

The Politics and Poetics of Indian Digital Diasporas

From Desi to Brown

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Chapter 7

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Introduction

In the late 1990s, a diverse group of British South Asian musicians began to gain wide attention in the UK for their distinctive blends of synthesised beats with Indian classical instrumentation (e.g., tabla, sitar, and Hindustani vocal samples). This included artists like Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) and Talvin Singh. Following the commercial success of these artists, British music industry executives debated as to whether to label these South Asian musicians using pre-existing musical genres such as Acid Jazz and electronic music or under an ethnically oriented classification such as ‘The Asian Underground.’ Despite vociferous opposition from the artists themselves, who viewed such a classification as confining and exoticising, the latter categorization became the most promulgated (Murthy, 2007) within dominant white society. This generalised label ‘The Asian Underground’ failed to recognise the specific ways each of these brown artists was experimenting with fusion music.

Today, predominantly white music industry gatekeepers, whether it be music critics or record label executives, continue to reinforce essentialising narratives that collapse the various musical aesthetics of South Asian diasporic artists into a singular ‘brown sound.’ Thankfully, some artists have insisted on their own modes of self-representation. Sarathy Korwar is one such artist who, while employing different musical aesthetics from acts like ADF and Singh, still builds on the legacy of these artists in how he merges Indian classical musical forms with contemporary black musical genres like Jazz and Hip-Hop. Most importantly, his work resists being confined to the label of ‘world music’ with its racist and colonial undertones.

Korwar is a London-based percussionist and composer born in the US and raised in Ahmedabad and Chennai, India. He began learning tabla at age ten and started playing a Western drum kit soon after. In 2011, he graduated with a Master’s degree in musical performance from SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) in London, with a focus on the adaptation of Indian classical rhythmic material to non-Indian percussion instruments. Building on his

academic interests, along with his passion for both American Jazz and Indian fusion music pioneers like Trilok Gurtu, Korwar went on to release the fusion music albums *Day to Day* (2016), *My East is Your West* (2018), and *More Arriving* (2019). It is the latter album that I focus on here.

While Korwar's unique approach to fusion music would by itself certainly be worthy of scholarly critique in a field like popular music studies, the aim of this chapter is to examine how Korwar's hybrid sonic elements along with the satirical visual aesthetics of his music videos are used to articulate the hybrid identities of South Asians both within the Indian subcontinent and the wider diaspora. In this way, Korwar's approach both transcends the imposed generic classification of South Asian diasporic music and speaks to the nuanced realities of South Asian diasporic existence. Korwar's musical collaborations involve brown artists coming from a wide range of lived experiences, such as economically marginalised 'gully' rappers from Mumbai, Kerala-born and Abu Dhabi-based writer Deepak Unnikrishnan, and East London-born Dub poet Zia Ahmed who is of Pakistani origin. Hence, Korwar's fusion music is both a site of self-representation and empowered identity formation. Commenting on the above-mentioned collaborators who appear on his album *More Arriving* (2019), Korwar believes that 'by virtue of them talking about what they're going through, the listener will realise that there's no singular brown voice' (Kalia, 2019b).

Korwar's own personal experiences with race and class deeply inform the conceptual themes and identity politics within his work. In fact, the album title 'More Arriving' is a reference to Brexit xenophobia. Korwar comments 'The fact that people are increasingly panicked that there are more immigrants coming to our shores. Yet, there are, and hopefully always will be, more people coming and we'll have to deal with it' (Kalia, 2019b). And, in recalling his experiences moving to the UK, he states:

Before I moved to the UK, I came from quite a privileged background, athletic, middle, upper middle class, like Hindu upper caste background in India. Racism was very much anti-Black, expedient to whiteness and colonial legalism and the empire growing up in India. But it was never really part of my life. I grew up with brown people everywhere, so I was never a minority. In the last ten years, I've really understood my place in the UK. There's a very interesting power dynamic to try and place myself within, understanding South Asians, and how they fit into the race game. Over time I've become more political with my music for two reasons. One is I've become more confident and able to share my story. It's a survival strategy at some level. It's like if you don't talk about race, somebody else is going to talk about it, build your narrative for you. [...] The fact that somebody can say, why don't you go back to where you're from? And you have to answer to that, you're constantly preparing a defense.'

(Zia, 2020)

This chapter explores three key conceptual themes within Korwar's *More Arriving* (2019): Firstly, I am interested in highlighting how Korwar's fusion music unsettles dominant (largely white) narratives around 'world music' and pushes back against music industry attempts to 'fit' Indian music into a Western form that is palatable for white listeners. Secondly, I study the political sound-making and listening practices, or what I term the *political brown auralities* of various South Asian identities articulated on the album. Thirdly, I question how digital spaces may further amplify the South Asian diasporic self-representations and expressions of identity constructed via *More Arriving* (2019).

