

Representing South Asian alterity? East London's Asian electronic music scene and the articulation of globally mediated identities

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In the years since the London tube bombings, popular depictions of British Asians have been increasingly 'othered' at best, and stereotyped as dangerous terrorists at worst. Asian self-representation continues to be a critically-needed intervention. East London's Asian electronic music scene serves as a means to represent the voices of young urban British Asians, attempting to bring them from peripheral alterity and render them visible in mainstream British popular culture. The music, which blends synthesized electronic music with South Asian musical stylings, has brought musicians from both the South Asian diaspora and the subcontinent to perform in 'Banglatown', East London. These regular globalized performances of the scene, an aspect rarely investigated, have challenged locally bounded British Asian identities.

Key Words: British Asians • diaspora • East London • ethnicity and culture • identity and music • South Asian popular culture

"we were fighting racism, full-on ... keeping the middle finger in full view"

Aki Nawaz (2006), frontman of Fun-da-mental

"life is a struggle,
everyday is a hustle...
life is hard as a young Muslim man"

Boys from the East, *Untitled*

The 'Shilpa Shetty affair' in 2007 in which the Bollywood actress was treated to a volley of racist vitriol and bullying on the British 'reality' (for once!) television show, *Big Brother*, is perhaps one of the more publicized examples of the racial 'othering' of South Asian bodies. The media coverage of the 2005 London tube bombings further revealed the fact that Britain's epistemic engagement with Asians¹ and Asian cultures continues to

remain ‘othered’ at best and demonized as violent at worst. With British Asian men still facing disproportionate police stop and searches, it is no surprise that many of them are fearful of publicly expressing their identities. However, one musical subculture in East London has been publicly articulating this tenuous state of urban Asian identities. The Asian electronic music scene in East London not only challenges negative Asian stereotypes, but also provides a local platform for representing alterior Asian identities. Ultimately, the scene has had some success in ameliorating the lack of British Asian voices in accessible ‘public cultural spaces’.

Historically, British Asian musics (e.g. bhangra) have been relegated to spaces within ‘ethnic Asian’ neighborhoods.² In effect, these remained in ghettoized isolation to similar white British public cultural spaces. They were separate and unequal. The move of some South Asian musics from the cultural periphery to center has done much for the public representation of the lives/cultures of this particular segment of mostly middle-class young Asians. This is not to say that these interventions have debased or infiltrated what John Rawls (2007, p. 6) calls ‘the public political culture’ (i.e. the dominant, everyday public culture). Rather, the motive of some in the Asian electronic scene was to challenge this cultural hegemony by fostering what Hannah Arendt (1958) terms a ‘public realm’, referring to a space which highlights and celebrates heterogeneities. Similarly, my invocation of (dominant) public spheres/public spaces is centered around their potential for exclusion and inclusion.

This article will first introduce the scene and its significance and then use particular

ethnographic case studies such as the Nasha Experience collective and Shiva Soundsystem to elaborate the workings of ‘minority’ cultural production and its negotiation of national (in/ex)clusion. This paper stems from a larger research project which explores Asian Electronic Music. As I have written about this elsewhere (Murthy 2007a, 2007b, 2008), this article is restricted in its remit and intentionally limits discussions of broader, though relevant, issues including hybridity and authenticity. The musicians involved are predominantly young Asian males and I conceive of the scene as a largely heterosexual masculine space. The few women involved are usually rendered ‘invisible’ in that they are involved behind the scenes in public relations, production, and administration. Ethnographic examples of Asian women (both participants and organizers) are included when possible, but are acknowledged from the outset as minimal.

The ‘Asian Electronic Music’ scene

The Asian Electronic Music subculture is a ‘scene’ that can be traced to the UK in the early 1990s with the rise of British Asian musicians such as Joi, Badmarsh and Shri, Talvin Singh, Osmani Soundz, State of Bengal, TJ Rehmi, and Nitin Sawhney as well as Asian dominated record labels such as Outcaste, Nation, Nasha and Swaraj. The geographical nexus of the scene was and is Banglatown in the East End of London, an inner-city, and as the name suggests, predominantly Bangladeshi, neighbourhood. Asian electronic music is characterized by a mix of some of the following: electronic digital manipulation, one or more ‘traditional Hindustani’ instruments such as the tabla, sitar,

sarangi or veena (or samples of them), Asian vocalists, lyrics and samples broadly relating to South Asia, samples of Bollywood tracks, but generally a rhythm line similar to drum and bass, downtempo, jungle and other electronic musics.³ In contradistinction to bhangra, it is not generally lyrically driven, though any lyrical inclusion is significant to the music's meaning, consumption and distinctive aesthetic.

