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SOUNDING THE HYPHEN: CROSS-CULTURAL PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH ASIAN
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Abstract

This dissertation explores the cross-cultural performance practices of the South Asian-American diaspora to theorize hyphenation as a cultural identity, creative process, and artistic product that stages a reciprocal dialogue between musical communities and genres. Focusing primarily on Indo-jazz fusion in New York City, I discuss the imbrication of Carnatic, Hindustani, and jazz aesthetics from both technical and sociocultural perspectives, analyzing the mechanics of cross-cultural collaboration and the practical considerations that go into communicating across genre lines as well as the implications these collaborations have for the formation of diasporic identity and cross-cultural community. Along the way, I interrogate mainstream ethnomusicological definitions of various South Asian musical concepts, offering an emic, performance-based perspective that emphasizes the ways these concepts are deployed in both traditional and cross-cultural contexts. Ultimately, I posit “hyphenation” as alternately an ontological, epistemological, and phenomenological construct. It describes, first, a transnational South Asianness that finds its complete expression only at the intersection of multiple competing national, ethnic, and cultural identities; second, a form of musical cognition and analysis, born of the genre-defying multiplicity endemic to the performance of traditional art in a transnational context; and third, a uniquely diasporic process of music-making that generates new meanings and new understandings of South Asianness through the act of cross-cultural translation, meanings that may account for the unwieldy global manifestations of fusion as an aesthetic genre.

Chapter One interrogates the affordances and problematics of interracial performance on the one hand, and the intrinsic sense of race-based authenticity that accompanies South Asian practitioners of the traditional arts on the other. I argue that this question of authenticity generates a productive anxiety in white practitioners of South Asian music, ultimately leading them to perform their whiteness differently before the brown gaze. Chapter Two deploys hyphenation as a mode of

theoretical analysis, asking what it means to treat the cross-cultural competence central to hyphenated artistic performance as a criterion for aesthetic evaluation. Chapter Three analyzes the artistic processes that go into communicating across genre lines as well as the sociomusical factors that shape this communication, emphasizing metaphors of language, conversation, translation, and speech to posit the cross-genre jam session as a space of productive dialogue and, ideally, mutual understanding. These chapters are separated by two short interludes, or *thukkadas*, in which I explore case studies that exemplify hyphenation as a music theoretical framework.

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Introduction

“Hybrid hyphenations emphasize the incommensurable elements — the stubborn chunks — as the basis of cultural identifications. What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, contingently, ‘opening out,’ remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference — be it class, gender, or race. Such assignations of social difference — where difference is neither One nor the Other but, something else besides, in-between — find their agency in a form of the ‘future’ where the past is not originally, where the present is not simply transitory.”

— Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

“There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americanism.”

— Theodore Roosevelt

In October of 2018, less than a week after I started my graduate studies at the University of Chicago, I tuned in to a radio broadcast of the Ragas Live Festival hosted by the artist collective Brooklyn Raga Massive. I happened to start listening just as the singer Ganavya began her distinctly Indianized rendition of Gershwin’s “Summertime.” The marriage of Carnatic *gamakka*¹ and *kalpanaswaram*² with one of my favorite jazz standards, with lyrics translated into Tamil — my mother tongue — sparked something in me. It was the first time I could remember hearing music that seemed to have been crafted specifically for me, that seemed to take into account my lifelong experience of culture clash and turn it into something harmonious.

I was born in the United States but spent most summers in India. We spoke Tamil at home, almost exclusively, enough that my sister and I struggled to pick up English when we first started school, resulting in a frantic shift in our home dynamic. I started singing Carnatic music at the age of three, in lessons where my first *guru* taught me to translate the Disney songs I knew and loved into Carnatic *sargam*.³ Alongside this innovative training, I was quickly exposed to Western music

¹ Usually translated as “ornaments,” a translation that will be problematized in Chapter Three

² A form of improvisation that deploys Carnatic solfège syllables in free flows as well as intricate rhythmic sequences

³ Solfège syllables

through a robust public school music program; by high school, I was preparing for my Carnatic flute and vocal *arangetrams*⁴ while also taking opera lessons and playing the Western flute in a state-ranked jazz band. This is all to say that by the time I could seriously call myself a musician, my musical sensibilities were definitively multiple and precariously — productively — intertwined. Today when I sing jazz my scatting draws on Carnatic *kalpanaswaram*; my ornaments are born of *gamakka*; the chestiness of my vocal timbre is the result of years of training in the Carnatic style. When I read Baroque counterpoint it is the subconscious translation of notes and phrases into Carnatic *sargam* that renders Bachian sequences more or less intuitive. Meanwhile, my operatic training has extended my Carnatic vocal range by almost an octave, and years of performing in jazz ensembles lends a certain angularity to my *kalpanaswaram*.

What I describe here is not quite “hybridity.” The concept of hybridity has proven useful for postcolonial scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, but has been critiqued by others such as Paul Gilroy for presuming the anterior purity of constituent elements.⁵ And indeed, my experience has not been one of bringing together once-discrete elements of East and West, but of curating an always-already multiple set of instincts that draws simultaneous influence from both sides. Neither does “bi-musicality,” which involves the liberalization of an already established musical epistemology,⁶ fully account for what I experience as an unbroken multiplicity. Rather, in what I here describe as “hyphenation,” multiple musical and cultural influences intermingle from the outset, leading to a cultural identity, creative process, and artistic product that stage an ongoing dialogue between communities and genres. Crucially, this foundational multiplicity often produces cohesive musical objects and, perhaps more interestingly, cohesive musical epistemologies. But this is an unruly cohesion. Hyphenation is at its core about the interactions between already unstable cultural

⁴ A debut performance which marks a critical stage in the performer’s artistic training and their readiness to appear onstage before an audience, usually only undertaken after many years of study

⁵ Kalra, Virinder S., Raminder Kaur, and John Hutnyk. *Diaspora and Hybridity*. London: Sage Publications, 2005.

⁶ Hood, Mantle. “The Challenge of ‘Bi-Musicality.’” *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 4 No. 2 (1960) pp. 55-59.

formations, the “stubborn chunks” that form the basis of cultural identification; it is about the resonances and indeed dissonances between multiple overlapping ways of knowing and being.

The term “hyphenated American” has historically been used as a derogatory epithet directed at immigrants who displayed any allegiance to their home nations. The wave of jingoistic patriotism that swept the nation during and around World War I led to a xenophobic perception of “hyphenism and hyphenated Americanism...as a potential fracturing and divisive force in an America on the brink of war.”⁷ American presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson both publicly characterized hyphenated Americans as traitors and outsiders, a mentality that infiltrated even presumably neutral sources such as the *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*, with the latter explicitly defining “hyphenated” as pertaining to “a person whose patriotic allegiance is assumed to be divided.”⁸ Most style guides today call for omitting the hyphen from diasporic identifiers; many immigrant groups themselves prefer to omit the hyphen from their identifying titles, out of a sense that the orthographic symbol connotes a failure to fully integrate into American society. The hyphen was even officially removed from “ethno-musicology” in 1956 at the suggestion of the Society for Ethnomusicology’s then-Program Chairman, Melville Herskovits.⁹

Meanwhile, well into the twenty-first centuries grammarians have continued to insist that the function of the hyphen — which was invented by second-century Greek grammarian Dionysius Thrax as a fundamentally prosodic and even musical indicator of rhythm and intonation¹⁰ — is to connect, rather than to divide. They point to the myriad words in the English language that have made the transition from two separate words to hyphenated compounds to single, closed words,

⁷ Mahdavi, Pardis. *Hyphen*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, p. 53.

⁸ *ibid* 57

⁹ Rhodes, Willard. “A Short History of the Founding of SEM.” https://www.ethnomusicology.org/page/History_Founding

¹⁰ Kemp, Alan. “The *Techne Grammatike* of Dionysius Thrax: Translated into English.” In *The History of Linguistics in the Classical Period*, ed. Daniel J. Taylor. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1987.

often taking on new meanings in the process and in response to societal transformations.¹¹ Pardis Mahdavi's 2021 contribution to the Bloomsbury Object Lessons series, *Hyphen*, interweaves this political and grammatical history with immigrant narratives about selfhood and assimilation, as she and her interlocutors navigate a xenophobic American landscape while working to articulate and empower their own in-between identities, ultimately embracing hyphenation as a qualifier that enriches rather than diminishing their Americanness.

Likewise, in spite — or perhaps because — of its historical and contemporary denigration, I find the hyphen extremely productive in that it occupies a visible and tangible presence in what can otherwise only be understood as negative space, a chasm, a void. Diasporic identity formation entails a constant negotiation between home and host cultures; the identity complex that emerges cannot be reduced to a straightforward combination of preexisting elements, but rather finds its expression in their often volatile interactions. The second-generation immigrant identity¹² in particular is characterized by a sense, albeit an anxious and contested sense, of full and equal ownership over both “halves” of the diasporic equation, as well as by a firsthand awareness of the way these halves intersect without diminishing any individual claim to authenticity. Hyphenation as an ontology speaks to this diasporic experience of being simultaneously both/and and neither/nor — and also to the sense of wholeness experienced in the moments between anxieties.

The primary “hyphen” that grounds this dissertation, then, is the spectral hyphen of “South Asian-American,” whose reinsertion in this text speaks to the ways my experiences in South Asian

¹¹ Mahdavi 2021

¹² There is no real consensus on how to best qualify immigrant generations; “first generation” can either refer to the first foreign-born residents in a family or to their children. In this dissertation, I use “second-generation immigrant” to loosely refer to the children of people who migrated as adults, a category which includes myself. This is the terminology I grew up using, and it is how I feel most comfortable speaking to my own experience. However, scholars such as Rubén Rumbaut have problematized even the idea of numerically discrete generations, instead theorizing distinct segments within generations to describe individuals who migrate at different age and life stages (Rumbaut 2004). As such, my use of the term “second-generation immigrant” is intentionally fuzzy, holding space for a wide range of experiences within this category. I enter into the conversation around immigrant generation in more detail in Chapter One.

and American spaces have been and continue to be shaped by my Americanness and South Asianness respectively. When we speak of South Asian-American as a cohesive cultural identity, we categorize individuals who must contend with the expectations and norms of both South Asian and American communities, as well as the “hyphenated” diaspora community that lays claim to competing sets of cultural values. When we speak of South Asian-American as a racial formation, meanwhile, we speak of a diasporic brownness that must situate itself against both South Asian and American racial frames, as well as the transnational racial frame aroused by their crossings.

Understanding South Asian-Americanness as a racial formation requires careful negotiation of the United States’ resolutely binaristic racial frame. Performance theorist José Muñoz, determinedly working outside of this Black-white binary, theorizes a “brown commons” defined, in part, by a collective sense of illegitimacy as well as indignation.¹³ Likewise scholars of Asian and South Asian America including C. J. Kim,¹⁴ Vijay Prashad,¹⁵ and Deborah Wong¹⁶ have commented on the perpetual outsidership of Asian-Americans within a hegemonically Black-and-white societal structure, as well as the history of and potential for solidarity with Black Americans that shape mainstream perceptions alongside the internal development of (South) Asian-American communities. This dissertation considers the role of both whiteness and Blackness in shaping and circumscribing American brownness, as South Asians alternately tool their own alliances and are catalyzed by the mainstream in service of finding our place within the American social fabric.

This primary hyphen leads us to a secondary set of hyphens, exemplified in this dissertation by the genre label “Indo-jazz.” The type of music I analyze in this project can be most readily categorized in terms of “fusion,” a charged term for practitioners of South Asian music and jazz

¹³ Muñoz, José Esteban. *The Sense of Brown*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

¹⁴ Kim, Claire Jean. “The Racial Triangulation of Asian-Americans.” *Politics & Society* Vol. 27 No. 1 (1999) pp. 105-138.

¹⁵ Prashad, Vijay. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

¹⁶ Wong, Deborah. *Speak it Louder: Asian-Americans Making Music*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

alike. In his 2013 dissertation for Columbia University, Niko Higgins cites the pun on “con/fusion” that Carnatic musicians often deploy in their rejection of cross-genre undertakings, suggesting that “fusion [is] unmusical and not practiced by ‘good’ musicians.”¹⁷ Meanwhile, Kevin Fellez cites a “reductive attitude of ‘f-word’ shame and disregard”¹⁸ among critics and scholars of jazz and rock fusion in the United States, an attitude that has held purchase since the genre’s inception in the 1960’s until today. In the field, my use of the word “fusion” would often cause my interlocutors to flinch and deflect; in my household growing up, “fusion” carried the weight of an expletive, with my father going so far as to confiscate and destroy a Carnatic fusion cassette my sister and I had adored (although he would profess his innocence for years after the fact).

In this dissertation, I attempt to recuperate fusion as a cultural and artistic practice by treating musical fusion as a process of hyphenation and thus as a fertile site of cross-cultural and interracial encounter. I take as fact the racialization of music and sound, which has been discussed at length by Philip V. Bohlman and Ronald Radano in their seminal *Music and the Racial Imagination*¹⁹ and more recently by the likes of Jennifer Stoeve²⁰ and Nina Eidsheim.²¹ This project builds on these discussions of sonic racialization to theorize anxieties around musical fusion as tied to even deeper anxieties over cultural authenticity and miscegenation. As such, I understand the value judgments that frequently preclude meaningful engagement with musical fusion to be both ethically and aesthetically charged; and I analyze the collaborations across racial and genre lines that characterize the hyphenated performance complex of South Asian-American music in terms of both cross-

¹⁷ Higgins, Niko. “Confusion in the Carnatic Capital: Fusion in Chennai, India.” Ph.D. Dissertation. Columbia University, 2014, p. 135.

¹⁸ Fellez, Kevin. *Birds of Fire: Jazz, Rock, Funk, and the Creation of Fusion*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, p. 5.

¹⁹ Bohlman, Philip V. and Ronald Radano. *Music and the Racial Imagination*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

²⁰ Stoeve, Jennifer. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. New York: New York University Press, 2016.

²¹ Eidsheim, Nina. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

cultural and artistic impact. To this end, I draw on theories of racial performativity as well as T. Roberts' notion of "sono-racial collaboration"²² to discuss the ways participants in the South Asian and Indo-jazz fusion scenes intertwine ethical judgments about cross-cultural and interracial performance with their aesthetic choices and evaluations.

Early readers of this work have not failed to notice that my writing, even beyond the unfiltered inclusion of my interlocutors' artistic perspectives, is riddled with value judgments. This is fair: I am — rightfully, I think — protective of South Asian music and fusion alike, especially in their American context. But beyond this, I find that value judgements are a central feature of diasporic identity formation, as hyphenated Americans must routinely contend with our own denigration as "neither One nor the Other," to borrow Bhabha's formulation. I am profoundly aware, whenever given the opportunity to perform South Asian music in a South Asian cultural context, that my performance will be evaluated relative to my Americanness and the presumed dilution of the South Asian classical tradition in the American diaspora. Meanwhile, one need look no further than the recent slew of executive orders on immigration to comprehend the extent to which immigrants of color are consistently perceived as less-than-American, and forced to "prove" their Americanness before a dominant white majority. The tension between this externally perceived adulteration of national and cultural identity and an internally held sense of ownership or belonging is central to what I here discuss as hyphenation. This tension is also particularly salient in the context of Asian America, as performance theorist Joshua Chambers-Letson discusses in *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America*. Chambers-Letson theorizes the "racial exception" of Asian-Americans, who have "long been cobbled together by dominant racial discourses that treat Asian-Americans as perpetually foreign, always already illegal, or an invading mob *and* model minority that

²² Roberts, T. *Resounding Afro-Asia: Interracial Music and the Politics of Collaboration*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

is both included within and excluded from the national body politic.”²³ Central to Chambers-Letson’s analysis is an insistence on the entanglement of social structures and artistic representation, as quotidian and aesthetic performances co-articulate in the making of racial subjectivity.

Likewise, I find that the anxieties around authenticity and value that haunt fusion as a depreciated performance practice are directly in conversation with the challenges to cultural identity and citizenship that plague hyphenated Americans and South Asian-Americans in particular. “Hindustani music is not Hindustani music when you start doing [fusion],” opines my interlocutor Jake Charkey in Chapter One. “It breaks it. And I mean that with all the violence that’s implied.” The challenge, for practitioners of South Asian music and especially fusion in the West, is to maintain the essential, unadulterated “South Asianness” of the performance even as these performances are transformed by their hyphenated, transnational context. As conversations with my interlocutors demonstrate, this challenge routinely results in value judgments along multiple axes, with factors including phenotype, depth of traditional study, cross-cultural competence, and “musicianship,” broadly defined, impacting audiences’ and fellow performers’ reception of fusion undertakings. This wide range of criteria, which are given variable weight and even allowed to compensate for one another in disparate performance contexts, speaks to the fundamental messiness of hyphenation as both a cultural and artistic process, one that can only be understood in terms of these very anxieties and occasional contradictions. Meanwhile, the categories of the ethical and the aesthetic bleed into one another throughout this project, in response to the heightened affective and political stakes of the “hyphenated” cross-cultural encounter.

So: this dissertation explores the processes and products of hyphenated music-making in the South Asian-American diaspora. I ask how and what a hyphenated musical perspective can contribute to processes of cross-cultural collaboration, and vice versa: what are the affordances of

²³ Chambers-Letson, Joshua. *A Race So Different: Performance and Law in Asian America*. New York: New York University Press, 2013, p. 10.

hyphenated musicking for diasporic identity formation? Ultimately, I hope to put forth an understanding of the South Asian-American artistic identity as one that can only be understood in terms of the negotiations across and between boundaries of race, culture, and genre that categorize cross-cultural encounter and the hyphen as a theoretical construct, with musical fusion revealed as a critical site for these negotiations. I explore the various ways South Asianness gets sounded in its transnational context, positing a capacious understanding of South Asianness and South Asian music that includes both diasporic and cross-cultural undertakings. In the process, I hope to open up new possibilities for both performance and analysis.

Setting the Scene

My primary field site for this project was New York City, home to the highest concentration of South Asians in the United States and arguably the artistic capital of the nation. Beyond this demographic significance, the South Asian-American musical community of New York attracted me for personal reasons. I grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey, home to a large and diverse enough South Asian population to allow for self-segregation within this category; indeed, the artistic and religious communities of my childhood consisted almost exclusively of Tamil-speaking Brahmins, rather than “South Asians” writ large. Perhaps thanks to this dense concentration of South Indians in particular, New Jersey has long been one of the preeminent sites for Carnatic music in the West. Throughout my childhood I was deeply involved with a local organization called CMANA, the Carnatic Music Association of North America, which among other things dedicates itself to youth programming and the promotion and development of Carnatic music in the West. I credit CMANA with providing myself and my peers with myriad opportunities to engage with Carnatic music at a high level from a very young age, including concerts by local and international artists, intensive youth competitions judged by experts in the field, and established platforms to perform before a

knowledgable audience. Later on, I bore witness to the New Jersey-to-New York pipeline, as many of my peers went on to pursue professional opportunities in the city, taking with them the robust knowledge of various classical South Asian art forms they had developed through participation in this suburban scene. This transition from the insular South Indian diaspora of the New Jersey suburbs to the multi-ethnic urban city just across the river brought with it the opportunity to situate Carnatic music in a wildly different cultural landscape, and to incorporate a much broader range of musical influences into what usually began as a more conservative performance practice.

Scholarship on the music of the South Asian diaspora, which has more often focused on the popular than the classical, has generally emphasized the role this music plays in defining and navigating relationships to home and host nations. Working in the Indo-Caribbean, scholars including Peter Manuel,²⁴ Tejaswini Niranjana,²⁵ and Tina K. Ramnarine²⁶ have emphasized classical retentions alongside idiosyncratic local developments that have resulted in the formation of undeniably transcultural musical genres such as chutney-soca and *tân* singing. Meanwhile, scholars of South Asian popular music such as bhangra, Bollywood, and South Asian hip-hop have examined the role these genres play in diasporic identity formation wherein the global and the local are placed in relationships of reciprocal influence.²⁷ Studies of Carnatic and Hindustani music have more often than not confined these genres to their mainland context; notable exceptions include Jeff Roy's exploration of the use of technology in the transnational pedagogy of South Asian classical music,²⁸ Rajeswari Ranganathan's discussion of the transnational Carnatic music scene driven by second-

²⁴ Manuel, Peter. "The Construction of a Diasporic Tradition: Indo-Caribbean 'Local Classical Music'." *Ethnomusicology* Vol 44 no. 1 (Winter 2000), pp. 97-119.

²⁵ Niranjana, Tejaswini. *Mobilizing India: Women, Music, and Migration Between India and Trinidad*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

²⁶ Ramnarine, Tina K. "'Indian' Music in the Diaspora: Case Studies of 'Chutney' in Trinidad and in London." *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* Vol. 5 (1996), pp. 133-153.

²⁷ Bakrania 2013; Diethrich 2000; Gopinath 2005; Sharma 2010

²⁸ Roy, Jeff. "The Internet Guru: Online Pedagogy in Indian Classical Music Traditions." *Asian Music* Vol. 47 No. 1 (2016) pp. 103-135.

generation American practitioners,²⁹ and Andre Fludd's 2021 dissertation for CUNY which outlines the historical development of both North and South Indian classical music in the New York metropolitan area from the mid-twentieth century to the present.³⁰

My own project is in dialogue with these latter explorations, but focuses primarily on diasporic trajectories of South Asian classical music that depart from the traditional mold. Alongside the corpus outlined above, I take up the question of how diasporic practitioners shape and are shaped by a displaced and reimagined classical tradition, and of the transformations to South Asian identity that are made possible by these negotiations. My first point of contact for this dissertation was the once-scrappy and now relatively well-established arts collective known as Brooklyn Raga Massive. BRM started in 2012 as a weekly jam session hosted by a group of South Asian-American musicians and their friends, many of whom had extensive training in Carnatic music, Hindustani music, or jazz. In its current form, the organization serves as both a platform for seasoned professionals and an incubator for amateur musicians. Many of the core members are South Asian, but many are not. The group's programming alternates between more traditional performances of what they refer to as *rāgā* music and more alternative undertakings, usually meaning fusion. Their spaces of performance range from warehouses to art museums to concert halls to one particularly charming cowboy-themed gay bar. BRM's concert offerings are also often paired with activist efforts, such as an ongoing Social Justice Series that in 2022 featured Afghan music and art in support of displaced Afghan musicians following the Taliban takeover. The formation of connections and political solidarities through music is thus an active part of the group's mission, in addition to the promotion of South Asian music and art in the city.

²⁹ Ranganathan, Rajeswari. "Emergence of an Ecumene: Transnational Encounters in South Indian Carnatic Music." *Asian Music* Vol. 52 No. 1 (2021) pp. 57-87.

³⁰ Fludd, Andre. "Indian Classical Music in the New York Metropolitan Area: The Development of a Transnational Ecosystem." Ph.D. Dissertation. CUNY, 2021.

My project quickly expanded to include artists and community members not affiliated with BRM, but in some other way connected to the South Asian-American music scene in New York. Still, BRM served as a useful starting point for multiple reasons. Among my connections, outside of the traditional scene I was raised in, BRM was and remains one of the most visible institutions for South Asian music in the diaspora, especially for nontraditional modes of performance. The collective also hosts a regular concert series that features an open jam session, where audience members of any level and instrumentation are invited to come up on stage and experiment with the house band. Throughout my fieldwork, these events provided consistent opportunities to study the dynamics of cross-cultural performance from a firsthand perspective, as well as to meet people involved in the South Asian-American music scene, strike up conversations, and make connections that would sometimes turn into ongoing ethnographic relationships and friendships.

