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# **‘We’re Just Like Everyone Else!’ Rethinking the Cultural Politics of the London Asian Urban Music Scene**

One Tuesday night in early October, 2008 I was doing fieldwork at club night ‘Bombay Bronx’ at the self-consciously gritty Notting Hill Arts Club. Bombay Bronx, which is no longer in existence, was the central night for many members of the London Asian urban music ‘scene’ to meet one another. I was there to see artist Riz MC perform his controversial single, entitled ‘Post 9/11 Blues’ to a raucously enthusiastic and cheering crowd. His single was released in 2006, stirring up a controversy after BBC radio stations refused to play the song because of its political content. After the show, Riz makes his way to the bar as young men clap his back, shake his hand and stop to talk. When I go to the bathroom, two young women march in. One declares loudly, ‘I don’t know...he’s funny but he’s a bit boring going on about 9/11 and all that. It really kinda turns me off...he talked too much about politics. I think he needs to stop talking about that too much.’ The other one laughs and says ‘oh my god, I know. It’s too much!’ This was a common reaction against an artist such as Riz MC that I encountered when going out to ‘desi’ club nights. Very often, outspoken and deliberative politics were not seen as acceptable or desirable within these spaces.

The sounds of the London Asian urban<sup>1</sup> music scene are a complex cross-section of the various genres that include bhangra ‘remix’, R&B and hip hop styles, as well as dub step and other ‘urban’ sample oriented, electronic music. Thus, the scene is not limited to a single musical genre but consists of loose groupings of musical styles. Other distinguishing factors include the fusing of traditional South Asian instruments like the tabla player, dhol drum, vocal samples and/or a South Asian language to a Western song structure and beats.

I refer to these networks as a music ‘scene’<sup>2</sup> because it is understood to be inclusive of all ‘music making, production, circulation, discussion and texts’ (Kahn-Harris, 2006: 3). In this sense, the Asian musical community that has become the subject of this article operates as a ‘scene’. Because the Asian urban music community cannot be reduced to a genre or distinctive sound, the scene can be identified by various names, which also suggests the existence of scenes within a larger scene. Some

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<sup>1</sup> The ‘urban’ category of black popular music includes hip hop, R&B, grime, drum and bass, garage, dubstep and many other subgenres, but members of the Asian urban scene that I have interviewed mainly perform hip hop and R&B.

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the concept of ‘scenes’ has now become the way in which scholars, as well as scene members and music journalists, have conceptualized contemporary musical communities. ‘Scenes’ connote a wide variety of music-related activities using more spatially oriented perspectives. Bennett and Peterson (Bennett, 2004) write that scenes provide the spaces where the production, performance and consumption of music and identity come together.

refer to it as the 'desi beats' scene, or the 'urban desi' scene, or as it is most commonly referred to, as the 'Asian' or 'desi' music scene. The use of different terms indicates that there is a certain amount of ambiguity and conflict over what sounds and who counts as representative of or even part of the scene. Yet, a 'scene' must draw some boundaries to make it distinctive from some other community yet they are fluid in order to accommodate the shifting loyalties, friendships and networks that make up the scene.

In this article, I focus on how the scene presents a challenge to essentialist ideas of 'race' and ethnicity still present within discourses of Asian popular youth cultures. I include interviews with an assemblage of various cultural producers, and what David Hesmondhalgh (2007) refers to as the 'symbol creators' of the Asian music scene and industry in the scene; the artists, DJs, MCs, producers, and various promoters. Included within this 'promoter' milieu are also people who write about Asian popular culture practices and about the scene.

Within the spaces of the Asian 'urban' music scene, the informal, everyday practices of making space contest and challenge perceptions of Asianness as a static ethnic identity. Equally important, the scene is not a site of straightforward 'resistance' to dominant ideologies. Instead, it is a contradictory site that offers a more complex and indeed, ambivalent set of responses to white, dominant middle class values and ideologies. In looking at contemporary Asian popular culture formations, the article draws attention to the importance of temporality and the ways that younger people understand and conceptualize the 'past' and the 'present' politics of race within the scene. The article highlights the importance of these perceptions of time when discussing how practices take up space within contemporary multi-racial and 'multi-racist' Britain (Back, 1996).