Dis-Orienting Rhythms (Sharma et al. 1996), the seminal book which critically introduced the cultural politics of Asian dance musics⁴, is now over a decade old. Since the publication of *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*, Asian electronic music has grown in several areas with established diasporic South Asian populations, such as New York City, San Francisco, Melbourne, Singapore, and Toronto.⁵ At the same time, a lively recorded and performative scene has also developed 'back' in India, with regular events in Delhi and past performances in Mumbai, Bangalore, and Hyderabad. In the words of one of the editors of *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*, Sanjay Sharma, the 'globalized politics' of the music is what, retrospectively with hindsight, the book lacks (Sharma 2006). This paper aims to begin filling this gap by analyzing the music's political aesthetic in London as negotiated through globally mediated performative events. A simplistic interpretation in terms of an antiracist political aesthetic will be avoided in order to draw out the more nuanced cultural politics behind these events.

Specifically, the live moments in which the diaspora meets 'homeland' (subcontinental musicians and DJs perform in London) and the diaspora meets diaspora (e.g. Indian American and Indo-Canadian musician/DJs perform in London) have challenged the

notion of tightly bounded local Asian ethnic identities in London. Rather, the engagement, not only across the diaspora, but also with the subcontinent has exposed the transnationality of diasporic South Asian identities. Though there is a deep plurality of Asian youth experiences in London, most Asian attendees of the scene's events are middle-class and usually, though by no means exclusively, well-educated. These similarities have enabled the production of a distinct politicized aesthetic which emphasizes the need to challenge the position of Asian cultural representations in British popular culture. In this case, what is meant by a politicized aesthetic is that these globally mediated performative events are themselves political objects which represent, engage, and encourage discourses (totalizing and divisive) on South Asian identities.

Talvin's Tabla: the rise of Asian Electronic Music

Dance music termed as 'Asian' is sufficiently distinctive to defy consistent musical categorization. For example, the CDs of Talvin Singh found their home in the electronic music and world music sections of record shops and Nitin Sawhney was regularly described as an Acid Jazz musician⁶. However, despite the overt differences in musical aesthetic, a common politicized thread of critical importance can be extracted from the work of many Asian electronic artists. The music has provided a way to render the lived experiences of this group of British Asians visible in white-dominated British popular culture. Additionally, the live performance of this music in mainstream venues – in contrast to the 'Asian spaces' of bhangra remix, Bollywood, or wedding performances - not only makes this scene distinct, but also has provided a means by which creative

young Asians can publicly represent expressions of their cultural experiences against a backdrop of cultural exclusion.



Figure 1: Talvin Singh in East London (Photograph by the Author)

Most agree that Talvin Singh, despite his later arrival to Asian electronic music, was, albeit inadvertently, most responsible for making this music known in British popular culture. His highly influential Mercury Prize winning album, *OK* (1998), along with *Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground* (1997), which he compiled, spurred British Asian electronic music into an overground musical ‘movement’.⁷ Like it or not, brown dance music became the new black - at least for one musical season. The everyday histories and lives of these diasporic British Asians were now being made audible and visible within public British culture. For example, Cornershop’s ‘6am Jullandar Shere’ (1995), which interprets a quotidian Punjabi call to prayer through the more unique medium of indie fused with electronica, was aired regularly on mainstream radio stations

including BBC Radio 1.

As the scene became quite established ‘overground’ in the late 1990s, record companies were all too keen to pigeonhole a whole set of diverse Asian artists into the category of ‘Asian Underground’. This racial niche marketing was not confined to record companies. Multinational corporations such as Philips used the music to give their marketing campaigns an exotic allure.⁸ The (now highly commercialized) Asian ‘overground’ became a catch-all space where everyone from Andrew Lloyd Webber (with his musical, *Bombay Dreams*) to first lady Cherie Blair becoming enamored with ‘all things brown’.⁹ The rise of Asian electronic music artists was valuable in terms of increasing Asian visibility/audibility in British popular culture. In this way, the commercial success of the music was not inherently problematic. However, their presence was racially commodified with commercial success contingent on racialization. This is a tension which cannot be overstressed.

To squirt lemon juice in the eye, the chosen racialization was itself Disneyfied and did little to represent the realities of many Asian lives. As Banerjea (2000, p. 65) describes, Asian Underground performances became ‘a sanitized encounter with an imagined Asian “other”’, by which he means that these engagements with Asians were relegated to superficial contacts with an exoticized Asian aesthetic rather than meaningful interactions with British Asians. Specifically, Asians were packaged as street-friendly decorative ethnic chic. Engagement with uncomfortable Asian ‘others’ (especially Asian Muslims) was virtually nonexistent. Mainstream style/fashion magazines such as *Wallpaper* and *i-*

D¹⁰ celebrated these events as a triumph of Asian fashion and culture. However, albeit sometimes inadvertently as was the case with i-D, these hype-laden portrayals presented a new, post-Stephen Lawrence, multicultural Britain. Everyday racisms and ghettoization were rendered invisible.¹¹ The Asian cultural traditions extolled as authentic in these performances played down the ghettoized state of Asians in London. Furthermore, the recurrent exposure of ‘Asian Kool’ stereotypes resulted in a rhizomic propagation of a carefully constructed Asian ‘other’ (Huq 1996). In other words, these representations of Asians literally took root and generated offshoots.