This chapter is therefore organised as follows. The second section looks at both the dominant discourse surrounding 'world music' as well as the work of scholars who critique this genre through an anti-colonial framework. I suggest how Korwar veers away from the notion of an 'authentic' brown diasporic sound based on tokenistic forms of representation. In the third section, I propose how Korwar's hybrid music works as a mode of self-representation that challenges the essentialising force of the white colonial gaze. More specifically, Korwar's incorporation of multiple brown voices on *More Arriving* (2019) can be understood as a form of what Spivak (1988) terms, strategic essentialism. It is a tactic for bringing together different minority groups and intersectional identities to create solidarity and a sense of belonging. The final section argues how Korwar's music videos for 'Bol' and 'Turner on the 20' mirror, mimic, and invert the colonial gaze. Additionally, I suggest how Korwar's dissemination of his music and videos via Bandcamp and YouTube is a means of exploiting the affordances of capitalist digital resources in order to form online counterpublics. Within such counterpublics, counter-discourses and anti-essentialist renderings of hybrid music can be circulated among global audiences.

Disrupting 'World Music' Logics

In a London pub in 1987, a group of white radio DJs, record executives, and music journalists conceived of 'world music' as a marketing term for the greater visibility of recently popularised African bands, following the success of Paul Simon's Johannesburg-recorded *Graceland* (1986) album that attempted to fuse South African street music with American pop, rock and zydeco. The group from the pub raised £3,500 from eleven independent labels to begin marketing 'world music' to record stores. 'It was the most cost-effective thing you could imagine,' said record producer Joe Boyd. '£3,500 and you get a whole genre – and a whole section of record stores today' (Kalia, 2019b). Promoters of the term 'world music' provided vague justifications for lumping together anything that was not deemed to be from a European or American tradition – 'looking at what artists do rather than what they sound like,' as editor of *Roots* magazine Ian Anderson states. The popular World of Music, Arts and Dance Festival (Womad), which was founded seven years before the term gained

prominence, similarly used it as a catch-all for its roster of international artists (Kalia, 2019a) including Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and Ravi Shankar.

Despite its success, world music has been the subject of much critique from postcolonial scholars. Frith (2000) suggests that the exploitation of non-Western musicians in the world music market is a 'double exploitation,' as 'third world musicians [are] being treated as raw materials to be processed into commodities for the West, and the first world musicians putting new life into [non-Western] music...' (Frith, 2000, p. 178). White music industry executives have been described as 'colonialist explorers [...] who perpetuate discourses of alterity and stereotypes of "premodern" and "primitive" peoples' (Aubert, Taylor, and Firth quoted in Cureño, 2021, p. 7). The Womad festival which still operates today has been described by some scholars as 'a kind of commercial aural travel consumption, where the festival with its collections of "representative" musicians, assembled from "remote" corners of the world,' is a more contemporary version of the Great Exhibitions of the nineteenth century (Hutnyk, 1998, p. 402).

In many instances, white music industry representatives and festival organisers suggest that their intention is to help 'give a voice' to underrepresented international and non-white artists, or in some cases, 'save' the traditional culture of the Other. Bex Burch, a musical collaborator of Korwar, points out how

musicians from African countries are still refused visas and have much less access to the music industry. So, the white 'saviour' tries to bring the black or brown musicians from a village to a studio or festival stage and profits from them.

(Burch qt. in Kalia, 2019a)

It is therefore essential to question whether contemporary white musicians who lead fusion music projects are still today reinforcing this white saviour world music power imbalance. White British musician Damon Albarn (Blur, Gorillaz) has led and produced numerous critically acclaimed albums in which he collaborates with Malian and Congolese musicians. However, what types of representation do such white-led hybrid music projects put forth? Are the subjectivities, both in terms of lived experiences and musical knowledge, of the various African musicians in these projects foregrounded or eclipsed by the status and musical authority of white 'cultural curators' like Albarn? The ethics of cultural representation produced by artists who source from various global music traditions is an area of research that sound and music scholars must therefore rigorously interrogate. I contend that Korwar is conscious of such ethical questions and uses his music to challenge normative renderings of brown identities.