My field research took place over roughly eight months and consisted of three primary elements: concerts, jam sessions, and interviews. At formal concerts I tended to retreat into my notebook, while jam sessions were opportunities for more active autoethnography as I documented my own shifting instincts as a musician, translator, and South Asian-American in cross-cultural artistic spaces. Interviews sometimes took place in my interlocutors' homes, or else at bars, restaurants, or cafés of their choosing; sometimes these were fairly structured, but more often they had an informal, conversational air, facilitated by the fact of my being a musician and a member of the same cultural community as many of my interlocutors. Jam sessions likewise varied in formality, sometimes consisting of a full jazz combo onstage before an audience and sometimes just of myself and a friend on the floor of somebody's apartment. The spaces of this research accordingly included cramped Brooklyn sublets and spacious Manhattan lofts, cafés and bars across Brooklyn and Manhattan and Queens, elegant recital halls and sticky, crowded concert venues. Some of my interlocutors were born in New York; some moved there as young professionals; some arrived later in their careers, as many musicians do, in search of this very scene. There is accordingly a

demographic slipperiness to my use of “South Asian America” in the title of this dissertation, as I understand this to be a deeply heterogenous community that also makes room for non-South Asians who find themselves drawn to our music (for reasons that I explore in depth in Chapter One). This slipperiness also extends to my choice of case studies, which include the undeniably Indian composition “English Notes” as well as various works by the British guitarist John McLaughlin. I use examples such as these to situate my interlocutors within a transnational lineage and a long history of South Asian music’s interactions with the West, which have resulted in today’s vibrant New York scene but which by no means began there. The city, in its wonderful diversity and irresistible messiness, serves as a useful incubator for exploring these hyphenated genres and communities, while also gesturing outwards towards a global South Asianness that cannot be geographically constrained.

Methodologies

As an ethnographer, I am committed to dismantling the hierarchies of power built into ethnographic research and writing. This means allowing my interlocutors to speak for themselves as much as possible, and using their emic perspectives to guide my analysis. I understand my interlocutors to be engaged in the work of theory every bit as much as I am from my position within the academy. They think critically about their art and their communities, and engage in deeply reflexive performance practices that put forth a particular understanding of South Asian-American music as both a cultural and artistic phenomenon. I have learned a tremendous amount about myself and the music I perform from our interactions. Postcolonial scholar Talal Asad advocates for this dialogic approach to ethnography when he writes: “It is one thing to try to understand ‘the native’s point of view’...it is quite another for the anthropologist to approach ‘the native’ with the possibility of learning something important for her own form of life that might help to transform

how that life is understood.”³¹ My experiences in the field have permanently transformed my relationship with South Asian music and the South Asian-American musical community. Accordingly, the goal of my research is not to “reveal” a musical community to its outsiders, but to put myself in dialogue with my own community and to stage our mutual discoveries in a way that I hope will be as beneficial for my interlocutors as it has been for me.

Of course, the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched become even more fraught when scholars from marginalized communities turn their lenses on subjects in positions of power. This decolonial reversal is an important part of my scholarly practice: I use ethnographic study of whiteness and cultural appropriation as a means of asking white practitioners of non-white arts — and, implicitly, ethnographers themselves — to interrogate their motivations and anxieties. Deborah Wong playfully describes this methodology, which requires a fundamentally different relationship to the field than that usually assumed by the academy, in terms of “post-Whiteness.” Post-Whiteness assumes a “relationship between fieldworker and informant...mindful of colonial histories and racialized class formations yet able to look beyond them to other explanatory systems.”³² This method emerges most clearly throughout this work in my analyses of whiteness, which put POC perspectives on racialization at the forefront and indeed claim a kind of expertise on whiteness born of the embodied experience of being brown in a hegemonically white supremacist society. While this remains a somewhat fringe perspective within critical whiteness studies, there are several important exceptions. In her 2023 monograph *Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness*, Kelsey Klotz suggests that the “the field of critical whiteness studies has often focused on the ‘invisibility’ of whiteness” while also asking “for whom whiteness is invisible, drawing attention to the well-documented experiences of people of color for whom whiteness is

³¹ Asad, Talal. *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, p. 9.

³² Wong 2004:317

necessarily visible and always has been.”³³ Meanwhile feminist scholar Sarah Ahmed wrote as early as 2004 that “the declaration that we must see whiteness, which could even be described as foundational within whiteness studies, assumes that whiteness is unseen in the first place. It is hence an exercise in white seeing, which does not have ‘others’ in view, those who are witness to the very forms of whiteness, daily.”³⁴

In this project, I engage the question of racialization and of whiteness in particular through the lens of performativity, expanding on the work of foundational performance studies scholar Judith Butler to understand race, like gender, as an “identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*.”³⁵ In the musical context, performativity has been discussed by a small handful of ethnomusicologists including Deborah Wong,³⁶ Jeff Roy,³⁷ Pavithra Prasad,³⁸ and Rumya Putcha,³⁹ beyond this, however, I find that the intersection between ethnomusicology and performance studies has remained relatively under-explored, despite the very real power of musical performance to, in Wong’s words, “[construct] new critical realities.”⁴⁰ The dual significance of the term “performance,” epitomized by Richard Schechner’s famous “is/as” distinction,⁴¹ is useful for understanding music and musical performance as vehicles for the performance of racial and cultural identity, performance in the Austinean sense of actually enacting these categories into being.⁴²

³³ Klotz, Kelsey. *Dave Brubeck and the Performance of Whiteness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 5-7.

³⁴ Ahmed, Sarah. “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism.” *Borderlands E-Journal* Vol. 3 No. 2, 2004.

³⁵ Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Gender Theory.” *Theatre Journal* Vol. 40 No. 4 (1988) p. 519.

³⁶ Wong 2004

³⁷ Roy, Jeff. “From Jalsah to Jalsa: Music, Identity, and (Gender) Transitioning at a Hijra Rite of Initiation.” *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 61 No. 3 (2017) pp. 389-418.

³⁸ Prasad, Pavithra and Jeff Roy. “Ethnomusicology and Performance Studies: Towards Interdisciplinary Futures of Indian Classical Music.” *MUSICultures* Vol. 44 No. 1 (2017) pp. 187-209.

³⁹ Putcha, Rumya. *The Dancer’s Voice: Performance and Womanhood in Transnational India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

⁴⁰ Wong 2004:5

⁴¹ Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2002.

⁴² Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things With Words*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1962.

Finally, as a member of the same cultural and artistic community as many of my interlocutors and a lifetime practitioner of many of the genres explored in this work, I have found that my own lived experiences as a South Asian-American and a multi-hyphenate musician provide a valuable well from which to draw. This is a kind of knowledge that sometimes proves difficult to cite in the context of an academic dissertation, but I will maintain that my *guru's* and my father's teachings are no less authoritative than Butler's or Derrida's. Learning to draw on the different kinds of knowledge I have gained from lifelong study in an oral tradition has been a crucial aspect of decolonizing my scholarly practice and indeed my relationship with music. The embodied processes of coming into knowledge and community in service of articulating a South Asian-American artistic identity are a central component of my research. Autoethnography has thus emerged as a critical tool as I work through sociomusical processes that unfold in real time, and in which I am implicated.

Stanely Brandes first identified the category of "ethnographic autobiography" in 1982,⁴³ while anthropologist Barbara Tedlock dates the emergence of what she calls "narrative ethnography" to the 1970s. Writing in the 1990s, Tedlock seems to consider autoethnography a bold undertaking, saying: "the public revelation of participatory details of the fieldwork experience is still considered embarrassingly unprofessional by some ethnographers."⁴⁴ Fortunately, I delight in being embarrassingly unprofessional, and am learning to take my own thoughts and emotions seriously as data in the process. Autoethnography has also involved reconfiguring my understanding of musical performance as itself a mode of doing theory. Artist-scholar Jonathan Leal considers this "intentionally open-ended, context- and medium-specific understanding of *theory as action*" to be a way of "draw[ing] attention back to marginalized, differently racialized individuals and communities

⁴³ Brandes, Stanley. "Ethnographic Autobiographies in American Anthropology." In *Crisis in Anthropology: View from Spring Hill, 1980* ed. E. Adamson Hoebel, Richard Currier, and Susan Kaiser. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1982.

⁴⁴ Tedlock, Barbara. "From Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography." *Journal of Anthropological Research* Vol. 47 No. 1 (1991) p. 71.

who have been repeatedly denied opportunities for their own self-articulation.”⁴⁵ Simply put, many of the ideas explored in this dissertation did not originate in an academic institution. Autoethnography allows me to put my lived experiences as a South Asian-American musician at the forefront of my analysis, and to insist on these experiences as themselves a form of “doing theory” in a way that has direct relevance for my cultural and artistic community.

Key Concepts

Rāgā

The central concept that guides my explorations of South Asian music as both a scholar and an artist is that of *rāgā*. This means, of course, that I will have to put forth a definition of the term. I hope my readers will understand why this is not a simple matter of including it in a glossary. *Rāgā* is a concept I have spent almost three decades exploring as a performer; I have only just begun to wrap my head around the infinite creative possibilities that this affective and melodic structuring device affords. As far as an academic definition goes, however, I am very fond of T. Viswanathan and Matthew Allen’s phrasing, which describes *rāgā* as “a storehouse of remembered melodic history and a body of melodic potential to be drawn upon and realized in performance, a bit like a box of painters’ colors.”⁴⁶ I find that Viswanathan and Allen capture both the historicizing and the forward-looking approaches to *rāgā* via an analogy that treats the very building blocks of *rāgā* as simultaneously bounded and infinite.

When I talk about *rāgā* in this dissertation, I am looking for a capacious definition that can engage with both the Hindustani and Carnatic traditions as well as their popular descendants, without becoming so broad as to lose its significance. I am here reminded of the ontological

⁴⁵ Leal, Jonathan. *Dreams in Double Time: On Race, Freedom, and Bebop*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2023, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Viswanathan, T. and Matthew Harp Allen. *Music in South India: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 42.

problem Paul Gilroy describes in defining Blackness and specifically Black music. Gilroy characterizes opposing definitions of Blackness as tending towards either homogenizing essentialism or saturnalian pluralism, neither of which he believes can properly address the intrinsic hybridity of Black art. He asks: “How can rap be discussed as if it sprang intact from the entrails of the blues?”⁴⁷ While this is not at its core a dissertation about Black music, it is about music that shares many of the qualities Gilroy describes, in particular a “playful diasporic intimacy” that allows us to imagine — and enact — a transnational and transhistorical community of creative agents. As one of the core musical concepts that has defined South Asian music for generations, Carnatic *rāgā* (and its Hindustani equivalent *rāg*) has come to resonate as one of the key ways of sounding South Asianness on a global scale. Its many transnational iterations, meanwhile, express variations on South Asian identity that speak to the fundamental capaciousness of this category. Gilroy offers music as a model whereby identity is neither a fixed essence nor entirely contingent. Navigations of *rāgā* in the context of South Asian-American music accordingly emerge as simultaneous sites for the negotiation of South Asian-American identity, in all of its slipperiness and historical depth.

In the field, I often circumvented the challenge of translating *rāgā* by focusing instead on the challenge of translating specific *rāgās*. *Malayamārutham* could be quickly glossed at a jam session as “Mixolydian, flat two, no four”; but what did we lose in the process? Viswanathan and Allen use the key concepts of scale, *swara* (note), *gamakka* (ornamentation), *sancāri* (phrase), and *jīva swara* (functional note) to define Carnatic *rāgā* from a structural perspective.⁴⁸ Writing on the Hindustani context, meanwhile, George Ruckert evokes the Sanskrit phrase “*ranjayati iti rāgā*” to define *rāgā* as “that which tinges the mind with color,”⁴⁹ and goes on to enumerate several of the abstract qualities that define the Hindustani *rāg* structure including selective use of pitches, strong tonal centers, and

⁴⁷ Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 34.

⁴⁸ Viswanathan and Allen 2004

⁴⁹ Ruckert, George E. *Music in North India: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 55.

prescribed melodic movements. In the field, I have often encountered different combinations of these and other structural elements, as bandleaders and performers individually decide which aspects of *rāgā* they want to prioritize in their cross-cultural endeavors while also having to figure out how to translate these concepts for non-South Asian musicians. For instance, *dhhol*⁵⁰ player and bandleader Sunny Jain describes how he deploys various elements of *rāg* in his compositions: “If I’m really basing a melody strictly off of *rāg* — and by *rāg* I mean a collection of notes, you know? And finding the motifs in there that can kind of bring out its essence, to a certain degree. Um, but then understanding the notes that you sit on, and how that brings out the heart and essence of the *rāg*.” From Viswanathan’s and Ruckert’s compendiums, Sunny brings *swara* (“a collection of notes”), *sancāri* (“motifs”), and *jīva swara* (“the notes that you sit on”) to bear on the definition of *rāg* he uses when working with jazz and other musicians, all while putting front and center *ranj* or “color,” the “heart and essence” of *rāg* which arises out of these more structural components. We will return to Sunny and to the question of defining *rāgā* in context in Chapters Two and Three. For now, however, I use Sunny as one example of how *rāgā* is translated in genre-agnostic spaces, and as a starting point for the music theoretical principles that guide this dissertation. The various ways performers deploy *rāgā* in their cross-genre undertakings are key to understanding these projects’ relationships to South Asianness as an aesthetic category, as well as the processes of translation central to hyphenated music-making and community formation.

Rasika

My father and I do not always get along, but for the 2023 Chennai music season he was my ideal companion. Infinitely knowledgable about Carnatic music, he was a reliable source of *rāgā* identifications and artist lore, which he shared in whispers between concert segments and discussed at length in the dining hall between acts. While we disagree on most aesthetic questions, when it

⁵⁰ A two-headed South Asian drum used in Punjabi wedding traditions and other celebrations

came to this music season my father and I often found ourselves in sync, or at least capable of understanding one another. My appreciative head nods and hand waves were usually met with acknowledgements of his own, which only increased the pleasure in shared listening. When we met up with family and friends between concerts, we delighted in reflecting on the successful performances and comedically lamenting the failures together, refining our delivery in each retelling. My father is not an emotionally expressive man, but I know that he gave himself swollen feet from sitting through too many *kutcheris*⁵¹ and tennis elbow from keeping *tālam*⁵² for hours on end, which I can only interpret as an act of love.

I have only recently reached a point where I can keep up with my father when it comes to *rāgā* identification. He usually pinpoints the *rāgā* of a composition or improvisation within the first few seconds of a performance. Sometimes he wavers between two neighboring *rāgās* for a moment — never more than an instant — before the answer reveals itself. I myself take longer. If I am between two *rāgās*, I usually know the key note or phrase that differentiates them, so that I find myself waiting for a single defining *swara* or *sancāri* to appear. This is not my father’s approach. When I ask him how he knows for sure that the *ālāpana*⁵³ we are listening to is in *Lalitha* and not *Vasantha*, he pauses for a moment before responding: “It doesn’t *sound* like *Vasantha*.”

I should say here, with love, that my father cannot carry a tune. When he attempts to sing or hum even a song that he knows very well, the melody is often unrecognizable. I do not think he can match pitch. I suspect that he might be tone deaf. On top of things, as he has gotten older, he has come down with a mild case of tinnitus, a constant ringing in one ear, so that I sometimes must shout to catch his attention. My father and I have completely different approaches to listening to Carnatic music. I have been taught the technical difference between *Lalitha* and *Vasantha*: *Lalitha*

⁵¹ A Carnatic concert performance

⁵² Rhythm-structuring principle in South Asian music, called *tālam* in the South and *tāl* in the North; also refers to the embodied process of maintaining the rhythmic pulse with the hand in both traditions

⁵³ An unmetered melodic improvisation sung on vocables.

contains a flat six, *shuddha dhaivatam*, while *Vasantha* contains a natural six, *chatushra dhaivatam*. At the aforementioned performance, I relayed this information to my father with absolutely no impact. He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head in polite acknowledgement of the detail, then continued listening, his experience unchanged. The information simply wasn't relevant to his understanding of either *rāgā*.

When I reflect on the way my father understands Carnatic music compared with my own technically-informed listening practice, several ready analogies come to mind. I have an extensive background in teaching ESL and no formal training in language pedagogy (as it often goes in the disorderly world of ESL). My understanding of the rules that govern English grammar and pronunciation are entirely based on my intuitions as a native speaker, so that as I prepare my lessons the formal rules I discover are often a surprise to me. We could likewise compare my father's passive, domestic acquisition of Carnatic music with my own lifetime of formal study in the genre; he grew up in a household where Carnatic music was omnipresent in the background, so that he acquired a native intuition for what different *rāgās* sound and feel like that is distinct from my own rules-based approach as a formal learner. We might also turn to theories of movement, such as Marcel Mauss's concept of body techniques: over time, Mauss suggests, we become entrained to what are in fact culturally-specific bodily movements and gestures, so that reflecting on our own physicality requires a kind of de-naturalization, an abstraction of intuition.⁵⁴ Like my father, we know without knowing how we know.

These frameworks are useful for understanding intuitions as a kind of embodied knowledge; and yet the problem with analogies of language and movement is that they involve a much more active expression of knowledge than the process I describe here. My father's knowledge is the knowledge of a *rasika*: it is couched not in his ability to perform, but in his ability to listen. The

⁵⁴ Mauss, Marcel. "Techniques of the Body." 1934. Translated by Ben Brewster. *Economy and Society* Vol. 2 No. 1 (1973) pp. 70-88.

intuitive ability to listen to music well has been explored by ethnomusicologist Shannon Dudley, who differentiates “rhythmic feel,” from more explicit analyses of rhythmic patterns;⁵⁵ discussions of “feel” and relatedly “vibe” are also pervasive in dance music scholarship, notably in the works of Luis-Manuel Garcia-Mispireta⁵⁶ and Oliver Wang,⁵⁷ both of whom theorize the ability to respond to music as a kind of affective knowledge. From this perspective, “vibe” goes beyond physical response to include feelings of social collectivity as well as individual moods inspired by music. Indeed, mood is a central element of my father’s embodied knowledge of Carnatic music, and the knowledge of most *rasikas*: not only do they know how to listen, they know how to *enjoy*.

Etymologically, *rasika* comes from *rasa*, a concept that has been central to Indian theories of aesthetics since at least the *Natyasastra* (roughly 9 C.E.). *Rasa* can most literally be translated as “taste,” referring both to the physical experience of flavor as well as to subsequent processes of aesthetic discernment.⁵⁸ The category of *rasika*, meanwhile, has until now escaped sustained academic attention. Chloë Alaghband-Zadeh translates the term as “connoisseur,” noting the verbal and gestural expressions of appreciation that mark this class of listeners with particular “cultural memory, sensibilities, and ethical dispositions.”⁵⁹ For Alaghband-Zadeh, working in the Hindustani context, the category of *rasika* or “good listener” is understood as primarily an *ethical* formation, tied to the performance of middle class values. In the Carnatic context, meanwhile, I can speak to the imbrication of ethics and aesthetics from personal experience as I recall not without trauma the

⁵⁵ Dudley, Shannon. “Judging ‘By the Beat’: Calypso versus Soca.” *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 40 No. 2 (1996) pp. 269-298.

⁵⁶ Garcia, Luis-Manuel. “Feeling the Vibe: Sound, Vibration, and Affective Attunement in Electronic Dance Music Scenes.” *Ethnomusicology Forum* Vol. 29 No. 1, 2020, pp. 21-39.

⁵⁷ Wang, Oliver. *Legions of Boom: Filipino American Mobile DJ Crews in the San Francisco Bay Area, Refiguring American Music*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

⁵⁸ Pollock, Sheldon. *A Rasa Reader: Classical Indian Aesthetics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.

⁵⁹ Alaghband-Zadeh, Chloë. “Listening to North Indian Classical Music: How Embodied Ways of Listening Perform Imagined Histories and Social Class.” *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 61 No. 2 (2017), p. 210.

intense pressure placed upon my sister and I from a young age to develop a taste for what was, for my parents, the religiously encoded genre of Carnatic music.

More on this religiously encoded trauma later. For now, however, I find the concept of the *rasika* central to understanding my own tendency, throughout this work, to treat aesthetic preferences — my own and others' — as a kind of knowledge. In my classical musical upbringing, preferences were to be earned. The idea that aesthetic preferences are tied to a kind of culturally specific knowledge has been thoroughly unpacked in Bourdieu's seminal work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Bourdieu writes: "A work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded...a beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason."⁶⁰ Bourdieu's work, which primarily situates taste as a marker of class, has been rightly critiqued for its lack of attention to race and ethnicity; and yet the caveat that immediately follows points, for me, to the role of aesthetic preferences in defining not only cultural competence but cultural *community*. Bourdieu goes on: "This typically intellectualist theory of artistic perception directly contradicts the experience of the art-lovers closest to the legitimate definition: acquisition of legitimate culture by insensible familiarization within the family circle tends to favor an enchanted experience of culture which implies forgetting the acquisition."⁶¹ Artistic perception is tied, in other words, to intuition, intuition that comes with insider status and lived experience — with "family."

In Chapter Two, I discuss the imbrication of aesthetic preferences with ethical value judgments in the context of hyphenated musical fusion, as well as the importance of these value judgments in defining a diasporic listening community. Meanwhile, throughout the dissertation I embody the perspective of a *rasika*, which means taking affective aesthetic judgments seriously as

⁶⁰ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987, pp. xxv-xxvi.

⁶¹ *ibid* xxvi

embodied knowledge. In conversation with other *rasikas* during the Chennai music season, I found that we often shared our perspectives both in terms of personal preferences and in terms of the supposed “correctness” or “truth” of a performer’s interpretation. Discussing one vocalist whose improvisation jumped from phrase to phrase with seemingly no narrative continuity, we remarked that it “didn’t feel like an *ālāpana*.” When another singer introduced a nasal quality in the middle of an *ālāpana* in *Sahana*, we commented that the unexpected color had “no place in that *rāga*.” Talking about what we liked and did not like became a means of understanding how we defined the parameters of Carnatic music and its constituent elements.

