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'Curry Tales': The production of 'race' and ethnicity in the cultural industries

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Abstract: Within popular culture in the West stereotypical representations of 'race' still persist. This is particularly troubling when we find that it is racialized minorities themselves behind such representations. The aim of this article is to explore how the conditions of the cultural industries steer the work of minority cultural producers in directions that can undermine the radical potential of the counter-narratives of difference. The article begins with a discussion on the politics of representation where I argue for integrating a sociological approach into cultural studies of diasporic popular culture that pays closer attention to the process of symbol creation. The remainder of the article uses a study of a British South Asian theatre company to show how the increasingly commercialized cultures of production that characterize the sector had a troubling impact on the way a play exploring postcolonial feminisms was marketed, and presented to the public.

Keywords: politics of representation, 'race' and ethnicity, commodification, cultural industries, british asian popular culture, sociology of cultural production

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Did *you* make me for a gap in the market

Did *I* make me for a gap in the market

(Extract from the poem 'Booking Khan Singh Kumar' by Daljit Nagra¹)

The most unwholesome ideas of ethnic absolutism hold sway and they have been incorporated into the structures of the political economy of funding black arts. The tokenism, patronage and nepotism that have become intrinsic to the commodification of black culture rely absolutely on an absolute sense of ethnic difference

Paul Gilroy (1993: 110-111)

In his book *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Vijay Prashad (2000: 32) describes the West's long held fascination with the 'ghastly and beautiful mystery' of the Indian sub-continent. And just a cursory look at the ways in which contemporary South Asian expressive cultures are marketed in popular culture in the West – whether in the form of a book jacket, an album cover, a theatre flyer, or billboard poster for a film or television show – finds these representations still configured to fit into these archetypes of the 'ghastly' or the 'beautiful'. Asian cultural works frequently appear in the West in highly exoticized forms – fetishized signifiers often based upon anthropological tropes of clothes, food, kinship and ritual (Hutnyk, 2000). Thus the 'beauty' of South Asia is reduced to repetitious images of colourful saris, spicy curries, Hindu sages, exotic weddings and Bollywood dance routines. Conversely, we find representations of the supposedly ghastly side of South Asian cultures, in more recent times defined in terms of 'beards, scarves, halal meat, terrorists, forced marriage' (Saha, 2012a).

The exoticization of South Asian culture has been relatively straightforward to explain when it has been explicitly driven by commercialism, where it can easily be dismissed as an example of corporate multiculturalism (Hutnyk, 2000; Hall, 2000; Gilroy, 2000). But such a perspective cannot elucidate those troubling instances when we discover how similarly reductive representations are just as likely to be made by Asian cultural producers themselves; individuals who, paradoxically, often define their careers as driven by an ethical and political urge to challenge the very stereotypical ways in which Asian cultures are represented in the media. The aim of this paper is to explore precisely such an instance, using the case of a Manchester-based, 'culturally diverse' theatre company, Rasa Productions, and their play *Curry Tales*. The article will examine the experience of a multicultural company (in the literal sense – the company is run by a South Asian woman and a white English man) in marketing a play based upon a narrative of Asianness that attempts to counter and transform stereotypical representations of South Asian femininities. It argues that increasingly marketized cultures of production in the theatre 'industry' steered the company into employing a rather caricatured representation of Asianness as part of its marketing strategy, which conflicted with the radical narrative of the play itself.

To explore this issue, the article employs an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to take equally seriously the text and the production conditions surrounding the text. While the article's focus on a British Asian theatre company might appear rather niche, the intention is to intervene in a wider debate on the politics of representation, and provide an empirically-grounded illustration of how capitalism attempts to govern the counter narratives of difference. To begin I will outline the debate within which this research is

situated, on commodification and the politics of representation, before I introduce my case study on Rasa Productions and their play *Curry Tales*

Towards a sociology of British Asian cultural production

The commodification of hybridity

The research upon which this article is based was sparked by a discussion on British Asian cultural politics in relation to the emergence of a new cultural and artistic movement of British-born South Asians that gained mainstream exposure in the mid-1990s. This was a scene that was lauded – initially at least – by cultural theorists and commentators for its articulation and normalization of a distinctively *hybrid* British Asian identity (Murthy, 2010; Sharma, 2006). Prior to this moment, whether in popular culture, or even cultural studies itself, young Asians were generally pathologized as victims of skinhead violence or as studious and conformist yet paradoxically unable to integrate into mainstream British society (Bose, 2003; Huq, 2003). Therefore, the distinctly syncretic aesthetic of this new scene of 2nd generation British Asians – whether in music (Huq, 1996, 2003), books (Nasta, 2002; Ranasinha 2007), plays (Godiwala. 2003; Kaur and Terracciano, 2006) or films (Sawhney, 2001) – were hailed for intervening in and subverting racist, nationalized discourse that relies on an absolute sense of absolute ethnic and racial difference (Hall, 1996; Gilroy, 1987, 2004; see also Dwyer and Crang, 2002: 413-4).