More conventional, past sociological accounts of popular 'underground' music cultures, including analyses of bhangra (see Back, 1996; Baumann, 1990; Bennett, 2000) tend to 'read' these cultural forms as straightforward sites of cultural resistance. These accounts overlook how much more ambivalent and contradictory these sites of cultural production and practice are in terms of offering forms that actually seek to challenge white dominant ideologies. Moreover, the assumption that music cultures should and do in fact, offer alternative cultural politics obscures the fact that the production and practice of a cultural politics in music are still highly racialized and classed practices.

In light of past accounts, in this article I provide a critical examination of the Asian urban scene as a site for the formation of mainstream Asian diasporic identities and an increasingly neoliberal, individualized space. Young people within this scene have deeply internalized these neoliberal

concepts of the free, consuming, successful, aspirational self and have adopted these wider ideas of selfhood to construct a diasporic, cosmopolitan identity that allows for them to break free from the constraints of a negative 'ethnic' or 'racial' identity tied to notions of static and 'traditional' 'community'. I draw a link between the ambivalence of politics within the scene and the neoliberal discourses that are pervasive within popular culture and particularly pervasive within hip hop.

A crucial element within the construction of these neoliberal identities is the alluring notion of the 'postracial' self. In trying to explore the connections between a neoliberal politics and a postracial identity, I argue that the adoption of a post racial discourse to discuss contemporary racialized social relations in the UK within a neoliberal landscape reflects how young Asians insert themselves into the racial order and explain their relative comfort and middle-classness, ignoring the fact that this is a selective and that this does not apply to all Asians in the UK.

The growing popularity of postracial and neoliberal discourses to articulate and distinguish contemporary Asian identities significantly re-shapes the conditions and possibilities for a radical cultural politics within contemporary popular music scenes. Thus those within the Asian scene re-imagine their spaces and the narratives that locate them within the particularly British racial and ethnic landscape allowing for new identities to emerge that challenge notions of culturally segregated and alienated Asian communities at the same time, close down the potential for collective radical politics in favor of individualized, neoliberal notions of success.

### **Changing Constructions of Asian/Muslim Youth: from 'Passive' to 'Dangerous' Formations**

To understand the contemporary terrain of Asian youth cultures and its ambivalent relationship with politicized music expression, it is useful to briefly review how Asian diasporic youth have been positioned in the UK, both in popular and academic discourses.

Discourses on Asian communities in the 70s and 80s in Britain tended to focus on the relative 'passive' and 'docile' character of Asians who had 'strong' family and cultural ties. While these discourses still exist, particularly for some Asian groups, competing discourses of Asians as problematic, anti-social and now, religious fundamentalists have emerged (Shankar, 2008). Increasingly, from the 1990s, discourses pathologized Asian Muslim youth as dysfunctional and criminal. These constructions of Asian criminality were formed out of specific religious and class-inflected views

that targeted Asian Muslims in Britain as the 'problem' (Alexander, 2000). The pathology of criminality and deviance were seen as resulting from being part of an alienated, impoverished and unassimilable 'Muslim underclass' (Alexander, 2000), particularly after the 2001 Northern riots (Alexander, 2004; Kundnani, 2001).

Meanwhile, Asian women were often perceived as victims of their traditional, patriarchal families (Sharma, 2006). Women were also to blame for their role in being the 'keepers of culture' (Anthias, 1993) within these traditional families and reinforcing traditional values and customs of their cultures which prevents their children from assimilating to British middle class values (Alexander, 2000). The reversal of perception, from being considered the 'good' minority to a 'bad' one for some Asian Muslim cultures, served to cement the image of the 'Asian' Muslim youth as an urgent threat to the moral order of Britain. The deployment of the label 'gang' within public discourse in Britain toward black youth became widespread.