This dissertation deals with significantly less established genres and entities, whose parameters have yet to be explicitly defined — except, I argue, by the value judgments made by practitioners, listeners, and community members. I treat these intuitive value judgments as data that allows us to understand the aesthetic and ethnical parameters of a genre or community. As myself a practitioner, listener, and autoethnographer, these judgments sometimes include my own. I take care not to state my preferences as definitive, while also treating intuitive value judgments as a means of expressing embodied knowledge about the genre at hand. Over the course of the work, this brings me into a complicated engagement with the ideas of musical and cultural value. I do not shy away from these complications; indeed, they are central to my theory of hyphenation. Regardless, this work puts the knowledge of *rasikas* on a level playing field with more conventional forms of academic analysis, with the goal of foregrounding a community-driven definition of South Asian-American music and its parameters.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is divided into three chapters, each of which approaches the question of hyphenation from a different perspective. Chapter One, “Performing the Other, Performing the

Self: South Asian Music in the Performance of Racial Identity,” takes up the very loose objects of race, culture, and genre through the more concrete objects of South Asian classical music and dance. For diasporic practitioners, these objects are sacred. They are also fragile. This chapter explores *why* brown music and culture are both sacred and fragile — why we feel they must be protected, and from whom. Accordingly, I engage the issue of cultural appropriation as I examine the various factors that draw people of different races to the racially marked genre of South Asian music, with a focus on the affective dimensions of these cross-cultural borrowings and collaborations. Hyphenation in this chapter describes the particular positionality of second-generation South Asian-Americans, whose culturally specific performance practices as well as their attitudes towards nonnative participation in these spaces are informed by their own navigation of disparate cultural affiliations and influences. I interrogate the affordances and problematics of interracial performance on the one hand, and the intrinsic sense of race-based authenticity that accompanies South Asian practitioners of the traditional arts on the other. I argue that this question of authenticity generates a productive anxiety in white practitioners of South Asian music, ultimately leading them to perform their whiteness differently before the brown gaze. In a sense, then, this chapter recuperates the very act of crossing racial lines in performance, while also emphasizing the affective stakes of cross-cultural performance for members of different racial and cultural communities.

Chapter Two goes on to ask what it means to treat the cross-cultural competence central to hyphenated performance as a criterion for aesthetic evaluation. As I and my interlocutors set about defining “Good Fusion,” we reveal the ways in which we listen for and hear cross-cultural competence in cross-genre performance and collaboration. I perform analyses of various hyphenated musical objects from the perspective of a South Asian-American listener, examining the ways South Asian and Western elements interact in pursuit of what T. Roberts calls “sono-racial collaboration.”⁶² Whereas Chapter One is about understanding the affective and ethical stakes of

⁶² Roberts 2016

hyphenated music-making, Chapter Two lays out the objects of this mode of performance, ultimately demonstrating the usefulness of hyphenation as a metric for music analysis.

Chapter Three takes this discussion of cross-cultural dialogue further to emphasize metaphors of language, conversation, translation, and speech. I take a closer look at the cross-genre jam session as a space of productive dialogue and, ideally, mutual understanding, analyzing the artistic processes that go into communicating across genre lines as well as the sociomusical factors that shape this communication. This chapter also returns to the anxieties around authenticity introduced in Chapter One, asking how a transnational, diasporic performance context shapes local perceptions of South Asian and South Asian-American music, in dialogue and sometimes in contradistinction with performers' lived experiences of South Asianness.

These chapters are separated by two short interludes, or *thukkadas*, in which I explore case studies that exemplify hyphenation as a music theoretical framework. In a Carnatic concert performance, a *thukkada* is a short, light *kṛit*⁶³ that is used as something of a palate cleanser. It usually receives minimal elaboration by way of *manōdharma*,⁶⁴ and gives the performer an opportunity to rest their voice and clear their mind as well as to transition smoothly between longer items in heavier *rāgās*. As such, these written *thukkadas* are intended as brief, uptempo transitions between longer and more ethnographically dense chapters. Each interlude takes up the theoretical themes of the preceding and following chapters as well as gesturing towards the broader discussion around hyphenation, lending a sense of continuity to the work as a whole while also providing an opportunity to demonstrate the practical applications of hyphenation as a theoretical tool. My conclusion gives my interlocutors a final platform to reflect on their own engagements with South Asian-American music and community, situates this theoretical discussion in terms of my own

⁶³ The most common form of composition in the Carnatic tradition

⁶⁴ Improvisation

trajectory as a fusion artist, and offers some final perspectives on the affordances and problematics of cross-cultural performance in South Asian America.

A Brief Note on Genre

I have above mentioned my attention to “value judgments as data that allows us to understand the aesthetic and ethnical parameters of a genre or community.” While studies of Western art music tend to understand “genre” primarily as it relates to formal and stylistic conventions, in this work I am more aligned with musicologist David Brackett’s definition as applied to popular music: “Genres are not static groupings of empirically verifiable musical characteristics, but rather associations of texts whose criteria of similarity may vary according to the uses to which the genre labels are put.”⁶⁵ In other words, genres describe *social* formations as much as aesthetic categories, so that we may rightfully turn our attention to “*how* a particular idea of a category emerges and stabilizes momentarily (if at all) in the course of being accepted across a range of discourses and institutions.”⁶⁶ Diasporic practitioners of Carnatic music, Hindustani music, Indo-jazz, and/or fusion align themselves with particular racial and cultural communities through the genre labels they ascribe to their artistic practices — and, equally, to the genre labels they avoid. I use my interlocutors’ own terminology wherever possible, while making a point to interrogate the social and cultural significance behind these classifications.

As far as my writing, genre has been a problem of mine since the early stages of my academic journey. Particularly as an (auto)ethnographer, I often find myself toeing the line between academic scholarship and something more akin to literary nonfiction. I cite amongst my favorite writerly influences Maggie Nelson and Esmé WeiJun Wang, whom I consider to have written

⁶⁵ Brackett, David. *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016, pp. 3-4.

⁶⁶ *ibid* 6

rigorous theoretical treatises on queerness⁶⁷ and mental illness⁶⁸ respectively; my most trusted and dedicated reader is my sister, who is primarily a writer of fiction. At the same time, I will insist on this project as a work of theory, drawing on queer-of-color affect theory and Sarah Ahmed in particular to center a definition of theory that treats non-dominant (read: non-white) forms of knowledge *as* knowledge, in contradistinction to a hegemonically white Western canon.⁶⁹

In terms of the genre of this work, then: my hope is that it will meet the minimum formal requirements of being called an academic dissertation. Whether it is classified as Ethnomusicology or Performance Studies or even Music Theory is largely a question of citational practice, but it might also be a question of who is willing to take it seriously. I will here cite my father and my *guru* alongside Derrida and Bourdieu. In this I am inspired by Imani Perry, who is herself “inspired by jazz wisdom and practice” as analytical tools for understanding race, and accordingly allows scholars of race from across academic disciplines to “jam with one another on [the] pages” of her book.⁷⁰ I won’t steal the metaphor wholesale, but I do take joy in Perry’s obvious joy in her own interdisciplinarity. Likewise, in this dissertation I have allowed for some genre play as characters and thinkers cross paths. In this project, as in my music, I have tried to hold space for values that are not always shared in academia. I have tried to hold space for sensuality, for playfulness, and for joy. I hope this joy comes through in the reading.

⁶⁷ Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015.

⁶⁸ Wang, Esmé Weijun. *The Collected Schizophrenias: Essays*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019.

⁶⁹ Ahmed, Sarah. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

⁷⁰ Perry, Imani. *More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. New York: New York University Press, 2011, p. xv.

Chapter 1

Performing the Other, Performing the Self: South Asian Music in the Performance of Racial Identity

The 11th annual Ragas Live Festival represented something of an ethnographic utopia. Self-described as an “expansive presentation of music inspired by the Indian Classical tradition,” and described by at least one prominent publication as the harbinger of “The Raga Renaissance,” this 24-hour festival brought together performers and consumers of South Asian music, broadly defined, in a uniquely contained context that also felt uniquely New York. The crowd was mixed: South Asians made up roughly half of the audience, whose numbers ranged from a few dozen to a few hundred over the course of the event. The stark, warehouse-like performance space provided a compelling contrast to the temple-adjacent concert halls I grew up patronizing; the ready availability of liquor and a smoker-friendly courtyard would have scandalized my devout Hindu parents. I quickly befriended the Indo-Trinidadian man serving up plate after plate of jerk chicken and vegetables out back, and made frequent use of the breaks between sets to buy us both cups of coffee (black for me, milk and three sugars for him) that would sustain us through the night. We bonded over our shared Indian heritage and our love of spicy food (if you ever find yourself in Kingston, NY, I can’t recommend Ram’s Valley Outpost highly enough). At some point, early enough in the evening that we were still making small talk, I mentioned that I had recently gotten married. Shortly before 4:00 am, when we had gotten a bit more comfortable, the following dialogue ensued:

“Your husband, is he white or Black? What color is he?”

“He’s white,” I responded, already laughing, although at the time I wasn’t sure why. Ram, too, exploded in laughter.

“You WHITE Indian girls always go for white guys!”

I erupted in nervous giggles. “White Indian girl.” The phrase rang in my ears as I returned to the concert space, every possible interpretation and implication crossing my mind. Was the delineation aesthetic? Ethnic? Nationalist? Colorist? The performance that followed was my first time hearing the *sārangi*⁷¹ live, as close to a spiritual experience as any; the night was filled with world music at a high artistic level, strangers sleeping side by side on the concrete floor, white hippies meditating cross-legged with tears streaming down their faces; but it is my friend Ram’s interpellation — accusation? — that has lingered long after the rapture and muscle stiffness have passed. When I introduced my new friend to said white husband a few hours later, it wasn’t without a wink and a nudge, a shared recognition that his existence marked me in some legible way, or was perhaps a reflection of a way in which I was already marked. The initial question — white or Black? — followed by a categorization that reified the polar categories of white and Black, even in its attempt to define a particular mode of brownness, demonstrated the ways in which racial categories rowdily intertwine even as the U.S. racial paradigm remains resolutely binaristic. Could my particular species of brownness be defined in terms of its proximity to whiteness? More to the point, how was the whiteness that pervaded this very festival shaped by its association with brownness? Could Blackness and brownness exert a defining influence, or was that power reserved for hegemonic whiteness? And what of the ways Blackness and brownness might shape one another?

In this chapter, I explore the racial underpinnings of various New York artists’ engagement with South Asian music, reading their performances of music and dance as simultaneous performances of racial identity. In a performance scene that includes artists of all races performing within the South Asian classical tradition, cultural appropriation emerges as one important lens. However, rather than attempting to determine *whether* a particular artist’s performance practice is appropriative — often the starting point for mainstream discussions of cultural appropriation — I here investigate the *affect* of cross-cultural and interracial performance, in an attempt to understand

⁷¹ South Asian string instrument played in many folk traditions

the social and artistic impulse to cross racial lines. What affective possibilities does brown art afford white artists? What can Black art afford brown artists? What justifications do cross-cultural practitioners use to make sense of their place in a culture and a community that is not their own? And, speaking from both sides — how do we all *feel* about it?

A couple of caveats, before I proceed. This dissertation has a complicated relationship with appropriation as both a concrete event and a theoretical framework. My goal is that it be read as neither an apology nor an exposé. The characters below are complicated human beings with complicated relationships to the art they perform and consume. Equally important, they are my friends. I take seriously the trust they have placed in me by sharing their thoughts, perspectives, and artistic philosophies. I use their experiences alongside my own as starting points to engage with the questions above, and partake in an ongoing conversation with them about music, dance, and identity that transcends these pages. Why we do what we do as artists is one of the most intimate questions we can ask of ourselves and of one another. I hope my representation does this intimacy justice.

“I Take It Personally”

Rachna Nivas is a powerhouse. She studied Kathak under Pandit Chitresh Das, a world-renowned master of dance credited with bringing Kathak to the United States; she is the cofounder and artistic director of Leela Dance Collective, a critically acclaimed, internationally touring dance company; she has been featured multiple times in *Dance* magazine; she is a prolific marijuana user and a proud divorcée; she is unabashedly cool. Most of all, she’s not afraid to speak her mind. She tells me about the last ethnographer to shadow her, fellow Kathak practitioner Sarah Morelli, to whom she offhandedly said in a conversation about white people, “I don’t mean you, I mean *real* whites” — a comment that made it into Morelli’s subsequent monograph, ripe for analysis.⁷² My

⁷² Morelli, Sarah. *A Guru’s Journey: Pandit Chitresh Das and Indian Classical Dance in Diaspora*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019, p. 140.

own notes from my time with Rachna include the quote “Black people make everything cooler,” a remark I have her explicit permission to include on the record. She speaks about race and identity with the candor of a UC Berkeley grad and the slight disdain for political correctness that is emblematic of her generation. I am a little bit in awe, a little bit unnerved, and more than a little bit enamored by her. In our first interview — in every subsequent interview — she speaks at length and with great reverence for her late *guru*, whose defining influence in her life reinforces the concept of a *guru* as a spiritual guide, a conduit of the divine.

Pandit Chitresh Das first arrived in the United States in 1970 on a fellowship to teach Kathak. For the first two decades of his tenure in the United States, his disciples were primarily young white women. This was more by circumstance than by design. Even so, Rachna recalls an anecdote in which her *guru* was approached by an Indian woman after a show, who asked him point-blank when he would start teaching Indians. The charge came with implications for his legacy: “Who do you want to take responsibility for these teachings, for what you were taught by your *guru* and what he was taught by his *guru*? Who do you want to take responsibility?” The question, Rachna says, “haunted” him. The weight of this responsibility was also not lost on Rachna, who describes her *guru*’s subsequent forays into the Indian-populated suburbs as a “mission to produce somebody like me.” And indeed, her *guru* frequently validated this sense of distinction and personal responsibility, walking up to Rachna in the middle of a class otherwise populated with white students and telling her, “This is yours.” In her retelling, he would point to a white student dancing nearby and say to Rachna: “You should be honored that she is adopting this culture and is learning this art, but I will hold you much more responsible.”

Morelli’s work likewise highlights the racialized discourses that pervaded Pandit Das’s early undertakings in the United States. Through at least the 1990’s, advertisements and public-facing interviews explicitly promoted Das’s dance company’s cultural diversity, taking the inclusion of white and other non-South Asian students as a point of pride. Still, in practice Morelli suggests that Das’s

teachings often reinforced a binaristic opposition between his South Asian students and others. She references her *guru*'s tendency to elide all South Asian students as "Indian" and all non-South Asian students as "white," even when this category included Black or East Asian dancers — a slippage which, taken in tandem with Rachna's comment about "*real* whites," suggests a definition of whiteness that goes beyond any particular phenotype or heritage but that is instead entirely determined by a lack of cultural South Asianness. Das acknowledged, and his students perceived, that he often pushed his "Indian" students harder than his "white" students, partly "as a means of breaking down any sense of entitlement South Asian-American students might feel for the dance form" but also in service of "understanding and articulating the dance's relevance for a growing population of South Asian-American Kathak students."⁷³ Morelli, herself a white Kathak practitioner, is transparent about the insecurity and defensiveness that she and other non-South Asian students often felt as a result of Das's remarks and differential treatment. Meanwhile, Rachna's attitude towards race in the context of Kathak must be situated against her *guru*'s apparent belief in her intrinsic legitimacy as an Indian practitioner.

This race-based legitimacy is something that, throughout this project, I try to avoid taking for granted. Still, for Rachna, as for her *guru* before her, the race question is simple: it boils down to stakes. White practitioners of the South Asian arts, she argues, always have the option of walking away from an art form that doesn't carry the weight of cultural heritage. Importantly, Rachna speaks with great respect for her white *guru didis*,⁷⁴ openly insisting that there are white Kathak practitioners who have deeper knowledge of the art form than she does; she grows indignant as she recounts race-based challenges to her white *didis*' authority. At the same time, she suggests that white practitioners aren't affected by their students' and communities' indifference in the same way that she is as a designated culture-bearer. "At the end of the day, my white dance sisters would go and

⁷³ Morelli 2019:141-2

⁷⁴ Sisters; an affectionate way of referring to dancers who have studied under the same *guru*

teach in the suburbs...but when Indian parents didn't get it, they could just be like, 'whatever.' No. I'm driving home tormented. 'Why doesn't my community understand, what can I do to get them to understand better?' And I take it personally."

This emphasis on cultural and emotional stakes adds an important dimension to conversations around appropriation that primarily discuss socioeconomic privilege and material inequalities. Lauren Michelle Jackson's seminal essay collection on cultural appropriation ties the problem of appropriation directly to capitalism and the wealth gap, saying: "When the powerful appropriate from the oppressed, society's imbalances are exacerbated and inequalities prolonged."⁷⁵ I certainly do not wish to downplay the role of economic inequality in shaping the flow of power, or the importance of equitable material compensation for cultural and artistic labor. But material wealth is only one form of privilege, and the affective dimensions of cultural appropriation are no less significant in understanding how race impacts cultural production. How does it make native practitioners *feel* to see their once-depreciated art forms gain mainstream (read: white) approval? Rachna remembers having a feeling in her gut long before the term "cultural appropriation" had entered the mainstream that something was, for lack of a better word, off: "I could not have articulated exactly what the problem was," she tells me, and yet she knew enough to respond to the appearance of white-run henna stands on UC Berkeley's campus with a simple, "What the hell is this?" At the time, she recalls, her South Asian friends were too busy being flattered that "they like our shit now" to take offense; and yet the childhood trauma of being sent to the principal's office for having henna on her hands left Rachna with a sour taste in her mouth that rendered her unable to enjoy the long-awaited mainstream embrace.

⁷⁵ Jackson, Lauren Michelle. *White Negroes: When Cornrows Were In Vogue...and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2019, p. 4.



Fig 1. Screenshot from Subtle Curry Traits



Fig 2. Screenshot from Subtle Curry Traits

Disparate emotional responses to cultural appropriation are not uncommon even within minority groups. Nationality and immigrant generation are important factors among others that affect how non-native adoption of a culturally specific practice is likely to be perceived. The above screen grabs taken from a popular online South Asian community group, “Subtle Curry Traits,” in August 2022 depict various responses to a self-identified white girl asking for the group’s perspective

— or perhaps permission — as she debates wearing a *saree*.⁷⁶ The original poster seems to anticipate at least some backlash, as she makes a point of listing her credentials for appreciating Indian culture: she studied abroad in India for a year, had Indian friends, and dated an Indian man (Fig 1). This dubious justification based on a romantic relationship immediately brings to mind the erotics of appropriation discussed in bell hooks’ “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance.” hooks writes: “When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, and sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other.”⁷⁷ hooks identifies an immediate connection between sexual and material transgressions of racial boundaries, reading into both an eroticism that is based predominantly on an imbalance of power. In the case of this particular white girl, the romantic relationship in question has, it seems, faded; yet the desire to consume the Other via “culture, fashion, cuisine, music, [and] dance” (Fig 1) remains.

Still, a number of the top responses to the post are highly encouraging, telling the woman to wear the *saree* with confidence and even suggesting that South Asians will feel a sense of pride or be impressed by her attempt (Fig 2). While I cannot determine with certainty the age, nationality, or immigrant generation of these online commenters, I can speak to my own experience as a child of immigrants when I say that my parents’ attitudes toward mainstream acceptance of Indian culture are frequently colored by gratitude (“they like our shit now”). I remember my own vague discomfort compared with my parents’ enthusiasm the first time we saw an all-white group of college students perform at a Carnatic music festival in Cleveland, Ohio. First-generation immigrants often respond positively when white Americans adopt their music, dance, or manner of dress, with Pandit Das going so far as to tell Rachna to be “honored.” However, this is a response that must be

⁷⁶ Traditional South Asian garment consisting of a draped piece of fabric

⁷⁷ hooks, bell. “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance.” *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992, p. 367.

contextualized against the devalorization and erasure of traditional customs that characterized colonial rule on the one hand, and the global white supremacist hegemony that continues to devalorize non-white traditions on the other.⁷⁸

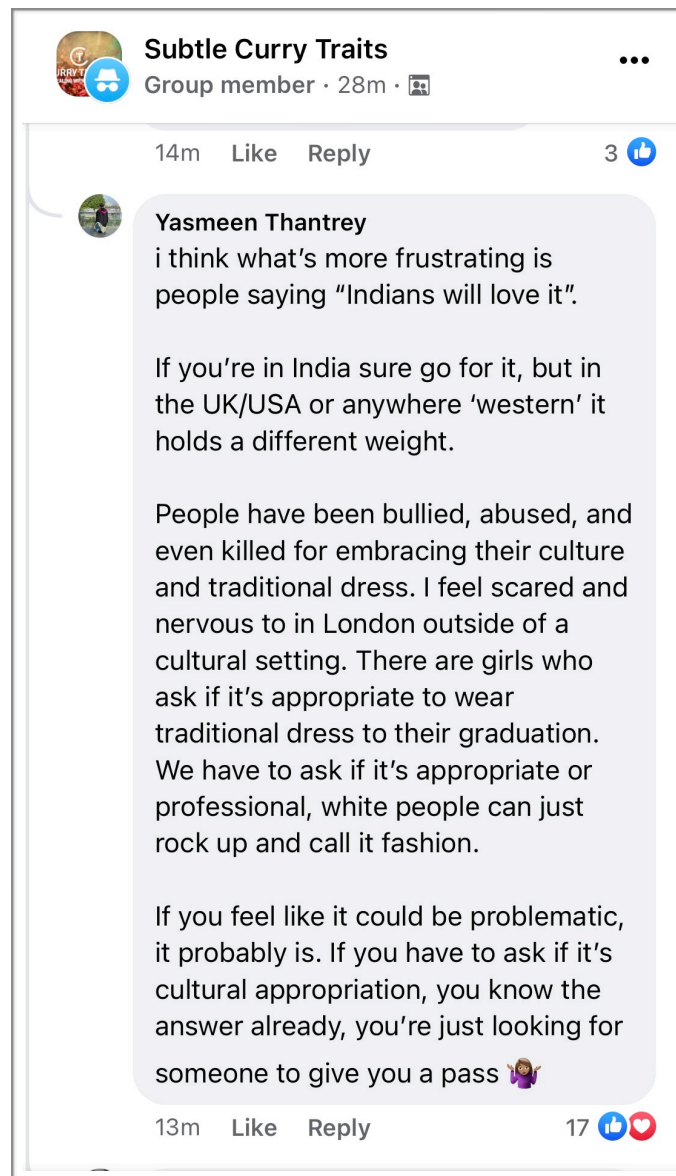


Fig 3. Screenshot from Subtle Curry Traits

⁷⁸ This framing is not meant to attribute any sort of false consciousness to an entire immigrant generation; I have equally often heard South Asian musicians of my parents' generation speak disparagingly of white practitioners behind closed doors, while outwardly painting a picture of welcome. "Gratitude" is, in these cases, accompanied by a sense of irony, but it is rarely absent altogether.

Other responses to the original post point out the double standard inherent in a white woman's sense of freedom to experiment with her mode of dress compared with the anxieties and even harassment that immigrants might experience while wearing traditional clothing (Fig 3). For many second-generation immigrants, acceptance or even appreciation are not cause for gratitude or pride: they are taken as a matter of course. The affect of cultural appropriation, like its materiality, is subsequently tied to power: the power attached to an incontrovertible national identity. Rachna's refusal to be "flattered" by her white peers' acceptance is attached to an intrinsic sense from a young age of her culture's rightful place within American society. If appropriation is indeed, as internet denizen Tijo Titus suggests, "a white problem not a brown one" (Fig 3), it is a white problem only insofar as the "default" Western identity is understood as white. For second-generation immigrants to the United States, meanwhile, the American identity must necessarily expand to include us; the negative repercussions we often face for expressing our non-white cultural identities are accompanied by a self-righteous awareness of the injustice and indeed illogic of any attempts to paint us as less-than-American.