However, theorists from a more radical cultural studies perspective criticized what they called excessive ‘hybridity-talk’ in the academy (Hutnyk, 2000); a discourse denounced as ‘neo-Orientalism’ (Sharma, 1996: 19-20) for its excessive focus on culture at the expense

of the real experiences of racial violence and economic and social deprivation felt by subaltern migrant communities in the UK and elsewhere. Moreover, these critics challenged the proponents of hybridity in terms of the politics of representation as well, arguing that through commodification, that is, the transformation of culture into a commodity to be extracted of surplus value, the disruptive potential of hybridity is subsumed and paradoxically repackaged into the commodity's unique selling point, a quality used to distinguish it from other cultural products in an overcrowded market (Sharma, 1996; Hutnyk, 2000; Sharma, 2006; Huq, 2003). As Hutnyk (2000: 36) states, 'hybridity and difference sell; the market remains intact'.

This article argues that in spite of these important contributions, the true nature of the 'commodification of difference' needs much further elaboration. While, the concept of hybridity has been a highly debated one (for various positions see Pieterse, 1995; Werbner and Modood, 1996; Hutnyk, 2000; Papastergiadis, 2000), the issue of commodification and difference has been addressed much less. Dwyer and Crag (2002) have conducted one of the few pieces of research that has explored this latter issue in a sustained (and empirically grounded) way. In their study of British Asian fashion design they provide a useful overview of literatures on commodity culture and ethnicities, which they find split into two rather crude arguments that either overly celebrate or overly critique Asian-produced cultural commodities in particular (in their view Hutnyk et al fall in the latter camp). Their own intervention is to disrupt an equally simplistic binary opposition between culture and commerce that underpins these positions. They do this by making two critical observations. Firstly, they suggest that ethnic identities do not exist in a pure state prior to commodification, but are reproduced through the social and material processes of cultural production itself. Secondly, they argue that commodification does not automatically result

in the production of inauthentic, stereotypical, reified representations of racial and ethnic difference; they in fact would rather declare an 'open verdict' (ibid.: 412) on the political outcome of commodity culture. Indeed this echoes the nuanced analysis of critical political economists who recognize commodification as a process that is *enabling* as well as constraining (Garnham, 1990: 164; Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 56-8).

I see much value in Dwyer and Crang's cultural economy critique, for its disruption of a particular crude and determinist reading of commodification (see also Jackson, 2002). However, there is a danger that their analysis can downplay the racializing dimension of capitalism and the production of symbols-as-commodities as informed by a nationalist discourse that seeks to other exoticize or denigrate non-white cultures. In emphasizing the diffused and decentralized networks of commodity culture, I believe that Dwyer and Crang's approach underestimates the lingering – yet powerful – effects of colonial legacies that shape minority cultural production. Essentially, they fail to see the cultural industries' role in the governance of social and racial hierarchies. For this reason I believe it is important to retain a particular cultural studies version of commodification, as articulated by the likes of bell hooks, John Hutnyk and Ash Sharma, which is conceptualized as capitalism's management of the Other. The importance of this latter approach to the question of black and Asian cultural production is how the question of racism never falls from sight in its exploration of 'race', new ethnicities and cultural production. However, I believe a sociological approach to cultural production is needed in order to provide the empirical detail on *how* commodification comes to produce reified, absolute representations of 'race'. In other words I argue that an exploration of the politics of diasporic cultural production needs to get behind the text and engage with the act of symbol creation itself to see how cultural industries work to reproduce ethnic and racial stereotype.

The sociology of cultural production

The urgency of this question of commodification becomes more apparent where we encounter those moments that I allude to in the introduction, where otherwise politically engaged symbol creators from racialized communities become themselves complicit in the production of racial stereotype. The purpose of integrating a sociological approach into the study of diasporic cultural production then, is to contextualize the text within the experience of creative labour that has gone into its production, set in turn against the political economic structures of the cultural industries, and the wider postcolonial context. Such an approach brings symbol creators to the centre of its analysis (alongside the text), where the methodological focus is orientated towards how best to access the meanings they attach to their work and the production of the cultural object in question.

It is in this way that I framed my research into British Asian cultural production. My particular methodological approach is influenced by what Hesmondhalgh (2007: 556-557) defines as the sociology of creative labour, exemplified by the work of Ryan (1992), McRobbie (2009), Negus (1999) and Hesmondhalgh himself (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2010). These researchers, employing qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observation, pay close attention to organisational dynamics to explore the values and conditions that drive creative work, and mark its uniqueness from other industrial forms of production. The focus here is on unpacking the 'cultures of production' that constitute industrial work, and the meanings and practices through which the creation and circulation of texts and technologies occurs (Negus, 1997: 69). My approach additionally draws from Georgina Born's (2010) version of the 'sociology of cultural production', and in particular,

her own ethnographic study of the BBC (Born, 2004). The multi-layers of narrative that her ethnography excavates, produces a rich, thick description of the encounter between new cultures of production and a very particular, historically and culturally embedded public service ethos, and its impact upon the form and aesthetics of BBC television output.

It was similar cultures of work that I wanted to capture in relation to British Asian cultural production. The aim was to consider the ways in which the actions of symbol creators and cultural intermediaries, their articulation of their aesthetic and ethical motivations, and their narratives of the experience of cultural production, produce knowledges about how cultures of production are constituted, and the effects this has on the aesthetics and politics of the British Asian cultural commodity. Subsequently I adopted a similar ethnographic approach to Born, incorporating interviews with over fifty cultural producers and creative managers, and participant observation conducted over a year (as well as the collection and analysis of ethnographic 'artefacts' including trade literatures, publicity materials, and press reviews) to see how respondents 'perceive and imagine the world in which they are working' (Negus, 1999: 11). However, the critical element that I draw from Born's approach is in connecting the analysis of the cultures of production within the cultural industries to a reading of the aesthetics of cultural commodity itself; or as Born states (2010: 191), 'to move from the analysis of production conditions, of genre conventions, of the subjectivities and intentionalities of producers, to the resulting cultural objects'. It is precisely in thinking through how the final symbolic form of the British Asian cultural text is a product of not just its creator's imagination, but also (and perhaps more so) the conditions of cultural production – itself formed in a relation with postcolonial and political-economic structures – which can help us explain the persistence of hegemonic and

reductive representations of Asianness and 'race', which in turn can highlight where future interventions need to be held.

