

South Asian Instagram Community Archives:
A Platform for Performance, Curation, and Identity

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Abstract

Identity Performance in South Asian Instagram Community Archives

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“South Asian” is a contested term often referring to persons and cultures with ancestral ties to the Indian subcontinent. For a variety of reasons, people have been and continue to be displaced from their ancestral lands. As a result, they are either resettled within the subcontinent or in other continental regions overseas. Through the fracturing of these populations and cultures by way of colonialism and imperialism, war, genocide, and socioeconomic pursuits, historical and cultural resources become more difficult to access for the deterritorialized. This thesis explores how certain users of the popular social media site Instagram are working towards the effective reterritorialization of an online reimagining of South Asia. My research is based on a two-phase methodology, during which I: a) conducted a digital ethnography of four Instagram accounts @BrownHistory, @SouthAsia.Art, @SouthAsianNation, and @yaada_, performing visual and textual analysis of content posted to the accounts between September 2020 and August 2021; b) individually interviewed the creators of these accounts. Mobilizing performance theorists Jose Esteban Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification” and Diana Taylor’s theory of “the repertoire”, I examine how these accounts act as immaterial community archives – storing, describing, and exhibiting South Asian cultural heritage material online. I demonstrate how participation in these accounts constitute a kind of identity performance in which South Asian-ness becomes articulated through a shared process of disidentification. I conclude by exploring the emergence of more recent social movements affecting the online South Asian community, noting the capabilities and limitations of the platform to enact social change.

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Dedication

To my feminist co-conspirators, my *sixters*, AM, Dani, Gabi, Jackie, & Meli... I could not have done this without you, and thus, I write this for you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Instagramming South Asian Identities

I packed up my car and moved from Toronto, Ontario to Montreal, Quebec quite spontaneously in May 2016. Originally conceived as a temporary move, *un séjour d'été*, I spent the summer frolicking in city parks, working odd maintenance jobs across the island, and meeting new people. Issues of French comprehension aside, I was struck by a particular kind of culture shock, one in which my citizenship as well as my racial identity was always being called into question. Something about me was not registering with the people I encountered.

On out-calls, I was often asked where I was from before being asked for my name (if I was even asked). A prospective landlord asked me, unprompted, if I was Korean. A nurse asked if my olive-skinned Italian friend and I were siblings. Bypassing French or English, strangers have approached me speaking in Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, and Creole, assuming a shared cultural affiliation when there was none. Only once did a young woman at an underground rave correctly identify me as a fellow Tamil. I learned quickly that unlike Canada's other major Canadian metropolises, Toronto and Vancouver, in Montreal, there seemed to be less recognition of South Asian identity. As an extension, my race or ethnicity was often misinterpreted.¹

The initial iteration of this thesis project would have had me researching into Quebec community and national archives to trace the clearly underexposed history of South Asian migration to Quebec. I was particularly inspired to do this research following an Instagram post I encountered on my feed. The post summarized an article that stated how in parts of rural Quebec the French word for Tamil (*Tamoul*) was considered a derogatory slur used indiscriminately toward people of colour.² While this research endeavour was unable to come to fruition given the closures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, I decided to focus my inquiries instead to the source that provoked that initial inquiry – Instagram.

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms today. Its popularity can be attributed in part to its ability to successfully marry the photo-sharing affordances of its predecessors such as Photobucket, Picasa, and Flickr with the principle of social centrality that arose with Web 2.0.³ As a social networking platform, various social and psychological motivations for using Instagram have been studied including social interaction, archiving, self-expression, escapism, surveilling others, documentation, coolness, and creativity.⁴ It has also been suggested that photos and videos have become a primary source of social currency both for individual users as well as marketers.⁵ With over one billion monthly active users, Instagram has a global reach and is most popular with people under 30.⁶ In recent years, there has been a noticeable surge of Instagram accounts acting as landing pages for brands, fandoms, and various other community groups. One particular genre that has caught my attention has been curated art and culture pages showcasing images, text, and media of various South Asian cultures. Simply by “following” these pages that were originally shared by other people already within my social media network, I have been inundated with social media content reflecting the sorts of racial and ethnic communities with which I feel a kinship.

Having found myself among the enormous following of these South Asian culture accounts (the most popular of these accounts has a following of over half a million), I decided to use this thesis as a vehicle of exploration into these landing sites of South Asian Internet memorabilia. Specifically, I analyzed how these accounts are able to enact a culturally legible

and recognizable performance of “South Asian-ness” given the plurality of identities, ethnicities, cultures, histories, and experiences that are encompassed under such a large umbrella.

The term “South Asia” itself is contested among many given the complicated and often fraught history among cultural, linguistic, religious, and political groups within the territory. Examples of such struggles are exemplified in the Tamil genocide in Sri Lanka (1983-2009), the 1984 Sikh Genocide in India, the Partition of India in 1947, the genocide in Bangladesh in 1971, and the Rohingya genocide (2016 – ongoing). Add to these the less explicit forms of violence, microaggressions, and ongoing oppression felt by marginalized ethnic, religious, caste, and gender groups. All these histories and complexities highlight the shortcomings of the term “South Asian” to equally encompass all peoples and communities and their situated realities from this diverse region. Nevertheless, the term, as this thesis seeks to trace, has become an effective moniker under which pluralistic, diasporic, and local communities have been able to gather to share art, culture, and history via Instagram.

My three principal research questions that guided this thesis were:

1. How are South Asian identities performed through various curatorial and cultural practices on Instagram?
2. How do South Asian Instagram community archive creators understand their roles as arbiters of “South Asian-ness”?
3. What kinds of content are circulated by these accounts and how do they challenge or support conventional South Asian socio and cultural politics?

Through the exploration of these questions, which have largely been under-researched both in social media studies and in diaspora studies, I seek to highlight how these practices of digital community archiving and curation enact a particular performance of cultural identity.

Theoretical Perspective: Instagram as an Archive of Performance

In the following, I explain three main areas, namely, critical archival studies, performance studies, and postcolonial media studies, that have informed this research.

Critical archival studies

Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand argue that critical archival studies addresses and seeks to change existing injustices in current archival research and practice. “In this way,” they write, “critical archival studies, like critical theory, is emancipatory in nature, with the ultimate goal of transforming archival practice and society writ large.”⁷

In this research, I draw on the traditions of critical archival studies broadly known as “community archives”. I then articulate the social media accounts I study as *South Asian Instagram community archives*, by which I mean these accounts act as cultural repositories made and maintained by and for a specific community. My conceptualisation of *Instagram community archives* builds on the work of community archivists’ and researchers’ studies on the archives as a community classroom as well as community archives’ role of heritage building as a site of cultural reproduction.⁸ Community archives function as a site of community building, pedagogical practice, cultural identity formation, and diasporic meeting place. When these archives are practiced on Instagram, as indicated by the term *South Asian Instagram community archives*, they function as an ephemeral curated collection of mostly visual media that by way of being presented on Instagram as dually archived and exhibited. The traditional community archive mostly deals with material records that are housed in a physical locale that may or may not also engage in exhibitory practices. The location of the

community archive often informs or is informed by the community who's records and being kept. Instagram community archives, on the other hand, are not bound to geographic locales and can collect and exhibit media across the globe.⁹

Community archives encompass a variety of non-traditional genres, including the queer archive which I mobilize in my work. Both queer archives specifically and community archives more generally enable us to recognize and legitimize non-traditional archives as archives in and of themselves. They allow for visual cultures, oral histories, and other record types not usually conserved within traditional archives to be engaged with as archival documents in their own rights. Crucially, these approaches demonstrate the importance of these queer and community archives as sites of activism and identity formation.

Jack Halberstam, for instance, states that archives act not only as a repository, but as “a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity.”¹⁰ Valerie Rohy, drawing from Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* further articulates the queer archive as a “technology of identity.”¹¹ When considering the intersectional nuances accompanying queer migrant identities, these documents of queer histories become, as Melissa Autumn White describes it, “assembled as archives of intimacy and trauma.”¹² It is through this lens of the queer community archive that I engage with South Asian community archives formed on Instagram and unpack their political identity work. Considering that South Asian locals and diasporans harbour complex and often suppressed histories, identities, cultures, memories, and traumas that they exhibit online, I argue that these Instagram archives act as a kind of queering of the traditional archive. Following Anna Poletti and Julie Rak's research on self-representation online, I argue that South Asian Instagram community archives also function as a technology of identity as they enact a form of “communicative identity-work.”¹³ As Poletti and Tak describe it, the activities involved in engaging in social media practices such as posting and sharing photos, liking, commenting, etc. coupled with platforms' and devices' technological affordances “make certain kinds of identity presentation possible (and others unthinkable).”¹⁴ To this point, I examine not only the media presented on this Instagram community archives, but how account creators' and users' engagement with them inform a certain performance and presentation of South Asian identity.

Performance Studies

Drawing on theories of performance and performativity proposed by Muñoz, Taylor, and Sedgwick (especially in relationship to diasporic and other minoritized communities¹⁵), I trace how diasporic publics are enacted via South Asian Instagram community archives and argue that notions of performance and performativity are baked into the production of these Instagram community archives as a site of diasporic cultural encounter.

As I develop this argument to analyze performance of identity within these South Asian Instagram community archives, I primarily mobilize Muñoz's theory of “disidentifications”.¹⁶ Muñoz's theory has thus far been utilized largely within the fields of gender and sexuality studies, disability studies, Latinx studies, and organizational studies. Few studies have investigated how the theory of disidentification can be applied to social media, South Asian studies, and online identity performance. Bringing the fields of performance studies and social media studies together, I apply the theory of disidentification to the context of South Asian and diaspora media studies. In so doing, I take the theory of disidentifications beyond the context of queer-of-colour identities, in which it was originally developed, and articulate how “South Asian” becomes a pluralistic and elastic identity under which marginalized

subjects within South Asian localities as well as South Asians living in the diaspora come to disidentify.

During my analysis, I also turn to Taylor's theory of performance in order to interrogate the Instagram community archive as a site of performance and as an example of what Taylor calls an "ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge" (emphasis in original).¹⁷ The content posted to Instagram, I would argue, is quite ephemeral in nature. With the introduction of Stories, Instagram users can post content that is only viewable for 24 hours. Even with the Highlights feature that allows users to save their Stories, Highlights and even regular feed posts can be deleted or "archived" at any time. The permanency of accounts is also not guaranteed as users can delete or privatize their accounts at any time, accounts may be suspended or deleted by Instagram for violating terms of service, and Instagram as a platform may disappear one day. While ephemerality and "staying power" are frequently addressed in performance studies (such as in the works of Taylor, Phelan, and Schneider¹⁸), these discussions are limited to aesthetic performances. In this research, I mobilize performance studies scholars' discussions of ephemerality in the context of Instagram. In doing so, I bring a new approach to social media studies analysis by studying social media activity as a performance and thus tracking how changes in media content and curatorial decisions over time signals changing understandings and enactments of identity over time. Through this critical focus on the ephemerality and remaining power of the performance of identities, I critically observe the curated media made visible onto these accounts – noting how these curatorial choices of what is archived in this public forum inform discourses of cultural representation and reproduction within South Asian communities.

Postcolonial Media Theory

In the process of deterritorialization, the kind of kinship that comes with belonging to a geographically situated community can be lost. Arjun Appadurai explains how the deterritorialized are tasked with necessary cultural reproduction of their backgrounds within their new locales. ¹⁹ "It is in this atmosphere," Appadurai writes, "that the invention of tradition (and of ethnicity, kinship, and other identity markers) can become slippery, as the search for certainties is regularly frustrated by the fluidities of transnational communication."²⁰ The resulting effects of this includes the deterritorialized's pasts becoming "increasingly part of museums, exhibits, and collections... an arena for conscious choice, justification, and representation – the latter often to multiple and spatially dislocated audiences."²¹ I propose that we can think, along with Appadurai's theories of cultural reproduction post-deterritorialization, the phenomenon of the South Asian Instagram community archive as an attempt at a large-scale mediated cultural diasporic reterritorialization.

A community-engaged and critical curatorial practice as is utilized by these Instagram community archives has the possibility of transforming narratives around cultural identity and representation by divesting from the dominant ideologies as exhibited in colonial archives and other cultural institutions. Throughout this thesis, I explore how South Asian Instagram community archives remediate cultural content as a strategic tool for education, empowerment, and transnational community building.

Methodology: Digital Ethnography

This research is composed of a two-part digital ethnography, including observations and interviews. Mirca Madianou describes digital ethnography as "combin[ing] a wide lens and a microscopic attention to detail" making it "perfect for capturing environments and their

contexts but also the microdynamics that produce them.”²² Digital ethnography is particularly well-suited to my study on the online performance of South Asian identity as it allows for capturing the broad cultural signifiers of South Asian-ness paired with deeper explorations into individual and nuanced experiences of identity and performance.

In the process of my research, I conducted a simultaneous digital ethnography of the following four South Asian Instagram community archives: @BrownHistory, @SouthAsia.Art, @SouthAsianNation, and @yaada_.²³ My two-part digital ethnography was composed of the following two stages: 1) a textual and visual culture analysis of the media posted by the four accounts over a period of 12 months (September 2020 - August 2021), which included feed posts and their captions and comments as well as Stories and Highlight); 2) semi-structured interviews with the creators and lead content managers behind the accounts.

In part one, I analyzed how the use of images, texts, videos, captions, and comments function as a means to informally archive, exhibit, and create discourse around cultural and heritage materials sourced by or for the South Asian community. While there are several accounts of this nature, I chose to narrow my scope and focus on the four accounts mentioned. As their posts and biographies indicate, each of these accounts have a similar aim, which is to showcase South Asian art, history, and culture through visual media (hence the reason why I focused on these accounts). Each account, however, employs a unique lens through which their media content is curated. They also have varying follower counts and posting schedules. For example, at the time of study, the range of followers of these accounts ranged from approximately 2,000 to 550,000. Their posting schedules also varied from once every few weeks to multiple posts a day.

Following the work of Isto Huvila and Kate Theimer, these four accounts constitute what I term “South Asian online participatory archives.”²⁴ I consider these online archives of South Asian material that as participatory in the sense that community members (in this case Internet and Instagram users) are able to submit their own documents (Instagram content) into the archives. There is also a second aspect in which these archives become participatory. Given Instagram’s technological affordances, users are able to participate and interact with archived media by linking, commenting, saving, and sharing posts uploaded to these archive-accounts. When evaluating accounts’ potential to be included for study, they needed to fulfil the following criteria: 1) self-identify as representing South Asian media; 2) invite user-contributed media; 3) do not represent a corporation, gallery, or any other brick-and-mortar institutions; 4) must currently be active or post content regularly (includes feed and/or posts to Stories); 5) content must be curated and not be the exclusive sharing of the creators’ own artworks. Hereafter, I will refer to these accounts as “South Asian Instagram community archives” or simply “Instagram community archives” as the context of this study implies the South Asian media focus.

I formatted my methodological approach following Diana T. Kudaibergenova’s digital ethnographic study of Instagram-based discourses of gender, sexuality, and traditionalization in Central Asia.²⁵ In her study, Kudaibergenova performed a close reading of popular Instagram accounts in Kazakhstan as well as the discourse they generated in the comment sections. In doing so she aimed study the role of social media in defining publics’ sexual identities and expressions. I similarly observed and analyzed the content posted to these four South Asian Instagram community archives, noting instances where significant discussions were incited in the public comment section. This was done in order to observe under which kinds of media content do tensions arise within these seemingly all-encompassing, inclusive

South Asian online communities. The content under study included the standard content published to Instagram which includes feed posts and their captions and comments, 24-hour long Instagram Stories and Highlights, as well as the public comments under these posts. I also extended this digital ethnography to any paratextual content outside the limits of the respective Instagram pages such as podcasts, affiliated accounts, and websites.

In the second part of my digital ethnography, I conducted a series of online, semi-structured interviews with the creators of the four Instagram community archives under study. The interviews were conducted over a video-based communication platform within which there was a mix of participants using their cameras and not. In each case, my own camera remained activated. I established initial contact with each prospective interviewee via direct message from my personal Instagram account with a very brief description of my project and with an invitation to follow up via email. Reaching out through my own public profile, similar to conducting the interview over video, allowed for the participants to see me. While the video interviews allowed them to see me in real time react and respond to their answers, my personal Instagram profile allows them to have the same kind of insight into my own online identity performance as I do theirs. As apparent in many of my posted photos as well as my list of followings, it becomes evident that exploring South Asian identity, art, culture, and history on Instagram is not only my research topic, but something I am engaged in quotidianly. My public following and followers list also signals my other online community affiliations including Indigenous resurgence movements, Black Lives Matter, contemporary art, and queer comedy among others. Instagram's features also allow for users who visit my page to see which other users (if any) we follow (or follow us) in common. I am strongly convinced that providing this more intimate glimpse into my non-researcher persona (which, as I have curated online, is much more whimsical and less serious) allowed for the prospective interviewees to feel more comfortable speaking to me as my online presence clearly signals my community-insider status compared to if I had communicated only via email or via a separate identity/personality-less account built just for research purposes (which I had also made).

Each creator I reached out to was interested in the project and open to being interviewed. Through email correspondence, I provided some sample questions to show the nature of my inquiry and answered any preliminary questions about the process, of which they were few. The interviews took place during the first half of my year of account observations. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted about one and a half hours each. As opposed to a survey or more structured interview that sought particular demographical responses, a semi-structured interview allowed me to follow interesting topics and conversations that arose and that were not predetermined. Through this set of open-ended questions, I sought to prompt my interviewees' own ideas and opinion. As well, I aimed to create a space for open dialogue around the very individual and subjective personal experiences of diaspora, community, and cultural identity as understood by each interviewee.

Thesis Overview

Each of the following chapters is organized in a way to investigate the phenomenon of South Asian Instagram community archives from the frameworks of archival and curatorial practices, identity, and representational and platform politics, respectively.

In Chapter 2, I offer a review of the relevant literature in archival studies. Using the example of a Tamil community archive exhibition in Berlin, I trace the various arguments and turns in the field of archival history. First, I explore the history of archives as a colonial construction

and the traditional gatekeeping of archives. I then propose a link between archival and curatorial practices, arguing that the choice of what is deemed to have archival value is a curatorial choice informed by the archivist/curator's knowledge and experience of a particular field, history, and community. Finally, I turn to the ephemeral and affective qualities of archives and how performance theory can allow us to understand the importance of non-institutional community archival projects. Bringing performance studies together with social media studies, I apply the former's focus on the ephemerality of archives and their political potential to the ephemerality of South Asian Instagram community archives and their political potentials. Thinking together with Taylor's concept of the repertoire, which captures both the ephemerality and yet the staying power of non-traditional archival practices of "embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)" I explore how online social networking platforms form sites of community that, through the circulation of cultural and historic media, inadvertently create social media community archives.²⁶

Chapter 3 unpacks the complexities of South Asian identity. Through the interrogation of my own personal anecdotes, I begin with analyzing my own experience as first-generation Canadian and how I came to understand myself as "South Asian" despite my evident national affiliations to Malaysia, the country of my parents' origin. I argue that this shifting away from a national identity to a pluralistic South Asian identity functions as an extension of Muñoz's theory of disidentifications. Through a series of qualitative interviews with creators of South Asian Instagram community archives, I explore this proposition further, looking at how others with relationships to different South Asian national origins and who have different diasporic identities (i.e., British and American) have had similar experiences to my own with respect to internalized difficulties in cultural self-identification. I conclude the chapter by positing disidentification as a tool of resistance for those who experience a sense of nonbelonging within their lived communities. This applies to members of the South Asian diaspora as well as South Asian locals, who by way of marginalized identities including caste, gender, and religion, may also experience this sense of nonbelonging.

Chapter 4 looks more closely at the platform of Instagram as a vehicle for archiving and exhibiting community culture and knowledge. Highlighting the circulation of visual culture as Instagram's driving feature, I address politics of representation within the platform. Keeping in mind the archival/curation duality of Instagram community archives, I propose that the posting choices of creators of these accounts-as-archives are deeply political in the sense that they have the dual potential to challenge or reinforce South Asian cultural norms. For example, the representation of one marginalized South Asian group does not mean that it automatically reflects the culture, community, and concerns of other marginalized South Asian groups. In fact, while two communities may both be marginalized within a South Asian context, they can at times be in tension with one another due to histories of lateral violence, issues of cultural and political elitism, and interlocking oppressions from multiple marginalizations.