This unruly relationship between race, culture, and nation — this hyphenated positionality — helps us understand the affect of indignation in the second-generation diaspora as a function of broader anxieties around identity and belonging. The hyphenated formulation "South Asian-American" expresses a subset without implying a percentage or ratio; "South Asian" acts as a qualifier that does not, to the second-generation immigrant mind, lessen our claim to a whole and uncontested Americanness. This intrinsic sense of belonging, however — one that many of us arrive at only later in life, if ever — is tempered by the lived reality of discrimination. Drawing on Sianne Ngai, Asian-American writer Cathy Park Hong coins the term "minor feelings" to describe the cognitive dissonance created when "American optimism is enforced upon you, which contradicts your own racialized reality."⁷⁹ Acceptance, when it comes, is not the solution to our hopes as

⁷⁹ Hong, Cathy Park. *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*. New York: One World, 2020.

hyphenated Americans the way it is for many first-generation immigrants, who often do not have the same prior expectation of inclusion. It is experienced as long overdue. Moreover, it is experienced as hypocritical: we see our fellow citizens embracing brown culture, but not brown people. It is for this reason, as Facebook user Yasmeen Thantrey suggests, that appropriation in the West “holds a different weight” (Fig 3).

Of course, this affect of indignation is tied to a racial hierarchy in which members of the dominant culture — in the United States, white people — have the power to meaningfully bestow or withhold acceptance. The question changes when we turn to interminority borrowings and collaborations, moving beyond Pandit Das’s problematic gloss of “white” to consider the interactions between differently raced non-white groups. I can’t help but ask where non-white, non-South Asian dancers fit into Rachna’s artistic philosophy: what, for example, is her relationship to her Black Kathak students? The answer: “Very different.” With her Black students, Rachna suggests, reverence is built into their relationship — specifically, a reverence for ancestry, heritage, and tradition. This isn’t simply a matter of feeling that her Black students respect her as an instructor; she tells me about the first night she spent with her Black collaborators on a recent Kathak-tap fusion project, and of the hours they spent showing one another videos of their *gurus* and great masters of the past, grounding their own collaboration in each genre’s history and in their individual artistic lineages. She admiringly describes Black tap dancer Jason Samuel Smith’s annual tap festival, where he routinely wheels out nonagenarian former hoofers to educate younger dancers on the art form. This reflexive orality, an interweaving of personal and cultural history with more straightforward artistic pedagogy, emerges as a shared value between these Black and brown art forms. Indeed, Rachna seems to identify a unique resonance between Kathak, jazz, and tap. Kathak was not “born out of struggle” like the Black American arts, but it was, in Rachna’s words, “annihilated” by years of British rule and the subsequent anti-Nautch movement tied to the

respectability politics of India's nation-building project, so that artists such as Das faced an uphill battle in their efforts to legitimize the art form. Generational struggle, Rachna insists, is in the blood.

Kathak, Bharatanatyam, and Carnatic music have all recently been the subject of some much-needed historical revisionism, as practitioners and patrons begin to grapple with the sexist and casteist legacies that shape contemporary understandings of these purportedly classical genres. Scholars including Sarah Morelli,⁸⁰ Daves Soneji,⁸¹ Margaret Walker,⁸² and Amanda Weidman⁸³ detail the processes of classicization that led to the appropriation of these art forms from their hereditary practitioners, whose lifestyles were criminalized at the same time as their art was legitimized for middle-class consumption. Many of these hereditary practitioners belonged to what are now considered lower-caste communities, whose experience has been explicitly likened to the Black American experience by the likes of B. R. Ambedkar and W. E. B. DuBois⁸⁴ and by the Dalit Panthers in their 1973 manifesto,⁸⁵ as well as by contemporary scholars of caste and race such as Isabel Wilkerson,⁸⁶ Suraj Yengde,⁸⁷ and Shailaja Paik.⁸⁸ We will return to this comparative discussion of American and South Asian structures of oppression later in the chapter; for now, however, I gesture towards the conversation around whitewashing in the South Asian arts to situate Rachna's feelings of solidarity with Black American artists, whose art has repeatedly been elevated in the

⁸⁰ Morelli 2019

⁸¹ Soneji, Daves. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

⁸² Walker, Margaret. *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014.

⁸³ Weidman, Amanda. *Singing the Classical, Voicing the Modern: The Postcolonial Politics of Music in South India*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

⁸⁴ Kapoor, S. D. "B. R. Ambedkar, W. E. B. DuBois and the Process of Liberation." *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol 38 No. 51 (2003) pp. 5344-5349.

⁸⁵ "Dalit Panthers' Manifesto." Bombay, 1973.

⁸⁶ Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Random House, 2020.

⁸⁷ Yengde, Suraj. *Caste Matters*. Gurgoan, India: Penguin Viking, 2019.

⁸⁸ Paik, Shailaja. *The Vulgarities of Caste: Dalits, Sexuality, and Humanity in Modern India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022.

mainstream to the almost complete absence of any parallel advantage to the communities in question. Indeed, Lauren Michelle Jackson describes this paradox in bitingly straightforward terms:

White people are not penalized for flaunting black culture — they are rewarded for doing so, financially, artistically, socially, and intellectually. For a white person, seeing, citing, and compensating black people, however, has no such reward and may actually prove risky [...] Everyone wants the insurgence of blackness with the wealth of whiteness. Everyone wants to be cool without fearing for their lives.⁸⁹

As far as appropriation is concerned, then, the term becomes complicated when applied to artists and communities with shared histories of racial discrimination. Rachna places a great deal of emphasis on shared history and shared struggle, as well as the importance of learning this history before attempting a collaboration with artists from a different genre and cultural background. She describes her own decade-long study of jazz and tap history before attempting her first cross-genre collaboration; she details trips to New Orleans and Harlem where her ability to contextualize jazz and tap against the local Black community's history and cultural background was deepened, so that by the time she actually danced alongside tap dancers and jazz musicians her understanding of the "weight" of these forms, her *reverence* for them, was undeniable. Scholar of ethnic studies George Lipsitz asks, "Which kinds of cross-cultural identification advance emancipatory ends and which ones reinforce existing structures of power and domination? When does identification with the culture of others serve escapist and irresponsible ends and when does it encourage an enhanced understanding of one's experiences and responsibilities?"⁹⁰ The deep mutual respect between Pandit Chitresh Das and Jason Samuel Smith has been well documented, most explicitly in a 2013 documentary about their longstanding collaboration;⁹¹ in the case of Rachna's own Kathak-tap collaboration, this personal history becomes as important as the genres' overlapping legacies of

⁸⁹ Jackson 2019:4-6

⁹⁰ Lipsitz, George. *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place*. London: Verso, 1994, p. 56.

⁹¹ Uchiyama, Hoku. *Upaj: Improvise*. San Francisco: Hindipendent Films, 2013.

erasure. “Jason’s like family,” she tells me with a smile. The responsibility they hold towards one another is implied.

These collaborations are not wholly removed from appropriation, but neither can appropriation fully provide for the nuance involved when mutually oppressed cultures and art forms collide. In her discussion of interminority appropriations in South Asian hip hop, Nitasha Sharma proposes a model of “appropriation-as-identification,” advocating a global race consciousness that allows young South Asians in the United States to negotiate their own racial invisibility by identifying with Black culture. In the process, they “[develop] newly racialized identities that express a political consciousness of interminority solidarity” by exploring their communities’ overlapping legacies of imperialism, displacement, racism, and labor exploitation.⁹² The collaborations described in Sharma’s work are, presumably, of the “emancipatory” sort: they encourage self-reflection as well as mutual understanding. Likewise, Jonathan Leal’s work on bebop takes up the spread of bebop beyond the Black American community to Japan, Mexico, China, and their diasporas, emphasizing this music’s relevance for “differently positioned and marginalized listeners of color across (and beyond) the United States — audiences newly driven to disrupt the standard logics of racial democracy through their insistent, dissonant dreaming.”⁹³ Rachna’s Kathak-tap collaboration seems to be of a similar variety, as the process of identifying shared values in service of cross-cultural collaboration reveals something about the cultural and artistic values of each constituent genre, ultimately enhancing Kathak and tap alike. In a successful interminority collaboration, then, the sense of self-discovery is mutual.

At times Rachna’s perspective skews towards essentialist. She suggests that the white approach to music, regardless of genre, is more often cerebral, while the Black approach is more visceral and embodied. She lingers on the word “soul,” suggesting that the Black — and brown —

⁹² Sharma, Nitasha. *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian-Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, p. 3.

⁹³ Leal 2023:3

experience is uniquely suited to creating a particular kind of musical affect: “It’s all just coming from *feeling*. And how do you create that feeling, you know what I mean? [...] There’s like a feeling of *joy*. And joy, you can only experience joy from struggle.” She is careful to acknowledge her own caste privilege while making this point, but quickly returns to the idea of generational struggle, of embodied memories that have been passed down from her parents and grandparents that she has absorbed into her own life and artistic practice.

I am initially quite resistant to what feels like an overly optimistic, even reductive, depiction of Black-and-brown solidarity. Anti-Blackness runs rampant in the South Asian community, both on the subcontinent and abroad. My friend Ram followed his comment about my white husband with a semi-ironic, “You could never bring me home to your parents.”⁹⁴ Furthermore, the Black and South Asian diasporas in the United States have followed vastly different historical trajectories. South Asians have typically benefited from a much higher degree of structural and institutional privilege than Black Americans, particularly following the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 which favored so-called “skilled laborers”; indeed, Asian-Americans have often been weaponized against the Black community as a means of shoring up white privilege, another point I will return to later in this chapter. What does it mean to insist on solidarity in the context of these sociopolitical differences and indeed historical antagonisms?

“There’s that,” Rachna agrees. “That’s why I’m so passionate about our show!” Her tap and Kathak collaboration, SPEAK, “actually brings together Indian artistic heritage and African artistic heritage [...] When we have shows the audience is like, half South Asian and half Black.” It is difficult to explain how revolutionary this statement feels in the context of a classical South Asian art form whose patrons tend almost exclusively to come from within the upper-caste South Asian

⁹⁴ The disparate histories of South Asian migration to the United States and the Caribbean, and subsequent Indo-Caribbean migrations to the U.S., significantly complicate ideas of race, caste, and privilege in South Asian-America. My project does not directly engage with the Caribbean context, although Indo-Caribbean practitioners are by no means absent from the South Asian-American arts scene; this presents a ready avenue for future research, and an opportunity to engage with scholars of the Indo-Caribbean including Tina Ramnarine and Tejaswini Niranjana.

community. Rachna is insistent that her show does not simply reflect a presumed solidarity, but actively enacts it. It brings Hindustani and jazz musicians together and demands that they grow to understand one another's artistic languages past the point of mutual intelligibility towards effective communication and indeed co-articulation. It brings racially diverse audiences together and proudly presents a collaborative interracial dynamic that is utterly foreign to many members of the South Asian-American diaspora. In the following chapters, I look more closely at the mechanics of cross-cultural fusion, analyzing the efficacy of various fusion undertakings in both ethical and aesthetic terms. For now, however, I am compelled by Rachna's "performance" of solidarity, performance in the Austinean sense that moves past mere depiction into the realm of enactment.⁹⁵ *SPEAK effects* interracial and intercultural community. Rachna might not always be politically correct, but she is performing solidarity onstage and off.

For Rachna as a South Asian-American Kathak practitioner, the affect of appropriation is necessarily racialized: the indignation that accompanies interactions with the dominant (white) culture is softened in the context of interminority collaborations. The remainder of this chapter engages not with the victims but the perpetrators of cultural appropriation — although these charged labels belie the tone of my engagement, as I ask practitioners why they find themselves drawn to their chosen art forms in a way that attempts to hold space for mutual growth and understanding. But first, a brief digression to tell you how Rachna and I first met.

A Brief Digression

It started with a Brooklyn Raga Massive event where I ran into an old acquaintance, tabla player Mir Naqibul Islam. We both took part in the open jam that followed the featured performance, we exchanged numbers, and shortly thereafter he invited me to a more intimate jam he

⁹⁵ Austin 1962

was hosting at his apartment the following weekend. The neighbors wouldn't mind, he told me; it was a "musician building." I arrived on Saturday, flute and notebook in hand, and was immediately treated to chai and a joint before the arrival of Shiva — another tabla player who unloaded a gallon-sized Ziploc of weed before immediately beginning to warm up; Galen — a quiet white man who made exactly the right number of jokes about not fitting in before setting down his sitar and disappearing into the kitchen to roll a cigarette; and, finally, Rachna herself. She stood smoking in her *salwar*⁹⁶ and *ghungroos*⁹⁷ telling us about her recent experimentation with ketamine therapy, taking little interest in who I was or why I was there beyond us quickly sizing each other up the way women in male-dominated spaces often do.

I learned a good deal about the day's participants from the ways Mir introduced them. Galen he treated with a fraternal irreverence, jovially complaining to me about how brown audiences would flock to ask Galen about his "musical journey" while ignoring his more experienced South Asian collaborators. (This led to a knowing glance between me and Mir moments later, when Rachna proceeded to ask Galen this very question.) Shiva and Mir were peers, with different enough approaches to their instrument to avoid full-blown competition but enough of the same training to foster mutual respect. Meanwhile, Rachna dominated the room. Shiva called her *didi* and treated her with a reverence that belied his stoner bro affect. Mir flitted about anxiously, fussing over the chai and asking for Rachna's input on how to arrange the room to accommodate her dance but also to achieve the best acoustic, no small feat in his cramped Brooklyn apartment. Everyone seemed to conveniently forget that I was there, leaving me free to curl up on the couch with my notebook and settle into my role as participant-observer.

I struggle to find the words to describe the musicking that ensued. It ranks among the top artistic experiences of my life to date. At its peak, when Rachna, Shiva, and Mir rapidly executed

⁹⁶ Traditional South Asian garment consisting of a tunic and pants

⁹⁷ Bells worn by classical Indian dancers around the ankles

improvised sequences in perfect sync while Galen furiously maintained the *nagma*,⁹⁸ Rachna stamped her foot coming out of a spin and hollered, “*This* is Kathak!” For my part, I alternated manically between scrawling notes and taking up my flute, doing my best to pick up on moments where I could hop into a rhythmic language I knew next to nothing about and drawing on my Carnatic training to lock into complex cadences, but pulling back when the unfamiliar layerings of odd-numbered beats became too much or when the urge to document overwhelmed me.

Many of my favorite ethnographers describe the pivotal moment when they knew they had “arrived” in the field. Clifford Geertz playfully narrates his experience of running from the police after an illegal cockfight in Bali, and of finally being accepted by his interlocutors as a member of the community.⁹⁹ My own fieldwork “moment” makes for no less colorful an anecdote: during a brief pause in our session, Rachna challenged Mir to recite an intricate rhythmic composition while playing his tabla, a useful skill for collaborating with dancers. Shiva, meanwhile, disappeared into the kitchen to roll another joint. Mir rose to the challenge, but eventually made a minor misstep, at which point Shiva instantly reemerged, poking his head out of the kitchen with a half-rolled joint in hand to casually chime in with the correction. The irreverence of it all, the sheer virtuosity combined with decadence, was almost too much to bear. I had found “the scene”; it was hazier than I had anticipated, less glamorous than its level of artistry deserved, but more intense and all-consuming than I had dared to hope. I moved into Mir’s building a few weeks later, subletting a tiny room in the apartment Galen had just vacated. My furniture consisted of a twin bed and a single flickering bulb hanging from the ceiling. Rent was \$750 a month. I had arrived.

⁹⁸ A repetitive melody used as a grounding structure for improvisation

⁹⁹ Geertz, Clifford. “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight.” *Daedalus* Vol. 101 No. 1 (1972) pp. 1-37.

Performance-Through-Performance

From Philip Deloria's "playing Indian"¹⁰⁰ to E. Patrick Johnson's "performing Blackness,"¹⁰¹ studies of cross-cultural performance often begin with the assumption that these are, at core, performances of the racialized Other. Even scholars who emphasize these performances' effect of revealing whiteness — see Deloria as well as Eric Lott¹⁰² — fundamentally understand these performance practices as ones in which the white performer crosses racial lines in a transgression of racial categories. In the following section, I interrogate the "anxious" affect of one white Hindustani musician's cross-cultural performance practice, an affect which suggests that this might better be understood as a performance of *whiteness* before the non-white gaze. In calling this a performance, I mean that these cross-cultural transgressions go beyond making whiteness visible, as Lott and Deloria suggest, towards actually producing a different species of whiteness, one that is in dialogue with the perspective and demands of the non-white Other.

Galen is appropriately self-conscious about the way he presents, translucent skin with long blond hair tied up in a loose bun, sitar under his arm. After our first interview he sends me a self-satirizing video of a sitar performance he's recently given in a local salt cave. The point, it seems, is to let me know that he's in on the joke; he's not one of *those* white people, at least not really.

The brief biography that starts our interview is illuminating. Galen was raised in upstate New York in what he describes as a "very homogenous town" where there "wasn't much of anything culturally." His introduction to South Asian music came at the age of sixteen from a white man who had bought a sitar on the internet, but knew little about South Asian music himself. Soon afterwards, Galen found himself traveling to India to study the sitar with little to no knowledge of

¹⁰⁰ Deloria, Philip J. *Playing Indian*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, E. Patrick. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

¹⁰² Lott, Eric. *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

the country's culture or traditions beyond what a brief Wikipedia search taught him about Hinduism.

Galen is profoundly, painfully aware of how he might be perceived as a white man studying Hindustani music. He says of India, in an offhand yet confessional tone: "You know how indelible the effects of colonization are there." For the Indian nationals Galen has met on his travels, the response to his interest in Hindustani music has been overwhelmingly positive, to what he describes as an embarrassing degree ("they like our shit now"). This local embrace has not been without its downsides, as Galen describes a sense that his first guru didn't feel the need to "put [him] through" the rigor of traditional instruction, excluding him from many of the social aspects of his teachings and even frequently watching cricket during their lessons. At the time, Galen was bothered and even offended by what felt like discriminatory treatment or neglect. In retrospect, he acknowledges his guru's likely impression that the stakes of learning Hindustani music were simply not very high for him as a white American: "I could come back [to the US] and the most that would have been broken is my pride," he concedes. This attitude directly parallels Pandit Das and Rachna's perspectives on white Kathak dancers, as well as Morelli's subsequent defensiveness as a white Kathak practitioner. Likewise, Galen does not hide his frustration with the dismissive attitudes and assumptions he sometimes encountered in India, which he summarizes in quotes: "Look at the rich [white] guy who found his next hobby."

Stateside, too, the way Galen is perceived as a white practitioner of a non-white art is never far from his thoughts. He characterizes the U.S. scene as somewhat more "egalitarian," although he still sometimes senses that he is being catered to as a white man. I myself frequently describe him to friends as a "white guy who plays the sitar," an epithet that we both acknowledge carries some unsavory implications. At best, Galen tells me, he hopes to distance himself from a particular kind of white person that we mutually struggle to define, although we both have a clear image in mind. In retrospect, I believe the distinction is fairly simple: unlike many of his peers, Galen is a white man

who thinks about his race. This should not be a controversial statement. The vast majority of white people are not often compelled to reflect on their race. Sociologist Ainsley Lambert-Swain describes race as a “low salience identity” for whites as dominant group members,¹⁰³ while Kelsey Klotz suggests that “many white people have not had to consider themselves as white — as being racialized subjects whose lives and livelihood have been shaped to some extent by whiteness.”¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, in between his sitar studies Galen received a degree from Goddard College, a nontraditional academic program where he was frequently encouraged to reflect on his whiteness from both practical and theoretical standpoints. As such, an active part of Galen’s performance practice involves thinking through the racial, cultural, and political implications of the artistic opportunities he is presented with as a white man.

I believe this matters. Galen’s presence as a white man in brown spaces is not, in itself, exceptional. Neither is his markedness, his visibility, in these spaces. Indeed, while many within the field of critical whiteness studies have theorized whiteness in terms of its invisibility,¹⁰⁵ Sarah Ahmed suggests that this foundational assumption is itself an “exercise in white seeing, which does not have ‘others’ in view, those who are witness to the very forms of whiteness, daily.”¹⁰⁶ From a non-white perspective, Galen has never *not* been visible as white. What is exceptional is Galen’s *own* experience of this visibility, and his awareness of *himself* as white. Performance theorist E. Patrick Johnson writes, “Self-reflexivity is usually a by-product of cultural performance, and this is particularly true for the performer who performs the Other.”¹⁰⁷ Galen’s Hindustani performance practice plays a crucial role in his engagement with his own whiteness: it generates in him a foundational anxiety tied to feeling white before the brown gaze. This is, I believe, a productive

¹⁰³ Lambert-Swain, Ainsley. “Marked and Managed: Performing a ‘Good’ White identity in Non-white Spaces.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 2023 pp. 1-21.

¹⁰⁴ Klotz 2023:5

¹⁰⁵ See Dyer 1997; Feagin 2009; Frankenberg 1993

¹⁰⁶ Ahmed 2004

¹⁰⁷ Johnson 2003:209

anxiety. Indeed, Ahmed goes on to theorize a “white subject [that] would come into existence in its very anxiety about the effects it has on others, or even in fear that it is taking something away from others.”¹⁰⁸ Galen’s “anxious” performance practice generates a particular performance of whiteness, one that has the potential to fundamentally reshape the flow of power in cross-cultural collaborations and appropriations.

I do not here mean to suggest that structural racism can be combatted with anxiety alone. Ahmed ultimately rejects the “fantasy...that to be critical and self-conscious is a good thing, and is even the condition of possibility for anti-racism.”¹⁰⁹ She considers declarations of whiteness and anti-racism to be “unhappy performatives” in that “they do not do what they say”¹¹⁰ or accomplish what they intend. In other words, merely acknowledging one’s role in structural racism as a white person is not enough to counteract its effects. I am not positing anxiety as an anti-racist tool, but I do understand it as one of the central affects of cross-cultural performance, and thus as a performative agent in the manufacturing of cross-cultural social structures.¹¹¹ As such, alongside Ahmed, I ask: “Is a whiteness that is anxious about itself – its narcissism, its egoism, its privilege, its self-centeredness – better? What kind of whiteness is a whiteness that is anxious about itself? What does such an anxious whiteness do?”¹¹²

The question need not be taken in the abstract, as Lambert-Swain suggests that anxious white people often do make conscious changes to their behavior in non-white spaces, both to signal a “good” white identity and to establish their belonging within their chosen communities.¹¹³ Indeed, Galen makes a concerted effort to counteract the privilege he holds as a white man playing a South

¹⁰⁸ Ahmed 2004

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*

¹¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹¹ See Ioanide, Paula. *The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of Colorblindness*. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2015.

¹¹² Ahmed 2004

¹¹³ Lambert-Swain 2023

Asian instrument. He consults his South Asian *guru* before deciding whether to accept gigs that he believes he might have earned for the wrong reasons, or that seem outside of his skill level as an artist. In our musical interactions at Mir's apartment, he audibly holds back, allowing the brown performers in the room to occupy the main stage. As we continue to collaborate over the course of my fieldwork, I am frequently attuned to the ways that this "impression management" is made manifest in Galen's sound as an ensemble musician, the waxing and waning affect of white anxiety revealed through his musical choices in different interracial configurations. I also find in Galen's "anxious" performance practice a productive opportunity to engage the category of performance itself, and to think about the affordances of cross-cultural performance for racial identity formation.