Racism and Asian dance music

Historically, Banglatown and the nearby Spitalfields area have been home to Britain’s Bangladeshi community. However, these areas where the Asian electronic music scene has flourished also suffers from soaringly high unemployment rates amongst Bangladeshis (Office of National Statistics 2001). This has been compounded by the renewed racism of post- 9/11 and 7/7 Britain in which strong currents of Islamophobia have led to physical and verbal abuse against South Asians in general (Poynting and Mason 2006, Ramamurthy 2006, p. 21). Though Trevor Phillips (2005), Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, reports that these increased racist attacks specifically triggered by 9/11 and 7/7 have subsided, the musicians and participants in the Asian electronic music scene report otherwise. From their perspective, a significant number of Banglatown’s young British Bangladeshi Muslim men remain ostracized from gainful employment as well as suffering continued physical and verbal abuse. It is within this

context that the Boys from the East, quoted earlier, sing that ‘life is hard as a young Muslim man’. One of the means by which disenfranchised youths, such as Boys from the East, have left the streets has been through community music projects.¹²

Such was the case with Nasha Records, an Asian electronic music label run by second-generation British Bangladeshis. I observed members of Nasha from 2004-2006 at their events in London, on tour in India, and at home. Their lives in council flats in Tower Hamlets, for example, run in sharp contrast to the mainly middle-class lives of the scene’s followers. Ges-e (pronounced “Guess-ee”), co-founder of Nasha and a DJ/producer for the Nasha Experience collective, recounted to me that there were very limited opportunities for young British Bangladeshis in the early 1990s. A community youth music project ‘got him off the streets’ of East London and soon after he and his friend Shahid began DJing what would become considered Asian electronic music. East London venues such as the Davenent Centre, the Enzyne Youth Club in Wapping, Trinity Church in Poplar, and the Woodsend Youth Club gave Ges-e, Shahid, and other young British Bangladeshis a means to creatively express what Ges-e refers to as their ‘cultural heritage’ as second-generation British Asians. Collaborations with Talvin Singh on Anokha projects inculcated a strong entrepreneurial sentiment in Ges-e, Shahid, and others – a feeling lacking before their contact with Asian electronic music. Along with friends from the Tower Hamlets College radio station (which Ges-e and Shahid helped found), they used their small savings from DJing and releases as the seed capital for Nasha Records, a label which has supported young British Asian DJs for over a decade.



Figure 2: Ges-e and Shahid of Nasha (Photograph by Author)

The story of Ges-e and Nasha is hardly unique in the borough of Tower Hamlets. Rather, Asian electronic music has provided a commercially viable, racially inclusive, outlet for young East End British Asians to creatively articulate their experiences. As Saha's (2006) research on Asian record labels has found, much of Asian electronic music has been propagated by small independent outfits. Ges-e and Aki Nawaz (2006), frontman of Fun-da-mental, agree that the majors were not interested in most Asian electronic music. Even Talvin Singh, a darling of the major labels in the late 1990s, broke into the music industry in the late 1980s through initial work on Nation Records, a small label co-founded by Nawaz, which actively supports musicians from ethnic minorities. However, the positive aspect of the major labels' myopia was that these artists could liberally express their political sentiments through tracks and benefit gigs.¹³ Furthermore, like the early musics of Asian Dub foundation and Fun-da-mental, the

assertive entrepreneurial endeavours of Ges-e and other young British Bangladeshis challenged what Sharma (1996, p. 48) has referred to as the ‘supposed onlooker status and passivity of Asians in a white-dominated music industry’.

The numerous live events hosted by Nasha, Anokha, Sitarfunk, Swaraj Records, Shiva Soundsystems, Samosafunk, as well as Nation and Outcaste Records spearheaded the turn of Banglatown ‘from an abusive stigma of East London’s ghetto to a celebration of placed ethnicity’ (Keith 2005, p. 8). However, Keith is only partially correct in his observation that ‘Banglatown’ has been ‘inverted and translated’ into a form of ‘identification and solidarity’ (Keith 2005, p. 8), as this remains the case for a small minority of British Bangladeshis. Most of the beneficiaries of Banglatown’s celebratory imagery have been Hoxton’s and Spitalfields’ new, mostly young white, professional settlers eager to be part of the East End’s fashionable ethnic chic. Their engagement with Asians living in the area is carefully sanitized at best and non-existent at worst. Sonia Mehta, Director of the East London based Asian Dub Foundation Education (ADFED) community music project adds that these ‘gentrification’ processes occurring in Bangladeshi East London are ‘pushing migrants to the periphery ... allowing a more financially viable [white] community’ (Mehta 2006) to move in, a view supported by Chris Hamnett’s (2003) research on gentrification in London. As Banglatown’s new white settlers happily club at Asian electronic music events, Mehta’s (2006) opinion is that police stop and search orders have increased dramatically overnight, a trend which is in line with general reports that young British Asian Muslim men have been disproportionately stopped and searched (Dodd and Travis 2005, Human Rights Watch

