Producing South Asian America:
Community, Digital Media, and Connectivity

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my father, David Herschell Wolock, who was always prouder of the accomplishments of his wife and daughters than he was of his own. He showed me every day that a just society starts by treating every person you meet with care and compassion.

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It would be impossible to thank all those whose kindness, intellect, care, and effort supported me through my graduate studies and went into the production of this dissertation. As with the many kinds of labor that go into producing and managing connectivity, the vast networks of human energy that go into academic outputs are largely invisible. I made my best effort to excavate and acknowledge the many people who have made this milestone possible, but found myself indebted to so many kind, generous people that I could not finish writing the acknowledgments. In lieu of my full thanks here, I hope to take the opportunity to thank the many friends, family, and colleagues who supported me over these years of graduate school personally.

While the strengths and merits of this document should be understood as the product of many people's efforts, its faults are entirely my own.

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My sisters Rachel and Jana, have always filled my life with warm wit and joy. There is no kind of laughing I've found better or more restorative than laughing with my sisters. I am also grateful to them for my nieces and nephews, who greatly brightened my time in graduate school. Finally, I am grateful to them for the peace I always had, feeling that they would look after me, their kid sister, no matter what.

My mother and father supported my academic pursuits from the time I was in preschool, and my curiosity well before that. I am so grateful to have them as models. My mother showed me that you should never wait to fight for equality, yours or others'. My father showed me that justice begins with the everyday action of treating others with compassion and respect; then you must carry that practice through to every aspect of your work and life.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who helped me through the final portion of my PhD in the wake of my father's passing. He was my biggest champion and my hero. His way of facing head-on the cruelties of American society with an unpretentious grace and endless kindness will always be an inspiration to me. From faculty and graduate students who counseled and consoled me, to friends who patiently soothed and cheered me, to my generous committee who treated me with a kind of compassionate humanity I fear too few experience in academia, I do not know how I would have made it through without you all. The world, for me, is darker without David Wolock in it. I selfishly demanded everyone help brighten it for me again, and so many graciously did. Among those who bore the brunt of my grief, particularly as it intersected with the many insecurities and anxieties a PhD can produce, I must thank John Bell, Annemarie Navar-Gill, and Sriram Mohan. Thank you for having my back.

PREFACE

Self-Disclosure

This dissertation examines the coalescing of a coalitional South Asian America identity and community over the last fifteen years. It is a formation mainly advanced by professionals who are the children of immigrants from South Asia to North America, or who immigrated as very young children. Curators, journalists, tech entrepreneurs, professors, graduate students, lawyers, and authors, their social cachet helped build South Asian America, but also frames it as an elite formation. As I will show, there are several ways South Asian America's advocates have consciously fought against this limitation, but there are also many ways in which South Asian America implicitly validates its own internal hegemonic norms. This major limitation of South Asian America is also a central limitation of this dissertation, but one that is repeatedly addressed, even if never satisfactorily, throughout the text.

My own cultural cachet as an academic attached to a premier research institution opened doors to interviews and other important forms of research access, and put me in easier and more frequent contact with certain communities within South Asian America. As with many of my research participants, I am deeply influenced by my experiences growing up in southeast Michigan (like Manan Desai and Samip Mallick of the South Asian American Digital Archive), my undergraduate experiences at University of Michigan which exposed me to South Asian American students and South Asian American activism [like Abhi Tripathi, *Sepia Mutiny* founder (Tripathi 2006)], and my time as a graduate student and teacher at the University of

Michigan [like Manan Desai and V.V. "Sugi" Ganeshananthan, who blogged for *Sepia Mutiny*, podcasted for the South Asian Journalists Association, and interviewed Mallick and Desai about SAADA for *Sepia Mutiny* (Ganeshananthan 2011)]. Indeed, this research would never have been started had my South Asian American friends from college and the years that followed not shared with me the quiet, earthshattering experiences they had doing coming-of-age identity work in an era that seemed to *almost* promise recognition, but never fully delivered. Their courage in the face of an interconnected nest of unsolvable equations of belonging has never ceased to inspire me, or this work.

This brings me to a second aspect of my positionality that shapes my research and this text (Lal 1999; Henry 2003), but remains largely silent throughout. To not mention it or explain it, I feel, would be unethical. I am White, the daughter of public servant lawyers who grew up in insular ethnic communities in and around Detroit—one Polish and Catholic, the other Ashkenazic Jewish. My parents were able, through education, support, access to opportunity, and hard work, to move up several rungs of the class ladder. I went to public schools with mostly upper-middle class White children, some of them also Jewish, but also some Black and Chaldean children. I had little exposure to people of any Asian background until college, but a strong interest in other cultures and a sense that something was deeply wrong about the racial politics of America. Although my parents met doing political activism, much of it about advocating for equality for people of color and women, I am certain my own life path, at times, surprised them.

It would not be possible to explain why I came to this research topic, even with unlimited space. It is one of those life directions that certainly depends on a series of strange, small choices, but cannot be explained by any of them specifically, or even all of them in total. Whatever access and support I have been given to study South Asian America, I am deeply

grateful for it, and I hope I have used it well. Yet it also reflects problematic inequalities in terms of access to the highest echelons of knowledge production. Particularly relevant are the alarming statistics in relation to women of color being denied tenure in institutions across the United States (Matthew 2016) and the disproportionately low rates of Asian Americans in positions of administrative power in higher education (Gin 2013).

Not infrequently I have felt like my background is a problem as I strive to be an ethical researcher. My ability to generate guilt—as a White, liberal, feminist, Catholic-heritage, Jewish academic with interests in postcolonial and critical race scholarship—is, unsurprisingly, well-honed. Yet I am aware a deep need for meaningful social change in my country, a goal to which my work is dedicated, should trump whatever discomfort I may feel putting myself forward as an expert on a community not my own. It is my hope that the unique perspective I bring as an outsider might be of use, and that my dissertation has meaningfully centered the voices of South Asian Americans. More than that, it is my guiding aspiration that my work and institutional power may support and encourage researchers with access to fewer opportunities than I have been given.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABCDesis   originally American Born Confused Desis, although this Reddit subgroup encourages personalized substitutions for the C.

APAC   The Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center

CM   *Chapati Mystery*

NCSAO   The National Coalition of South Asian Organizations (NCSAO)

SAADA   The South Asian American Digital Archive

SAALT   South Asian Americans Leading Together

SAJA   South Asian Journalists Association

SM   *Sepia Mutiny*

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the formation of South Asian America over the last fifteen years as a coalitional identity intended to circumvent divisions both subcontinental (e.g. religious, national, linguistic, colorist, caste-based) and domestic (e.g. racial, class-based). While the fruits of this mobilization are beginning to be seen in mainstream U.S. media, the backbone of this nascent movement is a community that gathered, organized, and communicated with itself using a variety of digital media sites and practices over the last decade and a half.

South Asian Americans are positioned at a pivot point between, on the one hand, transnational and national ethnocentrisms, and, on the other, similarly multi-scalar visions of the miraculous, increasing flow of technologies and capital. The media producers and curators of coalitional South Asian America take up this position, as desired yet dangerous members of the American body politic, for their own political ends, producing digital media to build and maintain a new community. The advocates of South Asian America, taken together, place themselves at a crux in multiple scales of racialized, capitalist empire to critique it and produce solidarities with marginalized communities within and without.

This dissertation is an examination of the abundance of unremarked yet remarkable labor that undergirds this formation, from repetitive production of blog posts, digital archive entries, and podcasts, to responding to hundreds of comments, to elaborate infrastructures and acts of affirming, listening, reading, and sharing. This dissertation reveals how, to build South Asian America, complex forms of identity and diasporic belonging are managed and imagined through

iterative, mundane, and loving acts of mediated labor. This dissertation reframes the meaning of connectivity—as a cultural practice and process as well as a technical phenomenon—and the labor that goes into its production and management. Re-conceptualizing connectivity allows us grounded purchase to explore the affective drive for diasporic connection that has inspired this unceasing and underappreciated labor. This new conceptualization of connectivity as both cultural and technical encourages us to consider how community connections, solidarities, and coalitions are built from a wealth of mundane interactions with people and media. To that end, this dissertation uses a multimodal approach in terms of methods, theoretical grounding, and phenomena of study, with particular focus on three multi-person digital media projects: blog and forum Sepia Mutiny (2004-2012), the South Asian Journalists Association podcast (2008-present), and the South Asian American Digital Archive (2008-present).

The formation of South Asian America is about imagining the arrival of South Asian Americans as Americans, a project that is complex, uneven, and in progress. It is premised on a coalitional strategy with progressive potential for some of the many communities that, taken together comprise South Asian America, as well as other marginalized and minority American communities. This dissertation unpacks the strategies and countless small human acts that render South Asian America viable, compelling, and legible.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of South Asia[1], as a grassroots sentiment of self-identification, is of very recent

vintage and decidedly North American provenance (Carsignol 2014). Its most compelling use

case is the budding formation[2] of South Asian America[3]. South Asian America is, in the

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[1] The South Asian subcontinent, marked off from the rest of Asia by the Himalayan mountain range, consists of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives. Afghanistan, which shares a border with South Asian Pakistan to the south and east, Middle Eastern Iran to the west, and three Central Asian countries to the north, and which has historical and cultural ties with all three regions, is not always included in lists of South Asian countries. I am less concerned with deciding for myself its categorization and more interested in how Afghanistan and its peoples are positioned by proponents of South Asian America, who largely promote solidarity with Afghanistan and feel they share with Afghans and Afghan Americans a struggle against exploitative global imperialist agendas.

[2] I use the term formation here in its colloquial sense rather than the specific usage of "racial formation" proposed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), but with deep indebtedness to their work as well as to Lisa Nakamura's (2008) important intervention, "digital racial formation." I consider the contentious struggle for the name, identity, and constituents of South Asian America (and other related categories such as Indian American) to be part of racial formation, "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (Omi and Winant 1994, 55). Significantly for this dissertation, Omi and Winant see the racial formation perspective as a necessary response to the limited nature of narrow "ethnic group-, class-, and nation-based" approaches to identity (48). While considering a range of ways in-group and out-group understandings of South Asian Americans are shifting, I am particularly concerned with "the ways that digital modes of cultural production and reception are complicit with this ongoing process" (Nakamura 2008, 14). The coalescing of a progressive, coalitional South Asian American community this dissertation attempts to document would more appropriately be called, in Omi and Winant's terminology, a "racial project." "A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines" (Omi and Winant 1994, 56). Racial projects can be macro- or micro-level, persist and unfold over a long period of time, and be associated with the political right or left (58). Indeed, building a coalitional South Asian America has entailed an elaborate effort to reorganize the relationships among various racial identities and meanings. I nonetheless feel the term "racial project" is unnecessarily misleading for use throughout the dissertation, suggesting more intentionality, precision, and conscious collaboration than occurred. It suggests a kind of discrete-ness. South Asian America, as I am using it, is a diffuse, ongoing set of phenomena, with many of its primary movers deeply ambivalent about its name and constituents. In other words, it is produced through the ongoing negotiations between many interrelated but often conflicting racial projects.

[3] Throughout this text, American will be used to mean people or things associated with the United States of America unless noted otherwise. This turn of phrase is unfortunate, given the way it ignores and erases other peoples and cultures in and of the Americas. Nonetheless, the first goal of this paper is to speak with clarity and specificity about the identity terms that relate to people of South Asian heritage, something sorely missing in mainstream discussions; to speak with such specificity is a political act in its own right. Unfortunately, fully unpacking the use of "America" as a mark of United States hegemony within the Western hemisphere—which would necessitate calling out and

articulations examined herein, a coalitional identity intended to circumvent divisions both subcontinental (e.g. religious, national, linguistic, colorist, caste-based) and domestic (e.g. racial, class-based). While the fruits of this mobilization are beginning to be seen in mainstream U.S. media, the backbone of this nascent movement is a community that gathered, organized, and communicated with itself using a variety of digital media sites and practices over the last decade and a half.

At the heart of South Asian America as a concept, community, and identity is an everyday politics of polyvocality and solidarity. Those advocating for South Asian America bank on their status as desirable yet dangerous. In popular culture, they are positioned at a pivot point between, on the one hand, transnational and national ethnocentrisms, and, on the other, similarly multi-scalar visions of the miraculous, increasing flow of technologies and capital.[4] By taking this position up for their own political ends by producing digital media to build and maintain a new community, the advocates of South Asian America place themselves at a crux in multiple scales of racialized, capitalist empire to critique it and produce solidarities with marginalized communities within and without.

This dissertation is not a paean to South Asian America. There are real limits to its value as a category of critique. This is particularly true when it is used to bolster the erasure of people of non-Indian heritage within South Asia and South Asian America. Moreover, many of its key protagonists continue to reflect flourishing inequalities in the U.S. and South Asia; they come

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clarifying its use each time—would render the central point of the dissertation (i.e. unpacking South Asian identity issues) unmanageable.

[4] Take, for example, Donald Trump strategist and advisor Steve Bannon's comments in a radio discussion with Trump in November of 2015, shortly after the Paris Bataclan terrorist attack. Trump argues that talented foreign students graduating from Ivy League schools should be encouraged to stay in the U.S. Bannon responded:

> "When two-thirds or three-quarters of the CEOs in Silicon Valley are from South Asia or from Asia, I think . . . " Bannon said, not finishing the sentence. "A country is more than an economy. We're a civic society." (Farenthold 2016)

from the most fair-skinned, well-educated, highest caste, and most financially well-resourced subcommunities. At times, South Asian American-ness is used, by both insiders and outsiders, as a bludgeon against other minority and marginalized communities in the United States.

The formation of South Asian America—its reception outside the community, its acceptance within—is even more curious when one considers internal and external forces that *should* make it impossible: numerous roiling internal tensions among a diverse set of communities that have not historically gotten along; a lack of internal or external agreement on terminology; a distrust of multiculturalism and its advocates from the left and right; a deeply held belief by some activists and intellectuals of South Asian heritage that the American "desi"[5] community lacks a proper sense of solidarity with other national communities of color; the geographically dispersed nature of South Asian Americans; and long-term disinterest from mainstream America, particularly in the arenas of media and politics.

Somehow, in spite of these significant barriers, a coalitional South Asian American identity and community has been coalescing over the last fifteen years. This dissertation is an examination of the abundance of unremarked yet remarkable labor[6] that undergirds this process, from repetitive posting, to reading and responding to hundreds of comments, to elaborate infrastructures and acts of sharing. This dissertation reveals how, to build South Asian America,

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[5] Desi is an identity term derived from "desh," a Sanskrit-based word that could mean country or homeland. Adding the suffix "i" produces an adjective which makes whatever it modifies "someone or something of the homeland/country" in many—but by no means all—South Asian languages. While championed by some (Prashad 2000b) as an informal, in-group way of suggesting a common experience for especially second- and later-generation South Asian Americans, the term is not universally accepted, as will be discussed later.

[6] In line with David Hesmondhalgh's (2015) broad definition of work, I will use the words work and labor interchangeably throughout the dissertation to "include any activities paid, or unpaid, recognized or unrecognized, that involve the production and achievement of something, a degree of obligation or necessity, and a degree of effort and persistence" (37). In part, this is to allow for variety in word choice. More importantly, neither work nor labor is perfect word, particularly given each has its own scholarly baggage, for capturing the perpetual, loving laboring I see as at the center of the production and management of connectivity. Encompassing acts of care, performances of identity and self, and efforts toward professionalization and branding in fields where there are few people of a similar background, none of these is exactly work or not. In the effort put forth, however, we see people *laboring*, exerting and struggling to change the shape of the world and their place in it.

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complex forms of identity and diasporic belonging are managed and imagined through iterative, mundane, and loving acts of mediated labor. To do so, I reconsider the meaning of connectivity—as a cultural as well as technical phenomenon—and the labor that goes into its production and management. This shift in the use of the term not only helps us excavate the endless, seemingly unremarkable acts of writing, speaking, listening, reading, curating, sharing, and affirming needed to produce and maintain connectivity. Re-conceptualizing connectivity also allows us grounded purchase to explore the affective drive for diasporic connection that has inspired this unceasing and underappreciated labor.

This new conceptualization of connectivity as both cultural and technical encourages us to consider how community connections, solidarities, and coalitions are built from a wealth of mundane interactions with people and media. It draws attention to when connections fail—emotionally, politically, and materially—and how connectivity is never accomplished, but ongoing, always at risk of failing. It reminds us that connectivity is built from small human acts and desires, and the ordinary people who enact and struggle with them. Finally, this shift in perspective allows us to harness the wonder and aspiration that usually attend technological (utopianist) visions of connectivity, a common if implicit perspective, and apply some of that wonder to humane desires, human practices, and political acts. How once-impossible were the connections created by the advocates of South Asian America—across continents and communities, and despite entrenched bigotries and barriers? How astonishing is it that they relentlessly built them and continue to do so today? To approach this question, we first must consider and appreciate how much the terrain of South Asian American media representation and visibility has shifted over the last fifteen years.

South Asian Men as America's Moral Compass[7]

In the midst and wake of a U.S. election cycle considered by many to be the most extreme, divisive, even "heartbreaking" (Matari 2016; Belluz and Zarracina 2016; Mei 2016; Angyal 2016) in memory, it is both surprising and timely that the United States (or at least its self-proclaimed liberal factions) turned to three Muslim South Asian American men for moral support and guidance. The first, Pakistan-born Khizr Khan, became a symbol of national conscience in July of 2016 at the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. Decorously flanked by his petite wife, Ghazala, in a diaphanous election-blue headscarf, Khan's speech would be the most notable of the night, despite being followed by the likes of actress Chloe Grace Moretz, singer Katy Perry, and headliners Chelsea and Hillary Clinton.[8] The tall, be-suited Gold Star parent criticized then-nominee Donald Trump for Trump's calls for a Muslim ban. Khan argued it went against the nation's principles of equality and freedom. Noting Trump had sacrificed "nothing and no one," he encouraged the nominee to "Go look at the graves of the brave patriots who died defending America—you will see all faiths, genders, and ethnicities." Most notably, he pulled a worn personal copy of the Constitution from his suit pocket, and, shaking, held it out offering it to Trump. Dignified, moist-eyed, and paternal, Khan was widely

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[7] This list of advocates and members of a coalitional South Asian America with national political visibility in the last year who notably and frustratingly includes no women. Importantly, a robust discussion from South Asian American women responding to their erasure or ridicule in mainstream American culture—particularly in relation to repeated depictions that center brown men becoming romantically involved with White women (*The Big Sick*, *Master of None*) who have first rejected caricatured versions of brown women (Hasan 2017; Kini 2017; Ahmed 2017; Agrawal 2017)—not only picked up steam across multiple publications, but was also covered more thoughtfully than usual by the likes of *The New York Times* (Deb 2017). Nikki Haley is, indeed, a South Asian American woman with national political visibility as the United States' Ambassador to the United Nations, but her relationship to her South Asian heritage, and the progressive-oriented coalitional politics of South Asian America, is uneasy to say the least (Wolock and Punathambekar 2016, 12-13).
[8] For example, as of November 2017, the CNN video posted to Youtube for Khan's speech, at nearly 840,000 views, had more views than the other four combined.

seen as having a gravitas and moral depth sorely lacking from American politics in general, and the two mainstream Presidential nominees specifically.

Half a year later, Aziz Ansari became only the third visibly Asian-heritage person to headline American comedy fixture *Saturday Night Live*[9] in its forty-plus years of broadcasting. Ansari, who is born in the United States and of Tamil[10] Muslim heritage, was tasked with hosting the day after President Donald Trump's inauguration. He struck a critical, but appeasing tone. His monologue addressed the fears and hopes of those who felt Trump's election reflected a revitalization of underlying racist, xenophobic, and sexist attitudes in American society. Personalizing the issue, Ansari highlighted the casual racism he faces on a daily basis, as when people tell him to "go home" even though he was born and raised in the U.S., and used it as an opportunity to highlight the ways in which this combination of racism and xenophobia function beyond facts and logic. "Go back…" he begins, but trails off as the racist xenophobe he is impersonating stumbles over the location of demanded return. "…To where you came from!", he finishes. Relating his personal travails to something much larger, he delivers the punchline: "They're not usually geography buffs."

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[9] The first was Jackie Chan on May 20, 2000. His monologue mixed comedy and martial arts as a bevy of SNL actors portrayed martial arts stars interrupting Chan. The last martial artist was Horatio Sanz, using yellow voice in his portrayal of Sammo Hung. Later that year on December 16, Lucy Liu's monologue was about being the "first Asian woman" to host the show. It featured a video diary of her doing a series of offensively stereotypical "Asian" activities during her week with the show. These included serving the cast cooked dog, giving Lorne Michaels a manicure, laundering clothing, pulling a rikshaw in a conical straw hat, and providing a massage with her "little feet" for Tracy Morgan who wistfully tells her, "keep it up girl, me love you long time." While the skit, on its surface, was clearly intended as an edgy call to ridicule stereotypes, it just as easily reads as a signal for Asian Americans to lighten up if they want to be part of the domestic American family, and for white Americans to feel at ease trafficking in these stereotypes. The South Asian American monologues of 2017—Ansari's and Pakistan-born Kumail Nanjiani's (Oct 14) are a study in contrast to those of Chan and Liu in 2000. For more on *Saturday Night Live*'s vexed history with a lack of Asian hosts and cast members, see Robinson (2017), "Chris Pine's *Star Trek* Sketch Exposes an Ugly Truth About *S.N.L.*"

[10] Tamil Nadu is a large state in southern India where Tamil is the main language. The term is a fluid mark of both state-based and linguistic ethnicity.

Ansari connected these daily, personal slights with a pervasive social ill: the rise of the "lower case KKK." He further explained that it is the "same god in Islam as Judaism and Christianity," and encouraged the media to improve the representation of Muslims by nixing the threatening music that plays whenever they show Muslim people on television. "We're divided," he noted in a moment of seriousness. "We've always been divided. As long as we treat each other with respect and remember we're all Americans, we'll be fine." In the heady brew of representational media critique, civics lesson, and comedy routine, he seamlessly connects his personal experiences with an everyday lack of global awareness among Americans more generally, and that with attitudes he marks as racist and as un-American—religious persecution and a lack of equality.

Finally, Hasan Minhaj elaborated on similar themes a few months later in April of 2017 during his surprising stint as the master of ceremonies of the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner. Most years, a big-name comedian yucks it up with a relatively affable Commander-in-Chief, watched by a crowd of glittering celebrities and scions of major media concerns. In 2017, the President declined to attend, countless entertainers and celebrities— including James Corden, Alec Baldwin, and Kevin Spacey—turned down the hosting gig (Ebro 2017) and were absent from the audience, and *Vanity Fair*, *Bloomberg*, and other major players demurred on attending. While Minhaj scrambled to prepare, having short notice as so many had been asked and declined before him, representatives of the press arrived embattled, demoralized, and defensive. In this bizarre and tense situation, the then thirty-one year old Muslim American of Pakistani heritage gave a virtuoso performance. Equal parts humorous, critical, earnestly pleading, and didactic, Minhaj praised the ideals of freedom of the press and religion while indicting the United States and Fourth Estate for failing them. It is the kind of indictment only

possible from a person who believes in the ideals deeply, and his success at arguing for them—how well his performance was received despite being relatively unknown to the broader American public (Ali 2017)—is a testament to the feasibility and legibility of him making this articulation.

Explaining how he had been given the post, Minhaj quipped, "No one wanted to do this [job], so of course it lands in the hands of an immigrant." Among the many condemnations he handed out, some of the most stinging included introducing himself with an identifying number in reference to a proposed national Muslim registry, and his linking then-Trump chief strategist Steve Bannon to Nazism. Implicitly tying structural racism domestically to willful ignorance and manipulation abroad, he variously called out the news media for being a "corporation profiting off minorities in prison" and also sought to remind those watching that Latin America and the Middle East know what it is like to have foreign powers, namely the U.S., meddle in their elections.

The last few minutes of Minhaj's monologue, notably, were dedicated to a pathos-filled plea to the press to win back the trust of the nation, keep Americans informed, and work hard to speak truth to power. The segment is in an extended joke about how, now that the media and press are despised, stereotyped, surveilled, and misunderstood, they finally "know what it feels like to be a minority" and must act accordingly. Offering advice as someone who has considerable experience from "three decades of being brown" in the U.S., Minhaj commiserates that they too will be judged by their mistakes, by the practices of the worst and least ethical journalists. Yet they must persevere for the sake of the country, and, implicitly, for the sake of the world.

As his civic sermon crescendos and Minhaj's voice catches, he admits that it is scary to be in the position "a lot of minority kids feel in this country." Standing up there at the podium and being broadcast nationally he, like the press, is faced with the dilemma of deciding whether to "just try to fit in, and not ruffle any feathers," or to be honest and courageous in defense of himself and his core beliefs, in this case regarding the First Amendment and free speech.

> Only in America can a first-generation Indian American Muslim kid get on this stage and make fun of the President. The orange man behind the Muslim ban. And it's a sign to the rest of the world, it's this amazing tradition that shows the entire world, that even the President isn't beyond the reach of the First Amendment.

In his candid and searing plea, he both addresses the plight of minority communities in the U.S., and associates them with moral authority; dewy-eyed, earnest, and hopeful, he extends that authority to the press as a surprisingly earnest gift. He critiques the treatment of immigrants and particularly Muslims in America while claiming the Muslim immigrant American experience as definitive and crucially American. Finally, he connects this to global concerns—the risks of a lack of global consciousness in the United States because, for him, the U.S. should be a beacon of hope for the world.

In each of the three moments sketched briefly above, a brown, Muslim, South Asian heritage man took to a national stage, an unprecedented circumstance, and pled with the country for the sake of its soul. Whether born in the U.S. or Pakistan, they made deep and loving claims to being American and to knowing what America meant, what its promise is. They made implicit and explicit connections between various forms of bigotry and inequality—particularly xenophobia, racism, and Islamophobia—making compelling cases for these being against American ideals and themselves as well-positioned to offer this critique mingled with hope. They mobilized a particular set of myths about the United States—that it is a country of immigrants; that it was founded, in part, to ensure religious freedom; that the American Dream is available to

anyone willing to commit to its beliefs, work hard, and sacrifice for the greater good; that its

commitment to liberty, equal opportunity, and freedom of speech make it a global symbol of

hope. That their unique positionality as respected but suspicious, American but something that

exceeds American-ness, and as a morally authoritative outsider/insider was legible and

compelling to even a fraction of the American viewing audience is a wonder. South Asian

Americans have had a shockingly recent history of meaningful mainstream media representation

in the United States, and a reputation for safely avoiding politics. So how did we get here?

Asian Americans and the Indefinite Deferral of Cultural Citizenship

South Asian America is at a moment of exhilarating, if contentious, visibility and

recognition (Mahdawi 2017). But arriving here, metaphorically, was neither predetermined nor

easy. South Asians may have been physically arriving in what would become the United States

and Mexico since as early as the 1600s (McCarthy et al. 2003, 52 & 238; Priyadarshini 2014),

with a meaningful if small wave of migration starting at the turn of the twentieth century. Only

7,000 Indians[11] entered the U.S. between 1881 and 1917 (Visweswaran 1997, 15).[12] Early

immigration was, however, always limited, and facilitated by the American West's insatiable

need for cheap labor in lumber mills, in agriculture, and to build railroad lines (Lal 2008, 17-18).

Of the 2,400 remaining by 1940, just 3% were professionals (Visweswaran 1997, 15). Living in

the U.S. was mostly vexed by various forms of bigotry. Some of the more formal kinds included

anti-miscegenation laws, extremely restrictive immigration policies, and lack of access to

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[11] These numbers are estimates as changing political and census terminology over time, and the technologies of counting, have been in flux since the founding of the United States. They are by no means perfect. For more on the history of changing census categorizations for people of South Asian heritage, see Susan Koshy (1998), "Category Crisis: South Asian Americans and Questions of Race and Ethnicity" and Kamala Visweswaran (1997) "Diaspora by Design: Flexible Citizenship and South Asians in U.S. Racial Formations."

[12] Vinay Lal (2008) puts the early figure slightly higher, noting that "some 8,000 Indians [were] estimated to be resident in California alone around 1914" (40).

citizenship. The more informal ranged from daily slights such as slurs and wage discrimination (Lal 2008, 18), to race riots and hate crimes.

Despite this long history of South Asians in America and seeking to be Americans, the mainstream impression of the community (or rather communities) is deeply tied to a major influx after U.S. immigration law significantly changed in 1965. The new Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 did away with the status quo of the past half a century, which had featured a powerful quota system set to maintain the ethnic distribution of the U.S (i.e. make sure the "right" kind of Europeans could immigrate) and the prohibition of immigrants from Asia. The new law, while keeping some of the country-of-origin-based limits, heavily shifted in favor of skilled immigrants and those able to bring significant foreign investment capital (Viseweswaran 1997, 15). It also allowed the immigration of family members of U.S. citizens and permanent residents. With a comparatively enormous English-speaking population and elites educated in European and European-style institutions, South Asia provided a stream of highly-skilled labor including doctors, lawyers, and engineers. "From 1980 to 2013, the Indian immigrant population in the U.S. increased from 206,000 to 2.04 million, doubling every decade" (Lee 2015). From 1965 to 1977, "83% of South Asian migrants to the US entered with advanced degrees" (Prashad 1999, 186). Having a smaller pre-existing population than other Asian American communities such as the Japanese and Chinese, the highly skilled immigrants of the post-1965 wave largely shaped the mainstream image of South Asians in America as the most almost-White, the most assimilable, the most "model" of minorities. While still smaller than the current population of East Asian Americans, or even Chinese Americans alone, "[b]etween 2000 and 2010, the South Asian American population became the fastest growing major ethnic group in the United States," growing from about 1.9 million to over 3.4 million over that period (SAALT 2012).

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The popular South Asian American narrative, of the triumphant arrival of a demographic

of professionals, is, of course, not the whole story. Before 1965, people from South Asia arrived

for educational opportunities and as religious and spiritual teachers. A meaningful contingent of

Punjabi Sikh men settled in the southwest and intermarried with Mexican heritage populations

(Leonard 2010). Bengali seamen, escaping from British ships, set up communities in port cities

like New Orleans, Detroit, and New York (Bald 2013). Less educated family members followed

after the post-1965 wave[13] and South Asians make up a not insignificant portion of unauthorized

immigrants to the United States.[14] Perhaps most critically, complex histories of global labor,

migration, and trade through centers of South Asian diaspora in east and south Africa, the

Caribbean, the United Kingdom, the Middle East, and so on that span not just centuries but

thousands of years (in the case of east Africa) further complicate the pat account.[15] The erasure

of these stories, or, when not erased, their discursive estrangement and ownership by single sub-

communities, has marked internal and external representations of South Asian American

communities for most of the history of this country. Discursive estrangement, moreover, is not

only a phenomena internal to South Asian America, but to South Asian Americans' position in

Asian America, and Asian America's position in the United States.

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[13] Although defined in the popular imagination by post-1965 migration, which at first heavily consisted of professionals, this is by no means the whole story. Disaggregation of South Asian American census data reveals that
> Despite their average high income, South Asian Americans have high poverty levels, across many groups—families (from 7% to 17%), families with female householder, no husband present (from 9% to 31%), individuals (from 10% to 21%), the elderly (from 9% to 27%) and children (8% to 25%). Nearly one in four Bangladeshi (25%) and one in five Pakistani (20%) children live below the poverty line compared to less than one in six for the general population. (South Asian American Policy and Research Institute 2005)

[14] According to a Pew report based on figures from 2014 (Passel and Cohn 2016), India was the country of origin for 4.5% (or 500,000) of the roughly 11.1 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States. While Mexicans still make up a little more than 50% of unauthorized immigrants, their number and percentage decreased (-500%) as the numbers from India (130%), China, and Central American countries increased from 2009 to 2014.