While we can easily categorize live music before an audience as a sort of "performance," Richard Schechner famously distinguishes between that which "is" a performance and that which can be read "as" a performance, the former being a historically and culturally determined category and the latter an interpretive lens.¹¹⁴ This latter understanding of performance as a hermeneutic has paved the way for discussions of the "performance" of race and gender, such as in the works of Judith Butler¹¹⁵ and E. Patrick Johnson.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, in a paradigm that we might call performance-*through*-performance, Galen's cross-cultural musical practice ("is" performance) simultaneously serves as an expression of his lived racial identity ("as" performance). To put it differently, Galen's performance of the sitar, a racially inflected instrument, is always simultaneously a performance of his whiteness, especially as the instrument brings him into contact with brown cultural spaces. Performance-through-performance need not be restricted to interracial performance, as native practitioners of racialized art forms also often use their art to interrogate their racial and cultural identities; I myself am a case in point. However, performance-through-performance is exceptionally salient in discussions of appropriation, as cross-cultural performance has historically

¹¹⁴ Schechner 2002:38-40.

¹¹⁵ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge, 1990.

¹¹⁶ Johnson 2003

been one of the most effective means of bringing whiteness to light. Indeed, the history of the West is riddled with examples of performance-through-performance, as white colonizers alternately appropriate and eradicate the cultural and artistic practices of the colonized as a means of defining their own whiteness in silhouette.¹¹⁷

From this perspective, we might consider performance-through-performance a form of identity work, wherein the performer's identity *outside* of the boundaries of the performance is ultimately rendered visible and comprehensible by its manifestation *within* the boundaries of the performance. Galen's adoption of the sitar and his participation in brown cultural spaces might be understood as a problematic interracial performance of brownness; but I would argue that from a non-white perspective, it is both more accurate and more productive to understand Galen's performance practice as a performance of *whiteness*. This represents an important departure from E. Patrick Johnson's work, in which a white Australian gospel choir is thought to have "participated in the coproduction of blackness" and thus to have "for all intents and purposes....in face of evidence to the contrary, '[become]' Black"¹¹⁸ through their performance. I have found Johnson's work extremely productive for thinking through the flows of cultural knowledge between differently racialized communities, but I am resistant to the degree of his belief in "the transformative power of dialogic performance."¹¹⁹ In my analysis, Galen's performance of South Asian music serves not as a racially transgressive performance of brownness, but as an "anxious" performance of his own racial identity that in turn *produces* a specific kind of whiteness, one that exists in relation to non-white communities and in attempted defiance of the structures of racism that governs these relations.

To a certain extent, this framing recuperates the very act of crossing racial lines in performance, denying the white performer the power to define or embody the racialized Other and

¹¹⁷ See Deloria 1998; Lott 2013

¹¹⁸ Johnson 2003:216

¹¹⁹ *ibid*

instead subjecting this white performer to the brown gaze, which thereby plays a role in producing whiteness. Meanwhile, Galen's "anxious" feeling of rejection by the insular community of classical South Asian musicians has led him to find a second home in the avant-garde scene, where he often performs before white audiences. These performances before the white gaze differ in marked ways from his Hindustani performance practice. Galen describes his process of making original music for white audiences in which he intentionally shies away from situating his compositions in particular *rāgs*; instead, he says, he tries to consider the sitar an instrument akin to a violin, in the sense of having access to a wide variety of musical and cultural traditions. The goal, he suggests, is to show that "this instrument has a certain history and a culture and it's also [just] a musical instrument."

This fundamental *lack* of anxiety around the sitar as an instrument — or perhaps, this attempt to divorce the sitar from its anxiety-inducing, racialized context — is a form of white privilege that Galen has yet to reject. From my own perspective, as a South Asian Carnatic musician, I cannot separate my instrument from its racial context. I am reminded of Robin Bernstein's discussion of "scriptive things" wherein she understands things (as opposed to objects) as situated and citational, as performatives that hail human agents into particular modes of behavior and interaction.¹²⁰ My instrument is one such "thing": I cannot take it outside of its racial, cultural, and historical context without intense anxiety and without real consequences for my relationship with my *guru*, my parents, and my community. The stakes, for Galen, are simply not as high. "Even though [Hindustani music is] the most important artistic thing in my life...I don't really have a horse in the race," he admits, later even going so far as to say, "My interpretation of *rāgā* is not a thing I need to bring into this world as an artist."

Rather than necessarily reading Galen's cross-cultural performance practice as an interracial appropriation, then, it is interesting to think of it as a self-conscious performances of whiteness, and

¹²⁰ Bernstein, Robin. "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race." *Social Text* 101 Vol. 27 No. 4 (2009) pp. 67-94.

thus as a rejection of the privilege that accompanies invisibility. Cross-cultural performance acts as a means of subjecting whiteness to the brown gaze, a gaze that produces self-reflection and anxiety in the white subject and in doing so produces a different *kind* of whiteness. I will resist theorizing this different breed of whiteness in terms of the “good white person,” although I do believe Galen to be a good person who is also white. But I find that the metric of “performance-through-performance” allows us to understand the potential value of cross-cultural performance, when undertaken with a degree of reflexivity and care. In Galen’s case, his performance of the Other succeeds only insofar as it produces the necessary anxiety for him to perform a different white self, a white self that is necessarily in dialogue with brownness. Cross-cultural performance thus resounds differently when used as an opportunity to prioritize the brown gaze.

However, not all of my white interlocutors are as transparent as Galen in their anxieties before this gaze. My project is somewhat self-selecting in attracting musicians who necessarily take the questions of appropriation and cultural ownership seriously, and who have engaged in some degree of self-reflection; but another thing all of my interlocutors have in common, by virtue of being practicing musicians, is that they have all, to varying degrees, found ways of living with their racialized status and their sometimes fraught relationships with South Asian music. In the following section, I explore a performance of whiteness that differs markedly from Galen’s performance practice, particularly in terms of its affect. While the comparative lens is intentional, I do not aim to pit these two artists against one another as examples of “good” versus “bad” whiteness. Rather, I hope to productively contrast their experiences of being white before the brown gaze, and the subsequent implications for cross-cultural performance.

“You Can Hear The Accent”

When Jake Charkey and I sit down for an interview at Ix, a homey Guatemalan restaurant in our shared Brooklyn neighborhood, I immediately note the easy familiarity he displays as I walk him through my research questions. He nods knowingly as I describe my own journey of learning to engage with South Asian music outside of its “traditional trappings”; he freely interjects as I describe the translation processes involved at most cross-cultural jams (more on this in Chapter Three). When our server arrives, he orders off-menu in Spanish with only the slightest hint of an American accent, without making a show of it but unavoidably catching my attention.

Jake is a Hindustani cellist. Notably, the cello is his first and only instrument as a practitioner of Hindustani music: he was fortunate to have a *guru* who valued his lifelong training on the Western instrument enough to suggest that he stay within his own area of expertise as he began to study Hindustani music. I first saw Jake perform as a member of Adam Rudolph’s Go: Organic Orchestra, a relatively experimental musical context. However, it becomes clear over the course of our conversation that Jake’s primary goal as an innovating artist is to introduce the cello into the Hindustani canon, and to demonstrate the instrument’s affordances for Hindustani music in its traditional, classical form. Respect for the classical genre is built into Jake’s artistic practice. Although his debut solo album, *Rasika: Beyond the Bounded Territories*, purports to explore points of overlap and tension between Western and Indian music, many of his innovations occur *within* the Hindustani idiom, rather than through any dramatic attempt to rupture genre norms.

It is important — and hard — to acknowledge the shared language Jake, Galen, and I use to explain what draws us to music that is “not our own.” Like Galen, Jake was raised in a somewhat insular musical environment. He grew up in Brattleboro, Vermont, a town with a robust classical musical scene thanks to the nearby Marlboro music festival. He describes his community’s “blindness” to music outside of this particular scene, a culture that shaped his own approach to classical music

throughout his childhood and adolescence. Jake went on to briefly attend conservatory at Rice University, an experience he describes as “not a fit” due to what he perceived as a lack of acceptance of or encouragement for creative choices beyond the classical mold. It was this dissatisfaction with the restrictiveness of his musical environment that first led Jake to explore other genres, and in particular to attend performances of South Asian music on campus that immediately piqued his interest. In discussing this initial attraction, Jake freely acknowledges that there was at least some degree of Orientalist exoticization at play. On the other hand, the way Jake describes his “reactionary” impulse to being raised in a restrictive and conservative musical environment speaks uncomfortably well to my own experiences experimenting with fusion and especially with Black American music after growing up in a conservative Indian household, so that I can’t help but empathize with the impulse to look beyond one’s own community for a more congenial musical and cultural value system.

As such, when I introduce the question of appropriation into our conversation, it is not without some hedging. I refrain from commenting as Jake describes his years spent living with a Rastafarian community while studying reggae music. He tells me openly, almost wistfully, how he grew out his locs, attended a Rasta church, and lived Yardie style. His tone as he recounts this period of his life is completely devoid of embarrassment; indeed, he takes his full embrace of non-white cultures as a point of pride, saying:

I think, you know, just me personally I feel like I’m somebody who’s *always* been comfortable giving myself that permission [...] And you know, I’ve thought about it a lot because I really don’t know where that comes from, like I don’t think my parents are like that, or anyone else in my family is quite like that [...] but maybe a piece of that does have to do with my own cultural identity in some way? Just, Jewish people have been assimilators and absorbers of other cultures traditionally [...] Also being somewhat divorced from my own, I mean I didn’t grow up with the religion or anything, there were a couple of ethnicky things that we did — and people looked at *us* as different growing up in super white Vermont, like people would identify me as, as ‘not of that,’ you know? But, um...so yeah, anyway. I’ve definitely thought a lot about it, and like, you know, in terms of my own steps and missteps.

Like Galen, Jake takes his non-white performance practice as opportunity to reflect on his own racial and ethnic identity, attributing the liberties he takes as he moves between cultural communities to a Jewish history of assimilation and adaptation. Unlike Galen, however, who can frequently be heard to criticize certain white practitioners' "mimicry" of South Asianness, Jake takes a more holistic approach to cultural tourism. He freely engages with cultures outside of the one he was raised in, beyond just playing the music. I am intrigued by his assertion later in our conversation that he "can speak Indian English," a practice that Galen explicitly disavows; indeed, Jake considers his attempt to mirror the dialect and accent of his interlocutors an important way of avoiding bringing his own power as a white person to bear on their interactions, saying:

Something that I've felt with a lot of white friends who are liberal and like, think deeply about these things, is coming up on their own...shame? Or guilt? About, um, about their whiteness, I guess? You know? It's like, no, you're allowed to participate! Like, in fact, culture is meant to be shared. And it's important, if you want to heal those wounds and bridge those gaps, *to* participate because otherwise, everybody has to come to you, and they can feel your discomfort, and like, how uncomfortable you are in their space, you know? It's like, no, relax! Like, yes, you're allowed to dance like that. Yes, you're allowed to speak the language. Yes, you don't have to have an accent when you speak the language! And that goes for music too, because the other thing that happens I think with white musicians a lot is like, you can hear the accent, you know?

The "accent" Jake refers to is here directly tied to affect, as "shame," "guilt," and "discomfort" dialogue with what I read as "anxiety" in Galen's cross-cultural performance practice. Meanwhile, for Jake, engaging deeply with non-white cultural forms becomes a means of meeting non-white people on their own terms, rather than forcing them to assimilate or code-switch into hegemonic whiteness. Doing so without discomfort or shame becomes equally important as a means of valorizing said cultural forms. Jake's attitude towards cross-cultural exchange is thus more one of assimilation than appropriation, allowing for a temporary reversal of power as he works to fully and appropriately participate in brown cultural spaces.

What Jake misses, to my mind, is the productive importance of white anxiety before the non-white gaze. For BIPOC, histories of oppression and erasure can lead to a permanent anxiety

about how our cultural practices will be perceived in dominant (i.e., white) cultural spaces. In navigating these interracial interactions, we are often compelled to code-switch into more palatable (i.e., white) modes of being. A 2019 article in the Harvard Business Review defines code-switching as “adjusting one’s style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities.”¹²¹ The same article emphasizes the negative psychological repercussions of code-switching, including hostility from one’s own community, cognitive fatigue, and a reduction in authentic self-expression. For non-white people, code-switching into whiteness is hard work. It is rarely done willingly, but something that we feel compelled to do in white spaces in order to ensure fair treatment. While Jake sees his own practice of code-switching into non-white modes of being as a means of reducing the cultural burden on non-white people, his breeziness proves somewhat frustrating when we consider the emotional toll of performing whiteness for BIPOC. Jake frames his participation in non-white cultures in terms of “healing wounds” and “bridging gaps”; but this attitude can lead to a complicated response from the communities in question (see “they like our shit now”).

And yet, on another level I don’t believe Jake misses this point at all. Consider his response, when I ask him explicitly how he reconciles his relationship with South Asian music as a white man who thinks critically about appropriation and Orientalism. “I mean, I don’t think I ever really like... wanted to...I was confused — well, maybe I was confused, I don’t know. I have no idea, like, looking back. But um...I mean I do still think about it. Like, I don’t...yeah. I — I don’t — I can’t say that I’ve like, settled into an easy place with that, actually.” This “anxious” response, bordering on incoherence, is far more reassuring than any claim to a definitive philosophy might be. On the surface, Jake seems to have made peace with his position as a white innovator in the world of

¹²¹ McCluney, Courtney L., Kathrina Robotham, Serenity Lee, Richard Smith and Myles Durkee. “The Costs of Code-Switching.” *Harvard Business Review* 2019.

Hindustani music. His album “explores hybridity, the overlapping spaces between Western and Indian music, points of tension or commonality, and new ways of using Indian techniques and musical grammar.” On the Kickstarter page for the album, he emphasizes the potential impact of his work as inspiration for a new generation of musicians versed in multiple musical systems. He also considers this mode of innovation a crucial means of ensuring that *rāgā* music remain a living art form. Yet when asked about the ethics of fusion as an artistic practice, again he equivocates:

I have mixed feelings about all of this, and I go back and forth. I’m in a big gray area, too. Cuz I think that on the one hand, there’s like, we should be concerned about appropriation, and give respect, and acknowledge where things come from. On the other hand, I’m from America, I did grow up in the age of hip-hop; I also have heavy exposure to Jamaican music, which also has this tradition of just like, ‘Oh, that’s a cool beat, I’m gonna make a new song out of it!’ ‘Oh, you wrote that? I’m gonna use it now!’ [...] Like, there’s never really attribution, it’s just like, a bunch of building blocks to make new stuff, and some of the new stuff is awesome. And so maybe on the other hand, the other end of the extreme is like, maybe we shouldn’t be precious about this at all, and just move fast and break things and, and make things new, you know? The American way.

It is worth noting that neither of the genres Jake cites as emblematic of free circulation and exchange are traditionally white genres, but rather come from Black America and the Caribbean. The rich history of sampling in Jamaican music and hip hop is beyond the purview of this project, but I will mention that sampling as an artistic practice was first introduced in the United States by Jamaican deejays in the Bronx;¹²² likewise, for Jake, “move fast and break things” is a distinctly *American* attitude, one that he feels comfortable adopting as his own. His claim that we “should be concerned about appropriation” is offered almost as a caveat, as a means of making sure *I* know that *he* knows the right thing to say as a white person playing brown music. Or perhaps that’s unfair — rather, he tries to signal that he has given the matter of appropriation some thought, has asked himself the same questions that I am asking of him now, and has arrived at a conclusion that leaves room for him as a white man in the worlds of South Asian music and fusion.

¹²² Cox, Wayne M. “Rhymin’ and Stealin’? The History of Sampling in the Hip-Hop and Dance Music Worlds and How U.S. Copyright Law & Judicial Precedent Serves to Shackle Art.” *Virginia Sports and Entertainment Law Journal* Vol. 14 No. 2 (2015) pp. 219-249.

In Chapter Two, I will turn more pointedly to the question of what makes for “good fusion” from an aesthetic perspective as well as an ethical one. For now, however, I will leave open ended the question of how these ethics change with the affect of the performance practice, and the anxiety — or lack thereof — that informs it. Jake has, ultimately, concluded that Hindustani music is his to break. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of composers featured on his album are South Asian, suggesting that he places at least some value on own voices and insider knowledge. For all his talk about not being “precious” about musical genre, there is a tangible degree of care present in Jake’s performance practice, care for the music itself as well as for the community who has shared it with him. “Hindustani music is not Hindustani music when you start doing [fusion],” he tells me. “It breaks it. And I mean that with all the violence that’s implied. But it gives it a possibility for something new, too.” Jake understands his performance practice as a means of giving back to the South Asian music community, of reinvigorating a deeply classical tradition that does not always seem to leave room for innovation. It is not simply about making the music his own. Whether this goal is successful will remain to be seen: “[It] can be interesting. Sometimes. Sometimes you just have, like, a couple of broken things.”

Everyone Needs to Eat

For U.S.-based practitioners of South Asian music, cultural appropriation has a handful of specific associations. Sarah Morelli quotes fellow white Kathak practitioner Charlotte Moraga, who says: “People assume that if you’re older and you’re white, you must be some New Age hippie.”¹²³ Many white American practitioners of South Asian music reference George Harrison’s popularization of the sitar in the 1960’s and 70’s, and the emergent hippie subculture that largely involved white people listening to the music of Harrison and his contemporaries while consuming

¹²³ Morelli 2019:140

psychedelics. A reductive depiction, perhaps; but the trope is seared into the minds of contemporary fusion practitioners, so that the all-too-frequent references to Harrison and other notable white figures in the history of South Asian music are generally accompanied by a jocular disavowal. This is the same imagined community that Galen, Jake, and Rachna's white guru *didis* attempt to distance themselves from: the indelible image of the drug-addled hippie, the resurgence of New Age spirituality — such associations are commonly thought to delegitimize any viable interest in Eastern artistic traditions.

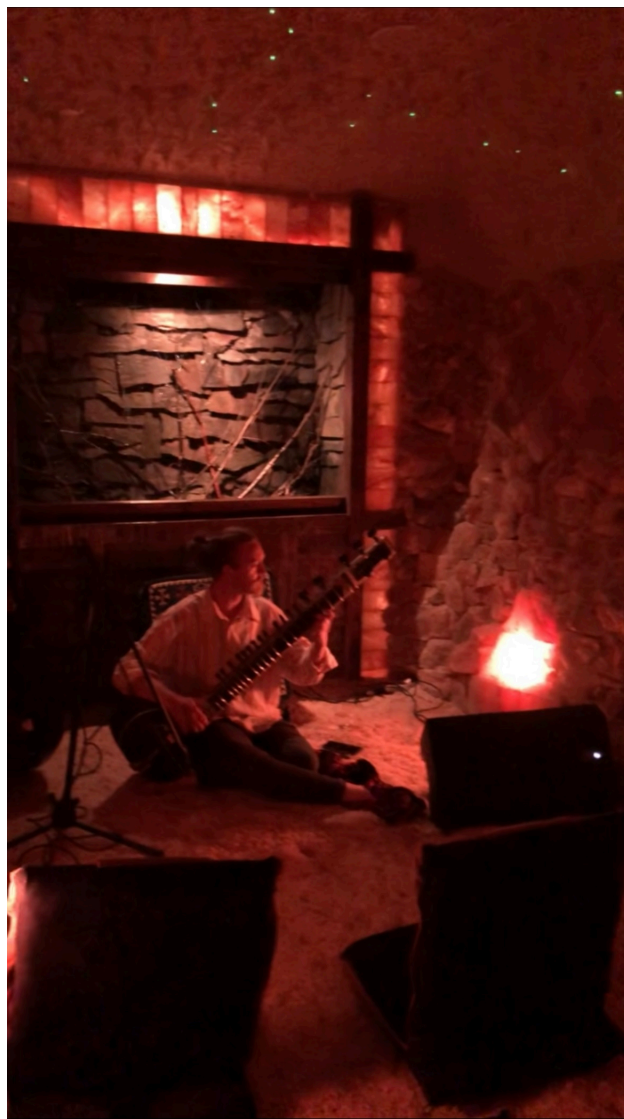


Fig 4. Galen Passen performing at Gaia NoMaya in Brooklyn, NY. Photo courtesy of artist.

In June of 2022 I was invited to a house concert where Mir would be performing tabla alongside a talented young *santoor*¹²⁴ player, Vinay Desai. The multi-floor condo where the event took place was shared by six young adults and boasted a spa in the basement and a spacious living area with beautiful acoustics, perfect for hosting musical events. That night, the room was filled with mostly young white Europeans; the small handful of middle-aged and older South Asian people clustered in the back seemed strangely out of place. Shortly before the performance began, I was discreetly made aware by our host that mushroom tea was available for consumption. I politely declined, mostly for the sake of my field notes. I watched with interest as everyone around me (with the exception of Galen, sitting beside me, and the brown aunties in the back) sipped their tea. I then proceeded to watch Vinay and Mir give what Mir later described as one of his all-time best performances, reaching tempos he had never before achieved onstage or even in his *rhythm*.¹²⁵

My field notes are, at first, colored by outrage. “It is clear that the intention behind tonight is to take drugs. The music is secondary.” Further down the page comes a comment that could either connote ongoing disbelief or begrudging appreciation: “I can’t believe this is happening in 2022 but now it’s us making the music.” Back to outrage, with slightly more room for interrogation: “I feel tricked. Unpack!” “It feels like Galen and I and this aunty are the only people in this room who know anything about this music. Why does that insult me?” Finally, two pages later, with unmistakable enthusiasm: “I think I have to do one of these gigs.”

Why the shift? In retrospect, I’m uncertain whether it was the roomful of white people or the focus on psychedelics that initially maddened me. Likely it was the combination of the two, an aversion towards the particular kind of whiteness that the union of South Asian music and psychedelics implied. Part of it was, of course, my own elitism as a classically-trained musician. Like opera in the West, Carnatic music is a genre that demands a certain virtuosity on the part of its

¹²⁴ A South Asian hammered dulcimer

¹²⁵ Focused practice

listeners, with the term *rasika* lending a dignified legitimacy to the cultural and artistic knowledge required to engage with the music “correctly.” Hindustani music has had a different historical trajectory and a different relationship with social elitism as well as with intoxicants; still, as a classical genre it certainly benefits from a knowledgeable and engaged audience. I was becoming used to drugs and alcohol on the periphery of South Asian musical events, but something about this evening suggested to me that psychedelics would in fact be taking centerstage for many participants, were perhaps even the primary motivation for attending the concert. Given my understanding of the training, dedication, and focus Mir’s performance demanded of both him and his ideal audience, I looked down on listeners who I assumed would only be engaging with the music insofar as it improved their highs.

As quickly became apparent from Galen’s muffled laughter beside me, I was not alone in this sense of superiority. There is an ethics attached to different modes of consuming and performing South Asian music in the West. A common theme that emerges within the South Asian-American music scene, even more acutely among non-South Asians, is a careful policing around what kinds of gigs are morally and artistically acceptable. Galen’s salt cave performance at Gaia NoMaya (Fig 4), a local “social wellness” venue that caters mostly to New Age white people, is an example of the kind of opportunity certain musicians might avoid, or else feel some shame about accepting. For example, Jake admits:

I mean the Gaia NoMaya thing, like, you know I’ll play that gig and then I’ll think about it for days, about what it meant that this person asked me that question, and this person wasn’t paying attention, and this person was paying attention but in the wrong way, and this person was showing me their feet, and this person was looking at their phone, and that person — you know, I see everybody in the room, and I absorb all of it, and, yeah. I mean, I think about it. A lot. And what it means for me also as a white guy to go in there, make some money...