2005, p. 117). In fact, by August 2005, British Transport Police data indicated that Asians in general were five times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people (Dodd 2005). Ultimately, Banglatown - as ghetto - persists, despite ongoing encroachment and gentrification of Banglatown and its surrounding areas. The trendy 'ethnic chic' portrayal of the area remains a thin veneer, masking the run-down council accommodation, shocking poverty, and high unemployment which are the lot of the majority of British Bangladeshis in the area.

In the following sections, I will introduce another Asian collective Shiva Soundsystem along with six respondents (two male British Indian musicians, a male British Bangladeshi student, a male British Bangladeshi youth worker, a female British Indian media consultant, and a female British Indian vocalist/youth worker).

Break lane mix¹⁴

Through the shared musical aesthetic of Asian electronic music, a unique collective bond between ethnically diverse (though it should be said predominantly heterosexual male) British Asians has developed. British Asians (of Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi, Trinidadian, and East African ancestries) from a range of socio-economic and religious backgrounds, like their parents before them, are identifying with each other through an 'Asian music'. This is exemplified by Shiva Soundsystem's 'Independence Day Mutiny'. This annual event, billed as a celebration of India's and Pakistan's independence, features musicians from the global Asian diaspora, who together 'represent' Pakistan, India,

Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Through its engagement across the Asian diaspora, Independence Day Mutiny, like the Indian Mutiny of 1857 which its name alludes to, has formed solidarities between diverse groups of participants. The use of 'mutiny' by Shiva Soundsystem subverted traditional conceptions of nationally bounded British Asian identities. The celebration of Indian and Pakistani independence as 'mutiny' should be read as a critical subaltern epistemological intervention. Speaking with musicians and attendees, the event as mutiny was considered to challenge the continuing hegemony of white Britain over its Asian 'others'. Even if the musical text as mutiny remains untranslatable, the performative event as a mutiny by the Asian 'other' is critical. In other words, the public performance here represents not just cultural assertiveness - a very visible demonstration of a particular strand of 'Asianness' in a British public space - but also a platform to deconstruct representations of Asians as an 'other'.

In this way, the live performances by Indian DJs from Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Delhi alongside British Asian DJs at other events challenges prevailing dominant hegemonic representations of Asianness. The articulation of Asian identities at these events is unique and has developed not only from dialogic interactions between diaspora and 'homeland', but also in conversation with the scene's many white attendees. Again, this is in sharp distinction to other 'Asian' musical scenes. However, the exposure of the complex, globalized character of British Asian identities in East London has not displaced or undermined the binary stereotype of Asian as terrorist 'demon' or Eastern 'exotica' (Hutnyk 2006, p. 77). That being said, the idea that the participants in this subculture are a hybrid germination of 1) Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indo-African, or

Indo-Trinidadian AND 2) British becomes untenable when one sees that the British Asians involved are not only engaging with British Asians from varied socio-economic backgrounds and national ancestries, but they are also regularly engaging with young musicians from the subcontinent and from the global South Asian diaspora.

For example, Akhtar, a 23-year-old British Bangladeshi student from Tower Hamlets saw the Bandish Projekt, a duo from Ahmedabad, India, perform. I interviewed him outside the Vibe Bar venue on Brick Lane, a street which his family has done their shopping on since he was a child. For him, a media tendency to depict India as either mired in poverty (cf. *Salaam Bombay!* (Nair 1998)) or a land of exotic people had prevailed, a feeling which had also negatively shaped his self-perception. This is in consonance with Franz Fanon's (1966) argument that pejorative identities can be self-ascribed with much the same vigor as laudatory ones. Akhtar described to me that this performance of two fashionable Indian DJs challenged his rather condescending view of the subcontinent and made him feel a sense of 'pride' and 'respect' for the Bangladesh and India of the 21st century. The energy behind this change of view was more than palatable. This one, globally mediated, performance added a transnational element to Akhtar's own conception of what it meant to be British Asian. Akhtar's experience in the scene also provides a concrete example of the local-global production of ethnic identities which Appadurai (1996) and Bhabha (1994) have theorized.