[15] For a more thoughtful and thorough overview of the history of South Asian migration to the United States, see Vinay Lal (2008), *The Other Indians: A Political and Cultural History of South Asians in America*, Sandhya Shukla (2013), "South Asian Migration to the United States," and Visweswaran (1997), "Diaspora By Design."

In Claire Jean Kim's (1999) seminal essay, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," she argues that the categories of Asian, Black, and White are co-constitutive.[16] [17] [18]Over the history of the United States, essentialized notions of identity have been mobilized, over and over again, to produce and maintain a field of racial positions that reinforce White racial power as natural and inevitable.

> By positioning Asian immigrants as superior to Blacks yet permanently foreign and unassimilable with Whites, racial triangulation processes fashioned a labor force that would fulfill a temporary economic purpose without making any enduring claims upon the polity. (109)

Industrious and controllable, the civic arrival of Asians as Americans is always deferred while their labor is exploited and celebrated. In this way, the racial structures of America are stabilized (Nishime 2014, 18), and Asians are left marked as perpetual "foreigner[s]-within" the American body politic (Lowe 1996, 5). They are always struggling toward various forms of cultural citizenship (Lopez 2016), but the struggle is never complete. Connecting this position in the United States to longer histories of ambivalence—South Asian's dual subjugation and relative privilege— Kamala Visweswaran (1997) aptly notes that the prizing of the "middleness" of specific, very privileged Asian populations (Chatterjee 1993) is a strategy not just of U.S.-based racist politics, but also a tool and legacy of European imperialism.

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[16] For a similar argument with more focus on South Asian Americans, see Koshy (2001), "Morphing Race into Ethnicity: Asian Americans and Critical Transformations of Whiteness." For a different discussion about how America's preoccupation with the Orient and Asians was part of the shaping of the United States from its beginning, see Tchen (2001), *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882.*
[17] All of the scholars discussed here in relation to triangulating Asian Americans' positionality in America's racial field, matrix, or hierarchies take care to think about other communities as well as Asian, Black, and White Americans, such as Latinx Americans and Native Americans. Many bring in questions of gender and sexuality as well as other intersecting factors that interact to produce complex experiences of nationality, identity, and belonging. In the interest of clarity and brevity, however, I have here opted to focus on the key relationship between White, Black, and Asian America.
[18] In this dissertation I capitalize Black and White following the practices of Black scholars who use capitalized-b "Black" as an act of community assertion, and scholars of color who use capitalized-w "White" as a means of drawing attention to the concerted and racist force exerted by ubiquitous, dominant, and enduring structures of White racial power. Throughout, I write brown in lower-case in line with the most common practice of the communities I study.

The placement of Asians as outside the realm of civic assimilability historically was not only a matter of social cues, immigration bans, and race riots, but also legal proceedings. In their stark details, *In re Ah Yup* (1 Fed. Cas. 223 from 1878), *Takao Ozawa v. United States* (260 U.S. 178 from 1922), and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (261 U.S. 204 from 1923) reveal both the importance of whiteness for citizenship and the impossibility of Asian Americans attaining it (Kim 1999; Koshy 1998). In the first case citizenship was denied because the plaintiff was "Mongolian." In the second because he was "yellow" rather than Caucasian, therefore not White. In the third, the citizenship that had been granted to respected World War I veteran Thind was rescinded because, while a "Hindoo" such as himself might be considered Caucasian by anthropologists, he was not White according to the common sense of the common (White) man. This is worth noting in such specificity because it lays bare how thorough and systematic the exclusion was, and how logic itself was bent to the task of maintaining White racial power. Moreover, it is noteworthy in relation to what becomes of South Asian Americans outsider status by the mid-2010s. Finally, it highlights the long history of the attempt to and the perceived threat of Asians "Outwhiting the Whites" (*Newsweek*, 1971).

Kim (1999) is careful to explain how this strategy of racial triangulation is not a modern phenomenon, but has been at work for over a century and a half. Nevertheless, there is a crucial turning point in middle of the twentieth century. "[T]he civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s," she argues, merely "generate[d] formal norms of colorblindness that mask ongoing racial domination" (116). The field of racial positions "is now elaborated in nonracial terms" (117), such as culture and ethnicity. Most popularly, this can be seen in the invention of the "model minority" in 1966. First appearing in a *New York Times Magazine* piece, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," the article is an ode to the "cultural values" of Japanese Americans

that William Petersen claimed allowed them to succeed: they were, by his account, industrious, frugal, self-sufficient, apolitical, invested in education, and achievement oriented. This was in stark contrast with mainstream White disgust with and fear of Black Americans in the wake of the Watts Riots (Palumbo-Liu 2001; Osajima 1988). Ignited by police brutality and taking place in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles just six months before the article was published, the six-day long affair left 34 dead and nearly a thousand buildings damaged or destroyed. Preceded by a handful of other uprisings, it would soon be followed by the roiling unrest of the summer of 1967.

A central discomfort at the core of Asian American identity, then, is that the affiliation has long been a tool of White racial power, inspired by White fear of Black demands for social change; it has been and continues to be a critical tool in efforts to sidestep reckoning with racism in the United States[19]. The long history of Asian Americans' strange, shifting, but always liminal status, moreover, is endlessly revealing of the neuroses of White America because Whiteness is produced through triangulation with Blackness, Asianness, and other categories of Othering (Palumbo-Liu 1999). Yet Asian Americanness is also fundamentally a mode of solidarity and critique (Chuh 2003) inspired by Black racial politics and the civil rights movement (Matsuda, 2002). As the term Asian American came into common usage for the sake of identifying something with which to ridicule "less desirable" and "acceptable" minorities, it simultaneously functioned, for other Americans, as a rallying point in education and politics for solidarity among different Asian American communities and activism against racism.

Added to this complicated mix, for South Asian Americans, is the fact that they are liminal to the liminal group. "[I]n the US, [Asian] refers to east Asians" (Mahdawi 2017).

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[19]The most overt use of this strategy, of late, is in relation to discussions of affirmative action in college admissions (Ramakrishnan 2017).

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Depending on the racial calculus of the moment, South Asian Americans are sometimes considered more foreign, at other times more American (read: White) than other Asian American communities. This liminal-upon-liminal status, however, was not always conferred by other Asian communities, or the institutions of mainstream White America. Indian Americans successfully pushed in the 1970s and 1980s for inclusion in the census category of Asian American, thus gaining access to resources set aside for minority communities. In a series of citizenship naturalization petitions and cases in the early 1900s until the Thind ruling of 1923, South Asians mostly pled their case "not by challenging the racial basis of [Asian] exclusion laws, but by arguing that they were falsely classified as 'Asian'" (Visweswaran1997, 21) instead of "correctly" identified as Caucasian or White.[20]

Given that Americans of South Asian heritage are not the people who readily come to mind when the words "Asian American" are spoken, that they are perceived as only recently arrived (Visweswaran 1999, 6) and heavily accented (Davé 2013), the difficulty some have "identifying" them properly (i.e. they are often mistook as "Arab" and "Middle Eastern"), and the difficulty some have sorting out proper nomenclature (i.e. "Is he Hindu, or Hindi, or Indian?"), they are, in several key ways, as more foreign. Yet in terms of their perceived potential for "success"[21] in a White-dominated society, particularly given the image produced by the post-1965 wave of skilled migration and their strong association with British culture and English language, they are often treated as the most promising, the least offensive, the least likely to make political demands. Within a category that is already defined by "civic ostracism"

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[20] For a consideration of successful cases that argued for the Whiteness of South Asian heritage people in the United States, see Joan Jensen (1988), *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America* (248-258).
[21] Which appears to be the closest people so indelibly foreign can come to Whiteness. William Petersen, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," New York Times Magazine, January 9, 1966. "Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites," *Newsweek*, 21 June 1971. 1. Barbara Kiviat, "Chasing Desi Dollars," Time, July 6, 2005.

(Kim 1999) and perpetual deferral (Lowe 1996), South Asian Americans are often portrayed as the least "uppity" in some sense because their arrival is perhaps the most deferred.

Managing National Excess: The Foreigner and the Alien

No single character has been more central to the portrayal of South Asians to American-ness over the last three decades than *The Simpsons*' Apu Nahasapeemapetilon (Davé 2013; Mahdawi 2017), nor is there any figure more central to the popular critique of South Asian American representation (Singh 2008[22]; Rao 2013; Perkins 2016). "It is not an exaggeration to say that, for decades, the most famous south Asian in the US was Apu" (Mahdawi 2017). As comedian and activist Hari Kondabolu aptly explains in a 2012 segment from *Totally Biased with W. Kumau Bell*, Apu is "a white guy doing an impression of a white guy making fun of my father." The White man in question is New York native Hank Azaria, who is of Greek and Jewish descent. He has variously explained that Apu's accent came from a mixture of brief encounters with South Asian store clerks (Davé 2005), the exigencies of comedy, and emulating Peter Seller's brown-face performance as Hrundi V. Bakshi in the 1968 film, *The Party*[23] (Rao 2013). On a 2007 radio show, Azaria joked that when the character first came up, the writers cheerfully asked him, "Can you do an Indian voice? And how offensive can you make it?" (paltalkscene, 2007).[24] Azaria has freely admitted, "It's a little, uh, stereotype" (paltalkscene 2007), but overwhelmingly Azaria and the staff of *The Simpsons* have considered it a *harmless* stereotype, a joke with no victims.

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[22] "Kal Penn @ UPenn | Sepia Mutiny"

[23] In the film Sellers, who is White and American, portrays a bumbling but lovable Indian actor who accidentally ends up at a wild Hollywood party.

[24] An alternative account, given by *Simpsons* writer Mike Reiss, suggests the character, as written, started out as a racially unmarked convenience clerk. It was only when Azaria started working with the script, claims Reiss, that "Azaria couldn't help but give Apu an Indian accent" (Davé 2005, 322).

Ask most South Asian American people who grew up with Apu, especially those who are second- and later-generation[25], and the story is quite different. While some have been able to find a silver lining in Apu's humanity (Viswanathan 2006), overwhelmingly the mood ranges from resignation to disgust. Over the last decade, with increasing frequency and publicity, famous South Asian American actors such as Kal Penn, Aziz Ansari, and Utkarsh Ambudkar have publicly discussed their disgust with Apu, recalling how the cartoon character directly led bullying and name-calling as children, and how it related to the endless need to fight against humiliating acting roles that demanded an accent (Rao 2013; Singh 2008), often specifically "the Apu accent" (Mumford 2017).

Certainly, the fact that Apu was the only regular character of South Asian background on U.S. network television since his first appearance in 1990 galled, and the fact that regular South Asian *American* characters, played by South Asian American actors, only started to appear in 2005 also frustrated many. Nevertheless, the worst aspect of Apu was his accent. It easily carried and travelled beyond the televisual, to the schoolyard, the office, the bar, and the gas station, where its catchphrases and cadence were repeated and improvised upon endlessly (Punathambekar and Mohan 2017). It marked Apu as privileged, sure. Although an immigrant, his English was understandable, but it was always different. His identity, his nationality[26] was accentuated, accented (Davé 2013).

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[25] Although usage of these terms can vary, typically first-generation South Asian Americans would be people who were born and grew up on the South Asian subcontinent and immigrated to the United States as adults. People who consider themselves second-generation largely were born and grew up primarily in the United States, with parents who immigrated. People who immigrated during childhood or for college or grew up on multiple continents, however, may identify with either generational category, while some of this contingent consider themselves "1.5-gen" (http://sepiamutiny.com/sepia/faq.php).

[26] Apu starts the series as an illegal immigrant having overstayed his visa by many years. In "Much Apu About Nothing" (1996), in fear of being deported and with the support of the Simpsons, he becomes a naturalized citizen. At the end of the episode, only Groundskeeper Willie MacDougal is deported.

As both Azaria's and Kondabolu's accounts attest, the voice of Apu, specifically his accent, was meant to be offensive, and it was. It defined him regardless of any other characteristic. It situated Apu as indelibly foreign, as Indian, through an impression (Azaria's) of an accent (Seller's) that itself was offensive nonsense. Although accents are a significant marker of identity within South Asian and South Asian American communities, the subcontinent boasting an astonishing diversity of languages and accents, the defining accent of South Asian-ness in America for decades was from nowhere. As an example of Orientalism (Said 2006), that which is supposed to be revealing of the Orient and the Oriental "Other," is, in this case, indeed instead revealing of the preoccupations of the Occident, or Western culture. Why must Apu be from and of elsewhere? Why must he be from an elsewhere that is entirely made up of American anxieties? Among the most notable: he came to the States illegally, has a Ph.D. in Computer Science, endlessly schemes to penny pinch and swindle customers, has a lengthy and difficult last name, has more children than any of the (non-ethnically marked) main characters on the show, and has a cousin in India who takes outsourced service calls for American companies.

Working through the relationship between immigration and the representation of Asian- and Asian American-ness in U.S. media, Robert Lee (1999) makes a crucial distinction between the concept of the "alien" and the "foreigner." The latter suggests a benign interloper, a person who is from somewhere else and here temporarily. The foreigner will not make any undue claims on the host nation. The alien, on the other hand, desires to stay where he does not belong, a pollutant in the body politic (3). In her groundbreaking work on Asian American media activism, Lori Lopez expounds on this idea. "Although the foreign still serves to bar outsiders from cultural assimilation, foreignness can nevertheless be fetishized and even admired because it does not pose a threat" (16). Apu is the lovable foreigner, who seems to suggest a time when the

majority of South Asians in America did have subcontinental accents. That he is from nowhere, no *real* where, makes it easier to manage and contain his difference, and defer any real reckoning.

For Kondabolu, the second figure of South Asian-ness to gain anything approaching the visibility of Apu was the menacing brown terrorist (Meeraji and Demby 2017). The terrifying alien to Apu's harmless foreigner, this figure became increasingly prominent in the wake of September 11th and its aftermath, but did not spring whole cloth from the grisly events of that day. As Kim (1999) explains most forcefully, episodes of increased racist treatment toward Asian Americans, such as the anti-Chinese movement of the 1870s, the Bellingham Riots of 1907, or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II should not be read as aberrations from a norm of civility and acceptance. Instead, she urges us to read them as telling signs of a longer, larger civic ostracism, without which they would not be possible. Similarly, without a longstanding reservoir of ignorance and prejudice in relation to Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and South Asian Americans, the immediate and deadly "backlash" (Mishra 2001) these communities faced in the days and weeks after 9/11 would not have been possible.[27] By this logic, the smiling visage and sing-song voice of Apu, and his indefinitely deferred status as "really" American, are not merely a benign if unpleasant representation existing alongside the nastier image of the brown terrorist; the two are deeply linked. One is the product and symbol of "racist hate," the other of "racist love" (Chin and Chan 1972, 65; cited in Lopez 2016, 17).[28]

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[27] For more on the figure of the brown and South Asian man as terrorist, and how the history of this figure extends before 9/11 see Junaid Rana (2011) *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora* and Vijay Prashad (2012), *Uncle Swami: South Asians in America Today*.

[28] Another central figure of the "racist hate" of East and South Asians, and one more intimately tied to the stereotype of the model minority, is that of the "pariah capitalist" (Chun 1989; Visweswaran 1997, 22).

South Asian American Critique

It is notable that a strong critique of Apu from various South Asian American quarters is not new (Davé 2005; Vij 2007), and yet, for years, their protests did not garner significant popular circulation. Imagine a similarly vulgar stereotyped character with a similarly offensive accent of East Asian heritage being so central to *The Simpons*. Even if community protests might not lead to the removal of the offending character, I believe it would have garnered more support and awareness across American demographics. It would be more likely perceived, according to common sense, as inappropriate.

This year, in concert with the November 2017 release of Hari Kondabolu's documentary, *The Problem with Apu*, the topic is gaining wide circulation across platforms and publications (e.g. *BBC*, *NPR*, *Vice, The New York Times, GQ, Variety, USA Today,* etc.). To return to the opening anecdotes about Khan, Ansari, and Minhaj, there are notable signs that, politically as well, the visibility and recognition of South Asian Americans has undergone dramatic change recently. How has the common sense about South Asian Americans changed so much over the last fifteen years? One popular explanation is that a sizeable second-generation cohort has finally come of age to enter public forums, especially media, to advocate for the community. Another argues that 9/11 was a "wakeup" moment for South Asian Americans. Suddenly under greater scrutiny and risk, segments of this normally apolitical demographic were galvanized into action. While there is some reality in each of these claims, they do not fully explain the social and political shift within the community—its emphasis on solidarity, outreach, and reframing concepts of citizenship and American-ness—and this shift's implications beyond South Asian Americans. Not only do they not tell the full story, they tend to obscure it.

To tackle the second argument first, it is important to remember that anti-Asian racism, hate, and bigotry has a long history in the United States. The 1907 Bellingham riots saw several hundred White men, under the auspices of the Asiatic Exclusion League, chase hundreds of Indians, mostly Sikh lumber mill workers, out of Bellingham, Washington. Local law enforcement officials appeared to be more on the side of the mob than the harassed and newspaper coverage warned of a "dusky peril." "Hindu hordes invading the state," a local headline proclaimed (Perinet 1906) despite the relatively small immigration numbers. This concern, of a "flood," an "invasion," a serious social "problem," was echoed in papers across the U.S. at the time (Lal 2008, 20). A more contemporary—but still pre-9/11—example is that of the "Dotbusters," who announced via published letter in the *Jersey Journal* that they would "go to any extreme to get Indians to move out of Jersey City" in 1987 (Committee on the Study of Religion - Harvard University 2009). Local acts of racialized hatred followed, ranging from vandalism and harassment to assault and murder (Marriott 1987).[29] September 11th was neither the beginning of anti-South Asian racism in the United States, nor its core source.

Similarly, political activism and organizing against racism, imperialism, and bigotry among South Asians in America long predates 9/11. The Ghadar Party or Movement, comprised mostly of Punjabi Sikhs, organized against British rule from the West Coast of North America in the early 1900s (Lal 1999). Pan-Indian organizations formed in the 1960s-70s worked on internal community uplift (Khandelwal 2002). Within a couple decades, within major cities, there was an efflorescence of organizations with more progressive agendas, such as fighting domestic

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[29] There is some debate as to whether the murder of Navroze Modi three miles away in Hoboken in September of 1987, the most notable crime associated with this period, was done by those calling themselves the Dotbusters or was mere coincidence (James 1989). A few days later, another Indian man, Saran Kaushal, was beaten into a coma in Jersey City Heights (Marriott 1987). As I am more interested in the discourses that surrounded these events, among South Asian Americans and those opposed to their presence, the exact motivations of Modi's assailants are beside the point.

violence and supporting survivors in 1980s New York (Das Gupta 2006) or coalitional work among taxi drivers (Mathew 2005). Certainly some strains of South Asian American activism increased after 9/11[30]. More important, however, is the range of people within the diverse set of communities that comprise South Asian America who began organizing together and, more broadly, communicating together.

In the realm of media and publicity, with sizeable migration beginning in the mid-1960s, there have been plenty of second-generation people of South Asian heritage before they finally made it on to prime-time network television as South Asian Americans in shows like *The Office* (2005), *30 Rock* (2006), and *House, M.D.* (Kal Penn joined the cast in 2007). Side characters or people with little cultural "baggage," it would take more time for South Asian Americans to create their own shows and popular films such that they might be able to portray more well-rounded South Asian American characters (*The Mindy Project*, 2012; *Master of None,* 2015, *The Big Sick,* 2017) More nuanced portrayals arrived slightly sooner in non-scripted television, from journalism (Fareed Zakaria, Sanjay Gupta, Kevin Negandhi) to comedy (Aasif Maandvi) to reality (Padma Lakshmi). During the early 2000s, even actors who would later take up strong political stances on South Asian American representation found they had to play degrading characters to enter the entertainment industry, such as Kal Penn who played Taj Mahal Badalandabad in the *Van Wilder* films (2002, 2006).[31]

The fact that a handful of South Asian American public figures gained enough notoriety and power to control some of their own fictionalized narratives is, indeed, crucial. Yet this opens

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[30] Should elaborate briefly on SAALT here. Umbrella organization. Took up policy work and lobbying. Counting hate crimes. Also produced 2008 action plan for the community.

[31] For a more comprehensive discussion of the history of representations of people of South Asian heritage in mainstream American media, see *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (Davé 2013) and *South Asians on the U.S. Screen: Just Like Everyone Else?* (Thakore 2017).

up further explanatory threads. The first is that rather than there being a lack, formerly, of South Asian American people attempting to enter media industries, the greater problem was that media industries refused to let them enter until the early 2000s, even if only to play the most stereotyped and offensive roles. After all, "more white women playing Asian women have won Oscars than Asian women" (Briones 2016).

A lack of visible public figures certainly made it easier for other communities to ignore South Asian Americans. Economic, cultural, and generational fault lines, both subcontinental and American, made it difficult to organize together, as South Asian Americans, in spite of a long history of meaningful organizing within different sub-communities. A growing contingent of scholars also attempted to reshape conversations within and about South Asian America (Prashad 2000; Dave et al. 2000). But there was also a very real sense that something amounting to a popular South Asian American critique, a community willing to see themselves as South Asian American, was absent. A locus of transformative community was missing. If there was a diffuse, proto-"imagined community" (Anderson 1991), that might work past older community fault lines to build a coalitional identity and community, what would be their daily newspaper?

South Asian America Online

Focusing on the early twenty-first centuries, this project examines the emergence of self-consciously diasporic, second-generation-plus, South Asian American, multi-person, digital media projects. Geographically dispersed and highly stratified by economic and cultural fault lines, the advocates of South Asian America I study came of age and became professionals not just with different ideas about how they related to their identities, but also with a slicker, more user-friendly version of the internet. The creators involved made use of new technologies and

understandings of these technologies, including the rise of blogging and other self-publishing tools such as podcasting in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and eventually more navigable and visually stunning modes of digitally curating and displaying visual materials. They were buoyed by excitement over global South Asian youth culture (e.g. bhangra influences in hip hop music, "the Slumdog effect") and rising economic interest in tapping new niche markets (Kiviat 2005). Most importantly, they were goaded by frustration over being continually underserved by both mainstream media and direct-from-the-subcontinent South Asian and first-generation immigrant media (Punathambeker 2009). Given new publishing resources at hand, they were poised to utilize digital media, as extra work, labors of love, in their quest for a deeply fulfilling, personal connectivity.

A slew of self-consciously diasporic blogs, sites, and digital media projects began to spring up starting around 2004. The most notable of these, and one of the case studies for this project, was the multi-person blog *Sepia Mutiny* (2004-2012), which referenced the first united South Asian military effort against the British in 1857 as well as the hues of brown associated with nostalgic photos. This self-consciously diasporic title—with its refusal to name a specific South Asian country as the source of affiliation, with its association with nostalgia and maintaining tenuous yet meaningful connections, and its use of the British name for the historical event (as opposed to the most common Indian name, the First War of Independence)—reflects the overall trend among these digital media ventures.

Take, for example, other blogs *Uberdesi* (2006-2012), *UltraBrown* (2006-2010), and *Chapati Mystery* (2004-present), sites associated with South Asian American organizations, such as the South Asian Journalists Association's podcast (2008-present) and blog (2006-present), or stand-alone digital media projects like the South Asian American Digital Archive

(saadigitalarchive.org, 2008-present). The use of shared cultural foods (i.e. chapati, a common flat bread), in-group words (i.e. desi), and references to revolt in the titles[32], as well as the broad and inclusive terms South Asian and brown reveal the concerns of the young professionals who overwhelmingly created these sites.

Before the success of the digital media projects discussed in this dissertation, "South Asian" was not a widely used term among South Asian Americans or the general public. There were and are several reasons to dislike it. It has bulky, clinical ring. The term was coined as part of the creation of Area Studies programs to facilitate U.S. Cold War efforts to surveil, study, and manage regions they feared would cave to Communism. Frequently, the term is used to claim a subcontinental inclusiveness for economic organizations and research that is largely India-based or India-dominated. Yet, as demonstrated by its use in projects meant to reach beyond scholarly and multi-national econo-political policy audiences, it was important to the larger enterprise of instantiating and validating a certain community, and bespeaks the awkward and hopeful position in which the sites' creators placed themselves.

Desi media consumption in the United States for the previous half a century had been dominated by first generation immigrant materials. Some were produced in America, such as community newsletters (Shukla 2003), multilingual and non-English terrestrial radio programming (Afzal 2014), and public access television shows featuring Bollywood top song countdowns and local dance festivals, while other content originated in South Asia, such as pirated tapes of song sequences that would then make it on to the public access shows (Punathambekar 2013). Eventually, direct satellite feeds of Zee TV and STAR TV and high-

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[32] The title *Chapati Mystery*, for example, also references the First War of Independence, but in a more conspiratorial and humorous fashion. Though never proven, the British believed that the Indians planned their revolt in 1857 by passing around secret information hidden inside chapatis (http://www.chapatimystery.com/about).

speed internet with expanding video and audio capacity allowed for synchronous consumption of subcontinental fare in South Asia and its diaspora. There is also a slowly growing genre of diasporic films that place second-generation-plus concerns at their center in a nuanced way, such as *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Loins of Punjab Present* (2007), *The Big Sick* (2017), but these few successes are notable exceptions rather than the norm.

The digital media projects of the 2000s did not significantly disrupt or displace the well-established, direct-from-the-subcontinent mainstream media sources. Rather, they opened up new ground for alternative ways of being South Asian American. While industry insiders found themselves time and again stumped regarding how to integrate such media and such attendant audiences into their established models, young South Asian American professionals—novelists, DJs, tech entrepreneurs, journalists, activists, lawyers, academics, artists, and a rocket scientist— threw their extra time into pet projects, internet media labors of love that spoke to and connected with a new generation in a new way.

This work paid off with surprising results. Multi-person blog *Sepia Mutiny* (2004-2012) boasted up to 197 posts a month, 1,347 comments per post, and 16,000 unique visitors per day. The bloggers and their posts were quoted in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Times of India*. The South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA, est. 1994) podcast (est. 2008), while reaching a smaller audience, was a crucial connecting hub for South Asian American news media professionals. The first time journalist and (then) undergraduate V.V. "Sugi" Ganeshananthan considered herself South Asian, for example, occurred in 2000. SAJA-co-founder and Columbia Graduate School of Journalism professor Sree Sreenivasan saw her name on a byline, called her publication, and asked to speak with her. Confused, her boss asked her, "Are you South Asian?" before handing her the phone (Ganeshananthan 2017). She would later

go on to be a Vice President of SAJA and a *Sepia Mutiny* blogger on top of her day jobs as teacher, novelist, and journalist. The podcast was also a critical site of information as events unfolded during the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks, connecting listeners to journalists on the ground in Mumbai, and news producers with potential sources.

The South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA, est. 2008), considered a pioneer in its field (Cotera 2016), was the first such community digital archive to receive a National Endowment for the Humanities Common Heritage Grant in 2015. Materials it located, digitized, and curated appeared in the 2014-2015 Smithsonian exhibition "Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation." In the summer of 2015, SAADA crowdfunded the production and printing of a textbook. Each person donating paid to receive a personal copy, and to have a copy sent to a public school or library. *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America* is a first-of-its-kind publication that names the community to a broad audience, making the claim that South Asian American history is fundamentally American history and fundamental to American history. It is currently nearing completion, with over 60 contributors, and over 400 pages of content.

I cannot claim that every current prominent figure of South Asian America has direct ties to the sites discussed in this dissertation. However, figures such as Kal Penn, Hari Kondabolu, and Himanshu Suri (also known as "Heems," who is currently part of the Swet Shop Boys with Riz Ahmed) all did publicly. Many up-and-coming South Asian American entertainers, novelists, and public figures spoke with the SM bloggers publicly and privately, discussing site content and even, occasionally, asking to join as bloggers; these overtures were typically rebuffed because of the time commitment expected from bloggers. Former SM alum Taz Ahmed became one half of the *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* podcast, while peers Kishwer Vikaas, Pavani Yalamanchili, and

Lakshmi Gandhi went on to found popular curated South Asian American blog *The Aerogram* (est. 2013). Gandhi, who is also a member of SAJA, did a stint at MTV-Desi and currently writes, among many places, for *NBC Asian America*. Current and former members of SAADA's board work as professors at universities and colleges across the United States in American Studies, History, Archival Studies, and other programs, building a South Asian American curriculum and academic perspective. SAJA's ranks include academics, journalists, and entertainment figures associated with innumerable prominent print, radio, and television publications, from *The Huffington Post* to *ESPN*, *NPR* to *The New York Times*.

The formation of a new identity and community is an incremental and diffuse process, impossible to measure. The increasing notoriety of South Asian American figures in politics and entertainment, and improving representation, certainly suggest meaningful progress has been made, but they cannot fully show us how. Of more import to this dissertation are the innumerable smaller and more human acts, from a wide variety of players, that rendered South Asian America personally legible for a small but meaningful community. The *American Desi* podcast, which was started in 2014 under the name *Indian, American*, is a marked example of the change, and also reveals the kind of work that go into imagining and voicing South Asian America. After 23 episodes, they changed the name, and hosts Akaash Singh (a comedian) and Arjun Gupta (an actor), solidified their format: they would alternate episodes between sharing in-depth interviews and featuring community conversation by way of emails and tweets. In the show they use the words "Indian," "South Asian," and "desi" interchangeably. The goal of the show is to explore what it means to be desi or South Asian or Indian American.

In discussing why making the show is so important to them, Gupta explains that a friend had told him, "I wish that I had had this when I was a kid, to know that there were other people

out there like this" (Singh and Gupta 2015). Time and again, this was the refrain I heard from friends over the last 15 years who were discovering these digital media projects. As one professor who uses archival materials from SAADA in her Asian American Studies class explains, it is incredible to witness students "suddenly discover [themselves] existing," their symbolic annihilation being viscerally countered by acts of "representational belonging" (Caswell et al. 2016). But how does a whole generation move through this experience? *American Desi*'s Gupta goes on to explain in the same episode that, "I truly believe South Asia is formed through community—or found through community." This is why, for their show, they "hit this stuff from all possible angles," by interviewing a variety of people from a variety of South Asian communities in the US, as well as immigrants from other countries, and other American communities.

> We want to talk to non-South Asians. We want to talk to White folk, Black folk, Latinos that grew up here and maybe didn't experience South Asians so much. What has formed their perceptions? How do they view us? How can we learn from that? (Singh and Gupta, 2015)

For Singh and Gupta, South Asian America is a critical need, a longing since childhood, only found through community, and only understood through endless multi-party discussions. It's a negotiation that needs to be constantly worked through, inspired by empathy and longing.

This dissertation examines the variety and depth of interactions that occurred in and around these digital media projects, and the time, work, and care that went into making the dream of a coalitional South Asian America possible. In the case of *Sepia Mutiny¸* for example, that entails examining many different kinds of labor, commitment, and interaction from the founders and bloggers: planning, organizing, and editing the blog; carefully building a bench of bloggers who represent a more diverse vision of South Asian America; watching for leads, sharing them with other bloggers, and writing posts; spending hours reading, responding to, and

curating the frequently hundreds of comments that could roll in on one's own posts and on other's posts over the course of the days; supporting other bloggers through difficult experiences with trolling, exposure, and doxing; and hosting live meet ups in cities across the country. Further, for fans and readers, it entailed not only participating in the lively comments section, but also reading and lurking, checking the site daily or even refreshing it more frequently in the hopes a favorite blogger would have posted something new, submitting story tips, following your favorite blogger across media platforms, and occasionally attending live meet ups. How were these personal, imaginative, and cultural connections forged and maintained? What theoretical and methodological tools do we need to study them?