Particularly for full-time artists whose financial well being is contingent on garnering (and accepting) as many artistic opportunities as possible, the competing impulses behind performing for

monetary gain and performing in service of their artistic and moral imperatives can create an acute inner conflict. Galen mitigates this contradictory impulse by taking advantage of what he considers lower-stakes performance opportunities to practice *rāgs* he does not feel he has mastered; when his audience is not likely to be aware of his mistakes, he feels freer to take different kinds of risks, and to allow his mistakes to serve as jumping off points for nontraditional improvisations. From the didactic mode in which Mir introduced his performance at this particular house concert, I quickly surmised that this audience, too, was expected to have little to no familiarity with the genre or instruments at hand. At the same time, Mir's refusal to phone it in — the commitment to his practice that led to an exceptionally virtuosic performance, even in the context of a less-than-knowledgable audience — astonished me. A few weeks later, over a midday chai, I asked Mir about his perspective on the performance. His response loses some of its poeticism in my retelling; still, I offered it to Jake as a sort of parable, a justification he might offer himself:

[Mir] was like, look, you can have a guy who makes really good *biryani*,¹²⁶ right? And someone is going to like, you know, they've got their job in construction down the street and they get hungry and it's lunchtime and they come over and eat some *biryani*. And then you have an expat, you know, who's been craving *biryani* since they left the country and they come home and they eat there. And then you have like a, you know, gourmet Michelin starred chef who is coming to try — like, they're all going to get something different out of that *biryani*. The product stays the same. And the ultimate impact of that product of reducing your hunger remains the same. And he was like...“The goal of my music is to reduce hunger.”

Following my initial judgment of the audience at Mir's concert, I was left shamed by the respectful focus many of them seemed to exude as they observed the performance. The insightful comments made after the event — from the comedy one listener found in the tabla's characteristic “liquid” bass strokes, to the fleeting moments of synchronized improvisation another listener astutely identified — revealed that I had been mistaken in my assessment of their priorities for the evening. They had come to dine, and their hunger had been sated.

¹²⁶ A seasoned rice dish

While I cannot pretend that Mir's attitude is representative of all South Asian musicians' approaches to performing in the United States, it is interesting that Mir, a Bangladeshi, expresses markedly less anxiety around performance context than his white American counterparts. He welcomes any opportunity to disseminate South Asian classical music to a willing audience; the desire to share his art supersedes any concerns about the reverence for or legitimacy of the art form that white practitioners feel pressured to uphold, whether by performing for mostly South Asian audiences or by rejecting associations with New Age spirituality. It would have been difficult for Galen or Jake to play the same show that Mir and Vinay had accepted without at least a sense of ironic detachment. Mir's legitimacy, it would seem, remained uncontested, his brownness shielding his artistry from suspicion.

In a New York Times article from the summer of 2022, the Indian luxury fashion designer Sabyasachi discusses a recent wedding between two white men in which he outfitted both grooms in traditional *sherwanis*.¹²⁷ For Sabyasachi, this non-Indian embrace of Indian haute couture represents a step forward, key to his own global expansion as an artist as well as the global status of Indian aesthetics writ large.¹²⁸ For certain South Asian practitioners of the South Asian arts, an uninitiated audience is a net positive; expanding the global reach of South Asian music is part of their mission. Indeed, over chai Mir stresses to me his fears for the future of Hindustani music without young American audiences' engagement. He describes hippies and their cultural descendants as a major consumer group, one to whom he is perfectly happy to cater. He simultaneously denounces what he calls a destructive perception among South Asians that classical music is inherently difficult to understand, insisting that he treats his audiences the same regardless of their level of exposure or experience. Importantly, artists like Mir trust themselves to disseminate their chosen art form in an "authentic" mode, even as they venture into unconventional performance territory. My gatekeeping,

¹²⁷ A knee-length coat worn on formal occasions

¹²⁸ Mari, Francesca. "How Sabyasachi Made the Sari Haute." *The New York Times*, June 26 2022.

which had extended to include white consumers as well as practitioners of South Asian music, was at odds with Mir's philosophy of feeding the artistically starved.

At the same time, I wonder whether such a philosophy is readily accessible to white practitioners, whose claims to expertise are often externally contested — such as in the case of Rachna's white *guru didis* — or else internally fraught. Mir's performance is not wholly removed from Galen and Jake's experiences at Gaia NoMaya, of performing for a majority white audience whose prior knowledge of the art form is minimal and whose mode of engaging with South Asian culture reinforces exoticizing Orientalist tropes. However, Mir's brownness enables him to subvert these tropes by providing what he can claim as an authentic and satiating musical experience, even in a nontraditional context — a claim that is authenticated by his race as much as by his artistic prowess.

Put differently, the anxieties around authenticity that accompany white entry into non-white performance cultures fundamentally differ from the anxieties that might accompany a brown artist performing South Asian music for a white audience. While Jake and Galen's anxieties seem to revolve around the demands they make of themselves as artists and a certain desire for external validation of their cross-cultural efforts, Mir's sense of legitimacy is untroubled by his audience's perception of his performance. It is my white interlocutors who seem the most preoccupied with the justification for their particular ethics of performance, while Mir and Rachna are relatively unperturbed by the white gaze of their audiences and students respectively. At the very least, this gaze does not exert any influence on their practice, or so they claim. For Galen and Jake, the stereotypical white consumer of South Asian music serves as a sort of funhouse mirror, a distorted and exaggerated reflection of the Orientalist impulse they recognize within themselves. Meanwhile, Mir's determination and his uncontested ability to provide an authentic musical product — his *performance* of authenticity — legitimizes the South Asianness of the encounter, its majority-white context notwithstanding. He does not allow his audience to have a superficial or appropriative experience; instead, he treats them as sanctioned consumers of a product he stands behind.

It would be reductive to subsequently claim that appropriation is a matter of perspective or even of intention. Rather, what I hope to demonstrate through this anecdote is that non-white musicians have a certain agency in determining the level of authenticity they choose to perform for the white gaze in any given context. White musicians, too, certainly have the option of demonstrating or withholding their artistic knowledge from moment to moment; however, the threat of (mis)identification with a depreciated subculture of whiteness can lead them to either misrepresent South Asian music for an audience they deem unworthy, or else to be sensitive to their own reception to a degree where this sensitivity influences their practice. For the brown performer of brown music, meanwhile, it does not matter for whom you are performing; a skilled performer can *construct* authenticity in any context, even when this authenticity is not *reflected* by said context. Good *biryani* is good *biryani*. And everyone needs to eat.

The Value of Appropriation

The Rāgās Live Festival made keen use of its 24-hour time cycle, anticipating the ebbs and flows of energy and crowds to curate a comfortable circadian flow. Around 10:00 pm it was time for the unofficial headlining act, the artist I bragged about seeing to my South Asian family and friends and even some vague acquaintances, knowing that the name-drop would at least be a talking point: Sid Sriram.

Born in Chennai but raised in the Bay Area, Sriram is primarily known as a playback singer, with credits in a variety of South Asian languages and a long history of collaboration with renowned composer and producer A. R. Rahman. Sriram has had rigorous training in Carnatic music, and regularly performs sold-out concerts during the Chennai music season; he is also well known, especially in the diaspora, as an R&B artist, fusing Carnatic vocalizations with spoken word poetry and crooning deliveries of introspective lyrics. Sriram has an ardent fan base, and just as many

detractors. His genre-fusing live act could readily lend to a simple, binaristic argument about modernity and tradition, East and West; his 2019 debut solo album, *Entropy*, deploys *nadaswaram*¹²⁹ and *tanpura*¹³⁰ alongside futuristic synths to similar effect. For now, however, my question is again one of racialization and cross-cultural performance, as Sriram's performance practice brings Black popular aesthetics to bear on a privileged South Asian classical tradition.

Dressed in an oversized t-shirt, puffy vest, and baggy jeans, with mid-length curly hair in a high ponytail that revealed a voguish undercut, Sriram appeared onstage at the Ragas Live Festival steeped in hip hop and R&B aesthetics. His soundcheck with drum kit, bass, and guitar emphasized heavy reverb and loop pedals. This was the first time I was hearing his music, but between South Asian fangirls' cloying adoration and my parents' undisguised disapproval, I had heard too much about him to expect him to be good.

The musicians cleared the stage. Sriram emerged, alone, and sat on a chair in the center of the stage. He straddled the seat at an angle with his head bowed and hands clasped. The effect was brooding and melancholy, Drake-esque. He turned on an electronic *tanpura*. He took a moment to settle into the *śruti*.¹³¹ And then he launched into an undeniably classical, technically adroit, and genuinely moving rendition of the *Saveri varnam*.

The role of the *varnam* as the opening number of a traditional Carnatic concert performance lies somewhere between a warmup and a flex. Technically demanding and melodically dense, *varnams* are more often than not used as pedagogical tools that emphasize vocal agility or else manual dexterity on an instrument, while also conveying authoritative knowledge of a particular *rāgā*. Usually allowing minimal room for improvisation compared with the rest of the Carnatic repertoire, the *varnam* is in some ways the performer's homage to tradition. As I have strayed further and further from tradition in my own Carnatic performance practice, *varnams* are the compositions I practice the

¹²⁹ A South Indian double-reed instrument played on auspicious occasions

¹³⁰ A string instrument that provides the grounding drone for South Asian classical music

¹³¹ Tonic pitch

least; when I do play a *varnam*, the impulse usually arises from a feeling of insecurity, a need to remind myself that my classical and technical chops are still there even as I move stylistically beyond the genre's norms.

What, then, is the impact of Sriram opening his concert with the performance of a *varnam*? Purists of my parents' generation are routinely dismissive of Sriram — as my mother explained to my white husband, “Carnatic musicians don't do *cini* [cinema] music.” Meanwhile, my field notes from the festival read: “This is what it feels like to be called in.” Sriram's performance insisted on the “cool” factor of Carnatic music — an aesthetic of “cool” that vividly recalls Lauren Michelle Jackson's description of the “insurgence of blackness.” (More on this in a moment.) It suggested that Carnatic music could be extracted from the conservative trappings of upper-caste South Indian culture and brought into a different social realm. (More on this, as well.) And, for a particular kind of listener, Sriram's choice to open his performance with a piece that epitomized the classical Carnatic tradition was a way of saying: “You are my audience — and in case you doubted me, here are my credentials.” *Saveri* is considered a heavier *rāgā* in the Carnatic tradition, and is objectively one of the more difficult *varnams* to pull off without regular practice. The *Saveri varnam* is also deeply classical in a way that might resist ready accessibility by an uninformed audience. The composition that opened Sriram's set led me to engage with the remainder of his performance in different light: I saw him, first and foremost, as a Carnatic musician, one with the training and technical chops to be taken seriously a Carnatic musician, who was intentionally pushing the genre in a novel direction. For the (much less classical) remainder of his set, *rāgās* did not function as “jumping off points,” as Carnatic-jazz violinist Arun Ramamurthy memorably described his own approach. Rather, Sriram presented each *rāgā* in its classical form with respect to *gamakka* and *sancāri*, but with innovative transitions, unexpected timbres, and nontraditional harmonic accompaniment. This was not, in my view, an R&B artist who “borrowed” from the Carnatic tradition; this was Carnatic R&B.

Various scholars of interminority interactions have searched for alternatives to appropriation to describe flows of cultural knowledge between minority groups, flows that could result in the creation of something like “Carnatic R&B.” Performer-scholar T. Roberts describes multiple forms of cross-racial performance in a passage that is worth quoting at length:

Motivated by curiosity, desire, and revulsion, minstrelsy is about defining the self while performing the Other [...] The temporary crossing of racial lines serves to distance the performer from the performed — presumed to be of a different racial category — and keeps the performer’s identity intact. Passing, however, involves a provisional disavowal of the self and capitalizes on the paradoxical rigidity and permeability of racial categories in order to forge a new social identity [...] Finally, cross-racial ‘appropriation as identification’ (Sharma 2010) posits retention of the self while drawing performative connections to the Other. The Other provides gestures, sounds, or techniques that allow the performer to express an alternate or more complete version of themselves than previously available. In each of these approaches, self-definition is paramount and the Other serves as a model or point of contrast.¹³²

Roberts, drawing on Nitasha Sharma, envisions a mode of cross-cultural and interracial performance that does not exist to objectify the Other, but that ultimately points towards and enriches the self — a mode that certainly seems to reflect the performances of whiteness analyzed earlier in this chapter. Importantly, Roberts’ framing does not exonerate artists from the structural power they hold in their encounters with one another; implicit in his use of “provides” and “serves” is an extractive quality that recalls hooks’ “alternative playground,” describing a hierarchy of power in which the performer literally tools the cultural resources of the racialized Other to serve their own needs. Sriram’s performance of Blackness via genre and visual aesthetics is not removed from the questions of appropriation that plague my white interlocutors. However, the relationship of South Asian-Americans to Blackness must be understood in the context of both minority groups’ relationships to hegemonic white supremacy.

The binaristic model of U.S. race relations means that both Blackness and whiteness exert an influence on how Asian-Americanness is situated and perceived. C. J. Kim treats disparate processes

¹³² Roberts 2016:60

of racialization in the U.S. as mutually constitutive and multivariable, arriving at a model in which Asian-Americans are denigrated as civic outsiders relative to both Black and white Americans, but valorized somewhere between the two groups in terms of racial supremacy. Importantly, through its appropriation by white Americans, Black *culture* — distinct from Black *people* — becomes a means of accessing the “superior, insider” category.¹³³ We could thus read Sriram’s performance of Black musical aesthetics as an “anxious” attempt to perform his own undeniable Americanness, even in the context of an homage to South Asian tradition.

To read this as simply an “American” performance, however, is to miss many of the implications of situating Black culture in a South Asian context. Vijay Prashad’s explication of the model minority myth demonstrates the ways in which Black and South Asian identities in the United States have long been intertwined. Prashad posits the model minority as a necessarily relational stereotype used to justify negative attitudes towards minority groups who resist assimilation or whose success does not resonate in the value frameworks of white supremacy. While the model minority stereotype was a “godsend for desis [that] provided them with an avenue toward advancement,”¹³⁴ it did so at the expense of Black Americans and to the direct benefit of whites. Prashad writes: “The lack of connection between desi advancement on the backs of blacks and the use of desis in a war against black Americans comes at the expense of a tradition of solidarity and fellowship that began at least a hundred years ago.”¹³⁵ I have firsthand experience of the anti-Blackness that permeates the South Asian community, both on the subcontinent and stateside; in theorizing this interminority racism as an agent of white supremacy, I am not, so to speak, letting us off the hook. But I am arguing that the relationship of minority groups to one another is fundamentally different from our respective relationships to whiteness, so that Sriram’s performance

¹³³ Kim 1999

¹³⁴ Prashad 2000:170

¹³⁵ *ibid* 171

of Black music, while worth interrogating, can productively be understood as a rejection of the logics of white supremacy.

At the same time, I am careful not to propose a model of interminority appropriation-as-solidarity. As Prashad himself notes, artistic solidarity cannot be mistaken for political solidarity. We can acknowledge the radical implications of an South Asian-American person's choice to align with Blackness in the context of the U.S. racial frame; but we should also contrast this with my own interpellation, at the same event, as a "white Indian girl." This interpellation points to the privilege both Sriram and I hold not only vis-à-vis Black Americans, but within the South Asian community. I have never heard another South Asian person refer to Sriram in terms of his caste. In the context of his Carnatic performance practice, along with a little helpful knowledge of Indian surnames, this almost certainly implies that he is a Brahmin; the Carnatic music scene is so entirely monopolized by Brahmins that any diversion from this norm, especially for a performer of Sriram's fame (or infamy), would almost certainly be subject to public scrutiny.¹³⁶ Within a structure that is directly in conversation with the U.S. racial frame, Brahmins are positioned as the elite "upper-caste" and hold an immense amount of structural power in South Asian society. In a letter to W. E. B. Du Bois, Dalit activist B. R. Ambedkar famously identified "much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and the position of the Negroes in America";¹³⁷ in this analogy, Brahmins certainly occupy the space of whiteness, as the group that has most benefited from and contributed to the subjugation of caste-oppressed groups.

¹³⁶ In a recent manifestation of this long-standing dynamic, on March 18, 2024, the Madras Music Academy awarded Carnatic vocalist T. M. Krishna with the Sangitha Kalanithi, the highest award in Carnatic music. Backlash was swift; several prominent Carnatic musicians withdrew from the MMA in protest, with former Sangitha Kalanithi N. Ravikiran (who has been multiply accused of sexual abuse) going as far as to return his 2017 award. Opposition to the Academy's decision has largely centered on Krishna's "anti-Brahmin" ideology: Krishna, while himself a Brahmin, has publicly criticized the casteism endemic to Carnatic music for many years — a stance that was characterized as "unfair, self-serving slander" in a recent op-ed in *The Print*, which instead suggests that non-Brahmins simply "exit[ed]" the art form when it became less economically viable following Independence and the decline of the patronage system. This ongoing controversy points to the near-total monopoly held by Brahmins over both the performance and consumption of Carnatic music in India as well as abroad.

¹³⁷ Ramesh, Hari. "Caste, Race, and Class." *Dissent* Vol. 68 No. 1 (2021) p. 152

I was raised in a Brahmin household where caste was almost never discussed, so that my relationship with caste can be readily compared to the “normativity and invisibility”¹³⁸ described by Aileen Moreton-Robinson alongside any number of scholars of whiteness. Caste is a glaring omission from my relationship with Carnatic music, and indeed from much of the public conversation around Carnatic music, at least until recently. T. M. Krishna, an internationally renowned Carnatic singer, has emerged as one vocal opponent of casteism in Carnatic music. In his 2013 monograph, *A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story*, Krishna writes that Carnatic music has been dominated by Brahmins “from the advent of the kutcheri till today,”¹³⁹ citing the historical and contemporary discrimination faced by composers, singers, and instrument-makers from non-Brahmin groups; his later work, *Sebastian and Sons: A Brief History of Mridangam Makers*, interrogates the unique positionality of *mridangam*¹⁴⁰ makers, who typically come from caste-oppressed communities and are thus excluded from the elite social world of the very instruments they create.¹⁴¹ Within academia, meanwhile, Amanda Weidman discusses the legendary M. S. Subbalakshmi’s “conversion from devadasi to married Brahmin woman” as central to the singer’s success and historical legacy,¹⁴² an argument that helpfully delegitimizes cherry-picked counternarratives of inclusivity in the Carnatic tradition. The casteism of Carnatic music and other classical South Asian art forms is also frequently discussed in terms related to appropriation, as the hereditary practitioners thought to have originated these art forms are today largely excluded from their performance structures.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. “Whiteness, Epistemology, and Representation.” In *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004, p. 75.

¹³⁹ Krishna, T. M. *A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story*. Uttar Pradesh: Harper Collins, 2013.

¹⁴⁰ A double-headed drum made from jackfruit wood and animal skin; the primary percussion instrument in the Carnatic tradition and an essential feature of any Carnatic performance

¹⁴¹ Krishna, T. M. *Sebatian and Sons: A Brief History of Mridangam Makers*. Chennai: Context, 2020.

¹⁴² Weidman 2006:116

¹⁴³ See Paik 2022; Soneji 2012

However, it is not so simple to map caste onto race in a one-to-one analogy. While Isabel Wilkerson draws a direct parallel between India's caste system and "the shape-shifting, unspoken, race-based caste pyramid in the United States,"¹⁴⁴ political theorist Hari Ramesh argues that "a theory that sees American racial oppression first and foremost as a caste system cannot account for crucial differences between social inequality in South Asia and the United States."¹⁴⁵ Ramesh emphasizes the distinct contexts of colonialism and capitalism in the Dalit and Black American civil rights movements, ultimately suggesting that Wilkerson's attempt to map caste directly onto race ignores the ongoing role of caste in the modern world. Sriram's performance of Carnatic music as a Brahmin is a performance of caste privilege, but this does not make it a performance of whiteness, especially within the context of the U.S. racial frame. However, this acknowledgement should not obscure the fact that the *function* of Sriram's nontraditional performance practice — that of making visible the respectability politics of Carnatic music as an upper-caste structure — is almost directly analogous to Galen and Jake's forays into South Asian music, which, I have argued, ultimately function as performances of whiteness. An intersectional perspective on Sriram's performance allows us to acknowledge the way his caste privilege shapes his ability to move in "respectable" (read: Brahmin) spaces, while also recognizing the reality of his brown skin that positions him as "Other" within the U.S. racial frame.

To that end, I will return to what has perhaps been the guiding question that underwrites this chapter's exploration of cross-cultural performance and racialization: what is the *value* of appropriation? While I am optimistic that certain collaborations or even borrowings can enact a kind of interracial solidarity, Roberts' formulation of cross-racial performance suggests that the primary value of Black culture and aesthetics in the Carnatic context is as a productive point of contrast to upper-caste South Asian norms — just as Hindustani music becomes a prism that ultimately refracts

¹⁴⁴ Wilkerson 2020:17

¹⁴⁵ Ramesh 2021:153

Galen and Jake's whiteness. Cross-cultural performance is, in all of these instances, fundamentally about definition of the self. Sriram's performative Blackness with and alongside a particular species of South Asianness reveals much more to me about my own upper-caste South Asian upbringing than it does about Black American culture, just as Galen and Jake's South Asian performance practices become a means of performing whiteness before the brown gaze. Meanwhile, some interracial collaborations, such as Rachna's project SPEAK, allow for a certain degree of reciprocity in this journey of self-discovery. Rachna's work does not emphasize contrast, but convergence, seeking to interrogate mutually held artistic and cultural values.

All of the above suggests that there is a way to cross racial lines in artistic performance that can, at the very least, avoid doing harm, and that can in fact have deeply productive outcomes for individuals and communities. As Roberts suggests, "the 'one-can-do-whatever' minstrel model and the 'one-can-only-do-their-own' folklore model are not the only options for racial performance."¹⁴⁶ In the following chapters, we will delve deeper in to what this in-between option might look like — and, more to the point, what it might *sound* like.

¹⁴⁶ Roberts 2016:17

Decolonial Disidentification in Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhaagavatar's "English Notes"

A well-respected *nadaswaram* player is invited to perform before various bigwigs of the British Raj. He plays masterfully in the traditional style, but the British are unmoved. An Indian onlooker asks, dismissively, "*Avalavu thaana aa?*" "Is that all?" What he means is: can't you play anything that will get this crowd going? The *nadaswaram* player accepts the challenge. He launches into Harikesanallur Muthiah Bhaagavatar's then-already-classic composition, "English Notes." The British, pleased, begin to waltz. Or something to that effect.

This is my father's memory of a pivotal scene from a movie he saw as a boy, *Thillana Mohanambal* (1968). His memory's fidelity to the actual events of the film — which is considerable — is perhaps less interesting than the place this memory holds in his understanding of Carnatic music history, and of "English Notes" in particular. My father offers this memory as a tangible citation for what we might call lore, the distinction between lore and historical knowledge growing ever fuzzier in the context of Carnatic music's centuries-long oral tradition. What my father tells me is this: when he was growing up, "English Notes" was everywhere, the very name of the composition evoking a deliberate engagement with the exotic West from a local musical perspective. But even beyond that, if *Thillana Mohanambal* is any indication: in a newly independent India, some fifty years after the song's composition, "English Notes" occupied a place in the popular consciousness as a subtle expression of Indian resistance against Western hegemony and British rule — as well as, however playfully intended, a representation of the fundamental superiority of Indian music and musicians vis-à-vis the British or even the West.