To illustrate this sociological approach to British Asian cultural production I present some research I conducted on the theatre company Rasa Productions. It might be surprising to draw from theatre especially when exploring the nature of commodification and industrial cultural production – its basis in traditional or semi-industrial production methods, leads Hesmondhalgh (2007) to describe theatre as a 'peripheral' cultural industry in contrast to mass media industries like broadcasting, film and music. However, what makes theatre such an interesting case is how in fact, despite it being mostly subsidized (in the UK at least), the processes of rationalization and standardization that characterize the increasingly marketized core cultural industries are spreading into theatre production – as will be made evident in the final section of this article. The research itself was an ethnographic study of the mounting of Rasa's 2005 production *Too Close To Home*, where I spent a month with the company observing (and at times participating) in the production of this play. However, the article focuses on a previous work, *Curry Tales*, which – as Rasa's most successful play by far – was a recurrent subject in our conversations. As such this particular study consists mostly of interviews with the producer and writer of Rasa, and their reflections on mounting *Curry Tales* (though it is embellished with detail gleaned from my immersion in the sector). The focus of the interviews was on how the respondents narrated their experience of working on this play and the theatre sector at large, to extract what Holstein & Gubrium (2004: 149) describe as 'the *how* and the actual *what* of narratives of lived experience'. Emulating Keith Negus' (1999) research into music production, I used their interviews and my field notes as a way of excavating the cultures of production of theatre, which I would then contextualize within the political economy of arts funding in the

UK – as a process of placing the narratives of respondents ‘within their organisational, historical, social and geographical contexts’ (ibid.: 11). This is then coupled with a textual analysis of the play itself, to see how the conditions of theatre production influenced the way the play was aestheticized, specifically in its marketing material. Following Born (2010: 191), it is ‘by eliciting producers’ exegeses about their creative work, and by elucidating the wider critical discourses that attach to the cultural object’ that we can, in the context of this particular research, discover exactly how racial epistemologies are produced through rationalized, standardized commercial processes, frequently with reductive effects.

Case study: Rasa Productions and *Curry Tales*

Rasa is a Manchester-based theatre company who write and produce plays about the South Asian diaspora. The company was founded in 1998 by writer and actress Rani Moorthy. At the end of 2002 – after three productions – they were awarded Regularly Funding Organisation (RFO) status by the Arts Council North West, which ensured a fixed amount of Arts Council money each year, initially for three years – making them one of the very few ‘culturally diverse’ (an Arts Council term) companies to receive regular funding. Rasa’s productions reflect Rani’s diverse roots: her family is Hindu Tamil though she was born and raised in Malaysia and educated in Singapore, moving to the UK in 1996. In addition to writing all of Rasa’s plays, Rani acts in them too, including three one-woman shows (*Pooja*, *Curry Tales* and *Shades of Brown*). The only other fulltime member of Rasa is Ed Higginson who joined as producer after helping on Rasa’s first play *Pooja* when he was working at the Library Theatre in Manchester. Rani and Ed have worked together as Rasa on eight

productions to date. As stated, it was during their fifth play *Too Close To Home* that I conducted my research.

The one common thread running throughout Rasa's body of work is the exploration of South Asian diasporic identities. Indeed a necessary yet precarious element of research on British Asian cultural production is establishing whether an individual could – or even should – be defined as an 'Asian artist'. From a sociological point of view there is the risk that empirical research into racial and ethnic groups paradoxically reifies those racial categories researchers seek to deny (Alexander, 2006; Nayak, 2006). But with regard to the artist, many black and Asian cultural producers are reluctant to define themselves by their perceived ethnicity due to fears of ghettoization that hinders their entry into the mainstream. Indeed such ethnic tagging can become a barrier that disallows them from telling stories outside of 'their communities'; as playwright Tanika Gupta said, referring to her production, *The Waiting Room*, 'Maybe the subject matter of *The Waiting Room* is Asian, but that doesn't mean that's all I can write' (Gupta quoted in Starck, 2006: 349).

In the case of Rasa there is no such ambivalence about being labelled as 'Asian'. When I asked Rani to describe Rasa's commitment to South Asian diasporic politics she replied, 'Wholehearted'. On the one hand there has to be no ambiguity since Rasa's RFO status is based on it precisely being recognized as, according to Arts Council jargon, a 'culturally diverse' arts organisation, and certainly this is made clear in the introduction on Rasa's website at the time of the research: 'We draw upon theatre, dance and multi-media from both South and South East Asia and blend this with western influences, aiming to create a dynamic relationship between performer and audience'ⁱⁱ. However that is not to suggest any opportunism on the part of Rasa; all of Rani's work in Britain has revolved around themes of diaspora, cultural exchange and translation. When I asked Rani to

describe Rasa's aesthetic it was articulated in terms of a South Asian diasporic cultural politics. And as the following quote from Rani demonstrates, such a discussion invariably evoked issues of commodification:

What's the political state of mind when you sanitize your own culture and make it appropriate for the new audience? Which is what I [am] doing: taking my background, my Malaysian, South East Asian, Tamil, my Indian roots and repackaging them and putting it up to an audience in Britain.