Organization, Methods, and Interventions

To appreciate this wide array of engagement and labor, and understand it in relation to a broader cultural shift, this dissertation uses a "non-media-centric media studies" approach (Morley 2009). While paying close attention to issues of symbolism, representation, and the movement of ideas, I also study the movement of people and digital objects, and the infrastructure that makes this possible. Non-media-centric media studies work forces us to consider the importance, meaning, and use of media within the context of larger lives and social practices that occur in mediated and unmediated settings. For example, Mary Gray's (2009) meticulous study of digital media use among rural queer youth calls attention to the work to which we put digital media in the larger context of well-rounded lives, full of non-mediated experiences and much traditional media content. Importantly, I do not want to relegate this phenomena, the formation of a coalitional South Asian America, to merely an effect of digital media.

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Informed by Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) (Brock 2016), this research incorporates critical theory and is multimodal, both in its selection of objects of study and in the variety of methodological approaches brought to bear. The research is focused around three multi-person, self-consciously South Asian American digital media projects, chosen so that I can make both platform-specific claims (e.g. podcasting, blogging, archiving) and draw conclusions about South Asian America that exceed each. To capture and analyze such a wide array of engagements with digital media, representation, and cultural politics, I employ an arsenal array of methods: ethnographic interviews with key figures central to each digital media project; site visits to museums, podcast recordings, and organization presentations; institutional analyses of organizations; and close readings of media technologies, websites, cultural exhibitions, and the discourses surrounding them. I explore related content and practices from other minority communities and other kinds of media and institutions serving and representing South Asian Americans. Throughout, I mobilize insights from a range of disciplines: from New Media, Production, and Cultural Studies, to Asian, Asian American, and Critical Race Studies; from Infrastructure Studies and Public Sphere Theory to Feminist work on digital labor; and from research on digital archives to Museum Studies and Postcolonial Studies.

The purpose of this introduction is not only to outline the overall project, but also to describe the state of South Asian America and its media leading up to the period covered in depth through three case studies. It offers a snapshot of the demographic complexity of the many communities that make up South Asian America, the dearth of meaningful portrayals in mainstream media, and limited coalitional political cohesion within and across South Asian American and other populations. This provides a baseline against which to appreciate the formidable task involved in imagining and producing South Asian America. It makes clear the

importance of identity and community work taking place on every scale, from the personal to the

national and transnational, to the larger project of shifting perceptions and connections within

and outside South Asian America.

The first chapter focuses on the South Asian Journalists Association and their podcast,

which largely features conversational interviews with South Asian heritage newsmakers (e.g.

Vijay Iyer, friends of deceased astronaut Kalpana Chawla) or people associated with South Asian

topics (global philanthropy), and helpful news briefings and roundtables ("Sri Lanka Briefing #2:

After the Fall of Kilinochchi," "What the US Election Results Mean for South Asia and South

Asians in America"). Analyzing patterns in their discussions, I make a case for using new

methods and theories to study engagements with everyday media and digital labor informed by

insights from the Broadcast Talk literature. The loving, subconscious-yet-orderly management of

talk in SAJA's podcast, revealed through a combination of discourse and critical discourse

analysis, produces structured and specific relationships through which listeners can imagine

themselves as part of the community of the show and the South Asian American diaspora. This

chapter maps out one way that people use media to produce a sense of homeliness and

belonging. The consideration of the technical ways in which talk systematically is used to

produce belonging mirrors and reveals the many forms of endless, mundane, and reflexive labor

that go into the management of diasporic identity and community more generally. This chapter

thus offers a careful study of the mundane and unremarked imaginative labor that produces and

maintains new modes of belonging, and allows me to reframe connectivity, arguing it is as much

a cultural process and practice—of endless, mundane care—as a technological accomplishment.

In the second chapter I turn to multi-person blog and forum *Sepia Mutiny* (SM), which

was seminal because of its wide appeal and dominance in this community. It acted as a center of

digital gravity for a national and transnational community that did not exist until it came together via this site. Its savvy posts on fashion, food, politics, media pleasures and issues of representation fueled substantive discussions that raged across over 5,300 posts, among its 60-plus bloggers, and in its over 250,000 often substantive comments in the pre-Twitter era. This chapter reveals how the founders worked tirelessly to produce space for a South Asian American public that was polyvocal, multi-perspectival, critical, and self-aware, and what that meant for bloggers and readers. Basing their vision of South Asian America in specificity *and* multiplicity, they reframed the concept and identity as a critical and coalitional lens. SM thus provides us with a rich, practical application of the theory of contentious publics and the public sphere, as well as imagined communities, that speaks to the multi-scalar positionality of many communities in an era of greater migration and mediation. Put most bluntly, to produce a viable "public" that produces "public opinion"—in this case South Asian America—SM had to provide a multidimensional perspective and cultivate a diversity of South Asian American publics. It reflected and produced not a single identity, but a worldview, in that it was an entire community (or world's) view on a wide variety of globe-spanning subjects ("on the world").

The third chapter focuses on the growing success of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), a digital-only archive that radically emphasizes accessibility and political self-awareness in its appraisal, description, and sharing practices as well as its participatory campaigns, such as the First Days Projects. In it, I examine the history and stakes of the national representation of South Asian Americans through analysis of two exhibitions featured in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History: "Aditi—A Celebration of Life" in 1985 and "Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation" from 2014 to 2015. Comparing these to SAADA's website, magazine, social media practices, and participatory campaigns, I show

how SAADA's members are leveraging new conceptions of curation and digital agency to make

a revolutionary and participatory claim for the recognition of South Asian American history as

American history. In the process, SAADA reimagines American history and the role of

marginalized communities in the American project through innovative interfacing with cultural

institutions such as museums and archives.

The present era in America is marked by a meaningful cultural shift toward inclusion and

valuing diversity, and the recognition that identities and belonging are, partly, matters of social

construction. This, however, is matched by an equally strong sense of cultural anxiety, producing

ahistorical understandings of race and other identities, and new forms of racism and oppression.

In the conclusion I consider the role sites like SAJA, SAADA, and SM play in producing new

cultural and digital imaginaries of belonging and coalition-building. This dissertation reveals,

theorizes, and shares these critical strategies.

This research connects and extends work into media use and the creation of diasporic

identifications (Gilroy 1993; Gillespie 1995). Questions of media and migration have most

frequently been explored in terms of reception and textual analyses, specifically, in the case of

South Asian America, through analyzing literature (Srikanth 2004) and films (Desai 2004). This

not only limits the media considered, but limits our ability to explore issues of reframing and

complex distribution (Punathambekar 2013; Youmans 2017), which are particularly important

for transnational and diasporic communities, but with growing implications beyond these

communities. Meanwhile, work on production cultures has tended to focus on first-generation-

oriented media (Afzal 2014, Shukla 2003, Mallapragada 2014). Extending this work to second-

plus-generation media production and use, this dissertation reveals how the interaction of

national and transnational identities in second-plus-generation communities impact understandings of national belonging and international politics.

A simple two-node model of national production and consumption (or even national production and transnational consumption) does not capture the elaborate labor of selecting, recontextualizing, and reworking that makes up a significant amount of the work of diasporic distributors and users (Thorson and Wells 2015; Punathambekar 2013; Youmans 2017). Work on migration and politics in relation to South Asia is often framed in terms of overt political and community organizing practices (Das Gupta 2006; Mathew 2005; Garlough 2013; Mishra 2016) and the psychological components of moving toward citizenship and acceptance (Bhatia 2007). This dissertation, in part, is an effort to find new ways to think about how media is constitutive of social life in the first instance (Montgomery 1986), to then help us better understand how it is part of an overall management of a social order, and thus back to questions of power and politics.

I looked for ways to study how media are used to manage and live questions of belonging, and how we can fully integrate the study of content, production, and use in one analysis (Morley 2009). We need a new set of tools to examine the everyday, ordinary, yet systematic ways people use media to meet their needs and produce ways of belonging. This demands, in this particular era, investigation into mid-level production and sharing, which has become ubiquitous in this heavily digitally mediated era and is central to the decision-making and identity work processes of ordinary users.

Digital Technologies, Global Vision, and Social Change

Taken together, these case studies reveal new ways to understand digital and cultural labor, community formation, and (small p) political activism, with implications beyond South

Asian America. Of greatest interest to me is the way this work can help us rethink the relationship between digital media and social change. In spite of ubiquitous and implicit claims that digital efficiency and efficacy will surely, in the end, have a redemptive effect on today's social ills, I share Nakamura's (2008) deep concern.

> The multi-layered visual culture of the Internet is anything but a space of utopian post-humanism where differences between genders, races, and nationalities are evened out; on the contrary, it is an intensely active, productive space of visual signification where these differences are intensified, modulated, reiterated, and challenged by former objects of interactivity." (Nakamura 2008, 34)

This critique, applied broadly, forces us to consider how racialized understandings of global inequalities and dominant visions of digital efficacy are intertwined in the discourses used by those in power as they articulate strategies for poverty alleviation, public health interventions, and good governance (Mazzarella 2010). In other words, even when people are not directly using digital culture to produce and circulate stereotypes and harm others, visions of liberatory digital solutions—by reconfiguring how we understand the world and social change—do much to obscure legacies of and innovations in bigotry and oppression.

Digital utopianism alone is virulent enough as a figure of messianic redemption, but grows all the more potent when combined with global utopianism. The problematic and often unremarked articulation of dreamy digital and globalist futures can range from seemingly benign clichés (e.g. "Twitter will change the world!"), to semi-effective cover for neo-colonial digital schemes, as when Mark Zuckerberg declared "Connectivity is a human right" to legitimize his efforts to make Facebook the de facto internet experience in various countries (Bhatia 2016). The realities of cultural and technological connectivity are a "far cry from the seamlessness of media circulation imagined by visions of a borderless world of information currency enabled by the proliferation of networked information and communication technologies" that Youmans (2017,

6) argues implicitly dominate discussions of media globalization. They nonetheless persist. Importantly, fantasies of the internet as an "information superhighway" are never fully separate from those of a "global knowledge society" (Mazzarella 2010, 784).

Both fantasies depend on a kind of flattening, one cultural, the other geographical and classist. The combining of the fantasies allows for the flattening of difference in one realm to legitimate the other in a recursive loop. William Mazzarella captures something of this powerful process when he explains that, "As a kind of technological materialization of the market itself, the Internet could appear as a universal field of equivalence, a network capable of absorbing and exchanging all needs, values, and objects (Castells 1996)" (Mazzarella 2010, 791). Both "global culture" and the digital here become grounds for the manufacture of equivalence out of very real and unethical inequalities. One of the many reasons studying South Asian America is important, then, is that it helps disrupt this flattening, the production of cultural equivalence and digital neutrality, that make digital and global utopianisms such happy bedfellows. It does so by taking a prized exemplar of the transnational movement of people and capital—South Asian Americans—and elaborating on the frictions that mar and disrupt the seemingly smooth flows of people, money, and culture, in the process revealing the strategies people and communities use to manage the uneven and complicated process of trying to arrive.

Diasporic media production and use are particularly fruitful sites to disentangle these issues. It is not without reason, for example, that Stuart Hall's (1990) most famous pronouncement on identity came from the piece, later in his career, in which he finally discussed his own experiences with diaspora. "[W]e should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (222). With similar clarifying force, diasporic communities can help us approach

digital and global utopianist claims with specificity, with an appreciation of the uneven forces and complex, sometimes contradictory strategies at play as these communities build partial, practical, and mutable imagined communities.

As Nakamura (2008) explains, "We are in a moment of continual and delicate negotiation between the positions of the object and the subject of digital visual culture" (14). One could say the same of Asian populations' positions as transnational citizens. In other words, Asians and Asian Americans are central desired and reviled figures in both digital and global fantasies. We must take care, as Mallapragada (2014) suggests, not to endorse the myth of South Asians as the model minority of digital technologies (24). Nonetheless, we must study this articulation, peeling it apart to see the complicated experiences of acceptance and rejection underneath. As I seek to demonstrate, South Asian America makes use of aspirational visions of South Asia, America, and the digital, with complicated results. In the process, this formation perpetuates a number of the inequalities inherent in normative discourses about all three categories, but also opens opportunities to confront and trouble them.

Imagining Arrival

Something completely new, with a different kind of resonance, with access to a much wider audience within the community and more broadly outside, was happening in South Asian American media. Why should it matter, though, what it means to be South Asian American? Why should it matter why and how this question is being worked out in digital media in this community?

To make this point, it is helpful to return to the story of Khizr Khan, but also another moment of South Asian visibility within the last year. You have probably heard of both these

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men, which is remarkable in and of itself. One South Asian American. One South Asian in America. The first, Khizr Khan, took a stand against Donald Trump's then-proposed "Muslim ban," claiming to stand for the sacred ideals of the nation. Srinivas Kuchibhotla, on the other hand, an Indian engineer working for Garmin, was murdered in February of 2017, having been mistook for Iranian and told by a white American "get out of my country." These are dramatic, even graphic examples of the frustrating, sometimes tense, sometimes dangerous experience of being South Asian in America. They draw attention to the liabilities of race and racism, the deep and inextricable connection between national and international forms of exclusion and hatred, and the need to combat them through the cultivation, in our classrooms and homes, of critical and global media literacies.

Put most simply, to be South Asian American is to be part of an always arriving community. Khizr Khan is a US citizen. He holds a Master's of Law from Harvard. He lost his son to the Iraq War. But Trump, pushing back on Khan's DNC remarks, suggested that Khan's wife did not speak on that stage in Philadelphia because Islam forbade it. Trump played on the permanent un-belonging that clings to bodies that are brown, that wear head scarves, that speak with an accent. This is in spite of the favored place of South Asians in American racial hierarchies, perceived as a lucrative and rising demographic, heavily associated with technology and Bollywood, and a model minority of engineers and doctors. Their status as desirable yet dangerous, at a pivot point between transnational and national ethnocentrisms and religious exclusions, places them at a crux in multiple scales of racialized empire.

How does one manage belonging when one is always arriving, never arrived, trying to balance being *really* American and *really* South Asian at the same time? Because for many, even if they wanted to, their coworkers, their friends, their fellow citizens, and their government will

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never let them forget that they are not ever fully either. The formation of South Asian America is the work of imagining their arrival, in progress, premised on a coalitional strategy. It admits that arriving itself is a problematic goal in a country founded and repeatedly reconstituted through acts of racial injustice. The work of this dissertation is to unpack the strategies and countless small human acts that have rendered South Asian America viable, legible, and compelling.

Chapter One

**Talking Community:
The South Asian Journalists Association Podcast and the Production of Connectivity**

In this chapter, I unpack the elaborate, mundane labor involved in the shared act of making meaning out of conversational podcast talk, specifically the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA) podcast. The loving, subconscious-yet-orderly management of talk in SAJA's podcast, examined through a combination of discourse and critical discourse analysis, produces structured and specific relationships through which listeners can imagine themselves as part of the community of the show and the South Asian American diaspora. This case study considers how diasporic communities are collectively built and managed through constant, ordinary, affective, and collective mediated labor.

The collective labor of podcast talk is revealing of the collective labor of connectivity more generally. This analytic frame is heavily influenced by infrastructure studies, particularly its tenet that "there is no particular point in the sequence of infrastructure where things stop being social and become purely technical (or vice–versa)" (Sandvig 2013, 93). It calls scholars to study the systems and labor—which is invisible, taken for granted, even boring—that makes our lives livable, that makes the world work (Star 1999; Suchman 1995). I explore the laboring that makes the SAJA podcast listenable and meaningful in a variety of ways. That includes the production of the site BlogTalkRadio and its use of audio compression software and phone lines, as well as the iterative spoken production of in-groups and out-groups, and the structuring of the

talk for an overhearing audience. How does SAJA use these features and others to produce a homely, sociable experience that means something to its listeners?

In studying SAJA's podcast, more broadly I examine the enormous human investments of time, energy, and care that constitute the sociable infrastructures of digital communications and media. Digital media studies (especially of the feminist bent) have offered powerful critiques of digital media labor as commodified and estranged from its producers (Jarrett, 2016), unfairly burdensome in its affective demands on and risky for women and marginalized communities (Nakamura, 2016), and as ignored and written off as immaterial (Jarrett, 2014). Yet these critiques often start by seeking to understand the destructive and exploitative aspects of digital media labor in a capitalist system in the first instance. They seek to, importantly, understand user complicity in the production of capital and the re-production of an exploitative social order (Humphreys and Orr, 2014). There has also been some critique of the idea that digital media is viral (Jenkins and Ford, 2014), erasing or even patronizing the humans who edit, curate, share, recommend, consume, and "like" media texts. While keeping in mind that much of cultural production does serve hegemonic ends, and certain forms of media labor involve more energy in a single discrete act (e.g. making a film), there is a critical need to think more comprehensively about our constant, affective investments in digital media. In other words, how are the mundane and constant ways we use digital media constitutive of how we experience the world? How are these mundane yet repetitive investments in digital media productive, generating ordinary yet important identities, communities, and belonging?

This paper proposes combining various analyses of podcasting and podcast talk as a means of examining both the conceptual and the phenomenological contributions of digital media to people's lived experiences of connectivity and belonging. Specifically, this paper

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examines the podcast of the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA, saja.org), a New York

city-based ethnic news association for North American journalists. The longest running South

Asian American podcast, they have been publishing episodes since February 2008, putting out

124 episodes to date. They cover a wide range of topics, from popular culture and South Asian

celebrities, to global and national politics, economics and philanthropy; from memorializing lost

community leaders, to breaking news coverage of the "War on Terror." The SAJA podcast,

moreover, is part of a robust South Asian American soundscape, a mundane ubiquitous,

communal, intertextual sonic resource that South Asian Americans live with, which is critically

understudied but crucial for many in the daily management of belonging.

Table 1.1 Sample of episodes

Episode Number	Recording/ Air Date	Title	Length (hour:min)	Number of Hosts, Speakers
124	Nov 28, 2016	SAJA looks at the Post-US-Election World	0:54	2 H, 5 S
108	Oct 4, 2012	Learn about SAJA Reporting Fellowships with NYT's Erik Olsen	0:36	2 H, 1 S
87	Jan 7, 2011	PAKISTAN: The assassination of Salmaan Taseer & the future of Pakistan	1:20	2 H, 5 S
73	Feb 9, 2010	MUSIC: Vijay Iyer, creator of the most acclaimed jazz album	1:00	1 H, 1 S
59	Feb 23, 2009	*Slumdog Millionaire* Post-Oscar Discussion	2:35	2 H, 10 S

32	Nov 5, 2008	NEWSMAKER CHAT: Cherie Blair, wife of the former British prime minister	0:30	1 H, 2 S
11	Feb 26, 2008	AUTHOR CHAT: Sudhir Venkatesh, *Gang Leader for a Day*	0:52	1 H, 1 S

Table 1.2 Episodes in the wake of Mumbai terrorist attacks[33]

Date (NYC)	Time (NYC / India)	Length (h:m)	Topic
Weds, 11/26	3PM / 1:30AM	1:00	Breaking news
Weds, 11/26	10PM / 8:30AM	1:31	Breaking news, connecting witnesses & experts with news outlets
Thurs, 11/27	10AM / 8:30PM	1:36	Breaking news, connecting witnesses & experts with news outlets, reflections
Thurs, 11/27	10PM / 8:30AM	1:31	History of Jews in Mumbai, Mumbai as a cosmopolitan city
Fri, 11/28	10AM / 8:30PM	2:00	Updates and reflections on Mumbai
Fri, 11/28	10PM / 8:30AM	1:58	1st hour: Novelists on what Mumbai means to them 2nd hour: Business implications for India, US, & world

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[33] The attacks began Wednesday, November 28, 2008 at 11:30pm Indian Standard Time, lasting until Saturday, November 29. 164 were killed, with more than 300 others left wounded. The attacks started at a major railway station, but then moved to a handful of sites heavily associated with tourists and rich foreigners: the Taj and Oberoi hotels, a café popular among foreigners, and an Orthodox Jewish center.
For more complete details on SAJA's coverage, see http://www.sajaforum.org/2008/11/breaking-news-terrorists-attack-mumbai-hotels.html

| Sat, 11/29 | 10AM / 8:30PM | 1:30 | Security and terrorism (co-hosted by BlogTalkRadio CEO Alan Levy) |
| Sun, 11/30 | 10AM / 8:30PM | 2:11 | Wrap up from returning guests |

Broadcasting and Diaspora

A diasporic podcast is a particularly fruitful site for investigating the linkage between collective mediated labor and connectivity. On the one hand, the heart of being diasporic, what makes one diasporic, is the work she or he undertakes to maintain a connection to something beyond one's present cultural location. On the other, podcasting, as it has developed and stabilized since the turn of the century, has taken the concept of broadcasting to its logical conclusion.

Broadcasting, as John Durham Peters (1999b) explains, calls to mind the New Testament parable of the sower spreading the allegorical seeds of knowledge of Jesus and Jesus' love, which will grow if taken up by receptive soil. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the shifting use of the term broadcast from agricultural technique (1767) to the work of mass media (1922), moreover, comes by way of discussions of the broadcasting of the gospel (1829). Podcasting allows for both a broader casting of seeds across time and space, and the seeds to find the most receptive soil. Broad casting, and in this case podcasting, is about sharing something widely, making it widely accessible, based on the *hope* of deeply meaningful reception. The term diaspora, meaning "to spread or scatter across," also has biblical origins (in the Greek translation of the *Torah* known as the *Septuagint*) and is also about widely cast seeds. *Spora* here encapsulates both the act of spreading *and* the spores or seeds that are scattered (Peters, 1999a). At the time of its coining, it captured the permanently dispersed culture of the Jews, evoking

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sustained connection through irresoluble, unrelenting, melancholic longing. The emphasis here is on the seed, that which has potential to bring forth life, and its meaningful attachment to and association with other seeds, even though they have been forcefully cast apart. Both diaspora and broadcasting, then, draw our attention to the longing, the love, at the center of our efforts to manage community and communication, to manage belonging. It is only through constant, affective, ordinary labor that this connectivity is miraculously maintained.

South Asian American Podcasting

The SAJA podcast, which was started and published most heavily in 2008, is not necessarily representative of trends in South Asian American podcasting, particularly of late. It is notably produced by and most centrally for an elite community of journalists, academics, and related professionals, and brings, most frequently, a cosmopolitan perspective to bear. Alternatively, the early years of what one might call South Asian American podcasting included some short politically progressive projects such as *Desi Dilemmas* (2005-2007), with its 21 episodes of about 15 minutes each by sociologist Smitha Radhakrishnan. With topics ranging from filmic representation to online matchmaking, Radhakrishnan (2008) works through "personal and research experiences to place common issues facing desis in a larger social and economic context." *Radiostan* (2008-2011), on the other hand, was based out of Chicago and featured co-hosts Samip Malick and Tina Bhaga Yokota interviewing guests and discussing issues of import with from a more self-consciously Asian American perspective. These shows, and particularly the latter, have much in common with current popular podcasts *American Desis* (originally called *Indian, American,* 2014-present), *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2015-present), *Politically Re-Active* (2016-present), and *See Something, Say Something* (2016-

present). Notably, all of these take a straightforward coalitional approach to managing identity and speaking back against racism and Islamophobia in the U.S. Both *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* and *Politically Re-Active,* for example, pair a South Asian American host (Taz Ahmed, former Sepia Mutiny blogger, and Hari Kondabolu, respectively) with another activist or entertainer of color (Iranian American Zahra Noorbakhsh and Black W. Kumau Bell).

These more progressive and overtly South Asian American podcasts, however, have only recently become sustainable, long-term projects. Before that, South Asian-themed podcast content from an American perspective largely consisted, on the one hand, of shows tied to well-established and well-resourced cultural institutions, such as *New Books in South Asian Studies* (2011-present), or educational materials published by major museums on cultural exhibitions and performances with ancient or traditional connotations. On the other hand, there was a lively scene of more contemporary DJed fusion music compilations shared regularly on sites like YouTube and Soundcloud (e.g. the *Curry Smugglers*, 2009-present).

SAJA's podcast, however, is the longest running South Asian American podcast. More importantly, its conversations are lively and homely, in both the sense of evoking the comforts of home and that its technical quality is humble. Given that SAJA has worked with a variety of nascent digital media technologies, the ability to compare the podcast's affordances and uses with SAJA's other digital media ventures helps clarify what the podcasting is "doing" for this community. Although it leans toward a cosmopolitan perspective best exemplified by its ubiquitous convener, Sree Sreenivasan, it involves so many kinds of speakers, identities, and communicative styles (e.g. scholarly, personal, journalistic), a key dynamic in all of the case studies in this dissertation which is crucial for the building of a coalitional and reflexive South Asian America. Finally, cultural as well as technical connectivity is easiest perceived when it

partially breaks down (Star 1999, 382). The multiple modes of being South Asian or interested in South Asian topics the podcast features, allows for us to study their interaction and when, at times, connections fail.

This analysis draws from listening to the 124 SAJA podcast episodes, close readings of transcriptions of several episodes and key fragments, interviews with SAJA podcast producers, and attendance at a SAJA podcast recording. In turn this paper considers the organizational structure of SAJA, its use of a variety of digital media, the technologies and logistics of its podcast, and the sound and talk of its podcasts.

The South Asian Journalists Association: Identity and Profession

SAJA started informally in 1994 when eighteen South Asian and South Asian heritage journalists began gathering in New York City for monthly "Pakora Eating Meetings," where they discussed the poor coverage of South Asian topics, the scarcity of prominent South Asian journalists in the United States, and their careers. With no dues and no organizational funds, they used whatever free electronic resources they could. In 1994, they opted to use the relatively new concept of an email listserv over the traditional newsletter, in the process encouraging resistant members to also become early adopters of the new communications technology. They based themselves out of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism where co-founder Sree Sreenivasan had received his master's degree and taken up a faculty position only the year prior. From its humble beginnings it has flowered into a formalized organization serving over a thousand members, with chapters in eight North American cities. They provide fellowships, scholarships, internship funding, yearly journalism awards, and networking events. Most of these occur on an annual basis; only a small cadre of organizers have any regular interactions through

SAJA. These typically took place on its various digital platforms. From its start, then, SAJA used cheap or free digital technologies wherever possible, but also relied for credibility and resources on the professional positions of its members and board.

SAJA has employed, and in many cases retired, a series of nascent online platforms and technologies over the last twenty-one year, from an internal listserv to a public member directory, from a multi-person "newsy blog" (http://www.sajaforum.org) to the podcast. The aesthetically simple blog started in 2006, and consists of over 2200 posts. Its largest and central section features the most recent entries on current news and analysis, but along the right side of the page, it also prominently displays a list of permanent links. These connect to a series of resource posts for journalists on everything from tracking prominent South Asians in commerce and media to how-tos for non-experts on covering Sri Lanka or the South Asian American impact on the 2008 presidential race. The posts are produced by a core group of largely South Asian heritage professional journalists who write for the blog on the side of their paid work, with the help of an array of guest and student authors. In spite of falling into disuse over the last several years, falling from 952 posts in 2008 to 68 in 2010 to just two in 2014, the site has garnered over three million unique page views and continues to receive new views each week.

SAJA's podcast, on the other hand, was started two years later in 2008 and includes 124 episodes recorded over phone lines and streamed via BlogTalkRadio (BTR, http://www.blogtalkradio.com). Afterward, the archive is available for direct download or subscription (for automatic downloading to computer, cloud, or mobile device) via the BTR site and podcast aggregating platforms such as iTunes. As of June 2015, the podcast had received over 2.6 million "listens" via the BTR website alone, fewer than 11,000 occurring live as the show was being recorded. Sreenivasan is a ubiquitous presence, speaking live in nearly every

episode. He is key not only for his professional connections, pulling in Columbia journalism students to be guests as easily as diplomats, but also because he operates the controls, having a premium subscription to the BTR service. As well as providing streaming and downloading hosting, BTR allows fairly simple podcast recording through the use of ordinary phone lines. Throughout, the audio crackles from the combination of cell and land phone lines and BTR's audio compression algorithms, phone lines are frequently dropped or are of poor quality, and audience members calling in and addressed by Sreenivasan as their area code often do not realize it is their turn to speak. Nevertheless, this system makes it possible to combine multiple, ordinary phone lines, eschew fancy software, and stream and archive at a low cost.

Longing and Belonging

This run-down of organizational logistics and technologies is useful because it highlights the improvisational nature of SAJA's founding and flowering, the mixed and complicated nature of its goals, the early and successive adoption of one technology after another, and the kinds of resources that enabled SAJA's success. When originally founded, those involved did not expect to produce a continent- or world-spanning organization; rather, the South Asian American journalists were merely trying to find other people who had the same issues and concerns, and support each other.

When asked what had driven Sreenivasan to connect his professional work as a journalist with his personal concerns about identity in the 1990s and co-found the group, he tellingly began by explaining how he felt coming to the United States as a young immigrant. His family moved repeatedly throughout his childhood and adolescence in line with his father's work as a diplomat for the Indian government. Sreenivasan lived variously in Japan, the USSR, the United States

(for elementary school), Burma, Fiji, and India, eventually returning to New York to complete

his higher education at Columbia University.

> I came to America when I was nine years-old from the former Soviet Union and I
> worked all my life to deal with issues of identity and be the new kid in the class;
> the new kid in the—not just in the class, or the new kid in the city, or the new kid
> in the country, but also the new kid on the continent […]
> And as I grew up in this country there were very few examples or connections to
> South Asia that you would see. […] I have been very kind of obsessed with what I
> call desi watching—like keeping track of South Asians if they're doing interesting
> things. […]
> In journalism there are many, many journalism organizations that are based on
> ethnic groups or interests. […] In this country when you say Asia you don't mean
> South Asian. You mean you are East Asian rather than South Asian. That is
> something that I paid a lot of, you know, very close attention to as a child. People
> didn't even think India was in Asia. […] So we started as an informal group that
> met once a month to eat pakoras[34] […] and at that time we figured there are
> twenty South Asian journalists in America. (Sreenivasan 2015)

Here Sreenivasan effortlessly connects his outsider status from classroom to continent,

highlighting how a lack of South Asian American visibility tied directly, for him, to the symbolic

erasure of the subcontinent and his difficult lived experience as a child perceived as alien

wherever he went. What he was—South Asian, thus Asian—simply was not a legible category

for him to inhabit in many contexts. This tenuous position demanded that he "work [all his] life"

to manage his difference from those around him and to find "examples or connections to South

Asia," specifically in the form of keeping tabs on high profile "desis." In some sense, then, the

founding of SAJA was not some grand professional plan. Rather, it was a formalization of these

activities he had been doing "all [his] life," providing a basis for networking and support on the

one hand, and outreach and awareness-raising on the other.

As is evident from Sreenivasan's articulation, the exact goals of the organization, the

specific orientations of that longing, are complicated and manifold. They include a desire for

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[34] Snack common across multiple South Asian countries, featuring vegetables, cheese, or meat fried in a batter
with gram (chickpea based) flour.

support and belonging as well promoting visibility and awareness. SAJA describes itself on its "About" page as "Where Journalism intersects with South Asia... A Network for Education, Inspiration and Training... Upgrading South Asia coverage... Uplifting journalism standards." More a site and practice than an organization by its own definition, it characterizes this state of being as the interaction of a profession, and its principles, with a constructed cultural category of only recent popular prominence, South Asia. The latter is meant to smooth over longstanding and intersecting divides and provide a platform for community mobilization. The former stipulates a professional investment. Full membership in SAJA, for example, is limited to journalists residing in North America or working for North American organizations.

This most inclusive conception of SAJA's purpose—that any North American journalist can be a member—is matched by its scholarships, reporting fellowships, internship fund, and journalism awards for outstanding coverage about "South Asia or the worldwide South Asian diaspora." Yet their board, year after year, is overwhelmingly South Asian American and they also offer three awards for South Asian origin students and journalists with no topical limitations. In other words, at its heart SAJA is driven by issues of identity and the need to produce sites of belonging, such as the participatory digital media that they have used over the years: first the listserv, then the blog, and now the podcast.

