, Kumar and Prashad are more focused on documenting (or “tracing” if we follow Lyon’s language) histories of diasporic counter-culture. However, as Puchner points out, the temporality of the manifesto is, by its nature as a political or artistic

program, future-oriented. The genre provides, as he puts it, a “poetry for the future.”¹⁵ The poetics of Kumar’s and Prashad’s work thus locate the South Asian American movement as an extension of a longer history of anti-colonial agitation and alliance. As I will discuss at greater length in the conclusion to this chapter, their work gestures towards the expansion, across the diaspora, of the new ideas about political subjectivity generated through South Asian American activist culture. Kumar, for example, actually describes *Passport Photos* as a kind of antidote to the highly localized nature of South Asian American activism in metropolitan centers like New York, suggesting that a message of solidarity might be amplified through his book’s circulation to a wider audience.¹⁶ This push to circulate an anti-model minority consciousness responded to the pressures of social and political conditions in the diaspora during the late 1990s, most notably the increasing complicity of the South Asian diaspora in religious fundamentalism in India,¹⁷ as well as the diaspora’s indifference to new forms of racialized labor exploitation under globalization.

As Lyon, Puchner and others have articulated, the ardent form of the manifesto seeks to produce a collective subject—a “we” whose members are measured on the basis of their opposition to a “scripted oppressor.”¹⁸ That the plural reflexive pronoun of the manifesto simultaneously hails its subjects and speaks on their behalf extends the series of questions I raised in Chapter 1 about the move from a singular “I” to an expansive “we” in Bald’s and Alexander’s autobiographies. There, I noted the uneven nature of the “we,” as gesturing towards a solidarity that remained nascent. Lyon sees this gestural quality not as problematic, but as productive for calls for social change. “[T]he ‘we’ of the manifesto,” she writes, “is highly unstable, inflectable, expansive and mobile.”¹⁹ In

this way, the genre is elastic; its work is less to announce the mission of a particular community, than to *craft* that community into being, through an act of what Prashad calls, echoing Kumar's sentiments about *Passport Photos*, "audience-making."²⁰ Indeed, within their own arguments for solidarity, there remains an honest question about the realizability of the "progressive, large-scale mobilization" of South Asians that Kumar and Prashad deem necessary, and a recognition of how difficult established narratives of cultural authenticity and national identity are to contest (Kumar ix). Rather than easily proclaim the logic of their arguments or assume a given audience, then, Prashad and Kumar attempt to evoke a collective subject through subtle and iterative argumentation, one that names an alternative politics for South Asian America as much through critical arguments as through formal acts of revision and reappearance.

Revision and Reappearance

At a discursive level, Prashad and Kumar revise broadly accepted narratives about race and national identity. This revision is most immediately apparent in the texts' modeling on prior narratives: for Prashad, W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal sociological study of race relations in the U.S., *The Souls of Black Folk*; and for Kumar, the passport itself. Prashad opens his book with a recollection of his first encounter with *Souls*, a transformative text whose affective power inspired him to attempt to "complicate the problem Du Bois offered a century ago" (viii). Where Du Bois's central question for black Americans was "How does it feel to be a problem?" Prashad seeks to ask his fellow model minorities, "How does it feel to be a solution?" (viii). The echoing syntax in Prashad's question illustrates the way he connects his critique to Du Bois's, and so links

his argument, as Lyon finds all manifestoes to do, to a larger “history of struggle against dominant forces...to the countless voices of previous perpetual struggles.”²¹

Conceptually and structurally, *Karma* also borrows from *Souls*: in its focus on ethos and affect, what Prashad calls “the feelings, the consciousness of being South Asian, of being desi...in the United States” (viii); in its critique of a political counterpart (in *Karma*, Dinesh D’Souza takes the place Booker T. Washington did in *Souls*); in its chapter organization, which lists, like Du Bois’s original study, a prefacing “Forethought” followed by fourteen chapters, each of whose title begins with the preposition “of”; and in its theorization of concepts like “*girmit* consciousness,” which references the Patois abbreviation of the indentured contract or “agreement” signed by plantation workers—a reminder of the way South Asian immigrants have been valued for their labor, but not their lives. Where Du Bois famously pairs canonical verse poetry with a bar of music from slave songs in his chapter epigraphs, Prashad offers his own archive of the representation and expression of South Asians, in the form of epigraph quotes by everyone from American transcendentalists and Allen Ginsberg to South Asian diasporic poets and musicians like Reetika Vazirani and the Asian Dub Foundation. In its thorough evocation of the structure of a text that is arguably the most important for the U.S. racial imaginary, Prashad’s self-proclaimed “flawed attempt” to draw upon *Souls* at once asserts the necessity of Afro-Asian solidarity for the sociological conditions of 21st century, and subtly signals Du Bois’s prescient attention to the solidarities possible among those he called the “darker races of mankind” (a phrasing that Prashad would also invoke in his recent history of Third World activism, *The Darker Nations*) (vii).²²

Kumar's *Passport Photos* also structures itself as a kind of imitation. "This book is a forged passport," Kumar announces in his preface (ix). Each chapter of the book corresponds to the categories of the passport: language, photograph, name, place and date of birth, etc. Beginning with Kumar's imagining, loosely, of how these categories might be read by an immigration officer, the chapters then extemporize a response to the officer's reading, one that "suppl[ies] different, proliferating narratives" to subvert the fixed, isolated identity that is imposed by the passport (xiv). Kumar hopes that these stories, attesting to "information [that] does not fit on the dotted line," might shift diasporic perspective from that of an individual state citizen to one who envisions alliances within and among diasporic communities (xiv).

The device of the passport also allows Kumar to respond to the prevalence of border metaphors in academic discourse in two ways. First, by returning the border "to the material reality of barbed-wire fences, entrenched prejudices and powerful economic interests that regulate the flow of human bodies across national boundaries" (x). And second, by calling for "disciplinary transgressions" that may produce "genuine, transformative shifts...requir[ing] the creation of new assemblages not only of forms but also of readers and, in a word, of communities" (x). This latter point illustrates part of the reason why pairing Kumar and Prashad is productive for my project—Kumar's language offers, in its self-reflection, a way to describe what I see both authors doing both politically and poetically.

For in addition to their rewriting of prior narratives, Kumar and Prashad also present their argument as an intertextual collage of criticism, personal photographs and poetry. It is in these mixed media forms that I see the books deviating from *Souls* and the

question of the postcolonial at large, and speaking to diasporic South Asian Americans in particular, by suggesting the need to build an archive of the diaspora's activist work and counter-narratives.²³ The chapters that comprise *Karma* are peppered with photographs—some of these are conventional images that commonly attend scholarly critiques, archival images of early Indian immigrants in the U.S. or Orientalist representations of Indians in American art. But most photographs are personal snapshots, taken by Kumar, Shamita Das Dasgupta, Sunaina Maira and other friends and scholars with whom Prashad collaborated in his organizing and academic work. The visual narrative of *Karma* thus tells a story about *desi* experience that completes the chronology of his chapters: there is our past and here is our present.

Or, as Kumar puts it, borrowing from the rapper Rakim, “this is where I’m at: in the spaces claimed or established by...images...[that] detail a different kind of immigrant experience” (14). Central for his argument and form, the numerous images that appear in *Passport Photos* are, according to Lyon, who mentions Kumar’s photographs in her study, “themselves manifestoes.”²⁴ They record and document civil resistance and state racism in the U.S. and India, and also shape Kumar’s personal project of bringing together “anthropology and autobiography” to explore the South Asian diaspora (56). In an additional intertextual resonance, the photographs, and some of the text of *Passport Photos*, are drawn from an earlier piece of Kumar’s, a film called *Pure Chutney* that follows the descendants of Indian indentured laborers in Trinidad.

I will discuss these intertextual and archival details at length in the rest of the chapter, but for now, raising their presence helps express the argument that I have been building thus far: that print manifestoes serve as a tool of change for Kumar and Prashad,

only when working in tandem with other media and modes of address. The coupling of the visual and the narrative, and the intermingling of the poetic and the didactic, function as supplements to the “we” that centers these texts. The new political subject these texts seek to initiate thus emerges through a revision of the black/white American race narrative on one hand, and through overlapping words, images and rhythms on the other.