Intersecting axes such as caste, class, ethnicity, religion, and language all contribute to prominence or erasure of certain communities both in mainstream media representations as well as within the Instagram community archives. With this in mind, I embark on a visual and textual analysis of the posts uploaded by the four accounts under study, looking at how Instagram's platform affordances are used by the different accounts for their own specific goals including public education. I also address how the nature of the contents posted have shifted dramatically throughout the course of this study (during which movements such as Black Lives Matter and Palestinian solidarity took hold) from implicitly to overtly political.

Lastly, I address how Instagram as a platform has its own politics embedded in its design, as seen in the examples of shadow banning, content blocking, and account suspensions that have been experienced by the accounts under study.

My concluding chapter returns to my original research questions and provides a summary and reflection of my findings gathered from the qualitative interviews and the Instagram media analysis. I revisit and reinstate the main scholarly contributions of this thesis which intersects the fields of media studies, performance studies, and community archival studies. These contributions include a novel application of Muñoz's disidentifications theory to the context of South Asian diaspora identities, and an exploration of the potentials of Instagram community archives through a performance studies framework of archive ephemerality. I end with addressing some limitations of this research and note the areas in which there is room for further study as well as the next steps my own research will be taking post-thesis.

- ¹ I acknowledge that the terms such as “race” and “racialized” are contested terms. As many have argued, race is a social construction, albeit with material effects. It is only through an application of racial differentiation, often presented through a lens of white imperialism and supremacy in a Canadian or Western context do people become “racialized”.
- ² Narayanan, ‘What I’ve Learned about Diversity Teaching in a Small, Rural Quebec Town’.
- ³ Jensen, ‘Instagram in the Photo Archives: Curation, Participation, and Documentation through Social Media’.
- ⁴ Lee et al., ‘Pictures Speak Louder than Words’; Sheldon and Bryant, ‘Instagram’.
- ⁵ Appiah, ‘Rich Media, Poor Media’; Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati, ‘What We Instagram’; Rainie, Brenner, and Purcell, ‘Photos and Videos as Social Currency Online’.
- ⁶ Clement, ‘Instagram’.
- ⁷ Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand, ‘Critical Archival Studies’, 2.
- ⁸ Mills, Rochat, and High, ‘Telling Stories’; Rochat et al., ‘Maison d’Haïti’s Collaborative Archives Project: Archiving a Community of Records’.
- ⁹ Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* also grounds my understanding of the archive as nodes of interconnecting cultures and histories across time and space.
- ¹⁰ Halberstam and Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, 169–70.
- ¹¹ Rohy, ‘In the Queer Archive’, 354.
- ¹² White, ‘Archives of Intimacy and Trauma’, 76.
- ¹³ Poletti and Rak, *Identity Technologies*, 7.
- ¹⁴ Poletti and Rak, 7.
- ¹⁵ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*; Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*.
- ¹⁶ *Disidentifications*.
- ¹⁷ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.
- ¹⁸ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*; Phelan, *Unmarked*; Schneider, *Performing Remains*.
- ¹⁹ ‘Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy’.
- ²⁰ Appadurai, 44.
- ²¹ Appadurai, 44.
- ²² Madianou, ‘Polymedia and Ethnography’, 2.
- ²³ Throughout the text, I use Initial capitals (“camel case”) to write the handles of these accounts as a practice of accessibility by making the compounded words more legible for various reader needs including those using screen readers.
- ²⁴ Huvila, ‘Participatory Archive’; Theimer, ‘Participatory Archives’.
- ²⁵ Kudaibergenova, ‘The Body Global and the Body Traditional’. My methodological framework also draws from other kinds of internet ethnographies that employ qualitative interviews with users of social networking sites including: boyd, ‘Why Youth (Heart) Social Network Sites’; boyd, ‘Social Network Sites as Networked Publics’; Gehl, ‘Power/Freedom on the Dark Web’; Renninger, “‘Where I Can Be Myself... Where I Can Speak My Mind’”; Serapis, *Coming of Age in Second Life*.
- ²⁶ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Exhibiting Community Archives

During the 11th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art in February 2020, Sinthujan Varatharajah curated an exhibition titled *Affect Archives*, jointly produced with multidisciplinary artist Osías Yanov. The questions guiding Varatharajah's curation were as follows: "Can a city hold and belong to more than a singular history and people? And what does it mean for a stateless people to shape and create new spaces within others' nation-states?"²⁷

Triggered by the cataclysmic event named as Black July, the nation-state known as Sri Lanka underwent a civil war. Over a period of over 25 years, the Sinhalese controlled Sri Lankan government fought against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam ("Tamil Tigers"). The Tigers and their supporters sought independence and sovereignty over a section of the island dubbed Tamil Eelam, the traditional Tamil name of the island. Between 1983 and 2009, the government's anti-Tamil pogrom resulted in tens of thousands of horrific and violent deaths, as well as countless reported cases of abuse, abductions, and torture of Tamil people. During this era, many chose or were forced to flee the ongoing violence as refugees. Varatharajah and their family were one such example of displacement, resulting in Varatharajah's birth as a stateless person in a refugee camp before their family was permanently resettled in Germany.²⁸

When displaced communities arrive at an already established cultural, historical, and political landscape, how and where are the histories of these communities made? How can the loss of their histories in the fabric of the new nation be prevented? Varatharajah's *Affect Archives* addresses these questions by featuring items and artifacts from the Eelam Tamil community of Berlin. These include community members' personal objects, press clippings, oral histories, maps, and other archival materials. Through the exhibition arrangement, Varatharajah maps the movement of Tamil people across Berlin, linking the falling of the Berlin Wall to the survival of the exiled Tamils.

Archives' Colonial Roots

Affect Archives seeks to assert cultural and historical difference within a white-majority nation such as Germany with a growing racialized population, mostly in urban centres such as Berlin. In other similarly operating nations including Canada, assimilation into the fold of nationalism and neoliberalism is the ultimate goal, despite official policies and popular rhetoric of multiculturalism. In fact, multiculturalism and other similar rhetoric are often employed by former colonial nations (or former settler colonies) as a neocolonial practice used to suppress minority community dissent.²⁹

While Varatharajah is able to manipulate the archive to challenge dominant national narratives of (white) German history, the origins of institutional archives are deeply rooted in colonial politics.³⁰ Generally, items obtained by archives are collected, sorted, described, and stored following a favourable appraisal by an institutionally accredited archivist. In her seminal essay, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," Ann Laura Stoler, unpacks the archive as a site of reproduction of colonial rule and power.³¹ Through a critique of anthropological and ethnographic research, she interrogates how the archive is approached as a site of knowledge. In one instance, Stoler notes how "students of the colonial experience 'mine' the *content* of government commissions and reports, but rarely attend to their peculiar *form* or *context*" (emphasis in original).³² By exposing the lack of criticality with which archived materials are often treated in pursuit of ethnographic study, Stoler challenges

scholars to extend critical reflection not just to the content of the documents themselves, but how they are used in scholarship. This also applies to the ethnographic treatment of archives as sites within which knowledge is extracted. Instead of taking them at face value, Stoler suggests reflecting on a reading of archives as cultural artifacts produced by a colonial authority.³³ While this does not necessitate a complete dismissal of colonial archives as a source of knowledge, it invites another lens through which its materials can be studied.

Following nineteenth century colonial rule, the technology and gatekeeping of archives has expanded in such a way that the term “archives” in the present day can point to any material or immaterial collection of cultural objects. Stoler explains this shift in the connotation of the term archive in cultural theory as being “a strong *metaphor* for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections – and, as importantly, for the seductions and longings that such quests for, and accumulations of, the primary, originary, and untouched entail” (emphasis in original).³⁴ Theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Allan Sekula among others have written extensively on the archive as metaphor and against the archive as an institution.³⁵

In this respect, the ubiquity of archives, can help us formulate the role of individual collectors of cultural materials as archivist. Even within an age of unbridled consumerism, decisions must be made as to which personal effects are to be kept, updated, or disposed.³⁶ These choices are made even for immaterial objects – which photos and files get saved and which get deleted. The professional archivist must often make similar decisions. Limiting factors such as storage space, personnel resources, backlog, and provenance influence archivists’ decisions to keep, process, describe, catalogue, and preserve materials. Within this framing, the question of what gets archived becomes a not solely a question of standard procedure, but a question of curatorial process.

Archiving as Curatorial Practice

Curation, like archives, are everywhere. We listen to curated playlists, we curate our social media feeds, and some of us even go as far to explore gastronomy through curated tasting menus. In *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else*, David Balzer makes a similar observation about curation as I made about archiving.³⁷ From once being rooted in professional museum settings, the concept of curation has seen an expansion to several aspects of modern life in the early twenty-first century. Balzer attributes this cultural shift as a response to the changing landscape of the museum and gallery in the mid-1990s which saw large cuts to funding and a rise of anti-elite-institution artwork. In response, the curator became a central figure to the rebranding of the institution. Their duties also extended to the courting of new publics by positioning the curator’s own experiences, identity, and influence in service of the employing institution. In return, these institutional affiliations worked to legitimize the role of the curator as also being both advocate and organizer.

In the decades following, however, the figure of the curator and the role of curation as it had been known has been evidently transformed into a marketable and corporatized entity. This is exemplified in supposedly “curated” exhibitions by organizations who do not employ curators as well as celebrities being contracted by major art institutions as guest curators to draw audiences. The adoption of the celebrity curator has been a topic of much debate in the art community as it puts into question the role of the gallery. Is this a space to engender artistic and political modes of inquiry and reflection? Or, rather, has it been reduced to a business like any other? That is to say, to be in the business of maintaining its own survival in an increasingly fraught economic situation. In reflecting on popular galleries’ reliance on

celebrity branding, Jamie Tennent aptly states, “In the world of financial risk analysis, why give a platform to a new name when an old one will bring the best returns.”³⁸

This movement of curation away from a mode of artistic research into primarily a mode of audience engagement forms a practice Tara McDowell coined “the paracuratorial”.³⁹ Celebrity curators are just one example of the paracuratorial direction some institutions are taking. The paracuratorial definition extends to “the array of curatorial activities that are usually parenthetical or supplementary to the exhibition proper, yet increasingly have taken centre stage” such as “screenings, lectures, panels, libraries” and other similar events traditionally serviced by art institutions’ education departments.⁴⁰ However, instead of putting these two camps of curation in opposition – those aligning with traditional, institutionalized curator roles and the emerging paracuratorial – McDowell proposes a collective interrogation of this shift in contemporary art.

If there is a distinction to be made, then it might be, according to some other commentators, between the idea of the curatorial versus the act of curating. In *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*, Jean-Paul Martinon and Irit Rogoff, for instance, propose that curating comprises a set of professional practices concerned with exhibitions and display.⁴¹ The curatorial, on the other hand, “explores all that takes place on the stage set-up, both intentionally and unintentionally, by the curator and views it as an event of knowledge.”⁴² McDowell echoes this sentiment, referring to the curatorial as a methodology or a philosophy and curating as a technical modality.⁴³ McDowell also takes steps to problematize the privileging of the intellectually legitimized curatorial over practice-based curating. She notes this phenomenon as being deeply entrenched in neoliberal ideologies of “minority world” countries, highlighting Indigenous and decolonial methodologies of neoliberal refusal.⁴⁴ In considering the possible looks and feels of a decolonial or feminist curatorial methodology, McDowell asks a series of pertinent questions with which I will engage in the following chapters including:

What modes of conviviality and sociality would be engaged? How would language be mobilised? What infrastructural basics, not to mention institutional operations and policies, would need to be rethought and reimagined?⁴⁵

Despite these efforts to problematize and challenge the aforementioned hierarchy of knowledges, much of the discourse around the legitimacy of curation still revolves around the site and objects of exhibition. In reference to curating as a discursive practice, McDowell mentions art institutions creating counter-public spheres by way of exhibiting particular works that trouble or critique the political and historical position of the institution itself.⁴⁶ These works may seek to reflect on colonial legacies of museums by curating works by Indigenous and other underrepresented artists. These institutions may also seek to diversify exhibitions in an attempt to appeal to new audiences. One example of the former was the Rebecca Belmore exhibit *Facing the Monumental*, originally curated by Wanda Nanibush for the Art Gallery of Ontario that has since toured across Canada including at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal (MACM). I have previously questioned institutions’ sincerity in these efforts to “decolonize” or “Indigenize” themselves.⁴⁷ This is especially poignant in critiquing large institutions such as the MACM that are known to be far from equitable in terms of gender and racial diversity in their exhibition programming.⁴⁸

Another example of curating for the creation of a counter-public audience is The Art Gallery of New South Wales’s *Buddha: Radiant Awakening* exhibition of 2001/2002. The exhibition curator, Jackie Menzies, citing the gallery’s difficulties in attracting audiences to Asian

exhibits mentions a lack of Asia literacy and unfamiliarity of (presumably white) Australians with Asian culture.⁴⁹ In response, Menzies decided to curate the exhibition around the iconography of the Buddha. The Buddha served a dual purpose as a focal and entry point for both Asian-Australians possessing a cultural familiarity with Buddhism as well as the general population. Other steps were taken to facilitate access and inclusion to the exhibition. One such ‘lure’ was the establishment of a “Wisdom Room” where each week of the exhibition, a Buddhist community from Sydney was invited to “‘show their wares’, as it were, to put themselves on display” such that a living Buddhist culture became part of the exhibition.⁵⁰

From these listed examples, I trace a common thread linking together philosophies and histories of archiving, heritage and identity documentation, and curatorial practices. In tandem with tying these links, I propose these concepts be put into service of the performance of identity. In line with Stoler’s critiques, this performance is one in which the archiving, curation, and exhibition of crowd-sourced heritage media places value in the objects of a community. With community members at the helm of archiving and curating media, the culmination of these acts thereby forms an informal community archive that operates against the grain of the traditional, institutional, colonial archive. While my particular case study is interested in digital, social media (Instagram) community archives, brick-and-mortar community archives have a long and rich history. It has been and continues to be of vital importance for marginalized communities to have control over the archiving and preservation of their own histories.⁵¹

Importance of Cultural Specificity in Archives

Housed in Canada’s capital city Ottawa, on traditional unceded Algonquin territory, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) epitomizes the modern state of the colonial archive. Despite its efforts to obtain collections from Canada’s diverse communities, LAC does not have the knowledge, resources, or community-centred approach needed to properly care for vulnerable communities’ collections. This is evidenced by their cataloguing and description of Indigenous heritage materials which has received much criticism. Most notably, individual nations and communities were often incorrectly generalized as “Indians” or some variation thereof. Responding to these criticisms, LAC debuted a review in 2007 of the identifying terminology used in Canadian Subject Headings.⁵² Twelve years later, consultations are still ongoing although the decision has been made to stop using the Library of Congress Subject Headings “Indians of North America”.⁵³ This slow and incremental change is indicative of the rate at which institutions are willing to adapt when minoritized communities voice their concerns.

While LAC and other similar institutions struggle to appropriately classify and describe the communities whose materials they collect, community archives circumvent many of these issues. With closer relations to their materials and the freedom to describe and classify using their own terms, community archives exemplify innovative and alternative archival methods that are better suited to their communities of origin. Various Indigenous communities across the continent have devised classification and labeling systems that describe collections and objects in more detail and with specificities for particular Indigenous nations and identities. Examples of such systems include traditional knowledge (TK) labels and the modifiable Brian Deer Classification Scheme used by Aanischaaukamikw: The Cree Cultural Institute, Xwi7xwa Library, and the UBCIC Resource Centre.

Community archives also allow for a more direct engagement with place-based, public histories. This opens unique pedagogical opportunities for site-specific research and cross-community relationship building. At Concordia University, in 2017, archivist Alexandra

Mills, community educator and graduate research assistant Désirée Roachat, and professor of history Steven High worked together to assemble and deliver an undergraduate public history course, “Telling Stories”.⁵⁴ During the course, students were assigned boxes from Concordia University Library’s Special Collections. These boxes were salvaged from the old Negro Community Centre (NCC) of the Little Burgundy neighbourhood. Both the NCC and the neighbourhood were two important historical sites for Montreal’s English-speaking Black community. In addition to teaching students applied archival research skills, the course had two pedagogical aims: to learn from the history contained in the boxes and to return the history to the community.⁵⁵

Telling Stories culminated in a public event hosted in a Little Burgundy community space that garnered much media and community interest. The event allowed the students and educators to reanimate the NCC archives for its own source community. Writing about the experience facilitating the course, Mills et al. note the link between archival engagement and furthering dialogue for public remembrance.⁵⁶ When conceptualized with the relationship between archives and their source communities in mind, the importance of actively maintaining these relationships is made evident. It then allows for reanimation projects like Telling Stories and *Affect Archives* as ways to repair or regenerate lost connections to these materials following the rupturing of these relationships via deterritorialization for instance.

There are many other kinds of community archives including queer history archives and site-specific archives of historic neighbourhoods and municipalities. I, however, deliberately draw focus and pull examples of heritage archives and exhibitions with non-white, racialized, and diasporic articulations.⁵⁷ In discussing the cultural importance of the NCC fonds, Mills et al. remind us that “Black community institutions also served to unify what was in reality a community of diverse origins.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, through the project of Telling Stories, they were able to “retrace a history of Black community building, organizing, mobilizing, and education in a context of racism and informal but real segregation” stressing that “the NCC fonds offer[ed] an antidote to the cultural erasure that often befalls racialized minorities.”⁵⁹

Archives, Memory, and Performance

To communities who have been victimized by various enactments of violence including state-sanctioned oppression, colonialism, poverty, racism, and ableism, the role of the archive goes beyond historicizing and documenting community activities. When separated from bureaucratic control, community archivists perform what Eric Ketelaar calls “memory-practice”.⁶⁰ Ketelaar proposes a refiguration of contemporary methods of record preservation and access. Suggesting instead to “weav[e] them into private and public memories as a healing ritual of commemoration.”⁶¹ Describing oral history archives of survivors of World War I, James Fentress and Chris Wickham describe these community-generated archives not only as sources of information for analysis, but as “acts of commemoration” and “monuments to the past” (emphasis in original).⁶² The authors of *Social Memory* elaborate on this point, noting that histories as recounted by the lay people who lived them construed the memorialization of their experiences. Experiences that were otherwise unable to be located within the official records and texts.

The unearthing, reanimation, and engagement with these cultural and historical memories can be classified as a kind of “performance”. Performance, according to Diana Taylor, has a dual is/as nature in the sense that it

...underlies the understanding of performance as simultaneously “real” and “constructed,” as practices that bring together what have historically been kept

separate as discrete, supposedly free-standing, ontological and epistemological discourses.⁶³

In relation to the archive, Taylor notes how “performance transmits memoirs, makes political claims, and manifests a group’s sense of identity” and proposes “taking performances seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge.”⁶⁴ The stability of these transmissions of knowledge, however, are often fraught as performance is considered by some commentators as being only ephemeral and hence always “disappearing”.⁶⁵ Criticizing this understanding of performance as disappearance, Taylor asks: “Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?”⁶⁶ Following various global histories of imperialism and colonialism, certain cultural performances and oral traditions that serve as knowledge transfers became forbidden but not all of them disappeared,⁶⁷ and it is this staying power and its subversive force that Taylor emphasizes in her concept of repertoire.