I met Hanif, a 29-year-old youth worker who also helps run an Asian electronic music web site, at his flat in Bow, East London, an inner-city neighbourhood he was born and

raised in. He told me of how British Asian youths in the area felt ‘culturally lost’ in Britain and were drawn to the streets after repeated failures in entering the formal economy. Hanif feels that Asian electronic music helped him ‘connect’ with his ‘ancestral roots’. He feels that the scene’s events gave him more insider knowledge about Bangladesh, the country of his ancestry, which he has not visited since he was six. Seen through the transnational flows of Asian electronic music in East London, British Asian identities cannot be neatly demarcated into putative British and Asian ‘essences’, an argument Gilroy (1993) and others have made in reference to black identities. Rather, these globally mediated performances (which Appadurai (1996) would consider as being products of transnational ‘scapes’) bring into sharp contrast the complex, networked identities of these Asian Londoners in which inherited categories and stereotypes of ‘traditional’ British Asians and South Asians are broken down.

It is tempting to conceive the visible group of musicians and regular participants who inhabit Asian dance musics in merely political terms - as a challenge to the hegemonic for example. Although they do question prevailing stereotypes of Asian popular culture, these events should not be read as rupturing them. On the contrary, the essentialisms of Asian popular culture as *exotica* are very much alive. Nonetheless, these events, as a mesh of networks, contribute to the audibility of alternative Asian voices. This is especially the case in collaborations with the global Asian diaspora as well as with non-diasporic Indians, events which have opened new transnational discursive modalities of deconstructing these essentialisms. In addition, the identities created through this globally networked ‘Asian cultural space’ can be read as not only problematizing

dominant Asian ethnic archetypes, but essentialisms created and maintained by Asians as well.

For example, at an event in London in September 2006, DJ Nerm, a British Asian DJ and founder of Shiva Soundsystem (which will be introduced subsequently), remixed a classic track by the well known Bollywood playback singer Lata Mangeshkar. The Bandish Projekt, a duo of Indian DJs from Gujarat mentioned earlier, decided to respond with some drum and bass beats, a genre traditionally associated with London. In addition to the evident blurring of the global and the local, this example illustrates how the expectation of the Indian musician to sample 'Indian sounds' was destabilized by the drum and bass 'response'. On the other hand, the archetype of the British Asian DJ as 'modern'/Western is not quite corrupted by the nostalgic 1960's Bollywood Mangeshkar 'call' as it fuses musical stylings from both the diaspora and 'homeland'.¹⁵ The subcontinent also becomes increasingly demystified through the Bandish Projekt's contribution to this exchange - a realization which itself disrupts some Orientalist self-mystification. Their physical presence at a fashionable London club perhaps does this more than the music which came out of their DJ console that night. Ultimately, the role-play of diasporic Asian as a traditional, exotic 'other' becomes tenuous when the 'homeland' is itself increasingly conceptualized as 'modern' and same.

Interventions of presence

I have found that the Asians who attend these events, despite diverse ancestral affiliations and to some extent class differences, identify with each other through a shared musical aesthetic. Instruments and sounds traditionally linked with the Indian subcontinent have a pan-South Asian diasporic appeal in this scene. Specifically, respondents seem to be bound together through a mutual 'pride' of the fact that a music with overt South Asian influences had achieved international commercial acclaim. Though respondents emphasize that the attractiveness of the subculture is 'the music' and not ethnicity, it is, however, hard to see how the two can be separated. Whereas external 'racialization' of the music can be distinguished, an internally driven pan-South Asian politics of cultural expression and survival can not always be appreciable. Firstly, the marketing of the subculture and its music involves globally mediated Asian ethnicities which are not always recognizable as such. Secondly, the music is not extricable from the greater political discourse of cultural legitimacy at least when played out in the diaspora. Thirdly, ethnicity is invoked by the media to categorize the musical aesthetic of this scene. This construction of the scene as generically 'Asian' inadvertently fostered an intra-Asian affinity with/consciousness from this music. The crux is that, for various reasons, these ethnically diverse Asian youths are identifying with each other through a shared globally mediated musical aesthetic. Previous work on Asian electronic music has dealt well with the politics of the music and issues of recognition and identity (Sharma et al. 1996). However, it has not concretized an understanding of ethnicity negotiated through Asian dance music as a globally networked movement.