The affective and aesthetic investment of Kumar’s and Prashad’s poetics is rooted in the community activist work they did as part of FOIL. Inaugurated in 1995 by a group of about fifty first-generation Indian academics, intellectuals and activists inspired equally by Ghadar as by *Desh Pardesh*, FOIL was committed to “social justice, secularism and equality” in India.²⁵ The group highlighted their diasporic position as strategic for influencing both the dominant conservative rhetoric of the professional-managerial class of diasporics who had settled in the U.S., Canada and England, as well as western media representations of India and diasporic populations. “The idea is a simple one,” FOIL’s mission reads, “Most of us work within the intellectual domain... We write, teach, and talk for a living. We could ensure our constant presence in the public media, and in the activities of various organizations, and thus in the long run, influence the politics of the community.”²⁶

To this end, Kumar led projects on media presence, encouraging the scholars and writers of FOIL to produce articles and pieces for “the diaspora’s media arms—newspapers, magazines, TV shows, etc.”²⁷ He also worked on a media fairness project, which organized “rapid collective response” in the form of editorials or calls for correction to inaccurate representations of Indian society and politics in the left liberal media and mainstream news.²⁸ Prashad headed up a FOIL speakers bureau that brought

“Foilers” to college campuses and community organizations to speak on South Asian topics. Together, Kumar and Prashad would also go on to launch Youth Solidarity Summer, a long-running radical summer camp that sought to educate young South Asian Americans about South Asian and diasporic political struggles, and to mobilize progressive political resistance at their respective college and high school campuses.²⁹ In each of these projects, Kumar’s and Prashad’s interest in publicly engaged scholarship and interventions into representation is apparent. In serving as “a trace and tool of change,” the manifestoes of *Passport Photos* and *Karma* track the need for a collective response to injustice and seek to foster mobilization via the cumulative affective influence of their collage narratives.

Pure Chutney

To describe the aesthetic style of *Passport Photos*, Kumar references *After the Last Sky*, a collaborative project between the late Palestinian literary critic Edward Said and photographer Jean Mohr. In that work, Said notes that the book’s nonlinear interchange of words and images arises from the experience of Palestinian exile itself, which fosters “hybrid, fragmentary and unconventional forms of expression”³⁰ Kumar asserts, “In writing *Passport Photos*, in the peculiar juxtaposition of images and words, and also divided sites and subjects, I follow Said’s lead.” (224). In truth, this multimedia juxtaposition is characteristic not only of *Passport Photos*, but of the entirety of Kumar’s work. Spanning film, poetry, fiction, memoir and critical nonfiction, Kumar’s œuvre uses eccentric aesthetics to capture the experience of diasporic migration and culture,

which produces unexpected configurations of place—“Lahore in London” as Kumar puts it (224).

Kumar’s first book, a poetry collection entitled *No Tears for the N.R.I.* (1996), comments upon his diasporic relationship to the U.S. and India using free verse. Though the collection was published by the Writers Workshop in Calcutta, and only available in India, several of its poems reappear in *Passport Photos*, juxtaposed (often without introduction) with Kumar’s critical prose. The recirculation of these poems in another format is not uncommon to Kumar’s writing and filmmaking practice. Like Alexander and Mootoo, Kumar revisits the same questions, themes and metaphors in multiple generic contexts, with entire sections of prose, poetry and image reappearing from one text to the next.

Of particular interest to me in this chapter are the intertextual resonances between *Passport Photos* and Kumar’s first film, *Pure Chutney* (1998), the debut in a series of film collaborations that Kumar took up with director Sanjeev Chatterjee. Some of the narrative and many of the images that so define *Passport Photos* in fact first appeared in *Pure Chutney*, a project for which Kumar served as both script-writer and still-photographer. Documenting Kumar’s travels from Florida to Trinidad, the film tracks Kumar’s interaction with a small Bihari community, whose ancestors arrived as indentured laborers following the British Empire’s abolition of slavery in 1833. Himeself born in Bihar, Kumar imagines that he and the Bihari Trindadians he encounters, though strangers, might descend from the same “far-off ancestors.”³¹ Coming from the homeland, as it were, and recalling Shiva Naipaul’s (V.S. Naipual’s younger brother)

journey from the Caribbean to visit India, Kumar comments, “I was traveling in the opposite direction from the Trinidadian Naipaul.”

Indeed, the entire collaborative series Kumar has planned with Chatterjee is about traveling in the “opposite direction,” in that their films are not about diasporic return, but instead are dispatches sent across the diaspora about South Asia’s many hybridized sites. The second and most recent film in the series, for example, *Dirty Laundry* (2005) is a documentary about Indian South Africans who participated in the anti-apartheid guerilla movement. Kumar and Chatterjee plan to shoot three other films, each in a different diasporic location, with one of them perhaps, Kumar has joked, “about a place where there [is] only one Indian, a frigid place in Finland, an Indian running a small restaurant.”³²

Kumar met Chatterjee many years after his arrival to the U.S. in 1986 to begin graduate studies, at his first teaching job at the University of Florida. Chatterjee, coincidentally, also grew up in Patna, Bihar, and so became interested in working with Kumar on the basis of their “shared history.”³³ A television producer and documentary filmmaker who now focuses on climate and social change, Chatterjee’s early work focused on issues of identity in the South Asian diaspora. In 1995, he had completed the film *Bittersweet*, one of the first films to document the lives and experiences of first and second generation Indian Americans.

Pure Chutney extends Chatterjee’s interest in identity and the documentary mode, but acts as a travel essay that explores how descendants of indentured Biharis have reimagined India abroad. The film’s title symbolizes a celebration of the mixed culture of diaspora, in which, as Kumar comments in a poem that concludes the film, “Only the

impure/ will endure.”³⁴ The irony of lasting transformations contained in this verse line speaks to the mixed mode of the film itself, a rotating collage of black and white still photographs, color video footage, voiceover narration, and poetry—an outgrowth of Kumar’s and Chatterjee’s individual approaches. “The nature of our collaboration is intimately related to the very language of documentary that we are trying to produce,” Kumar notes. “They hybrid mix of poetry, still photography, ethnography and video-travelogs is precisely the result of a collaboration in which we preserve our differences.”³⁵ Circulated mainly at festivals and local screenings at the time of its release, *Pure Chutney* won second prize at the 1999 Film South Asia Festival held in Kathmandu, Nepal.³⁶

The film anticipates Kumar’s interest, in *Passport Photos*, in developing a “political aesthetics” (236). In this way *Pure Chutney* is about Bihari Trinidadians, and also about a coupling of politics and poetics that helps his critique, Kumar writes, “to find expression in public forum, [and] to resist the suffocating air of a fixed materialism that is, in John Berger’s memorable phrase, ‘oppressive and literal’” (*Passport Photos* 226). To combat fixity, Kumar argues that South Asian diasporic writing (an argument that partly grows out of and is thus applicable to his film, I am suggesting here)

be one of a *movement*—both in the sense of an engagement with a mass, and hence one that is tested on the grounds of the communities it opens, engages, interrogates in dialogue, but also in the sense of mobility, and hence, a political aesthetics that has the swing, the agility, of history itself (236, emphasis added).

Kumar’s agile political aesthetics are not represented by the blurred, kinetic imagery that characterizes Bald’s *Taxi-vala*. Instead, mobility in *Pure Chutney* is more conveyed through circulating photographs, whose stilled images evoke a movement that, after Roland Barthes, is largely affective, recognizing that which is absent from us.³⁷

The film opens with a black and white shot of Kumar, behind the lens of a camera, adjusting the zoom (fig. 9). This initial image both highlights Kumar's role as a witness and recorder, and foregrounds the issue of the gaze for the film's overall project. The first several minutes of the film features a succession of photos and still frames shot in Trinidad, with Kumar speaking in voiceover: "Now that you're gone I only have this image in my mind—of you making photographs, always making photographs. You and your camera."³⁸ Several of the images are paired to make visible Kumar's and Chatterjee's acts of recording. In one, we see a cane farmer and, in the next, a zoomed-out image of Kumar photographing the cane farmer. In another, a family sits together on a sofa, crowding near each other to fit into the camera's frame. In the next image, the mother in the photo is peering through the eyepiece of Chatterjee's video camera (fig. 10). Ostensibly, these images raise the question of who is witnessing whom in *Pure Chutney*, with the objects of a doubled gaze—Kumar's camera on one hand, and Chatterjee's filming on the other—turning the lens back on Kumar and Chatterjee, and, by extension, on the film's viewers.