Living (in) Network

The production and maintenance of a network is at the heart of SAJA's goals, but it is neither solely the technical sense—of internet-enabled and communicating devices—nor the professional sense of networking that I mobilize here. Rather, I deploy it in both ways and, finally, in a manner that exceeds these meanings.

Diaspora, as a well-travelled word, has been conceptualized in a number of ways too narrow for our present purposes: as only applicable to the Jewish situation; as describing only the situation of those experiencing violently-enforced exile; and as only a state of being for those who wish to but can never return to a homeland (Clifford, 1994; Cohen, 1997). In this case, always-frustrated longing is the operative aspect. Metaphorical formulations, such as Brah's (1996), are more pertinent to the experiences of many economic and political migrants today. In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, using her own complicated biography as an example, Brah highlights that a pure homeland concept may no longer be relevant as migration increases both in distance and frequency, and questions of agency in the act of migrating become more complicated. Instead, she describes the defining feature of living in diaspora as "re-turning," to an idea of an identity, even if actual return is neither possible nor desirable. Yet this perspective can also over-emphasize always-frustrated longing that is never fulfilled. It does not fully capture the communal, collective, and generative aspects of the diasporic experience described by my informants.

A number of scholars have argued for more contextualized, interactional, and generative framings of diaspora (Gilroy, 1993). Some also highlight that this generative quality can produce a flexibility of identification that is particularly available to the privileged for its use and abuse (Visweswaran, 1997). Shukla (2003), notably, makes a compelling case that the production of a diasporic sensibility allows for the circulation of multiple, productive, co-articulated imaginaries of India, America, and England. Gopinath (2005) calls to task highly gendered and heteronormative visions of Indian diaspora and nation, which in turn put emphasis on cultural production and biological reproduction, advocating for a critical stance that queers diaspora and applies a diasporic lens to queerness. Mishra's (1996) work highlights that there are at least two

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distinct historical moments of diasporic South Asian formation: one based on indentured colonial labor, the other on more privileged migrants seeking economic opportunity since the mid-1900s. What is crucial here is not what single, specific articulation of diaspora is activated by the SAJA community. Indeed, a central argument of this dissertation is that South Asian America is necessarily a polyvocal formation. Diaspora, more generally, has become such a heavily used word, in so many contexts, it has begun to lose discrete meaning (Brubaker 2005). Instead, I am interested in how important and ubiquitous the term has become, particularly in South Asian America and other transnational South Asian formations (Hedge and Sahoo 2017; Chatterji and Washbrook 2014). For those doing academic work on South Asian America, as well as for those working to produce and mobilize the formation in more popular registers, diaspora is a generative site of contestation and imaginative labor.

For the purpose of examining connectivity, I build on John Durham Peters' (1999a) employment of the term diaspora, which focuses on the possibilities of "reconstitution-in-dispersion," and does so by framing diaspora against the concept of exile. Forceful, painful exile animated the earliest uses of diaspora in the *Septuagint*, but is no longer so relevant for many current, popular and academic applications of diaspora. Most helpfully, Peters pays explicit and fairly technical attention to mediated structures of connection. He explains that what is key is

> diaspora's emphasis on lateral and decentered relationships among the dispersed. Exile suggests pining for home; diaspora suggests networks among compatriots. Exile may be solitary, but *diaspora is always collective*. Diaspora suggests real or imagined relationships among scattered fellows, whose *sense of community is sustained by forms of communication* and contact such as kinship, pilgrimage, trade, travel, and shared culture (language, ritual, scripture, or print and electronic media). (p. 20, emphasis added)

Here diaspora is not, constitutively, about the displaced state the person lives in, but rather about the collective and active labor of connection, in a network of lateral relationships, managed

through ritualized infrastructures of media, communication, and contact. Although it can and should be elaborated upon further, Peters' list of means of sustaining connectivity renders what is often abstract in other formulations (Anderson, 1991) more concrete.

Applying this to SAJA, the podcast, rather than the blog or even the listserv, is a more meaningful site for the production and management of this type of connection-in-dispersion specifically because it involves the live, conversational communication of speakers and listeners spread across diasporic locations. Talk co-produced live can bring the distant figure more intimately to life. The atmospheric sound invites us, even if only partially, into people's homes and offices, into the familiar and mundane spaces of their lives, and to hear emotion that might not be conveyed in writing. In this reading, although longing is still central, it is a potentially recursive and generative longing that elicits a sense of dwelling together in separation, of belonging instead of lack. Part of the joy, in fact, is in living apart and immersed in another culture while sharing something extra, something deeply meaningful. The homes and offices from which people recorded and listened to the podcast, these sounds blending together, match so well because they are not about geographic proximity, or national identity, but feature the homely in-between-ness of being diasporic South Asians.

The Joys of Longing and Belonging

The effort displayed in "locating" themselves, for example, is palpable among so many of the invited podcast speakers, not necessarily because it is vexed, but because it is deeply meaningful to them. Like Sreenivasan, many locate themselves by and express joy in their imbrication in the network, both geographical and affective. He was situated in the pull between powerful nation-states, his family, his career, and particularly by the act of "desi watching."

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Given the prominence of these locating narratives, it is unsurprising that the most oft-discussed subjects, regardless of nominal episode topic, are parents, intergenerational family issues, and food.

In an episode titled "Currying Culture: South Asian Food and the Caribbean" (May 30, 2012), three Indo- and Afro-Caribbean heritage food professionals, and an Indo-Caribbean heritage academic spend the episode discussing their favorite Indo-Caribbean foods and avowing the significance of South Asian traditions in Caribbean cuisine. In the process, Ramin Ganeshram describes her "way of being" as a prelude to naming her favorite Trini Indian dish.

> Because I have this kind of, in a way, sort of once-removed-from—Not in a way. Literally.—once-removed-from-the-Caribbean-and-twice-removed-from-the-Old-World sort of way of being, because my parents were immigrants to America, everything is really… I often find that what my favorite [Trini Indian dishes] are very much wrapped in a memory. And I love aloo [potato] pie because my father used to talk about coming to New York and desperately wanting an aloo pie. And of course, in those days, it was 1954, there were very few very specifically Trinidadians because, for the most part, we immigrated to England, being a colony of the UK up to that time. And he would buy knishes[35], which were also sold on the street at the time, and slice them open and put hot pepper sauce on them and imagine it was an aloo pie. So that, for me, is my favorite. But I have to tell you my husband, who is an eighth generation Irish-American, is the doubles[36] king. If he can find his way past a doubles shop, even if it's 30 miles out of his way, he will, and he could eat that day and night.

Each figure in the story—Ganeshram, her father, her husband—is in a sort of double motion, physically and in terms of questions of identity and home. Ganeshram's identity itself is not fixed but in process; it is not who she is, but her "way of being," and it involves not only traveling, eating foods from various cultures, and marrying an Irish-American man, but also

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[35] Knishes are a popular snack food originating in Eastern Europe and associated with Jewish culture, particularly in North American urban centers. A knish consists of a dough pocket stuffed with a potato-based filling, then baked or fried.

[36] Doubles is a popular street food in Trinidad and Tobago, consisting of two (hence the name doubles) flat breads filled with curried chickpeas. *While working on this draft I got really hungry for doubles. Unfortunately Jamaican Jerk Pit doesn't carry them. Otherwise, I totally would have brought some to our seminar.*

traveling through memory, and being invested in a favorite food because of its potential to fuel

connection. Her story is at once conceptually complex and immediately familiar, even

comforting. Moreover, no one else can inhabit and share her exact cozy yet complicated location,

but they can share in what Ganeshram has painted as a homey experience of dwelling in

dispersion and connection.

This is a sense of dwelling and belonging (rather than, say, citizenship) produced through

sociability (rather than overtly political acts and identity claims). Studying the communicative

characteristics of SAJA's self-consciously South Asian American podcast allows for a nuanced

take on the possibility that the social practice of talk, even the sound itself (of homes, of people

speaking with accents), can provide a sense of place for what is not a finite activity but rather a

way of being that does not seem possible elsewhere. Moreover, however ridiculed, these ways of

being appear to be a necessary part of getting by.

The South Asian American soundscape

The sounds of SAJA's podcast must be considered in relation to what I am calling the

South Asian American soundscape. The term captures the vibrant mixture of sounds, media, and

practices that provide a common cultural sonic resource. It is an auditory backdrop that, while

not monolithic, is ubiquitous, familiar, and communal. In identifying a shared and intertextual

sonic context as the South Asian American soundscape, I emphasize the interrelation and

employment of sound across media in the production and maintenance of sociability in this

community.[37] Sound is crucial in this community because of its cultural resonance and

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[37] My use of the term "soundscape" hews most closely to Charles Hirschkind's (2006) in *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. In discussing the omnipresence and importance of cassette tape sermons in the Middle East, he discusses how the ubiquity of sermons and the call to prayer affect and reconfigures space. They provide a "sensory background" that is crucial as listeners re-"orient themselves within the modern city

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popularity, which cannot be separated from questions of access, distribution, and translatability. This includes musical familiarity in spite of language barriers, the song as a consumable and transposable unit, and the ease of access to the means of producing, shipping, and broadcasting music. Further, for all of the reasons listed above, sound media are media one lives with, within, and around.

Largely dominated in the early days of post-1965 migration by film music lovingly carried across the ocean in the form of records, the early South Asian American soundscape displayed an emphasis on music that wove together the cultural, religious, national, and filmic. Records and celluloid gave way to heavily pirated cassette tapes and video tapes, then DVDs, CDs, VCDs, satellite television, and now digital subscription and streaming services. The common sonic foundation established in the 1960s spread to first radio, public access television countdown shows, cultural performances, and occasional film screenings, then cars, domestic television sets and VCRs, and eventually personal electronics. Although dominated by music, especially film music, a strong heritage of sociable and broadcast talk, particularly in the form of ethnic radio, is also key. While some private listening is feasible, this is most often a communal activity, meaning that people live with these sounds in the spaces of their everyday lives and in the midst of their familial, personal, and business interactions.

In the study of sound media, sound itself, and talk, are more often than not set to the side to consider issues of conceptual (rather than sonic) content, the political economies of media production and broadcasting, and questions of representation. Sometimes, when considering sound, such studies discuss accents, code-switching, and multi-lingualism.[38] All of this is

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as a space of moral action" (22). Sound here is a constitutive element of people's understanding of space and, relatedly, how they fit in that space, who they are or are becoming.

[38] Brown Accents book or brown voice article- Dave, (Casillas, 2014)

important work, and this chapter will also consider issues of content, topic, and economies of production, but it demands that we pay equal attention to sound and casual talk as a means into questions of the mundane ways we live with media and manage belonging.

The production and re-production of social life

To draw out the repetitive, humane, and mundane labor that goes in to the production and management of talk and communities, this paper employs tools from the broadcast talk literature (Scannell 1991). Building off scholarship on conversation analysis (Hutchby and Wooffitt 1988) and pragmatics (Brown and Levinson 1987), broadcast talk scholars (Brunt 1990; Heritage 1985; Heritage and Greatbatch 1991; Montgomery 1986) draw attention to how, in traditional broadcast media (e.g. radio and television), the situation must constantly and systematically be talked into being. In particular, this work of talking the situation into existence depends on the management of the relationship, between the broadcaster and audience member, which lies across the public institutional space of the broadcasting studio and the private, domestic space of the listener/viewer (Scannell 1996).

The talk of media professionals creates structured opportunities for audience engagement and involvement that shapes their experiences of and with radio and television shows. For example, television news interview shows are oriented to the "overhearing audience" in that the interviewer poses questions to the interviewee as a representative of the imagined audience, on their behalf: the interviewer maintains a neutral tone throughout, even when expounding criticisms of the interviewee's ideas; the interviewer does not respond to interviewee's questions, but prompts the interviewee to say more or offers a gloss or summary of interviewee's position; unlike a normal conversation, the interviewer asks questions for which he or she already knows

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the answer; the interviewer does not produce response tokens (e.g. "Oh!") while the interviewee responds as the answers are not meant for the interviewer. In this way, the non-present audience members may consider themselves as the real or primary audience (Heritage 1985; Heritage and Greatbatch 1991). This example is worth considering in some depth because the elaborate work that is done in conversational broadcast talk toward the end of maintaining a relationship between media figures and audience members is often overlooked and ignored. In many cases, this work is routine and must be perceived as routine and comfortable to produce the desired effect. Like other care structures (Scannell 1996) that make life livable and legible—such as digital connectivity—the best measure that this implicit broadcast talk work has been done well is that we do not notice it happening.

Scholars of broadcast talk emphasize the highly and implicitly structured nature of talk and its ability to do things, to talk a situation and relationships into being. This strategy allows us to examine the immanent logic in the talk of the community, and the constant, subconscious efforts that speakers and listeners must perform for it to succeed, for communication to occur, for it to make sense and flourish. The tools of broadcast talk, then, allow us to think about the mundane yet constitutive role of media in the production and "reproduction of social life" (Montgomery 1986, 424) in a way that exceeds the typical questions about the political reproduction of social order, pushing us to consider the highly technical (precise and procedural) management of sociality and community.

The use of broadcast talk analysis can be approached from a purely technical standpoint or one inflected with ideological concerns. For example, one can study the techniques of implicit in-grouping and out-grouping that take place during a news clip on Black Lives Matter protesters, noting perhaps the repeated use of inclusive pronouns (e.g. I, we, us, our) on one news

channel and exclusive (e.g. they, them, it) on another news channel with or without connecting it to political questions of racism. In analyzing the South Asian Journalists Association podcast talk, I draw on both of these robust traditions within broadcast talk to illuminate, technically, the production of connectivity (i.e. who belongs in this group and how are they connected), and, politically, the production of South Asian America. Combining this with an appreciation of the topical content as well as for the quality of the sound and its affective resonance, gives a much fuller picture of the meaning and experience of podcasts and podcasting in people's lives.

Podcast talk

Earlier analyses in this paper have taken inspiration from broadcast talk's careful examination of talk, particularly those strains that use critical discourse analysis as their key tools. This next section, however, most explicitly takes up broadcast talk's investment in the more technical skill of conversation analysis as a means of revealing the logic underlying communicative practices. My interpretation, in the end, still displays a critical bent, but in first paying close attention to technique rather than intention, this paper reveals the constant and repetitive work that the talk of the podcast is doing.

SAJA's podcast serves its various organizational goals to varying degrees. Most notably, it leans toward issues of networking and support for its South Asian American journalist members over concerns of education, outreach, and affinity building. This is not to say they do not happen on the podcast, but they are less frequent and less successful. Put another way, an examination of the subconscious and systematic use of talk on the podcast reveals an emphasis on producing a communicative experience of shared dwelling that is clearly very important for the South Asian American media professionals and journalists who came together in the 1990s to

forge and develop a community that practiced evolving forms of iterative connectivity through new media use. It is much easier to see this in practice, however, by identifying where talk breaks down.

In an episode on the "South Asian Blogosphere" (September 26, 2008) the speakers repeatedly exhort listeners to get involved. After it has been suggested by the only panel member who identifies as Pakistani, Sabahat Ashraf, that an increase in South Asian resident voices in the "blogosphere" would be helpful, one of the South Asian American panelists, Anil Dash, continues on this point:

> AD: It would be great. And. It's just not that easy. I mean, but, you know, we're, anybody who's listening right now, if they have, if they're from Pakistan, in Pakistan, or in India, or Bangladesh, or whatever, and they want to do this regularly, they, you know, they're good writers and they have a sensibility for media and happenings, then we're completely open to it.

> SS: And we'll also, also take things like video, photographs, so you don't even have to be a writer if you just want to do a photo essay. Preston Merchant who helped pull together SAJA's forum and has been an editor on it for two years publishes photo essays on there and he's looking for stuff so definitely check that out on SAJA forum, but let's get our other two speakers on here now. (Emphases added)

Although taking turns speaking, the two are not having a conversation with each other, but speaking for the benefit of an overhearing audience. Having validated Ashraf's point ("It would be great"), Dash uses "and" to fill the space between two contradictory thoughts ("It would be great," and, "It's just not that easy"), suggesting, however, that they are consistent. He then smoothly and without conscious thought moves to distance himself and SAJA from the previously legitimized problem. What started as possible encouragement ends as a promise not to dismiss South Asian resident bloggers offhand, should they meet a string of criteria and bring themselves to the attention of SAJA.

Throughout Dash's response, "you" is only used in the phrase, "you know," a space filler that also serves to entreat and validate agreement. Rosalind Brunt (1990) highlighted the import of the interchangeability of personal pronouns in the construction of a consensual mode of address. Heavy conversational slippage between pronouns such as "I," "you," "we," and "our," suggests significant affinity between the speaker and audience, that the two match; the reverse is possible with exclusionary pronouns. Whereas the SAJA podcast frequently displays conversational slippage between "I," "you," and "we," Dash's speech is a marked example of the avoidance of such slippage. Those listening in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh are a resounding "they." Sreenivasan quickly steps in as a helpful institutional voice, addressing potential South Asian inhabitant listener-bloggers with the more personal and present "you," but by offering a set of compromised possibilities for involvement such as being part of stories curated by a bona fide SAJA member. With less than a full stop after the word "forum," Sreenivasan moves on, redirecting conversation to the introduction of the next panelist. This is not to suggest a conscious effort to silence critique, and the show does have to keep moving. However, this example, which is reflective of a common trend in the data, displays the systematic structuring of SAJA's language to provide a meaningful, supportive space for the absent yet assumedly South Asian American audience in the first instance.

Personal anecdotes that diligently work to make the South Asian American audience specifically feel hyper-included are frequent as in this discussion of SAJA's "newsy" blog from the same episode, again by Anil Dash:

> And actually, <u>I</u> said to my parents recently, SAJAforum is one of those sites that has made <u>me</u> more Indian or more aware of being South Asian [. . .] And, you know, what better testament, I think, to what a blog can be in saying, "Here's a topic <u>you</u> may not have even known <u>you</u>'re interested in, but I'm going to cover it to such depth, with such passion, that <u>you</u> will not be able to resist reading it, it

> will make <u>you</u> more interested in it.
> (Emphases added.)

Here, the personal pronouns are highly interchangeable, as now there is a high match between the identity of audience segment being addressed, the background of the speaker, and the identity of the podcast. Implicitly, that topic which the intended "you" will not be able to resist will be material that heightens South Asian Americans' connections to their South Asian heritage. It is worth noting the diasporic angle of this encouragement; re-connecting with one's South Asian-ness would not make sense for a lifelong citizen or resident of the subcontinent.

The SAJA moderators make it clear that the most expected audience members, and thus those for whom the most comfortable listening position is created, are the people who most closely resemble SAJA's membership. After a much-hyped and very brief interview with two Bollywood stars, the moderators read through some of the unasked audience questions:

> Here's somebody who says, "Big hello from Toronto," asking questions—we obviously couldn't get to all of them. "A big 'Hello!' from [1 second pause] Yerevan, Armenia. I've got a question for you both: Is this really the last film for you as a jodi[39]?" I mean, they're asking kind of very knowing, intelligent questions about them. (February 1, 2010)

The person sending salutations from Toronto is expected, but the statement that "they're asking kind of very knowing intelligent questions about" the Bollywood stars would only make sense if the speaker did not expect greetings or clever questions from listeners in Armenia. This interpretation is reinforced by the use of "they" instead of "you" as he speaks of the surprisingly knowing inquirer and the tone of the speaker's voice as he discussed the salutation from Yerevan, pausing to process the information and raising his voice in incredulity and amused surprise at their use of in-group lingo such as "jodi."

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[39] Jodi is Hindi for "pair," meaning two actors who are repeatedly paired together romantically in a variety of films and roles. A Hollywood example would be Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks.

Through a number of strategies that are distinguishable using the tools from broadcast talk scholarship, the SAJA podcast subtly works to draw and re-draw a variable boundary between the outside and inside of the group for which it exists even as the panelists overtly encourage people from the "outside" to listen to the podcast. For example, non-explanations validate the in-group, allowing for affirmation, even witnessing of a profound experience, without actually educating outsiders. This frequently takes the form of going out of one's way to describe non-English terms, but leaving those most opaque yet central to the in-group unexplained. Again in the "Blogosphere" episode, semi-transparent terms such as "Pakistaniyat" and "Filmi" were defined, but "desi" was not. Rather than adding clarity for out-group listeners, it serves to draw attention to their outsider status. On the other hand, this could take the form of celebratory non-explanations, such as when the Super Bowl is discussed during the semi-annual[40] podcast held the morning of the big game and featuring a cadre South Asian heritage sports journalists. While they occasionally attempt to describe the Super Bowl for non-American listeners, they never fully explain the event and its mesmerizing quality, instead allowing for a moment of communal joy and affirmation for those who already understand.

Another strategy, which I call "speaking the Other" entails elaborately announcing and reminding audience members of the identities of non-South Asian American speakers, an experience that must be refreshing for a community so often forced to explain themselves (i.e. the perennial toxic question, "Where are you from?"). For example, in an episode spent interviewing people associated with NBC sitcom *Outsourced* (May 17, 2011), the whiteness of showrunner Robert Borden is repeatedly noted for the benefit of the audience while the South

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[40] SAJA, often in conjunction with SAMMA (South Asians in Media, Marketing and Entertainment Association) hosted Super Bowl webcasts (which are later downloadable as a podcast) in 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2015, and 2016.

Asian heritage actors are assumed to be desi. The confusion of the situation is heightened by the fact that the actors who are on the call have to use exaggerated and stereotypical "Indian" accents on the show. Here, their bland middle American accents are a sign that they no longer have to perform an elaborate, farcical performance of Indian-ness, while Robert Borden's "lack of accent" must be called out lest he be mistook for South Asian American.

The most prevalent tactic is the recital of visibility narratives, and host and interviewer efforts to get recalcitrant guests to perform them properly. Each South Asian heritage guest is asked to share theirs, and such articulations are modeled by the host, sometimes three times in an episode in the vain and likely subconscious hope of reciprocation. This becomes particularly obvious when such efforts fail, which is most notable when athletes—so often schooled in other discourses of self-presentation for mainstream and sports media consumption—are guests on the show. In such situations, the moderators often repeatedly demonstrate and prime stories of South Asian American visibility and uplift, such as how it felt for the host's children to see a South Asian American name on a sports jersey, or how it felt for the host to tell his children of a South Asian American football player, or his children's reaction to hearing the player's father's name is Ram. Although these incidents are sprinkled through their 2009 Super Bowl show, half white, half South Asian Brandon Chillar responds mostly with discourses more familiar from his interviews with sports entertainment shows: tales of the colorblind triumph, American hardwork, and motherly love.

Time and location checks, on the other hand, tame different temporalities (including streaming vs. archived listening) and geographies, and do so through emphasizing a particular worldview. At the top of an episode, titled "South Asians and Hollywood," Sreenivasan announces that "It's 1:00 p.m. in New York, 10:00 a.m. in Los Angeles, and 11:30 p.m. in

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Bollywood." Not only can the podcast bridge separate time zones to produce a coherent space to dwell in connectivity, but also disparate visions of the world, different geographies of modernity. The preferred perspective here is an elite South Asian American cosmopolitanism that has access to and values, above being American or South Asian, being both.

These very explicit applications of the broadcast talk methods are necessarily cursory given the limited space, but importantly illustrate the constant, repetitive, and subconscious effort that goes into producing talk for a specific community. Although this labor is unremarked and seemingly unremarkable, it is elaborate, unending, and highly ordered. It is something the participants—Sreenivasan, other hosts, guests, and audience members who listen—do, even as the popular discourse surrounding digital media suggest they are viral and act upon us. In spite of being a labor produced out of longing and care, this does not make it any less labor, which is why we need a new language to discuss the production and management of cultural and technological connectivity that highlights not only its diffuse and extractive qualities, but also its mundane, humane, and generative aspects.

The Labor of Connecting

I have called many things labor in this paper: the offline management of social and professional networks; the technical production and distribution of podcasts; the management of talk and its implicit, subconscious structures during the podcast; curation and sharing of podcasts; and listening. These are not the typical parameters of the term labor in its more traditional Marxist sense, but as Jarrett (2014) makes clear, a feminist Marxist intervention in the study of affective, immaterial labor is crucial if we are to meaningfully understand how labor works in the digital realm. Often affective and immaterial, digital labor's variable and indirect

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relation to the production of value, Jarrett continues, leaves it vulnerable to erasure. This allows cover for the significant extraction of excess value, which is then put to use in the reproduction of the social order.

It is true that the kinds of community digital labor herein described are multiply liable to erasure and it is thus incumbent upon us to seek new ways to make cultural labor visible (Suchman 1995). These kinds of labor are mundane, unremarked, ubiquitous, and necessarily invisible for the broadcast talk or community to seem coherent and legible. It entails an affective labor, which is under-appreciated and under-compensated. It is digital media labor, often mistakenly perceived as ephemeral, utopian, even bodiless. It includes forms of participation – listening, sharing – that are rarely given their due. This is precisely why these kinds of labor need to be made visible and theorized, and in a way that balances a critical reading of capital exploitation with a generative reading of their phenomenological significance. Both readings are crucial for a substantive understanding of the ethics of digital media production and use, of how new media forms coalesce, and of how connectivity works.

As Jose van Dijck (2013) explains, "media have historically coevolved with the public that uses them, as well as with the larger economy of inscription," or the major societal-level manner in which we record and document our culture, whether that be on stone, on paper, or in bytes (5). This claim is builds on Lisa Gitelman's (2006) helpful conceptualization of media as "socially realized structures of communications," with the idea of structures encompassing both (cultural) protocols and technological forms (7). Both of these quotes draw attention to the socially-informed nature of media as only meaningful as media-in-use. As such, they can only come into focus, particularly burgeoning media, as they are put into practice by producers and users.

Van Dijck employs this foundation to build a vital argument about the historical evolution of the culture of connectivity in which we currently live. Early excitement over platformed sociality (via what is generally called social media and van Dijck suggests should be called "connective media"), fed by the promise of human connectedness and supported by automated connectivity, over time has become a tool for corporations to categorize and monetize its users and the content they produce. As she succinctly puts it, " 'connectivity' […] in the context of social media […] quickly assumed the connotation of users accumulating *social* capital, while in fact this term increasingly referred to owners amassing *economic* capital" (16). In carefully historicizing the expansion of social media—including not taking ideas like "sociality" and "connectivity" for granted, but elaborately documenting the transformation of their meanings and uses over the previous fifteen year—van Dijck is able to shed light on both what social media have become and the "new norms for sociality and values of connectivity" that are being fought over and defined in this ongoing process (20). Van Dijck's focus is on the relationship between business practices, privacy, sociality, and our understandings of connectivity, and these are critical areas for research at present.

Yet I would argue of even more pressing concern is the under-interrogated way the term connectivity is part of a larger, implicit trend of techno-utopianist investment and faith in digital media (Mazzarella 2010). Perhaps the most notorious figure in this mobilization is Mark Zuckerberg, who proclaimed that "connectivity is a human right" (Shearlaw 2014). This was the title of a ten-page document, released as part of a larger campaign to bring the bounty of the internet to millions of new users around the world who were only just beginning to use digital media and smartphones in 2014. The catch, of course, was that Facebook would be the beneficent portal; Facebook was trying to *become* the internet for these new users. In such a

mobilization, connectivity was the cure-all ICT (information and communication technology) solution to the world's ills, as well as something that could be simply switched on.

In some invocations, digital and cultural connectivity hold out the promise of immediate relationships, a perfect annihilation of distance, and freedom of identity and activity. Seen another way, connectivity is shadowed by questions of its misuse: hyper-specific demographicizing, corporate desire for the monetization of cultural content and peoples, and the exploitation of user content, connections, and labor. Most common of all, without proper infrastructures of technology and care, cultural and technical connectivity can simply fail.

Diaspora, as a term, carries an emotional weight. It references forcible exclusion, thousands of years of exile, and a strong dose of melancholic longing for a land or state (of being) that the exiled may never have known. It tells us a great deal about the way in which people currently experience long-term displacement and "dwelling differently" (Clifford 1994, 321) (i.e. not exactly as an unproblematic native would) that the word is being used with greater frequency in an increasingly number of contexts by a variety of communities. Unlike the vaunted, exceptional, and smoothed emotional and geographical connections suggested by the world "transnational"[41]—or the ease belied by the term "connectivity" itself—the actual multiple attachments managed by diasporic communities are uneven and fraught, physically, logistically, and emotionally. Managing them takes a toll, but many consider the effort worthwhile. What would it mean if we thought about connectivity as similarly complicated, weighted, uneven, fragile, and sometimes good, but also sometimes bad?

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[41] This is not a universal interpretation of the word, certainly, but it importantly draws attention to the way that the "trans-" in transnational renders of a single piece many different types of geographic excess, rupture, distance, and travel.

SAJA's is not a podcast about longing to return to a lost homeland or about overtly taking up activism to produce awareness of issues of import to South Asians Americans. It is not intended to lobby overtly for new ideas of citizenship or acceptance of South Asians in America. Yet it is systematically supporting these goals and supporting a way to live comfortably through enjoying connection-in-dispersion. Moreover, it is doing all this in a manner that is more common, unassuming, and understudied than so many other current media studies takes on participation and civic engagement, or media and migration, or citizenship and globalization. This work is a complement to those more well-trod analytical paths. A focus on diaspora and those living in it reminds us of the unevenness of connection and the affective dimensions that are central to connectivity. A focus on connectivity as a cultural process and practice, in turn, and the mundane, constant, loving labor involved, is crucial if we are to trace the formation of a coalitional South Asian America.

The Culture of Podcasting

So far, this chapter has heavily focused on understanding the endless effort and care that goes into SAJA's podcast talk or the management of diasporic belonging *as technically complicated feats of cultural labor*. The reverse is also productive. Social and cultural factors played an important role in shaping investment in and the developing nature of podcasting as a popular and legible technology or medium. Part of the success of the idea of podcasting—rather than some other ideas about publishing audio to the web—rested on the hype surrounding blogging, and larger discourses about the internet, freedom, authenticity, and participation. These discourses are deeply entangled with individualistic, universalistic visions of technology use, leaving us with a raceless (or beyond race) history of early podcasting as the hobby of (White)

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nerdy enthusiasts (Nugent 2008). How might we read culture and race into the production of podcasting as a technology?

The term podcast, first used in 2004, was created by combining "-pod" from iPod with "-cast" from broadcasting. The widespread success of the iPod upon its release in November 2001 quickly made the MP3 player an everyday, personal technology. By no means the first MP3 player made commercially available, the iPod not only dominated the American market and global imagination based on the quality of the product and the brand power of Apple, but also because of its joyful and emancipatory image. For the iPod, Apple sought to project a vision of a nonthreatening, diverse, frictionless future that would be guided by individualistic digital bounty and freedom of choice and expression. Soon after its launch, the "iPod people" (Bergen 2011) of its commercial campaign emerged: a series of hip, young people, depicted as black silhouettes set against a succession of bright single-color, backgrounds, who listened to upbeat music on their sleek white iPods while dancing like maniacs. The bodies, loosely identifiable by their hip hop dance moves, hair styles, and sartorial choices, suggested diversity without difficulty.

Emancipatory utopias not only propelled the success of the iPod, but also podcasting. With rising acceptance of the iPod, there was now a way to carry around what then seemed to be a dizzying number of audio files for personal, mobile consumption, but the device was heavily associated with music. Meanwhile, the release of RSS in 1999 and its widespread use in the early 2000s dramatically advanced the power and scope of web publishing by allowing people to subscribe to feeds that announced updated material from the feed source, such as a favorite website. These myriad updates would then pop up, nicely organized and accessible, in one's RSS reader or aggregator.

Prior to podcasting, people were serially posting audio files to the web, sometimes calling such posting "weblogging." The latter term gained popularity through the release of commercial software by the same name that allowed one to call a number and leave a voicemail that would then be posted to one's blog (DiPasquale and Knowles 2003). Other companies and inventors worked on tools similar to those that eventually enabled podcasting, trying different nomenclature, protocols, and practices.