Figure 3: Flyer for Mahatmas Revenge, May 2005

Shiva Soundsystem, at the time of my interviews in 2005, were based in a warehouse loft in the infamously titled ‘murder mile’ area of Hackney, East London. Their music making is known to engage not only diverse sections of the Asian diaspora, but also those outside of it (perhaps a product of the multiplicity of Hackney itself). Their eye-catching flyers and website also draw attention to the transnationality of this music scene. For example, the flyer above (Figure 3), an advertisement for an event by the Shiva

Soundssystem crew, exemplifies a globally mediated textual and visual contestation of British Asian (double) identities. In terms of the text, the night is positioned as a site where Asian identities are being aurally deconstructed. In the words of its promoters, Mahatma's Revenge, is a product of translation. The inputs into the translation are 'confusion', 'anarchy', 'double identity', and 'hybridity'. These then undergo a 'cultural mutation', which produces 'soundscapes of Eastern influenced breaks and beats'. One should first note that this 'mutation' is itself globalized as the event includes performances by a South Asian-American diasporic group, Dhamaal, alongside the resident British Asian DJs. The visual also enters the discursive space of transnationally mediated 'double identity' and 'hybridity' through the invocation and ridicule of hyper-essentialized tropes of Britishness and 'Asianness'.

This particular flyer was selected for several reasons. First, it explicitly engages with the identities and representation of British Asian youth. Targeting a particular market which is acquainted with the language of cultural studies, the flyer asserts its legitimacy as a site for contesting 'hybridity' and 'cultural mutation'. Secondly, the text argues that this contestation can be done aurally. This is done by invoking 'cultural mutation into soundscapes'. Importantly, the event is considered a negotiation of 'hybridity' within this context. Mahatma's Revenge is textually and visually argued to be a partial product of 'double identity' (cf. Du Bois [1903] 1994). The textual and visual aesthetic negotiates a multiplicitous and ambiguous theoretical array. This marks a dramatic shift from the useful, but dated politicized discourse of antiracism or Asians as a dyad of British and Asian that were prevalent in previous studies of British Asian dance musics

(e.g. Chadha 1989, Hyder 2004). But, one might wonder how extensive its appeal is, since events such as these also reflect the above-average educational level of the target audience.

When I asked Nerm, a founder of Shiva Soundsystem, to elaborate on their choice of imagery in the flyer, he was keen to emphasize that the visual aesthetic of the flyer, and their events in general, was meant to be read as a ‘punk statement’ and not exotic:

A multi-armed Beefeater [sic.] carrying a pot of tea and a British passport, a raygun, a *degchi* [steel cooking bowl], a *nariyal* [*kalash* – ritual Hindu coconut on metal bowl], and some takeaway curry on a British flag – I don’t call that exotic, I call that punk. That is, if you look at the logo to it – that is a punk statement. [...] It isn’t an exotic statement at all.

Nerm’s distinction between ‘punk’ and ‘exotic’, though rife for analysis, is beyond the scope of this article. However, the fact that Nerm and his colleagues are making such distinctions in the first place is noteworthy. Specifically, the engagement with critical discourses on exoticism are virtually nonexistent within most Asian dance music cultures. This places the Asian electronic music scene in a unique position. In contradistinction, the bhangra scene’s events, for example, are usually targeted to Asian youths (Hall 2002, p. 142). Bhangra musicians themselves have also been known to construct the scene as ethnically ‘Asian’ (Baumann 1996, p. 156). In terms of attendees, the bhangra remix scene in London is also almost exclusively Asian, whereas at Asian electronic music events, Asians generally do not even make up the majority.

Within the present climate towards Asians, Shiva Soundsystem’s public contestation of Asian identities, vis-à-vis a critical engagement with the language of the Academy, is of

the utmost importance. Nerm himself had been a victim of racial violence on his way back to Shiva Soundsystem's studio. Against this backdrop, hearing electronic music with tablas, sitars, raags, qawwals and other musical elements traditionally associated with the subcontinent in a London dancehall functions as a platform to articulate experiences such as these. In addition, the scene's success serves as proof that a diasporic Asian popular cultural form can infiltrate mainstream performance spaces.

The inclusion of subcontinental musical stylings into electronic dance musics has also led many Asians to claim that the music is 'theirs' (despite the overwhelming influences of black diasporic musics for example). I interviewed Poori, a 27-year-old British Indian media consultant from London and active participant of the scene at her office in North London. Her success in the media industry as an Asian woman was not only revealing of her class position and educational level, but is in sharp contrast with many of the inner-city South Asian women living in the East End of London. Poori perceives a special cultural connection to the music, which she feels gives her a greater understanding of the music: 'hearing the Indian sounds is very nice ... I kind of feel it more ... maybe it's cos (sic.) I'm Indian ... I don't know'. When 'Asian culture' is being represented in a (trendy) British public cultural space, young Asians feel a sense of empowerment in which they become cultural insiders rather than maintaining their normal position of outsiders. In other words, these clubs spaces transform British Asians into the dominant 'us' rather than the minority 'other'.