Yet, it is important to note that while the practice of the gaze is self-consciously addressed in the film's visuals, the heteronormative masculinity that underwrites the movement so crucial to Kumar's projects remains obscured. In general, women and issues of sexuality are not absent from Kumar's work: in *Passport Photos*, he carefully reviews the way the "figure of the Indian woman...inhabits the space of representation" in the diaspora, noting women's overdetermined symbolism in films, and in Indian and U.S. left media alike (180). But Kumar's access to diasporic sites and communities is



Figure 9. Kumar behind the lens. From *Pure Chutney* (1998).



Figure 10. Chatterjee and one of his subjects trade roles. From *Pure Chutney* (1998).

informed, like Bald's entrée to a bachelor community of taxi drivers, by a legible masculinity that serves as its own kind of passport to interacting, in *Dirty Laundry*, with the African National Congress in South Africa and, in *Pure Chutney*, with Hindu leaders in Trinidad. This focus on male political leaders in the diaspora not only renders more private or unarchived forms of resistance "secondary to 'real politics,'"³⁹ it also speaks to Susan Sontag's point that photography itself functions as an act of appropriation: "To photograph...means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power."⁴⁰

Kumar's own ease with accessing Trinidad is based partly on his imagined relationship to the Bihari descendants who reside there, but also, as becomes apparent over the course of the film, on his self-understanding as an Indian national who values, rather than disparages, the cultural hybridity of the diaspora. This openness leads to overly-familiar gestures during some of Kumar's interactions with the Trinidadians he meets. In some of the film's more discomfiting scenes, for example, Kumar: gamely interviews a Christian convert about religion, while the man's Hindu father is burned on a funeral pyre behind him; and, at a mosque, slips a borrowed kufi back onto the head of its owner in a gesture that toes a line between friendliness and condescension. In their conversation about the filmmaking process, Chatterjee comments that Kumar's "flippant" presence on camera balances out the film's serious message about displacement and cultural reinvention.⁴¹ But, by extending Sontag's point above, Kumar's facetious joking also structures what might be seen as a compliant appropriation—one mediated by his romanticizing of diaspora, and so different from what Kumar calls "the poor economy" of

the appropriation exhibited in isolated headshots taken and circulated “by the state or the racist, dominant media” (*Passport Photos*, 42).

Halfway through the film, embedded within its ethnographic footage, a stranger indirectly confronts Kumar’s fascination with Trinidadian culture during Carnival, Trinidad’s national street festival. In plain clothes, but surrounded by costumed dancers, Kumar approaches a woman standing near the sidelines, who has been painting the lips of passers-by with bright red lipstick. The following shot shows Kumar getting his own lips painted when, from the lower left hand corner of the frame, an Afro-Trinidadian reveler reaches out and smears Kumar’s cheek with three finger swipes of dark body paint. Kumar backs away from the woman holding the lipstick, and then quickly breaks into laughter once he makes eye contact with the man with the body paint, who remains off camera, also laughing. Just as he backs up though, the camera registers Kumar’s slight start at being unexpectedly touched.

This scene performs, in an unstaged way, what Kumar and Chatterjee present at the film’s beginning in the series of photographs featuring interview subjects holding cameras. For here, *Kumar* becomes the object of the unknown man’s outreach—though the act of wiping body paint on his cheek is partly embracing, in the jubilant spirit of Carnival, it also marks Kumar as an outsider and tourist. During this scene of transfer and contact Kumar comments, in voiceover, “Amidst all this playful mixing of identities, I kept asking myself one question: What did it mean to assume the face of a diasporic Indian?”⁴² The stripes on his face suggest that while assuming a diasporic “face” might mean embracing the “pure chutney” of hybridity, and challenging the self-distancing he experiences from resident Vishwa Hindu Parashad (VHP) nationals who characterize

Afro-Trinidadian culture as immoral and immodest, it also means recognizing the impossibility of complete understanding and inclusion across difference. In the scene that follows Carnival, Kumar stands, sometime later in the day, in front of a docked cargo ship. He has removed his lipstick, but left the marks that run unevenly down his cheek and jaw, a badge of his participation in Carnival, but also, as I read them, the trace of a stranger's confrontation of Kumar's diasporic project.

Passport Photos

A still from this shot by the dock, with Kumar in sunglasses, smoking a cigarette and looking somewhere beyond the camera lens, reappears in *Passport Photos*, as Kumar's author photo on the book's back cover (fig. 11). By beginning with a reading of his film, and seeing the film's extension into the textual space of *Passport Photos*, I want to highlight *Passport* as a text that attempts to gather together narratives of the diaspora into a community, yet whose very act of interpellation is attended by subtle resistance. In his conclusion to *Passport Photos*, Kumar insists:

I do not mean to romanticize diasporic culture as the true site of a new politics. What I do, however, want to insist on is the potential for culture, any culture, to escape the dictates of law and custom. In the diaspora, especially, culture and lives can, and often do, find new undiscovered forms (228).

While I believe that Kumar attempts to be responsible and self-critical in his work, the language of discovery that shapes his statement above also informs his thrill, in *Pure Chutney*, with "discovering" a Trinidadian diasporic community that features intermarried Hindu-Muslim families, detoured laborers from Trinidad to Venezuela who adopted Spanish mulatto names and identities, chutney soca, and a hybrid language of Bhojpuri and Patois. As remarkable as these legacies of indentured history might be, and



Figure 11. Evidence of a cross-racial confrontation. From *Pure Chutney* (1998).

as important as it is to intervene in the metropolitan diaspora's lack of knowledge about Trinidad, Kumar's enthralled wonder echoes the exoticizing fetishization he sought to critique in FOIL's media projects.

When questioned about his romanticization of the diaspora by curator Prerana Reddy at a recent screening of *Dirty Laundry* sponsored by the South Asian film collective 3rd I, Kumar characterized his approach as a way to "escape from roots." Sukhdev Sandhu added that we might conceive of romanticization as a limited, but productive lens that "compels a future journey."⁴³ Neither of these comments provide entirely satisfying answers, but they do suggest that romanticization be theorized as an

important aspect of Kumar's imperative to "produc[e] new, rebellious songs linking expatriate lives with oppositional possibilities in the homelands" (*Passport Photos* 131). In particular, I think we can conceive of the affect produced by Kumar's photos and self-insertion in his works as creating a revisionary nostalgia, a romance with history that inspires community-building.

This reading of revisionary nostalgia extends from prior iterations of the concept, including Gopinath's "interventionist nostalgia," in which "'India' signifies a history of radical organizing rather than a site of pure, unsullied cultural identity"⁴⁴ and Sunaina Maira's "critical nostalgia" which names the way South Asian American youth "critique [an] ideology of authenticity and challenge dichotomies of pure/impure ethnicity through the complexity of their everyday practices."⁴⁵ For Kumar, I would add that revisionary nostalgia also provides a way to remember the unexpected alliances and blended cultures produced in the South Asian diaspora, *regardless of whether we have experienced or witnessed them before*. And perhaps, following Sandhu's comment, this revisionary nostalgia is what charted the path for others on the South Asian American left to seek out their diasporic complements in Britain, Africa and the Caribbean. Where Barthes searches, in the photograph, for his deceased mother, Kumar might be said to search, in the photograph, for a disappeared history of cultural detours and political alliances that he seeks to revive and reconnect to contemporary struggles against nationalism and globalization.