Korwar resists the urge to 'save' the music of the lesser-known brown artists featured on *More Arriving* (2019) and is not concerned with producing an 'authentic' brown diasporic sound based on tokenistic forms of representation. Instead, he creates music to highlight more nuanced and intersectional forms

of identity politics. For Korwar, the term world music ‘helps reinforce the narrative that other people’s music is less evolved and important than your own and doesn’t deserve a more nuanced approach’ (Korwar qt. in Kalia, 2019a). Therefore, in the next section, I suggest how Korwar has conceived of a new form of hybrid music whereby global music cultures are layered in complex ways but work alongside each other. He does so as a refusal to neatly ‘fit’ Carnatic musical elements into Jazz and Hip-Hop musical aesthetics more palatable and familiar for white listeners.

Sounding Out Brown Hybridity

The opening track ‘Mumbai’ on Korwar’s *More Arriving* (2019) begins with a typical Western Jazz drum rhythm with saxophone and keyboard lines evoking the distinct sound of Ethiopian Jazz legends like Mulatu Astatke and Hailu Mergia. However, a striking sonic counterpoint arrives once Aklesh Sutar (aka MC Mawali) begins rapping in Marathi and Hindi about working-class life in Mumbai. Sutar is a member of *Swadesi* a multilingual Hip-Hop crew in Mumbai who are pioneering the burgeoning socially conscious ‘gully rap’ scene. *Swadesi* is ‘liberating India’s underprivileged youth and helping them find their voice’ (Sood, 2019). Similar to how Korwar’s hybrid music draws on multiple genres, the *Swadesi* Hip-Hop sound draws heavily from US Hip-Hop and UK Grime. However, the Indian MCs rap in slang-infused regional languages and dialects focuses on daily life on Mumbai’s streets and the troubles facing the economically disenfranchised. Sutar comments, ‘I grew up as a street kid. We learnt the street lifestyle, the ghetto life. People don’t have money or jobs; people are getting manipulated. So how do we get justice? What is poetry? What is freedom of expression?’ (Sood, 2019).

‘Mumbai’ (2019) gives the listeners the impression they are hearing something starkly different from dominant Western narratives around what ‘South Asian music’ or ‘East/West fusion’ should sound like. There are no tablas, sitar nor Carnatic vocal scatting (i.e., *Konnakol*) in the track ‘Mumbai.’ Widely praised examples of ‘world music’ that fuse Indian and Western traditions include the album *West Meets East* (1967) with Ravi Shankar on sitar and Yehudi Menuhin on violin, as well as English guitarist John McLaughlin who led the jazz fusion band *Shakti* that included L. Shankar on violin and Zakir Hussain on tabla. Canadian rock musician Michael Brook collaborated with Qawwali singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan on several albums in which Brook overdubbed guitar, drum machines and the West African Kora over Khan’s improvisations. In contrast, Korwar’s alternative hybrid sound world on ‘Mumbai’ disorients listeners by destabilising any notion of fixed musical genre classifications.

Amplifying Political Brown Auralities

In his critique of the racial authenticity that world music attempts to capture and commodify, Gilroy (1993) argues that such:

authenticity enhances the appeal of selected cultural commodities and has become an important element in the mechanism of the mode of racialization necessary to making non-European and non-American musics acceptable items in an expanded pop market.

(Gilroy, 1993, p. 99)

Sharma (1996) suggests that within the genre of world music, particular musics and artists are divided by their national origin even though in some instances the music is not confined to a hegemonic national culture (e.g., Indian). So, world music marketing practices often promote specific artists as representations of authentic ethnic national musical cultures. This has inevitably led to the valorization of artists who play 'traditional' (often non-electric) instruments and sing in native languages in an attempt to satisfy the white West's desire for tradition and primitivism (Sharma, 1996, p. 23).

Korwar's conception of fusion and hybridity veers away from these normalised aesthetics that in many cases attempt to 'fit' Indian music into a Western form that is palatable for white listeners in addition to often being depoliticised. For instance, 'Mumbai' (2019) abruptly segues into a short field recording collected by Korwar of Funk pioneer James Brown's 'Give it up or turn it a loose' (1969) being played over what sounds like storefront loudspeakers in Mumbai or New Delhi, with scooter honks in the background, and two men discussing Brown's music in Hindi. This soundscape helps mark *More Arriving* (2019) as both a commentary on and re-imagining of Korwar's musical influences from both Black and brown diasporas.