Increasingly, after 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings, discourses on 'ethnic minorities' have shifted toward 'minority faith communities' (Fortier, 2007). The image of Asian Muslim male youth has become the site of new fears and anxiety symbolizing the failures of multiculturalism. A shared British liberal 'culture' becomes positioned as incompatible with Muslim/Asian forms of 'culture' which then deems multicultural integration an impossible outcome (Alexander, 2000; Gilroy, 1987; Gilroy, 2005; Fortier, 2007). Further, the emphasis on 'culture' reveals how ethnicity and religion have become conflated so that British Muslims and South Asians become one and the same. Thus, the targeting of Muslims brings risk to all members of the British South Asian community and have rendered all Asian youth as hyper-visible as the current source of insecurities and 'problems' (Seidler, 2007).

On the other end of the spectrum, however, is the linking of British Asians who are non-Muslim with the 'model minority' myth, where those who are most often, Indian are considered high-achieving, middle class, successful and assimilated (Werbner, 1999; Alexander, 2000). Thus, discourses of Asian communities are fractured along the lines of class and religion where there are Indian 'achievers' versus the disadvantaged Muslim 'believers' (Modood, 1992: 43).

Relatedly, Asian youth cultures have also been invisible as legitimate sites of political and cultural creativity, despite much empirical evidence to the contrary<sup>3</sup> (Banerjea, 2002). That is, the scholarship on youth cultures often read youth cultural formations as forms of ‘resistance’ to social structures, as noted earlier in the introduction. However, the ‘resistance’ model is also a highly racialized reading where only white and black youth cultures were considered to offer collective forms of ‘resistance’ against the dominant or hegemonic order. The persistent associations of Asians with arranged marriages and religious fanaticism have meant that Asians are constructed as profoundly anti-modern, especially in comparison to the hypermodernity of the ‘Black Atlantic’ (2002: 575). Thus, Asian youth cultures have always been excluded from being the ‘restorative site for social relations’ as white and black vernacular cultures have been presented and the progressive, postmodern diasporicity of black vernacular music expressions never quite extended to Asian music cultures {Alexander, 2002; Banerjea and Banerjea 1996; Banerjea, 2002}.

Relatedly, much of popular music scholarship analyzed these formations as alternative public spheres that provide a space for critical practice and acts as a challenge to the dominant white order of the public sphere (Back, 1996; McRobbie, 1991; Buckland, 2002; Malbon, 1999). Black vernacular formations such as hip hop has been understood as being part of a black ‘counter publics’ see (Dawson, 1994; Pough, 2004; Perry, 2008; Neal, 1999). Yet, it is often the case that these formations, especially hip hop, are equally problematic sites where its power to challenge dominant and hegemonic forms of whiteness, its ‘overblown defiance’ have become ‘routinized’ (Gilroy, 1994: 51). Thus, the creation of alternative public spheres requires attention to time, and place. Equally important, the construction of a subaltern public sphere cannot be applied to all marginalized minority groups. Instead, the specificities of racial and class hierarchies in the UK must be taken into account when thinking about vernacular forms of popular culture and its potential to be a site of critical practice.

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

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<sup>3</sup> Grassroots, collective social protest such as Asian youth movements have formed out of the unresponsiveness of formal institutional politics of the Left and the state. See discussions of Asian youth movements of the 1970s and 1980s such as the Southall Youth Movement (SYA) which developed as a direct response to police inaction over direct racist attacks of Asians, including the killing of Grump Singh Cheggar in July, 1976 (Sivanandan, 1981, 1982; Ramamurthy, 2006). Also, particularly in the late 1990s Asian diasporic forms of cultural production, especially in popular music, provided an alternative, oppositional space for politics.

Ballantyne (2006) argues that during the end of the 1990s, South Asians were becoming increasingly assimilated into the British middle class with a 'renewed emphasis on the pursuit of material wealth and political influence often at the expense of social justice and the protection of the community's welfare' (2006: 146). Here, Malkit's brief statement relates Asian material success to the emergence of Asian music production that reflected different outlooks.

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

Helen: So you think that feeds into the underlying desire to make music? Is it about affluence and about taking it for granted that Asians are like everyone else?

Malkit: Yeah, well we are like everyone else! It's not about emulating affluence, it's about maintaining ambition...