The very assertive use of the terms 'sanitising' and 'repackaging' pulls into sharp focus the nature of cultural commodification as a process in which culture is (re)presented in a way to meet the perceived tastes of the audience – in this case an explicitly British (and implicitly white) audience. The way in which Rani deploys these terms to describe her creative process reflects a heightened awareness of the tension at the heart of diasporic cultural production: the extent to which the cultural politics of difference clashes, or can work in harmony with the market. Unpacking the politics of 'sanitizing' and 'repackaging' difference for consumption by Western audiences becomes the purpose of the remainder of this article. This issue is explored through a critical analysis of the very unique marketing campaign behind Rasa's production *Curry Tales*. The aim is to show how it is when situating Ed and Rani's exegeses about the mounting of the play within the broader political economy context of the theatre – as the 'sociology of cultural production' approach prompts us to do – that uncertainties emerge over the nature of acclaim that the play received.

Curry Tales – the marketing person’s dream!

Curry Tales is Rasa’s most successful play, in both critical and commercial terms. After premiering in 2004’s Edinburgh Festival it toured in over eighty venues in England and won acclaim in nearly all the major newspapers including four-star reviews in the *Guardian* and *Times*. It was additionally featured as Critic’s Choice in *Time Out* and broadcast on BBC Radio 4. As alluded to, I have concerns about the way in which the play was aestheticized and marketed. But I see this as in stark contrast to the actual aesthetics and politics of the play itself, which in fact offers something much more radical and subversive.

Curry Tales is a one-woman show, written by and starring Rani, consisting of six monologues performed by a different character (all played by Rani). Each scene is based around cooking curry in various domestic settings, which is used as a vehicle in which different characters explore notions of race, nationalism and femininity. For instance Kalvinder is a British Asian woman who describes her fears of infertility as she makes an egg curry for her white in-laws; Rosemary Kempadoo is a Trinidadian Tamil woman whose monologue is based around sexual jealousy, her passion reflected in the fiery chillies she throws into her curried goat; and Mrs Wong, an Indian living in Malaysia, prepares a multinational curry laksa against the backdrop of the 1969 race-riots. Two of the play’s most interesting features – or indeed ‘unique selling points’ (USPs) – involved, firstly, curry actually being made live on stage during the performance using a real working hob, and secondly, direct interaction between the character and the crowd, either conversing with the front-row, or handing out the freshly prepared curry in small bowls for the audience members to eat. The play’s central theme is the articulations of femininity that emerge from

the central performance of cookery, but with an overriding narrative informed by a particular South Asian feminist politics. As Rani explained,

With *Curry Tales*, the biggest most significant thing is that people came in with the expectation to have the stereotypes confirmed – having the sweet little Asian girl who is going to cook for them and feed them [...] Then to be confronted by someone who is [...] actually asking, demanding a question, and engaging you in a conversation, which is what the first character does. [...] There are instances where I am subverting people's sense of what they think an Indian woman should be.

In this quote Rani explicitly talks about the intended effects of *Curry Tales* – to undermine an exoticized, and eroticized perception of Asian women. Moreover, there is evoked a sense of overcoming the disavowal of the subaltern and her (in)ability to speak, not just within the context of the narrative or even the space of the stage, but in breaking the fourth wall and engaging directly with the audience, 'demanding a question'; staging a platform where the subaltern and middle-England come face-to-face.

Considering the plays articulation of postcolonial feminisms and subaltern politics, I was subsequently surprised by the way in which the play was aestheticized in its publicity material. From the title, *Curry Tales*, to the design, there was a deliberate play with stereotypes of Asianness. The main promo picture in particular (conceived and produced by Rasa themselves), which was used in posters and flyers and featured heavily in preview pieces, consisted of a striking and somewhat comical image featuring Rani as the Goddess of Curry, stirring a big curry pot, with four arms, a crown of chillies, her tongue stuck out like the goddess Kali, to taste the food being presented to her by one of her hands. Highlighting

the playful nature of the image, and reflecting the subversive themes of the play, we see that, on closer inspection, in one of her hands the goddess is holding an electric food processor. This subtle disruption of the exotic with a mundane, everyday consumer item suggests that Rasa was attempting to do something more than just employ a caricature of a Hindu goddess to promote a play about curry. Nonetheless, there is an explicit admission from Rani and Ed that they were employing stereotypes of Asianness to promote *Curry Tales*. In the quote above, Rani alludes to how the play's potency is in subverting the very 'expectation' of the audience who believe that are going 'to have their stereotypes confirmed'. And this in fact was the very logic upon which marketing strategy was based – enticing the white audience precisely through their Orientalist assumptions about Indian culture, which would then be challenged inside the theatre. Ed explains this in more detail:

I mean *Curry Tales* in a sense feels like it could be very hackneyed, filling a whole cliché. But yeah you get a cliché in the title, and you get a bit of a cliché at the very beginning of itⁱⁱⁱ but then you get lots of twists in that which you didn't expect and you end up with a piece that is about identity and nationalism and fertility. So it's almost like bringing people in with them maybe thinking they're going to get one thing and gradually twisting it so they get something else.