In his chapter entitled "Photograph," Kumar argues that the formal juxtaposition of photos and narrative creates space for affiliation with strangers. Like Kumar's other chapters, this one is expansive and highly associative in its connective logic, covering a

range of texts from mug shots to “digitally encoded photographs” on green cards to the work of photographers and critics like Sebastião Salgado, John Berger and Jacob Riis (41). Compiling together political cases of unjust visual representations of immigrants and theories of photography, Kumar suggests that alternative interpretations of images can intervene in mainstream narratives that otherwise objectify immigrants and postcolonials. “Especially in a postcolonial context,” he emphasizes, “an image will have to be seen as surrounded by other images, other words, and always, other worlds” (47). This statement is instructive as a methodology for reading *Passport Photos*, and for thinking of the way the extra-narrative material in the book—images, newspaper editorials, poems—creates an alternative archive of the diaspora, an album of figures who we have never met, but for whom we can feel nostalgic. “As photographers and viewers, we need to make an image work like memory, crisscrossed by dreams and detours,” Kumar writes (47).

Understanding the import of this mixed media form for Kumar’s project of revising nostalgia has much to do with what he describes as the vexed process of viewership for immigrants, one that involves an act of “negotiation between two poles—one of them anthropological and the other autobiographical” (56). Certainly, this comment relates directly to Kumar himself, the holder of an H1-B visa at the time he wrote *Passport* and the script for *Pure Chutney*. But, by following the associative logic of his reflections, it becomes apparent that Kumar is talking as much about an individuated experience in a world saturated by images, as about the challenge of defending the lives of strangers whose histories interconnect with yours.

Kumar references Richard Wright's book, *Twelve Million Black Voices*, as an example of autobiographical ethnography, a mode that simultaneously makes legible the plural subjectivities of African Americans, and obscures "objective knowledge" about them (56). Kumar quotes from Wright:

Each day when you see us black folk upon the dusty land of the farm or upon the hard pavement of the city streets, you usually take us for granted and think you know us, but our history is far stranger than you suspect, and we are not what we seem (55).

Kumar interprets Wright's provocation to his reader as a first-person narrative that "assumes the force of collaboration and collective identity ('us black folk...we...our') precisely through documentary" (55). That Kumar's isolation of the plural reflexive in Wright's language mirrors my earlier isolation (in this chapter's introduction) of Kumar's own plural reflexive is not accidental. For while its narrative progression at times appears improvisational, the thematic through-line of *Passport Photos* consistently elaborates on the claim made in "Photograph" that a critical diasporic autobiography must risk appropriating others.

Accordingly, the chapter ends with a photo of a Trinidadian Indian peasant, one of the images that initially appeared in *Pure Chutney*. Along with the other photos in *Passport*, of cab drivers, vendors, HIV activists, rally goers and construction workers, this image figures Kumar's alternative archive as cohering specifically around "labor and protest" (14). By suggesting that the expression of Kumar's experience as a postcolonial immigrant necessarily invokes a collective, Kumar marks what Barthes might phrase as the advent of himself as other.⁴⁶ His story, Kumar writes:

is told here in parts. It doesn't drive to a single conclusion or even claim authority. It arrives at a series of related points from all directions, like people

coming to board a train that will take them away. I sit among them, but the journey is not mine alone (56).

Of Karma

At first glance, Prashad's narrative voice deviates widely from the performative nature of Kumar's. "Amitava is an artist," Prashad asserts in one review, "who thinks about art and about those who make art around him."⁴⁷ As Prashad's affectionate, but pointed characterization suggests, the oblique, introspective quality of Kumar's reflections versus Prashad's more methodical genealogical study marks a key difference between them. But the tone of Prashad's work exhibits a cadence similar to that of Du Bois, or James Baldwin in his essays on black life, that brings an emotive charge to the archival history and social critique he presents.

Begun in 1998 as a way to consolidate ideas Prashad had developed "in discussions with activist and students across the country" and in "community periodicals" like the *South Asian Magazine for Action and Reflection (SAMAR)* and the aforementioned *Sanskriti, The Karma of Brown Folk* founded a narrative of Afro-Asian solidarity that Prashad has continually reformed and revisited (ix).⁴⁸ His next book, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity* (2001), extended Prashad's reputation, as Bill Mullen attests in his *Afro-Orientalism*, as the academy's "most brilliant applicator" of hybridity theory for understanding "the historical relationship between peoples of Asian and African descent."⁴⁹ Prashad's more recent projects, including a book produced in association with Howard Zinn, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*, build upon his attention to forgotten histories by archiving global struggles, small and large,

against imperialism.⁵⁰ (An expansive project perhaps foreshadowed in Prashad's offhand comment in *Karma* that the criticism of the relevance of the Left after the fall of the Soviet Union is "Eurocentric, since the Communist Left is still going strong in, among other countries, India, Nepal, Cuba, Vietnam, China, South Africa, and Chile" (194).

As an imperative for the South Asian American community, the major complaint of *Karma* is that South Asians in the U.S. willingly concern themselves with the accumulation of wealth, rather than with political participation and engagement. The result is a classic diasporic condition in which South Asians, for reasons both voluntary and structural, "live in America, but...are not *of* America" (102). In response, Prashad attempts to move the conversation about South Asian immigrant and generational life from the realm of cultural identity to that of social justice.

He begins with the crux of model minority identity, which at mid-century, structured Asian entry into the U.S. as a "weapon against black folk" (viii). The hierarchized discourse of race in media and political circles, which presented Asians as more compliant and successful than African Americans, restructured two existing race narratives. On one hand, it blamed racial disparities on supposed deficiencies of black culture, rather than on the lasting inequalities of slave history that had been a major message of the Civil Rights movement. On the other hand, it reimagined Asians in the U.S. from suspect internal enemies, gathered together in insular Chinatowns and Japantowns, to exemplary assimilated national subjects. It is this ahistorical state narrative, enabled by a slew of conservative theories and policies in the 90s—among them, *The Bell Curve*, Newt Gingrich's "Contract for America," and Dinesh D'Souza's *The End of Racism*—that Prashad seeks to revise.

In its attention to the racial management of the state and the countering need for interpersonal and intergroup affiliations that attest to the existence of alternative narratives of identity and belonging, Prashad's project shares much in common with Kumar's. But their bonds also appear in more implicit ways throughout *Karma*, partly through Prashad's reference to working with FOIL and other Asian American groups, and partly through the book's cover itself. In what might now be considered an iconic image for the South Asian diasporic left, Prashad's cover features a rotated image of a young boy, edited with a blue tone filter that evokes classic Hindu iconography of the blue-skinned Lord Krishna. His fingers raised in a peace sign, the boy gazes directly into the camera, a slight smile turning the edge of his lips (fig. 12). Reappearing in its full form in the body of the book, the photo, one of Kumar's documentary shots of the diaspora, reveals a group of other boys in the background, gathered together on a New York City stoop. Of all the photos in Prashad's book, this is the only one whose caption includes a quote, ostensibly spoken by the boy(s) in the photo: "We are the bangla niggers." Raising both the appropriation of black language and culture that Sunaina Maira documents in her *Desis in the House*,⁵¹ and the need for a poetic, hybrid, historical language to describe South Asian American identity, the quote indirectly evokes this response from Prashad:

In loving detail I will try to offer the karma that has befallen my people as we wend our way in the United States, unaware of how we are used as a weapon by those whom we ourselves fear and yet emulate. This is our dilemma (9).