The focus on culture is largely tied to late stage capitalist shifts in racial and class structures in Britain that have helped to remake racial, gendered, and class identities. Sivanandan (2006) argues that the politics of 'race' is shaped by economic structures but negotiated through culture. The rise of a British Asian, urban middle class identity was formed in and through practices of consumption as well as through the cultural realm, such as music, film and visual arts. In particular, the rise of neoliberalism, and globalization within the last 30 years has brought culture into the very center of production and consumption, where cultural forms become accommodated, absorbed and homogenized but maintain their specificity and particularity, becoming 'flexible' regimes that are contradictory, where capitalism lives with and contains difference (Hall, 1997).

Considering this, Malkit's linking of music to politics and changing material circumstances highlights the importance of music in articulating everyday experiences. The material, cultural and political changes were occurring that meant young Asians were no longer only speaking from (and for) the margins. The once 'underground', subaltern space for the practice of a collective, oppositional politics that dominated Asian popular music in the 80s and most of the 90s— was slowly giving way to a mainly individualized, middle class, consumption dominated youth music space. For example, the dominance of hip hop as a globalized form of popular culture meant the

embrace of the materialism often celebrated in mainstream US-led hip hop. In contrast to the politics of earlier Asian 'underground' music, the practices of consumption have eroded the notion that identity determines a kind of politics. Thus Malkit's statement reminds us that a community's link to a practice of oppositional collective politics is determined by the broader political, social and economic circumstances of those times.

Yet, it is also important to point out that this narrative of prosperity and betterment is more applicable to certain communities than to others. Here Malkit is referring to his own experiences and that of the local Punjabi community of London. Malkit's statement reflects how the relatively privileged position of some Asian groups today is a direct outcome of the collective political movements of a previous generation in the UK. This generation of relatively affluent young British Asians, more conservative and individualized, comes out of those collective movements. To an extent, this link has been devalued or remained unspoken within Asian communities, and is largely absent from academic literature on 'race' at the time (Alexander, 2011; Ramamurthy, 2006).

In Gautam Malkani's frank statement we can see a hint of that erasure and ignorance of a political history within Asian communities in the UK. The 30 year old Asian music fan, and author, sat down and spoke with me about how conservative Asian immigrant parents just wanted their children to achieve material success without acknowledging the political history that many first generation Asians have created through collective action (Sivanandan, 1981; Brah, 1996; Alexander, 2011; Ramamurthy, 2006).

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

Gautam articulates a much repeated view that those of the 'Asian Underground' music scene of the 1990s, many of whom identified with a particular leftist, radical politics from the margins, were considered to be elitist, niche musicians by those within the Asian urban music scene. His comments exemplify the complex racial and class politics that often are at play within different Asian music circles with the claim that the Asian Underground were often more interested in speaking to and engaging with a white middle class audience rather than their working class Asian counterparts. Gautam raises the astute point that enacting or engaging in a cultural politics of



difference was often about having access to the opportunities afforded to those of white, bourgeois, liberal socioeconomic and cultural background. Artists who were seen as musically and culturally ‘marginal’ were often not accessible to young Asians at the time. This notion of access relied upon having a certain amount of (sub) cultural capital.

In academia, arts and culture, notions of the subaltern and liminality are celebrated for their creative potential and often valorized as being the exemplary space of identity and culture (Julien and Mercer, 1988; Hall, 1997; Hutnyk, 2000). Yet this emphasis on the marginal and a politics of difference as reflected in the ‘experimental art and culture’ of Nitin Sawhney and Talvin Singh, largely, were inaccessible to the vast majority of people, who could arguably have seen the ‘marginal’ as a position they wanted to escape rather than embrace. Liminal spaces could arguably be considered desirable only when occupied by a privileged group of people who can choose to exercise this right as forming part of a particular lifestyle. Thus, these forms of political engagement and political positions became associated with a white, bourgeois set of practices—or whom Kolektive, rapper and producer, referred to as those ‘Guardian-reading-chinstrokers’! Thus, for some within the Asian urban scene, rejecting such cultural forms and embracing an aspirational form of consumerism, often valorized within hip hop and black cultural production, became a way of resisting or distinguishing themselves from the white middle class. Thus, it could be argued that a radical politics of difference as expressed by the ‘experimental set’ took on very different meaning for Asian urban youth who perceived and actively constructed their class, racial and cultural positions as distinct from their white peers.