For example, Hanif, a respondent introduced earlier, expressed to me that the inclusion of subcontinental musical stylings into drum and bass and jungle produced a special relationship between the former and Asian consumers in that the music became transformed into an Asian cultural product:

when someone put in that kind of Asian samples and Indian samples into it [electronic dance musics], it just took it to the next level for you because you felt like it was yours [...] Just that Indian-ness there made it yours a bit more than everyone else's

He also believes that this perceived ownership of the music gave him a position of being part of the dominant ethnic culture of the club, rather than being in the minority (as he states that most rave and other electronic music scenes were predominantly white, middle-class):

Suddenly you felt like not only did you enjoy the bass line and the beats that were going around it, [...] but there was this sudden Indian sample that you could kind of relate to and when you heard it in the clubs you thought- "I know this better than most people, I know these sounds, I know what this is this". And people coming up to you and asking you... "what's that sound, what is that instrument [...]" And suddenly, you felt like you are bigger part of that scene [...] it kind of made it ours in some sense. You kind of knew the DJ's who were producing the music, you knew the club DJ's. Friends, older brothers, and relatives involved in it, and it just kind of felt like it was ours in a sense.

Poori and Hanif are suggesting that their Indian ethnicity might be facilitating a more intense relationship with live Asian electronic music versus other forms of live electronic music. Their responses provide insights into the motives for why Asians become regulars at these ethnically diverse events. For most Asian participants, producing or consuming Asian electronic music represents, not only an element/artefact of their ethnic genealogies, but also an accessible modality of cultural representation.

Apna Sangeet?¹⁶

The ‘rooting’ of Asian electronic music to an authentic subcontinental essence has been a longstanding trend. Over a decade ago, nights such as Anokha were the subject of debates on whether they were exclusionary Asian cultural events. The Asian electronic music promoter, Sweety Kapoor, commented that the ‘Anokha style borrows from many cultures’ and that it was ‘international rather than just a combination of Asian and British’ (quoted in Sherwood 1997). Mukul, a Hackney-based ex-Anokha DJ turned visual artist, recounted to me that nights such as Anokha and Global Sweatbox featured Asian musicians, but the core musicians were very diverse. He observes that Marque Gilmore, an African-American drummer from New York; Friedel Lelonek, a German drummer and DJ; and Nelson Dilation, a dreadlocked white British DJ were all part of the Anokha ‘crew’. Similarly, he emphasized that Bjork and Africa Bambaataa were regulars at the club. For Mukul, it was this heterogeneous confluence of musical styles - and not an emphasis of what he refers to as ‘Asian aspects’ - that was the driving force behind Anokha’s musical successes. Talvin Singh agrees:

I don’t actually have such a big Asian following. People come to hear good music - not Asian music (quoted in Sherwood 1997)

Though Singh may have been keen to disassociate the music from ethnic labelling, the reality was that the music was not only widely labeled as ‘Asian’ but its success was also partially contingent on this. Though Nerm of Shiva Soundsystems considers his work ‘alternative music of Asian origin’¹⁷ and Ges-e of Nasha stresses its ability to articulate

East London Asian identities, the press rarely played along. For example, an article in *The Times of London* reduced Ges-e's music to 'spicy Eastern sounds' (Munday 2004).

Notwithstanding the critique of the music's labeling as Asian, the reality is that it is considered to reflect Asian youths at some level. Nerm believes that the Shiva Soundsystem collective, for example, have changed people's perceptions towards Asians through their music, events, artwork, and design. He feels that his DJing is, for whatever reason, taken to be reflective of Asians:

I'm very conscious of the fact that my attitudes and my behaviour will lead to that being applied to the entire race of brown people. I'm very aware that if there's a group of rudeboys firing on a train, people are gonna (sic.) view everyone brown as being like that. And it'll just cause more social problems by these stereotypes being generated. That's a really odd thing to say but the idea that what you do, your reactions, carry weight for your entire race is something that I've dealt with for a long time.¹⁸

Nerm's belief is that the gangsteresque 'rudeboy' images of young Asians - as fictionalized in *Londonstani* (Malkani 2006) for example - are applied to Asians in general. He believes that Shiva Soundsystem presents counter images of Asians which challenge these harmful Asian essentialisms. Of note, however, is the absence of any mention of the class differences between working-class rudeboys and the relatively comfortable lives of the participants of the Asian electronic music scene.

Conclusion

Gilroy's (2003, p. 393) suggestion that there are difficulties in cohering a single 'overarching' diasporic soundscape that reveals localization and globalization is useful.

One solution is to search for a diasporic soundscape that reveals the localization and globalization of the 'local' rather than the world. A case study of the local in the case of Asian electronic music does much to understand both the globalization and localization of Asian soundscapes at a global level. Viewing the London performances of Asian electronic music as a globally mediated event has challenged prevailing essentialisms that position second-generation Asians as post-modern hybrids – a facile embrace of 'Asianness' and 'Britishness'. First, the affirmation of the global in Asian electronic music through the regular performances of subcontinentally-based Asian electronic music DJs in London alongside local British Asian DJs raises critical questions for how we view diaspora, performance, and Asian identities.¹⁹ And secondly, these frontier-breaking events have opened up new connections between diaspora and 'homeland', exposing both to astereotypical visions of each other. Thirdly, these live performances continue to serve as a vehicle for making these Asian youths visible within British popular culture.