Palimpsest

As a counter to the ahistoricity of model minority identity, Prashad traces out, in the chapter “Of Antiracist Racism” in *Karma*, what he calls “a tradition of solidarity and fellowship that began at least a hundred years ago” (171). The language of

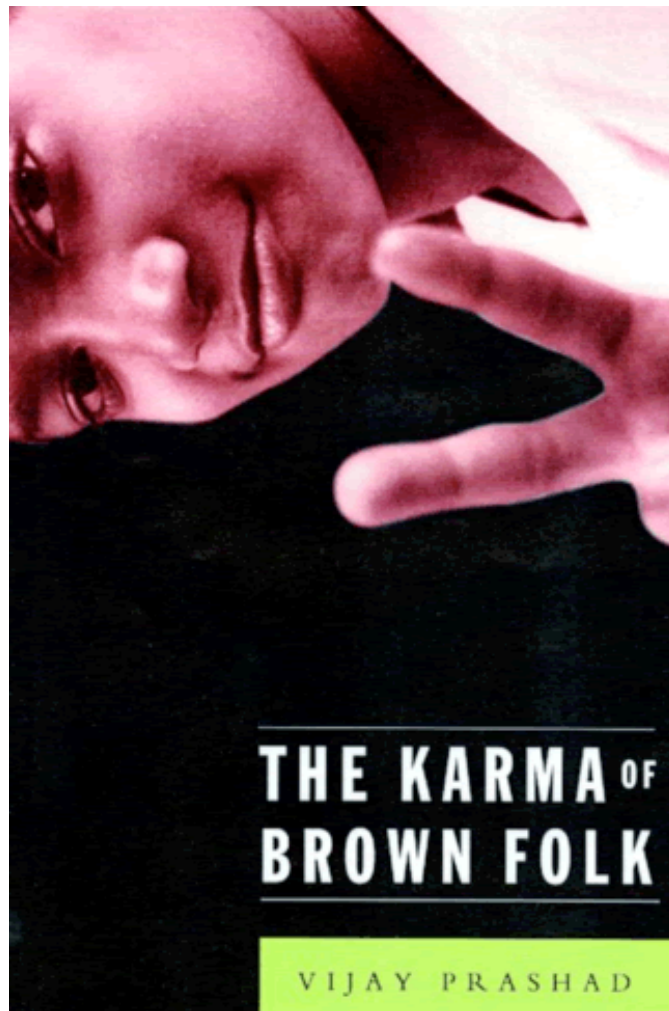


Figure 12. Kumar's photo on the cover of Prashad's *Karma*.

“tradition” is intriguing here, for it takes a word commonly ascribed to conservative diasporic rhetoric of religious and national preservation, and reappropriates it for the legacy of the left. In a gesture that signals the mixed mode of Prashad’s alternative archive, he introduces this tradition with two poems, “Gandhi is Fasting” by Langston Hughes and “Come Africa” by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Presented without their titles, the poems appear in their entirety, separated by a thin horizontal black line that literally structures new relations across differences:

Mighty Britain, tremble!
 Let your empire’s standard sway
 Lest it break entirely—
 Mr. Gandhi fasts today.
 You may think it foolish—
 That there’s no truth in what I say—
 That all of Asia’s watching
 As Gandhi fasts today.

All of Asia’s watching,
 And I am watching, too,
 For I am also jim crowed—
 As India is jim crowed by you.

You know quite well, Great Britain,
 That it is not right
 To starve and beat and oppress
 Those who are not white.

Of course, we do it too,
 Here in the USA
 May Gandhi’s prayers help us, as well,
 As he fasts today.

Come, I have heard the drum’s rhythms
 Come, my pulse races
 Come, Africa.
 Come, I have lifted my forehead from the dust
 Come, I have scraped the despondent skin from my eyes
 Come, I have freed my arm from pain
 Come, I have clawed through the web of helplessness
 Come, Africa.

In my grip, the chain has become my mace
 I broke the fetter from my neck and made it into a shield
 Come, Africa.
 In every swamp, the radiant spear ends burn
 The enemy's blood turns the dark night red
 Come, Africa.
 The earth throbs with me, Africa
 The river dances and the forest keeps time
 I am Africa, I have taken your shape.
 I am you, my walk is your lion's walk,
 Come, Africa, come with your lion's walk,
 Come, Africa
 (173).

Much could be said about these two poems: their opposing addresses to colonizer and colonized, Great Britain and Africa; the way Hughes's alignment of himself with those "jim crowed" in India echoes Faiz's imagined metamorphosis into the "shape" of Africa; the off-kilter resonance between Hughes's characteristically melodic cadence and Faiz's dramatic, invoking rhythm. But for Prashad, these poems act as historical evidence. He uses them to open up a catalogue of black-Indian alliances, in a way that figures verse as a productive gateway to history. The first series of anti-colonial friendships grew around the decades-long struggle for Indian independence followed closely in New York City and across African American intellectual circles, leading up to the time of India's independence, just a few years after the publication of Hughes's poem in 1943. The second series of unities took shape after India's independence, around the time of Faiz's writing of his poem, in 1955, when "the spirit of Bandung (the Afro-Asian conference of Newly Independent States held in 1955)" would infuse not only Faiz, but also Civil Rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. (175).

Prashad's association of memories of cross-racial alliance with two poems by major figures of African American and Indian literature is striking. It speaks to the way

that Prashad's project (to narrate "the feelings, the consciousness of being South Asian, of being desi") requires a revision of collective memory—one that is not arbitrary, but palimpsestic. For it recalls a coalition among races through the very process of compiling together fragmented cultural forms and historical relationships. Accordingly, in its conclusion, Prashad's chapter suggests that the contemporary outgrowth of anti-colonial political struggles might be found in the "ethno-racial subcultures" created by urban South Asian, Caribbean and African youth, who have organized anti-fascist collectives in Britain, and bhangra parties in New York (181).

Solidarity is in the Heart

Karma and *Passport Photos* harness the form of the manifesto as a conduit through which alternative diasporic histories and historical figures might "speak" to present-day readers. It is the conclusion of Prashad's book, however, that most strongly amplifies the redefinitions of diasporic identity that were taking shape across the 1990s. FOIL, the radical group that Kumar and Prashad helped found, took its place within a wider South Asian American activist scene in the U.S. and Canada, replete with progressive arts and political organizations such as the South Asian Women's Creative Collective and South Asian Youth Action; cultural events such as the *Desh Pardesh* and *Diasporadics* festivals and New York's monthly *Basement Bhangra* and *Mutiny* club nights. Together, these organizations and forms of cultural production experimented in material ways to shift South Asian American identity, from an inheritance of homeland to a political choice grounded by affiliation and cross-racial solidarity.

Kumar and Prashad read this contemporary landscape of cultural activism as an extension of the hybrid cultural forms and anti-colonial alliances they spotlight in their work. Kumar presents South Asian American community-based activism as providing snapshots of what an “other” diaspora might look like: “these diasporic articulations...radical poetry or the mixed beats of *desi* musical groups, reports of workers’ strikes or queer struggles for HIV education among working-class South Asian groups, summer schools for youth run by progressive groups, or pamphlets distributed by those who run shelters for battered women—in these often fragmentary ways, the nation is being reinvented” (168). Part of what *Passport* and *Karma* attempt to do, then, is catalog and record this kaleidoscopic cultural activity. Accordingly, Kumar ends *Passport Photos* with a list of immigrant outreach organizations, and Prashad’s last chapter, “Of Solidarity and Other Desires,” reads almost entirely as a roll call of South Asian advocacy organizations in the U.S. that work to advance social justice, instead of “cultural and social priorities” (191). In one sense, these lists are practical—they serve as a guide for those sympathetic to, but uninitiated in, cross-racial solidarity and community activism. The chapter’s opening supports this reading in its careful recitation of the three central ideas Prashad repeats across his book, like an instructive mantra: According to the white gaze, “the desi is to be spiritual and cooperative, but driven to success in commercial terms” (186); “constructions of the desi as essentially docile ignores the deep roots of racialism, both in the subcontinental past and in the U.S.” (186); and lastly, “Radicalism is as South Asian as Gandhi” (194). But this catalog of activist and arts groups can also be seen, especially at the end of a decade of committed political

organizing and cultural innovation, as a recognition of the gains of the South Asian diasporic left—as acknowledging the work of friends and fellow colleagues.

The concentration of photos in this chapter attest to Prashad's engagement with his readers' memories, in that they serve as a nostalgic reminder of several path-breaking moments in the contemporary history of the South Asian diasporic left: the successful culmination of SALGA's battle with the Federation of Indian Associations to be included in the India Day Parade in 1997, on the 50th anniversary of India's independence; and the Taxi Worker's Strike of 1998, in which hundreds of South Asian drivers came together to protest Rudolph Giluiani's discriminatory regulations. Nearly identical to the photos of South Asian American activism that appear in *Passport Photos*, these photos in *Karma* signal not just a history of activism, but a shared participation in this activism—a “real” memory (fig. 5).