Composed in the late 19th or early 20th century in the time of British colonial rule, "English Notes" is thought to have originated as something of a joke. Muthiah Bhaagavatar is said to have been challenged — by whom it is unclear — to create a Carnatic composition in the style of

Western classical music. The story fits neatly within Bhaagavatar's legacy, as he was a prolific composer and innovator within the Carnatic tradition who was known for a certain playfulness in his approach, including and especially when inventing his own *rāgās*. My father tells me about the *rāgā Nīroshta*, said to have been invented after the king bit his own lip and struggled to sing; Bhaagavatar's new *rāgā* — whose name translates to “no lips” — entirely omitted the labial syllables *ma* and *pa* and could thus be sung without the lips ever touching. The legend behind “English Notes” suggests a similar whimsy, as it asks with a spirit of both curiosity and defiance: could a Carnatic composition be made to “sound like” the music Indian citizens heard from the British officials who occupied their midst? Based on the song and its legend's beloved place in the Carnatic repertoire even today, the answer seems to have been a resounding “yes.” In *Thillana Mohanambal*, the onlookers are pleased, they are even moved to dance; in contemporary practice, “English Notes” is a guaranteed crowd pleaser, often occupying the place of final *thukkada* in a Carnatic concert program or else light filler music in a Bharatanatyam recital. Note well, then: this is not “serious” music.

Indeed, taking this legend at face value, we can understand Bhaagavatar's chief goal in composing “English Notes” as one of accessibility and translatability across racial and cultural divides. In the context of the classical Carnatic tradition, this is not a neutral goal. As I have earlier discussed, the ability of *rasikas* to meaningfully engage with Carnatic music is understood by consumers and practitioners alike as a skill in and of itself. To call a piece or performance “accessible” is not, in the Carnatic context, a compliment. As such, the challenge that drives “English Notes” extends in two directions. It is, on the one hand, a test of Bhaagavatar's ability to ape the West; but at the same time, the song's very simplicity is itself a gesture of irreverent condescension towards a less sophisticated ear — one that is marked, here, as Western and white. “English Notes” presents a version of Carnatic music that is digestible for a white Western listener. Meanwhile, for those of us on the other side of the joke, the composition is marked by a spirit of

lightness and joy that does not belie its status as an object of decolonial resistance, but rather reinforces it.

“English Notes” is set to *Sankarabharanam*, the *rāgā* most closely associated with the Western diatonic scale. It is interesting to consider Bhaagavatar’s use of *Sankarabharanam* for this composition in light of his propensity for inventing his own *rāgās*; the challenge of creating a “Western”-sounding composition certainly seems like a ready opportunity for this sort of innovation. Yet Bhaagavatar chooses to work within the existing Carnatic idiom, ensuring in the process that Carnatic performers would be able to handle his composition with ease while portraying the Western diatonic scale as a stripped-down version of a more complex Carnatic melodic structure. *Sankarabharanam* is one of the core *rāgās* of the Carnatic canon, and is often featured as the centerpiece of a concert performance. It is also a *rāgā* I myself struggle tremendously to perform, perhaps because of its deceptive resonances with Western music. Indeed, the *swara* that comprise *Sankarabharanam* can be easily translated to Western notes, with allowances for *gamakka* — which, in “English Notes,” are minimized to the point of being nonexistent. As such, a transcription of “English Notes” using Western notation is not only possible but quite useful:



consequent; and yet this structure is itself set within the broader cyclical structure of a Carnatic *pallavi*,¹⁴⁷ with the elaborated phrase in mm. 9-15 representing one of several potential *sangathee*s, or variations that expand outwards, ideally creating a sense of forward momentum. However, this composition is more than a straightforward marriage of Carnatic and Western elements: it is a parody, one intended to establish the relative superiority of the Carnatic tradition vis-à-vis the West. We would do well to note that the *sangathee* notated in mm. 9-15 differs from mm. 1-7 only in terms of repeated or elided notes that do not significantly alter the shape of the melody; in fact, it might be a stretch to even call this a *sangathee*, in light of the practical absence of the forward momentum that defines the role of the *sangathee* in a Carnatic composition. Robert Morris discusses the role of the *sangathee* in the Carnatic *kriti* in terms of “architectonic complexity,” pointing to the intricate syntactical processes that create the forward impetus of a Carnatic compositional structure.¹⁴⁸ In “English Notes,” meanwhile, the deliberate “failure” of subsequent *sangathee*s to propel the piece forward perhaps gestures towards the simplistic and repetitive quality that Bhaagavatar identified in British music.

And indeed, for the initiated listener, “English Notes” rarely fails to bring on a smile or even a chuckle. The song, for whatever reason, is *funny*. Musical “jokes” in Western classical music — along with jokes more broadly — have often been discussed in terms of the subversion of expectations. Writing on C. P. E. Bach, for example, Susan Wollenberg suggests that the composer’s “stylistic diversion and the defeat of expectations” produce a “witty effect” in his music.¹⁴⁹ Similarly, I find that the comedy of “English Notes” derives in part from the composition’s departures from Carnatic norms, which are designed to highlight the supposed unsophistication of Western music in contrast. We are encouraged, I would argue, to hear this composition in two ways: as simplistic, and

¹⁴⁷ The opening section of a *kriti*, usually consisting of a theme repeated with variations.

¹⁴⁸ Morris, Robert. “Variation and Process in South Indian Music: Some *Kritis* and their *Sangatis*.” *Music Theory Spectrum* Vol. 23 No. 1 (2001) pp. 74-89.

¹⁴⁹ Wollenberg, Susan. “A New Look at C. P. E. Bach’s Musical Jokes” (1988). In *C. P. E. Bach* ed. David Schulenberg. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2018, pp. 295-314.

as funny by virtue of its simplicity. The convention of only minimally elaborating subsequent *sangathees* is just one example of the patronizing humor that colors this piece. The fairly steady alternations between tonic and dominant throughout can be understood as a simplified hearing of Western harmonies, while the relatively quick pace of harmonic motion serves to underscore the bouncy waltz feel of this piece, with strong downbeats and constant “lifts” that are atypical of Carnatic music. Even beyond this, however, Bhagavata’s play with rhythm and meter contributes to a choppy, “light” listening experience that establishes Western music as a less-serious counterpart to the Carnatic tradition.

In the Carnatic context, our expectations for meter are mostly informed by the *tālam* of the composition, which is usually identified within the first few seconds of performance by accompanying hand gestures. Importantly, these standardized hand gestures also indicate the expected subdivisions of each metrical cycle, so that *Misra Chapu* is not just experienced as a seven-beat cycle but specifically as an alternating pattern of 3+4. In the case of “English Notes,” the use of *Tisra Nadai Adi Tālam* establishes an eight-beat cycle in a triplet feel, symmetrically divided into 4+4 beats. Note here an important disconnect in the translation of this metrical cycle into Western notation, where what is understood as a single “beat” in the Carnatic context is visually represented by a full measure, so that the 3/4 time signature indicates not the metrical cycle but the subdivisions of each individual beat within an eight-beat cycle (Fig 5). In *Adi Tālam*, it is customary for a melodic (and syntactical, given that these compositions are almost always set to lyrics) phrase to occupy the full eight beats of the cycle, or else to follow the symmetrical subdivision of 4+4 in what can usually be heard as, effectively, an antecedent and consequent.

Taking these expectations into account, the opening phrase of “English Note” feels almost impossibly abrupt, arriving oddly on the third beat of an eight-beat cycle and followed by a cheeky silence. Furthermore, when the next phrase enters in m. 5 transposing the opening melody up a fifth, the expected metrical symmetry is both attained and subverted, as the melody reliably lands on

the downbeat of m. 7 but continues uninterrupted into what effectively functions as “filler” music, a turn that allows us to return to the beginning of the *tāla* cycle. Christopher Hasty uses the term “projection” to describe “the process in which a mensurably determinate oration provides a definite durational potential for the beginning of an immediately successive event.”¹⁵⁰ The phrase that begins in m. 5 and continues through m. 8 disrupts the already uncomfortable expectation set by the short phrase in m. 1-3, so that our experience of the meter as listeners is necessarily off-kilter, with the anticipation of a comfortable groove thwarted at multiple levels. The angular *ma-sa-pa* (F-C-G) in m. 8 is also uncharacteristic of both the Carnatic genre and the *rāgā* at hand, functioning purely as a fill that enables the necessary return to *samam*¹⁵¹ (Fig 5). All of these elements together force an experience of the composition that unfolds one downbeat at a time, rather than a more conventional — and arguably more complex — eight-beat phrase.

Moving further into the piece, we might note that the composition is set to “stanzas” rather than the traditional nested structure of *pallavi*, *anupallavi*, and *charanam*. This is not uncommon for *thukkadas*, which sometimes do proceed in a more linear fashion than “heavier” Carnatic compositions; however, it is a decision that marks “English Notes” as belonging to a distinct compositional category, highlighting its resonances with both “serious” Western music and “unserious” Carnatic music. And indeed, the typical placement of “English Notes” in the “light” second half of a concert performance allows the piece to retain some of its foreignness, as it routinely shares space with *javalis*,¹⁵² *padams*,¹⁵³ and other subgenres that are yet to be fully integrated into the Carnatic canon. “English Notes” is generally performed with minimal *gamakka*, and is rarely subjected to elaboration via *manōdharma*, both conventions which add to the song’s “light” quality; it is also, interestingly, set without lyrics, something that is almost unheard of in the Carnatic tradition.

¹⁵⁰ Hasty, Christopher. *Meter as Rhythm*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 84.

¹⁵¹ The downbeat that begins a *tāla* cycle

¹⁵² A light love song within the Carnatic tradition

¹⁵³ A slow love song in the Carnatic tradition that emphasizes spiritual and emotional depth

We might interpret these ways in which the composition deliberately departs from Carnatic norms as an articulation of the Indian perspective on British music in the colonial era, which seems to have been characterized by plain (unornamented) notes, repetitive linear structures, and a lack of semantic content.

It is difficult to say what exposure to Western classical music Bhaagavatar might have had prior to writing “English Notes.” My father tells me of the British military bands that accompanied official festivals and ceremonies during the colonial era, even performing alongside *nadaswaram* at temples, religious functions, and weddings when they could be afforded. When asked what type of music they would have performed, he pauses and chuckles before answering, “Not Carnatic music.” In contemporary performance, “English Notes” is a popular choice for fusion — one particularly interesting arrangement by the Indian arts platform IndianRaga opens with a quotation of Mozart's Symphony no. 25 before leading into “English Notes” blended with “God Save the Queen.”¹⁵⁴ The song's relationship with and integration of Western musical structures, and its subsequent accessibility for a Western audience, is inextricable from its ontology *within* the South Asian Carnatic community as, ultimately, a silly little joke.

There are any number of readily available lenses for interpreting “English Notes” as both a joke and a form of decolonial resistance. We might extend bell hooks' “oppositional gaze” to theorize an oppositional ear, one that hears and refracts the oppressor's voice through local epistemic frames and thus produces new knowledge from below;¹⁵⁵ we might turn to Henry Louis Gates' “signifyin’,” and theorize “English Notes” as an ironic reversal of sonic signifiers of whiteness, one that is not necessarily legible as such to the white listener;¹⁵⁶ thinking with Audra Simpson, we might consider the politics of refusal in Bhaagavatar's choice to produce music for a

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HzU1ne-QtA>

¹⁵⁵ hooks, bell. “The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators.” In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 1992, pp. 115-31.

¹⁵⁶ Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Western listener through and within a “light” Carnatic idiom;¹⁵⁷ or, turning to one of my favorite theoretical frameworks, we might consider Bhaagavatar’s composition a Muñozian disidentification with Western music, a means of satisfying the demands of his colonizers while also retaining his own identity as first and foremost an Indian musician — and making a mockery of his oppressors in the process.¹⁵⁸ There is much to be gained by deploying any one of these analytical frameworks, but I suspect there is even more to be gained by acknowledging the saturation of tools we as people of color have developed for exercising agency within and against and sometimes even through the white racial frame. Humor and lightness in our delicate handling of the master’s tools emerges as a means of controlling the narrative from below, and of refusing to fully succumb to the colonizer’s demands.

But also, I find myself less interested in situating this composition within any particular theoretical frame, and more interested in thinking about the kinds of stories we as South Asians circulate about our relationship with the West. My father tells me about the Indian officials in the British Raj, including his own grandfather, who would wear suit jackets over their *panchakacham*¹⁵⁹ in order to “comply” with the foreign dress code while also adhering to local tradition. In this story, as in *Thillana Mohanambal*, both parties walk away satisfied: the white colonizer feels that their demands have been met, while the brown subject feels that they have exercised sufficient agency to have “won” the encounter. In both stories, there is a narrative of successful cross-cultural translation, as both brown and white subjects are made legible to one another — but within their own terms. The white British soldiers who waltz to *nadaswaram* accompaniment are even able to have an embodied response to the music of the Other, which has been transformed to reside comfortably within an existing cultural script.

¹⁵⁷ Simpson, Audra. *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

¹⁵⁸ Muñoz, José Esteban. *Disidentifications*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

¹⁵⁹ A traditional South Indian men’s garment consisting of pleated fabric around the waist and legs.

But also: this complex matrix of associations with “English Notes” — defiance, excellence, whimsy — perhaps overstates how seriously the piece really asks to be taken. The playful spirit of having “won” the encounter with the West is certainly part of the composition’s narrative. As popular blogger Krish Ashok writes, “This piece was extremely popular with an Independence-era audience that felt pride in one of their own ‘getting’ western music, while no English man could perform a Thodi ālāpana.”¹⁶⁰ Whether the piece actually resonated as a victory among British listeners is something we cannot know. But for Carnatic listeners, who continue to delight in the piece, there is even today a mischievous joy built into the encounter.

¹⁶⁰ Venkatesh, Karthik. “‘English Notes’ That Pepped Up Patriotism Then And Is Great Fun Today.” *Outlook* November 15, 2017.

Chapter 2

“Good” Fusion: Ethics and/as Aesthetics in Cross-Cultural Performance

*“When cultures intersect, to me that’s like the **best** food and the **best** music. That’s when the shit gets real.”*

— Anupam Shobakar, personal communication

I’ve come to accept that part of my responsibility as an ethnomusicologist involves remaining peripherally aware of a wide variety of musical genres. I still hadn’t expected this particular dissertation to lead me to Megadeth. “I just finished writing [a piece] for a full orchestra, for sarod, for double neck guitar, and for modular synthesizers,” Anupam Shobakar tells me over the clattering of espresso cups, which we carefully balance between sips on any available surface in his cluttered home studio. “So it was insane, it took a year to write the music, and now we’re in the process of finding the right kind of conductor, because that’s *really* important. And the music is very dense, it’s very complex, it’s almost like György Ligeti meets sort of like a Rachmaninoff thing with uh, with Ali Akbar Khan thrown in and, Jimi Hendrix, I don’t know.”

It’s not hard to pay attention when Anupam speaks — he has all the magnetism of a self-described “rock and roll guy” — but every so often my eyes drift to the pair of double neck guitars standing off to the side of his studio. These are clearly custom instruments: one neck of each is completely fretless, allowing for a more fluid approach to melody than an ordinary guitar, while the fretted side seems designed for the kinds of discrete pitch combinations that can prove challenging on many South Asian instruments. I struggle to envision a more apt physical embodiment of hyphenation. Anupam’s instrument can, from one perspective, appear split — and yet when he plays, it sounds as a cohesive resonating body.



Fig 6. Anupam Shobhakar's home studio. Photo courtesy of artist.

Anupam was born in Calcutta and raised in Bombay, a city he says “shaped [his] sensibilities as a musician and as a human being.” He grew up playing a guitar he’d inherited from his older brother, flipping the strings to accommodate left-handed strumming. While his grandfather taught Hindustani music, his mother sang *khyal*,¹⁶¹ and his father studied the tabla, Anupam listened to heavy metal records, spending his teenage years sneaking into the rock and heavy metal clubs that populated Bombay prior to the religious riots of the 1990s.¹⁶² His parents were encouraging of his interests, believing that any interest in music was something to be nourished. It was Anupam’s pursuit of the guitar as an instrument that first led him from metal and rock towards jazz:

¹⁶¹ A form of improvised vocal music within the Hindustani tradition

¹⁶² The ever-present tensions between Hindus and Muslims in India reached a breaking point in 1992 Bombay with the demolition of the Babri-Masjid, a 16th-century mosque thought to have been built on the site of the Hindu god Rama’s birthplace. Several months of violent intercommunal rioting followed, resulting in thousands of deaths. Meena Menon explores the history of religious conflict in Bombay leading up to these riots as well as the traumatic aftermath in her 2011 study, *Riots and After in Mumbai: Chronicles of Truth and Reconciliation* (New York: SAGE Publications).

The older guitar players [...] were moving away, as it happens, from like the rock guys and metal guys and they were trying to expand their musical possibilities, and we all had guitar player magazines that we used to bootleg in Bombay [...] and there'd be these little lessons, little, how to cop certain standards, and how to learn certain progressions, how to learn like a 2-5-1 thing, you know, just the basics, and then you'd hear [...] things that they were doing that the rock guys wouldn't do.

It is worth noting here that Anupam's introduction to jazz came primarily through the lens of jazz fusion. "Because this is India, you know things migrate there in a certain pace, they get there, but over here [in the US] things have moved onto something else, right? So the jazz that we were engaging with for me in my teens was more of the stuff from the fusion Miles Davis era, of when Miles was starting to get more of an electric sound."¹⁶³ As a result, unlike many of my interlocutors, Anupam is comfortable embracing the word "fusion," even as he echoes the popular conception that all music — "in fact, all art" — is fusion; he characterizes painting with a single color as fusion with negative space. As we discuss the politics of fusion as an artistic practice, our conversation moves fluidly between music, visual art, diasporic cuisines, and even interracial romance, with cultural mingling posited as the ultimate goal: "That's when the shit gets real."

At sixteen, Anupam found himself at a crossroads. He knew he wanted to be a professional musician, and his parents were supportive of his goals; but as a performer of Western music, his options in India were limited, and he didn't feel that leaving India to study abroad was the right choice. Fortunately, around the same time he found himself with a front row ticket to a sarod concert by Ali Akbar Khan. "I walked out not knowing what the hell happened," he tells me. He spent roughly the next twenty-five years going deep into the Maihar *gharānā*¹⁶⁴ as a practitioner of the sarod.

¹⁶³ See Jayson Beaster-Jones' *Bollywood Sounds* for a discussion of the impact of economic liberalization on the Indian music industry, and the dramatic increase in local access to international media around the 1990's (Beaster-Jones 2014).

¹⁶⁴ A particular school or lineage of music or dance within the North Indian classical tradition

Anupam's disparate musical interests were not always compatible, even on a physical level. He explains to me that the style of sarod playing demanded by his *gharānā* required him to keep his fingernails long, which would inhibit his guitar playing. "You can't play your guitar like that. It's impossible. So when I was going back to [the guitar] I'd have to like cut my nails off and then I'd have a sarod concert a week later and I'd be like, ack, what do I do?" This experience of literally having to shape his body to inhabit two different worlds wasn't the only thing that ultimately drove Anupam away from classical Hindustani music deeper into the world of fusion. He tells me outright that he found Hindustani music "limiting" as an expression of his identity as a musician. When pressed on whether this had to do with more than just music, he elaborates:

The culture, yeah. All of it. It [can't just] be about the music. The music's great. The, the culture. I just can't see myself in a *kurta pijama*, you know what I'm saying. I can't do that. I'm not that. So it's — I can't be what I'm not, right? And I'm very aware of that. And I've been in that world [...] that spiritual *guru* Ramakrishna used to say if you want to study Islam, be a Muslim. You know, like, be that. Learn. Do your *namaṣ* five times, read the Quran, read the *hadids*, whatever. So being a Hindustani musician for so long, I really realized that that's not who I am. You know, and I got to experience it at the highest level, playing with my teachers and great tabla players and festivals and all that, but it's — I don't enjoy that as much.

When I first heard Anupam perform, he was playing doubleneck guitar in a converted New York City warehouse as part of a tribute to John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra. Musically as well as socially, he seemed completely at ease. This is likely due in no small part to the instrument he has designed for himself, which combines elements of the sarod and the guitar to afford equal fluidity in multiple traditions. Anupam says that this instrument has allowed him to finally feel capable of having his own sound: "Because I can have the best of both worlds."

Case Study: Natural Elements (1977)

Anupam's attitude towards jazz fusion as a more inviting cultural environ than Hindustani music speaks to the imbrication of ethical and aesthetic values that invariably marks cross-cultural

performance. “It [can’t just] be about the music,” he insists. As part of their engagement with fusion as an aesthetic genre, practitioners, consumers, and scholars of fusion must also contend with the sociocultural implications of different bodies, genres, and sounds — and, more to the point, their interactions. In Chapter One, I examined the “anxious” affect of cross-cultural performance from the perspective of artists whose transgressions of racial and cultural lines double as performances of their own racial and cultural identities. In this chapter, I focus on cross-cultural collaboration, asking what happens when differently raced bodies and sounds are brought into conversation. In these contexts, musical fusion operates as a cultural collision site where new meanings are negotiated across and between racial hierarchies. Any meaningful engagement with fusion as an artistic practice must accordingly take into account the the ethics of the interracial, cross-cultural encounter. And indeed, in conversations with my interlocutors, social and ethical values such as cultural competence routinely emerged as key metrics for aesthetic evaluation.

It is possible that some of my interlocutors will disagree with this characterization. Anupam tells me explicitly that he “[doesn’t] have any identity politics,” professing to evaluate musicians purely in terms of their technical skill and dedication to their art: “Just be badass at what you play, practice fucking every day, be good, be sharp, have your skill sets in playing, and do what you want to do, you know?” Yet in our discussions of the fusion collaborations he admires, additional values emerge, values that seem to treat cultural competence as not only an essential skill for fusion performance but as itself a form of musicianship. Like many of my interlocutors, Anupam identifies white fusion guitarist John McLaughlin as a major influence, and speaks with high regard for McLaughlin’s relationship to South Asian music:

McLaughlin wasn’t a cursory student of Indian music, he wasn’t appropriating it, he was studying it with Ali Akbar Khan. In fact, the Shakti guitar, Ali Akbar Khan told him how many synthetic strings he had to have. He asked him, *Baba*, what do you think, he said get seven, and he put seven of them on. And that’s where he met Zakir, in Ali Akbar Khan *saab*’s house, they were sitting and playing together. And he was studying with S. Balachandar, he was studying the *veena* — in fact he nearly became a *veena* player before he decided to do that. And he took a deep dive into that. It’s, it’s pretty Carnatic, *Natural Elements* and all that

stuff. There are a lot of interesting *corvais* and *teermanams* that he's using that, even John wrote some of them. And uh, I was hanging out with John a couple of years ago at the Blue Note [...] and he taught me a *teermanam* that he wrote himself and it sounds like something that, I don't know, Doraiswamy Iyer or somebody would write, you know? So he's steeped in that tradition. That's important there. If you want want — if you want a detailed deep dive through that world of fusion, at least take the time to study some of that shit. Study the art that you want to mingle with.