The common thread between these three 'conclusions' is actually a tension. The live performance of Asian electronic music in London is continually negotiating a tightrope between the prevailing overarching tendency to ethnically essentialize any visible 'Asian' cultural product and the powerful impulse of young urban British Asians to affirm anti-essentialized everyday Asian lives. The regularity and nature of the global mediations in the live performance of the scene is the unique contribution made to this discourse. Where the local has failed to break Orientalist constructions of a homogeneous 'other', a globally mediated local does not. As the DJs from Delhi scratch drum and bass, they remind us that the pursuit of an overarching diasporic Asian soundscape perhaps echoes

old ethnic essentialisms. Seeing, hearing, and dancing to these subcontinental musicians can and does shape, real-time, the ethnic identities of some of the Asian Londoners who participate in the subculture. Despite its failings in terms of gender equality and class diversity, Asian electronic music continues to heed Nawaz's call of 'keeping the middle finger in full view' by making visible the lives of a segment of British Asian urban youths.

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¹ 'Asian' in this article follows the British usage in that it is synonymous with 'South Asian'

² Such as Southall, Ealing, Wembley, and Harrow in London.

³ For the purposes of this article, 'electronic music subcultures' broadly encompass music subcultures, whose musics are predominantly electronically synthesized. Such subcultures range from highly experimental electronic to techno to drum and bass. An equally broad usage of 'electronic music' that encompasses everything from arthouse to popular electronic music will be employed.

⁴ Which the authors define as including bhangra remix, post-bhangra, asian electronic, asian remix, and bhangramuffin. Cornershop, though an indie band, was also included within the term. Their later track such 'Brimful of Asha' became a dance club hit.

⁵ This trend of an 'Asian-influenced' music growing popular in many segments of the Asian diaspora is not confined to just bhangra or Asian electronic music. Rather, it seems to extend to other 'Asian-influenced' musics such as Indo-Caribbean chutney (Ramnarine 1996).

⁶ Sawhney has headlined Jazz Festivals such as the Lemon Jelly Jazz Circus, Hampstead, London, 10th July 2005.

⁷ *Soundz of the Asian Underground* was a highly significant release, not only in terms of its musical innovations, but also it has been attributed as spawning the Asian electronic music scene in the UK, which was dubbed the 'Asian Underground', taking its name from Singh's album (Banerjea 2000: 64). Singh also had a two-year residency at the Blue Note Club in London and subsequently ran 'Anokha' nights at venues such as Fabric in East London's fashionable Farringdon district. In 2001, he relaunched his Anokha night at 93 Feet East in Brick Lane, East London.

⁸ Philips used Talvin Singh's popular club anthem 'Jaan' in television advertisements.

⁹ Bhachu (2004) describes how, at the time, Cherie Blair began wearing Indian-inspired fashion like salwars and sari suits.

¹⁰ See Khan (1997) for an example from i-D magazine.

¹¹ This is not to say that the media as a whole engaged in a celebration of multiculturalism. Rather, some media representations - whether intentionally or inadvertently - helped fuel the New Labour-driven 'multiculturalist' wave in which, as Holohan (2006, p. 19) argues, 'the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence was repackaged as a leftover of a Britain divided by class and race'.

¹² The Asian Dub Foundation Education (ADFED) community music project is the best-known example and the program that Boys from the East participated in. However, other community music projects have been set up through local government funding in Tower Hamlets and elsewhere in the East End.

¹³ Examples include Nasha's 2005 'Earthquake Relief Fundraiser' and Samosafunk's 2006 KIDSCO charity event.

¹⁴ This is the name of a track by Ges-e and Osmani Soundz. The name is a play on Brick Lane, a well-known Bangladeshi area where many Asian electronic music events are held.

¹⁵ In many ways, this call and response is predictable. As the literature (e.g. Cohen 1997, Vertovec and Cohen 1999) illustrates, the diaspora often more closely associates with the steer a typical/traditional/nostalgic elements of their 'homeland' cultures.

¹⁶ This can be translated from Hindi to English as 'our music'. One of Britain's oldest bhangra outfits is also named Apna Sangeet.

¹⁷ Personal interview

¹⁸ Personal interview

¹⁹ The Delhi-based MIDIval Punditz, the Ahmedabad-based Bandish Projekt, and Mumbai-based Kris are some examples of Indian based Asian electronic musicians who have performed at the subculture's events in London.