According to the most popular version of the story, however, the term and the concept did not take off until late 2003. Former MTV VJ and internet entrepreneur Adam Curry wrote a "demo" script that automatically moved audio files from his RSS feed reader to iTunes, where they could then easily be moved onto his iPod. More than that, he produced daily content. His rudimentary script, combined with his compelling, recurring audio files, incited others, throughout 2004, to produce better scripts, and eventually quality audio files to be enjoyed by the growing audience for podcasted material (Curry 2004).

As news of podcasting broke in major media outlets, people compared it to TiVo, a then already accepted technology to timeshift one's television viewing (Braiker 2004). As Gitelman (2006) notes, the way we relate to new media is partly affected by our relationships with and understandings of existing media, in this case broadcasting, voicemail, blogging, and digital video recorders. Further, innovations and capacities alone did not guide the manner in which we began to understand and embrace podcasting, leading to its flourishing.

Early coverage of the phenomenon compared it to the success of blogging, insinuating that it would potentially surpass blogging as a means of self-publishing and expression on the internet (Goldberg 2004). The same article, as well as others (Searls 2004), insinuated that it was the "people's radio" or the next stage in the evolution of pirate radio (Braiker 2004), freeing

people from the schedule of terrestrial radio as well as the endless advertisements of commercial terrestrial radio (Goldberg 2004). It would "give [people] time" by allowing them to listen to shows at their leisure (Mohney 2004). With podcasting, there would be greater freedom in terms of producer creativity and content, allowing greater intimacy between producers and listeners of podcasts (Hammersely 2004).

Such freedom for producers fed into claims about the honesty, authenticity, and ideal Do-It-Yourself nature of the internet. "Because [podcasts] are made by enthusiasts, rather than corporate executives, the talk can be as real, strange and surprising as people are" (Goldberg 2004). "Disintermediation" would thus occur, whereby content producers would be able to connect more directly to their audience without media corporations intervening (Hammersley 2004). The use of podcasting would not only create a greater sense of intimacy, but literally stimulate participation. The necessary tools to publish a radio-like product had significantly lessened, but more than that, some podcasting enthusiasts perceived the sheer act of downloading as an overt form of participation. For Christopher Lydon, who had formerly worked at NPR and *The New York Times*, knowing people were listening because they had downloaded his work (even though downloading does not compel listening) was a "revelation" (Goldberg 2004).

This generalized hype, notably, rests on utopic and universalistic visions of the internet and digital technologies. Only the conveniently raced bodies of the iPod dancers suggest podcasting was developed in a complex society marred by racism, sexism, and so on. So how did the South Asian Journalists Association end up as a fairly early adopter of podcasting, or at least as an early adopter in the history of South Asian American podcasting? Sree Sreenivasan's persona as a tech evangelist played no small part, as did the journalistic mores of SAJA. The globe-spanning needs of the organization made *BlogTalkRadio* the clear choice of platform,

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BlogTalkRadio (BTR) founder Alan Levy, interestingly, came up with the idea for the site while running a blog at his father's hospital bedside (McKay 2007). The possibility of remote discussion and broadcasting, among multiple family members via phone line, became an inspiring dream in the face of his father's battle with and eventual loss to cancer. While much of podcasting's fabled origins rests on notions of utopic freedom, individual success, and individual access, BTR was created in the wake of tragedy, with a more collective, family-oriented ethos than many early platforms.

Just as we can unpack the constant, highly technical if subconscious efforts and care that go into the production of cultural connectivity, a similar, reverse-direction analysis can reveal how podcasting is also a culturally complicated and socially-informed feat of technical labor. Both forms of analysis are crucial if we are to fully understand the management of connectivity, materially, technically, and culturally.

Chapter Two

Blogging Critical Identities:
Sepia Mutiny **and the Management of Polyvocal Publics**

When multi-person blog *Sepia Mutiny* (SM) closed shop in April 2012, the

announcement was met with sadness, even grief, by an army of dedicated if lapsed readers.

Many had once been faithful daily, even hourly, "refreshers," ardent commenters, happy lurkers,

and enthusiastic tip-droppers (John 2012b). They felt deep down that the site *should* be there,

that it was an incredibly important locus of discussion and insight whenever a new political or

popular scandal occurred as well as a daily source of "greater brown community" (John 2007).

For example, when Ashton Kutcher's brown-face Pop Chips ad was broadcast within a month of

the blog's closing, many were unhappy to find *Sepia Mutiny* no longer existed to provide a space

for them to air and reflect on the grievances and opinions the episode elicited (Sreenivasan and

Venugopal 2012). Nonetheless, many of the bloggers and readers shared a sense of resigned

understanding at the thought of closure (Chhaya 2012; Momaya and Luis 2015). The multi-

person blog and forum with the memorable tagline—"All that flavorful brownness in one savory

packet"—had become a shadow of its former self in terms of its regular postings and the quality

and quantity of comments.

This chapter will offer a sketch of *Sepia Mutiny*'s founding, its central topics and

accomplishments, and its organizational structure. In the process, I will argue that *Sepia Mutiny*

played filled a critical need, establishing a complex space of dialogue and belonging for a

generation of people to imagine themselves as South Asian Americans. The simultaneous impossibility and necessity of naming this community was used as generative fuel to build a polyvocal, provocative, and playful movement that was sustainable and inspiring for its participants. Powerfully, *Sepia Mutiny* managed to foster a community that could understand itself as, on the one hand, ordinary and legitimate, on the other hand, radically coalitional both within and outside South Asian America.

Seeking Belonging through Mutiny

Sepia Mutiny was started in 2004 by five second-generation Indian Americans bloggers in response to a lack of political coverage by and for South Asian Americans in the run up to the 2004 presidential election (Tripathi 2017; John 2007). Over its 8-year run, SM's 60-plus bloggers produced nearly 5 and a half thousand posts (over 3000 by the top five posters alone), with up to 197 posts a month, sometimes hundreds even a thousand comments per post, and 16,000 unique visitors per day (Sahni 2012). Visitors were based mostly in the US (roughly 70%, Tripathi 2007), but with sizeable readership abroad, particularly in Europe, South Asia, and Canada (Tripathi 2017).

Despite mischaracterizations by the likes of *The New York Times* that its focus was geographical (Zeller 2006), *Sepia Mutiny* was about aggregating a set of South Asian American *perspectives* in one place (Chayya 2012). In its original printing of "In Internet Age, Writers Face Frontier Justice" (Zeller) on May 1, 2006, *The New York Times* described *Sepia Mutiny* as "a Web log dedicated to the Southeast Asian diaspora." The online version was corrected on May 5, noting the Gray Lady had "misstated the geographic focus of the Web log SepiaMutiny.com, which discussed the [plagiarism] case [against Kaavya Viswanathan]. It is

South Asia, not Southeast Asia." This still missed the point that, to the degree the site's investments could be roughly called geographical, they were multi-level, intersectional, and deeply contested. They both reinforced and confounded given designations and divides of various kinds—internationally regional (e.g. South Asian, Tamil diaspora in Asia, North American), intranationally regional (e.g. south Indian), religious, linguistic, transnational (e.g. Tamil diaspora more broadly), etc.—and forged a fraught but invigorating polyvocal public in the process.

No site was more central to producing a popular commitment to being South Asian American even as it repeatedly recognized that any specific designation was insufficient and impossible. Actively recognizing this impossibility was part of its bid to make a mutinous, imaginative locus of belonging, as suggested by posts like "Which Term Do You Prefer" (Tripathi 2004, 19 comments), "Speaking of Self-Description: 'South Asian'" (Singh 2006, 409 comments), and "What Is Brown/Desi to You?" (Khan 2011, 52 comments). Blogger Tanzila "Taz" Ahmed (2012) explained in final post as SM closed shop, "This site provided a much needed space to dialogue and develop the South Asian American identity and, in many ways, set the benchmark with how the community voiced ourselves." The production of identification, belonging, and a jumping-off point for collective action is not only enhanced by, but *requires* space for discussion, difference, and personal and community development. Writing a couple years earlier in a post on when and how it is most productive to call out popular culture as racist, Ahmed explicitly staked out her personal investment in the multi-person blog and its relation to building a wider community. "I write on *Sepia Mutiny* to tell the counter narrative of our South Asian American community. We are putting words in the form of a blog to narrate our

community." Building South Asian America in the early 2000s was an ongoing and imaginative project, and *Sepia Mutiny* was on the front line.

Using a non-hierarchical model, the editorial mandate was simple: 90% of each blogger's posts had to cover things of interest to "South Asians living in North America" (Singh 2017). Otherwise, bloggers were given wide latitude to write about what interested them, leading to a "good mixture of the serious and popular" (Vikaas, 2017). Posts ranged from pop culture commentary and activist happenings, to global, local, and national politics; from philosophical musings on South Asian American reality show contestants to fractious discussions on immigration, the War on Terror, and how to ethically respond to human rights crises around the world. Although started by Indian Americans, the Mutineers—what the bloggers call themselves—came to include people of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and European descent; Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and un-affiliated; straight and queer; Republicans and Democrats; novelists, DJs, tech entrepreneurs, journalists, activists, lawyers, academics, artists, and a rocket scientist. This was not by accident, but involved serious effort among its founders and Mutineers to seek out and support bloggers with backgrounds different from their own. Critical gaps were acknowledged, such as a lack of bloggers from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds. New bloggers and invested commenters were observed and offered a chance to guest blog before they were inducted as full Mutineers. Ahmed (2012) articulated this approach most clearly in her farewell post. "I always approached blogging on this site with three things in mind – 1) write about the Desi-American experience, the narrative I was yearning for, 2) a 1:1 ratio of pop to politics posts, and 3) find the marginalized Desis and give them space." Actively finding and providing a platform for "the marginalized Desis" was always a central and constitutive element of *Sepia Mutiny*.

In a wistful comment to a subreddit post on r/ABCDesis[42] in 2017(b), co-founder Anna

John looked back on the confluence of different kinds of labor and united passion that made

Sepia Mutiny possible.

> I'd love to create something new, but I can't do it alone. The original site and
> community soared because we had technical geniuses to run everything
> beautifully, while I could focus on writing, community management, and
> finding/mentoring guest bloggers. (ABCDesis 2017b).

In a similarly appreciative post penned on the occasion of *Sepia Mutiny*'s third anniversary, John

more specifically praised co-founders Abhi Tripathi as the sites "visionary" and Manish Vij as its

"technical wizard." Vij designed the early site, arduously hand-coding much of it and setting its

visual tone; he provided both services for free (Singh 2017). A couple of the founders who had

made some money during the Dot-com boom of the 1990s covered most of the early and ongoing

server and web hosting costs, although five Paypal donation drives over SM's eight-year run

bolstered its funds. During the final "pledge drive," Tripathi (2011) explained that server costs

were $65 per month, which he had been paying out-of-pocket for half a year. *Sepia Mutiny*,

according to its founding vision and against the larger trend across blogs and websites during the

same period (2004-2012), remained advertising-free no matter what the cost. As with the South

Asian Journalists Association, a variety of existing resources—technical skills, personal contacts,

access to capital, mentoring ability, and competence in community management—were brought

together to make *Sepia Mutiny* a reality and a success. What is more, an ethic of care and a

powerful drive to connect, to build cultural and technical connectivity, undergirded the

phenomena.

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[42] ABCD has typically stood for the sometimes playful, sometimes cruel title American-Born Confused Desi, as referenced by Tanuja Desai Hidier's (2003) acclaimed coming-of-age novel, *Born Confused*. The ABCDesis subreddit, however, leaves "its interpretation up to our members. Confused or Confident. Charismatic, Creative, or Cunning, we are what we make of ourselves and every experience is different."

By the time it shut down, *Sepia Mutiny* had sent Mutineers to cover the National Conventions with press badges and supported a massive bone marrow registry drive among South Asian Americans. They extensively covered several "scandals" in South Asian America, offering clear and carefully-cited explanations for how ordinary events, organizations, and beliefs in this interlinked set of communities, often understood as "merely" cultural, had political connections and implications (Ahmed 2012). In a thousand mundane ways, they implicitly and explicitly complicated what it might mean to be brown, desi, or South Asian, as well as American. Its impact for the communities it served cannot be overstated.

Already organizations, particularly in major metropolitan cities, had begun to gather under a coalitional South Asian American banner in the 1980s and 90s, but often without the label "South Asian." This was particularly true of marginalized communities such as survivors of domestic assault, or taxi drivers and domestic workers (Khandelwal 2002; Das Gupta 2006; Mathew 2005) who organized on the basis of class as opposed to along the linguistic, national, and religious fault lines that have, traditionally, heavily influenced the politics of first generation South Asian Americans. US cultural workers, intellectuals, journalists, and activists established small but influential organizations and publications (Prashad 2012, 34). Eventually, a slate of progressive South Asian advocacy organizations, mostly run by civic and commercial leaders, arose in the early 2000s. They culminated, in 2008, with the establishment of the National Coalition of South Asian Organizations (NCSAO) and the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA). More recently, progressive organizers have started pulling together South

Asian and desi American youth solidarity summits[43] in major metropolitan areas across North America.

The seminal text of this movement was Vijay Prashad's (2000a), *The Karma of Brown Folk*. A prolific America-based Indian academic, journalist, and public intellectual, Prashad is deeply concerned about the apolitical, neoconservative, and new age orientalist positioning of many affluent South Asian Americans and cosmopolitan transnational South Asians. The book is inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and its initial question, "how does it feel to be a problem?" In homage and reply, Prashad (2000a) demands Asian Americans—and especially South Asian Americans—contend with another defining question of racial positioning and the upkeep of white supremacy: "How does it feel to be a solution?" (viii). What then follows is a series of essays building connections across historical moments and social movements to level a critique of South Asian American complicity with what Prashad sees as facile American multiculturalism (Prashad 1999). That is, an essentializing view of cultural identity that allows for some communities, those deemed essentially helpful and upright if still inferior, a form of partial participation in American society. South Asian Americans labor is welcome, for example, while their full access to cultural citizenship is permanently blocked. A call to political and coalition-building arms, the text is a plea for the souls of South Asian Americans. For although the "social retreat sanctioned by U.S. orientalism provides a space to develop a life apart," those who participate will never fully be accepted as Americans. By assuming the position of lackey race to a white supremacist society, he argues, South Asian Americans sign a "social compact [that] reproduces anti-black racism" (xi).

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[43] These include Youth Solidarity Summer in New York, RadDesi Summer in Texas, Organizing Youth in California, Bay Area Solidarity Summer, South Asian Summer Solidarity for Youth in Boston, Desh Pardesh in Toronto, Chicago Desi Youth Rising, and Southern Desi Summer in Atlanta.

Many heard Prashad's call. Indeed, *The Karma of Brown Folk* came up across interviews for this dissertation (Desai 2015; Vikaas 2017; Singh 2017) and is a touchstone for a generation of South Asian American activists and intellectuals who came of age in the 1990s and since. The vast majority of those who have discussed the text with me, however, have had the inclination toward and access to graduate education. The text is intended to be accessible. Thus, while Prashad uses the clunky and clinical sounding "South Asian American" from time to time in the *The Karma of Brown Folk*, his hopes are pinned on the term "desi" as a locus of identification and activism. He uses it throughout the text as an inclusive, enthusiastic, and galvanizing call to the reader. "Since we, as desis," Prashad (2000a) writes in *Karma*, "are used as a weapon in this war against black America, we must in good faith refuse this role and find other places for ourselves in the moral struggles that grip the United States" (ix). Here, desi is used as an assumed collective and organic term, equivalent to "black," and similarly catalyzed by awareness, by political and activist intentions.

Prashad actively promoted the term desi across books, interviews, and organizing venues.

> I love the word 'desi.' It is so beautiful. […] Phrases like African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, etc. are bureaucratic words that do not hold within them the revolutionary aspirations and histories of a people (categorized but not controlled). I prefer words like Black, desi, Latino, Chicano, because these words raise associations of struggles, such as the Black Power movement ('Black is Beautiful,' etc.), the Chicano struggles of the farm workers, of La Raza, and what not. Desi seems to be a similar word, one filled with so much historical emotion. And again, it is an ironic word, because it means of the homeland, but it does not say what that homeland is. We who use it do not hearken back to the 'homeland' of the subcontinent, because we are generally not nationalistic in that sense. Our homeland is an imaginary one that stretches from Jackson Heights to the Ghadar Party, from the rallies against Dotbusters to the Komagata Maru, from the 1965 Immigration Act to Devon Street. (Prashad 2000b)

Desi, for Prashad, is a concept forged out of intersectional awareness and coalitional struggle, producing national and transnational political connections, awareness, and activism. It turns the

idea of homeland into a concept that is constantly being co-erased and co-produced by all those who choose to participate. This is crucial, as such a move responds to the critique at the center of discomfort with the category "South Asian," that it is "imported from academia, is purely geographic, artificial, recent and entirely *devoid of any imaginative force*" (Vassanji 1996, 116, emphasis added). In Prashad's telling, desi is alive where South Asian is lifeless; desi brims with affective resonance, self-identification, and participatory and imaginative fervor.

The Karma of Brown Folk, published in 2000, was written well before 9/11 and its fallout. In the wake of a changed political landscape, Prashad followed up with a second popular-scholarly book on South Asian America in 2012, *Uncle Swami*. While desi does appear in the text, the book overwhelmingly focuses on the post-colon portion of its title: *South Asian in America Today*. In spite of Prashad's love of desi, it has significant limitations like any term for this community. It rings very strangely in the ears of non-diasporic South Asians, for one. Not unlike the English word country indicates "nation" as well as "rural land, separate from the urban" and thus "not urbane," the use of desi in South Asia has similar bumpkin-like connotations. Its use as a hip coalitional term (Shankar 2008; Sharma 2010) has much to do with transnational circuits of migration, diasporic youth cultures, and the access to social capital that facilitates such. In this way, it emphasizes class and generational divisions, setting us cosmopolitan South Asian transnationals as a separate category, with a different vernacular.

Perhaps the more indicting critique is the way in which desi means "of the homeland," even if intended as inclusive and an invitation to imaginative play, for only those who speak Sanskrit-based South Asian languages, such as Hindi, Punjabi, and Bengali. Commenting on a post on "Speaking of Self-Description: 'South Asian'" (Singh 2006), Tamil-heritage Mutineer Vivek explains in a comment that his "mother has no problem with the term South Asian. But

after three years of me throwing around the term Desi, she finally got fed up with it and told me that to her the term Desi meant North-Indian/Pakistani Hindi/Urdu speakers." Dravidian languages, which are from an entirely different language family, dominate in the four southern states of India. In India and abroad, the conflation of India or South Asia with north Indian culture, Hindi, and Hindi-language media (e.g. Bollywood) is an infuriating flash-point for many Indian and Sri Lankan Dravidian-language speakers.

More than bowing to these specific critiques of the term "desi," Prashad (2012) runs with the terminology "South Asian American" in *Uncle Swami* because of a shift in the naming practices of university and community organizing groups. Prashad traces the coming of age of cohort of young people raised by immigrant parents. In their childhood years, most heritage-relevant events consisted of apolitical cultural or religious gatherings to meet other young people from a similar, limited background. "When these young people went to college in the 1990s, a new form of racial belonging emerged. They became 'South Asian American,' a term that does not refer to a place (South Asia) but to a sense of community among children of parents from the various countries of South Asia" (13). Here again South Asia is a geographical marker that is more than or not geographical at all. "These parents might not have that much in common (Sri Lankans would not meet socially with Pakistanis), but their children saw the connections intuitively" (13). While I argue this overstates the generational argument, and implicitly overstates 9/11 as a turning point in South American's racialization, these reasons are certainly part of the shift toward South Asian American as a meaningful and widely-used term.

Similarly, the earlier telling of events in South Asian American activism features a curious leap. An earlier politics of working class and more marginalized groups within South Asian America, who were often uncomfortable with the label South Asian American and had

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more pressing concerns on their minds, gave way to one focused on national policy decisions, and pulling in highly educated, often upper-middle class young people. The latter has more readily taken up the mantle of South Asian American. How was this accomplished? This chapter argues that *Sepia Mutiny* played a crucial role in establishing a complex space of dialogue and belonging for a progressive, young professional generation of people of Indian, Pakistani, and other national descents to imagine themselves—in ways political, mundane, fun, and serious—as South Asian Americans. The site reflected and produced not a single identity, but a worldview, in that it was an entire, complex, multi-faceted community's (or world's) view on a wide variety of globe-spanning subjects.

The point here is not that South Asian American is a better term than desi, or vice versa. The key is that any term used for this community was and is vexed. No single term is sufficient, especially without a larger community dialogue about terminology. Instead, the case of *Sepia Mutiny* highlights how the simultaneous impossibility and necessity of naming the community was used as generative, imaginative fuel to capacity build a provocative and playful movement. This movement worked to legitimize the ordinariness of South Asian American identity, while advocating for a hopeful, radical politics of racial and religious coalition. *Sepia Mutiny* was ground zero for this ordinary-radical labor. It balanced these concerns by producing a polyvocal public.

Today, the South Asian American movement is still largely led by and comprised of high caste, upper class activists, but it has also become increasingly aware of and distressed by this limitation. It has grown more invested in "find[ing] the marginalized Desis," and "giv[ing] them space" (Ahmed 2012) and support. Unpacking the SM phenomenon reveals a fundamental productive tension of ordinary-radical activism at the heart of the South Asian American

formation specifically, and the production and the management of identities and publics more broadly.

Orienting Media

The backlash against South Asian Americans after 9/11 was a key moment fomenting new coalitional activities—particularly among previously well-protected communities—through a shared experience among South Asian Americans of racialization and violence. Both the unethical treatment of Muslim American communities and pro-South Asian American advocacy, however, built upon ground work laid over preceding decades, potentially centuries. Neither the symbolic violence that followed in 9/11's wake, nor the responding upsurge in activism can fully explain *Sepia Mutiny*'s success. There were other blogs with similar topical mandates, some even multi-person. Moreover, a broad and politically conscious coalition of South Asian Americans had been attempted previously (and concurrently with SM) under the identity term desi, but it never fully found its legs. What made *Sepia Mutiny*'s foray into building a new South Asian American politics and community seem more relevant to the thousands of readers it would eventually draw?

A month and a half after *Sepia Mutiny*'s closure on April 1, 2012, three of its founders spoke on the South Asian Journalists Association podcast, giving an "exit interview." SAJA member and journalist Arun Venugopal, a regular contributor to NPR with ties to other publications including *The New York Times*, PBS, and *The Guardian*, framed the import of SM, stating:

> For much of the nearly 8 years of its existence *Sepia Mutiny* was a singular phenomenon tackling just about every South Asian diasporic issue there was, serious or inane. In the process it established itself as a model of intelligent interactive blogging and the voice of a generation. Those of us who worked

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> elsewhere in the desi media including at SAJA looked on with a combination of admiration and envy. How are they so prolific? What makes their readers so damn smart? How do they get so many comments? (Sreenivasan and Venugopal 2012)

SM was an orienting phenomenon in his life, now resoundingly absent. He emphasizes that what he went there for was not just the posts written by specific bloggers, but the diversity, intensity, and intelligence of the comments. He did not go there for one perspective on breaking news, events, and popular culture. He went there for a complete picture with a variety of intelligent voices, including reader voices.

When asked by Venugopal in the same podcast how and when the founders knew the site was a "big deal," the Mutineers first joke about finding out that the CIA and State Department had listed Sepia Mutiny as recommended reading, evidently to help one build an understanding of South Asian and South Asian American culture. They discuss how they had repeatedly come to find South Asian and South Asian American celebrities—Kal Penn, Aziz Ansari, Anoushka Shankar—were avid readers and sometimes commenters. Even non-South Asian American public figures dropped by, as when sociologist Robert Putnam responded to a post about hisnewly-released research on diversity and civic engagement (Singh 2007a).[44] Some South Asian heritage celebrities (diplomatically left unnamed) wanted to be Mutineers, but were always politely turned down. The bloggers and their posts had even been quoted in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Times of India,* with founder Tripathi once appearing on a *BBC* radio show (Tripathi 2005).

These were secondary matters to them, however. Instead, Tripathi spoke with excitement about how, when the *BBC* or *New York Times* came to the site for, say, commentary on the

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[44] Putnam leaves the 60th of the post's 97 comment. "Please forgive an outsider for listening in," he begins, "but this is the most serious and thoughtful of the dozens of blog discussions of my paper that I've read so far." He then responds to methodological questions brought up by earlier commenters and further elaborates on what he believes are the most interesting implications from his results.

Dutch Mohammed cartoon controversy, or Benazir Bhutto's assassination, such papers of record quoted the blog:

> The commenters to the post were getting cited! The comments themselves were the source of so much intelligence and learning. And around that time that's when I thought this is big. The community is generating ideas. (Sreenivasan and Venugopal 2012)

Pseudonymous Ennis continued on this theme, noting that the blog was even, sometimes, one or two steps ahead of the mainstream media in its reporting.

Most tellingly, Anna John finishes this anecdote by picking up on the thread of an active and contentious readership. In relation to a scandal eventually covered by *The New York Times* in which an Indian American Harvard undergraduate student's novel was found to be largely plagiarized, Anna John wrote a post asking for patience and calm while the facts were coming to light. In response, she received hate mail on every side of the issue—detractors of the plagiarist and of the supporters, variously asserting it was her regional, or nationalist, or religious bias which led to Anna's shameful actions. She recalled, with stinging clarity, how one person expressed their displeasure by referencing a separate heartbreaking post Anna John had written about a traumatic incident during her college years. The angry emailer wrote, "I used to feel sorry for you, but now I'm glad you got raped. You deserved it" because, according to the complainant, Anna's post asking for patience meant she was pro-plagiarism (John 2012b).

The Labor and Stakes of Polyvocal Publics

What is most immediately striking about this anecdote is, of course, the mental-emotional labor and risk undertaken by the Mutineers, especially Anna John. This is most pertinent to John, who wrote by far the longest and most painfully personal posts (as well as many short and humorous ones). A cursory glance at the twenty most commented posts in the history of the blog

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(see Table 2.1) shows that John wrote 12 of them, including the single most commented post, which garnered 1,347 responses. This lines up neatly with other literature on the import of emotional labor providing important affective fuel for online activism and the toll it can take (Lopez 2014), as well as how such labor online, particularly when undertaken by women of color can be underappreciated and erased (Nakamura 2016; Adair and Nakamura 2017).

The Mutineers I interviewed were concerned, but uncertain about a gendered dynamic to the ill treatment the SM bloggers faced online, conceding that John's posts were some of the most personal, and that the most serious attack on a Mutineer occurred when the pseudonymous male co-founder, Ennis Singh Mutinywale, was doxed, with his name being publicly revealed (Singh 2017; Vikaas 2017; Ganeshananthan 2017). The threat, moreover, was enhanced by internal policing among diasporic Sikh communities, of which Ennis is a recognizable member. Yet the tenor of abuse lobbied at John remains disturbing. John, a journalist by trade, was also doxed, in that her public name across platforms and outlets is comprised of her first and middle name. Once her full name was revealed, it was used to publish her parents' names and address on a blog dedicated to harassing the Mutineers (Singh 2017).

Anna John may have also been a prime target as her posts were, from the very beginning, marked by an emphasis on and celebration of difference. She is Malayalee (therefore south Indian) and Christian, and was the only woman of the original bloggers. The management of difference also complicated Taz Ahmed's (2012) experiences with harassment as a Mutineer. As she explained looking back on her run with *Sepia Mutiny*, she had to give herself "the self pep talk before every remotely Muslim post – 'Fuck all the trolling Islamophobic haters – as long as they're commenting, there's an important reason to keep blogging.'" Ahmed was also doxed,

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along with John and Ennis; her stable online persona, Taz, was publicly connected to her full

name, Tanzila Ahmed.[45]

Table 2.1 Top 20 most commented posts

Date	Author	Title	Number of comments[46]	Post word count
7/28/2007	A N N A	Whoa-- is dating White not right?	1347	8798
8/1/2007	A N N A	Who is SKINNY? (Updated)	785	6772
8/22/2007	A N N A	Are you in an Aviyal Relationship?[47]	723	8083
10/21/2007	A N N A	Bobby [Jindal] Makes History	659	3102
8/23/2006	amardeep	An Adopting Mother Confronts the Complexion Gap	625	2594
5/14/2007	A N N A	Why Does Caste Matter to US?	582	2498
4/25/2007	Ennis Singh Mutinywale	Can't buy me love?[48]	577	2842
8/13/2007	A N N A	Hyderabadis in Blackface?	568	1498
4/24/2006	A N N A	Kaavya is Innocent, Until Proven Otherwise[49]	564	9990
1/8/2008	A N N A	Cricket: Ponting tells on Singh, is now that annoying kid we all hate for being lame.	556	7256
7/14/2006	amardeep	"Black Men, Asian Women" Article by Rinku Sen	552	3545

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[45] Ahmed now publicly uses her full name across a variety of platforms.

[46] The comment numbers here are likely slightly undercounted in that a not insignificant number of comments to *Sepia Mutiny* posts were deemed inappropriate and deleted by the bloggers and admins. The most common reasons were insulting language and attempting to derail the conversations.

[47] In the post, John contemplates joining Facebook, and is convinced of its merits when she learns of a Facebook group for Indians whose "partner is Indian but is from a different state in India or is from a different religion or caste. This type of relationship can't be called interracial, so it can be called an 'Aviyal Relationship.'" Aviyal is a South Indian mixed vegetable dish with a coconut sauce base.

[48] Singh discusses an academic paper about how money, race, and height impact online dating prospects.

[49] Kaavya Viswanathan's young adult novel, *How Opal Mehta Got Kissed, Got Wild, and Got a Life* (2006), came under heavy scrutiny for heavy plagiarism from a variety of sources. Written while she was in high school, the book came out while Viswanathan was a sophomore at Harvard.

7/12/2007	A N N A	You are Christians and Fools.[50]	531	5408
11/12/2007	amardeep	Just Your Typical, Slightly Snarky Arranged Marriage Post	488	3287
12/3/2007	A N N A	Turban + Beard = No <3?	467	4985
9/28/2007	A N N A	"...given up hiding and started to fight"[51]	445	26395
12/8/2006	siddhartha	Oh, All Right. But You Asked For It[52]	444	2235
4/15/2006	Taz	Sepia Destiny[53]	441	3179
6/18/2007	Abhi	When landlords get all up in your bidness[54]	428	2427
1/11/2007	naina	As American As Amit, Aasif, or Barack	427	2536
8/29/2008	A N N A	My PUMA[55] is flummoxed by Palin.	425	4837

For John, however, the toll of her emotional labor and abuse was far outweighed by the value of passionate, polyvocal, contentious discussion. The two are deeply intertwined in that, at every organizational level, the Mutineers opted to take on more work to support a more powerfully multi-perspectival experience. Mutineer V.V. "Sugi" Ganeshananthan (2017) called this *Sepia Mutiny*'s commitment to being "epically pluralistic." When something post-worthy happened and because there was no editorial oversight, multiple bloggers often began writing up posts on that single topic, only finding out when someone hit publish. Sometimes, the other draft posts were scrapped, but more often, there was such a diversity of opinion among the Mutineers

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[50] John, a Catholic, castigates protesters who consider themselves "patriots and Christians" for trying to shout down the first Hindu clergyman to offer the morning prayer for the US Senate.

[51] In this post, John details three incidents from different schools she attended as a child where she was marked as Indian (as in foreign) by her teachers and peers, asked to explain their stereotypes and misunderstandings of what that meant, and ostracized for their misunderstandings. She then compares how that felt to realizing the women bloggers and commenters on Jezebel, while "smart, defiant and allergic to bullshit" and "fierce" on many subjects, could be just as ignorant and cruel as her childhood tormenters when it came to discussing news related to India.

[52] The post humorously responds to a *BBC* article titled "Condoms 'too big' for Indian men" (2006).