In the context of the play's themes and cultural politics this conscious play with 'clichéd' images of Asianness appears quite clever and sophisticated – based upon a self-awareness that such an approach could appear 'hackneyed' if applied without the right level of nuance and understanding, or politics. Indeed, in terms of press coverage and 'bums-on-seats' alone the strategy can be regarded as a success.

Using the example of the rebranding by Bangladeshi businessmen of East London's Brick Lane to 'Bangla Town', Michael Keith (2004), highlights how 'the fact of commodification' can be strategically appropriated by marginalized communities who use the market to advance their material needs^{iv}, and we can evaluate the success of *Curry Tales* in a similar way (not least since they both have their basis in an association of Asianness with food). Certainly in our interviews Ed underlined the commercial potential of *Curry Tales* and its design:

We're a funny one because yes we did *Curry Tales* – the marketing person's dream! *Curry Tales* – what more do you have to say? I mean we had a fantastic image for it, everybody knows about curry and of course the white audience, the mainstream audience know what curry is and you suddenly have got something you can sell.

Thus, alongside the rationalization of the marketing campaign in terms of it as a strategic play with exotic images of Asianness in terms of a feminist diasporic cultural politics, this quote reveals an additional excitement at the concomitant commercial possibilities, where the concept of *Curry Tales* gives the 'marketing person' a wealth of material to play with; material that would be particularly effective at enticing a 'white audience, the mainstream audience'.

The implicit logic to the marketing of *Curry Tales* was to present difference in a *pre-digested* form, or at least in a way that the white mainstream audience would recognize and more readily consume. This is made more apparent in a story I was told about the premier of *Curry Tales* at the Edinburgh Festival, which took place in the upstairs of an Indian restaurant; a USP consciously engineered to entice the press – a notoriously difficult

challenge in the hyper-competitive atmosphere of the festival. As Ed explained, this strategy was a major factor in helping *Curry Tales* gain publicity:

So we had this double, treble USP. So we had '*Curry Tales*' – so instantly you can grab onto the title, does what it says on the packet kind of thing. Then there's cooking in the show, so people are going to get fed, and then it's being done in a room above an Indian restaurant, in association with one of the big theatres in Edinburgh – the Traverse – but was done as a site performance. So therefore again that was another thing, this isn't happening in your normal converted church hall or university lecture room or whatever spaces in Edinburgh actually really are outside of the festival – it was happening above an Indian restaurant.

The narration of the promotion of the play in terms of its multiple 'USPs' reflects again the increasing adoption of standardized marketing techniques, or at least language, within the arts and is a point I shall return to. But I want to flag Ed's comment on *Curry Tales* as doing 'what it says on the packet'. This was a phrase he used several times in our interviews – evoking Ronseal's claim that its brand of literally-named varnish 'does what it says on the tin'. Ed sees the shrewdness of the title *Curry Tales* in giving the audience a direct flavour of what is contained therein; the presentation of difference in a more predictable, *pre-digested* form. This notion of culture as 'pre-digested' is not intended as a culinary pun but in fact is a reference to Theodor Adorno's (1991: 67) critique of popular culture where he argues that the reduction of art to pre-digested commodity eases consumption, increasing the potential for extracting further surplus value. I should stress that I am not suggesting that Rasa cynically used Orientalist signifiers (i.e. anthropological tropes of religion, diet, kinship etc.)

for commercial gain alone, and I certainly think that the cultural political rationale behind the particular aestheticization and marketization of *Curry Tales* by the producers as highlighted above needs to be acknowledged. Nonetheless their marketing strategies are purposely based on the logic of aiding the digestion of difference so that it sells more effectively. In *Curry Tales*, Asianness is pre-digested – or indeed, *sanitized* – through the self-conscious deployment of exotic signifiers to promote the play.

Problematizing the aestheticization of the British Asian cultural commodity

Following Dwyer and Crang's (2002) and Keith's (2004) less dogmatic version of ethnic commodity culture as set out above we might read *Curry Tales* in a positive light. According to this perspective, the case study provides an illustration of how producers from minority backgrounds draw from their cultural backgrounds to create 'ethnicized cultural commodities' that can mobilize 'multicultural imaginaries' in a productive way (Crang and Dwyer, 2002: 412). Yet I am much more ambivalent about the play's effects. One immediate flaw I see is in the very rationalization of their marketing strategy. To recap, Rasa felt they could use exotic signifiers – that is, 'clichés' in the title and main promotional image – to entice a 'mainstream' audience, as any Orientalist assumptions of Asian cultures would then be challenged by the play itself. But it would only have been a tiny proportion of people who both saw the promotional images and went to see the play. Indeed within the economies of signs and space (Lash and Urry, 1994), the publicity material - in the form of photos, preview pieces, JPEGs - takes on a social life in itself, reaching more people than the text it is promoting. In other words, beyond the immediate audience, it is the stereotypical

representations of Asianness that would have been consumed rather than the subversive themes of the play.