Returning to the conception and function of the traditional, institutional archive as a tool of imperialism and colonialism, archival records and documents ascribed the most value have tended to be those of tangibility, materiality, and which employ *the written word*. Jacques Derrida critiques this logocentrism, stating that “[a] science of the archive must include the theory of this institutionalization, that is to say, the theory both of the law which begins by inscribing itself there and of the right which authorizes it.”⁶⁸ Historically, logocentrism as employed by imperial and colonial powers has been of importance for its usefulness in tracing the migration of commodities such as persons forced into slavery, plantation goods, and other trade items.⁶⁹ Consequently, cultures, communities, and people who did not keep such imperially legible records ended up being devalued and their histories being delegitimized. This came as a result of the absence of records or “proofs” of their own histories given that the tangible, material record held a hierarchical precedence over intangible records such as oral histories. These dynamics continue today with Indigenous land claims battles across Canada where the nation-state’s colonially biased understanding and interpretation of history is at odds with the histories understood by Indigenous communities of the areas in question.⁷⁰

In interrogating the colonial roots of traditional, logocentric archives, I am not, however, making the case against material archives as a whole. Especially in the case of marginalized communities subject to displacement for whom “[m]ateriality of records acts as a reminder of those who existed and occupied spaces before.”⁷¹ Furthermore, materials themselves contain histories and records as evident in the fields of anthropological, archeological, and paleontological study and in objects such as textiles, animal skins, and other culturally specific tools and crafts. Taylor also proposes that the rift at hand is not between the written and spoken word. Instead, it lies between “the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language dance, sports, ritual)” (emphasis in original).⁷² Following my observations of the circulation South Asian heritage materials on social media, I classify these materials as belonging to a kind of repository of documents that border this distinction between the archive and the repertoire. I am, therefore, proposing a study of a new kind of immaterial, ephemeral community-generated archive that I dub the “social media community archive”, by which I mean social media accounts that collect and harbour mediatic digital materials of a particular community.

Social Media Community Archive

Social media sites and their associated mobile applications provide a low-cost barrier to entry for individuals, brands, and communities to foster collective spaces in which to share and

circulate media. While there are several potential applications of social media use, it is the sense of fostering community space that I explore further in this thesis. The use of the term “communities” thus far has been centered around shared racial, ethnic, or cultural identities, most of which arise from a common national (or multinational) affiliation. However, I wish to draw on Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities” and extend his conception of nationhood beyond citizenship within a particular nation-state.⁷³ I seek instead to explore how communities developed on social media can create their own imagined communities or “nations”. As per Anderson’s definition, a nation can be thought of as “an imagined political community” where the imagined is “both inherently limited and sovereign.”⁷⁴ When thinking about the communities that are formed through virtual, online networks, Yasuko Kanno and Bonny Norton’s articulation of imagined communities is especially apt. For them, imagined communities are formed by “groups of people, not immediately tangible and accessible, with whom we connect through the power of the imagination.”⁷⁵

Given the worlding possibilities offered by social media, I read social media networking and nation building as an extension of this referenced power of imagination. Through mutual followings and interactions with digital media, individuals with particular shared experiences or interests are able to transverse national borders and form enclosed communities on social media. These communities are self-sufficient in their provision and moderation of information, media content, and forum discussion. Often these groups post and enforce their own sets of guidelines and rules to follow in order to maintain structure and order within the community.⁷⁶

In addition to offering a space for live information exchange, the culmination of materials on social media pages forms a kind of “archive”, albeit not in the traditional sense. Following Carolyn Steedman’s articulation of the archive being “also a place of dreams”, Mike Featherstone discusses how archives offer the opportunity of delighting at the discovery of hidden or lost records and truths.⁷⁷ He describes the archive as a site for the researcher to find their identity “through the process of historical identification.”⁷⁸ He notes that this reimagining of the archive allows archiving to become democratized. This allows for the archive’s reach to extend beyond scholars’ exclusive use to include “individuals in everyday life who seek to preserve documents, photographs, diaries and recordings to develop their own archives as memory devices.”⁷⁹ While migrant and diaspora archives and exhibitions such as Varatharajah’s *Affect Archives* exemplify this well, social media accounts and pages addressing specific cultural and community memory can function similarly, hence why I refer them as social media community archives.

Similar to the experience of displaced persons, for many queer people, social media provides access to communities, media, history, and events that may not be otherwise available in traditional and local archives. In examining specific co-created Facebook pages used for community practices of memorializing lost queer spaces, Rob Cover argues for “a continuing need to theorise practices of archiving in terms of how new digital and participatory methods both expand and critique formal understandings of archives as physical spaces that collect materials for the purpose of forging imagined communities.”⁸⁰ Sam McBean makes a similar statement in writing about photo albums uploaded on Facebook following LGBTQ events as developing queer digital archives memorializing queer histories that are often forgotten.⁸¹

In the following chapters, I break down the findings of my digital ethnography of Instagram accounts that I consider to be constitutive of what I call “South Asian Instagram community archives”. I will unpack the various ways in which “South Asia” and “South Asian” are constructed as an imagined community and as a social identity through the mediated

performance of these social media community archives. I will also explore the transformative possibilities, challenges, risks, and other issues involved in analyzing such immaterial and ephemeral archives.

²⁷ Berlin Biennale, *How to Move an Arche, Talk by Sinthujan Varatharajah with Duygu Örs*, 28.2.2020.

²⁸ Varatharajah, *Through the Generations*.

²⁹ Maynard, *Policing Black Lives*, 56.

³⁰ Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance'; Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.

³¹ Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance'.

³² Stoler, 90.

³³ Stoler, 90–91.

³⁴ Stoler, 94.

³⁵ Derrida, *Archive Fever*; Foucault, 'The Statement and the Archive'; Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive'.

³⁶ Meissner, 'Against Accumulation'.

³⁷ Balzer, *Curationism*.

³⁸ Tennent, 'The Rise of the Curator / Fall of the Critic'.

³⁹ McDowell, 'The Post-Occupational Condition'.

⁴⁰ McDowell, 22.

⁴¹ Martinon and Rogoff, 'Preface'.

⁴² Martinon and Rogoff, ix.

⁴³ McDowell, 'The Post-Occupational Condition', 25. The term minority world is used here to reference to countries that disproportionately possess and control the world's resources and wealth in comparison to their populations. These countries are also referred to as the Global North, the West, or developed nations. The countries who do not fit under the conditions of the minority world form the majority world.

⁴⁴ McDowell, 25.

⁴⁵ McDowell, 25.

⁴⁶ McDowell, 31.

⁴⁷ Krishnan, 'Field Notes and Reflections as a Settler of Color'.

⁴⁸ Dymond, *Diversity Counts*.

⁴⁹ Ang, 'The Predicament of Diversity', 309.

⁵⁰ Ang, 312.

⁵¹ The term marginalized is used here to highlight the ways in which certain communities are either oppressed, erased, underrepresented, or otherwise underprivileged in mainstream society by way of legal status or systematic disenfranchisement by way of racist, ableist, queerphobic, sexist, classist, casteist, or other such prevalent oppressive rhetoric of the area.

⁵² Library and Archives Canada, 'ARCHIVED - Update on Subject Headings for Aboriginal Peoples in Canada'.

⁵³ Library and Archives Canada, 'Canadian Subject Headings for Indigenous Peoples'.

⁵⁴ Désirée Rochat is a friend and collaborator of mine who provided me this resource as well as many others on community archive theory and case studies. She also facilitated my gaining practice experience in community digital archival practices by bringing me into the digitization project for the Maison d'Haïti archives in Montreal.

⁵⁵ Mills, Rochat, and High, 'Telling Stories'.

⁵⁶ Mills, Rochat, and High, 39.

⁵⁷ I acknowledge that the terms "white", "racialized", and "diasporic" are contested terms. As many have argued, race is a social construction. It is only through an application of racial differentiation, often presented through a lens of white imperialism and supremacy in a Canadian or Western context do people become "racialized". What counts as "white" is also historically and locally situated. In Canada, for example, there are significant "white" heritage populations with deep histories of cultural importance. Some of which, at the time of resettlement in Canada, were not considered to be "white" by today's standards often due to varying degrees of xenophobia, religious persecution, or classism. Indigeneity and racial identification also demand a nuanced unpacking that I am unable to do here. In short, regardless of an Indigenous individual's personal racial identification (if one even chooses to identify thusly) I am in agreement with scholars' articulations of indigeneity in settler colonial states as being of a kind of diasporic experience resulting from forced displacement from traditional lands and the unconsented reshaping of lands resulting from settler colonialism.

⁵⁸ Mills, Rochat, and High, 'Telling Stories', 41.

⁵⁹ Mills, Rochat, and High, 43.

⁶⁰ Ketelaar, 'Archives as Spaces of Memory', 13.

⁶¹ Ketelaar, 13.

- ⁶² Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, 89. Emphasis in original. To exemplify this duality, I point to two foundational examples of applied performance theory: J. L. Austin's performative utterances and Judith Butler's gender performativity. In brief, an Austinian speech act "is" a performance such that the verbal rhetoric performed by the speaker is based in a specifically located ontological understanding. For Butler, on the other hand, gender is seen "as" a performance given how the enactment of gender expression can be construed as a methodological practice rooted in culturally specific epistemologies.
- ⁶³ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 3.
- ⁶⁴ Taylor, xvii, 16.
- ⁶⁵ Phelan, *Unmarked*.
- ⁶⁶ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 5.
- ⁶⁷ In Canada, laws and programs were enforced across the country that aimed to forcibly remove Indigenous peoples from their cultures and traditions. Such acts include the establishment of residential schools, as well as the banning of the Potlach, smudging, and other ceremonial practices. Despite these genocidal programs, these cultures and traditions continue today.
- ⁶⁸ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 4.
- ⁶⁹ Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.
- ⁷⁰ It is worth mentioning here the calls for the repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery and terra nullius (Latin for "nobody's land") concepts by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. These concepts, as advanced by Christian religious orders, were and are used to justify European dominion over the land that would later be called Canada despite the presence of Indigenous peoples and their own systems of land relations and governance. For more information, please see Assembly of First Nations. "Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery." (2018).
- ⁷¹ Mills, Rochat, and High, 'Telling Stories', 43.
- ⁷² Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 19.
- ⁷³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
- ⁷⁴ Anderson, 6.
- ⁷⁵ Kanno and Norton, 'Imagined Communities and Educational Possibilities', 241.
- ⁷⁶ For example, studies of transnational diabetes support groups on Facebook have illustrated how, despite occasional information overload, users from different nationalities as well as language and cultural backgrounds were able to form a supportive meeting place for community building and resource sharing. These supportive networks ultimately allowed members of the group to have a more favourable impression of their medical condition and quality of life due in part to the positive relationships they built on the platform. For further reading, see Zhang, He, and Sang, 'Facebook as a Platform for Health Information and Communication'; Kingod and Cleal, 'Noise as Dysappearance'
- ⁷⁷ Steedman, 'The Space of Memory', 67; Featherstone, 'Archive', 594.
- ⁷⁸ Featherstone, 'Archive', 594.
- ⁷⁹ Featherstone, 594.
- ⁸⁰ Cover, 'Memorialising Queer Community', 126–27.
- ⁸¹ McBean, 'Being "There": Digital Archives and Queer Affect'.

Chapter 3: South Asian Disidentification

Despite being born and raised in Canada, sporting a Canadian accent and Western dress, I have nevertheless been asked the question “where are you from?” or some variant of it more times than I can recall. These types of questions are often posed, not out of maliciousness, but as a reflection of the state of multiculturalism. While Canada is the place of my birth and the nation in which I hold citizenship, there exists a pervasive stereotype of Asians and other migrant-descended groups as being perpetual foreigners.⁸² Within a multicultural state, those identified as the Other are often put in the position of being cultural ambassadors, representing cultures, nations, and histories with which they may not be familiar.

My father moved to Canada under what is now referred to as the Federal Skilled Worker Program in 1988. After getting married, my mom followed in 1991 and I was born the following year. Shortly thereafter, in the mid-1990s, South Asian immigrants formed the largest source of newcomers to the place of my birth, Toronto, Ontario. By the end of the decade, South Asians had cemented themselves as the most numerous visible-minority group in the region.⁸³ Nevertheless, it was not until I reached my teen years in the mid-2000s that I finally found myself among peers who shared the same, wide, racial category of what we referred to as “brown”. Yet, the same question, *where are you from* kept repeating, this time asked by the very people I saw as my “skinfolk”.⁸⁴ This transformation from perpetual foreigner inquisition to an interrogation into a nuanced cultural identity shifted my relationship to this question, and by extension, my positionality. While I sought affirmation for my non-white racial identity within this newfound group of migrants, factions began to form among them, in which I struggled to orient myself.

It seemed that unlike me, my immigrant peers knew *who* they were and were validating whether or not we shared the same cultural, linguistic, religious, or caste background. Often, it felt like I again “failed” the identity screening. As a cultural product of double displacement (India to Malaysia, Malaysia to Canada), otherwise articulated as being a member of the “double diaspora,” I remained illegible to both white Canadians as well as many South Asian immigrants.⁸⁵ It is from this place of double displacement, or which I, following performance and queer theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz, analyze as “disidentifications”, that this chapter emerged.

In a very queer response to the binary logic of identification and counteridentification, Muñoz offers the theory of disidentification as a third possible option. Disidentifying allows for the possibility of seeing oneself within a particular identity while simultaneously rebuking some of that identity’s assumptions. Arriving at this third option through his own experiences navigating his identity as a queer person of colour, Muñoz articulates this theory by illustrating examples of how queers of colour may identify with queerness insofar as it describes a non-cisheteronormative understanding of gender and/or sexuality. Within this identification, however, there is a concerted rejection of mainstream and popular optics of queerness that is by and large dominated by white aesthetics.

In the following, I mobilize Muñoz’s concept of disidentifications as a way to explore how and under what conditions “South Asian” becomes constructed as a racial category. First, I explore my own difficulties with deciding on a racialized self-identification. I outline my own journey to dis/identifying with South Asia by describing how diaspora politics problematize static national identification. To do so, I compare the status of Indian migration to Malaysia versus Canada – the countries to which I have a national affiliation. Next, I highlight sections of my interviews with creators behind what I dub South Asian Instagram community archives.

During these interviews, they, individually, discuss their own nuanced relationships to identity and the process of disidentification both internally and with respect to the contents of their accounts. I note in this section how the illustrated process of disidentification is seemingly common across those living in the diaspora and those from minority or marginalized communities living in the Indian subcontinent. I then conclude by troubling the notions of a unified South Asia by describing the challenges faced by these account creators to diversify their South Asian media content.

Identification Trouble

I begin, here, with my own story of disidentification, or how I came to disidentify. My parents were born and raised in Malaysia, but their parents and grandparents arrived onto the Malaya Peninsula (at the time part of British Malaya) by way of India. This migration exemplifies one of many categories of displacements that Indians underwent under British colonial rule. Under multiple oppressive systems including feudalism, colonialism, and casteism, there was much difficulty for Indian labourers, primarily Dravidians in the South India (including Tamils), to attain upward class mobility. One way in which an escape from these difficult conditions was possible was to join the labour migration movement. As I have come to understand it, through the passing down of informal, familial oral histories, both sides of my family originate from the Indian state of Kerala. Over several generations, they eventually migrated and settled further south in the state of Tamil Nadu before migrating to Indonesia and British Malaya as migrant labourers.

Malaysia has three large ethnic groups that form the basis of the nation's multicultural identity. Malays form the majority, followed by Chinese, and with Indians as the third most populous ethnic group. Despite the official rhetoric affirming the power Malays hold as the nation's native people, Malays, as well as Chinese and Indians, are complicit in the dispossession of local Indigenous peoples (Orang Asli) and the occupation of their lands.⁸⁶ The Orang Asli, Malay for "original people", comprise various Indigenous groups living on peninsular Malaysia. There are other groups of Indigenous peoples living on the island of Borneo that also comprise Malaysia's Indigenous population, that are separated from the Malay demographic.

Within Malaysian legislation, both Malays and the Orang Asli are given the title of *bumiputera*, meaning "sons of the soil". Within this ideology, Malays are officially recognized by law as the nation's indigenous people. And indigeneity in Malaysia functions, according to Nah, as "the main basis for legitimising political power and the economic redistribution of wealth."⁸⁷ Affirmative action laws such as Malaysia's New Economic Policy permit Malays "special privileges in contrast to Chinese and Indians who are not *bumiputera*."⁸⁸

Malaysia's New Economic Policy was established in 1971 and was later succeeded by the National Development Policy in 1991. These policies, under the veneer of national unity, had the effect of pushing affirmative action type policies for Malays. In turn, these policies succeeded in cementing "Malay" as a racial category, one that held dominion over other racial groups sharing the territory. The Malay identity was initially constructed by the British to imbue political power onto a population they could control within the postcolonial nation-state. According to A. B. Shamsul, the three pillars of "Malayness" is comprised of "*agama, bahasa dan raja*, i.e., Muslim religion, Malay language, and the aristocratic government of the sultans."⁸⁹ As such, the constitution essentially "requires that Malays be Muslims. In other words, by definition, Malays cannot but be Muslims in Malaysia."⁹⁰ By extension, this rejects the Orang Asli from the Malay category (although many national efforts do exist to convert

the Orang Asli to Islam as well as to adopt the Malay language). It also rejects Malaysians of Chinese and Indian ancestry from claiming a Malay identity despite an increasing proportion of these “foreign” populations being locally born and despite the existence of Muslim Chinese and Indian communities in Malaysia.

Despite the Orang Asli having the *bumiputera* title, this rejection of a “Malay” identity while still being Indigenous creates for Malays what Nah calls a *dual mimicry* “that continues to be repressed and transferred by constructing the Orang Asli as ‘not quite/not Malay’.”⁹¹ I argue that as a result of these policies and the construction of a Malay identity in opposition to the foreign Other, Chinese and Indian Malaysians as not *bumiputera* therefore are also always seen as *not quite* Malaysian. This also extends to those who are Chinese and/or Indian *and Muslim*, with legal citizenship, and who speak Bahasa Malaysia. As Anthony Milner writes: “For centuries, people of foreign origin had been accepted into particular Malay communities. By changing oneself in such areas as language, dress, customs and religion, it was possible to ‘become Malay’.”⁹² In contemporary Malaysian context, however, it becomes clear that this is no longer the case in order to avoid a potential transfer of political power.

There are interesting links that can be made between how the racialized Other struggles to find belonging in both Malaysia and in Canada. From my own experience, I found that my mere presence in Malaysia is not questioned the way it is in Canada. While Indians are still a minority group, they are nevertheless legible as citizens, albeit of a second class (by not being *bumiputera*). There is also more of a semblance of homogeneity among Malaysian “Indians” in that most are Tamil or Punjabi. In Canadian legislation, on the other hand, there are no distinctions made between the rights of white Canadians and other settler and immigrant groups. Yet, the perpetual foreigner stereotype continues to put into question racialized Canadians’ national and ethnic identities. Moreover, for Asians in Canada (including South Asians), the model minority stereotype continues to plague the community by ascribing and reinforcing the idea that Asians exist as a kind of idealized immigrant subject. One that is subservient, law abiding, and non-threatening to the white supremacist and capitalist status quo.

While the idea of the model minority exists in Malaysia too, it is usually not extended to those of Indian descent. In fact, the 2020 resurgence of Black Lives Matter in global news coverage has sparked much conversation in Malaysia around pervasive anti-Black sentiment and its consequences on the Indian community. Indians in Malaysia face disproportionate rates of police violence and deaths in custody as well as unemployment.⁹³ Growing up, I was told stories of how my family members were subject to various institutional discriminations including being barred from educational and employment opportunities as well as being routinely stopped by police officers seeking bribes in exchange for safe passage.

I wish to note here, that in a Canadian context, there have been other immigrant groups that although are now largely considered to be a part of the majority racial group, aka “white”, this was not always the case. For instance, in 2021, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau met with some important figures of the Italian Canadian community. This meeting came two years following his announcement that his government would issue an apology for the internment of Italian Canadians during World War II. Previously, anti-immigrant sentiments were also applied to Greek Canadians which escalated into a three-day long anti-Greek riot that took place in Toronto in 1918. In the decades since, there has been a shift in the way race is largely understood in a Canadian-US context. While occurrences of public acts of anti-Semitic violence are gaining traction in news media, one no longer needs to be a WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant) to be considered white and legible as a Canadian or US citizen.⁹⁴

However, for visibly racialized persons living in white-majority countries during the late twentieth century into the present, despite a minority world cultural affiliation or citizenship status, the fact of being of non-European descent is always suggesting a disclosure of a nonbelonging.

Learning to Disidentify: Constructions of Racial Identity in Canada

Given these complicated histories of Indians in Malaysia, I found that trying to holistically identify as Malaysian was difficult – dishonest, even. This became compounded when I considered the hostile conditions of structural racism Indians face in Malaysia which led to my parents’ eventual emigration. Furthermore, the several generations separating me from my Indian origins had severed many of the ties that would have put me in community with my Indian peers. Such as a legibility in contemporary Indian caste dynamics, language, religious practice, popular media, and cultural references.