Furthermore, the music of 'Mumbai' (2019) conveys a sense of urgency and militancy with Sutar sounding out what I call a *political brown aurality* rooted in the street life of Mumbai. Critically listening to such an aurality helps to draw out the unique political sound-making and listening practices of various South Asian identities and communities. More specifically, my definition of political brown aurality here focuses on the ways South Asian people deploy sound to articulate a politics of representation that refuses hegemonic categorisations of 'brownness' and challenge neoliberal constructions of multiculturalism. Political brown aurality encompasses the ways in which multifaceted brown diasporic and homeland (i.e., living in the South Asian subcontinent), positionalities and experiences with exclusion can be conveyed via the creative mixing of seemingly disparate sound worlds, as Korwar does. It is an intersectional brown sonic ontology and epistemology emerging from the margins and conveyed via musical hybridisation. In this manner, political brown aurality responds to Hall's (1996) call for a new politics of representation and a positive conception of ethnicities from the margins. He conceives of *new ethnicities* that account for how 'we all speak from a place, out of a particular experience, particular culture, without being contained by that position as "ethnic artists"' (Hall, 1996, p. 447).

The track 'Mango' also from *More Arriving* (2019) can similarly be read as a sonic rendering of political brown aurality and Hall's (1996) 'new ethnicities' among diasporic South Asians. It features hypnotic Zimbabwean Mbira

melodies and Korwar playing the clay pot Gharta, an ancient Carnatic percussion instrument likely unknown to many Western listeners. While the instrumentation may, on a superficial level, evoke an ‘exotic’ sound, the soothing music is contrasted by Zia Ahmed reciting spoken-word Dub poetry in which he scathingly satirises British Brexit-era racism, the persistence of the colonial gaze in popular culture, and the notion of world music itself:

‘Maybe it needs a symbol to represent the exotic,
 Something like
 A mango. [...]
 Give you the default sitar solo,
 A.K.A. Indian banjo [...]
 This guy’s telling me to go back home. [...]
 I think that I’m invisible, no.
 I think that I’m a mythical creature.’

Ahmed, who was born and raised in England to Pakistani parents, is expressing his own political brown auralities unique from that of Sutar. He recounts his experiences as a brown man living amidst the already entrenched racism of a post-9/11 and post-7/7 London Tube bombings England in which strong currents of Islamophobia have led to physical and verbal abuse against South Asians in general (Murthy, 2009, p. 334). Ahmed satirises the racist abuse heard in his daily soundscapes, whether it be on the streets of London or in public discourse about ‘South Asian music.’ His own political auralities sits alongside and sometimes aesthetically and tonally clashes with the meditative and esoteric soundscape of remixed and reimagined African and Indian music. Furthermore, Ahmed’s witty but unsettling vocal delivery and lyrics in ‘Mango’ (2019) refuse to assuage listeners with utopic depictions of a diverse and tolerant multicultural England.

In describing the aim of *More Arriving* (2019), Korwar hopes to highlight the South Asian diasporic experience in the UK and ‘break the monotony of a singular clichéd South Asian voice that is too often portrayed in the West’ (The Leaf Label, 2019). Commenting on South Asian artist stereotyping, he recalls once being labelled as a ‘tabla beat poet’ on a concert poster, when the album he was performing only had one track of minimal tabla on it. ‘These things make controlling my own narrative really important,’ Korwar comments (Kalia, 2019b). I argue Korwar’s counter-narratives are amplified through his creative remixing aesthetics, which I define as political brown auralities.

Combining multiple political brown auralities from different intersectional lived experiences and overlaying them within a single album permits Korwar to construct a hybridity that insists on self-representation and a counter-hegemonic politics of representation aligned with Hall’s (1996) anti-essentialist understanding of diasporic ethnicities and identities. This album thus questions why the white colonial gaze only deems specific forms of speech and music produced by diasporic brown communities as palatable and marketable.

Empowered Hybrid Identities

I suggest that Korwar's multilayered collage of musical aesthetics and plural brown identities help to sound out what Bhabha (1994) proposes as *empowering hybrid identities*. These identities are formed within 'third spaces' that 'open the way to conceptualising an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38). In *More Arriving* (2019), we hear how South Asian diasporic communities occupy such in-between third spaces. These communities experience forms of systemic racism and stereotyping unique from those experienced by other BIPOC groups. For this reason, I argue South Asian diasporic artists living in the West like Korwar formulate their own international culture as a survival strategy to help them affirm their identities and lived experiences. The stylistic leaps from Jazz to Hip-Hop to spoken word on *More Arriving* (2019) encompass the breadth of immigrant experiences (Kalia, 2019b). Throughout the album, the interweaving of various music genres and voices provides aural snapshots of how brown communities living in different geographical and social contexts use music as a tactic to articulate their intersectional subjectivities. This eclectic album suggests that there is no such thing as 'authentic' and easily identifiable South Asian fusion music.