The main reason for my uncertainty however are due in part to Rani's own reflections upon the way in which the play was received, where I found that, two years on, she herself had become ambivalent about the nature of the success of *Curry Tales*. As stated the fieldwork was conducted during the production of their play *Too Close to Home*, which tells the story of a British Muslim family who discover that the youngest son is a potential suicide-bomber. For this play Ed and Rani decided to keep the marketing restrained as they were wary of the possible sensationalization of the play's potentially incendiary storyline (the production had in fact a much more muted tone). But I also sensed that this was in part a reaction to the rather less subtle approach employed for the preceding play. From the deliberately ambiguous (and ethnically unmarked) title, to the relatively quiet promotional image of a young Asian boy standing against a streetscape, the aesthetization of *Too Close To Home* contrasts sharply with *Curry Tales*. Also in contrast to *Curry Tales*, *Too Close To Home* received many more negative reviews – from the very journalists who had praised the former production the first time round. And it was a rather critical piece in *The Times* that led Rani to reconsider the nature of the acclaim she received for *Curry Tales*. In particular, she questioned whether the original reviewers of *Curry Tales* had in fact understood the politics behind the deliberate play with exotica:

The Times gave me five stars for *Curry Tales* [and had awarded *Too Close to Home* two stars]. It makes you suspicious of why you are lauded in that way [...] you're lauded because they are missing the whole point by engaging with [...] the little bits of exotic which I use as metaphors, but they don't really want to read that.

This was elaborated again elsewhere, where Rani reflects on the ‘joke’ of deliberately using exotic representations of Asians to sell a play:

AS: So again calling it *Curry Tales* and having that image was a very purposeful way of playing with people’s perceptions about Asian identity?

Rani Moorthy: And people still didn’t get that joke! They still thought that was what they were going to get. Two years on they still think... it made me wonder, do people get it? What are they really getting?

Rani is making these comments in response to a negative review of *Too Close To Home*, and there is clearly a slight bitterness in her tone. But nonetheless it is interesting to note an acknowledgement as well of the possible detrimental side-effects of using ‘little bits of exotic’, and the potential pitfalls of using a ‘joke’ (i.e. the deliberate use of a caricature of Asianness) that people might not fully get. Rani here is suggesting that reviewers misread *Curry Tales* – only buying into its exotic elements, rather than the subaltern politics of the play – which in turn has potentially framed the way in which all of Rasa’s subsequent work has been received. According to this narrative, the reason why *Too Close To Home* got mostly negative reviews was because Rasa refused to use the same affected, purposefully over-determined representation of Asianness as they did for *Curry Tales*.

As the research took place two years after the production of *Curry Tales* it was impossible to gauge the audience’s reaction, but looking at the press for *Curry Tales* one can see why Rani had become hesitant about the response it got. Philip Fischer’s (2004) review in the *British Theatre Guide* is perhaps the clearest example of a reductive reading of the

play when he effectively renders its rich narrative to a shallow and lazy comparison to Indian cookery shows: 'If you love Madhur Jaffrey, go and see *Curry Tales*'. While most of the reviews did recognise the craft of storytelling behind *Curry Tales*, the reviewers cannot help but laud the play in terms of food-related puns. *The Observer's* preview piece (Anon, 2004) in their Edinburgh festival guide is typical – 'Rani Moorthy offers divination by curry. Full of flavour' – and we see examples of more predictable 'curry flavoured' sound bites in the chosen press quotes presented on the Rasa website: 'A red-hot combination of storytelling and cooking', 'tickles the taste-buds', 'A rich evocative brew'. It is of course inevitable that the reviewers focused on the food since this is a unique aspect of the play – and indeed, its central theme. But I argue that they are in the same process reproducing an Orientalist discourse around South Asian culture as exotic, spicy, aromatic and sensual. It is telling that the *Time Out* review of *Too Close To Home* finishes with yet another curry quip – 'a well-spiced tragi-comedy with a lingering aftertaste' (Halliburton, 2006) - even though the play was not about food.

Returning to *Curry Tales*, the consequence of this framing is that the subaltern politics – indeed, the very essence of the play – is sidelined. One of the most powerful scenes in *Curry Tales* was that of Kali, a slum dweller, who performs her monologue entirely in Tamil, begging the western audience for ingredients for her curry pot. Despite most of, if not the entire, audience not knowing what the character is saying there was still an implicit understanding of the story being told. To get an overwhelmingly white audience to sit through ten minutes of a foreign language without any translation is in my view a significant moment for British (let alone British Asian) theatre. But surprisingly this was hardly mentioned in any of the reviews – none of *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Sunday Times* or *The Independent* referred to it (they chose to mostly speak about Rosemary Kempadoo, the

most exotic and sensual character). It is as though the USP(s) picked for the show narrowed the range of narratives that emerge from *Curry Tales* where certain stories (highly sensual Rosemary, Delhi socialite Mrs Melwani with her Bollywood gossip) gain prominence whereas others (Kali the subaltern, Mrs Wong and the colonial riots outside her kitchen) become incidental. I argue that this type of reduction is part of an Orientalist discourse that constructs the Other as dehumanized, absolute, reified difference. As Rani says in light of the negative reviews of *Too Close To Home*, 'There is a refusal to see us as complex beings'.