Despite these schisms, I was able to form community with some of my brown peers during my teen years in Brampton, Ontario.⁹⁵ Brampton is well-known (perhaps infamously known) as a hub for immigrants from the Indian subcontinent. The racialization of the city has also led to it being commonly referred to as a “ghetto” and is notable for its experience of “white flight”.⁹⁶ At the time, however, I was not privy to the negative connotations the city held. Living in Brampton finally allowed me the opportunity to form a South Asian community of my choosing – one that was strengthened by our shared frayed connections to the Indian subcontinent. While we had different identity labels, Malaysian Indian, Indo-Caribbean, Indo-Fijian, East African Indians, we shared common experiences of illegibility and alienation. These shared feelings existed both within the majority Indian-dominant “South Asian” community and within the majority white Canadian society in which we lived. Our drive to articulate a new community, distinct from the one that did not represent us exemplified exactly what Muñoz termed “disidentification”.⁹⁷

To put the framework of disidentification theory into context, I provide the following examples in response to the question “where are you from?” To be clear, this question does not necessarily ask for one’s place of birth. Instead, it is a politely veiled interrogation of why or how someone is non-white, or in my case, brown.

On one end of the dis/counter/identification spectrum, a person may see themselves encapsulated within the mainstream articulation of an identity. In such cases they may choose to identify with a specific national orientation such as Indian or Pakistani regardless of their actual place of birth or lived experience in that country. While that person identifies with, or belongs to, a national identity that is not Canadian, it may still be apparent through other assimilationist identity markers – such as situational context, language, accent, and style of dress – that they maintain residence in Canada (if not also possessing Canadian citizenship).

On the other end of the spectrum, when asked the same question, a person may choose a counteridentification approach to respond. Annoyed by the frequency and the microaggression embedded in this question, I often chose this approach as a youth. I would assert my identity as a Canadian, as being “from here”, or as having been born in Toronto. This counteridentification served a dual purpose. First, it served as a reminder that race was not indicative of someone’s capacity to be Canadian. And second, as a result of my own misgivings with identifying strongly as Indian or Malaysian, I strategically counteridentified as Canadian to not have to make a decision. This allowed me to distance myself from the imposed cultural identity I inherited and am expected to perform as well as the imposed racial stereotypes that come with such an identification.

After having oscillated between these two ends for much of my youth, I have come to view and argue that identifying as South Asian embodies a practice of disidentification. As opposed to a specific national identification (e.g., Indian, Pakistani), adopting a South Asian identity allows one to de-nationalize identity and shift the focus to a broader cultural and geographical location instead. As such, it can bypass some of the cultural consequences that come with the choices of identification or counteridentification, both of which are related to nationality and citizenship. For many, including those living in the diaspora, a South Asian disidentification provides an opportunity to circumvent certain nationalistic assumptions based on stereotypes and cultural norms. Identifying as South Asian at once signals the cultural similarities between populations of these regions while also deprioritizing said assumptions. In reference to how Muñoz articulates queer of colour disidentifications, marginalized groups with backgrounds originating in the South Asian region might turn to a South Asian disidentification in order to actively refuse the ways in which nationalist hierarchies and dominant cultural and religious norms further their specific oppressions. In this view, disidentification becomes a tool of resistance and refusal of certain hegemonic norms.

Muñoz's theory of disidentification is particularly well situated to understand the complexities of the histories and current political fractions in South Asia. Take the case of India. In 2014, the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party's leader Narendra Modi assumed office as India's 14th Prime Minister. This has sparked what many have referred to as India's movement towards becoming a fascist, Hindu-nationalist state.⁹⁸ Despite officially being deemed a secular democratic republic vis à vis the 42nd Amendment of India's constitution, many of India's state-oppressed peoples – specifically religious minorities including Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, and Adivasis – may choose to self-identity under South Asian or by these same monikers of specificity. This kind of refusal toward an imposed nationalist identity are used by other groups across South Asia including Eela or Eelam Tamils (Sri Lanka) and Punjabi (India).

Another situated reality that contributes to disidentifications is deeply held societal beliefs around gender and sexuality that cut across national borders. These beliefs continue to stigmatize, harm, and disenfranchise minority groups across South Asia on the basis of gender and sexuality regardless of anti-discrimination laws (where they exist). As a result, disidentification allows for developing an affinity with certain cultural realities while at the same time rejecting harmful societal norms. This can allow these minoritized groups and individuals to maintain a sense of cultural identity while also distancing themselves from the associated harm and stigma.

Tracing Disidentification: Gaining a Global Diasporic Perspective

In the following section, I turn to the interviews I conducted with five individuals who each curate and exhibit various kinds of media onto what I term South Asian Instagram community archives and analyze them through the framework of disidentification. Unlike personal Instagram accounts which most often exist to showcase one's own images, media, artwork, etc., each of these five accounts that I selected act as a standalone project separate from its creators' personal identity and account. Each use (or have used) the term "South Asia" in either their name or description thereby articulating the kind of nebulous geographies, cultures, and histories they seek to represent and reflect in their content. In this respect, these accounts, as I discuss in the following, exemplify how a common and global drive toward a South Asian disidentification exists and is used to in order to forge a sense of community.

Prior to requesting the interviews, I was not privy to the identity or location of any of the accounts or their creators – with the exception of @BrownHistory whose account profile

specificities being based out of Toronto, Ontario. During the interviews, it was revealed that all of the interviewees have diasporic relations to South Asia. However, each had their own varying relations to the territory and how they identify to and with it. Of the five, two were born and raised in India and then later moved to the United States (New Haven, Connecticut and Chicago, Illinois). The other three were all born and raised in the minority world (Canada, USA, and UK). Each country, however, has their own specific histories of South Asian migration which shaped how each person came to reconcile their own questions of South Asian identification. Despite the different ways citizenship, regional and cultural specificities, religions, genders, etc. created markers of difference and separation, the umbrella of a South Asian identity provided an ideological structure under which many could gather as minority subjects within the greater political landscape of the Indian subcontinent. It is through this lens that I approach and analyze South Asian identity as disidentification.

During the interviews, one of the first questions I asked, which was also part of the sample of questions sent to interviewees during the recruitment process was: “How do you identify or with which communities do you identify? (Not exclusive to race, can be culture, language, gender, sexuality, generation, caste, class, nationality).” Based on these criteria, I would then lead the discussion by describing myself as elaborately as possible in order to be as open and honest about the ways in which I am positioned both politically as well as culturally. With this open spirit in mind, I described myself in each interview as “a Tamil-Malaysian [ethno-cultural affiliation], nonbinary [gender], millennial [generation], petty bourgeoisie [class], non-Brahmin [caste], Canadian [nationality].” The intent behind providing this level of detail of these many identity criteria was not to set a guideline or expectation for how the question was to be answered. Instead, I wanted to illustrate that there is no singular way to construct identity (as the dreaded “where are you from?” question suggested) but that there a myriad of ways in which identity can be thought about.

By listing the different criteria, I wanted to leave the space open for each interviewee to discuss which aspects of their identity were at the forefront of their perceived selves and how this contributed to the work of their Instagram community archives. While none of the interviewees answered every single offered identity prompt (nor were they expected to and were told as such), I found that it did prompt responses that underscored which intersecting axes of identity felt most pertinent to each. For some this was a class and/or caste background who emphasized their ostracization from the larger South Asian community given their working class or low caste upbringing. On the other hand, others highlighted how their upper caste status also influenced how they perceive their responsibilities as community content producers. For these creators, this acknowledgement of their caste privileges encouraged a self-reflectivity to intentionally curate diverse content that speaks to a plurality of experiences.

Upon reflection on this process and upon writing this thesis, I have come to realize that my own understanding and relation to my identities is in constant negotiation. These identity categories are also in constant flux, as knowledge, language, and circumstances change. There is a multitude of ways in which people can identify, such as with non-human animals as one interviewee pointed out. In trying to cover the gambit of political identity affiliations (an impossible task), I left out some of my own critical identity traits that fundamentally influence my experiences and how I interact with and in the world. This included me in/formal occupation as a community educator and activist, my leftist political orientation, as well as being disabled and living with chronic pain. My omission of these categories of analysis during this research is perhaps telling of a perceived binary between static and dynamic identities and their purported usefulness in a didactic analysis (which is not the intent of this

research). So, while questions of identity during the interviews were primarily relegated to the aforementioned markers, my own analysis considers the many other ways in which identity is perceived, understood, and performed – not simply as an inherited trait, but as a choice to embody and live.

The question “How do you identify or with which communities do you identify?” presented in this way yielded surprises. Across each interview, I noticed that there were evident tensions that arose when each interviewee tried to articulate their respective identities. Curiously, each interviewee begun with a particular national orientation either Pakistani, Indian, or Gujarati (referring to the cultural identity of those with roots in the Indian state of Gujarat) followed by other markers of distinction that serve to disrupt or challenge commonly held notions of how these identities are constructed. This was one of the first places I noticed my interviewees disidentifying. Religion, gender, queerness, caste, and class were issues of identity that were brought up as a way to disturb national and cultural identifications. For instance, as the creators of @SouthAsia.Art, Ayqa and Som explained:

Ayqa: I find these labels to be both limiting but also transformative at the same time...
Som: But I guess these labels disintegrate when it comes to @SouthAsia.Art. When it comes together there's expansiveness.

@SouthAsia.Art, while conceived and managed by Ayqa and Som, often invite guest curators and researchers to participate in a kind of virtual artist/research residencies in the form of an “Instagram takeover”. As the name suggests, these takeovers are a common practice on the platform in which a user (often a public figure) will post on behalf of another notable person or brand in order to utilize the other’s platform to promote or showcase their own work, incite public engagement, or diversify the audience. In the case of @SouthAsia.Art, guest curators are invited to use the account to share their artwork and research. This has led to a diversity of posted art and research in both content and form including photography, sculpture, illustration, graphic design, video, and radio covering a wide range of topics relating to South Asian cultures and histories.

This kind of mixed response or relationship to identity labels is emblematic of the experience of disidentification. Similar to the ways in which Muñoz writes about a common articulation of queerness predicated on a standard synchronous with white queer aesthetics, Ayqa problematizes racial and other identity labels. Gender, for instance, has been the subject of long-standing discourse. Questions have been raised around how the construction of gendered hierarchies via patriarchy has led to the suppression of women’s rights. Demands such as equal access to education and employment as well as voting rights sparked Canada’s first of many feminist movements in the 19th and early 20th centuries. While battles against gender oppression and the promotion of gender equality continues, others, including trans, non-binary, genderqueer, gender fluid, and agender people are finding liberation through gender self-determination. Eric A. Stanley views this as “a collective praxis” that builds “a world beyond the world, lived as dream of the good life.”⁹⁹

I argue that racial identification undergoes a similar duality, as suggested by Ayqa. In an American context in which both Ayqa and Som are presently situated, there is always an undercurrent of racial stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations with respect to how a particular racial subjectivity is meant to be performed. Like with gender, this can be limiting in certain ways, especially considering the ways racialized people are discriminated in the United States vis à vis institutional racism and personal biases. This is evidenced in the ways in which over half of reported hate crimes in the US in 2019 were linked to race or

ethnicity.¹⁰⁰ As with gender, however, there can a liberatory – or as Ayqa put it, “transformative” aspect to a racial identification as well. Black American community organizing such as the Black Panthers and Black Lives Matter as well as online social movements like #BlackGirlMagic and #BlackBoyJoy have exemplified the potentialities for organizing and imagining the radical possibilities of what these contested identities provide.

Som hints at this potentiality too in stating how their individual identity labels “disintegrate” in favour of the formation of the collective entity that is @SouthAsia.Art. Unlike the other Instagram community archives that curate and post content themselves, @SouthAsia.Art lends the direction of the account to guest archivists-curators who have full control over what is posted, what the account is named, how it is used and what features are used. In doing so, the “identity” of the account is never fixed. Instead, it is nebulous, shifting its aesthetics, artistic direction, media, and content with each “takeover”. This kind of expansiveness has led to the production of some content that is not contextually or aesthetically “South Asian” per se but is permitted as the artistic content is produced by South Asians. On the other hand, some takeovers were handled by non-South Asians artist-researchers. One such example includes the April-May 2020 takeover by Mexican American researcher Rick Morales (@ch0la_empire) whose week-long guest curation featured posts relating to Morales’s research on South Asian influences on Mexico’s sociocultural development via a specific 17th century Mesoamerican folk legend. During the interview, Som also mentioned the intention behind identifying the account with a moniker as nebulous as “South Asia”. Som stated that it allows for a larger participatory audience to be involved in the research and exhibition process of the account. He notes that “there are always people who are not really South Asian, but they still bring a very valid and enlightening perspective to the discourse. So, it was better to not let it be so categorically fitting.”

While the accounts are not necessarily particularly oriented as objectively queer or low caste, Pakistani, etc., they all in some way engage with exhibiting materials from minoritized South Asian communities. Issues of casteism, for instance, has been a topic engaged directly by three of the four accounts. @PartyOfficeHQ’s takeover of @SouthAsia.Art in August 2020 consisted of several Instagram Live videos with conversations discussing casteism. @SouthAsianNation, during the period of study, also posted informational slides regarding casteism and denouncing anti-Dalit sentiment. @BrownHistory has also included posts with reference to casteism and the links between Dalit organizing in India and the Black Panther Party in the United States. In December 2020, the Brown History Podcast featured an episode entirely on the topic of caste in an interview with Suraj Yenge, author of *Caste Matters*.¹⁰¹

During the interviews, each creator also confirmed that they seek to use their platforms to enlarge the bases of representation, history, and art that is most dominant in mainstream South Asian culture. In this way, these creators are reappropriating Instagram’s affordances as a platform originally intended for the social networking between individual users (and later brands and organizations). Instead, the subversive use of the platform forms a new kind of affordance – an affordance that repositions the accounts as a sort of landing place for minoritized and disidentified South Asians seeking self-reflective representations.

Addressing South Asian Heterogeneity

@SouthAsianNation, for instance, is managed by a collective of women from different social and geographic locations. I interviewed the founder, Divya, who grew up in India and had recently moved to Chicago, USA. She mentioned needing team members given the amount of work required to maintain the page. This governing collective includes a team of women from South Africa, the United Kingdom, and Zambia. Between the four of them who all have

ancestral roots in India, @SouthAsianNation's coverage of topics reflect issues in both North and South India. The coverage of both these regions is notable as much of mainstream Indian culture originates from North India. Unlike countries like Canada, the United States, and Australia, where the capital cities were strategically placed to decentralize power from one specific group, New Delhi lies staunchly in the North. It is where all three branches of government are located, and where Hindi presides as one the official languages and the one most spoken. While there are marginalized communities within North India, as a whole, it possesses a concentration of wealth and resources – particularly within global politics and entertainment media.

India's issue of its North/South cultural divide extends further into the separation and hierarchal nature of South Asian society at large due to the Aryan-Dravidian cultural divide. The distinction between these two lingual-turned-ethnocultural groups, further perpetuated during British occupation, has resulted in the cultural dominance of North India and its Indo-Aryan population over South Indians and its Dravidian population. Rooted in complex systems of colourism, racism, and caste and language oppressions, South Indian news, culture, and politics tend not to be adequately reflected in mainstream Indian media or even in its diasporic media outlets. As such, Divya, when speaking to me, made it clear that @SouthAsianNation's collective features women from South India. One woman in particular, Sonia, Divya noted "lives in the U.K. and [is] South Indian. So, if you see a lot of art about South Indian beauty or bodies—that would be her. Even for the language, Tamil language or Malayalam language. So, there are areas that she can touch." Speaking for herself, Divya mentions she lived in North India: "so I [Divya] cover the whole north from Punjab to Jammu and Kashmir and everything else."

Divya's mentioning of the separate coverage of North vs. South Indian issues is interesting and indicative of the cultural divide in the country. Because of the way a racialized and cultural divide has been made between the two geographic and linguistic groups, fair coverage of these issues requires specialized knowledge. Hence why Divya has enlisted a separate account manager to handle those posts. South Indian-specific issues such as beauty standards (while overlap with North Indian culture) require a more nuanced unpacking given the issues of racism and colourism tied to South Indian culture.¹⁰² This desire to talk about colourism was also reflected in the messages Divya received on the @SouthAsianNation account page. "People wanted to talk about dark complexion in the brown community. I'm a light-skinned person... So, we wanted to feature more dark-skinned South Asian beauties. So, we started conversations about colourism."

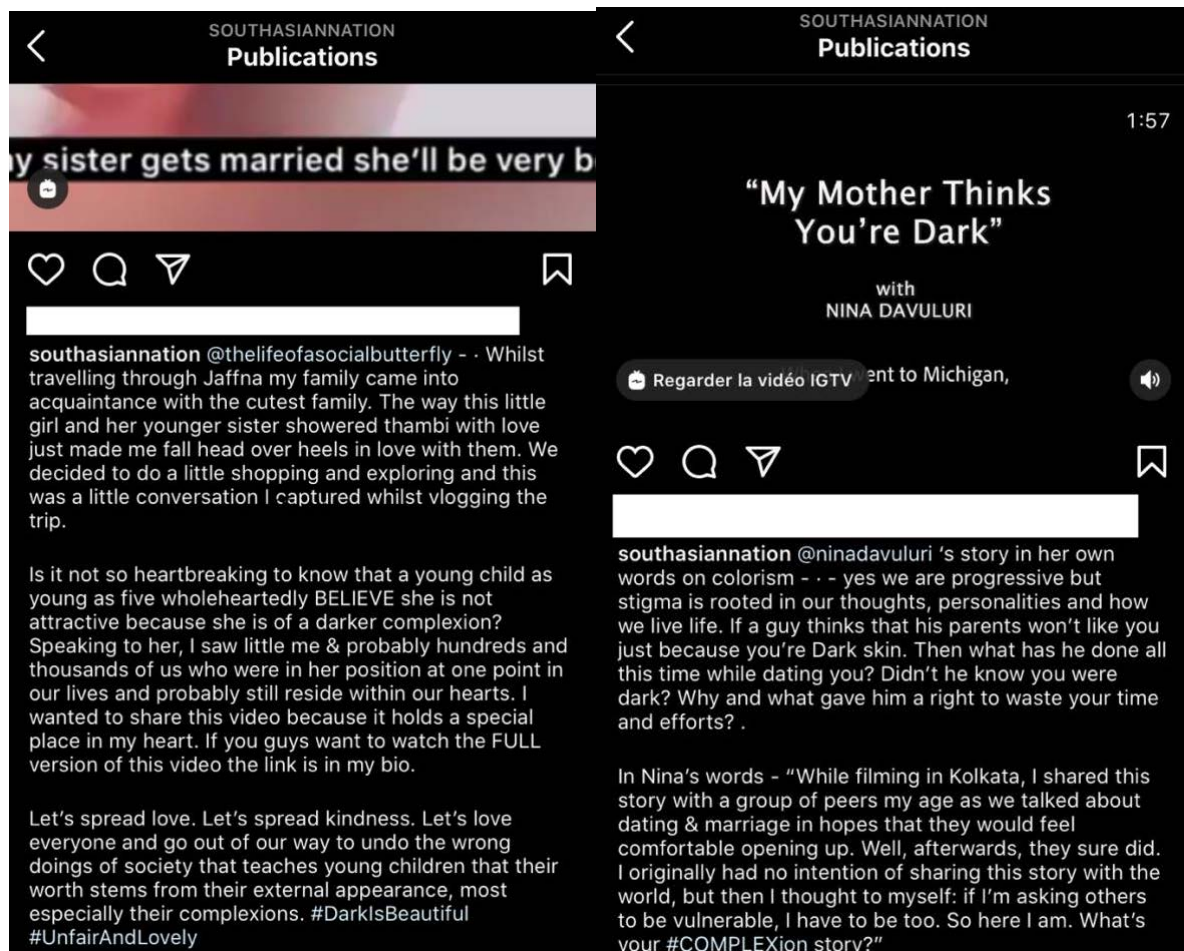


Figure 1: Screenshots of colourism videos re-posted on @SouthAsianNation (Instagram). The image on the left captures the bottom quarter of the video screen displaying the cropped subtitle “sister gets married she’ll be very.” There is a long caption describing the context in which the video was taken where the videographer encounters a young girl who believes herself to not be attractive due to her darker complexion. The screenshot on the right is of the title screen for the video titled “My Mother Thinks You’re Dark’ with Nina Davuluri.” The original posts are by @TheLifeOfASocialButterfly and @NinaDavuluri (Instagram).¹⁰³

Despite the apparent privileging of the North and of Indo-Aryans, India’s political movement towards a Hindu-supremacist, fascist state has seen the active military suppression of cultural and religious minorities in the North. Divya makes mention of this as well. She positioned her upbringing in North India as providing her insider cultural knowledge to be able to cover issues in Punjab, and Jammu and Kashmir. The former state was largely the subject to a series of anti-Sikh pogroms in 1984 which saw the deaths and displacement of thousands. Recently, Punjabi farmers have been at the forefront of the ongoing Indian farmers’ protest, contesting the passing of three acts in parliament that have been deemed to be “anti-farmer”. The union territory of Jammu and Kashmir have been in a constant state of conflict since the partition of Pakistan and India in 1947 where, in Kashmir, there is a majority Muslim population. In 2019, Article 370 of the Indian constitution was abolished which resulted in the removal of the level of administrative and constitutional autonomy Jammu and Kashmir specially possessed. This was followed by Indian military occupation of Kashmir, the arrest and torture of thousands including minors, as well as the blocking of telephone and internet services in the region.¹⁰⁴

Given the plurality of perspectives behind the content curators of @SouthAsianNation, many of the account's posts address the intersections of cultural specificity and gendered experiences. Some of these posts use cultural iconography such as particular jewellery and outfits to signal certain cultural affiliations such as Bharatanatyam outfits. The captions that follow are often educational in nature, shedding light on the more obscured cultures, histories, and traditions of minority groups including Adivasis. Others seek to interrogate or problematize certain cultural norms such as the common use of skin lightening beauty treatments.