Accordingly, these memories are narrated not in the tone of distanced analysis, but with a celebratory build-up of invigorated belief in a struggle whose motivation, on the cusp of the 21st century (when Jhumpa Lahiri had just won a Pulitzer for her stories about middle-class suburban South Asian Americans, the counter-cultural forms and groups that emerged in the 1990s were becoming institutionalized, and many South Asian diasporic academic and artistic activists were graduating to more advanced teaching positions and publishing deals around the country), seemed to be waning or dispersed. “We cannot back down,” Prashad implores, adopting the imperative vocabulary that infuses Kumar's own conclusion. “The fights are endless and our leftist morality must draw us consistently to the front lines...” (203).



Figure 5. A shared visual archive, a shared activist history: one of the photos by Kumar that appears in *Karma* (2000).

The importance of such affective sway for projects of antiracist social justice becomes clear when Prashad acknowledges that no ontological or “natural” imperatives exist for the production of solidarity. Solidarities are not necessary for the continuation of history. Instead, solidarity exists in the realm of the conditional, as “a desire, a promise, an aspiration” (197). As something that Du Bois, according to Prashad, not only strategically advocated for, but “opened his heart to” (ix). This ephemeral quality of solidarity—held in place only by those actively committed to its prioritization—

structures the way *Passport* and *Karma* seek to perform as tools of change for the South Asian American left.

In this way, I read the urgency and “loving detail” with which *Karma* and *Passport* are written as signaling a compulsion to record the acts and ideas of the South Asian diasporic left before they could be forgotten (9). Setting the stage for other academic monographs that archive South Asian community and arts activism in the 90s, like Gopinath’s *Impossible Desires* and Maira’s *Desis in the House*, Kumar’s and Prashad’s texts take on a special valence of not just referencing events that relate to their research, but of chronicling an ephemeral and shifting conversation that was approaching a reconsolidation. In saying this, I have in mind not only 9/11, but also the long view these books take towards casting out a “wish for a kind of unity, one that does not exist now but that we want to produce” (197). I suggest that the compilation of an alternative archive becomes an important part of that wish, because speaking about karma is to speak of one’s fate, but also to anticipate an inevitable reincarnation into an unfamiliar form.

Endnotes

¹ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2000). Hereafter referred to in text as *Karma*.

² Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 167.

³ For an extended discussion of the emergence of the term “model minority,” see Viet Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (London: Oxford UP, 2002). For an updated take on the term’s meaning for South Asian Americans post-9/11, see Jasbir K. Puar. and Amit Rai, “The Remaking of a Model Minority: Perverse Projectiles Under the Specter of (Counter)Terrorism,” *Social Text* 22.3 (Fall 2004): 75-104.

⁴ Prashad writes in his acknowledgments that “I gave many of these formations as talks at Desh Pardesh...at South Asian Students Association (SASA) 1996, 1998, and 1999...and at numerous other schools and community gatherings.” *Karma*, xiv.

⁵ Amitava Kumar, *Passport Photos* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 2000).

⁶ Andrew Hsiao, “Out of the Shadows,” *The Village Voice*, March 28, 2000.

⁷ This essay forms the basis of the chapter in *Karma* entitled “Of a *Girmit* Consciousness.” Prashad, “Roots: A Manifesto For Overseas South Asians,” *Sanskriti* 6.1 (December 1995): <http://www.proxsa.org/resources/sanskriti/dec95/vijay.html>. Accessed 10/30/08

⁸ Prashad, “Smashing the Myth of the Model Minority: An Interview with Vijay Prashad,” *AsiaSource*, <http://www.asiasource.org/society/Prashad.cfm>. Accessed 3/05/09.

⁹ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

¹⁰ *Aiiiee!* and Ghadar manifesto citation.

¹¹ Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999) 16.

¹² Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006) 5.

¹³ *Ibid* 2.

¹⁴ Ibid 22.

¹⁵ Ibid 259.

¹⁶ Personal interview, 16 April 2009.

¹⁷ See Amit Rai, "India On-line: Electronic Bulletin Boards and the Construction of a Diasporic Hindu Identity," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 4.1 (Spring 1995).

¹⁸ Lyon, *Manifestoes*, 24. In her chapter on "Manifestos of Desire," Shalini Puri reads hybridity scholarship by Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy as "disguised manifestos" due to these scholars' affiliation with metropolitan universities, a phrasing that I do not extend in my analysis of *Karma* and *Passport Photos*. For while I recognize the limitations scholarly conventions place on Kumar's and Prashad's work, they both speak back quite directly to the universities in which they labor and forge transparent alliances with community organizations in a way that does not, in the case of the critics Puri categorizes as disguised, "eras[e] the signs of their own institutional conditionality and political partisanship." *The Caribbean Postcolonial: Social Equality, Post-Nationalism, and Cultural Hybridity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) 95-96.

¹⁹ Lyon, *Manifestoes*, 36.

²⁰ Vijay Prashad, personal interview, 7 May 2009.

²¹ Ibid. 29.

²² Du Bois, "To the Nations of the World," qtd. in Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 23.

²³ Of course, many arguments have been made about the importance of music and orality for Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*, but I am thinking specifically about the way *visuality* informs the work of Kumar and Prashad. For more on Du Bois and music see, for instance, Kevin Thomas Miles, "Haunting Music in *The Souls of Black Folk*," *boundary 2* 2000 27(3):199-214.

²⁴ Lyon, *Manifestoes*, ix.

²⁵ "FOIL," <http://foil.org/resources/foil/foilpg.html>. Accessed 30 March 2009.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ YSS ran from 1997-2005. It sought “to provide radical political education for young activists of South Asian descent. YSS aims to build a movement of youth activists engaged in anti-oppression work, and to create a forum to share organizational and political strategies. The long-term goal of the program is to create solidarity among a new generation of activists fighting for social justice.” (Qtd. from the South Asian Organizations Directory at [http://southasianforum.org/component/option,com_mtree/task,viewlink/link_id,819/Itemid,54/.](http://southasianforum.org/component/option,com_mtree/task,viewlink/link_id,819/Itemid,54/))

³⁰ Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (New York: Columbia UP, 1998), qtd. in Kumar, 224.

³¹ *Pure Chutney*, dir. Sanjeev Chatterjee, writ. Amitava Kumar, VHS, 1998.

³² Vijay Prashad, “Amitava Kumar’s Excellent Adventure,” *Zspace*, 03 July 2007, <http://www.zmag.org/zspace/commentaries/3159>. Accessed February 10, 2009.

³³ Sanjeev Chatterjee and Amitava Kumar, “Ethnographic Exploration,” *Afterimage* 27 (Nov. 1999).

³⁴ *Pure Chutney*.

³⁵ Chatterjee and Kumar, “Ethnographic Exploration.”

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ “...the person or thing photographed is the target, the referent, a kind of little simulacrum, any *eidolon* emitted by the object, which I should like to call the *Spectrum* of the Photograph, because this word retains, through its root, a relation to ‘spectacle’ and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.” Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: FSG, 1981), 9.

³⁸ *Pure Chutney*.

³⁹ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 167.

⁴⁰ Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), 4.

⁴¹ Chatterjee and Kumar, “Ethnographic Exploration.”

⁴² *Pure Chutney*.

⁴³ Screening of *Dirty Laundry*, NYU Cantor Film Center, New York City, 11 November 2007.

⁴⁴ Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 43

⁴⁵ Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002), 194.

⁴⁶ Barthes famously comments that the photograph “is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.” *Camera Lucida*, 12.

⁴⁷ Prashad, “Amitava Kumar’s Excellent Adventure.”

⁴⁸ Prashad’s early articles on nationalism and solidarity include his manifesto in *Sanskriti*; the essay “Tracing a Lineage of Conservatism,” *SAMAR* 9 (Winter/Spring 1998); and an editors’ introduction, co-authored with Biju Mathew, to the special issue of *Amerasia Journal* on South Asian American political culture, “Satyagraha in America: The Political Culture of South Asians in the US,” *Amerasia Journal* 25.3 (1999/2000): ix-xv.

⁴⁹ Bill V. Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis: UM Press, 2004), xviii.

⁵⁰ Prashad, *The Darker Nations*.