[53] Ahmed muses on the rules for "dating desi," joking that the blog should include a tab for dating site *Sepia Destiny*. Even without a formal space, many relationships and marriages developed from the community surrounding the site (Vikaas 2016; Singh 2016).

[54] Tripathi discusses a *Christian Science Monitor* article on the preference of many landlords to not to rent to single women in India, although they mind less if the women in question are White.

[55] PUMA is a play on "Ma" as in mother, as well as the acronym PUMA, for Party Unity My A**.

that all of the posts went up (Sreenivasan and Venugopal 2012), and multiple follow-up posts might come out as events developed (Vikaas 2017). While Abhi Tripathi claimed that at its height, he was spending 6-7 hours a day on *Sepia Mutiny*, Anna John (2012) put the number at up to 15 hours a day during the blog's peak in 2007.

The majority of those hours were spent moderating the conversation in the comments, not only for her own posts, but for other Mutineers. Curating that conversation, providing a safe space for "an elevated level of discourse" and responding nearly around the clock to their continent- and globe-spanning readership was crucial to producing the mutiny she wanted, particularly since, according to her, it was the quality of the discourse alone that "attracted more Mutineers" (John 2012). Ganeshananthan (2017) praised John's skills and attentiveness in relation to curating the comments on others' posts. The mutiny was, as one of John's reading's of the blog's title suggests, a "brown uprising" against South Asian Americans' treatment and erasure in the American mainstream. Yet they were also "mutinying against the idea that we were going to be quiet" (Sreenivasan and Venugopal 2012). To make sure the many marginalized voices within South Asian America were no longer forced to be quiet, John's labors suggest, involved a great deal of work beyond what we might imagine is entailed in the "job description" of blogger. John not only wrote and curated comments, she actively sought to cultivate new Mutineers as bloggers and community members.

Table 2.2 Posts by year

Year	Number of posts	Average word count per post	Average number of comments per post
2004	435	1388	6
2005	1263	2313	22
2006	1122	3213	59
2007	817	3354	90
2008	603	3717	63

2009	464	3412	54
2010	312	3261	40
2011	184	2923	18
2012	49	3861	12

Note: 2004 and 2012 were partial years. The first post went live July 30, 2004. The last post is dated May 4, 2012.

Here, a reading of the blog's title is helpful. *Sepia Mutiny* references the first united South Asian military effort against the British as well as the hues of brown of aging photographs. It refuses to name a specific South Asian country as a source of affiliation. It highlights brown-ness as a unifying and racially coalitional concept. The title suggests, with its connotations of nostalgia, the maintenance of ineffable yet meaningful connections that warp but also last, even sometimes deepening over time. It plays on the British (rather than Subcontinental) name for the historical event, the Sepoy Mutiny, signifying a greater familiarity with diasporic terms and a desire to confront and upend legacies of colonization[56]. From this inclusive, evocative, and heated platform, the Mutineers overtly advocated for the idea and identity of being South Asian American, with several posts over the years and innumerable comments across a sizeable portion of all posts dedicated to adjudicating productive community terminology. I argue, in particular, they did this by promoting *Sepia Mutiny* as a polyvocal public. This included the enthusiastic use and debate of multiple identity terms. It entailed laboring toward "epic pluralism" constantly, from political perspectives to identity positions, to what topics could be considered "South Asian American." It involved cultivating bloggers from a variety of South Asian backgrounds, and providing extra encouragement and support for those who were perceived as marginalized within

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[56] Another reading of the use of colonial references in the titles of this blog, *Chapati Mystery*, and similar, might suggest, instead, an unwillingness to confront legacies of empire from which those who have the power to critique and analyze often partially benefit (Aouragh and Chakravvarty 2016).

this already minority community. Sepia Mutiny did this while simultaneously arguing that South Asian America was utterly normal and importantly radical.

This commitment to pluralism carried through its design as well. From the beginning, *Sepia Mutiny* featured a rotating banner, with each one depicting a sepia mutiny in one form or another (John 2007). Earlier banners featured the title in a bulbous font with white outlines, overlaying clever remixes of and references to South Asia, South Asian culture, and depictions of South Asian culture. Old film stars and contemporary activists, artists, and writers shared the role of banner fodder with *Johnny Quest*'s orientalist character, Hadji. This practice would eventually give way to a permanent logo, maroon letters with Sepia stacked above Mutiny, all title case. The "i"s of both words replaced with an authoritative, dagger-like maroon pen. These maroon letters appeared as if cut out from a rotating selection of original art banners designed by readers and friends of Mutiny. Beyond the banners, during its active years the site always included ways to participate on the homepage, including a tab for sending tips. Eventually, the front page featured new posts on the left, with two running tickers on the right. One showed comments as they were posted, noting the commenter, post title, and how recently it was published. A second offered a running list of news stories as submitted by readers.

South Asian America as a Network of Negotiations

Sepia Mutiny advocated for the concept of South Asia America while subverting its most salient critiques—that South Asia is a facile term born of upper middle class diasporic political correctness. It is a thinly veiled cover for India, thus for Indian Americans and for Hindu hegemony, and, among Indians, North Indian hegemony. That, like the adoption of many pan-ethnic coalitions, it would lead the community to focus exclusively on politics at home in the

U.S., taking the sting out of its critique of issues abroad (Kurien 2004; Carsignol 2014; Wildman 2001; Singh 2007). I do not mean to suggest that they overcame all of these limitations, but rather that they put a tremendous amount of elaborate, sustained, and often affective labor behind maintaining a space where it was possible to subvert them, where it was encouraged to repeatedly confront them, and that this is critical in building a set of publics that bring the concept of South Asian Americanness into a more popular and personal legibility than ever before. In other words, the only way *Sepia Mutiny* could successfully advocate for the concept of South Asia America as a living, breathing identity and community was by constantly critiquing it. Only in doing so was *Sepia Mutiny* able to produce a space where South Asian American-ness could be articulated as an interconnected identity co-constituted, variously, through a complex of affiliations—at multiple political and geographic scales.

In so many ways, *Sepia Mutiny*, has deep resonance with Nancy Fraser's (1990) crucial articulation of counterpublics. She defines them as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (67). What, then, is revealing about this case study? First it helps us consider the varieties of intentional and elaborate, mid-level curatorial and affective labor that go into the maintenance of publics as well as deliberation, authorship, and discussion. It helps us better understand how geographies of belonging—in both their physical and conceptual aspects—are key parts of so-called "virtual" communities (boyd 2010; Parks 2010), not identarian additions to more universal and fundamental characteristics (Habermas 1991). Indeed, as Tripathi explains in the long comment discussion (i.e. 409 comments over 52 hours) that follows Singh's (2006) post questioning the value of "South Asian" as a means of self-description, identity is contextual and multiple. One

identity term does not mean more to him than another, but are all meaningful in different contexts. Meaning is produced out of the negotiation between terms, taken up in multiple registers. *Sepia Mutiny* emphasizes multiplicity and refusal of closure (Prashad 1999), allowing us to more deeply consider non-deliberative and non-decision-based idioms of expression in relation to publics.

Sepia Mutiny also reminds us that the formation of contentious publics is not only crucial against authoritarian regimes (Zayani 2015; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010), but internal contention is necessary for the production of identities and publics (Yang 2009). Indeed, in the case of Anna John's appreciation for her disturbing hate mail, we see contention and multiplicity are at times far more important than deliberation. It implies how all publics, including those with enough hegemonic dominance to be considered "the public," to be perceived as unitary and univocal, are constituted through the concerted interplay of smaller publics (Squires 2002). Indeed, that is the trick of hegemonic publics; their dominance allows them to seem like "the public," with its "public opinion," rather than a complex negotiation among many contesting formations. *Sepia Mutiny* was not one public, then, but produced by the many people who came to read only certain bloggers, or sought to self-identify and organize around terms other than South Asian American, including brown, desi, and various national and religious affiliations.

The term polyvocal publics helps us build useful connections with the discussion from chapter one on the South Asian Journalists Associations' podcast. The polyvocal podcast similarly banks on the understanding, expertise, and collectivity that is only possible when conversations occur between, and are led by, a variety of voices. Although Sreenivasan is a constant presence, he frequently has other subject experts cohost or facilitate the conversation. This kind of podcast talk and blogging reminds us that voice is connected with recognition (e.g.

"to give them a voice") and the production of publics by addressing them (Warner 2002).

Emphasizing voice in both chapters demands we consider the importance of listening (Lacey

2013), the important part that readers and lurkers play in a formation such as South Asian

America. The first chapter also connects voice to questions of affect, homeliness, emotional

excess, and closeness. The timbres, cadences, and accents of diasporic voices *talking together*

helped create a sense of homely sociability for the podcast, rendering those far away in distance,

close and intimate. Polyvocal blogging uses terms, turns of phrase, and topical intimacy to

produce an excess of familiarity and meaning. The latter is critical for a community that felt so

underserved and disconnected.

Polyvocal publics are not merely additive, or publics constituted of multiple smaller

publics, or publics with ornamentation laid on top of universal concerns and identities. This maps

usefully onto Vijay Prashad's (1999) argument for polyculturism over multiculturalism.

"Multiculturalism, in my estimation, emerged as the liberal doctrine designed to undercut the

radicalism of anti-racism. Instead of anti-racism, we are fed a diet of cultural pluralism and

ethnic diversity" (189). For example, "In Thatcherite England, the turn to ethnicity from around

the time of the Festival of India in the early 1980s took some steam out of the omnibus

anticolonial political category 'Black'" (199). In other words, the ascendance of more pleasant

categories of difference, such as ethnicity and diaspora, often allows for a simultaneous turn

away from forthright discussions of race and racism, obscuring power relations.

Instead of multiculturalism, Prashad advocates for polyculturalism, a term he bases off

Robin Kelley's (1999) concept of "polyrhythms—many different rhythms operate together to

produce a whole song" (Prashad 1999, 196). Polyvocal blogging similarly produces a new whole

in the form of *Sepia Mutiny*. He continues, explaining that

A polyculturalist sees the world as constituted by the interchange of cultural forms, while multiculturalism sees the world as already constituted by different (and discrete) cultures that we can place into categories and study with respect (and thereby retain 1950s relativism and pluralism in a new guise). (197)

The polyculturalist thus sees difference not as something additive, or extra, but as the meat of the world. Although Kelley coined polyrhythm to eschew the concept of hybridity, the resulting term polyculture has meaningful resonance with Marwan Kraidy's (2005) use of hybridity, which emphasizes appreciating the interaction of difference without losing sight of the power relations that shape the interaction. To illustrate his charge for an appreciation of polyculture, Prashad then draws attention to how a variety of institutions and concepts heavily associated with "the East" or "the West" were produced out of the dialectical interaction of many institutions, cultures, and individuals. For example, he highlights the founding of Yale University using funds acquired through the British colonization of South Asia, or Jesuit influences on modern Confucianism (197). The lens of polyvocality similarly urges us to consider how South Asian America is forged from the interaction of many voices, including those seeking to control and manage South Asian bodies.

The Impossibility of a Name

Polyvocal publics are publics that cannot exist *except* as many-voiced. They are impossible, in the Derridean sense of "*sous rature*/under erasure." They are "inadequate yet necessary" (Saldívar 2015, 527). Their "erasure does not mark a lost presence. Rather, it marks the potential impossibility of presence altogether" (527). In the polyvocal public created around *Sepia Mutiny*, bloggers and readers were able to address and consider this impossibility, and make something productive and recuperative out of it, together. Although the constant effort toward multiplicity made building and managing SM laborious and, in the long run, impossible,

the Mutineers showed not only that they could sustain polyvocality, but also that it was necessary, beautiful, and sustaining.

Names and naming are central to this struggle, as evinced by Mutineer and English professor Amardeep Singh's (2007b) SM blog post turned journal article, "Names Can Wait": The Misnaming of the South Asian Diaspora in Theory and Practice." In it, he uses Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, *The Namesake* (2003), its movie adaptation (2006), and public discussions surrounding both as a jumping off point for a discussion of the second-generation, diasporic South Asian experience, and its vexed namelessness. In the end, the article argues for the reinvigoration of non-English language South Asian literary studies, and especially the study of non-English diasporic literature. Yet it does so by offering what feels like a deeply personal tale of fighting for belonging, inflected through the Lahiri novel and one of its key references, Russian author Nikolai Gogol (and his short story, "The Overcoat").

> Since "The Overcoat" is deeply invested in anonymity, which is at once spiritual and literal, the name "Gogol" is a perfect metonym for the strangeness of the Indian immigrant experience in the United States. As Lahiri shows, the child of immigrants begins in a kind of nowhere place. She is firmly of America, but is not quite an American, in part because she is not recognized as such by others. The child may have privileges—access to education, significant mobility—but she still has to first discover and then adapt to American values and life concepts, which are firmly resisted at home. She can buy herself the appropriate overcoat, but it will not be cheap, and it can always be stolen. Overcoats can be purchased and names can be changed, but it is difficult to change the fact that the city in which one lives remains cold. (17)

The deep and personal yet utterly mundane chill of being a child an immigrant or child of immigrants leaps off the page. The impossible "nowhere place" from which the child starts, and the unrelenting cold that must be faced starkly contrast the ordinary ways "the child" gets by nonetheless, an explorer in the land of her birth. According to Singh's reading, moreover,

namelessness and a lack of belonging are deeply tied. She does not fully belong because she lacks the right name, and thus, like a chill, is something she can never fully shake off.

Singh powerfully connects his reading of the novel, film, and public discourses about the film, including the negotiations Jhumpa Lahiri (Singh 2007b) and Kal Penn (Singh 2008) have made in relation to their own public names, to Gayatri Spivak's (1999) concept of catechresis (141-42). Literally, the Greek term translates as "abuse," but it is used to describe a semantic error, a misnaming. American Indians, for example, did not call themselves anything of the sort until Europeans came to the "New World" seeking passage to the "Indies" (itself a catechresis), and named all lands on the Western Hemisphere after the early 16th century Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci. These misnamings always reflects power inequalities, and can shape the futures of those misnamed in strange ways. Like Sree Sreenivasan in chapter one, Singh connects global issues, in this case misnaming, with the out-of-place feeling of being the odd person out in elementary school. The re-naming of South Asian American children by their teachers so that their names are more palatable, Singh argues, is just a more local instance of this often global maneuver, with similarly existential and mundane consequences. These stories bring to the fore the interconnection of multi-scalar forces in the management of belonging, and how at many levels South Asian Americans have no choice—much like many others—but to build identity out of impossibility.

Overtly discussing identity categories and, having many to work with, thus, was a necessary element for the formation of South Asian America. Of particular import were a small set of coalitional terms, each with its own merits and baggage: desi, South Asian, brown. While the sites founders had some preferences, the contents of the blog confirm that all three terms were simultaneously in use by many authors, often within a single post. Sometimes they allowed

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for specificity of meaning, at others, linguistic spice. The import of having a variety of identities and languages of identity to speak with is borne out by a correlational analysis of the words most likely to appear in any given post that includes such identity terms across the body of *Sepia Mutiny* posts (Table 2.3). Such an analysis allows for a high-level snapshot of the kinds of topics the Mutineers most frequently addressed using each term. For example, while the words most likely to appear in a post with the word "Indian" are fairly general, the words most highly correlated with each of the coalitional South Asian American identity terms vary meaningfully, suggesting there are significant differences in topic and tone. As previous discussions of "South Asian" and "desi" suggest, no one word is perfect, universally agreeable, or helpful in every circumstance.

South Asian has been primarily critiqued as a clinical term, rife with Cold War baggage, forced onto a region that is heavily dominated by India. In Anouck Carsignol's (2014) comprehensive piece on "The Construction, Mobilization and Limits of South Asianism in North America," she explains that "South Asianism, as an ideology, promotes the ideals of social justice and pluralism, in reaction to the homogenizing ideology of the State, the essentializing effects of multiculturalism, and the dangers of communalism, aggressive nationalism or religious radicalism" (13). In this sense, it becomes a reactive political project with high-minded ideals, but perhaps without organic and deeply personal substance. Then again, as Singh (2007b) and others argue, the current national divisions of the subcontinent are byproducts of colonialism, with names such India being examples of nonsense catechresis. Is South Asia, then, closer or farther away from some older and more meaningful sense of subcontinental belonging? In *Sepia Mutiny* posts, the words that appeared most frequently with "South Asian" reflect an investment in civics, history, theater, and academia. These posts tend toward discussions of high culture, but

also meta-identity. As much as some of these topics might sound stuffy and pretentious, the ability South Asian offers, to talk about identity at a meta-level, is invaluable.

Desi, as previously discussed, has a more organic ring to it for many transnational and diasporic South Asians. Nonetheless, it has less appeal among first-generation immigrants, South Asians based in South Asia, and those who are angered by Hindi hegemony in relation to all things Indian and South Asian. Some suggest it also masks internal diversity within South Asian communities (Carsignol 2014, 16). In *Sepia Mutiny*, desi was likely to appear in posts that discussed dating, family, friends, and community, reflecting personal negotiations, uncertainty, and an investment in experience. Qualitatively, it appeared to be a comfortable term for many, but also one they felt was limited to in-group usage because it is not well-known or well-understood outside (Singh 2006).

Table 2.3 Frequency of four terms of identity across all posts [in brackets] and correlations for the 35 terms most likely to co-appear with each term in a post

Indian [7181]	brown [1409]	desi [4135]	South Asian [2532]
india 0.37	subcontinent 0.27	desis 0.24	**theatre 0.43**
indians 0.29	continue 0.25	mtv 0.24	**community 0.36**
also 0.21	**identity 0.18**	**dating 0.23**	plays 0.35
one 0.21	much 0.18	**guess 0.22**	american 0.33
many 0.2	**christians 0.17**	**conversation 0.21**	southasians 0.32
american 0.19	just 0.17	**dad 0.21**	collection 0.29
subcontinent 0.18	americans 0.16	**date 0.19**	**work 0.26**
americans 0.17	billion 0.16	**rules 0.18**	**published 0.25**
even 0.17	level 0.16	**maybe 0.17**	**arts 0.24**
like 0.17	middle 0.16	really 0.17	**attention 0.24**
probably 0.17	**people 0.16**	**woman 0.17**	drama 0.23
well 0.17	probably 0.16	always 0.16	individuals 0.23
much 0.16	terms 0.16	interesting 0.16	issues 0.23
people 0.16	**arab 0.15**	think 0.16	saalt 0.23
see 0.16	**evil 0.15**	**community 0.15**	summer 0.23
way 0.16	**friends 0.15**	**experience 0.15**	**professional 0.22**
years 0.16	know 0.15	**feeling 0.15**	**together 0.22**
know 0.15	like 0.15	**friends 0.15**	**population 0.21**

often 0.15	never 0.15	certain 0.14	**historical 0.19**
seem 0.15	**personal 0.15**	dont 0.14	south 0.19
though 0.15	**speaking 0.15**	either 0.14	**youth 0.19**
first 0.14	type 0.15	etc 0.14	**generation 0.18**
great 0.14	**white 0.15**	like 0.14	**history 0.18**
hindi 0.14	**colonial 0.14**	**living 0.14**	african 0.17
just 0.14	dont 0.14	american 0.13	mandvi 0.17
part 0.14	east 0.14	feel 0.13	think 0.17
seems 0.14	even 0.14	lot 0.13	**academic 0.16**
think 0.14	issue 0.14	mentioned 0.13	americans 0.16
anand 0.13	**poverty 0.14**	never 0.13	**literary 0.16**
ancestry 0.13	think 0.14	**parents 0.13**	many 0.16
can 0.13	become 0.13	sort 0.13	**politics 0.16**
constitution 0.13	can 0.13	went 0.13	though 0.16
culture 0.13	clear 0.13	**different 0.12**	also 0.15
fact 0.13	experience 0.13	experiences 0.12	always 0.15
really 0.13	feel 0.13	get 0.12	asian 0.15

Note: If a term appeared 6 times in 1 post, it would count 6 times toward the overall frequency, but once for the sake of the by-post correlations. The numbers in brackets are frequencies. The number between 0 and 1 beside each term is the correlation. This analysis does not include comment text, just the text of blog posts. Emphasis added to draw attention to topical variation across terms.

Brown is the most recent entrant in the naming contest, reflecting a shifting politics of identification and coalition for South Asian Americans with Muslim and Arab Americans, as well as with Chicanx, Latinx, and Mexican and Central Americans. Although some feel this might reflect a desire by more model minorities to capitalize on the hip-ness of a performative racial politics (Chow 2017), others argue that nearly forty percent of Asian Americans—those of Filipino and South Asian heritage—are indeed brown (David 2016). The term suggests political solidarity with the struggles of other brown and Black people. Madumbi (2015) in particular highlights how "The vernacular discourses of Latino/a and South Asian American bloggers in the context of SB 1070, legislation recently passed in Arizona, illustrate how their shared experiences of discrimination (re-)articulate 'brownness' as a complex racial formation aligned with constructions of 'illegal' immigrants." Nonetheless, there is a risk that usage among South

Asian Americans may make it seem more acceptable for majority communities to call people of various communities brown, with potentially derogatory consequences (Carsignol 2014). Posts that included "brown" on *Sepia Mutiny* tended to feature terms of popular solidarity; Arab, White, colonial, poverty and Christian are notable examples. Like desi, many such posts had a spirit of joyful in-group camaraderie.

Political Beginnings

While some posts did tend toward a critique of neo-colonialism or empire, for the most part the mutiny was not against something so much as it was a mutiny for a new perspective. It did, however, start out as an oppositional venture with political activism at its core. Following a brief, playful post on July 30, 2004, the blog began posting regular content starting a week later, on August 7, putting out 173 posts in August of 2004. This period, notably, falls between the Democratic (July 26 - 29) and Republican National Conventions (August 30 - September 2) of 2004. At the latter, Arun Venugopal, who was covering the convention for Indian publication Rediff.com was detained for hours and became aware of Sepia Mutiny's existence because they covered the incident. Abhi Tripathi had also been paying attention to Venugopal, and one other South Asian heritage reporter, as the lone South Asian voices reporting on the DNC and run-up to the 2004 Presidential election (Sreenivasan and Venugopal 2012). It was in this climate that Tripathi began to email other South Asian American bloggers he admired who had been writing about politics with a proposition (John 2007). As Anna John explains:

> That's how you reached out to us. Because I had written about one or two events and I think Manish had as well and you approached us with that email. You were like, I have so many friends that are undecided and yet when I forward them your links they suddenly have a clearer sense of the person they want to vote for and wouldn't it be great if all of this was in one centralized location. It was absolutely inspired by campaign shenanigans in 2004. The Michigan GOP's [offensive]

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outsourcing website; a desi photojournalist, of desi descent, being barred from a Bush-Cheney event because she had a funny sounding name, or something. I first blogged about this on my personal blog. Manish had [as well]. I think Vinod may have. So we were all doing it, on our own, and it was Abhi who said it would be so much more powerful if we consolidated this and had one site for people to come to and learn about this. (Sreenivasan and Venugopal 2012)

While politics were certainly involved in the inception and duration of this transformative blog, they were a necessary but insufficient ingredient. As well as current anger and political motivation, the Mutineers relied on an existing network of bloggers and a critique they had been building for years without a venue to fully voice and explore it. When they came together, it was not to be the arbiter of South Asian American public opinion, but rather to be "a community" (Chayya 2012), a digital center of gravity for a group of disparate people longing for a place they felt was for them.

As *Sepia Mutiny* closed up shop, Anna John wrote two farewell posts. The first (March 30, 2012a) humorously ran through the responses she saw across social media about the blog ending and was supposed to be her last. It kept the real issues, to some degree, at arm's length. Two days later, however, she posted a searing nearly 7000-word post that worked through her darkest moments with the blog—as when she received emails encouraging her sexual assault—but also what she saw as *Sepia Mutiny*'s greatest achievements (April 1, 2012b). This post captures, in many ways, the affective excess that marks *Sepia Mutiny* and made it so pivotal in the formation of South Asian America. In it, she discusses spending six, even twelve hours at local SM meetups—events that took place in various metropolitan coastal cities and even, occasionally, sites like Ann Arbor, Michigan. She notes how many people found life partners through becoming involved in the SM community.

The most universal experience she touches on in relation to Sepia Mutiny's blog, however, is what it meant for people to find what they felt was, finally, *their* community.

The other thing I was so proud of was how we made people feel. We didn't intend to, but we created a fantastic, dynamic, global community. Whenever we had meetups, no matter what city I was in, I'd hear the same exact thing: "I never fit in with the other Desis in my life…(I wasn't in SASA[57]/I didn't go to Bhangra Blowout/I'm South Indian, not Punjabi or Guju[58]/I avoided Indus' shows like the plague/I grew up in a rural place where I was the only Indian kid for 50 miles)…but for the first time ever, I felt…welcome. Like I was where I belonged." That was gratifying.

[I'd hear that at] Every meetup I ever hosted or attended. Sometimes two or three times at the same event, independently, from different people I'd rush to shout out so they could immediately meet likeminded new friends. I'd hear it at non-SM events, too! DJ Rekha at the Black Cat? I heard it there, too. I'd say, "Yes, we understand completely, that's why we grabbed you and your similarly lonely counterpart from every college in the country. We all thought we were suffering alone, that we were the only ones. Nope. Just the only ones at our school. Then came Katamari[59] Mutiny, sweeping every oddball up and making them a Mutineer…that's how we rolled."

Offering a multiple-choice inventory of how the new community members felt they had not fit in before, this is clearly a refrain John heard over and over, and over again, but also one she never tired of. Indeed, I heard similar anecdotes when querying friends about *Sepia Mutiny*, and while interviewing SM's bloggers. Kishwer "Phillygrrl" Vikaas described excitedly reading the blog aloud with her brother before, years later, becoming a Mutineer (Vikaas 2017). One friend informed me that the moment she realized she could pursue a PhD in the humanities was when she found Amardeep Singh's posts on *Sepia Mutiny*. What is more, the mere act of caring about *Sepia Mutiny*, in John's eyes, made one a fellow mutineer, an immediate comrade in arms. There is little space in traditional public sphere theory, or the earliest discussions of "imagined communities" for this kind of emotional and identity surplus. Indeed, Sepia Mutiny actively worked against the bracketing of status differentials, and it was never intended to produce a unified body politic or cultural, national or otherwise.

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[57] South Asian Student Association.

[58] Guju is short for Gujarati, the main ethnic group of the Indian state of Gujarat.

[59] *Katamari Damacy* is a Japanese video game in which you control a character who rolls over objects to gather them together to produce enough mass to produce new stars.

Generative Mutinies

Mutinies, normally, are short-term uprisings against a specific source of power, meant to overthrow it. And, indeed, the rise of a coalitional South Asian America has had some momentous victories as discussed in the introduction. However, these were not quick victories, nor are the combatants now subdued and content. While Sepia Mutiny's moment has passed, members have gone on to found popular blog *The Aerogram*, the *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* podcast, and to pursue various kinds of activism and community organizing. Some went on to fruitful journalism careers, others to publish more novels, one to get tenure to teach and research about postcolonial literature, and another to do immigration law work. Many run private Facebook pages where they discuss the kinds of issues they had on *Sepia Mutiny* (ABCDesis 2017b), and a *Sepia Mutiny* Twitter account (@sepiamutiny) continues to curate links and conversations on issues connected to South Asian America.

Instead of focusing on the loss of *Sepia Mutiny* here, a point I will pick up in the conclusion, at the end of this chapter I turn to the generative aspects of connectivity and the South Asian American formation. The story of Salman Hussain, a Pakistani immigrant to the US, is instructive. He found *Chapati Mystery* (CM) while working a desk job at a midwestern company that produced paper goods. CM shares some features with *Sepia Mutiny*, especially its multi-person format and once-vibrant comments section, but is more scholarly and intellectual in tone. It is specifically Pakistan-focused. Several years later, Salman is a PhD student in Anthropology and History, and the sole reason CM continues to publish, although at a slower pace than before. For him, finding *Chapati Mystery* was not something that just happened to him, it was something that needed to happen.

Arriving in the US for a Master's in Business, over the course of several years he had tried to reconcile the ruptures of diasporic life. The confused way the US media spoke about Pakistan, South Asia, and the rest of the world, and the Pakistan he knew personally, seemed to be worlds apart. Slowly, he worked his way through US news media looking for news and non-fiction pieces that captured anything that seemed remotely familiar about Pakistan, South Asia, and the Global South in general. Disappointed, he then turned to international Western media, then South Asian media, and finally to *Chapati Mystery*, brought there by a blog roll link from another site. At first, he just lurked, devouring the posts and comments. Eventually his encyclopedic knowledge of the site and his own commenting led to his being made a moderator, then a blogger. He now posts and manages the blog using the moniker, "Patwari," meaning an official recordkeeper. For him, the site offered up something he desperately needed, a "migrant subjectivity" and "diasporic sensibility." It offered, rather than easy condemnation or celebration, or the ambivalent and strangely ahistorical picture of Pakistan he found in US news media, a "critical nostalgia and a critique of various things Pakistani." It was through joining an American community, in the form of the CM bloggers—which included South Asians, South Asian Americans, and a White American—that he finally felt at home. Like *Sepia Mutiny*, the multi-person blog *Chapati Mystery* was a profound, generative site of belonging, providing a kind of comfort and identification that ethnicities or nationalities, various mainstream media sites, and geographical claims alone could not. According to Hussain, "As it complicated the past and present in South Asia, it started to root me—in a rootless manner—in America."

Hussain's experience is similar, if slightly more academically phrased, to those of the Mutineers I have spoken to, as well as friends who grew up with *Sepia Mutiny*. Moreover, his account draws attention to the crucial multi-perspectival and critical yet ordinary tone of these

sites, and the way it led him to feel that he belonged to a sociable community. That critical

perspective is the only fulfilling means, for some, to find belonging. It supports Hussain's need

to hold multiple critiques at once—critiques of South Asians in America, critiques of American

actions toward the rest of the world and treatment of internal minorities. Likewise, a significant

portion of *Sepia Mutiny*'s community-building success rested on its encouraging discussions of

South Asian American-ness that were contentious, multi-layered, and involved multiple

languages of identity. It allowed for various kind of commitment and participation, from the

lurker to the site admin to the bloggers. Out of code, text, and collective passion, *Sepia Mutiny*

and *Chapati Mystery* built communities that made people feel like the impossible parts of being

South Asian American were also normal, even generative.

Throughout this chapter I sought to capture the mundane and imaginative ways in which

Sepia Mutiny provided a space of coalescence for a polyvocal public, and the immense,

collective labor such a feat requires. This case study reveals a productive tension of ordinary-

radical activism at the center of the South Asian American formation, which can be applied to

the production and management of identities and publics more broadly.

Chapter Three

Curating Inclusion:
Authoring and Accessing America through the South Asian American Digital Archive

The exhibit "Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation" opened in 2014 in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and online, emphasizing Indian American contributions to the United States. It contained a yoga dome and spelling bee area as well as artwork and historical objects evincing Indians' centuries-long struggle for acceptance in the US. This, however, was not the first time that Indian culture was prominently featured at the Museum, fit in amidst massive dinosaur fossils and gems. Offering lavish colors, crafts, and Indian "folkways," the exhibit "Aditi - A Celebration of Life" had earlier produced goodwill as part of the larger 1985 Festival of India, mainly through its orientalist images of India as a timeless, monolithic culture. "Aditi" featured forty artisans, puppeteers, and various other "villagers" inside the austere halls of the Natural History Museum, and walked visitors through the "Indian Life Cycle" from a "child's perspective." Both Smithsonian exhibitions, "Aditi" and "Beyond Bollywood," proved successful overall with the museum's attendees, but came under considerable debate among Asian Americans, as frequently declared groundbreaking as inadequate.