That is not to say that all positive reviews of *Curry Tales* were disingenuous. A review in *The Independent* hinted at the play's convivial effects: 'astonishingly moving show... rarely have I seen such talent or such intimate contact with the pulse of this nation'. Nonetheless, I argue that the aestheticization and marketing of *Curry Tales* framed the reading of the play (and the company's subsequent productions) in a reductive fashion. There is of course the possibility of an alternative reading; Rasa stated their pride in reaching a 'mainstream', white audience – a 39-venue tour took the production beyond metropolitan cities, right into the heart of middle England – and the play would have no doubt transformed some white perceptions of Asian people. But in light of Rani's ambivalence, and the nature of some of the press reviews we cannot help but be a little cynical about this. As David Hesmondhalgh states 'the shadow of exoticism is never far away when the primary audience for Asian acts comes mainly from the white middle-class and the Asian middle-class occasionally' (Hesmondhalgh, 2000: 299). It is when we zoom out and set the production of the play against the structures of the theatre industry, that this critical perspective becomes more persuasive.

The political economy of theatre and the racialization of the cultural commodity

To reiterate, it is my contention that the strategy for *Curry Tales*, contrary to the producers' intentions, encouraged an Orientalist reading of the play, which undermined its intended counter-hegemonic goals. Measuring the social-cultural impact of the play will need further investigation than can be afforded here. But for me, the more interesting issue – and the very crux of this article – is how and why Rasa felt that this strategy would work, and what led them to it in the first place. In light of Rani's own self-confessed doubts over the plaudits she received for *Curry Tales*, and her dismay that no-one *got the joke* of using exotica, it would be tempting to place the blame back on Rasa itself for employing such a risky marketing strategy. However, through immersion in the field, it is my argument that Rasa were *coaxed* into aestheticizing and representing the play in the way that they did, that ended up potentially undermining the themes of the play. Put another way, the seductiveness of using very obvious, and potentially reductive, symbols of Asianness in the marketing of *Curry Tales* is due to the political economy of theatre that, along with the core media industries, has shifted increasingly towards marketization and hyper-commercialism.

Even though theatre in the UK is still heavily subsidized by the Arts Council, as Peacock (1999) highlights, following the deregulation of the British media in the 1980s, subsidized theatre was forced to adopt the values of commercial theatre, in particular through the 'imposition of business methods and the further weighting of the role of artistic director from the aesthetic towards the managerial' (ibid.: 216). In essence, a market that was once characterized as mature and static has now been opened up to intensifying competition (Bennett, 2002: 49), which in turn has seen the increasing rationalization of theatre production, and the standardized use of market-based plans focused on increasing

audiences (Fraser, 2004: 48). It is this shift towards standardization and rationalization, and the cultures of production that it has produced, that I argue led Rasa into employing the marketing strategy that they did. There are two factors in particular that lead me to this point.

The first factor is to do with Rasa's funding and what I call arts funding governmentalities. As noted, Rasa are one of the few Asian companies who receive regular annual funding from the Arts Council England (most companies getting funding – if at all – on a project-to-project basis). However, this funding was based on Rasa being recognized as 'culturally diverse' company – that is, the funding they received came from a pool of money that was ring-fenced specifically for 'Black Minority Ethnic' theatre. On the one hand this represents progressive politics – the prioritisation of the arts that Britain had previously ignored, to paraphrase the seminal text by Naseem Khan (1976). But what this has inadvertently done is place an expectation on the work that culturally diverse companies are supposed to produce – work that stresses the *cultural diversity* or difference of their narratives. Even though Rani described her interest in exploring and articulating a particular transnational South Asian lived experience as 'wholehearted', from her accounts and those of various other practitioners working in theatre who I interviewed, they felt an indirect pressure to represent difference in a particular, (and reified) form. More precisely there was an implicit understanding of the kind of representations of Asianness that was expected – as I have suggested, narratives often based upon anthropological categories of food, kinship, ritual, that are complicit with a dominant, white, bourgeois nationalist worldview – i.e. the worldview belonging to the people who run theatre venues and cultural institutions such as the Arts Council England. In one interview for instance, Ed described to me how Rasa was once told it was 'not Asian enough', or rather, its aesthetics was based on a representation

of Asianness that was seen to have little commercial value, certainly in contrast to a particular Bollywood formula, that following Andrew Lloyd Webber's huge hit *Bombay Dreams* was seen as the most viable (or indeed, only) way for Asian theatre to make money.

As Ed expands,

[T]he response I have found in the past when we were struggling to get a piece of work on, is the, you're not doing Bollywood, kind of thing. You can almost feel the venues saying, you're not doing Bollywood stuff, I don't know we can do anything with you or sell you or anything.

This is the most explicit example of the politics of representation as mediated through commercial forces, frequently to the detriment of the producer's particularly aesthetic and cultural politics. Moreover, Ed's remark that *Rasa* was not something they were 'able to sell' brings into sharp focus the notion of theatre production as commodification and the ideological effects of this process. There is an expectation – embedded in the very structures of arts funding and venue provision – over the kinds of plays British Asian companies should be producing. The quote alludes to how particular, stereotypical representations of Asianness are privileged over more challenging, potentially disruptive narratives. Thus, even though Asian cultural practitioners such as Rani felt a genuine need to tell stories about their particular cultural life experiences, I argue that through arts funding governmentalities practitioners are steered towards creating productions that reproduce the usual racialized archetypes, stifling the ability to move beyond certain narratives, reducing them to the usual fetishized ethnic signifiers. Therefore it is pressure from institutions and industry demands that led *Rasa* – via a form of self-discipline – into

producing a caricatured representation of Asianness in *Curry Tales*, from the title to the promotional image, to the chosen press-quotes to promote the play, which sustains a particular Western idea of Asian culture as a site of exotica.