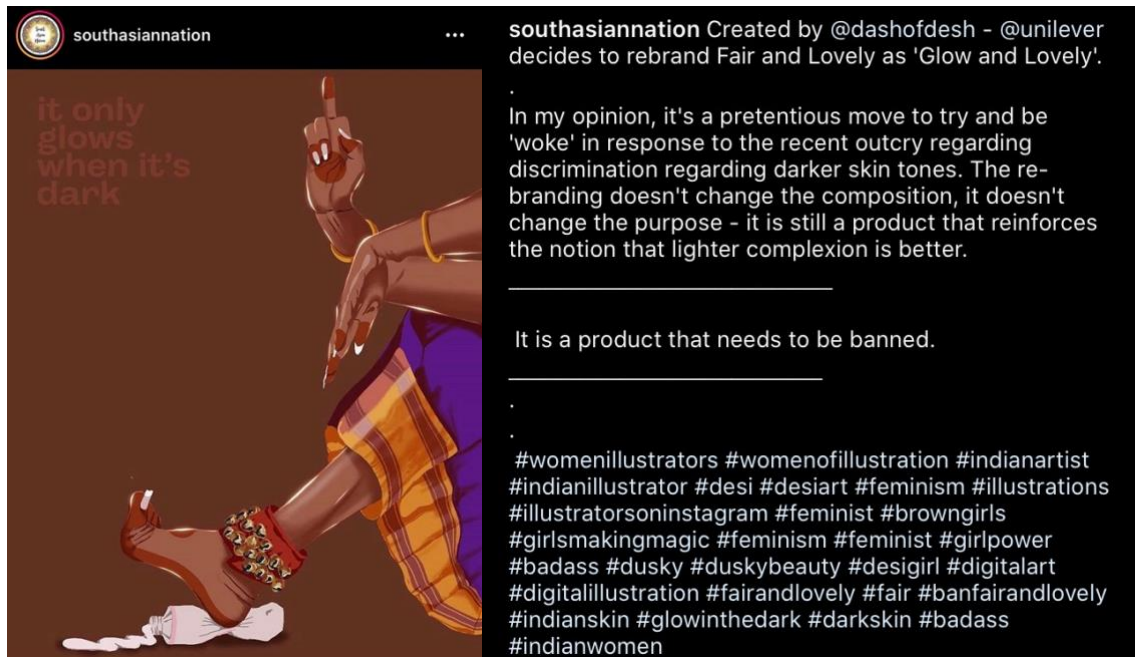


Figure 2: Screenshots of post and caption about colourism reposted by @SouthAsianNation on Instagram featuring an illustration of a dark-skinned woman wearing salangai (ankle bells) commonly associated with classical Indian dancing such as Bharatanatyam. Her heel is squeezing out a white tube of what is presumably a skin-lightening cream. The background of the photo is brown and in a lighter hue are the words “it only glows when it’s dark.” Original post by @dashofdesh (Instagram).¹⁰⁵

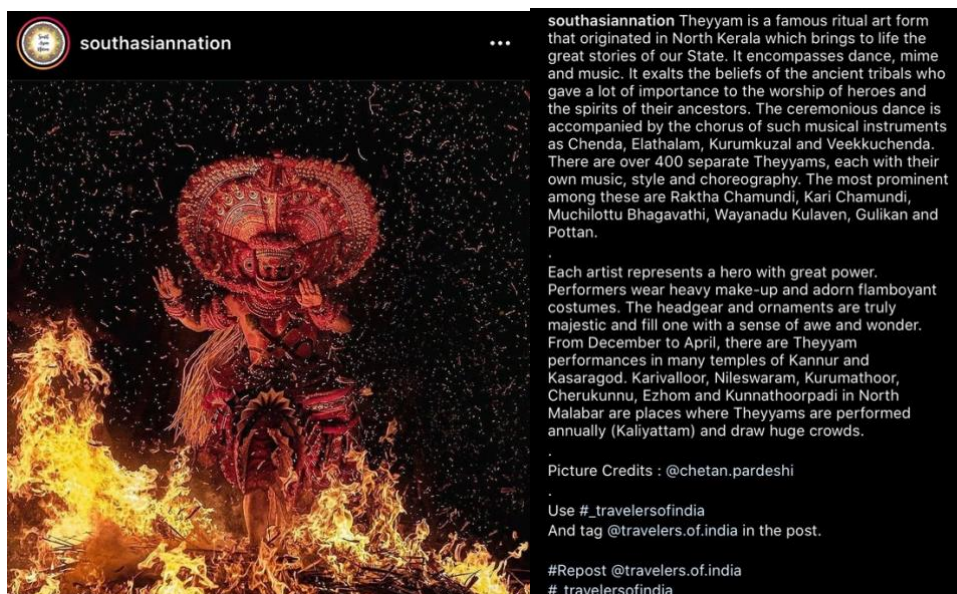


Figure 3: Screenshots of post and caption about Theyyam – a traditional dance practice native

to South India reposted by @SouthAsianNation on Instagram. The image features a person wearing a traditional Theyyam costume against a black background while fire burns around them. Original post by @travelers.of.india (Instagram). Original photos by @chetan.pardeshi (Instagram).¹⁰⁶

Several posts of this nature call out various forms of sexism including anti-colourism, anti-casteism, and reproductive rights. They often feature digital illustrations of South Asian women or iconography signalling the topic's cultural specificity. The captions and/or subsequent carousel posts either provide more detail to the topic or pose questions to incite discussions in the comments.



Figure 4: Screenshots of post and caption of the cover and summary of the revised edition of *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* (2003) by Uma Chakravarti posted by @SouthAsianNation on Instagram.¹⁰⁷

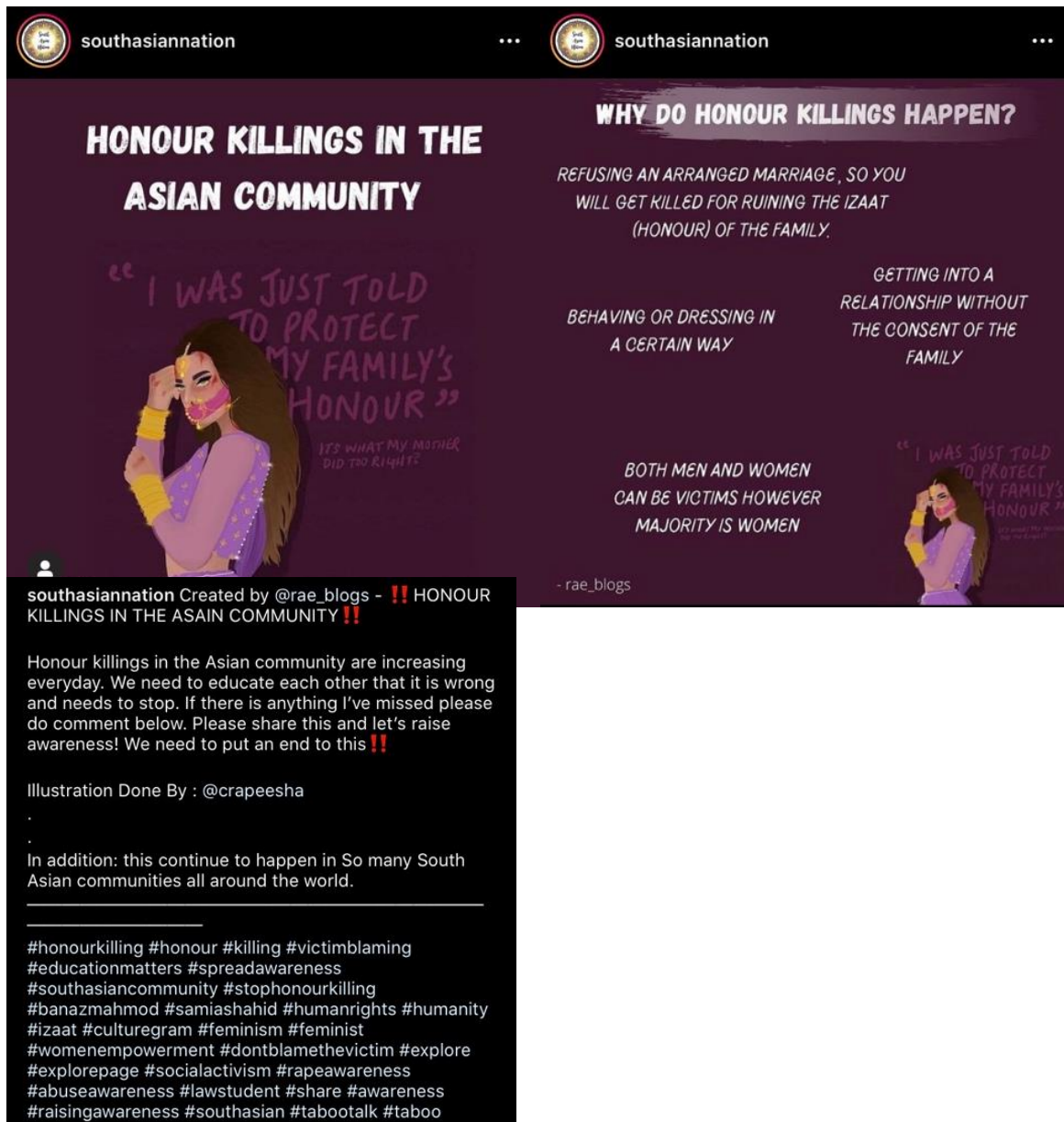


Figure 5: Multiple screenshots of a carousel post addressing honour killings in the Asian community reposted by @SouthAsianNation on Instagram. The image on the top left features a light-skinned brown woman against a burgundy background wearing gold jewellery and purple crop top and pants. Her face and hands have signs of bleeding. White text along the top reads “Honour Killings In The Asian Community.” Below it, in light burgundy text reads “I was just told to protect my family’s honour’ Its [sic] what my mother did too right?” The image on the top right features the same image, resized, and repositioned to the bottom right corner. Along the top in white text is the title “Why Do Honour Killings Happen?” Responses in a smaller font include “Refusing an arranged marriage, so you will get killed for ruining the *izaat* (honour) of the family; Getting into a relationship without the consent of the family; Behaving or dressing in a certain way; Both men and women can be victims however majority is [sic] women.” The bottom left photo is a screenshot of the caption which reads “Honour killings in the Asian community are increasing everyday. We need to educate each other that it is wrong and needs to stop. If there is anything I’ve missed, please do comment below. Please share this and let’s raise awareness! We need to put an end to this!!” Original post by @rae_blogs (Instagram). Illustration by @crapeesha (Instagram).¹⁰⁸

The posts may alternatively use positive messaging to reframe certain cultural taboos like money, sex, and beauty in the effort to “empower” its followers to advocate for change within their community as well as disrupt their own internalized negative ideology.

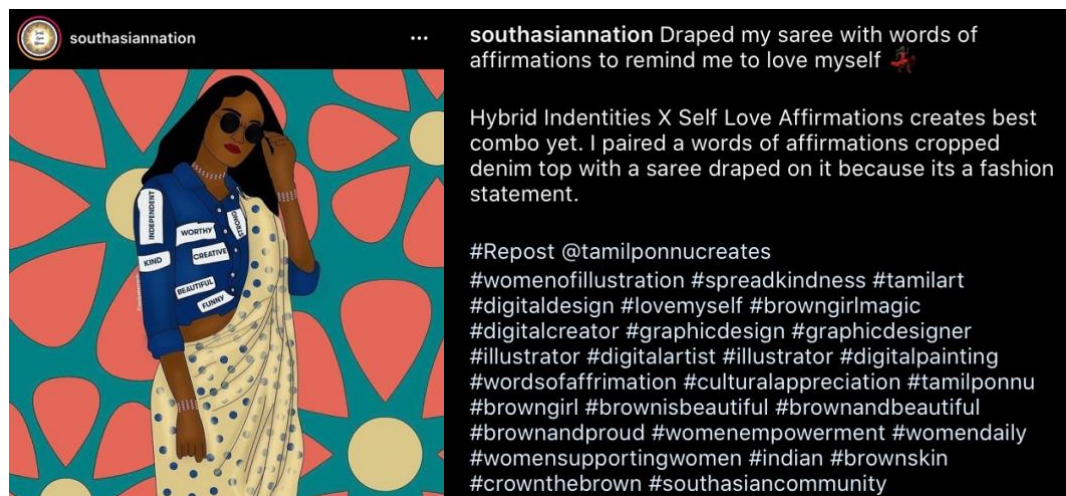


Figure 6: Screenshots of post and caption of an illustration of a dark-skinned Tamil woman wearing sunglasses, a pale-yellow saree with blue dots over top a blue collared stitched with words of affirmation including: kind, independent, worthy, creative, strong, beautiful, and funny. Image and caption reposted by @SouthAsianNation on Instagram. Original post by @TamilPonnuCreates (Instagram).¹⁰⁹



Figure 7: Screenshot of a drawing and caption posted by @SouthAsianNation on Instagram. The image title in the top right corner reads “If Kali Were Another Indian Woman”. The post features an illustration of the goddess Kali holding a sign that says “Body Freedom” in one arm and holding up a rainbow flag in the other. Around her are various speech bubbles that retell the misogynist language used to describe Indian women who exhibit feminist traits. Original illustration by @enchanted_aesthete (Instagram).¹¹⁰

While @SouthAsianNation maintains a primary focus on women’s issues in South Asia and its diasporic communities, they also include posts targeted to men. These posts, while less

frequent, usually aim to destigmatize issues around body image and toxic masculinity as well as to support men seeking mental health treatment.



Figure 8: Screenshot of image and caption posted by @SouthAsianNation on Instagram supporting a body positivity for men’s bodies. The post features four comic panels of a fat brown-skinned man’s torso with the words “stretch marks”, “rolls”, “pouch” and “still handsome, still worthy”. Reposted from @crwndcrane (Instagram). Original illustration by @ArtByMoga (Instagram).¹¹¹



Figure 9: Screenshot of image and caption posted by @SouthAsianNation on Instagram to broach the taboo subject of men’s mental health issues and rates of suicide. The image on the right features two brown men sitting down on a purple patterned rug, the one on the left is crying. The man on the right is holding the other’s hand with a speech bubble overhead that reads “Bro, Men cry too, it’s ok!” Original post and image by @ArtsyBrownLady (Instagram).¹¹²

One such post cites a 2010 study by Time to Change. It suggests that among South Asian men, there is a particular reluctance to discuss mental health issues.¹¹³ Reasons include the ways in which it is stigmatized in the community and the reported feelings of shame and embarrassment that comes from breaking the veneer of a rigid and arguably “toxic” masculinity. Divya echoes this observation, noting that, “it has always been a top priority to talk about mental health issues with the community because there is still a stigma.” She mentions as well that men’s mental health remains particularly unaddressed in the community. Interestingly, it is these posts that seem to receive the most criticism, which I observed in the respective posts’ comments sections. Divya also addressed this response explaining: “we received backlash on that as well by some men that they don’t need mental health help.” While most comments are in support of the topic, a minority of comments do uphold this mentioned stigma, reinforcing the idea that South Asian men don’t need mental health support and body positivity. A number of these comments used the language of corrupting the “alpha male” and turning “alpha males” into “betas”.

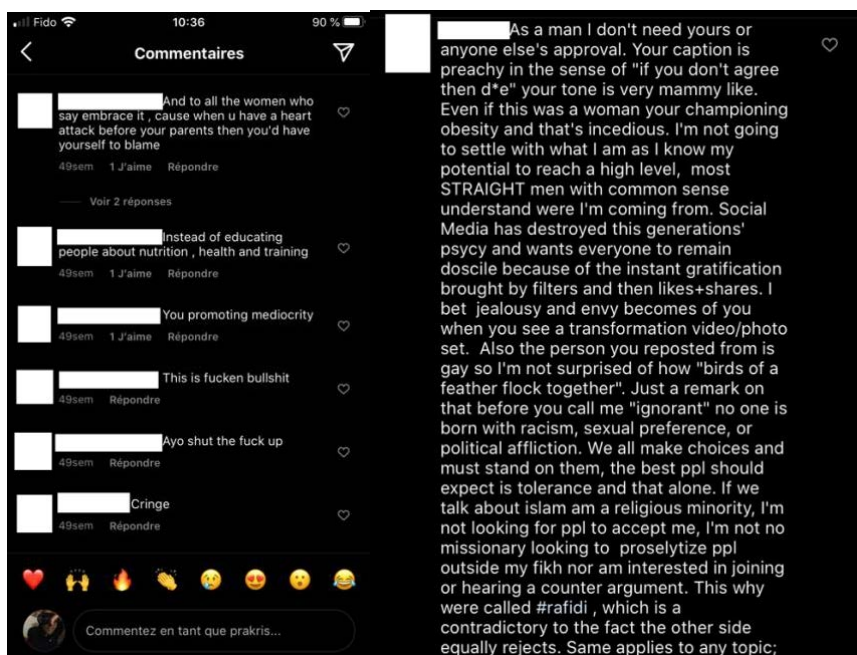


Figure 10: Screenshot of negative comments posted under an image promoting body positivity for men posted by @SouthAsianNation. The image on the left features six short comments of which the top five were authored by the same commenter. The image on the right is a cropped screenshot of one lengthy comment decrying the need for this genre of post. The comment on the right received 6 “likes”.¹¹⁴

Picturing Diasporic Identity

In terms of representing the pluralities of identities, @yaada_ was the only one of the four accounts under study seeking to exclusively explore nuances of diasporic identity. Also, unlike @BrownHistory, @SouthAsia.Art, and @SouthAsianNation which post content of various visual media including photographs, illustrations, comics, videos, and text posts, @yaada_ exclusively posts photographic content. Another distinguishing feature of the account is that all the material is sourced and curated by the account’s sole creator and manager. The other accounts, while also engaging in this practice, also solicit submissions and guest curators. The account at present, has the fewest number of posts (26 as of August 2021), and only shares portrait photography taken of South Asian diasporic subjects.

The creator of the account, Mira, is of Gujarati-descent and was born and raised in the United Kingdom. Her mother is Gujarati from India. Her father is also Gujarati but migrated to the U.K. from Malawi in Southeast Africa. When I asked her the question with respect to how she identifies, she explained that foremost, she identifies as Gujarati. She clarifies as well that this has much to do with her ability to speak the language. She continued in stating that when engaging in deeper conversations with people about her cultural identity, she will specify that half her family is from Gujarat, India, and the other half from Southeast Africa. She denotes the need for this distinction “because the cultures are actually quite different and the nuance of both those identities and sides of my family inform my upbringing and definitely shaped how I identify today.”