Over the same long decade it took to imagine, fund, and organize "Beyond Bollywood," the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) mobilized networks of South Asian American academics, activists, citizens, and residents to produce a polyvocal space of

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collaborative history-building that not only makes a case for South Asian America, but reframes America. Since 2008, SAADA has been working to digitize, catalogue, curate, and share a variety of visual, textual, and audio documents that imagine and produce South Asian America as a coalitional identity. It proclaimed South Asian American history as American history, while arguing that radical forms of accessibility—that stretch and reformulate conventional understandings of what museums and archives do and are—is central to SAADA's success.

In this chapter, I examine the process of building SAADA as an organization and set of sites (an archive, a magazine, and a series of participatory projects), the various kinds of labor and social capital that went into the endeavor, and trace the major milestones of public curation of South Asian American history. This comparison is crucial in order to reveal this community's innovative use and understanding of digital media (Ng 2016; Nakamura 2008; Lopez 2016) to produce South Asian America and its relations with other racial and geopolitical formations, which is connected to the rising acceptance of South Asian America by mainstream America.

This work is based on analysis of news coverage, interviews with SAADA and Smithsonian curators, observations at the Beyond Bollywood exhibit and SAADA events, and SAADA's public communications and participatory projects. Working through this material, I examine activists' perspectives that the digital realm is a space of dynamic, collaborative identity work where memory, history, and identity not only can, but *must* be written, rewritten, curated, connected, and shared (Keightley and Pickering 2012; Thorson and Wells 2016; Jackson et al. 2017; Kahn and Kellner 2004). Moreover, this chapter makes a case for the need for a curational framework as a complement to the representational framework that predominates in scholarship on race, identity, and media in relation to minority and marginalized communities in the US. A curational framework allows us to re-think questions of agency in the digital era and focus on the

labor of variety of community members when they politically organize as well as when they produce, select, and recommend media, sharing new visions of themselves and society.

SAADA leverages participatory practices and discourses of the digital, America, and South Asian-ness to develop both in-group and out-group legitimation. Examining this, in turn, reveals how each of these categories—South Asia, America, the digital—are produced in a specific confluence of technological, cultural, and economic forces. These imaginaries—South Asia, America, the digital—are interconnected and aspirational. This confluence reproduces some of the power inequalities manifest in each of the three concepts, but reworks others to produce new US racial solidarities.

Making South Asian America Legible

In 2008, Michelle Caswell was working as the Assistant Bibliographer for South Asia at the University of Chicago and pursuing a Master's Degree in Library and Information Studies. Samip Mallick, having recently finished his undergraduate studies in Computer Science at the University of Michigan , began working with Caswell as the Outreach Coordinator of the South Asia Center while also pursuing a Master's in Library and Information Sciences from the University of Illinois. They first came together to organize the archival materials associated with University of Chicago Professor A.K. Ramanujan (b. 1929, d. 1993). The Indian poet and literary theorist joined the faculty at Chicago in 1962.

Tasked to create a finding aid for the collection, they were shocked to learn of the state of South Asian American archival materials. That is, they were dismayed to find that no one seemed to understand them as such. While small, discrete collections and one-off items existed, sprinkled across national, community, and research repositories, no one was systematically

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appraising them or cataloguing them in cultural relevant ways. No one, at least no one with access, authority, and significant resources, saw them as South Asian American. No one was connecting them and putting them in conversation.

One day, Mallick wrote on a napkin, "South Asian American Historical Association." Although the title needed reworking, the idea would eventually lead to the South Asian American Digital Archive. By 2015, it had ballooned. That year its annual budget was $100,000. Over two thousand items had been carefully selected, digitized, and catalogued. SAADA regularly pushed out digestible stories about archival items via its thriving online magazine, *Tides*. They raised funds to produce a textbook on South Asian America, nearly $40,000 from over 400 Kickstarter backers alone. Today, SAADA is considered on the cutting edge of ethnic community archiving (Cotera 2015).

Many activists and scholars have been duly impressed with SAADA's work, carefully described in Caswell's (2013; 2014; 2016) scholarly output as a professor of Archival Studies and recognized with national awards and grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (2015), the Society of Archival Scholars (2016), and The Institute of Museum and Library Services (2016). Yet its present success, shiny accolades, crisp and beautiful website interfaces, and charismatic correspondence with funders does much to obscure the difficult path it took to bring SAADA to life and the many kinds of labor of connecting that made it possible. Of particular interest for this dissertation is the way, over time, SAADA reframed its core mission and values, mobilizing visions of digital participation and immigrant America to legitimate South Asian America.

Accessibility as Documenting and Preserving

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While the South Asian American Digital Archive claims 2008 as its founding, and the archive as the nucleus of the endeavor, little collecting happened at first. For two years, while doing graduate school and other day jobs, Caswell and Mallick worked to imagine the venture and establish it as a financial and legal entity. They drew up collection documents and mission statements. They recruited one of Mallick's college friends, Jennifer Ford, who was then studying for an MBA in non-profit management, to help them with finances. Working with her and a pro-bono lawyer, they incorporated in the state of Chicago and filed for 501c3 non-profit status. Only in 2010 did they meaningfully start the work of collecting, bringing academics and activists—all personal acquaintances—together to form a Board of Directors.

It was at this point that they began to focus on their cutting edge post-custodial style of digital archiving. Unlike a traditional archive, the items remain with the people who donate them. The submitted materials are meticulously digitized and catalogued in culturally relevant ways. Everything they archive is made public and carefully tagged by language, time period, source, geographic state, and so on. Unlike many traditional archives, SAADA only accepts items it will digitize and make accessible. There is no impressive edifice, within which there is special area where one cannot enter without getting permission and passing inspection. This highlights the first way that SAADA sees itself as advocating for radical accessibility. There are no gatekeepers on these materials. Not only do they collect materials for this purpose, they also collaborate with institutions with materials seeking a wider audience, as when the Historical Society of Pennsylvania partnered with SAADA starting in 2014 to make a series of 18 multi-hour oral history interviews from the 1980s and 90s accessible to the public.

The early mission and visions statements of SAADA reflected this commitment to documenting and preserving in the first instance.

> The South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) was founded in 2008 in order to document and provide access to the diverse and relatively unknown stories of South Asian Americans. [… SAADA] hopes to play an important role in the preservation and availability of primary historical materials that document the history of South Asian American communities. We envision an organization that will encourage dialogue, debate and discussion on the role of history in the creation of South Asian American identities and communities. Our ultimate goal is to examine the importance of the past in shaping the future and to ensure that the stories of the South Asian diaspora in the United States are preserved for future generations. (2010)

SAADA's early mission marks its dedication to preservation and documentation in a manner that focuses on accessibility as availability. Although it is important how these materials are used to build a future, the greater driving force is the fear that they will be lost. To that end, before they collected materials, they sought to build a sustainable organization that could, if it succeeded, outlast Mallick or Caswell's tenure. Finally, these early mission and vision statements highlight that SAADA has a specific directive to steward and share content that adds greater diversity to common understandings of South Asian America.

Accessibility as Contextualizing, Connecting, and Circulating

While the early mission of SAADA focused on documentation and preservation, it also hints at the circulation and use of content. This was already implicit in the manner SAADA catalogued and collected materials, tagging them for effective hyperlinking within the site. This practice would later be further enhanced by the ability to interface with the collection temporally or geographically, using a map that visualizes which materials are associated with which states in America. As SAADA began to gain board members and archival materials, however, a much more significant kind of connecting, circulating, and sharing started to complement the archive and its straightforward interface.

After much behind-the-scenes planning, University of Michigan professor and board

member Manan Desai published a brief article based on SAADA content, "The Picturesque

Hindoo," on October 7, 2011. It discussed a series of articles in the archive from early 1900s

American newspapers and magazines that described the South Asian men who were then

arriving on America's shores. Contextualizing and connecting materials in the archive, Desai

focused on Saint Nihal Singh, who wrote the strangest account of all, which described

"specimens of the Hindoo genus homo" phenotypically, from their clothes to their hair type,

comparing them to people from other ethnic groups. Easy to read and open about his own

confusion and curiosity regarding Singh's narrative and intent, Desai's was the inaugural article

of *Tides Magazine*.

Using this publication, SAADA would go on to leverage the knowledge and connections

of its board members to produce digestible and relatable content for circulation over email and

social networking sites. Publishing articles within its first year on topics ranging from "Indian

Food in the US: 1909-1921" (Mannur Oct 2011) to "The complicated racial politics of Little

Black Sambo" (Jeyathurai Apr 2012), *Tides* widened SAADA's reach and appeal. The magazine

worked to make a long vision of South Asian American history visible and accessible, as well as

advocate for solidarities across American minority communities.

These articles combine a number of factors: SAADA's visually sumptuous digitized

archival materials; a smooth interface that pairs a calm, muted-color nostalgia with sleek,

uncluttered modernity; important historical context; and the often-complicated feelings of the

authors about the archival item and South Asians' place in America. In doing so, the authors

actively work to re-negotiate their positions as "the object and the subject of digital visual

culture" (Nakamura 2008, 14) inviting the reader to similarly reexamine their relationship with

American history and its presentation. As *Tides* progressed, it would come to feature more stories about recent history and events in South Asian America, such as "Queens Girls" (Oct 2015), which details Odessa Devi Despot's life growing up as an Indo-Caribbean illegal immigrant in 1990's New York, and a series of interviews in 2017 with five artists associated with SAADA's "Where We Belong: Artists in the Archive" project (https://www.saada.org/wherewebelong).

For the mostly academics who wrote these pieces, the experience was both liberating and frustrating. Often pieces were too long and had to be carved up into shorter articles and although the articles were meant to be accessible for a wide audience, many authors struggled to limit or remove the footnotes (Desai 2015). The indignities of "clickbaity," *Buzzfeed*-like titles such as "5 South Asian Americans You Should Know About" (Desai 2013), while distasteful to some, helped SAADA push this content out across their own Facebook page, at times getting picked up by other bloggers discussing race critically.

While SAADA had begun to invent new ways to make its materials more approachable and as its collecting gained steam from 2010 to 2012, there was a serious risk that the venture might plateau or even collapse. Originally planning to post a *Tides* story each week, this strategy proved unsustainable, as did the larger scheme of free labor asked of all of SAADA's board members and archivist volunteers. As Manan Desai explained,

> We were so excited. So excited we could do so much with so little. We were using all the resources at our disposal. Chicago's library, [The University of Michigan]'s scanner in the [library] stacks. But that could only get us so far if we wanted to be a sustainable organization and continue indefinitely, if we wanted to maintain the archive indefinitely.

Having leveraged a variety of resources—from the institutions where they worked, from their personal and professional networks, and from their own research—there came a point where

SAADA's growth appeared unsustainable and uncertain. Although SAADA does not keep physical items, from the very beginning Mallick and Caswell had thought carefully about building an organization where they could afford server costs indefinitely (Caswell 2015). This would not be possible without significantly greater buy-in from a larger South Asian American community.

Recognizing Curational Labor

Until this point in its evolution, SAADA largely relied on what I argue can be helpfully called *curational labor*, a kind of identity work. People do curational labor when they expend effort and care to collect, connect, organize, contextualize, and circulate media and ideas *about identity*. Or when they work to make such media and ideas circulatable, shareable, and spreadable (Jenkins et al. 2013).

Questions of media and identity have long been studied using a variety of theories and methods, but by far the most prominent framework, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, is that of media representation (Hall 1997, Gerbner 1998). Counting and analyzing the kinds of representations available through mainstream media is a crucial exercise for understanding how minority, marginalized, and oppressed communities are re-presented in and to society. These representations affect personal and cultural narratives about these communities and often limit peoples' expectations and understandings of these groups. This is particularly important given the lack of access women and many minority populations have to the means of mainstream media production and distribution. (Erigha 2015).

The means of media production, distribution, and circulation have undergone profound changes over the last couple decades, however. In light of that, a complementary curational

framework allows us to re-think questions of agency in the digital era and focus on the labor of a variety of actors, when they actively organize new media ventures as well as when they produce, select, and recommend media, sharing new visions of themselves and society. In the case of SAADA, curational labor includes but is not limited to premeditated archival selections, elaborate story framings, and concerted sharing practices across platforms. Put more granularly, SAADA tireless works to find, collect, organize, contextualize, and circulate materials that had previously gone unnoticed and unconnected. They progressively sought to make their site more user-friendly, and their content more digestible and ready to circulate, then put in time and effort to push it out across social media.

Under a curational framework, the labor of actors such as Caswell and Mallick is still legible, but so too are new kinds of laboring. It includes those who exert effort and care sharing SAADA stories, sending them to a friend, and donating to crowdfunding projects to ensure the media projects they value get made. This lines up well with a non-media centric approach to media studies. A curational framework helps connect seemingly disparate kinds of labor, like writing a *Tides* article with the intention of producing cross-racial coalitions, reading it, and sharing and talking about that article. A curational framework does not suggest they are all the same or take the same amount of effort, but rather holds that they are all meaningful identity work, that they are related, and that many kinds of effort, care, and labor are necessary for a larger socio-cultural shift to occur.

Scholars are beginning to study the intersecting flows of media in a digital era, the variety of actors involved, and how information is then processed under those conditions, using the rubric of curation (Thorson and Wells 2016). This is an important intervention, particularly as curation has been increasingly used in studies of algorithmic culture as a term that references the

automated curation of users' experiences (Elsami et al. 2015; Morris 2015), suggesting the constructed nature of online environments and users' lack of agency at the hands of ever more powerful cultural gatekeepers like Google and Facebook. My usage of curational labor, however, pushes for a greater emphasis on user agency, and a sharper critical edge. Like questions of media representation, a curational framework is not meant to simply capture a raw phenomenon, but also argue that the current allocation of political, economic, and social resources for marginalized, minority, and oppressed communities is inequitable, and should change.

A curational framework, critically, captures and appreciating the efforts at belonging undertaken by those who are shunted from more conventional paths and forms of mediated labor. Namely, those who appear most invested in curational labor are communities dealing with marginalization, typically multiple, intersecting forms. They are forced to take up curational labor to manage, to get by. Cass Adair and Lisa Nakamura (2017), for example, study the "vernacular pedagogy networks" of mostly women of color who have found circuitous ways to disseminate and acquire copies of *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, both when it was first printed and more recently on Tumblr. Their account, spanning decades and a variety of analog and digital formats, illustrates how these networks constantly and creatively "operated in opposition to hierarchically controlled content distribution and educational systems" (255) to share this seminal but hard to access text. Similarly, Jackson et al. (2015) found that

> trans women on Twitter, […] in response to histories of misrepresentation and ongoing marginalization and violence, deliberately curate an intersectional networked counterpublic that works to legitimize and support trans identities and advocate for trans autonomy. (1)

These diffuse, but concerted efforts by people left out of mainstream systems of representation deserve more respect. Underappreciating their curational labor only continues the cycle of their exclusion from mainstream media, education, and knowledge production.

Accessibility as Participation

Returning to SAADA's story, the organization would soon find it needed to do new kinds of curational labor and add new kinds of participatory opportunities to continue to become sustainable, in the process changing its understanding of its own mandate. Around 2012, as SAADA's top-level volunteers began to exceed the personal circles of its founders and dream bigger, Rabia Ahmed, a professional fundraiser, entered the picture. Within the year, Ahmed had "transformed the organization to fundraise systematically" (Mallick 2015), creating a calendar with discrete and long-term campaigns to keep money coming in. Starting in 2012, Mallick took a year off from his day job to devote himself full-time to SAADA to see if he could make Ahmed's plan work. If, after a year, he could make it sustainable for him to have a complete salary as SAADA's only employee, he would stay on, and SAADA would have a bright future. What might happen if this tactic failed was uncertain.

As the organization sought to develop new ways for people to connect with the archive and become involved in SAADA's mission, they turned to participatory projects. The First Days Project (FDP), launched in the summer of 2013, encouraged people to record themselves or a relative discussing their first days in the US, and upload it. It would respond to a critical part of SAADA's mission, to fill the "gaps in the archive" (Caswell 2015), countering South Asian Americans' symbolic annihilation in mainstream America (Caswell et al. 2016, 58; Gernber 1972). It proved surprisingly successful. Originally intended to be for South Asian Americans

only, after much external interest and significant internal debate, the site began to accept other

First Days stories. Currently operating on a separate URL (https://www.firstdaysproject.org/),

FDP encourages all American immigrants to submit their stories.[60] This reflects a larger shift on

the part of SAADA to argue for South Asian American history as American history because the

experience of South Asians in America is part of and revealing of the immigrant experience

more generally.

This decision and shift were not easy, however. In the fall of 2013, SAADA had its first

board retreat, where they considered the burgeoning requests for non-South Asians to submit

stories for the First Days Project and sat down to rewrite their mission. Getting everyone on

board with FDP, even without outside interest, had been difficult. "The relationship between

First Days and the archive is kind of tenuous," explained Desai (2015). Nevertheless, "it's

connected to the larger goal." Caswell (2015) admitted, it "even challenges my liberal notions of

what an archive is." For one thing, SAADA would not be able to fully steward the objects; there

would be too much content. To submit video content to FDP, participants post their stories to

YouTube. The FDP site houses a narrative, image of the person, and link to the video.

According to Caswell, the tenets of Archival Studies demand that a responsible archive

must commit to preservation by stewarding the materials and making them accessible through

appropriate description and presentation. Starting participatory projects would mean loosening

these requirements, letting go of some control.

> To make them participatory and democratic, archivists have to give up some
> amount of control. And in return, we get excitement. We get the documentation of
> untold stories. Against and alongside the official record. The trade off, here, for
> me, was worth it. But I have to think about it case by case.

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[60] While considered a great success, to date the website has only 376 First Days stories posted. About half of those
feature people of South Asian heritage. The site includes the tales of immigrants from every continent but
Antarctica.

SAADA chose to open up entirely new avenues, suggesting radical ways to make archives accessible. Yet they could not fully reconcile this disjuncture. Their discussions of it, both laudatory and uneasy, reveal a real discomfort. Outside the organization, they also came under censure for their decision.

Sending in a journal article to an archival studies publication, Caswell heard back from one reviewer that SAADA was not an archive. They were not archiving existing things, according to the reviewer, but generating the archive. "Traditional archival theory claims that records should be the neutral byproduct of some of kind of legitimate activity," Caswell (2015) explains. Of course, the activities of marginalized populations are rarely considered legitimate. Access to neutrality, of act or perception, is generally the purview of those with implicit access to social power. In the end, Caswell persevered and "Collecting the Easily Missed Stories: Digital Participatory Microhistory and the South Asian American Digital Archive" (Caswell and Mallick 2014) was published elsewhere. Nevertheless, while Caswell argues that the artefacts produced through FDP are legitimate, she also readily admits that they are not incorporated into the central SAADA archive (Caswell 2015).

In other quarters, SAADA's leap of participatory faith paid off. Greater interest from South Asian Americans brought more attention and donations, while greater interest from other American communities brought attention and legitimation. With enough excitement around SAADA, they would eventually be awarded elusive grants that had previously been out of reach for an ethnic and community archive (Caswell 2015). Even if it left the scholars and archivists of SAADA somewhat uneasy, this was a crucial political victory.

As Maria Cotera (2015b), founder of digital archive Chicana por mi Raza (CPMR), explains, much of the earliest major funding for digital archiving went to already established

archives, to digitize their existing records, mostly notable works by and records associated with White European and American men, like Whitman and Shakespeare. CPMR, on the other hand, focuses on oral histories and document preservation relating to Chicana and Latina voices from the Civil Rights Era. By the time smaller ventures like CPMR were off the ground around 2012 and seeking funding, large grant-giving institutions claimed they were already moving on to "questions of scalability and sustainability" and no longer funded digitization efforts. In other words, only archives that already existed, already had traditionally acceptable archival documents, and already had institutional support were worth digitizing and supporting. CPMR, while vibrant and exciting, survives in some sense on Cotera's reputation and access to university resources alone.

In her powerfully titled article, "'Invisibility Is an Unnatural Disaster'[61]: Feminist Archival Praxis After the Digital Turn," Cotera (2015a) argues that "digital archiving projects" can "reformat the archive in critical ways by shifting it from a static repository to an active site" of "encounter," allowing "the co-creation [...] of knowledge" (781). Yet she herself has faced serious pushback, at conferences, during scholarly article reviews, and every time she seeks to fund and expand CPMR. Both SAADA and CPMR have been called out in these debates by leaders in the field of archival studies, such as Margaret Hedstrom, for "not being an archive" because "they are not sustainable" (Cotera 2015b). In response to these critiques, Cotera has carefully branded her site as "the Chicana por mi Raza Digital Memory Collective - a hybrid

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[61] Provocatively, the title references Mitsuye Yamada's contribution to the seminal collection, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). In it, she discusses how much of her life she has been invisible, impossible to truly see because people recognized her only as the stereotype of the submissive Asian woman and because she had not contested that image. Her own invisibility was only revealed to her by seeing the anger Asian American visibility provoked in White people, including her college's students and administrators. She ends with a call to action: "To finally recognize our own invisibility is to finally be on the path toward visibility. Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone" (40).

archive, museum, and digital curriculum,"[62] but continues undaunted. While some of SAADA's board live with a certain unease about its participatory turn, CPMR and SAADA's First Days Project directly contradict the claim that Chicana, Latina, and South Asian American voices are illegitimate because they do not have a legitimate repository, the very thing that eminent cultural institutions have systemically refused to give them on their own terms. Such projects disrupt the "invisibilizing feedback loop" of "traditional archival methods" (Cotera 2015a, 785).

Rearticulating the National and the Global through South Asian America

Coming together in the fall of 2013, the board members of SAADA found themselves transformed by their foray into participatory memory projects. Previously they had struggled to garner sufficient excitement and financial and emotional investment beyond a small community of like-minded activists, academics, and cultural workers. "When we started talking to people about archives and records, archives and records are boring" (Caswell 2015). Their "earlier mission," Mallick (2015) contends, was honestly "for a smaller group of people." According to Desai (2015), while academic peers understood the import of SAADA, it was difficult to convince family members and friends. Once the First Days Project started, however, the situation changed entirely.[63] Interviewing his mother, father, and aunt, they were suddenly active contributors to SAADA and to South Asian America as a larger project. In other words, they saw how they fit into SAADA, and SAADA began to see a new role for itself.

At their fall 2013 retreat, a new mission and vision were formulated, one which, at its core, argued that "South Asians are vital to America" (Mallick 2015). The new statements,

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[62] http://chicanapormiraza.org/
[63] This narrative, that FDP marked a momentous, positive shift, was repeated in every discussion I had with SAADA volunteers and when representatives spoke at public events

which were posted with a series of "Values" following them, are worth considering at some length.

Figure 3.1 SAADA's Mission, Vision, and Values from October 2013 to the present

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Mission

SAADA creates a more inclusive society by giving voice to South Asian Americans through documenting, preserving, and sharing stories that represent their unique and diverse experiences.

Vision

We envision American and world histories that fully acknowledge the importance of immigrants and ethnic communities in the past, strengthen such communities in the present, and inspire discussion about their role in the future.

Values

• We believe South Asian American history is an integral part of American and world histories.

• We believe in a broad conception of South Asian America, centered on those in the U.S. who trace their heritage to Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the many South Asian diaspora communities across the globe.

• We believe that diversity is a strength. We strive to build archival collections that reflect the vast national, religious, regional, socio-economic, and cultural diversity of South Asian Americans.

• We believe that immigrants are central to the story of America's past, present, and future.

• We believe that individuals make history, that ordinary people make extraordinary contributions to society, and that everyday stories matter.

• We believe that history is not a spectator sport.

• We believe communities can use history as a tool for empowerment.

• We believe in the possibility of technology to encourage participation in archival collecting.

• We believe that strong archives are vital to community wellbeing and that archives can be dynamic spaces for dialogue and debate. There is no dust in SAADA!

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Banking on deep myths about the United States—that it is a nation of immigrants and opportunity—the new Mission, Vision, and Values emphasize the importance of America itself (albeit a specific vision of an inclusive America). In turn, the importance of America legitimated South Asian Americans, who, the mission claims, are central to the American project. Moving away from technical language, it focused on sharing everyday stories, asserting that discussion and story sharing are key vectors of identity and nation building.

According to Caswell, it was only because of the significant interest in FDP from external communities that they were "able to articulate where SAADA fits," in this case "in a larger narrative about immigration" and America. This, in turn, produced the excitement and investment that would allow SAADA to grow, earn grants, and activate larger participatory projects. This is not to suggest there were not other outreach and education efforts. SAADA has worked over the years to produce public exhibitions, community forums where community members could bring objects to display and offer for digitization, materials to assist teachers in using SAADA's materials in class, etc. Nonetheless, the First Days Project (2013) laid the groundwork for SAADA's future, and in the process reshaped how the organization understood itself.

Of particular import is that SAADA's new vision reshaped South Asian America by reshaping the categories of America and the global, and producing a new articulation of the relationship between all three. Scholars of Asia and its diasporas have noted that these diasporic formations exceed assumed national boundaries, enmeshed in transnational migration networks invariably tied to colonization and empire (Visweswaran 1997; Chatterjee 1993). At one level, these diasporic formations, with their excess of identity, affect, and meaning, can change the

imaginative contours and outlines of India or other South Asian countries, such that they become global or transnational. At another level, diasporic South Asians also can be agents and vectors of transnational visions of England, the United States. Those South Asians with access to transnational mobility, for example, can spread discourses about human rights and consumerism that bolster specific visions of America (Grewal 2005).

In SAADA's vision of America and the world, inclusivity, diversity, and the honoring of ethnic groups and immigrants are essential ingredients. The potential for Asian Americans to access a more flexible citizenship (Ong 1999; Visweswaran 1997) owes a great deal to inequalities in histories of migration and capital accumulation. Heavily associated with education, technology, and model minority success, South Asian Americans here become mediating figures in America's complicated relationship with neo-colonialism, xenophobia, and internal racism. SAADA makes an incredibly important intervention in discourses about who is American. To do this, however, they make use of the materials at hand—visions of American exceptionalism, in this case as a font of inclusivity; of technology use and individual participation as remedies for large, systematic problems; and of South Asian Americans as poised to do this discursive work.

Aspirations of Digital Empowerment

Around the same time SAADA overhauled its mission, it also settled, more or less, on the "look" for its site.[64] Eschewing the skeuomorphism (Harrison et al. 2017) that some sites use to represent nostalgia and non-digital materiality, SAADA uses a minimalist and contemporary "flat design" (Berry 2017). On a crisp white page, two very thin gray bars separate three different

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[64] The following description captures how it looks in the fall of 2017.

page areas. The first area is a vertical section that runs across the top of the screen, featuring SAADA's logo and six high-level navigation tabs: About, News, Events, Projects, Resources, and Donate. All of these are in various shades of what you might call Internet Blue; it is to the shades of blue used by popular websites, apps, and software products like Twitter, Facebook, Pandora, Dropbox, Microsoft Word, Venmo, Skype, etc. The logo itself is a set of three overlaid blue boxes with white borders that call to mind beloved and charming polaroid photos. The more they are layered on top of each other, the darker they become, suggesting both the act of compiling the "snapshots" or records, and that bringing them together produces more, brings something into greater focus.

Underneath the top vertical bar, the rest of the page is divided into a large left-hand section, taking up about three-quarters of the page, and a small right-hand section. The large left-hand section features a shuffling set of beautiful, wide archival images or promotional materials which are the focal point of the page. Their grainy qualities and specificity in the midst of the rest of the page's unremitting white and round yet geometric mod font (Proxima Nova Alternative), makes them jump out at the viewer. A black bar inset in the wide central photo gives a headline-style blurb to entice the viewer to click on the sumptuous photo and go learn about a SAADA project, *Tides* article, or a specific collection within the archive. Below the central image a shortened about statement appears, and below that a set of tiles will take the user to pages about various projects or SAADA ventures.

The smaller right-hand bar includes navigational links, a search box, and a sentence with an up-to-date count of the unique items catalogued and available via SAADA. At the top of it is a large orange button, the only element in this accent color, with white text: "Support SAADA." If someone has made a donation to cover server costs for that day, a sentence will appear naming

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the supporter or the person in whose name the donation was made. Italicization is used throughout the homepage to highlight SAADA's basic tenets (*document*, *preserve*, *share*).

The basic style tenets of SAADA's homepage apply across all of its pages and sites. Chic, flat design with a tempered use of bright colors and nostalgic imagery. It is an archive for young, digitally-savvy people, who want cultural content, but also want for it to be cleanly presented, with clarity and professionalism. While the Mission & Vision page is accessible in the About section, the first thing that appears when you click onto the About page is a charting of impact numbers in bold orange, including the years SAADA has been in operation (9), number of unique items (3,068) in "the largest publicly accessible archive of South Asian American history," the number of global visitors since 2014 (over 595,000), the number of *Tides* articles (84) and the number of presentations and events SAADA has held (80). All of this is to say, overwhelmingly, the site feels less like an archive or museum, and more like a startup webpage or a beautifully curated app.

This is important to consider at length for a few reasons. First, the way websites work or look are "by no means 'natural' or 'obvious'" (Ankerson 2009, 193) and reflect the socio-cultural context of their production and intended use. Second, this aesthetic is worlds apart from those which had been predominantly used in relation to South Asian American cultural display and communication. Inflected variously by orientalist visions of Asia and Asians, ethnic and cultural notions of identity, and first-generation investments in a politics of nostalgia, South Asian culture has typically been associated with the simultaneous use of a wide array of bright colors and ornamentation. Third, the website's aesthetic heavily relies on a specific vision of digital-ness, associated with startup culture's investment in aspirational digital presents leading to utopian digital futures.

Digital here is not only a descriptor of non-analog media, but also a symbolic and visual category with significant cultural baggage, meaning various things to various parties (Casemajor 2015). In the case of SAADA, the aspirational techno-futures suggested by its sleek site design are meaningfully connected to its belief that history and technology can and should be tools of community empowerment. According to sociologist and former SAADA board member, Pawan Dhingra, using these digital tools to manage participatory projects, SAADA is "expediting the process of bringing the group into cohesion." English professor and SAADA volunteer Rajini Srikanth contends that SAADA helps her constantly stay updated on what is going on in South Asian America, both as a current political formation and as a historical subject being excavated and explored. It "permits a dynamic iteration between user and archive" that helps "speed up the process to visibility, recognition. To be full citizen-subjects" (Dhingra et al. 2016).

Using the Digital to Change the Material

When talking with founders Caswell and Mallick about SAADA, they both spoke with deep reverence about the archive, claiming it was the "heart of SAADA" (Mallick 2015). Yet SAADA volunteers put in countless hours to not only collect and digitize archival items, but also to catalog, contextualize, and connect their items in a culturally relevant way so that they are accessible (i.e. available, meaningful, and digestible), then more hours to push this commentary-level material onto social media. Board members spend time communicating, having meetings, fundraising, and building the social connections that make SAADA's existence and growth possible. SAADA's success with a wider audience, moreover, is tied to a few large-scale participatory projects.

Starting in 2013 with the First Days Project, SAADA would move on its 2015

Kickstarter-funded, multi-authored textbook, *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian

America*. The book is still in production, but is currently over 400-pages long and includes work

from over 60 contributors organized into 11 chapters. Each is headed by at least one South Asian

heritage academic, and contains five to seven "snapshot" stories. Concerned with responding to

the many gaps and erasures that have plagued the mainstream representation of South Asian

Americans, the book assiduously works to offer a diversity of perspectives, evincing SAADA's

commitment to curational labor and a coalitional vision of South Asian America.

Finally, in the summer of 2017, SAADA launched The Road Trips Project: Reimagining

an American Tradition (RTP http://roadtrips.saada.org/). Interestingly, RTP takes a much

stronger public stance regarding who it documents and why. As the website explains,

> American culture is steeped in the mythology of the "open road." Yet, so much of
> this imagery has long been limited in who it includes.
> During a time when immigrant lives and experiences are being especially
> devalued, SAADA's Road Trips Project aims to reframe a major American
> tradition by sharing images and stories from South Asian Americans, a
> community too often excluded from these narratives.