⁵¹ See especially Chapter 2, “To Be Young, Brown and Hip,” in which Maira argues that South Asian American youth’s identification with black culture expresses a critical alienation from both American assimilation and the upward mobility narrative of model minority identity. Nitasha Sharma has also taken up the influence of black culture and music forms on South Asian Americans in her recent *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Post-Script: Post-9/11

Following September 11th, the community mobilization project of the South Asian diasporic left shifted—both as an organic consequence of financial difficulties, and as a response to changing race relations in North America. *Desh Pardesh*, the annual festival that formed the core of the arts activist movement, disbanded in May 2001 due to outstanding debt and decreased government funding for community arts events.¹ In the absence of this annual gathering, the movement became increasingly decentralized, taking place within separate but overlapping festivals, organizations and events. This transformation was accelerated by emergent patterns of racialization within the U.S., as South Asian Americans, particularly those of Muslim and Sikh religious backgrounds, became targets of government surveillance and hate crimes. Muslim men—and those who resembled them—thus came to occupy what Inderpal Grewal describes as a "new category of visibility" after 2001.² Based on their common experience as targets of xenophobic racism, South Asian and Arab American communities began to strategically align with each other. The conclusion of this dissertation considers how these shifting social and economic conditions impacted South Asian American cultural production and activity in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and explores the possibility of a comparative ethnic study of post-9/11 artistic collaborations between South Asian Americans and Arab Americans.

A comparative approach to South Asian and Arab American cultural production extends and revises the central questions that frame my dissertation. *Conditional Futures*

traces the development of a critically assertive diasporic consciousness that was shaped not only by dislocation from homeland, but also—and perhaps most powerfully—by transnational shifts during the 1990s, such as India’s economic liberalization in 1991 and the post-Cold War rise of U.S. economic and military global dominance. As I argue, this diasporic consciousness refused the assimilationist, “model minority” self-image espoused by South Asian American professionals; instead, it highlighted the potential of panethnic, cross-racial coalition as a form of resistance to fiscal and social state imperatives.

In the preceding chapters, I demonstrate how artists and scholars like Vivek Bald, Meena Alexander, Shani Mootoo, Amitava Kumar and Vijay Prashad turned to aesthetic innovation as a vehicle for generating solidarity, drawing upon narrative, imagery and form to imagine “conditional futures”—modes of diasporic collectivity that did not yet exist, but could possibly evolve. My conceptual aim in this dissertation has been to intervene in an ongoing debate about the fit of South Asian diasporic culture and history within Asian American Studies; I do so by illustrating the way progressive South Asian American cultural production is informed by both post-colonial critiques of imperialism *and* the tradition of grassroots community building that grounds Asian American Studies.

This conclusion develops the conceptual intervention of my dissertation by applying it to one of the first collaborative art projects between South Asian and Arab American artists: the 2003 documentary, *Lest We Forget*.³ In this film, Indian American director Jason DaSilva historicizes post-9/11 detention and special registration by structuring a parallel between these policies and the World War II internment of Japanese Americans. The documentary’s cautionary message about the dangers of limiting civil

liberties thus bridges issues of post-9/11 U.S. imperialism with those of pre-1965 Asian American history.

Of course, the effort to connect these two distinct histories bears the danger of conflating them. However, Da Silva's film mitigates this danger by self-consciously incorporating repetition, both in its form and its narration by Palestinian American poet Suheir Hammad. It is the collaboration between DaSilva and Hammad that produces what I call a "poetics of repetition" in the film. In contrast to the uncontextualized images of falling towers and of photo mug shots of Muslim extremists that played non-stop on television or regularly occupied news headlines in the months and years following 9/11, DaSilva's and Hammad's practice of repetition borrows from the urban oral tradition of spoken word poetry to iteratively build historical and affective texture around the issue of the racialization of South Asians, Muslims and Arab Americans after 9/11.

Rhythm and Repetition

Lest We Forget intersperses the stories of seven interviewees: three Japanese Americans who experienced internment during WWII; and four South Asian and Arab Americans who were victims of racial profiling, hate crimes and detention after 9/11. The writer and activist Yuri Kochiyama figures the most prominently among these interviewees; she details the experience of witnessing her bed-ridden father being removed from their home, without any warrant or prior notice, by FBI agents on Dec. 8, 1941. Kochiyama's father was one of 2,192 Issei (first-generation) men taken to regional INS detention facilities as prisoners of war during the weeks following the bombing of

Pearl Harbor.⁴ This act led towards the later internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans as “enemy aliens” for the remaining years of the war.

The initial roundup of Issei men as the U.S. entered WWII has a direct parallel with 9/11. In the weeks following Bush’s announcement of the “War on Terror,” the FBI detained over 1,200 South Asian and Arab Americans, whose names and locations have yet to be disclosed. DaSilva, however, connects Kochiyama’s story, and that of Japanese internment, to 9/11 in a more oblique way. In the scene following Kochiyama’s testimony, Hammad describes the U.S. Special Registration program, which required all men over the age of sixteen, and who are nationals or citizens of Muslim majority nations, to register with the INS between December 2002 and February 2003.⁵ As Hammad announces the nations included in this program, the film’s visuals present archival footage of Japanese Americans registering upon their arrival at assigned internment camps. This juxtaposition of narrative and image presents a comparison that is not entirely parallel; in other words, it does not present Special Registration as equivalent to internment. Rather, the film presents an *uneven* comparison in order to foreground two points. On one hand, it renders more visible what Hammad describes, in comparison to internment, as the “quieter form” of enemy alien exclusion after 9/11—the detention, disappearance and deportation of portions of the South Asian and Arab American population.⁶ On the other hand, the juxtaposition of Hammad’s narration with archival footage from the War Relocation Authority inspires its viewers to imagine the possible recurrence of the most extreme extension of the logic that underwrites the construction of Muslim Americans and Japanese Americans as “enemy aliens”: the mass confinement of an entire minority group.

The film's anxiety about history repeating itself critically revises the patriotic connotation of its title, typically used as an expression of national memorialization. Indeed, as *Lest We Forget* opens, we see an image of the *New York Post* from September 11, 2002—the direct inspiration for the film's title. The cover headline, printed in boldface above an image of the burning towers of the World Trade Centers, reads: “Lest we forget.” By repeating this phrase throughout the film, Hammad defamiliarizes it, and reinterprets its meaning as a call to think instructively about historical trauma. Riffing off the *New York Post* headline, she recites a verse fragment that hangs unattached to the rest of her more fact-based narration: “Lest we forget the unheard stories, the people whose voices went missing, the quiet suffering of those trapped and later unearthed.” Most immediately, this line references those who died in the Twin Towers. However, when we hear the line a second time—over footage of men lined up outside a New York City INS office, awaiting registration, and after hearing the testimony of WWII internees—it begins to also reference the enduring logic of xenophobic wartime state policy. In its second iteration, the line recalls less the victims who died on 9/11, than the living who have been excluded and expelled from the U.S.

Like the film, fiction and criticism of Bald, Alexander, Mootoo, Kumar and Prashad, *Lest We Forget* seeks to critically frame the possibility of a more just future for South Asian and Arab Americans by remembering the past. The film thus engages what David Eng describes as a melancholic relationship to history. In his analysis of national grief after 9/11, Eng reinterprets Freud's concept of melancholia as a “depathologized structure of feeling.” Where mourning resolves loss by closing it off as a past occurrence, melancholia defers the resolution of loss; the melancholic subject thus

identifies with and continually returns to it. Eng explains, “By refusing loss and by engaging in ‘countless separate struggles’ with it, melancholia might be said to constitute an ongoing and open relationship with the silence of the past—bringing its fleeting ghosts and specters into the present.”⁷ Hammad’s verse line takes up this melancholic perspective by alluding to the way the detention of South Asian and Arab Americans recalls the unresolved trauma of Japanese internment, in that both groups have been physically confined (“trapped”) and later released (“unearthed”). Her attention to the stories of those affected by security policy (whose *voices*, not bodies, we might note, Hammad grieves as “missing”) confronts the relative silence that, despite redress, attends this history. In this way, Hammad’s excess line of verse that she repeats throughout the film frames *Lest We Forget* as a generational project, in which two young artists converse with older activists to recuperate an oral history of internment. The stark visibility of the elderly internees’ age as they speak on film supports this reading, calling up the way traumatic memory is “trapped” through repression and later “unearthed” and passed on through dialogue.