For instance, gully rapper Sutar identifies with the aesthetics and social context of early US Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop was a means of expression for marginalised Black youth in the South Bronx of New York City. Because these youth did not have access to white-owned nightclubs, they used creative tactics with minimal financial resources and audio equipment. Hip-Hop DJs like Kool Herc in the 1970s would illegally tap into lamp posts at local parks to power his audio equipment (Morgan, 2009). Underprivileged youth like Sutar and his rap crew Swadesi do not receive music industry financial backing on the same level that many independent rock and electronic musicians from India's metropolitan cities do. Consequently, gully rappers and break-dancers in Mumbai organise their own underground after-hours Hip-Hop sessions. Like early Hip-Hop crews in the South Bronx, gully rap was forced into existence in large part due to the class divide in both the music scenes and dominant society more generally. Mumbai rappers use affordable Chinese smartphones and cheap cellular data packs to produce and disseminate their music. Indian youth upload and watch gully rap on YouTube to circumvent paid-streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple (Sood, 2019). Korwar uses his public platform as a relatively established British artist with access to publicity in major outlets like *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* in order to disseminate the political discourse of emerging rappers like Sutar to Western listeners.

On 'Mumbai' (2019), Sutar applies classical Carnatic vocal rhythms to his rap flow, delivered in a 7/4 time signature (uncommon for rap music). Lyrically, he puns on the associations of the colonial term 'Bombay' and the Indian nationalist 'Mumbai' (TNN, 2019). Therefore, he identifies with politically

subversive forms of Black cultural production while also re-imagining these practices to express his own empowered brown identity that is hybridised through sound. Additionally, his aurality points to the subversive potential of a counter-hegemonic international culture that forges solidarity between Black and brown creative practices and cultural politics.

Similarly, Zia Ahmed on the *More Arriving* (2019) tracks ‘Bol’ and ‘Mango’ draws on the rhythmic vocal delivery and politics of pioneering Black British Dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson who often used his spoken work accompanied by Dub Reggae music to deliver satirical commentaries on anti-Black racism in the UK during the Thatcher era of the 1980s. Ahmed re-imagines Johnson’s poetry and applies it to his poetic verses about what it is like for South Asian diasporic peoples living in Brexit-era England.

However, I suggest Korwar’s musical international culture and empowered hybrid identities (Bhabha, 1994) are careful not to reinforce assimilationist narratives that ignore the power imbalances that exist among brown communities both within the Indian subcontinent and across the global diaspora. He is conscious of the fact that he comes from an economically privileged background and is university-educated, whereas Sutar faces economic oppression and relies on music to survive. So how can one create hybrid music that unites brown people across caste and class in solidarity against the essentialising construct of world music, while at the same time remaining mindful of each person’s unique intersectional identity?

Musical Collaboration as Strategic Essentialism

Spivak’s (1988) concept of *strategic essentialism* may be a helpful way to address this dilemma. This form of essentialism is a political tactic in which minority and disempowered social groups mobilise on the basis of shared gendered, cultural, or political identity to represent themselves as a collective. While strong differences may exist between members of these groups, it is sometimes advantageous for them to temporarily ‘essentialise’ themselves and to bring forward their group identity in a simplified way to achieve certain political goals (Spivak, 1988).

In the case of *More Arriving* (2019), Korwar temporarily essentialises his own brown diasporic identity, as someone who has lived in different countries, in order to form both creative and political alliances with economically marginalised gully rappers in Mumbai, a spoken word artist of Pakistani origin born in London, as well as a Kerala-born writer living in Abu Dhabi. Strategic essentialism involves the ‘appropriation of artificial categories and representations, with the aim of transcending them at a later stage,’ according to Mir (2018). ‘For example, “a woman” may choose to speak for “women,” knowing fully well that the category of “woman” is simply too broad for such a representation to be authentic. However, if the category is a subaltern construction, representation becomes an ethical act. By speaking for women, a woman can challenge patriarchy’ (Mir, 2018, p. 307).

Drawing on Mir's (2018) insights, it is perhaps fruitful to understand musical collaboration in Korwar's work as a survival strategy and creative tactic in which the category of 'brown' is appropriated. The collage and remixing of various musical genres and political brown auralities linked to different lived experiences arguably transforms the vague label 'brown' into a unified subaltern brown identity. This unified, albeit essentialised, identity still permits Korwar and his fellow brown artists to wield their own representational power in order to challenge what Hutnyk (2005) identifies as the binary stereotype of the South Asian as terrorist 'demon' or Eastern 'exotica' (p. 348), the latter characterisation of which is often reinforced and commodified via world music narratives.