Having laid the inclusive groundwork that produced out-group legitimation with the

participatory and curational First Days Project, SAADA was able to make a more pointed claim.

Calling out more directly the invisibility of South Asian Americans, it again banks on the

narrative of America as an immigrant nation, portraying South Asian Americans as central

figures in the current national fight over the soul of America.

I emphasize these projects participatory projects and physical book as central to

SAADA's success not to detract from the import of the core archive itself. Rather, appreciating

them helps make it clear that what makes this digital archive digital is not *just* its siting online,

but perhaps more importantly its elaborate structures of sharing and aspirational concept of

accessibility and social change. SAADA operationalizes an aspirational digital-ness. It is based

on visions of iterative, sped-up social change, elaborate curating and sharing practices, new

conceptualizations of accessibility, and the sleek and digestible management of a complicated

past. They leverage it with a set of interlocking aspirational imaginaries—of the digital, the

global, and the coalitional—to produce South Asian America.

The Festival of India

Considering SAADA among the major milestones of the national, public curation of

South Asian-ness in America provides informative contrast. In June of 1985 the Festival of India

arrived at the National Mall and its various museums, travelling to New York in September and

the West Coast in 1986. The US Festival was inspired by the Festival of India in Britain in 1982,

both being diplomatic events of significant economic import considering India's economic

liberalization was still five years off by the end of both festivals in 1986 (Durrans 1992, 23). Its

$15 million cost was mostly paid for by India. The festival offered "5,000 Years of Splendor" as

a sumptuous "movable feast of culture" (*Newsweek* 1985) intended to intoxicate and delight

while exposing Americans to "India's immense adventure in democracy" (Jayakar 1985, 14).

Although it included exhibits of ancient objects and modern art, the most beloved portions of the

festival were its mela (fair) on the National Mall and the exhibit housed at the Smithsonian

National Museum of Natural History, "Aditi - A Celebration of Life" (McGill 1985; *Newsweek*

1985).

For Aditi, an entire floor of the museum was transformed into a "an Indian village of

small mud-brick houses and narrow streets" (McGill 1985) filled with an incredible diversity of

craftsmen and performers. The exhibit offered a "lavish look at life in India through the world of

the child" (Jayakar 1985, 142), with a focus on the timeless tradition and "cyclical regeneration" (142). Reviewing a book on the entire Festival, Kristin Helmore (1985) of the *The Christian Science Monitor* found that the, although "the examples of modern art lack grace" with too much "garish color," the overall experience was well worth it.

> The goddess Durga's perpetual battle with the forces of evil is mirrored in the fascinating juxtaposition of supreme loveliness and abject misery that one encounters in India at every hand. To Westerners, India may represent the ultimate in exotica -- and on closer inspection, it does not disappoint.

Certainly, it is astonishing that Helmore gained such a profound understanding of India from a single book covering the Festival's various exhibitions. Nonetheless, it is revealing of the weight such national displays can have.

In this first Natural History Museum exhibit, Indians are portrayed as existing in a realm beyond Western time, where traditional ways are timeless, eternal, and best understood with childlike wonder. Connecting questions of preservation, paternalism, and neocolonial commerce, Saloni Mathur (2006) ties such museum and living exhibitions of South Asian-ness to enduring strains of colonialism and imperialism. Tracing a line from curio cultures, department stores, and World's Fairs, she sees the "cult of the craftsmen," in particular, as linked to the "aesthetic and commercial practices of empire" (30).

What is crucial here is just how far outside the bounds of American-ness the brown bodies filling the Smithsonian *as the exhibit* were in 1985. Although they were modern people, living just as modern lives as those who came to visit, they were framed as living in a time outside of time, another realm entirely, charming but irreconcilable with the modern American nation.

Beyond Bollywood

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Opening nearly 30 years later in the same museum, the differences between "Beyond Bollywood: Indian Americans Shape the Nation" and "Aditi" are dizzying. Tucked up in a small gallery on the second floor, "Beyond Bollywood" had two entrances with racks of donated shoes, encouraging the museum goer to feel like Indian Americans have made a home in the US, and that they are welcome into that homely space. Outside, long walls with mirrors featured decals of Indian Americans in elaborate and brightly colored festive garb. The figures, mid-pose, were exuberantly performing various kinds of traditional Indian dance. The decals invited museum attendees to experimentally strike the poses, putting themselves in the same visual field as the Indian Americans pictured and hopefully enticing attendees into the enclosed exhibit. Inside, the space had the sparse openness of a typical museum, but paired with a lush, if controlled, color palette of magenta and saffron. Throughout, shiny, round metal plates, called thalis, were used as framing devices for informational charts, images, and explanatory blurbs.

One side of the hall focused on the arrival of Indians and their fight for acceptance. It featured a nostalgic, battered trunk around which old Hindi film songs played, images of contemporary Indian Americans, a section on Indian religions and yoga and their impact on America, and archival materials on the Bellingham riots. An artist's recreation and response to early photography of East Indians and Native Americans offered a playful but pointed critique of settler colonial in North America and Western imperialism in Asia. Most striking, it featured a full-wall image of Dalip Singh Saund, who became the first Asian American elected to Congress in 1957, and an area about the "decade of fear" that followed 9/11. The latter's focal point was a display case that included the dastaar (Sikh turban) and journal of Balbir Singh Sodi, a gas station owner shot on September 15, 2001 by Frank Silva Roque, who had gone out that today intending to "shoot some towel-heads" (Rediff 2003).

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The second half covered more contemporary issues, particularly Indian Americans at work: a short documentary about taxi driving, an area recreating a motel lobby, a doctor's bag. One wall was dedicated to prominent Indian American figures in media, fashion, and sports and Indian dominance in the National Spelling Bee. In front of this wall, as if these prominent figures were joining one for dinner, a long table featured information on Indian food cultures. Farthest away from the narratives of Indian arrival, a section on youth and hybrid culture included fusion music, images of protest, and contemporary art by Indian American women.

"Beyond Bollywood," like SAADA, had been produced out of collaboration. It took nearly a decade to raise funds and interest from the community, soliciting donations of some of the objects featured (e.g. shoes, clothes, LPs), getting assigned space in the busy Smithsonian museums, planning, and executing it (Momaya and Luis 2015). With so little space and so much to cover, its curators knew that "Beyond Bollywood," although groundbreaking, could only be the beginning of a conversation. Yet as S. Mitra Kalita (2014) explains, "Despite a promise to go 'Beyond Bollywood,' the exhibit offers a fairly self-congratulatory, North Indian, Hindu-centric view of what it means to be Indian." Her article for Quartz was pointedly titled, "The new Smithsonian exhibit on Indian-Americans is great—if only it were 1985." While coverage of the exhibit from White reporters was generally laudatory (Dingfelder 2014; Catlin 2014), South Asian and South Asian American coverage was more ambivalent (Mani 2015; Srinivasan 2014).

From personal conversations to observation at the exhibit, younger South Asian Americans seemed to find it more difficult to connect with the exhibit than older generations. One friend, a young professional whose parents immigrated from India in the 1970s, said she was pleased for the recognition, that it meant a lot to her parents that she could take them to such an exhibit in such a prestigious museum, but that was where her affection for it ended. One

family at the exhibit featured a sari-wearing grandmother who seemed pleased to be spending the day with her family, parents with a light South Asian accent who kept pointing excitedly to signage and discussing it with their children, and a girl, roughly twelve, who loudly declared she thought the label describing Darsh Singh as "turbaned basketball player" was racist.

Comparing an exhibit on Japanese Americans at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, LeiLani Nishime (2004) describes how such ventures by Japanese Americans attempt to use the traditional ideologies of museums to forge a new vision of Asian American citizenship, but that this is always only a partially successful process. "While challenging conventions of both museum culture and national identity, ethnic museums still draw upon many of the same conversations to legitimize their own claims to national identity" (46). I do not mean to suggest that some of the same critique cannot be lobbied against SAADA as well. Nonetheless, portrayal of "proper," particularly male citizenship, is a more central feature of "Beyond Bollywood."

The incredibly large image of Dalip Singh Saund, as well as the homage to Balbir Singh Sodhi's sacrifice to the nation, as well as depictions of Asian American model minority success, dominate the visual space of "Beyond Bollywood." This was only heightened by The SAPAN (South Asian Performance Arts Network) Institute's performance piece which played out in the exhibit space of "Beyond Bollywood" on select days. The show featured six vignettes, each taking place in a different area of the exhibit:

> **Scene 1**
> In front of the battered trunk, an Indian steamship worker, using heavily accented speech, tries to persuade his coworker to jump off the ship with him, swim to shore, and start a new life in America.
> "Come on, Amjad. Miss Liberty is right there before our eyes, holding a torch to show us the way! Just a little bit of ocean between us and a better life."

"We'll make up funny stories like this sari came on an elephant. Or we rode it like a magic carpet. Let the buyer have the fantasy of India they read about in books and all."

Scene 2

In front of reprints US newspapers and magazines from the early 1900s expressing anti-Asian, a man and his fiancé, using heavy accents, read a series of letters. They chronicle his experiences working in American orchards with Filipino immigrants, and her experiences waiting in India to be wed. After US immigration law changes, barring Asian women from coming to the US, he eventually marries a Mexican woman.

Scene 3

In front of the picture of Dalip Singh Saund, a well-dressed South Asian American campaign staffer in a suit, looking much like Saund's picture and speaking with an American accent, welcomes you to join the campaign.

"Judge Saund believes there's no room in America for second class citizenship. The American way is that everyone gets a fair shake."

"He doesn't dwell on the hardships he and his family have faced, except to try to change things for the better."

Scene 4

In the motel area, a young girl in New Jersey is afraid for her mother's safety at the hands of Dotbusters if her mother comes to chaperone her school dance in a sari.

"We fit in here being exactly who we are," the mother exhorts. "Nobody's going to hurt us, beta[65]. I believe in the system."

Scene 5

A Sikh American brother and sister set the dinner table while discussing how to break the news that the boy wants to enlist in the military. The sister thinks her parents will not approve, especially as their grandfather had also fought for the nation, but still was not treated as a citizen.

"I can barely make it through airport security. I'm an American. I'm a patriot. With or without my turban," explains the brother. "Maybe I'll feel glad to protect a country that gave our family real opportunity."

Scene 6

A young Indian American politician frets over wearing a sari to a campaign event.

"Why would I ignore Indian Americans' patriotic history of bold risks, hard work, and self-improvement? That story is as American as it gets. And anyway, almost all our families came from somewhere else, didn't they?"

"I trust you to both see it [her sari] and see beyond it."

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[65] Term of endearment, meaning "child."

Across time and space, valid concerns about violence and the exclusion of brown bodies from the American body politic are responded to with courage and perseverance, but also faith in America as a land of liberty, opportunity, and fairness. If necessary, these figures will use Americans' foolish images of India to their benefit, as the steamship crewman did. One way or another, as the myth of the model minority suggests, they will *make* America accept them through individual accomplishment and tenacity.

Accessing Imaginaries

Implicit is the belief that it is possible to "make it," to arrive. That the system, in its fairness, will eventually relent. That you can hold onto your culture and acquire citizenship (Rosaldo 1994). Unlike the performers of "Aditi," those at "Beyond Bollywood" technically belong in and to the American nation. And yet, it is a belonging meaningfully marked by lack. Just as we must ask for whose benefit the artisans, musicians, magicians, and puppeteers performed their timeless village life and childlike wonderment, we must also ask for whose benefit do SAPAN's performers put on thick accents, declare faith in "the system," and wax poetic about "Lady Liberty" and the torch she bears to the world?

Lauren Berlant (1997) explains that "Americans experience themselves as national through public sphere accounts of what is important about them: this is why the manufacture of public opinion is crucial for both producing citizens and seeing how citizens are produced" (45). In this chapter I have shown how SAADA has labored to build and legitimate such an account over and against the long symbolic annihilation of South Asian Americans from American history and earlier media, and even against fairly redemptive accounts like that of "Beyond Bollywood." The latter is certainly a far cry from its predecessor, "Aditi," but implies that the

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traditional avenues to and institutions of public sphere expression and public opinion manufacture are inherently insufficient for producing meaningful inclusion for various marginalized groups. This is not to suggest SAADA is without its limitations and flaws, but it has "sought to reimagine not just the content of history but also the relations of production at the center of historical meaning-making" (Cotera 2015a, 786). SAADA accesses the imaginative and transformative capacities of remembering (Keigthley and Pickering) and labors to make such imaginative identity work accessible on a large scale, to a diversity of people within and outside South Asian America. It is unclear whether this imaginative labor produces more change in South Asian Americans or America. The hope, of course, is both.

The Limits of South Asian America

Many of the central players in the story of coalitional South Asian America I have told have been high caste South Asians and South Asian Americans with generational access to social capital and economic resources (Dave et al. 2000). The South Asian Journalists Association, for example, mobilizes a cosmopolitan and professional view of transnational South Asian-ness, and speaks to an intended professional South Asian audience in the first instance. The membership of the Board of Directors and Academic Council of the South Asian American Digital Archive, with its strong association with academia, reflects the preponderance of people of high caste Hindu lineage across cultural institutions (and in positions of power) in the United States and South Asia. Of the case studies considered, *Sepia Mutiny* did by far the best job at widening internal community visions of South Asian America. This feat, registering only a small but meaningful shift, took an astonishing amount of thought and care, backed by *Sepia Mutiny*'s ideals of tension and contention as central to community formation.

Chief among the foundational absences of South Asian America are class and caste. In the United States, class is brought up frequently, but rarely contended with, particularly by those of a high enough class that they do not have to experience its very real constraining and structuring realities. Discussions of caste, which is often related to but distinct from class, similarly suffer from a toxic silence. It is exceedingly rare, outside of educational and activist settings, to hear young, non-Dalit South Asian Americans speak about Dalit history and struggles. Put bluntly, the former is significantly more rare than young, White Americans discussing race and Blackness, however uncomfortable and underdeveloped such conversations might be.

As sociologist Satish Desphande (2013) explains, "conflicting policies of social justice and caste-blindness" in India, allow "privileged upper castes […] to think of themselves as 'casteless', while the disprivileged lower castes are forced to intensify their caste identities. This asymmetrical division has truncated the effective meaning of caste to lower caste." The result can be even more pronounced in the American diaspora, where some South Asian immigrants embrace a performative traditionalism far beyond that practiced by the nominally same communities the immigrants left in South Asia (Kurien 2001). Caste and other divisions can become more strongly held onto, while generational differences in "homeland" fluency can further obscure that which is already taboo—the benefits of being upper caste and the inseparable difficulties face by those less privileged. Negative discriminatory practices, of which untouchability is just one, become the keywords to index caste presence.

In terms of external solidarities, many proponents of South Asian America appear more game for cross-racial coalitions (Sharma 2010), but this is again hampered by the difficulty of meaningful class discussions in the US, since classism and racism have often been used to

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reinforce each other in a variety of ways. Ties across proximate groups, like Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and some Asian American communities are strengthening (Iyer 2015), but hindered by historic cleavages (David 2016). It is for all these reasons that it is worth considering the risks of bids for cultural citizenship, like those discussed in the introduction and last chapter, that depend so heavily on positioning the United States as the pinnacle of political and cultural development, and South Asian Americans as pivotal figures in the American saga. By pivotal, I mean figures of aspiration and hope, but also figures at a crux in multiple scales of racialized, capitalist empire, particularly as articulated with technological innovation and engineering labor.

In light of these limitations, but also in earnest appreciation for the tireless work of the advocates of South Asian America, here I will end with one last story about changing our understanding of accessibility, about harnessing the terms of digital fantasy for political change. When asked about the labor involved in making South Asian American stories accessible, and about what accomplishments at the South Asian American Digital Archive had meant a great deal to him, then-SAADA board member and editor of *Tides* Manan Desai immediately knew the story he wanted to tell, recalling an incident where SAADA was called out on Twitter. Anirvan Chatterjee, technologist, community activist, and co-organizer of the Berkeley South Asian Radical History Walking Tour, had been searching SAADA's archives for materials on Dalit history in preparation for an initiative called Dalit History Month.

> @SAADAonline April's #dalithistorymonth, but no content on SAADA
> (http://www.saadigitalarchive.org/search/dalit) :-(@dalitdiva, ideas on Dalit
> stories to archive?
> (@anirvan March 31, 2014)

Tagging SAADA in his tweet, he also brought activist Thenmozhi Soundararajan (@DalitDiva) into the conversation. An artist, activist, and transmedia storyteller born in India and based in the United States, she is involved in Dalit activism projects that cross platforms and continents,

advocating for the recognition of Dalit histories and peoples, particularly through curating and publicizing them.[66]

Using a lead garnered from previous research discussions among colleagues, Desai was able to locate and get permission to post a pair of letters. They are the only existing correspondence between W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963) and B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) (Desai 2014), the famous Dalit intellectual, social reformer, and oft-called Father of the Indian Constitution. By telling a friend who worked at *Colorlines.com* about it, the story gained more coverage (Solomon 2014) and traffic than usual, much to Desai's delight.

I am personally heartened by this tale, and the depth of meaning it had for Desai. Nonetheless, a search for "Dalit" in SAADA's archive of over 3,000 items in November of 2017, yielded only one item. It is a letter written by Dr. Chumpa Sunthanker, "one of the first women from India to earn her degree in medicine in the United States" (SAADA 2014). In it, she discusses her work with Dalit leprosy patients. Two others appear when "untouchable" and "untouchability" are searched, one of them being DuBois' letter to Ambedkar. In part, this reflects the archive portion of SAADA's investment in excavating lost South Asian American history's, especially those pre-1965, and how caste status was a structuring factor in who could travel to the United States, and when. I imagine SAADA—across its array of projects—contains many more relevant artefacts, recordings, and stories that connect the archive to the vibrant social and political lives of Dalits in this country. It is likely a matter of tagging and curating these materials from a culturally relevant Dalit perspective, as well as cultivating more

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[66] Some of the projects she organizes and assists include Dalit History Month (https://www.facebook.com/dalithistorymonth/), Dalit Nation! (https://dalitnation.com/), and #DalitWomenFight (http://www.dalitwomenfight.com/). My use of the word Dalit follows the practices advocated by Soundararajan, who writes, "DALIT NATION takes its name from the self-determined name Dalit's use instead of the term Untouchable. It means broken people, broken under caste but still determined to survive."

acquisitions on this front, and teaming up with other activist organizations as Desai did. This is work SAADA will undoubtedly take up in the future. Mallick and Caswell's original dream for SAADA was that it could only work if it was bigger than them; if it could be sustainable, eventually, without them, without any one person; if it could grow and bring in new voices.

I end on this anecdote because it reminds us that connectivity is driven by human desires to imagine, to belong, and to reach across distances that once seemed impossible. This is work that can be done using digital media, but not without human intentionality, passion, and effort, sustained over time. Connectivity demands constant re-commitment, and re-imagination.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation I have unpacked various kinds of effort, care, and work that go into imagining and producing South Asian America as a coalescing coalitional formation. In chapter one, I examine the South Asian Journalists Association and its podcasting, arguing that studying the ordinary, implicit structures and relationships that make conversation miraculously successful can help us understand the mundane, constant, collective, and loving labor that produces connectivity. Connectivity, then, is not only a product of digital (here meaning technical) infrastructures, but is also a cultural process and practice. Connectivity is impossible without a driving desire to connect. In the case of South Asian America, the desire for connectivity is sustained by a longing for belonging that is critical, generative, and sometimes quite homely.

In chapter two, I examined how such labor, put toward building a self-reflexive, polyvocal, and critical set of interconnected publics, is crucial for the production of a fully-realized popular community. A single community voice or image of the community, even if it is positive, even if it breaks from the "racist love"/"racist hate" dyad, is insufficient, particularly in the face of a history of problematic representation that needs to be deconstructed. A few is still inadequate to support an everyday politics of solidarity and belonging. Instead, elaborate, repetitive, iterative, and collective community labor is necessary to build a complete social world, consisting of multiple, interrelated communities and identities from a variety of identifications: linguistic, ethnic, national, regional, political, racial, sexual, and gendered. South

Asian America, instead, is most persuasively produced through a collective exploration of its impossibility. Persistently and carefully laboring to practice an inclusive, transformative, and "epic pluralism" so as to make room for this contentious mix of identifications, *Sepia Mutiny* supported a multifaceted community capable of sustaining people in their daily lives and in direct forms of anti-racist, coalitional, and political activism.

In chapter three, I considered the various kinds of organizer and participant labor that is necessary to make national and institutional claims of belonging for South Asian America. In particular, I considered how South Asian America is constantly being produced in a specific confluence of technological, cultural, and economic forces along with other aspirational imaginaries—those of the digital and of America. As part of this process, I foreground institutions of memory (and thus history and future production) and curational labor, such as the South Asian American Digital Archive and the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. While some forms of curational labor help produce and manage connectivity, the two are not synonymous. Connectivity as a cultural practice and process is part of everyone's lives. Curational labor, as I posit it, is a critical form of identity work, whereby marginalized people curate a media experience that responds proactively to the lack of power and visibility associated with their identities in mainstream representation and politics.

Of the three case studies, *Sepia Mutiny* is by far the most important to the popular formation of South Asian America. Its old readers still pine for and promote the site (ABCDesis 2017a), preaching the mutinous gospel and attempting revivals on sites like Reddit (https://www.reddit.com/r/SepiaMutiny). The latter, established in the fall of 2016, features only 34 posts to date. What is left of *Sepia Mutiny*, according to co-founder Anna John, is a frequently updated Twitter feed that curates stories without adding the famous SM commentary, and some

small, walled garden Facebook groups like the one she moderates (ABCDesis 2017b). If *Sepia Mutiny* was so groundbreaking and galvanizing, fulfilling a critical community need, why did it shut down in 2012 despite continued online discussions of support and desires for it to continue? The story of its passing can tell us much about more recent shifts in American racial discourse online and the political and social connectivity of marginalized communities.

Across the chapters, I worked to unpack the strategies and innumerable small human acts that render South Asian America viable, compelling, and legible, arguing that this is as revealing of connectivity as studies of the internet as extractive, algorithm-based, and service-oriented. South Asian Americans are positioned at a pivot point between, on the one hand, transnational and national ethnocentrisms, and, on the other, similarly multi-scalar visions of the miraculous, increasing flow of technologies and capital. As favored subjects of a supposedly high-speed, interconnected world, the advocates of South Asian America have interestingly managed the hype surrounding digital capital to trouble their ostracization and isolation from other communities of color, with varying results. This is an important, but less-discussed aspect of Web history.

This era of Web history (i.e. the first decade of the 21st century), during which *Sepia Mutiny* started and flourished, is understudied yet crucial (Brügger 2013). Reconstructing the regimes of labor and care that built and sustained *Sepia Mutiny* highlights both the deep methodological challenges of such scholarship and also the variety of political goals and forms of participation that were necessary to produce such a successful, non-monetized website. To some degree, the exploitative logics of online activism (Lopez 2014; Nakamura 2016) grew increasingly unsustainable as the Mutineers aged into better jobs and started families. After an exhausting week-long, 395-comment discussion on a post by Anna John (2010), in which she

heavily critiqued a *Time* article and called out its racist overtones, the blogger closed the

comment thread after reminding upset commenters why they should treat the SM staff more

thoughtfully.

> [W]ith respect to this and many other "Why don't you…"s [..,] there is only so much one can or should ask of a tiny force of awesome, over-worked volunteers who all have rigorous day jobs and families. SM is not a business or a non-profit or an entity with vast resources; it is a labor of love.

In some sense, the risks and rewards of producing a committed and boisterous online community

had to constantly be weighed, with various bloggers bowing out for professional and personal

reason over the run of the site. As with anything that provokes such passionate commitment,

external critique was not the only stress. Internal disagreements and backchannel drama also

created rifts among the Mutineers over time (Singh 2017).

Likely more important, in the end, was a broader shift toward websites based on user

sharing (Flickr, Twitter) (John 2013), which would eventually be substantially subsumed by

social networking logics (Ellison and boyd 2013). Sites built by enthusiasts, encouraging non-

monetizable forms of participation, gave way to a generation of slicker websites, with greater

affordances, that began to profit not only off advertising, but selling user data. While *Sepia*

Mutiny resolutely refused, many blogs moved to funding themselves through advertising

supported by the rise of Google Analytics and similar services. Over a decade, the web media

landscape decisively changed, favoring a few large players with advertising and extractive

publicity as their underlying modus operandi. As Jose van Dijck (2013) explains,

> Connectivity quickly evolved into a valuable resource as engineers found ways to code information into algorithms that helped brand a particular form of online sociality and make it profitable in online markets—serving a global market of social networking and user-generated content. Large and influential platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn exploded in terms of users and monetizing potential. (4)

Even as people might read stories and posts from various sites, the conversations they were having about them increasingly took place in a few centralized sites—Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, etc.

As outside sites rendered their material readable, sharable, even tailor-made for ease of use within a small set of social networking apps and sites, those central loci of media transit, such as Facebook, worked assiduously to make all external data "platform ready" (Helmond 2015). Such platforms thus sought to becoming infrastructural, underlying structures supporting all experiences with digital media and communication (Plantin et al. 2018). This shift undermined the lifeblood of *Sepia Mutiny*, its lively comments section. Even if the Mutineers continued to post, it would be difficult to keep the substance of the conversation on their site rather than on Twitter and Facebook. And in an era when all users should be trackable across platforms, controversial opinions could become incendiary flashpoints more so than during *Sepia Mutiny*'s heyday. Even expressing non-controversial opinions, given the new infrastructural affordances of the current Web, could lead for cross-platform and offline harassment, with consequences falling variably on differently marginalized bodies.

There is a less sinister, and less technologically-deterministic way, to understand the fading of sites like *Sepia Mutiny*. Nonetheless, we would do well to be wary of the extractive digital economy that provides us so many benefits at the cost of finding ever more personal and exhaustive ways to wring value out of its users and participants. For example, as Julie Chen (2018) explains, "taxi-hailing apps have made taxi drivers into data producers, algorithm trainers, and infrastructural labourers, simultaneously" (231).

For one, there were finally enough South Asian Americans in prominent positions culturally and politically in the United States that covering every incident in minute detail, a very

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real joy of early *Sepia Mutiny*, no longer makes much sense. As many blogs monetized through advertising, and more traditional publications seriously set up shop online, it became possible to make money from writing well online (Vikaas 2017). As blogs like *Jezebel*, *Colorlines*, and *Racialicious* got under way, blogging from an intersectional feminist and racially conscious perspective became less of a scarce commodity. People now have the tools to easily curate their own reading lists, publicly share them, and snoop on others'.

The most rewarding reason *Sepia Mutiny* makes less sense in the current era, I imagine, is that it successfully cultivated a generation of bloggers, writers, and cultural brokers who write, produce podcasts, and publish across a wide array of sites. This was most obvious with the release of *The Big Sick* in the summer of 2017. Heavily supported and promoted by the likes of co-producer Judd Apatow and distributor Amazon, it followed on the heels of other commercial comedic successes by South Asian American men, such as Aziz Ansari's *Master of None* (2015-present), and Hasan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* comedy special (2017). Featuring the true love story of Emily Gordon and Kumail Nanjiani, the romantic comedy was lauded in *The New York Times* for "revitalizing an often moribund subgenre with a true story of love, death and the everyday comedy of being a 21st-century American" (Dargis 2017). What might seem like an obvious opportunity for celebration was, however, the latest in a set of popular media texts that centered South Asian American male characters without providing a fraction of similar visibility or dignity to South American women.

With titles like "The pursuit of white women: Brown actors like Aziz Ansari have reduced brown women to a punchline" (Agrawal 2017) and "From the Perspective of Those Rejected Brown Women in 'The Big Sick,'" (Hasan 2017), South Asian women published pieces on the subject in nationally and internationally renowned sources, including *Jezebel*, *Quartz*, *The*

Aerogram, and *Muslim Girl* (blog). The critique put forth by these South Asian women writers, moreover, was covered in *The New York Times* (Deb 2017). This is a far cry from the lack of coverage that plagued South Asian America ten years ago. Multiple White scholarly friends, knowing of my research interests, sought me out to discuss the matter of the disappointing or lacking popular portrayals of South Asian women because they saw one of the multiple articles circulating in their Twitter logs and posted to blogs they read.

This racial awareness in public American discourse at present, however, was hard won, and the marker of both progress and problems. The "post-racial" Obama moment may have offered promises of multicultural bliss, but certainly delivered greater racial animosity (Pasek et al. 2014) and new alibis for racial prejudice (Wolock and Punathambekar 2015). On the other hand, while heavily extractive, the current state of the Web is also significantly more conducive to broadcasting previously silenced and ignored voices, as evinced by the power of movements such as #OscarsSoWhite and #MeToo. Many of the pillars of early Asian American blogging, such as Phil Yu of *AngryAsianMan*, Jenn Fang of *Reappropriate*, and the Mutineers, keep up with a lively, publicly engaged conversation via Twitter, podcasts, etc. This online conversation is much larger than it used to be, spawning campaigns like #ThisIs2016 (Woo and Al-Hlou 2016; Lopez 2016) and supporting the work of communities like Racebending.com. Nonetheless, it is hard not to feel like the louder the voices of those who have been historically marginalized have become, so too have the voices of bigotry, racism, and xenophobia.

Of great concern presently is a major shift in national politicals. During the Bush and Obama presidencies, particularly as it relates to South Asian Americans, the political environment was animated by questions of terrorism, and differing perspectives on how the United States should wield its global leadership. In the case of the Bush administration,

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discourses focused on military might and safety, as suggested by his slogan, "A Safer World and a More Hopeful America." While still quite marshal, Obama's administration emphasized diplomacy, with Obama and America figured as "Hope" for the world. After all, Obama was awarded a preemptive Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 (*BBC News* 2015). The current presidency, however, is marked by an inward-looking American focus, built on a message of White resentment and appeasement ("America First," "Make America Great Again"). In working to produce a vision of America as synonymous with Whiteness, efforts have increased to imagine non-White and non-Christian Americans as unassimilable, inscrutable, and dangerously foreign (e.g. Muslim ban, border wall). Although this state of affairs has made some more aware of the festering state of American racism and xenophobia, it has also emboldened those who hold an ahistorical vision of American racial politics and immigration history, as well as global religious politics.

The formation of South Asian America is about imagining the arrival of South Asian Americans as Americans, a project that is complex, uneven, and in progress. It is premised on a coalitional strategy with progressive potential for some of the many communities that, taken together comprise South Asian America, as well as other marginalized and minority American communities. Advocates of coalitional South Asian America are in some ways feeling more organized, galvanized, and well-resourced than ever before. But the fight they face is also more pressing, particularly for those who take a coalitional stance against xenophobia, racism, and enduring strains of imperialism seriously. Projects like *Sepia Mutiny*, the South Asian American Digital Archive, and the South Asian Journalists Associations' podcast provide hope for this fight. They show that new coalitions and communities can thrive, particularly when communicative resources and technologies are available and assiduously taken up by thoughtful

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activists, artists, academics, and community members willing to put in the enormous amounts of effort such a task requires.

In this light, *Sepia Mutiny*'s current absence in its original, beloved form is not so much a setback as a necessary step, a critical part of the ongoing mutiny. As co-founder Abhi Tripathi explained in an interview in 2006,

> If *Sepia Mutiny* ever lives up to its ambitions, the people that read us will spread something they have learned on our blog to others, and they will in turn pass it on to still others. Soon there will be a lot of South Asians aware about issues that affect all of us. Then the real mutiny will begin. (Ahmed 2006)

With the Mutineers on to new ventures (e.g. *The Aerogram* blog, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* podcast), and others' projects picking up steam (e.g. *The Problem with Apu* documentary, *Our Stories* textbook, the *Almirah Radio Hour* podcast), hopefully the mutiny is only just beginning.

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