Gautam outlined another problematic aspect of leftist politics which has shifted ground within the last twenty years, to become a location or space that often increasingly excludes the working class and minorities. Instead, the radical margins have become a space for the privileged, university-educated middle classes. Moreover, as with post-feminist identities (McRobbie, 2004), these ‘new’ racial and ethnic subjectivities of minority and working class youth are primarily constructed and shaped by ‘regimes of consumption’ (Nayak and Kehily, 2008). Arguably, the looting that occurred during the August 2011 disturbances in London exemplifies the extent to which practices of consumption were the dominant framework through which youth resistance was played out and provided the means through which to enact protest against much larger, systemic failures of housing, education, and opportunities.

Here Rav, BBC Radio One DJ, and promoter of Asian club night Bombay Bronx, speaks about R&B star Jay Sean and the uprooting of Asian identity from the margins to the center.

He said:

Helen: Is there this sense of the subversive about the kind of current Asian scene, or a kind of cultural politics within Asian music today?

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

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

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

Rav's statement above exemplifies the ambivalent attitudes within the scene towards collective politics within Asian music from an earlier period, one that challenges the assumption that one's identity determines a particular kind of politics. This ambivalence around the usefulness of collective political identities suggests that debates around the politics of identity of the 90s have been effective in bringing about greater recognition of diversity and the instability and non-fixity of identity.

For example, Rav's statement also brings to light the significance of the continuing politics of race that is being engaged with through an embodied form of politics exemplified by an artist like Jay Sean. His status as the first British Asian urban artist to have been recognized as an R&B artist in the US is significant towards progressing a politics of recognition for Asian cultural producers without necessarily having to consciously occupy a collective, politicized position. Instead, his recognition as a British Asian artist within a predominantly African American genre increases visibility for Asian Americans and British Asians as being significant hip hop and urban music fans and producers, a fact that has long since been the case but only more recently uncovered by white and non-Asian popular music audiences. It also goes some way towards challenging certain stereotypes of Asian-ness of being hardworking, 'uncool' effeminate nerds (Banerjea and Banerjea, 1996).

However, as evidenced by Rav's lauding of Jay Sean's version of politics as individual material success and 'getting mine' neoliberal ideas of individuality has also crept into the language of politics and identity. These ideas often take shape within popular culture and this idea of an atomized individuality becomes the central way in which ideas of the self within certain forms of youth culture such as in hip hop are portrayed and understood. The shift away from a conscious and collective politicized identity politics within the contemporary Asian music scene suggests that the neoliberal agenda of individualism of the 1980s dissolved people's willingness to identify with wider collective social movements. As Angela McRobbie (2004) has noted, there has been a shift as politics has become further individualized.

Thus the radical, politicized minority position that was carved out from earlier generations of Asian students and youth, which then continued to be articulated through bands of the 'Asian Underground' music movement has given way to a messier, ambivalent space that is less 'militant', less connected to a stable collective 'Asian' identity. This increasing individualism poses a problem in that Asian youth (at least within the scene) no longer see a space for collective, politicized action as necessary to the struggle for social justice. The individualism that marks these fluid, ambivalent and multiple identities is accessed through modes of consumption where youth, ethnicity and 'race' themselves become commodities. The data suggests that to a certain extent, Asian youth who have grown up with affluence, have become increasingly more conservative in their politics than the previous generation.

### **A Postracial Desiness?**

A key element of a neoliberal Asian subjectivity is the disavowal of race and racialization as a central organizing principle in contemporary Britain. This disavowal comes in the form most commonly of a 'post-racial' discourse that speaks of overcoming racism or moving past it, often through individual successes. In analyzing parts of a rap song called 'Brown Boys' and in highlighting popular novel 'Londonstani' and the author's perspective, I argue that these help to identify a 'postracial' discourse that has been taken up and woven into particular Asian 'desi' assimilationist narratives of belonging and identity in Britain.