When prompted for the impetus behind creating the account, Mira recounted to me a story about being in a Contemporary Africa history course at a London university. One week, during the course, the lecture content covered South Asian migration and presence in East Africa which came as a surprise to most of the students. She noted that most Gujaratis in the UK are from East African countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Yet, she remarked on a continued lack of discussion of this history in mainstream representation and discourse around British Asians. With respect to the connection with her Instagram practice, she described her thoughts at the time of creating @yaada_:

... a lot of people were using [Instagram] to post historic pictures of India, and sharing educational things about India, and traditions from India, and celebrations and beauty. But I still just didn't really feel like those things necessarily spoke to my identities today as much as I do feel like that's my home. But I was like, there are [South] Asians everywhere. And really, I want to know about the diaspora in all the other places. The East African Asian diaspora is just one place to start... for me to just want to know more myself and help others realize that not every South Asian person has come straight from [India].

When asked about her impression of the current realities of South Asian diaspora representation, she called it “one dimensional.” She also makes mention of how the iconography used to emblemize a generalized South Asia includes dated media such as the film *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) that privilege an image of the diaspora that is only South Asians living in the minority world. She stresses that, in her creation of the curated photography account, @yaada_ that, “I wanted it to be strictly only to do with the diaspora” but ran into trouble, noting, “it’s really difficult to find contemporary photo projects that are representing [the diaspora] today.”

She also mentioned her own difficulty in trying to access her own networks and relationship to her father’s former home country of Malawi. “Even to this day, my dad has a lot of family friends in Malawi, but he doesn't want to go back. And me and my brother have always wanted to know where he was from.” She suggests that the sudden exile from a country breeds trauma and resentment. Elaborating on this resistance to return, she said, “the expulsion of Asians from these countries was quite traumatic for people. And having to suddenly move and just make your life somewhere else. I think that's probably part of why.”

Considering how Mira is unable to access the East African side of her family’s culture and history despite her father still having living connections there, it becomes evident how these kinds of minority South Asian diasporic histories, cultures, and identities risk being lost or forgotten. In discussing her choice to label the accounts as “South Asian”, Mira explained,

“It is difficult, I found, with the account, to equally represent South Asian communities just because of the lack of work produced by some. But if I hadn't, I wouldn't even have started to think about what communities are missing – that kind of photographic representation today, which I think has been helpful to think about, for sure. And like smaller kinds of diasporic communities like Mauritius, for example, places like that, they get sidelined.”

Due to the lack of accessible documentation and visual representation, when it comes to South Asian diasporic representation Mira isn't satisfied with what is currently presented on Instagram and other media platforms. She highlighted how “There is a whole world, we have Indo-Caribbeans, Malaysian Indians, and everyone has their different culture, different cuisine, different dress” which also deserve to be promoted and valued as part of the South Asian culture and experience. As to how this came to influence the creation of @yaada_ : “I just felt like it was something I wanted to explore.”

I also asked the creator of @BrownHistory the same question. With over half a million followers, @BrownHistory has the greatest number of followers and the second greatest number of posts (following @SouthAsianNation). The account posts a range of content – primarily historical photographs as well as some contemporary photos, poetry, and press clippings. It is also the only account to post self-promotional materials, such as notices of its crowdfunding Patreon account, art prints for sale, as well as advertisements for clothing as part of its “pop-up store”. While much of the material is sourced online by the creator (similar to @yaada_), there is a recurring trend in the posted materials in the form of the #BrownHistoryPhotoAlbum. Images and captions with this hashtag are user-submitted but are edited for concision and clarity by the account creator. They are collected onto the page and contribute to the collective digital archive of South Asian histories.

The creator, who wished to be kept anonymous, is a Canadian-born Pakistani (henceforth referred to as “BH”). BH revealed to me during the interview that the account's original name was “Before 1947”. This is a reference to the year in which British India was partitioned into the Dominion of India (known today as the Republic of India) and the Dominion of Pakistan (known today as the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the People's Republic of Bangladesh). This original project aimed to speak back and against the contemporary distinctions between Indians and Pakistanis. By only posting photos taken prior to 1947, it aimed to serve as reminder that the borders are an artificially imposed, imperialist construction. It also reminds the public that formerly, there was one nation and one people. Speaking of the transition from “Before 1947” to “Brown History”, BH explained to me,

I wanted to post only things because 1947 because I felt like that was where the beginning was, because we were all one, we were all connected somehow... But as I started posting more, I realized the story goes after 1947... Whatever decisions that were made in the 1800s, today is still being dealt with. So, instead of Pakistan, it became the whole thing [South Asia].

In terms of a crafting a “South Asian identity” through the Instagram account, BH recounts their own shifting and complex relationship toward identity, echoing the feelings of Som and Ayqa of @SouthAsia.Art. BH recounts feeling “more confused now [after launching @BrownHistory] than before” and that prior to the project, they were feeling a sense of non-belonging both to Canada, where they live, and to South Asia. This problematizing of self-identifying as South Asian seems to be a shared experience for those in the diaspora who are in this work of cultural engagement. As Mira pointed out, “I think the South Asian label is

obviously so problematic. But we can make it useful, I guess.” The creators of @SouthAsia.Art also expressed similar contentions with the term. Reflecting on the account’s curatorial process, Som explained:

I think a reason why I also mention “messy” is because these definitions of "South Asia" or "curation" or "representation" and stuff are constantly under negotiation. Even when we say, "South Asia", Ayqa and I are only representative of a very particular faction of it. So, we have to also step back and look at ourselves and be like, "what are we missing out on?" or what are parts that we can ask someone to fill in instead of us, too. And let's not let "South Asia" just be India and Pakistan as well. Let's not let it just be Bollywood. It's like these things we're thinking and then we try to find people who will be on the same frequency as that and try to learn from them. And that's a big part of curating for us, right Ayqa? I feel like there's something we're both interested in and we're selfishly learning through this way – if that makes sense.

Echoing the sentiments of BH and Mira, I can personally attest to a changing intrapersonal relationship to South Asian identity. In conducting this research over the last year, I have come to identify and relate less to generalized South Asian content and have instead begun investing more time in researching Tamil and Malaysian-specific histories, media, and art to fill in the gaps of my own knowledge. On the other hand, BH’s work toward creating @BrownHistory, learning history, and engaging with South Asian materials and media has led them to express an even more pronounced feeling of not belonging anywhere. However, BH mentions that “at the same time, [I] have grown comfortable in being an outsider anywhere I go. And that’s because of the knowledge I’ve attained. And I feel more of a conviction and a confidence of my outsider-ness.” Here, BH makes the case for being comfortable in settling for a non-identity approach, therefore disidentifying as an “outsider”. Through this satisfaction of being a continuous outsider, it can be argued that perhaps, an arrival at a stable and settled identity is not, in fact, the end goal. As BH expressed, the goal could be choosing instead, to be satisfied simply living in a state of nonbelonging. I argue that this exemplifies well a South Asian disidentification. Instead of BH using “South Asian” as a moniker with which to disidentify, “outsider” itself becomes a way to disidentify from the South Asian community itself by asserting their existence in a state of flux – that their identity, no matter the locale, is always in tension with the expected norm.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I remarked on the common thread of the difficulties in settling on a specific identity or set of identities, through mobilizing Muñoz’s theory of disidentifications in a media studies context. The words that my interviewees used outside the language of nationalist or cultural monikers such as “human”, “outsider”, and “butterfly” evokes Muñoz’s theory of disidentification. From what I have found out in conducting these interviews and given the time, energy, and labour spent to maintain these accounts (up to two hours per day for Divya for @SouthAsianNation), I argue that despite this unease in clearly identifying with a specific national or cultural identity, there is a longing to seek and build community around a kind of overarching and nebulous yet inclusive umbrella – hence, South Asia. Unlike identifying with the strict national identity of one’s ancestral homeland (e.g. India), or an insistence to counteridentify by claiming a national identification with the nation in which a diasporic subject maintains citizenship (e.g. Canada), a South Asian identity circumvents both these poles of identification by asserting a belonging not to a particular nation-state (and as a result, inheriting its biases, stereotypes, and mainstream assumptions), but instead to a more pluralistic community of imagined subjects thereby creating a new sense of cultural belonging predicated upon a communal disidentification.

This phenomenon is, of course, not exclusive to South Asians. It also appears in queer and disability community discourses as well as other diasporic discourses including Black, Latinx, West Asian, East Asian, and Indigenous.¹¹⁵ From what I've gathered from my research, among those that share this sense of disidentification with respect to their countries of origin (whether it be their own, their parents, or ancestors), there is an acknowledgement of an inability to completely either identify or counteridentify. This gap or "failure" to fully identify or counteridentify then becomes, as I have argued here, an opportunity to disidentify – or a performance of disidentification as resistance. It allows for a reimagination of how to build community ties where none yet readily exist. Instead of being restrictively bound by the hegemonic policies and particular racialization of a certain nation-state, community can be formed through a shared affective affiliation to a pluralistic and diverse set of populations, regions, and cultures. While this kind of generalizing can be used to further erase already minoritized communities, I argue that these accounts, through their various acts of disidentification, have made efforts to highlight minority communities within the broader South Asian umbrella including religious minorities, Indigenous groups, gender and sexual minorities, and non-Western diasporic communities. These efforts underscore the potentials of a South Asian disidentification have to disrupt these kinds of political and patriarchal status quos.

Through the visibility of these accounts, I see the participation in these Instagram community archives (via following, creating, or otherwise interacting) as a vehicle to engage in and rearticulate a sense of belonging or identity with a place and/or culture. As it holds for many diasporans as well as people living in South Asia who occupy positions of marginalization (via religion, caste, gender, sexuality, etc.) these accounts serve as archives of potentialities and belongings that may otherwise be unavailable. The following chapter engages with the im/material content of these Instagram community archives more closely. I observe the ways in which even these supposedly utopic spaces of subversive, representational possibilities can inadvertently reproduce certain South Asian socio-political hierarchies.

⁸² Lee, Wong, and Alvarez, 'The Model Minority and the Perpetual Foreigner'.

⁸³ Gee, 'South Asian Immigrants Are Transforming Toronto'.

⁸⁴ The phrase "All my skinfolk ain't kinfolk" is commonly attributed to Black American author Zora Neale Hurston. Here, skinfolk is used to signal a community of people who share the same racial identification whereas kinfolk comprises people with whom there is mutual respect and understanding.

⁸⁵ Parmar, *Reading Cultural Representations of the Double Diaspora*.

⁸⁶ Chee-Beng, 'Ethnic Identities and National Identities'.

⁸⁷ Nah, 'Negotiating Indigenous Identity in Postcolonial Malaysia', 512.

⁸⁸ Chee-Beng, 'Ethnic Identities and National Identities', 449.

⁸⁹ Shamsul, 'Identity Construction, Nation Formation, and Islamic Revivalism in Malaysia', 209.

⁹⁰ Shamsul, 209.

⁹¹ Nah, 'Negotiating Indigenous Identity in Postcolonial Malaysia', 513–14.

⁹² Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*, 12.

⁹³ Arutchelvan, 'Death in Custody - the Questions of Concern'.

⁹⁴ I acknowledge that exceptions here exist, primarily among those with racially ambiguous features, accents, who wear clothing with specific cultural or religious affiliations, those with visible disabilities, etc. The legibility of which I speak comes from a "passing" of whiteness. The criteria for how whiteness is defined or assigned is dynamic and can change over time.

⁹⁵ The term "brown" in this context is in reference to immigrants from the South Asian region, members of the diaspora, and their descendants.

⁹⁶ Ahmed-Ullah, 'How Brampton, a Town in Suburban Ontario, Was Dubbed a Ghetto'. White flight refers to the phenomenon of white people and families leaving communities when these communities experience an influx of non-white habitants.

⁹⁷ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

- ⁹⁸ Akbar, 'Rising Fascism in India'.
- ⁹⁹ Stanley, 'Gender Self-Determination', 89.
- ¹⁰⁰ U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation, 'Incidents and Offenses'.
- ¹⁰¹ Yengde, *Caste Matters*.
- ¹⁰² South Indians/Draavidians tend to have darker skin complexions compared to North Indians/Indo-Aryans. Across many South Asian beauty standards, there is a default privileging of Indo-Aryan features such as lighter skin, straight hair, and thin noses.
- ¹⁰³ The South Asian Nation, '@thelifeofasocialbutterfly'; The South Asian Nation, '@ninadavuluri's Story in Her Own Words on Colorism'. This and the following figure captions include extended image descriptions in order to be more accessible for blind and partially sighted readers.
- ¹⁰⁴ Pal, 'Thousands Detained in Indian Kashmir Crackdown, Official Data Reveals'; Wallen, 'Young Boys Tortured in Kashmir Clampdown as New Figures Show 13,000 Teenagers Arrested'.
- ¹⁰⁵ The South Asian Nation, 'It Only Glows When Its Dark'.
- ¹⁰⁶ The South Asian Nation, 'Theyyam Is a Famous Ritual Art Form That Originated in North Kerala Which Brings to Life the Great Stories of Our State.'
- ¹⁰⁷ The South Asian Nation, 'Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens'.
- ¹⁰⁸ The South Asian Nation, 'Honour Killings in the Asian Community'.
- ¹⁰⁹ The South Asian Nation, 'Draped My Saree with Words of Affirmations to Remind Me to Love Myself'.
- ¹¹⁰ The South Asian Nation, 'If Kali Were Another Indian Woman'.
- ¹¹¹ The South Asian Nation, 'Something That Needs to Be Talked about More and Embraced. Men's Body Positivity Does Not Get Talked about.'
- ¹¹² The South Asian Nation, 'Bro, Men Cry Too It's Ok!'
- ¹¹³ Time to Change, 'Family Matters'.
- ¹¹⁴ The South Asian Nation, 'The South Asian Nation (@southasiannation) • Instagram Photos and Videos'.
- ¹¹⁵ Schalk, 'Coming to Claim Crip'; Tate, 'The Performativity of Black Beauty Shame in Jamaica and Its Diaspora'; Langellier, 'Performing Somali Identity in the Diaspora'; Liu, 'Object-Oriented Diaspora Sensibilities, Disidentification, and Ghostly Performance'.

Chapter 4: Instagram Politics & Performance

Social Media & Political Interventions

In conducting this research, the political nature of social media platforms – Instagram in particular – has never been more striking. In the past, there has been much talk around the politicized nature of other popular social media sites and apps such as Facebook and Twitter. Regarding Facebook, high-profile and public scandals such as that of Cambridge Analytica, its alleged influence on elections, and its data breach from April 2021 have brought to the forefront concerns about data privacy and the power of high-tech companies.

Twitter, which acts primarily as a site of discourse, has also had its share of public scandals that have called into question the politics and ethics involved in the platform's selective platforming and suppression of speech. Some of these public incidents include Gamergate, which was in part organized and enacted via Twitter, as well as the banning of former US President Donald Trump earlier in 2021 after several years of Twitter users flagging Trump's history of circulating hate speech on the platform. Following a similar incident, Nigeria has banned Twitter following the deletion of a tweet penned by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, citing the tweet's alleged "abusive behaviour". Recently, Twitter has also been accused of blocking or hiding content from specific Indian activists and journalists reporting on the farmers' protest.

Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Instagram seems to receive less political news coverage than its aforementioned counterparts. This lack of coverage continues despite Instagram being one of the most popular social networking sites, globally. It has one of the largest user bases of individuals under 35 and has an overall larger user base than Twitter. In searching for news stories on the CBC relating to Instagram, under 6,500 results appeared compared to over 42,000 and 53,000 for Twitter and Facebook, respectively.¹¹⁶ In my own use and observation of Instagram, however, it is clear that a different kind of political engagement is occurring on the platform that merits deeper study.

As outlined by the previous examples, it is not necessarily the content posted to Twitter and Facebook that garner news media attention. What has been the focus of media commentary instead has been the effects of these events on the offline world. One of the latest social media apps to be taken up by young users has been TikTok. The video-based app received similar press coverage to that of the Twitter-Buhari event when former US President Trump sought to ban the app after TikTok users collectively purchased the free tickets to one of Trump's events. The result was that almost no attendees were present upon Trump's arrival. Instagram, however, does not seem to have the same kind of relationship in terms of visibly and directly politicizing its public. Nor does the platform receive the same kind of vilifying narrative by journalists or politicians. Instead, Instagram has occupied a position that until recently has seemed innocuous and apolitical to the broader public.

Various events from the past year occurring during the period of my study, however, has all but effaced Instagram's apolitical veneer. I do want to note, however, that despite the recent surge in content uploaded to Instagram that speaks directly and overtly to national and translational politics (including Black Lives Matter, and COVID-19 responses), the ways in which certain marginalized communities have used Instagram have been perhaps less explicitly but always already political. In addition to Instagram communities forming around racial and geopolitical communities such as the South Asian Instagram community archives of study in this thesis, other fringe groups such as disabled and chronically ill communities have also turned to Instagram as a site of knowledge and resource sharing.¹¹⁷

Politics of Representation

Despite the recent increase in the addition of overtly political content to Instagram, the ways in which South Asian Instagram community archives operate have already been inherently political. Consider @yaada_ for example. For Mira, the creator of @yaada_, working from a UK context where Gujaratis are a predominant South Asian group, Instagram provides her a platform to diversify and problematize this dominant narrative.

I definitely felt a sense of responsibility to try and represent and shed light on some other South Asian communities that haven't had the same privileges or spotlight shone on them by Western institutions. And my own identity is upper-caste, North Indian, and especially with India being what it is right now, I don't feel like you can be lazy with how you want to represent and think about community, for sure. But it is difficult, I found, with the account, to equally represent South Asian communities just because of the lack of work produced by some. But if I hadn't, I wouldn't have even started to think about what communities are missing that kind of photographic representation today.

The sense of responsibility Mira refers to is indicative to the politics of posting, especially in relation to the particular affordances of Instagram that prioritize visual content. In this case, the politics of posting becomes deeply entangled with the politics of visibility and representation. Through the maintenance of these Instagram community archives, Mira and other creators are inadvertently ascribing a new kind of historical record that reaches thousands of people around the world. Because of the dually visible nature of the content in terms of the visuality of its media content (in @yaada_'s case, diaspora photography) and the high visibility of these accounts with their thousands of followers, the curatorial question and process becomes inherently political in deciding which communities get archived and visibility platformed.

Accompanying the development of social Internet infrastructures via the transition to what is called Web 2.0, came a sense of increased democratic participation. Where access to social media is granted (via geographic permissions, and technological and financial access), everyone supposedly has equal space and opportunity to voice their opinions, concerns, and other content. While this may seem true to a certain extent (all accounts are limited to one "like" per post and have ability to comment on others' posts), in reality, there are several factors that disrupt this sense of platform equalizing and prevent egalitarian democratic deliberation. Much like many offline societies, social media users are not equal according to Daniel Gayo-Avello, as a result of the "colonization" of social media by political, corporate and media elites.¹¹⁸ "Such elites," he writes, "are central actors in political social networks... posts by social media elites usually have a clear agenda-building objective, and such posts are favored by the general public over posts from non-elite users."¹¹⁹

In more mainstream contexts, these "elite" actors may be more easily identified based on factors including follower count, wealth, proximity to political power, and offline influence. Celebrities are another easily identifiable "media elite". Some of whom use their personal Instagram accounts to blend their personal content with corporate advertising. These advertorials have, in the past, been subject to scrutiny. At times, it is unclear when this promotional content is a result of paid sponsorships. However, this obscurity, or integration of sponsored content among the personal is an effective way to garner consumer interest.¹²⁰

In the context of the South Asian Instagram community, however, pinpointing these "elite" figures requires a more nuanced analysis. In describing her sense of "responsibility" with the

representation of diversity within @yaada_, Mira assumes the position of “elite” within the South Asian Instagram community. In this context, however, elitism is not necessarily articulated in the same sense as traditional elites in the areas where media and politics operate. Instead, for figures like Mira, it comes as a result of occupying positions of relative power and privilege within the UK’s South Asian community. Crucially, she is aware of the position she holds and desires to hold space for those who are less privileged or who have less access to representational media. Unlike traditional media elites, Mira is conscious of her positionality as being of a high caste status and being part of the large community of Gujaratis in the UK. She is then reflexive on this point and interested in using the political affordances of her identity to platform and support less visible diaspora groups.