That DaSilva’s and Hammad’s recuperative project takes the form of a documentary film that adapts the structure of spoken word is itself historically conditioned. Spoken word and documentary film are particularly compatible and relevant forms for an exploration of post-9/11 Homeland Security policies, as both were among the first and most accessible platforms through which South Asian and Arab American artists responded to 9/11. The independent production that typically underwrites documentaries, as well as their composition through interviews and archival footage, render it a cost and time-sensitive medium. Similarly, the spontaneity of spoken

word and its grounding within local political movements privilege its relationship to activist art. Hammad's "First Writing Since," a piece composed one week after 9/11, is a particularly apt testament to this latter point.⁸ One of the first works of art to respond to 9/11, the poem captured widespread underground interest within the spoken word and arts activist community. After going viral in New York City, the poem further catapulted Hammad to national fame when she performed it on Russell Simmons' 2003 HBO series, *Def Poetry Jam*.

By collaborating with Hammad in the narration of his documentary, DaSilva not only harnesses her reputation as a political artist, but also invites her poetic practice to inform his film. That the film is critically shaped by a "poetics of repetition" is perhaps most apparent through Hammad's performance of a rhythmic pattern particular to the spoken word form, in which a poet repeats a line twice, and then a third and concluding time, but with a difference. Towards the end of *Lest We Forget*, over a time-lapse image of a city intersection, Hammad again invokes the film's title in the form of extended verse:

Lest *you* forget, I will repeat myself.
 Your ignoring me does not make me go away.
 I am a part of you—a limb, your roots.
 And I will repeat myself
 To get attention, to be acknowledged.
 I am a shame, and your silence will not disappear me.
 And I will repeat myself
 Until you deal with me.⁹

The first thing we might note is that these lines of verse sound more like a stanza, than a complete poem. It is for this reason that I have referred to the initial iterations of Hammad's verse as fragments. As I am suggesting, the line, "lest you forget, I will repeat

myself” extends and completes the three-part refrain that structures spoken word performance, and which is embedded within Hammad’s larger narration.

The confrontational address Hammad presents in her revision of the film’s title—“lest *you* forget”—raises the question of audience and opens up additional layers of meaning. Her naming of an unspecified “you” hails the audience watching the film, in much the way spoken word poetry invites its listeners to share in a common “political and aesthetic responsibility.”¹⁰ Yet, the second and third lines of this stanza, which insist, “I am a part of you,” also signal a challenge to the wider U.S. nation whose security policies exclude Arab, Muslim and South Asian Americans. Hammad’s metaphorical description of the poem’s speaker as “a limb, your roots” insists, in response, that these communities are not excisable from the nation. The images that attend this moment of narration further underscore this point.

Where Hammad’s verse opens on the sped-up footage of cars and pedestrians crossing a city street, it ends by replaying the images of the interviewees from the film. We thus see the faces of those who have been surveilled, detained or interned by the U.S. government as Hammad recites the lines, “I am a shame, and your silence will not disappear me.” The film thus performs the very repetition highlighted by Hammad’s explicit internal refrain, “I will repeat myself.” Visually and discursively, *Lest We Forget* self-consciously references repetition as an act of resistance and confrontation. By extension, the pairing of the images of interviewees and Hammad’s line about repeating oneself cites the circulation of the documentary film itself, whose screenings in classrooms and festivals becomes a platform for the visibility of South Asian and Arab

Americans, and a recurring reminder of the injustices committed in the name of national security.

Anti-Imperial Alliances

I situate *Lest We Forget* within a growing body of post-9/11 collaborations between South Asian American and Arab American artists that includes both large-scale arts and media collectives such as the Visible Collective—a temporary coalition of artists and activists who produced a film trilogy in response to post-9/11 security panic—as well as a series of artistic partnerships: Indian American painter Chitra Ganesh and Afghan-Lebanese performance artist Mariam Ghani create a counter-archive in their web project *Warm Database* (2004), which interrogates the discursive secrecy around detention; and Indian director Mira Nair is currently filming an adaptation of the Pakistani author Mohsin Hamid’s 2007 novel about post-9/11 New York, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (forthcoming from Fox Searchlight Pictures). These collaborations enlarge the “transnational turn” of Asian American Studies towards diasporic and global paradigms, by considering Asian American art not only through its relationship to the U.S. nation-state, but also through its horizontal affiliation with Arab American experience. As Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade suggest, this move more strongly positions the field of Asian American Studies around U.S. empire. In their introduction to the 2006 special issue of the *Journal of Asian American Studies*, Maira and Shihade argue that linking Asian and Arab American studies “helps to locate the issue of ethnic and racial borders within the larger frame of U.S. empire, and to understand that the question facing Asian American studies today is how to intellectually and institutionally confront imperial, not

just national or ethnic, politics.”¹¹ I envision this conclusion and the consequent project it proposes as a contribution to this analysis of empire. As contemporary Asian American communities increasingly diversify, a framework of collaboration might offer a compelling alternative to the more familiar comparative paradigm that shapes Asian American Studies: panethnicity.¹²

Addressing the role of art for post-9/11 anti-imperial politics additionally contributes to the wider field of American Studies, which has rapidly developed analysis of twenty-first century American literature and culture through an attention to the 9/11 novel. Recognizing the robust body of writing and performance that South Asian and Arab American artists have produced about religious identity and fundamentalism, war-time detention and internment, and U.S. racism and xenophobia diversifies this emerging canon of post-9/11 literature. While much has been said about post-9/11 literature in the academy, critical analysis has focused almost exclusively on the work of white American and European male novelists, such as Jonathan Safran Foer, Don DeLillo and Ian McEwan. These authors are certainly important for our understanding of twenty-first century fiction. However, there also exists a need to consider the critical—and abundant—voices from those communities most affected by detention, xenophobia and surveillance.

Finally, this conclusion raises a number of questions about the relationship among aesthetics, history and social change. How do *acts* of artistic solidarity, over and above the narratives of alliance I identified in left-minded South Asian American texts of the 1990s, shape unity between Asian and Arab American communities? And how does art, more broadly, help us frame and articulate the histories unfolding before us? By

pursuing these questions, an expanded comparative ethnic study of South Asian and Arab American art would open up an exploration of how practices of collaboration inform social change, as well as how the pressures of historical exigency produce new modes of cultural expression.

Endnotes

¹ See Bakirathi Mani, "Destination Culture," SAMAR 14 (Fall/Winter 2001). Online. <http://www.samarmagazine.org/archive/article.php?id=47>

² *Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) 209. I should note that while Grewal refers to the racial visibility of South Asian and Arab Americans as "new," in terms of its prevalence within public consciousness, she rightly points out the way this racialization relies on long-standing orientalist ideologies, as well as "older racial technologies of criminalization and visibility." *Transnational America*, 210.

³ *Lest we Forget*, dir. Jason DaSilva, VHS, 2003.

⁴ Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004) 175.

⁵ Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, *Special Registration: Discrimination and Xenophobia as Government Policy*, 2004
<<http://www.aaldef.org/docs/AALDEF-Special-Registration-2004.pdf>>.

⁶ *Lest We Forget*.

⁷ "The Value of Silence," *Theater Journal* 54.1 (March 2002): 88.

⁸ *In Motion Magazine*, 7 Nov. 2001, online.

⁹ This poem does not appear in text form in the film. My transcription of its line breaks is thus my own interpretation of the emphasis and rhythm indicated by Hammad's performance.

¹⁰ Miguel Algarin, "Introduction: The Sidewalk of High Art," *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994) 9.

¹¹ Maira and Shihade, "Meeting Asian/Arab American Studies: Thinking Race, Empire and Zionism in the U.S.," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9.2 (2006): 118.

¹² Yen Le Espiritu has herself recently revisited the particular challenges of panethnicity, given the transformed social and political conditions of Asian American communities after 1965. "Asian American Panethnicity: Challenges and Possibilities," *The State of Asian America: Trajectory of Civic and Political Engagement*, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, Inc., 2008 <<http://www.aasc.ucla.edu/policy/yen.pdf>>.

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Yu, Timothy. *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. Print.

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Principle Occupation

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