By 'post-racialism', I mean a particular set of discourses and ideologies, most often favored by Conservatives in Britain (and in the US), in which there is a core belief that racism is no longer a

social problem. Moreover, the project of postracialism works to replace the explicit language of race with that of 'color-blindness'. Postracial narratives demonstrate how racism retains its power through its mutability, because it is according to Back and Solomos (2000), a 'scavenger ideology' with the ability to pick up and use other ideas and values. Older, overt forms of racism are being replaced by covert, subtler, sophisticated forms, which incorporate ideas of culture and nation into older ideologies of race and inferiority (Winant, 1998; Omi and Winant, 1994). Scholars have identified these forms as 'cultural racism' (Back, 2000), 'symbolic racism', and 'color blind' racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Bobo and Smith (1998) call it 'laissez-faire racism' in part because of its connection to the neoliberalization of politics. They describe it as being more socially permeable and less extreme than Jim Crow racism.

In the 2008 remixed track entitled 'Brown Boys'<sup>4</sup>, which was a collaboration between artists Mentor, AG Dolla, Swami Baracus, Menis, Kayvew, Nika-D and Lost Soul-jah, provides a narrative that 'speaks to the nation/from a perspective of an Asian'. As is common with many contemporary hip hop tracks, the song tells a narrative of struggle and success, where each rapper speaks from their unique 'perspective of an Asian'.

I will focus on two particular sections within the track, one by rapper Swami Baracus' and the other by Nika-D. In the second half of the track, Swami Baracus raps:

'Generation Part II/lost in the future/

Barracuda/proud of my culture/

the path that we laid out/the past is played out/

now the racists fade out/

pushed in the Commonwealth/now we're common in wealth.

Here, Swami Baracus repeats the central tenet of postracial ideology of the 'dissolved racial subject' where racism is something that we can leave to the distant past and not have to confront in the present (Jackson, 2005). Here, a 'post-racial' present and future is also deeply connected to being 'common in wealth', where the relative economic success of a few British Asians are held up as proof of this postracial moment. In doing so, it works to reinforce the notion of a meritocracy and social mobility which minimizes the 'salience of [racism's] experience' for racialized minorities (Lentin, 2012: 2). In fact, this ignores the fact that most racialized, non-white members still suffer

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<sup>4</sup> 'Brown Boys' was inspired by a similarly titled track, 'Black Boys' by grime artist, Bashy

from racism and that in particular, not all South Asian communities have experienced an equal amount of economic and social success in the UK. It also ignores the growing evidence that in fact, along with Blacks, South Asians are now suffering from increased surveillance and monitoring by the Metropolitan Police.

Following Swami Baracus', Nika-D offers his narrative on the song when he rapped:

'I'm a mixed race man with skin like a sun tan/  
I'm a brown boy man/yeah half white and Asian/  
In the new millennium/you see my time for it about/  
you see signs for the country are changing/  
And color's just not important anymore/  
It's all about rich and poor/not a phase/  
I see many brown faces black faces making a wage

Here, Nika-D's reference to his mixed race heritage is used as an example to suggest that 'color' is no longer an issue. In this case, Nika-D's mixedness is deeply tied to his validation of a post-racial Britain. His mixedness affords him greater mobility in terms of being able to sometimes bypass being of minority status and position. Secondly, contemporary discourses and representations of mixedness often valorize certain forms of mixedness as attractive and desirable faces of multiculturalism. A recent example of this was in London's 2012 Olympic opening ceremony which featured a beautiful mixed race British family heralding a new, cosmopolitan future. Thus in the contemporary moment, being mixed race affords him a certain amount of flexibility and he can take advantage of being 'exotic' and 'attractive' without necessarily being considered a racial or ethnic minority.

As Nika-D demonstrates, a key claim within a postracial discourse is one that asserts that we live in a 'color-blind' society where people, and especially whites do not 'see' or recognize one's 'race' (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). This statement is important because it shows how racism is understood to be limited to one that's color coded and therefore the claim to not see color effectively denies the charge of racism. In the UK particularly, race as an important structure that shapes life chances and opportunities have always been disavowed in favor of other forms of social inequality, such as class.

Similarly, Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* (2007) stitches together a fictional world in which this problematic anti-racialism or a post-racial identity becomes part of the overall moral message of this narrative. Yet, the story and characters are filled with ambivalence. At times, it is difficult to tell whether the book supports this anti-racialism or a post-racial present or if the book seeks to construct a utopian anti-racist future. Through both interviews and through the story itself, it suggests that Malkani at times articulates both positions.