To be clear, I do not wish to suggest that Korwar has successfully created a seamless fusion of musical genres and identities. Creative projects like his that incorporate cultural politics are sometime 'messy' works in progress, that come with their own ethical questions about cultural appropriation. Even Korwar himself acknowledges that people of colour can be appropriative within their own cultures. He states,

What drew me to gully rap is that these deprived kids have totally made it their own and I didn't want to come along with my privilege and poach it. I had to sit and play for them, show them that I needed their voices on the record as much as my own – even more, perhaps.

(Kalia, 2019b)

I, therefore, suggest Korwar is invested in self-reflexive methods of cultural borrowing and remixing that remain conscious of the power hierarchies between him and his collaborators. Of course, there may also be charges of cultural appropriation regarding Korwar and his brown collaborators transposing their own positionalities linked to class, race and citizenship status onto Black modes of cultural and political expression like Jazz, Hip-Hop, and Dub poetry.

However, some scholars have highlighted the productive and positive aspects of cultural appropriation, especially in terms of Afro-South Asian musical fusion. For instance, Powell (2020) studies the work of artists like John Coltrane and Miles Davis who have included South Asian instruments like tabla and sitar, as well as cultural references to Hinduism in their music. However, Powell (2020) differentiates these artists from the Western appropriative practices of the Beatles and Madonna who also engaged with South Asian cultures and underlines the particularities of cross-cultural musical collaborations between racially marginalised musicians. The collaborations examined are not confined to the realm of the interpersonal but also musical activities that occur between and among sounds themselves, according to Powell (2020). These 'meetings, blendings, and entanglements of sounds' can be understood as key cultural sites that are 'just as central to the construction and meaning of Afro-South Asian music as are the Black and South Asian (American) subjects who

produce them,' Powell states (2020, p. 3). Furthermore, such hybrid music 'hones in on the political importance of Black and South Asian relationalities, and how they might help us imagine and create other possible worlds of and for Black music, politics, and peoples' (Powell, 2020, p. 5). It would thus be important to question the ways in which the entanglements of cross-racial sounds within Korwar's music point to possible futurities in which a more expansive understanding of brownness as linked to Black cultural politics is possible.

How can certain forms of cultural appropriation such as Korwar's re-imagining of Black music help build cross-racial alliances? Considering how South Asian diasporic communities are sometimes themselves complicit in anti-Black, and casteist logics (Patel, 2016), popular music scholarship needs to have a better understanding of how South Asian fusion artists can employ music as a way to build political and cultural alliances informed by shared struggles of Black and brown diasporic communities who both navigate white supremacy, but in unique ways. Ahmed speaks to these shared struggles in 'Mango' (2019) when he proclaims, 'That working-class Black, that working class brown. We don't seem to have any worth in your towns.' It is also no coincidence that the cover art for *More Arriving* (2019) designed by Tuashar Menon is a tribute to the street protests held in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s when Black and South Asian communities united to face down the racist National Front (Songlines, 2020).

Up to now, this chapter has discussed how Korwar's music attempts to overlap and 'remix' a wide range of South Asian lived realities and creative practices, while at the same time veering away from essentialist logics that ignore the intersectional dimensions of brown identity. His sonic collages work to build political and creative alliances among the wider South Asian diaspora, between the diaspora and homeland, as well as with Black communities. In the final section, I examine how Korwar exploits the potential of online platforms to circulate anti-essentialist narratives and potentially forge such alliances with a wider network. I begin with a discussion of how Korwar's music videos employ the creative tactic of reflectionism to invert the colonial gaze.

Online Counterpublics and the Global Circulation of Counter-Narratives

In critiquing the proliferation of police surveillance cameras installed throughout numerous American cities, Mann (1998) proposes the concept of *reflectionism* as a creative tactic in which the oppressor's tools are appropriated and turned against the oppressor through a form of subversive 'mirroring.' According to Mann (1998, p. 95): 'The goal is also to induce deep thought ("reflection") through the construction of this mirror. Reflectionism allows society to confront itself or to see its own absurdity'.

Jiwani (2011) applies Mann's (1998) conception of reflectionism to a broader surveillance context – that is, the surveillance of brown communities

not only via the state, but also by the wider colonial gaze of a dominant white society. Using Iraqi-Canadian rapper Narcy's music video for P.H.A.T.W.A (2010), Jiwani (2011) highlights the potential of reflectionism as an anti-disciplinary tactical intervention for media activists and artists. The music video satirises the common experience of Muslims detained and interrogated at airports. Narcy rapping in the video is accompanied by backup dancers dressed in orange prison suits and bags over their heads as a reference to Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prisoner abuse and torture incidents. Jiwani (2011) argues that the reflectionism at play in this video involves 'reflecting back' and mimicking those who are in a dominant position, thus working to 'denaturalise dominance' and invert the colonial gaze (p. 345). Furthermore, reflectionism often relies on satire or parody (Jiwani, 2011, p. 346) as political tactics that facilitate the circulation of counter-narratives.