The second factor that contributes to the reproduction of Orientalist depictions of Asianness is to do with what I refer to above as the increasing rationalization of cultural production in the media industries. Even though the theatre industry does not employ the same industrial methods as other cultural sectors such as television or publishing (theatre is not in the business of mass production), nonetheless, like those industries, production has become increasingly rationalized and standardized as outlined above. I argue that the transformation of the hybrid British Asian text into exotic stereotypes occurs as part of standardized marketing practices – particularly niche marketing – driven by a particular commercial rationale. For instance, we can see this in a previous quote from Ed when he stated that *Curry Tales* succeeded because it had multiple USPs – the title, the striking promo image, and the making of curry live on stage. The risk for the politics of British Asian cultural production is that in the requirement to define the product's USP, the author's ethnicity becomes the default quality used to distinguish the product from other cultural goods in the market. The further danger is that the focus on reaching the largest audience (following intensifying competition) places a demand to produce an instantly recognisable – and therefore, reductive and caricatured – version of difference. As Stuart Hall (2000) says, within the global postmodern, the West loves nothing more than 'a bit of the Other'. It was in this way that *Curry Tales* was designed so that it gave the impression of doing 'what it says on the packet' – a form of *taste-the-difference*, which in my view belied the particular postcolonial feminist narrative.

It is the common-sense, normative way in which such a strategy is narrated, that hides this racializing process. This is illustrated in the following exchange, when I asked Rasa about the temptation of using certain exotic archetypes in their marketing:

RM: We're not naïve. We play it sometimes, not this time [with *Too Close to Home*] but we do play it sometimes. We have to. I know when I am doing it, even when...

EH: When we did a press call for *Curry Tales* in Edinburgh, we did a thing with three or four photographers and just one scene. We did Rosemary who is very sensual, very sexual, wears a big headdress of feathers – it's quite an extreme image really, and very colourful, very in your face, lively. And it did get used a lot, I think in *The Observer* ...

RM: It was huge ...

What I think is key in this passage is how it highlights the seductiveness of using certain markers of Asian exotica, which the producers believe will prove popular with the 'mainstream' audience and press. Certainly, demonstrating how Ed and Rani are not 'naïve' and do 'play it sometimes', their language, through the use of adjectives such as 'sensual', 'sexual' and 'colourful', reflects a knowingness about the particular Orientalist aesthetic they are reproducing. Yet despite the individual agency in reaching these decisions, they are determined within a climate of increasing commercialization of cultural production. There is something very revealing in Rani's comment that 'we do play it sometimes. *We have to*' [emphasis added]. Through increasingly commercial cultures of production Asian artists and cultural practitioners are coaxed into presenting Asianness in a way that is acquiescent with the dominant nationalist discourse on identity and difference, in order to attract attention

from arts institutions on whom they are dependent, as well as the press and the audience. This is not in any way to disempower the author, and elsewhere I have shown how symbol makers through building an effective 'politics of production' can harness the enabling properties of commodification in order to produce a progressive form of multiculturalism (Saha, 2012b). But in this case, it is through arts funding governmentalities and increasingly standardized production techniques that I argue that the cultural commodity becomes racialized, and potential cultural transruptions (Hesse, 2000) are transformed into exoticized, reified difference.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how British Asian symbol creators working in the cultural industries can themselves end up producing exotic translations. Even though it would be easy to interpret this as bad ethical practice, or even *selling-out*, I believe that racialized minorities working in the arts are vulnerable to the materialities of cultural production, that through the varying degrees of a complex hegemony and the durability and strength of imperial discourse (Said, 1991: 4), steers symbol creation down particular, dangerous routes. I argue that it is through the political economy context of theatre production and its shift towards marketization that sees the imposition of increasingly standardized and rationalized processes of cultural production, that the representation of a particular Asian identity is reduced to a caricature of 'Asianness', with all the racialized pathologies that such signification holds.

The underlying purpose of this article is to reinvigorate a debate on the politics of representation and the cultural politics of difference (Hall, 1996; West, 1990) that I believe

has stalled in recent times. This subject has tended to be the domain of a subfield of cultural studies particularly influenced by the literary analysis of postcolonial criticism, where issues of representation would be explored through textual analysis and unpicked with cultural theory (see Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000). The problem is that such an approach tends to treat the text as though it exists in a vacuum, ignoring the fact that it is the product of the cultural industries – that is, rationalized, industrial cultural production – which has a determining effect upon (or at least, is a critical dimension to) its form and how it appears at the point of consumption (and indeed analysis). Through a sociological driven study of cultural production, paying closer attention to the process and structures through which representations and symbols of difference are produced, we begin to question the nature of the commercial and critical success of *Curry Tales* by seeing how enlightened and politically engaged cultural practitioners were steered into a very risky play with racial stereotype that arguably undermined the cultural political goals of the production. The disturbing aspect of this story is not that Rasa – to refer back to the lines of poetry that opened this paper – was forced into the gap in the market reserved for Asian artists, but with *Curry Tales*, ended up making itself up in a way to fit into this gap.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Nagra D. (2007) *Look We Have Coming To Dover* Faber and Faber

ⁱⁱ <http://rasatheatre.co.uk/about-rasa> [last accessed: 15/2/11]

ⁱⁱⁱ This refers to the opening character a supposed Bollywood insider who claims to know all the biggest stars.

^{iv} Paul Stoller (2002) describes a similar scene in his study of West African street vendors in New York who sell African art to shoppers – mostly tourists.

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