As one of the only novels to emerge that tells a story about young British Asians and the creation of London youth cultures, it provides fascinating insight into the everyday and lived experiences of young British Asians. The book commences with a pivotal scene in which Jas, the main protagonist and his friends beat up a young white man for supposedly calling one of them a 'Paki'. However, by the end of the scene, what the reader gleans is that the young white man never did call any of them a Paki and instead, is the innocent victim of a perceived threat that is not there. Malkani discusses this first scene with me in June, 2008. He said:

H: We were talking about constructed identities, and the invention of a common enemy...does racism come into the day-to-day activities of young Asians?

G: It depends where you are. If it was somewhere other than Hounslow it would be relevant. In the 70s there were huge problems. What I'm saying is: where does the stuff about racism come from in the beginning of the book? Common enemies help you bond and you need to have a common threat. I think that people get a bit carried away with the racist threats or exaggerate it or imagine it when it's not there. For me it seemed to be more interesting to explore incidences where racism doesn't matter.

While Malkani is careful to not completely deny the existence of racism, it is something that happens to others but not to him and to other (middle class) Asians like him. Gautam subscribes to the notion that forms of racialization and racism are no longer everyday acts that young British Asian Londoners have to undergo. Here Gautam articulates an increasingly common feature of a postracial discourse where racism and prejudice are believed to be individual and subjective acts and affects the individual at the level of the interpersonal only, or what Goldberg refers to as 'born again racism' which is a privatized racism with no history and no precedents (Goldberg, 2009: 23). This view of racism rejects the existence of racism as systematic, organized, and structural; forms of racism that is embedded in the legal, political and economic structures and institutions.

As neoliberal economic policies usher in the dissolution of the welfare state system along with slashes in funding across all social institutions especially in higher education, these austerity measures have exponentially increased social and economic inequality, especially for those whose lives were already precarious. The novel in effect, in line with a neoliberal model, serves to decouple 'race' from racism. Yet it is still haunted by the traces of racism and its effects. That is, Jas's whiteness forces us to re-examine with a more critical eye the numerous points at which the characters interact with each other in ways that are supposedly unmarked by racism and 'racialized' hierarchies. For instance, the existence of Jas distracts from the way in which embodied forms of racialization and racism still exists, particularly for those who are perceived as 'other', which is often the case with young Asian men in London. The message of a post-racial Britain is the astute point that Alana Lentin (2012) made that a post-racial discourse is exactly how contemporary racism expresses itself. That is, 'post-racialism' is often framed in direct relation to the backlash against multiculturalism (and its supposed failures) wherein the need for diversity to be recognized and accommodated is seen as being excessive, overly-conciliatory, 'too PC'; or quite simply, there is 'too much diversity' (Goodhart, 2004). And as the various plot twists in *Londonstani* reflect, contemporary racism resurfaces intertwined, mediated, justified and articulated through culture (Lentin, 2012; Gilroy, 2012). Jas' relationship with Samira, who briefly date in secret, and Samira's brother's violent reaction when he found out about their clandestine relationship are understood and framed through Samira's and her family being Muslim. And the solution too must be one in which culture is central, made evident by the adoption of community cohesion policies and David Cameron's 'muscular liberalism' (2011). With relation to Jas and his whiteness, this too can be 'solved' through cultural means. He simply has to adopt 'desi' ways, language and practices and he will be perceived as someone in that youth culture. Yet, the question remains whether Jas will never be perceived or positioned and interpellated as 'Asian' nor will the ever evolving forms of 'cultural' racism and increased racial profiling of young Asian men (both Muslim and non-Muslim) that are still very much in effect affect him in the same ways.