South Asian Identity Politics in the Western Diaspora

As she described during our interview, Gujaratis are the predominant South Asian group in the UK. However, the language, culture, history, and experiences of Gujaratis and British-Gujaratis are not indicative or wholly encompassing of the variety of British-Asian experiences or the breadth of other Western and non-Western diasporic experiences.¹²¹ Acknowledging the difficulties and traumas resulting from the expulsion of a country – referencing the exile of Indians from Uganda and other East African nations – there comes a certain privilege in the form of cultural capital when belonging to a larger minority group. Especially when combined with other axes of privilege, such as caste, wealth, and education, it becomes easy for certain minority experiences to overshadow the experiences of other further marginalized and oppressed communities. This can result in being seen as (perhaps unintentionally) speaking on behalf of the entire community and thus effacing certain intercommunity struggles. It also risks obscuring the unique experiences of those within the community who do not have the same kind of cultural currency to achieve such popularity on the same kinds of platforms.

As an example of how minority groups can also occupy such “elite” positions, I elaborate here on the example of the Punjabi/Sikh community in Canada.¹²² In Canada, Sikhs/Punjabis comprise the largest South Asian group in the country. Their arrival to Canada began in 1867 and, currently, Punjabi is the most spoken South Asian language in Canada with over 650,000 Canadians knowledgeable in the language according to a 2016 census.¹²³ Like many immigrants to Canada around the turn of the century, Punjabi migrants often sought a new life in Canada for economic opportunities. Canada also saw a large influx of Punjabi refugees following the 1984 Sikh Massacre.¹²⁴ Despite the general limitations of education or financial resources possessed by other migrant groups, Punjabi-Canadians hold a certain kind of political and cultural power in Canada.

In 2017, the Canadian-born child of Punjabi immigrants, Jagmeet Singh, was elected leader of the New Democratic Party (“NDP”). This event marked the first non-white politician to lead one of Canada’s three major federal political parties in Canada’s 150-year post-Confederation history.¹²⁵ But Singh is not the sole Punjabi figure in Canadian politics. Following the election of Justin Trudeau in 2015, four Sikhs were sworn in as cabinet ministers including the ministers of defence, infrastructure, small business and tourism, as well as innovation, science and industry. This, along with gender parity has made Canada’s cabinet the most racially and gender diverse it has ever been. It has also meant that Canada has the most Sikh representation in any country’s cabinet, including India’s.¹²⁶ During the 2019 general election, 18 Punjabi members of parliament (MPs) were elected to Canada’s House of Commons from the Liberal, Conservative, and New Democratic parties.

While numbers alone might be one reason for which Punjabis and Sikhs in Canada have been able to acquiesce into Canada's political elite, another important factor includes and intense political and community organizing. Despite comprising only one percent of Canada's population, according to journalist Srijan Shukla, the reason why the Sikh community is able to "wield more power" than other migrant communities in Canada is due to "a robust culture of grassroots politics, organisational skills and fundraising capabilities, and a particular feature of Canada's electoral system that requires each candidate to bring in a certain number of signatures and party members in order to get nominated."¹²⁷ According to Kwantlen Polytechnic University professor Shinder Purewal, Sikh political hopefuls are able to rely on their ethnic community ties to turn the Canadian letter-nomination system in their favour. She notes that "Sikhs have a strong internal unity based on the caste [system] (vast majority are Jatt Sikhs)."¹²⁸ Strong grassroots organizing both inside and outside religious settings (gurdwaras) as well as financial resources to back political campaigns have also been cited as reasons for their stronghold in Canadian politics.¹²⁹

It is not only in the realm of politics where Punjabi-Canadians occupy "elite" positions. In the realms of popular contemporary media, there are several prominent Punjabi-Canadians on the world stage, most notably film director Deepa Mehta, comedian Lilly Singh, and poet Rupi Kaur. Each of these creatives have received international success in their respective endeavours which often are predicated on minority community storytelling. Yet, they all have received criticism around the ways in which they (mis)represent communities to which they do not belong.

Recently, Deepa Mehta's adaption of the coming-of-age novel *Funny Boy* about a queer Tamil boy in 1980s Sri Lanka was produced by Telefilm and released on Netflix in Canada. As the film came to fruition, however, Tamils were effectively erased from the film that comprised a nearly all-Sinhalese cast. Many critics have pointed out the ways in which the elites of South Asia continue to construct narratives that maintain existing social hierarchies. As queer Tamil-Canadian writer Sunthar Vykunthanathan explains, "North Indians and Sinhalese both have a heavy history of violence against Tamils and, in this film, they are given the power to tell the stories."¹³⁰ Lilly Singh has similarly been critiqued for exploiting a culture not her own. In this case, the focus of this attention has been on her appropriation of Black and Caribbean culture vis à vis certain hairstyles and vernacular (aka employing a "blaccent") as well as stereotyping and denigrating Punjabis through her satirical skits.¹³¹ Lastly, Rupi Kaur's poetry has been critiqued both for its lack of depth and its failure to adequately explore the nuanced experienced at the intersections of her own identity as a young Punjabi-Canadian woman. Critic Sagaree Jain notes that instead, Kaur's poetry "resonate[s] with white women as easily as they do with women of color, and for a woman internet-famous for posting menstruation blood on Instagram, her public persona is very much apolitical."¹³²

These examples from popular and legacy media industries (film, comedy, literature) illustrate how, within the South Asian community, the politics of representation continues to demand a complex reading and analysis. For this reason of requiring further nuance, each of the interviewees of study expressed similar goals of diversifying the representation of South Asian media to their audiences. As mentioned previously, Mira (@yaada_) sought to explore photography of and by the global South Asian diaspora. Divya (@SouthAsianNation) wanted to discuss and educate on the issues and interconnectedness of casteism and colourism within the community. Ayqa and Som (@SouthAsia.Art) sought to showcase and platform the work of contemporary South Asian art and artists in contrast to the predominance of historical South Asian images and media that circulate through Instagram. Lastly, the creator of

@BrownHistory, who does post much more historical content, began the account as an exploration of pre-partition Indian history and since evolved it into a deeper investigation into various South Asian histories. Interestingly, at some point over the course of the study, the biography of @BrownHistory on its account page changed from “Historical doses of South Asia” to “South Asian history retold by the Vanquished”. The change feels fitting given the prominence of user-submitted photographs and histories retelling stories of families forced to survive incredible violence to seek a safehold in the newly divided countries following the partition of India in 1947.

Shifting Politics, Shifting Content

Within the diaspora, including online, it becomes possible to either reproduce or refuse the existing social hierarchies imported from the ancestral lands. For Punjabis, Canada becomes a nation in which there is more opportunity to gain political power in comparison to India. Similarly, digital social spaces such as Instagram, which give voices to some, may also obscure others. For example, Mira (@yaada_) discusses her difficulty in sourcing images from non-Western diasporas:

I kind of started with England and looking at photographs of British-Asian communities here because at least I knew the areas and local archives I could look up online. I kind of know where the Asian communities first migrated to. But now, I try to look at all the different places where I know South Asians migrated to. But some places just continue to be so under-photographed, like the Indo-Caribbean community for example. It's really difficult to find contemporary photo projects that are representing them today. Barely any images. Just blurry news pictures.

In discussing my own background as a Malaysian Indian, Mira notes, “Malaysia is actually another place where I’ve found it quite hard to find family contemporary photo projects that are documenting the [Indian] community there.”

Aside from focusing solely on the content of the posts, Mira also discusses using the account as a way to platform and showcase young South Asian talent:

I also didn't want to post too much archival or historical material because I also thought that could be a way to support young Asian photographers as well. And I think being of this generation [Generation Z], it’s kind of the first time South Asian teenagers are going to art school, are pursuing careers in photography... So, finding young South Asian photographers that are photographing their own communities here, in America, all over – that's what I want to share the most. I think going forward, being able to commission young photographers to photograph their own communities would be the dream.

Of the 26 posts currently on the account (most posts contain a carousel of two or more photos), more than half were taken in the United Kingdom (15), with another seven in the United States, four in Singapore and one in Mauritius. The range of identifiable communities showcased in the photographs include North Indian, Punjabi, Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Pakistani, and Indo-Caribbean. Despite Mira’s own background within the Indian diaspora in East Africa, @yaada_ has yet to publish any photos from this community in either East Africa or in the UK. Likewise, other prominent South Asian communities in the UK such as Sri Lankans whose presence in the UK has a long history were also absent or went unnamed.¹³³

For @SouthAsia.Art, the creators made themselves quite clear in their positionality. As Som describes it:

I think something that we're also trying to be conscious of is not sounding like an authority or being too didactic in the way we share information. I feel like a lot of South Asian accounts kind of have a specific tone. And part of it is because the platform is set a specific way and certain posts get engagement when it's very nostalgia driven. Or like educational or "get in touch with your history" stuff like that. But Ayqa and I try to not speak in those terms, or not to be an expert or not to be teaching but learning with you guys in a way.

For Som and Ayqa, their interest lies in crafting a space of experimentation without a particular aim to cover the kind of diverse geographic bases that Mira sought after. Unlike the other accounts which primarily rely on permanent feed posts and still images to circulate media content, @SouthAsia.Art began experimenting in not only content but in form as well.

Ayqa: ...about the shift in the way curators or artists are now using Instagram, I think what has happened was that when we had started to experience lockdown, I started to notice that, or it was probably before, a lot of people started to use Instagram Live more. This makes sense, everyone is stuck at home or stuck somewhere and there's a big difference consuming an image and listening to a Live. But then there's also a difference in participating in a conversation that's live. But I remember seeing a lot of people on Instagram Live and I was like "ok, we need to really tap into this with the artists". So, the curators that we had, we started to say "please use the features, if you want to. If you want to hop on an Instagram Live and talk to somebody, there's so many things you can do. You're not just limited to just sharing images of your work and writing about it. If you want to have a conversation, if you want to play music, if you want to host a radio show – which The Packet [@The_Packet] did, and it was incredible...I remember The Packet did a radio show and it was really interesting because when I tuned into it, I started to see all these people I knew come into it, who I didn't think were looking at the page, or interested in the content. And I was like, "oh, this is music." This might be something that everyone can connect to. Or everyone can understand. Or it's just something different.

Som followed up with another example of using a new feature for Instagram – “Highlights” which save to the account’s public page, what are usually ephemeral “Stories” which would otherwise disappear from public view after 24 hours.

Som: Each person who takes over the account uses it in a very different way. For example, someone like Abeera Kamran [@AbeeraKamran]... would put things on Stories and they would all be so poetic and rich in narrative and I would have to tell her, "oh can you actually make this a Highlight because it's going to go away and there's so much to look at." And I feel that's also part of the way people use the features. But I guess to answer your question about how it changed from purely visual to interactive, it was shifting, I guess. Also, cultural expectations did that too. Like the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests in India... we were intrinsically responding to these pivotal shifts in youth culture or our lives.

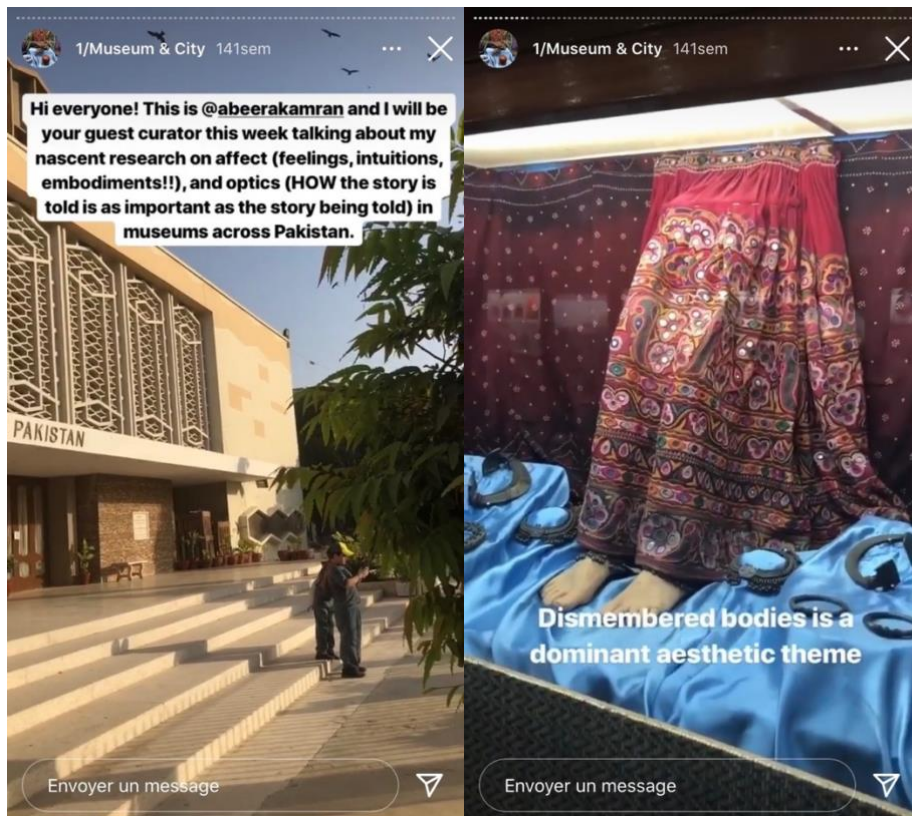


Figure 11: Two screenshots from short videos saved within the @SouthAsia.Art Highlight titled “1/Museum & City”. The first screenshot is of a video showcasing the façade of the National Museum of Pakistan. There is a text annotation written in black text on a white background at the top of the video that reads “Hi everyone! This is @AbeeraKamran and I will be your guest curator this week talking about my nascent research on affect (feelings, intuitions, embodiments!!), and optics (HOW the story is told is as important as the story being told) in museums across Pakistan.” The second photo is of a museum display of mannequin legs draped in a red, patterned fabric, standing on a blue fabric base. There is white text on the screen that reads “Dismembered bodies is a dominant aesthetic theme.”¹³⁴

As Som mentions, the shifting political climate that occurred in mid-2020 including a global recognition of the Black Lives Matter movement as well as the farmer’s protest in India necessitated a shift toward direct political engagement.

Som: Sometimes people come to us, and they have an idea that they'll want to execute. And they'll be like, "Can we do this with you?" or something. Like Prinita [@prinita.thevarajah] who's an artist and social worker, during the Black Lives Matter [movement]. It was her idea to translate all these key terms into South Asian languages. And we were like, yeah you can send it to us, and we'll post it. And then Nimisha [@NimishaBhanot] who had an idea about doing a phone bank and then organizing a teach-in with [Equality Labs] yeah. And so, people bring these things with them and then we can just facilitate it to happen. But it's very much stuff people bring with them.

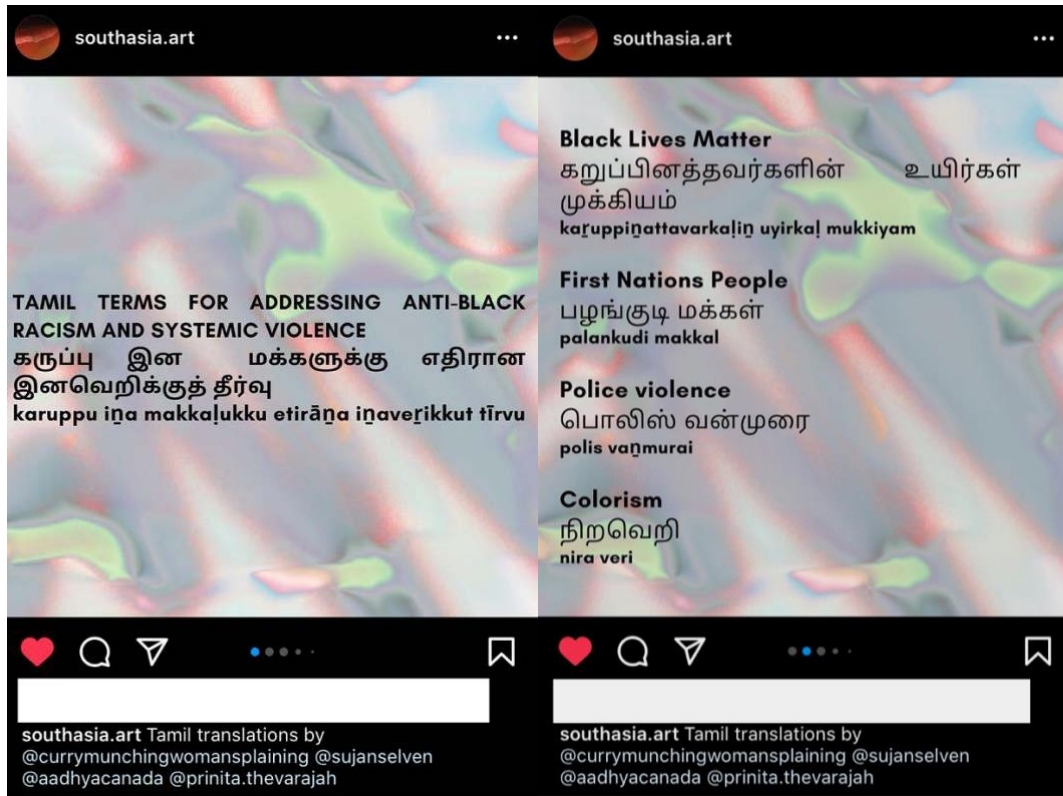


Figure 12: Two screenshots of texts posts by @SouthAsia.Art. The picture on the right has black text that that reads “Tamil terms for addressing anti-Black racism and systemic violence” in English followed by the Tamil translation written using Tamil script and again using the Latin alphabet. The text is posted on a multicoloured background of red, purple, blue, and green hues in an oil slick pattern. The screenshot on the right is the second photo of the series following the same translation format and background with the terms “Black Lives Matter,” “First Nations People,” “Police violence,” and “Colorism”. The caption reads “Tamil translations by @CurryMunchingWomansplaining @SujanSelven @AadhyaCanada @Prinita.Thevarajah”¹³⁵

@SouthAsianNation’s content also underwent a similar shift around this time. While the account has always been in the service of sharing educational content around women’s issues, mental health, colourism, and casteism, during this period, the account managers noticeably began sharing content not directly tied to South Asian culture or communities but that reflected issues around Black Lives Matter (BLM). Around the matter of BLM, many posts were oriented around South Asian education or community call ins. These posts use text, imagery, or a combination to tie South Asians toward the struggle for Black liberation. Others call out anti-Blackness within India as well as within the South Asian diaspora. Several other posts, however, do not make reference to the South Asian community, instead, they simply share BLM posts and the posts of Black activists. Unlike the majority of the account’s content, these posts do not seek to reflect issues facing the South Asian community. Instead, they serve to call-in or educate the South Asian community in supporting and being allied with the Black community. This practice of non-South Asian information posting has continued on the account. Recently, @SouthAsianNation has posted news around the discovery of mass and unmarked graves at former Residential Schools in Canada. These posts are often captioned with community call-ins requesting solidarity from South Asians to other marginalized groups.



Figure 13: Two screenshots of images reposted by @SouthAsianNation addressing anti-Blackness in the South Asian community. The image on the left features gold text centred on a green background that reads “South Asian Friends How To Be A Black Lives Matter Ally.” The text is surrounded by a gold circle with gold floral trim around the border. The image is watermarked with the handle of @Mind.FullyResilient. The image on the right features dark brown text on a lighter brown background that reads “Confronting Racism, Colorism, Antiblackness & Hypocrisy In South Asian Communities.” In a smaller, lighter font there is a subtitle that reads “Does Being Brown Absolve Us Of Racism?” There is a block colour gradient on the top right with five colour blocks from dark brown to light beige. A footnote reads “Read more AnayaJain.in”¹³⁶

@BrownHistory, with the largest following of over half a million, likewise experienced a subtle shift in content in recent months. Notably, it shared informational content around the Siddis, which are a community with ancestral ties to Africa who live across India and Pakistan. Siddis have long undergone an effective erasure in the historical record, sometimes even dubbed as a “forgotten tribe.”¹³⁷ BH has also used their platform to bring attention to the forced expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and neighbourhoods by the Israeli state. In response, @BrownHistory has posted images of solidarity iconography in the form of stamps and passports linking various South Asian nations with Palestinian struggles. These stamps and passports date back to the late 1970s and were issued by the governments of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. There was also a surge of content showing South Asian figures in Jerusalem and other parts of occupied Palestine as well as an influx of follower-submitted content and photographs relating their South Asian family history with Israel and Palestine.