The music video for Korwar's track 'Bol' (2019) clearly articulates the political potential of reflectionism. The video opens with Zia Ahmed, a fully bearded brown man, wearing a t-shirt with a British flag on it, sitting anxiously at a kitchen table surrounded by about a hundred full teacups. We see a dancing Mr. Bean toy as well as pictures of the Beatles and a frowning Queen Elizabeth II on his kitchen wall. The scenery presents exaggerated stereotypes of authentic 'British culture.' It is a satirical form of 'reflecting back' to the white gaze how it feels for South Asians in the UK to experience dehumanising stereotypes. Ahmed's words expose the essentialising narratives about brown people and brown sound-making both within 'world music' rhetoric and popular culture. 'Nothing to pledge allegiance with. Trapped in a box. Play some Bhangra man! Dance monkey, dance to the music, to the snake charmer,' he sarcastically recites. As for the music in the video, we hear a pulsing synthesised bass riff as well as rhythmic clapping and harmonium melodies perhaps inspired by Korwar's love for Qawwali music (Kirpal, 2019).

In the next scene, Ahmed is walking aimlessly throughout a predominantly white crowd outside Buckingham Palace (see Figure 7.1). He is now wearing a suit and tie, an iconic British 'Bowler' top hat, and holding a saucer with a cup of tea. Horse-mounted police stop to question Ahmed as he looks out of place. Ahmed's performance here is a direct reference to British 'Muslim-looking' communities being perceived as suspicious, if not terrorists, especially since 9/11 and the 2005 London Tube bombings. The video's final segment shows Ahmed sitting on the Tube train with passengers staring at him. Ahmed is inverting the colonial gaze that often dominates brown typecasting in film and television. He proclaims,

I am slum-dog millionaire, downward dog. I am Shiva, Al-Qaeda. I am auditioning for the role of 'Terrorist 1'. Yeah, I can do that in an Arabic accent. I am cinnamon, I am cardamom, I am not invited to the house of parliament.



Figure 7.1 Zia Ahmed wearing a bowler hat.

In the video for 'Bol' by Sarathy Korwar (feat. Zia Ahmed & Aditya Prakash) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WppAg6juAw>

Jiwani (2011) reminds us that

the realm of the alternative is confined, often to the margins or wherever such media can be harnessed towards corporate interests. Nonetheless, in retelling the story of colonialism and in producing media that are anti-colonial, tactical interventions function to disrupt and rupture the dominant narratives.

(Jiwani, 2011, p. 349)

Being both brown and an independent artist makes accessing large audiences, while controlling one's own narrative, challenging for someone like Korwar. So, he exploits the affordances of capitalist digital resources to circulate his counter-discourses and anti-essentialist renderings of hybrid music to global audiences. Although he releases all his music on independent labels like the Leaf Label and Ninja Tune, his albums are also sold online via large corporate streaming platforms like Bandcamp and Apple Music. Such platforms are one means for Korwar to network with different South Asian communities abroad and often form artistic collaborations. For instance, he notes that when he released his first album *Day to Day* (2016) online, there was suddenly a large interest from young music fans in India who follow independent labels like Ninja Tune. This led to headlining spots at music festivals in India for Korwar (Kalia, 2019b).

YouTube is often used across the Global South, for economically marginalised people in particular, to bypass the paywalls of paid streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music in order to hear international independent music.

Therefore, Korwar releasing a video as visually striking and political as 'Bol' (2019) on YouTube can be understood a tactical intervention by itself in how he subverts a corporate online medium in order to circumvent the predominantly white music industry gatekeepers and tastemakers who attempt to commodify essentialist and tokenistic renderings of brownness. Some have proposed that popular music embodies the contradictions of commercialised culture and serves as 'an intersection between the undesirable saturation of commercial culture in every area of human endeavour and the emergence of a new public sphere that uses the circuits of commodity production and circulation to envision and activate new social relations' (Lipsitz, 1994, p. 12). I suggest Korwar is conscious of such contradictions in how he navigates and appropriates mainstream online spaces that are deeply embedded in the circuits of transnational capital itself (Alvarez, 2008, p. 578), while simultaneously finding opportunities to insert underrepresented and ignored brown voices and creative practices into these same spaces. Doing so not only helps build relationships with potential artistic collaborators, but also provides brown and other marginalised communities globally with an alternative politics of representation that affirms the plurality of diasporic lived experiences and cultural production.