But there is also a more hopeful, utopian vision of a 'postracial' future present at various points in the story. This is most clearly the case when we come to the final twist at the end that reveals that the protagonist Jas is in fact, a white, English young man. This is only revealed by the utterance of his full first name which is 'Jason Bartholomew-Cliveden'. The surprise ending reveals a challenge to the ethnic absolutist ways in which culture and increasingly religion are used to essentialize and effectively racialize Asian youth cultures and practices. Thus, Jas' racial identity and positioning is not mutually exclusive of his 'desiness' and of being an 'authentic' voice of this South Asian 'desi' coming of age story. In Gautam's own words, he argued 'In the 90s, you had this ethnic identity as

a proxy for masculinity, and now that subcultural identity as a proxy for ethnic identity'. In other words, Gautam here insists that a subcultural identity supercedes an ethnic identity. This highlights the fact that these Asian youth subcultures exist not as an 'Asian' set of cultural practices but are seen as syncretic local cultures, no longer to be read as purely mono-cultural and mono-racial practices. Instead, they can be seen as highly masculine 'body-reflexive' practices (Nayak, 2003) that cross-cut ethnic and racial boundaries. And precisely because of the supposed failures of multiculturalism (often the blame is squarely placed on immigrants and diasporic communities and more recently, the British Asian Muslim community especially) and the subsequent rise of the aforementioned 'community cohesion' as a backlash to 'too much diversity', perhaps Jas' whiteness becomes an important message about the endurance and the reality of 'zombie' multiculturalism (Gilroy, 2012) that refuses to die. Multiculture, rather than having failed, is very much an everyday part of London and British life.

## **Conclusion**

Given how little there has been written about with regards to Asian youth cultures, this article charts the significant moments of the interactions between a local 'desi' urban music scene in London and the globalized music culture of hip hop. With an emphasis on this local 'desi' music scene, the article documents the disappearance of a space for collective and conscious political activity within Asian popular culture and the inadequacy of understanding these spaces as alternative public spheres.

I argued that within the context of the Asian scene, the lyrics, message and performances articulate a much more mainstream view that suggests that the framework of (subcultural) 'resistance' and the creation of an alternative public sphere are overly-simplistic and inadequate. The practice of a cultural politics does not automatically entail a resistance towards the mainstream music industry or mainstream views on politics. Often the cultural politics showed a resistance to the marginal and the 'alternative' which reveals complicated relationships between class, race and privilege associated with these marginal, alternative positions.

Throughout the article, I highlighted how these changes have led to new articulations of 'desiness' that are increasingly individualized and neoliberal and increasingly (and contradictorily) similar to a white middle class majority. Thus the article showed that the Asian urban scene utilizes the now global and very mainstream genre of hip hop as a medium through which to articulate these messages that often coincide with and support ideas of individualism and neo-liberal capitalism that contradict certain progressive ideas of politics.



Within the message of hip hop, hyper-individualized, and specifically neoliberal models of consumption have become central narratives within the music, style and culture of hip hop. Hip hop's corporate brand of multiculturalism symbolized by the 'hip hop mogul' showed that youth, ethnicity and 'race' themselves become commodities. This is increasingly apparent when we someone such as Jay Sean is lauded by Rav as someone who represents progress for the British Asian community. And of course, his success as someone who has defied the stereotypes of South Asians as exotic Orientals or still as foreign 'others' is to be celebrated. However, the fact that he reached a level of success outside of the UK still indicates something about how Asians are continually represented and constructed in British popular culture as 'Other'.

The neoliberalization of contemporary Asian diasporic identities also manifests itself in the adoption of a postracial sensibility, where racism is seen as a relic of the past, and no longer significant in shaping the lived experiences of young, middle class 'desi' Asians. Moreover, racism itself becomes understood as individualized acts or behaviors rather than as structural and institutional formations. The adoption of postracial narratives of the self can be seen in examples of music and in popular fiction. These narratives are especially problematic because it downplays the continuing forms of racism and discrimination that specifically target Asians in the UK. Paradoxically, the dominance of postracialism has coincided with the return of overt, explicit forms of racism and violence in Europe and the USA against racialized minorities, migrants and asylum seekers.

Discourses that repudiate and deny the significance of racism in our contemporary context have become the way in which racism lives on. These discourses do the work of silencing critique and claims that racism is still alive. Moreover, as the article points out, what we're also seeing is the shifting nature of racism itself, as a 'scavenger ideology', and the belief in a 'color-blind' racism that focuses on the common sense of cultural incompatibility, on the failures of diversity, on different 'ways of being'. Discussions on postracialism and neoliberal identities through the constructions of race in a local 'desi' music scene are significant in being able to help build a conversation about the everyday complexities of racism, culture, class and nation.

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