Figure 14: Four photos of South Asian stamps printed in solidarity with Palestine. The stamps were printed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The image in the top left features a colour photograph of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem framed by a red border with “Pakistan” written in yellow lettering in English and with additional Arabic text. On the top, in English is written “For The Welfare Of The Families And Martyrs And Freedom Fighters Of Palestine”. The image on the top right has the same photograph of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, but with a purple tint with “Bangladesh” written on the side and additional text in Bengali and Arabic. On the top in English is written “To The Welfare Of Families Of Martyrs And Combatants of Palestine.” The bottom left features an illustration of the Al-Aqsa Mosque against a pink background with the printed date of 1977. Along the top in black text is written “Postes Afghanes” There is additional script in Arabic and French. The French text is a translation of the same phrasing used in the former two stamps. The bottom left image is a picture of stamp with an illustration of waving Indian and Palestinian flags hovering over the sketch of a group of people. There is Black text of English and Hindi script reading “India” along the left and “Solidarity with the Palestinian People” along the bottom.¹³⁸

Platform Suppression

Shortly after publishing these pro-Palestine posts, @BrownHistory had its account suspended without warning on the 30th of May 2021. Posting on their secondary account, @BrownHistoryPodcast, BH shared a screenshot showing the deleted @BrownHistory account and posted the following in the caption:

Hi everyone, my instagram [sic] account @BrownHistory has me blocked from accessing it. I know this account means a lot to many and I apologize for the inconvenience. I'm not sure exactly what the cause is but it's probably from the heat caused by the constant upload of posts supporting oppressed communities and peoples such as Palestine. I've had over 3 years of research, hardwork [sic] and dedication on my @instagram account and I am working endlessly trying to get it back. It was a space full of history and culture and a medium to share your personal stories and I hope to see you all very soon. Please do share and encourage people to follow me here while I fight to get my account back. Thank you!

The following day, the account was reinstated. The account then posted a meme of Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, the parent company of Instagram, holding a cellphone with the @BrownHistory page pasted on the screen. Beside Zuckerberg's face is a speech bubble that reads "If I don't steal it, someone else will."¹³⁹

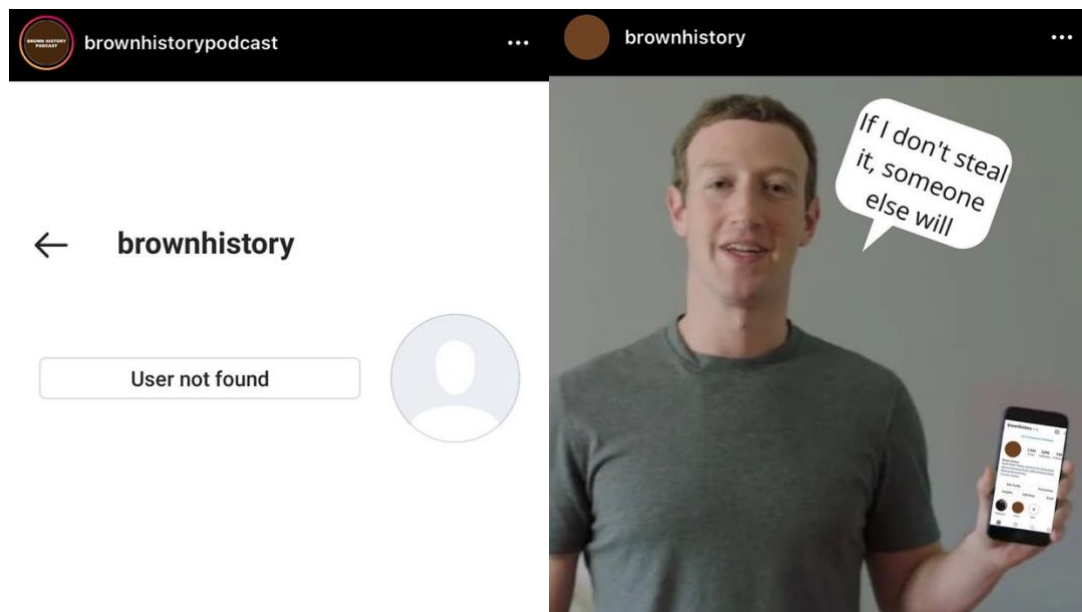


Figure 15: Screenshots relating to the @BrownHistory suspension. The image on the left is a screenshot from a post by @BrownHistoryPodcast that is a blank Instagram profile page for @BrownHistory that has the default, empty profile picture with the text "User not found". The image of the right is a post by @BrownHistory of a meme of Mark Zuckerberg with a speech bubble reading "If I don't steal it, someone else will." In his hand is a smart phone open to the @BrownHistory Instagram page.

At the time the interviews were conducted, no other accounts had experienced account suspensions. @SouthAsia.Art, however, did experience what they described as "shadow banning". Shadow banning is a phenomenon existing on Instagram and other social media platforms in which an account has not been officially disabled – as was the case for @BrownHistory – yet search engines and algorithms will prevent the shadow-banned account

from appearing either on users' feeds or in search results. When I asked about the experience, the creators of @SouthAsia.Art explained it at such:

Ayqa: Even with the shadow banning stuff, that stuff is really confusing and hard to navigate because on one hand, all of this information and research and labour is going under the rug and slipping through peoples' fingers and not reaching a wider audience. And we're still trying to understand or figure out how to really navigate that whole experience. Because from my understanding – I'm not sure what you know about shadow banning or like how it works – but like, it just seems, I don't know, it just seems very problematic.

Som: Yeah, like I've noticed every time a curator posts work that's Dalit-centric or somewhat anti-fascist, or anything that's outwardly political, the views and engagement suddenly just drops and its only 30 people saw it... Something Ayqa and I were talking about the other day was how Instagram really favours consistency. But then consistency can also be a form of oppression because you're always expected to have this very consistent output be it a very specific kind of image or have only very aesthetic outputs. Because a lot of people who post share archival footage or longer videos and whenever people do that it breaks the consistency, so it never shows up in the feed or they have to post it twice and stuff like that.

Instagram has also been accused of erasing certain posts relating to human rights awareness issues. One recent example was the vanishing of Instagram Stories relating to Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit People that occurred on Red Dress Day (May 5, 2021).¹⁴⁰ Instagram's public relations team responded via Twitter stating "We know that some people are experiencing issues uploading and viewing stories. This is a widespread global technical issue not related to any particular topic and we're fixing it right now. We'll provide an update as soon as we can."¹⁴¹

This is not the first time, however, that Instagram has blocked political content. In February 2021, following protests in Sri Lanka for Tamil and Muslim rights, the hashtags #Eelam and #TamilEelam were removed from the app. Clicking the hashtag would lead to a message reading "This Hashtag is Hidden. Posts for #Eelam has been limited because the community has reported some content that may not meet Instagram's community guidelines."¹⁴² These narratives of content banning tied to communities engaged in colonial conflict is interesting given the new critical attention being given to the platform as it undergoes this political shift. This opens the possibility for new research to explore Instagram and other platforms accused of minority community content suppression in the face of ongoing political adversary.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored some of the ways in which Instagram is a politicized social media platform similar to others which have received more mainstream news and scholarly attention such as Facebook and Twitter. As a dual visual/textual media platform that also builds a globally available cultural and community archive, I made the argument that it is necessary to critique representations in these South Asian Instagram community archives in the same sense that other more popular South Asian media are critiqued. I noted that these archives risk reproducing and reifying online social hierarchies existing offline. This reproduction comes through the privileging of certain content and perspectives of dominant diasporic groups that while may be marginalized in a local South Asian context, are able to wield more political and cultural power in their diasporic settings.

I then turned my attention to the findings of my visual culture and textual analysis of the content posted to these Instagram community archives. In particular, I explored how major global movements including Black Lives Matter and the struggle for Palestinian rights have influenced the kinds of content posted by the accounts under study. I investigated in depth how across the accounts, the creators decided to use their platforms to engage more directly with global political issues. This engagement is promoted by linking these emergent events with South Asian communities as evidenced by posts in the theme of South Asians for Black Lives, protest media, and other solidarity imagery.

In ending the chapter, I explored how Instagram's affordances can negatively affect users. In the case of @BrownHistory's temporary suspension, I highlighted the place of precarity upon which these archives are built. Alternatively, through @SouthAsia.Art's experience, I outlined the experience of shadow banning and how although content is being produced and exhibited, the platform's infrastructure can make it such that this content is effectively effaced from view. Ongoing issues of Instagram suppressing targeted content of marginalized, minority groups such as Indigenous women and Eelam Tamils also harken back to earlier points made regarding the intrinsic politicization of the platform and how certain hierarchies continue to be reproduced online.

¹¹⁶ CBC is Canada's public broadcasting company. Figures were taken by the author of June 10, 2021.

¹¹⁷ Berard and Smith, 'Post Your Journey'; Tembeck, 'Selfies of Ill Health'.

¹¹⁸ Gayo-Avello, 'Social Media, Democracy, and Democratization'.

¹¹⁹ Gayo-Avello, 10.

¹²⁰ Evans et al., 'Disclosing Instagram Influencer Advertising'.

¹²¹ In the UK context, "Asian" is understood to be in reference to South Asians.

¹²² Often grouped together, Punjabis refer to people with cultural roots in the Indian state of Punjab (and sometimes, but less frequently, to Pakistani's Punjabi population) whereas Sikhs refers to those of the dominant religion practiced in Punjab, India. Where it is mentioned in this text, 'Punjabis' refers to those of Indian origin. There is a lack of census data that outlines the numbers of non-Sikh Punjabis in Canada as well as non-Punjabi Sikhs. Therefore, they are sometimes used interchangeably in this text or used in line with the corresponding reference.

¹²³ Statistics Canada, 'Census Profile, 2016 Census'.

¹²⁴ George and Chaze, 'Punjabis/Sikhs in Canada'.

¹²⁵ The first person of colour to lead a Canadian federal political party with parliamentary representation was Haitian-born Vivian Barbot who was the interim leader of the Bloc Québécois Party between May 3 and December 11, 2011.

¹²⁶ Tharoor, 'Canada Now Has the World's Most Sikh Cabinet'.

¹²⁷ Shukla, 'How Are Sikhs so Powerful in Canada? It's Not about Their Numbers'.

¹²⁸ Shukla.

¹²⁹ Shukla.

¹³⁰ Vykunthanathan, 'Why Deepa Mehta's "Funny Boy" Isn't as Inclusive as You May Think'.

¹³¹ Sherwani, 'Spill the Chai'.

¹³² Jain, 'Rupi Kaur Doesn't Care About Your Critique of Identity Politics'.

¹³³ Jazeel, 'Postcolonial Geographies of Privilege'.

¹³⁴ Kamran, '1/Museum & City'.

¹³⁵ SouthAsia.Art, "'Tamil Translations by @currymunchingwomansplaining @sujanselven @aadhyaacanada @prinita.Thevarajah'".

¹³⁶ The South Asian Nation, '@mind.Fullyresilient - Took a Therapist Approach, It's Very Important to Start Educating Our Family, Friends and Everyone in Our Circle First'; The South Asian Nation, 'By @ananyajainn - Confronting Racism, Colorism, Anti-Blackness and Hypocrisy in South Asian Communities, a Thread. Does Being Brown..."'.

¹³⁷ Vallangi, 'India's Forgotten African Tribe'.

¹³⁸ Brown History, 'A Special Stamp Series in Support for the Palestinian People Issued Late 1970s - Early 1980s.'; Brown History, 'A 1981 Stamp Issued by the Government of India in Support for the Palestinian People'.

¹³⁹ Brown History, 'And We're Back!'

¹⁴⁰ Monkman, 'Indigenous Women's Instagram Stories on MMIWG Awareness Vanish on Red Dress Day'.

¹⁴¹ Instagram Comms, 'We Know That Some People Are Experiencing Issues Uploading and Viewing Stories.'

¹⁴² Lall, 'Instagram And Spotify Have Blocked #Eelam And #TamilEelam In A Social Media Censorship'.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As I undertook this research, I have come to realize the sheer breadth of information and analyses that can be discerned from something as seemingly innocuous as South Asian Instagram community archives. My pursuits of graduate studies have always been markedly self-interested. I have, for many years, been eager to fill the gaps in my knowledge about my own self, identity, and familial history. I can discuss and critique ad nauseum Canadian history and politics, queer theory, even race and the experiences of racialization as a whole, but I always struggled to articulate my exact positionality with this respect. Noticing these gaps in my knowledge, I embarked on this research project, not solely to understand this online phenomenon and its practical uses for public education, but to better understand myself and to unpack my own journey of racial reckoning.

My initial questions were:

1. How are South Asian identities performed through cultural exhibition practices on Instagram?
2. How do South Asian Instagram community archive creators understand their roles as arbiters of “South Asian-ness”?
3. What kinds of content are circulated by these accounts and how do they challenge or support conventional South Asian socio and cultural politics?

Drawing on my interviews and ethnographic observations, I argued that, in lieu of territorial, national, or cultural demarcations (from which traditional identities are often based), there is a performance of “South Asian-ness” apparent in these Instagram accounts. Further, these performances act as a particular reiteration of what Jose Esteban Muñoz theorized as “disidentifications” in relation to queer of color identities.¹⁴³ Bringing Muñoz’s theory of disidentifications into the field of social media analysis, I argued that the act of disidentifying as South Asian consolidates pluralistic national, cultural, and intersecting identities (instead of focusing on a singular identity). In so doing, it allows for an aggregation of communities with strained relationships to their ancestral lands. Further, these public South Asian Instagram community archives, which function simultaneously as both archives and exhibitions, allow for a potential online reterritorializing of the disidentifying public – a move that goes against traditional, national territorialization of identities. Through this framework of understanding these Instagram accounts as online community archives, I also proposed a reading of these social media accounts through the lens of archival performance. Through Diana Taylor’s articulation of the (ephemeral) repertoire as opposed to the traditional archive, I argued that these accounts not only present content that suggests a performance, but the Instagram community archive itself is itself performing an embodied knowledge and culture.¹⁴⁴

When it comes to these account creators unknowingly or even accidentally performing the work of archiving and curating, they all provided similar testimonials. Each wanted to craft a space in which to compile and share their cultures, their histories, and their research. Even the two creators who were adult immigrants to the United States expressed their desire to diversify the kinds of imagery and narratives that often dominate South Asian spaces. Although not always perfectly flawless in execution, the sense I gathered is that these creators take their roles as arbiters of South Asian Instagram media *very seriously*. Further, they are trying their best to diversify and give voice to South Asian communities and experiences that are often underrepresented or actively silenced.

Crucially, the content posted across the four South Asian Instagram community archives was quite widespread in terms of both form and content. While each account has its own clear

style and aesthetic (for instance @yaada_ only posts diaspora photography), the accounts, overall, posted quite diverse content in terms of historical placement as well as national and cultural origins. In terms of form, images were the primary genre of content posted, congruent with Instagram's history as originally offering only photo sharing. Videos, however, did also appear in some of the accounts (primarily @SouthAsianNation and @SouthAsia.Art) which were used to explore certain topics in further depth. By and large, these posts across accounts served to provide historical context, personal anecdotes, visual representations of art and culture, and educational resources relating to South Asia and members of the diaspora. Most of these posts sought to platform the voices and experiences of communities that are already marginalized within a South Asian context. For instance, @BrownHistory's subproject #BrownHistoryPhotoAlbum features many photos and stories of families who were affected by the partition of India and Pakistan. @SouthAsianNation focuses on women's issues and mental health – an apparent taboo topic within the South Asian community.

It is also the case, however, that certain histories and cultures were not afforded the same kind of platforming within these accounts. Alternatively, when they were present, they were not presented with the same level of description as other posts of more prominent marginalized communities. Examples of this include the infrequent mention of Adivasis and other Indigenous groups, the Hijra and other gender diverse groups, non-Western diaspora, and Dalits and other casteism issues.

Research Limitations

This research is not without its limitations. First, my sample size was small, having only interviewed and closely observed four accounts. While I did locate other accounts that fit my criteria for South Asian Instagram community archives, I limited my scope to the four mentioned in this study due to restraints of time and budget.¹⁴⁵ I also made the choice to limit my research to accounts posting primarily in English. The main reasons were for my own ease of research and avoiding needing translators. English is also the lingua franca in South Asia, although this omits non-English-speaking South Asians from participating in these archives. Additionally, given the posting frequency of these accounts, four was a manageable number for me consistently monitor over the year-long study. This did, however, limit my perspective. Other accounts may have oriented "South Asia" differently and included or promoted the kinds of content I had previously noted as being underrepresented.

Moreover, while Instagram is popular around the world, overall access to Instagram via access to smartphone technology and reliable and affordable Internet is not a given. There is still a recognizable digital divide and the community that form around these archives do not represent a holistic view of South Asia. In fact, communities who are the most underrepresented in these accounts may likely be those with the least access to Instagram. The demographic data provided by the account creators also suggest particular biases with how the follower make up is constituted. Across the accounts, women make up more than half of followers and most followers are located in India and Pakistan, as well as Canada and the United States in which there is a large diaspora population. These statistics may be indicative of the lack of reach these accounts have to other South Asian countries and communities. Conversely, it could be the case that because these other communities are not as visible in these accounts, they are less likely to follow them. This is one area in which further research may be conducted.

Now that I have set the groundwork for studying cultural community formation on Instagram with a focus on South Asian communities, future studies can embark on the studies of other kinds of Instagram communities. Communities on Instagram are not formed only through

racial, ethnic, or cultural affiliation, but also through shared interests, political affiliations, health status, and other kinds of social identity categories including gender and sexuality. (I am part of many of these communities myself, for example disability, leftist memes, and contemporary art). Given this multiplicity, I welcome other scholars to use the frameworks that I have provided here to explore the rich knowledge, culture, and communities that are formed by and through these Instagram community archives.

Future Areas of Exploration

During the research, I became very interested in how the accounts mobilized South Asian imagery to educate South Asian publics and call them to action concerning certain global movements such as Black Lives Matter and Free Palestine. This also led to the creation of new groups such as @SouthAsians4BlackLives whose purpose is to educate and mobilize the South Asian community towards combatting anti-Blackness. This intermingling of global liberatory movements and the emergent explicit politics of South Asian Instagram communities constitute an area of future study.

Further, there is a plethora of other accounts and content that went unexplored in this research that can be taken up by future researchers such as non-English accounts. Additionally, because of the individual aesthetic and technological choices made by the accounts I studied, certain forms of common Instagram content including Instagram Stories and Reels, memes, and filters/effects, which were not explored in my study, may provide additional layers of insight into online South Asian community formation and cultural identification.

Over the last year and a half of research into this topic I have come to once again interrogate my relationship with my own cultural identity. As I searched to unpack how South Asian is constructed as an identity, I began to see my own more clearly. Nowadays, I find it less important the words I choose to describe myself. Lately, when asked the question “Where are you from?” I answer that I am Tamil, but from Malaysia. In doing so, I situate myself as being under the umbrella of South Asia via my Tamil-ness, but with a level of specificity that allows me to comfortably disidentify with the experiences of Eelam and Indian Tamils who each have their own specific histories and cultures. While I am now less concerned with the South Asian question, I am still very much taken with digital community archiving.

I will soon be putting the theory and insights articulated in this thesis into practice. In the coming year, I will be working on a collective 3D digital art/archiving project, “Things+Time” for which the team and I were able to secure \$100,000 of funding from the Canada Council for the Arts Digital Now initiative.¹⁴⁶ Things+Time will exhibit community archival materials that have undergone three-dimensional digitization. Thanks to this collaborative project, I can now take on the mantle, myself, of online community archivist and curator. I am thrilled to be able to further explore these themes in a new role and in a new medium. I hope to see you in the archives, wherever and whenever they happen to be.

¹⁴³ Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

¹⁴⁴ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

¹⁴⁵ It was important for me to adequately compensate the interviewees for their time given the amount of unpaid labour that is involved in maintaining these online archives. Each interviewee (or pair of interviewees in the case of @SouthAsia.Art) were compensated \$75 CAD. These honoraria and the fees incurred to transfer funds overseas were generously supported in the form of a bursary provided by my supervisor Dr. Arseli Dokumaci.

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