Expanding on Lipsitz (1994) view that the circulation of capital can produce new public spheres, Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) suggest that capitalist resources facilitate the merging of multiple smaller counterpublics to form joint counter-public spheres. These merged counterpublics, when mediated via online platforms, have higher visibility in society and are more likely to effectively challenge dominant discourses (Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010, p. 143). Korwar's work that is circulated online arguably forms what Lamont Hill (2018) understands as *digital counterpublics* – that is, online or otherwise digitally networked communities in which 'members actively resist hegemonic power, contest majoritarian narratives, engage in critical dialogues, or negotiate oppositional identities' (Lamont Hill, 2018, p. 287). However, Korwar's tactical interventions not only critique racist dominant discourses related to brown identities and brown sound worlds, but also mimic and 'invert' the aesthetics and ideologies reinforced by the very same corporate platforms he exploits. We can see this in his music video for 'Turner on the 20' (2020). The video plays on the tropes of TikTok and Instagram videos in which social media 'influencers' construct viral online phenomena through their dance moves or cultural commentaries. Korwar states that the track was made in response to an online review of *More Arriving* (2019). A white music critic wrote,

As a protest record, surprisingly enough, *More Arriving* falls short of its high standards due to bland generalizations, such as 'which racist do you want on your bank note?' And not least because the English painter J.M.W. Turner – the new face of the £20 note – campaigned for the abolition of slavery.

(Zia, 2020)



Figure 7.2 Zia Ahmed (left) and Sarathy Korwar (right).

In the video for 'Turner on the 20' by Sarathy Korwar (feat. Zia Ahmed). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iQKoiz1qi3M>

Korwar and Ahmed's on-screen performances and lyrics in 'Turner on the 20' (2020) challenge the notion that 'because Turner' has been officially celebrated, we should no longer be calling out the racism that the economy of Britain has historically been built on' (Korwar qtd. in Zia, 2020). The viewer sees split-screen webcam videos of Korwar and Ahmed, each dancing ironically in their apartments (see Figure 7.2). However, their tactical reflectionism (Jiwani, 2011) is most evident in their satirical lyrics commenting on colour-blind racism:

'Cheer up mate! It's better than before!' or 'I don't see race, I just see mates.'

Conclusion

Before the advancement and popularisation of the internet, music industry personnel bridged the gap between the consumer and the artists. These personnel play an important role in the distribution and commodification of world music, as they manage audiences', musicians', scholars', and journalists' views and expectations of world music and what makes it valuable (Cureño, 2021, p. 7).

Through exploiting and appropriating the online 'circuits of commodity production' (Lipsitz, 1994, p. 12) including YouTube and Bandcamp, Korwar has a more effective means of disrupting representational economies that the white music industry traditionally monopolised when marketing fusion and 'world music' especially prior to the internet.

To be clear, I am not making a technologically determinist argument that independent diasporic artists need to rely entirely on corporate online platforms to disseminate their political messaging. However, the potency and impact of tactical interventions depend on the 'depth of their impact and the number of times that such salvos can be launched from the margin to decenter the center,' according to Jiwani (2011, p. 349). So, Korwar employs a wide variety of dissemination media including online platforms, physical records and live performances in order to launch counter-narratives across multiple spaces, so that each creative tactic of anti-essentialist self-representation may disrupt and weaken hegemonic renderings of brownness in small but potent ways.

By employing both sonic and conceptual 'remixes,' Korwar is able to amplify the sounds of political brown auralities and empowered hybrid identities. The hybridised and decolonial musical soundscapes heard on *More Arriving* (2019) are perhaps one creative means of imagining futures for cultural and political alliances across racial, class, and caste lines. Korwar's fusion music can also be understood as a practice of refusal against the 'white saviour' music industry representative or concert promoter attempting to treat music from the Indian subcontinent as necessarily uniform and palatable for white Western ears.

This chapter has attempted to highlight how Korwar's creative work is committed to reclaiming control of narratives around the multitude of South Asian experiences and sound worlds. He unsettles the colonialist world music framework – that is, the notion that Western music needs to be fused with non-Western music in order to put new life into the 'raw materials' (Frith, 2000) of these supposedly inferior non-European art forms. The counter-narratives and anti-essentialist renderings of intersectional brown identities sounded out through *More Arriving* (2019) and the reflectionism of Korwar's music videos work to disrupt neoliberal and tokenistic representational politics, thus reminding us that there is no singular brown aurality.

Note

- 1 The English painter J.M.W. Turner was associated with the slavery abolition movement of the late eighteenth century. His painting 'The Slave Ship' (1840) was apparently inspired by the 1781 incident of the captain of the Zong slave ship ordering for 132 enslaved people to be thrown overboard (Manderson, 2013).

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