While McLaughlin is widely known as a pioneer of jazz fusion, he is perhaps best known within the South Asian community for his work with the Mahavishnu Orchestra and later with Shakti, where he fuses Carnatic and Hindustani elements with jazz and electric rock. In evaluating McLaughlin as a practitioner of Indo-jazz fusion, it seems important for Anupam to be able to situate the artist within a lineage that includes the likes of Ali Akbar Khan, S. Balachandar, and Zakir Hussain; important, too, that McLaughlin visited these artists at home, partaking in the cultural intimacy emphasized by the *guru-s̥iṣya* tradition.¹⁶⁵ It is important that McLaughlin took Khan *saab*'s input and blessing when he modified the guitar he would end up using with Shakti, demonstrating that he knew how to show his guru the appropriate respect within a South Asian cultural context. It is equally important that McLaughlin has a solid grasp of more traditional forms of South Asian music, proving, to Anupam's mind, that his engagement with the art form has not been superficial, but that he has taken a "deep dive." Interestingly, all of this leads Anupam to conclude that McLaughlin "wasn't appropriating," an ethically-charged claim rooted in both cultural and technical competencies.

Accordingly, in this chapter I treat cultural competence and intercultural interaction as key metrics for music analysis, and indeed as evaluative criteria for *artistic* competence. In the first section, I follow Anupam's suggestion and analyze Shakti's 1977 album *Natural Elements* through the lens of interracial encounter. I ask what kinds of meanings are produced, and how, in the sonic

¹⁶⁵ Kevin Fellesz notes a similar predisposition in McLaughlin's listeners from the jazz end of the spectrum, who took note of the guitarist's interpersonal connections within the jazz scene: "While jazz observers may have found it easy to dismiss Jethro Tull and its fans, they found it far more difficult to disregard John McLaughlin, the guitarist who was currently recording with Miles Davis" (Fellesz 2011:3).

interactions between East and West and across racial divides that characterize this album in particular and Indo-jazz fusion as a genre. Over the course of the chapter, as “hyphenated” characters and objects come into focus, I analyze their performances from both ethical and aesthetic perspectives, with cultural competence at the heart of these evaluations. Musical fusion serves as both a microcosm and a metonym of broader social interactions, with implications for both performance and analysis.

While this approach is somewhat novel within music studies, it is far from unprecedented. Cross-cultural performance in particular has frequently invited an approach to analysis that puts sonic and sociocultural interactions in direct conversation. Writing on one of the best-known examples of cross-cultural collaboration in music, Paul Simon’s *Graceland*, Louise Meintjes suggests that “the musical collaboration both points to and is isomorphic with social collaboration... allow[ing] one domain to collapse into the other so that the two domains can be experienced as one and the same — even if only for the duration of the music, or for moments during the listening experience.”¹⁶⁶ Likewise, in his book on Afro-South Asian musical collaboration T. Roberts posits a theory of “sono-racial collaboration” in which “racialized sounds themselves collaborate, working in tandem to construct interracial discourses even when bodies are not present (although always implied).”¹⁶⁷ Cross-cultural exchange is central to Paul Austerlitz’s analyses of Afro-Cuban artist Machito’s collaborations with American jazz musicians,¹⁶⁸ while Elliott Powell analyzes Miles Davis’s *On the Corner* through the lens of Afro-South Asian alliance as he vividly recalls the jazz musician telling South Asian tabla player Badal Roy to “play like a n*gga.”¹⁶⁹ In the same vein, I here analyze musical and sociocultural interactions in tandem, taking cultural competence as both an aesthetic

¹⁶⁶ Meintjes, Louise. “Paul Simon’s *Graceland*, South Africa, and the Mediation of Musical Meaning.” *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 34 No. 1 (1990), p. 48.

¹⁶⁷ Roberts 2016:6

¹⁶⁸ Austerlitz, Paul. *Machito and His Afro-Cubans: Selected Transcriptions*. Middleton: A&R Edition, 2016.

¹⁶⁹ Powell, Elliott. *Sounds from the Other Side: Afro-South Asian Collaborations in Black Popular Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.

and an ethical prerogative for fusion performance. My interlocutors, meanwhile, emerge as both performers and critics of musical fusion, so that their value judgments extend to both post-hoc evaluations of past collaborations and forward-looking intentions for their own fusion practices. The “good” in the title of this chapter speaks to the variously ethical, aesthetic, technical, and cultural demands on fusion practitioners, whose artistic pursuits can only be understood and evaluated in their cross-cultural context.

Speaking of which: not all of my interlocutors consider Shakti to be a success story. Pakistani-American jazz guitarist Rez Abassi is effusive in his praise for McLaughlin, but when we turn to Shakti, he suggests that this particular collaboration may have left something to be desired: “Shakti was an Indian group with a Western guy who walked in....it was more of an orchestral, uh, orchestration kind of idea, you know like, guitar with an Eastern, or in an Indian band...And it still sounds great, you know, it’s pretty amazing, some of that stuff on that level, but not on a hybridity level.” When pressed, he clarifies: “When I say hybrid I really mean something that has a context. Like, it’s sort of a — putting ideas together into another idea, rather than sort of just putting ideas together.” This formulation readily brings to mind Homi Bhabha’s “third space,” which emphasizes the new meanings produced as a result of cross-cultural colonial encounter; Rez here seems to suggest that in Shakti’s music, the different cultures that intersect ultimately do not manage to articulate a hyphenated third idea.

Indeed, McLaughlin’s distinctive role within the South Asian ensemble is emphasized in the titles of all three albums released by the band between 1976-77, which advertise Shakti “with John McLaughlin.” These titles themselves reinforce a binary separation between McLaughlin the white guitarist and the remainder of the ensemble, which consists of L. Shankar on violin, Zakir Hussain on tabla, and Vikku Vinayakram on *ghatam*.¹⁷⁰ McLaughlin is notably the only white member and the only performer of a Western instrument in what is otherwise a South Asian ensemble — albeit, we

¹⁷⁰ A South Indian percussion instrument consisting of a large clay pot played with the hands.

might note, an ensemble that is itself a fusion of South and North Indian members and of Carnatic and Hindustani elements. The very makeup of the ensemble, then, establishes a starting expectation of what T. Roberts calls “body-culture determinism,” a politics that ties “singularly raced bodies to a particular cultural output.”¹⁷¹ In the following analysis, I interrogate the ways McLaughlin both reinforces and resists this expectation, at times performing his white Westernness in contradistinction to a grounding South Asian texture and at other times deliberately crossing these racial and cultural lines. I compare this approach to violinist L. Shankar’s audible attempts to put Eastern and Western musical elements in conversation, as well as the ensemble as a whole’s alternation between treating McLaughlin as an auxiliary presence and working to integrate him into the cross-cultural sonic landscape.

Natural Elements opens with the sound of a *morsing*, an ancient jaw harp whose Indian origins are widely accepted but which have been documented primarily through folktales. It is relatively rare to see the *morsing* in performance, certainly in part due to the sheer difficulty of playing the instrument, which in addition to being physically demanding requires yogic breath control and a thorough knowledge of *konnakol* or percussion vocabulary. The sound of the *morsing* almost immediately evokes India and specifically South India for a listener already familiar with the instrument; for an uninitiated listener, however, the nasal, twangy sound might be difficult to place, evoking instead an undifferentiated “foreign” quality. It is perhaps worth noting that this instrument is used nowhere else on the album and is not a standard part of Shakti’s orchestration, so that its “foreign” sound is also singular in the context of the ensemble’s repertoire. When the other instruments enter at around 0:17, the *ghatam* makes a brief introductory remark before immediately locking into the groove laid down by the *morsing*, while McLaughlin plays a series of out-of-time flourishes on the guitar (Fig 7). For the remainder of the piece, the South Asian, “foreign” percussion instruments remain in perfect sync while McLaughlin’s guitar rests atop the established

¹⁷¹ Roberts 2016:7

texture. He takes audible liberties with the meter, occasionally syncing with the underlying rhythmic pattern and at other times allowing arrhythmic phrases and long chords to ring out. The drum set, which sounds markedly Western in the context of a predominantly South Asian rhythm section, serves only to respond and add color to McLaughlin's improvisations, engaging minimally with the rest of the percussion section beyond matching the established tempo.

I find it productive to contrast this opening solo with L. Shankar's violin solo on the second track, "Face to Face." Specifically, it is interesting to compare Shankar and McLaughlin's engagement with the South Asian rhythmic structure of *tāl* or *tāla*. "Mind Ecology" has a grounding 4-beat structure, identifiable by subtle downbeat accents and a slight variation on beat three of each 4/4 measure from the *morsing* (Fig 7). Beyond this, however, we cannot definitively identify a broader structuring *tālā*, what in a Western context we might compare to a hypermeter (a translation that I complicate in Chapter Three). In McLaughlin's solo, he plays loose two or three measure phrases followed by irregular silences, with the first two melodic units stretching over four beats, the next over eight, the next over nine, and onwards. This metrical irregularity is characteristic of the entire piece, even as McLaughlin switches from playing long, arrhythmic phrases to playing rapid 16th-note runs interrupted by occasional ringing chords. The effect of this irregular hypermeter over a more steady pulse from the ensemble is to establish McLaughlin and the ensemble as two separate streams, one South Asian, one white and Western. The two camps play simultaneously, and are locked into the same grounding beat, but there is no shared structure of *tālā* to unite them, or anything to unsettle the clear hierarchy that positions McLaughlin as featured soloist and relegates the mechanically repetitive ensemble to a supporting role.

“Mind Ecology” 0:11-0:55

This musical score is for the piece "Mind Ecology" from 0:11 to 0:55. It is written for four instruments: Guitar, Ghatam, Morsing, and Drumset. The score is organized into four systems, each containing four staves. The first staff in each system is for the Guitar, the second for the Ghatam, the third for the Morsing, and the fourth for the Drumset. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is marked with measure numbers 6, 12, and 15. Red brackets and a red Y-shaped symbol are used to group measures across systems. Yellow highlights are placed on specific musical phrases in the Guitar and Morsing parts.

6

12

15

Guitar

Ghatam

Morsing

Drumset

“Mind Ecology” 0:11-0:55 cont.

18

24

27

30

Fig 7

On “Face to Face,” meanwhile, violinist L. Shankar takes McLaughlin’s spot atop the ensemble texture. Here, it is immediately apparent that Shankar and the rhythm section are locked into a unified metrical structure. McLaughlin opens the piece with what can only be called an *ālāp*¹⁷² in a minor mode before initiating a 7.5-beat groove, represented in Figure 8 by a $4/4 + 2/4 + 3/8$ subdivision. The South Asian percussion section quickly falls in line, playing in the 7.5 beat rhythmic structure of *neel tal*, while Shankar takes over the melody. In some ways, Shankar’s solo here echoes McLaughlin’s earlier approach: he allows long tones to ring out and has a relaxed relationship with the underlying pulse, with *gamakka* and ornaments stretching across and between beats. However, Shankar’s adherence to the *tal* as a 7.5-beat hypermetrical unit is audible in the consistency of his phrase lengths, as the ornaments that cue each new phrase inevitably land on or around the downbeat, or *sam*:

¹⁷² An unmetered improvised solo in a particular *rāgā*, called *ālāp* in the Hindustani tradition and *ālāpana* in the Carnatic tradition.

“Face to Face” 0:41-1:12

The musical score is divided into five systems, each with three staves: Violin (top), Guitar (middle), and Tabla (bottom). The time signatures change frequently throughout the piece.

- System 1 (Measures 1-8):** Violin staff has rests. Guitar and Tabla parts are in 4/4, 2/4, 3/8, and 4/4 time signatures.
- System 2 (Measures 9-14):** Violin staff has rests until measure 10, where a note is circled in red. Guitar and Tabla parts continue in 3/8, 4/4, 2/4, 3/8, 4/4, and 2/4 time signatures.
- System 3 (Measures 15-20):** Violin staff has a long note in measure 15, followed by a red-circled eighth-note triplet in measure 16, a rest in measure 17, and another red-circled eighth-note triplet in measure 18. Guitar and Tabla parts continue in 3/8, 4/4, 2/4, 3/8, 4/4, and 2/4 time signatures.
- System 4 (Measures 21-25):** Violin staff has a red-circled eighth-note triplet in measure 21, a rest in measure 22, and another red-circled eighth-note triplet in measure 23. Guitar and Tabla parts continue in 3/8, 4/4, 2/4, 3/8, 4/4, and 2/4 time signatures.
- System 5 (Measures 26-30):** Violin staff has a red-circled eighth-note triplet in measure 26, followed by a rest in measure 27, and another red-circled eighth-note triplet in measure 28. Guitar and Tabla parts continue in 2/4, 3/8, 4/4, 2/4, 3/8, and 2/4 time signatures.

Annotations include blue curved lines spanning across measures and red circles highlighting specific eighth-note triplets in the Violin staff.

Fig 8

In Shankar's solo, then, we can identify a subservience to the *tāl*, a subservience that unsettles the previously established hierarchy of soloist-ensemble. On "Face to Face," Shankar, McLaughlin, and Hussein all form part of the same rhythmic stream. Indeed, the discrepancy between McLaughlin and Shankar's improvisational styles, specifically in terms of their relationships to *tālā*, is audible at multiple points on the album, including on Shankar's feature on "Mind Ecology" and McLaughlin's later solo on "Face to Face." McLaughlin routinely adheres to the ensemble pulse only at the level of the individual beat, whereas Shankar often seems keyed into a broader hypermetrical organization. It is worth wondering whether this is a calculated approach to each musician's solo, or whether it simply reflects Shankar's intuitive propensity for *tālā*'s long metrical units resulting from a lifetime of study in the South Asian classical tradition compared with McLaughlin's later initiation. In any case, McLaughlin's refusal to integrate into the rhythmic texture can be read as a bifurcation between white and South Asian elements, reinforcing an East/West, top/bottom dynamic that places McLaughlin above and apart; while Shankar's approach is more democratic, allowing the South Asian rhythmic structure and the ensemble — including McLaughlin — to constrain the shape of his solo.

As far as melodic organization, I hesitate to ascribe a definitive *rāgā* to any of the tracks on this album, although most of the melodies do engage in the logic of *rāgā* by remaining within a stable modal area and largely avoiding accidentals. If we were to identify a structuring *rāgā* for "Mind Ecology," *Ābhēri* would be a strong contender — a Carnatic *rāgā* that came up repeatedly in my fieldwork as a convenient choice for a cross-cultural jam, due to its ready translatability as a pseudo-blues. Likewise the opening section of "Face to Face" approximates *Kharaharapriya*, which closely resembles the Dorian mode, while the fourth track, "The Daffodil and the Eagle," mostly references a common pentatonic mode that can easily be heard as *Mohanam*:



Fig 9

The third track, dubiously titled “Come on Baby Dance With Me,” is even more explicit in its reference to *rāgā*, as it pays almost too close an homage to a popular *thillana*¹⁷³ in the the Carnatic *rāgā Kadanakuthalam*, famous for its “crooked” ascending scale which severely limits the melodic possibilities of both composition and improvisation:

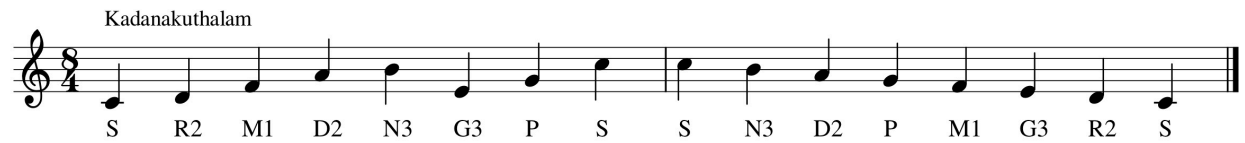


Fig 10

I should note that in selecting Carnatic *rāgās* as the lens through which to hear these pieces, I am favoring both Shankar’s background as a Carnatic musician and my own biases as a Carnatically-trained listener. McLaughlin’s training in Hindustani music might make the *rāg Bimpalasi* a more appropriate analogy than *Ābbēri* — and *Kafi* than *Kharaharapriya*, and *Ābbēri* than *Mohanam*. In any case, *rāgs* and *rāgās* with ready translations across the Carnatic-Hindustani divide are a feature of

¹⁷³ A rhythmic composition usually performed towards the end of a Carnatic concert performance

most classical South Asian fusion collaborations such as the *jugalbandhi*,¹⁷⁴ so that it seems fitting to also encounter them here with their accordant translations into Western modes. *Kadanakuthalam*, a strictly Carnatic *rāgā* that effectively prescribes an accordant melody, is in some ways the exception that proves the rule. I discuss *rāgā* selection in the context of Indo-jazz performance in more detail later in this chapter. For now, however, we may productively analyze McLaughlin and Shankar's individual and combined approaches to *rāgā* as an index of their relationships to South Asianness in the context of interracial and cross-cultural encounter.

McLaughlin opens both “Mind Ecology” and “Face to Face” with unmetered melodic introductions that can easily be heard through the lens of *ālāp*. In these solos, the artist's Hindustani influences are audible; he incorporates frequent bends and glides between pitches that are idiomatic of Hindustani music and of Khan *saab's* *gharānā* in particular, beyond adhering to the *rāg* at the note level. Following the introduction on “Mind Ecology,” around 1:10 McLaughlin transitions into playing rapid sixteenth note runs interrupted by occasional chordal flourishes. Here, his style at the note level is audibly more discrete, with pitch bending occurring only at the tail end of phrases, almost as an afterthought. These Hindustani ornaments are not fully integrated into his solos, but serve as deliberate, isolated moments of introducing South Asian color into what is not otherwise identifiable as a Hindustani sound.

Shankar's violin solo at 2:16 on the same track is brief but noteworthy. Once again, in general the solo cannot be described as stylistically Carnatic, as it avoids Carnatic *gamakka* in service of discrete pitches, short sequential phrases that traverse the octave, and distinctly unidiomatic falls. Shankar seems to be directly responding to McLaughlin's style earlier on the track in his use of unornamented runs and loose phrasing. However, unlike McLaughlin, who sometimes seems to treat *rāg* as a way to add auxiliary Oriental flavor to an otherwise genre-agnostic solo, I find that Shankar here puts Carnatic and Western melodic structures in intricate dialogue, to remarkable effect. The

¹⁷⁴ A duet between two soloists, often featuring performers from different traditions

solo begins by quickly emphasizing the pitch A, a fourth above the tonic E. This implies a potential shift to *madhyamam* or IV, a legible move in both Carnatic and Western melodic forms. But instead, the subsequent solo reinterprets A as the fifth of the scale and introduces the previously unused pitches of F# and C#, so that we move from *Ābbēri* in E to a D major pentatonic mode that resembles *Hamsadvani*. The effect is to completely destabilize the *rāgā* at hand (*Ābbēri*) while holding the key signature (E Dorian/D major) steady, resulting in a solo that sounds sufficiently foreign and sufficiently familiar to both sets of listeners.

Graha bhēdham is an advanced technique in Carnatic music whose execution can be readily compared to the derivation of Western modes. A skilled Carnatic performer can momentarily destabilize the *rāgā* by shifting the sung tonic while holding steady the collection of pitches in the scale as well as the tonic drone provided by the *tanpura*. Figure 11 demonstrates the different *rāgās* that can be derived from the *ārōhanam*¹⁷⁵ of *Ābbēri*, which produces *Mohanam* when starting from *ga*, *Madhyamāvathi* from *ma*, *Hindolam* from *pa*, and *Suddha Sāveri* from *ni*:¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Ascending scale that defines a *rāgā* structure

¹⁷⁶ The set of *rāgās* described in this list would typically include *Suddha Dhanyasi* rather than *Ābbēri*. *Suddha Dhanyasi* is a symmetrical pentatonic *rāgā* — like the rest of the *rāgās* mentioned in this list — that shares its *ārōhanam* with *Ābbēri*, which is an asymmetrical *rāgā*. Figure 9 refers to this shared scale as *Ābbēri* in service of connecting the solo in question with the rest of the piece, which is better described by *Ābbēri* than by *Suddha Dhanyasi*; as I go on to discuss, the indiscriminate use of F# and C# (*ri* and *dā*) in this solo and the subsequent shift in *rāgā* described in Figure 10 draw strategically from the *avarōhanam* of *Ābbēri*, rather than *Suddha Dhanyasi*.



Fig 11. *Ābhēri Grāha Bhēdam*

Meanwhile, in this solo, Shankar shifts the tonic from E to D but goes on to incorporate F# (*ri*) and C# (*da*), notes that are only found in the *avarōhanam*¹⁷⁷ of *Ābhēri*. The subsequent shift to what is effectively a D major pentatonic scale feel perfectly natural in terms of the E Dorian key signature, but completely ruptures the South Asian melodic structure of *Ābhēri*:

¹⁷⁷ Descending scale that defines a *rāgā* structure



Fig 12

Shankar’s approach in this solo can thus be understood as a translation of the Carnatic structure of *graha bhēdham* in terms of Western key signatures and modes — a translation that has the effect of significantly simplifying the Carnatic maneuver for performers and listeners alike. At the same time, the Western translation of this structure for allows melodic possibilities forbidden in the context of the Carnatic *rāgā*, allowing Shankar to draw on his Carnatic skill set while also moving beyond the restrictions of his native genre. The result is a solo that can appeal to both sets of audiences while, like Shankar himself, residing comfortably within neither genre’s norms.

If McLaughlin and Shankar’s solos can be used to interrogate their respective relationships with South Asian and Western musical structures, we can learn as much if not more from what happens when the two artists play together. Shankar’s solo on “Face to Face” leads into a tripartite rhythmic cadence that sounds very much like a *corvai* or a *tibai*; the *ghatam* immediately locks in, accompanying Shankar’s runs while also expertly filling the gaps between phrases. Following this synchronized cadence, McLaughlin steps back into the soloist position. Whereas before McLaughlin’s guitar accompaniment served as the backdrop for a genre-blending solo from Shankar, when McLaughlin begins his solo at 3:14 the percussion accompaniment introduces a lilting groove, taking audible advantage of the *ghatam*’s pitched quality to present what I hear as a distinctly South Asian soundscape. McLaughlin, however, does not in any noticeable way incorporate South Asian sounds beyond the *rāgā*-esque sound world that he occupies; his adherence to the meter is once

again freer than Shankar's, as he deploys phrases of different length that refute any attempt to identify a consistent *tālā* cycle. While Eastern and Western elements are juxtaposed throughout this track, then, their interactions are minimal — that is, until the four and a half minute mark, when McLaughlin and Shankar begin to weave around one another in a pentatonic mode (a famously translatable melodic structure)¹⁷⁸ in some of the only truly dialogic playing on the album. It is at this point that Shankar's playing becomes most expressly Carnatic, while McLaughlin remains within a jazz idiom. We are able to hear the two musicians responding to one another, taking up the tail ends of one another's improvised phrases to mutually shape the arc of their duet. The segment is short-lived, lasting just under thirty seconds, but it is by far one of my favorite moments on the album.

Other tracks on the album include an extended exploration of rhythmic unison and two-part pentatonic harmony on “The Daffodil and the Eagle,” as well as a upbeat song called “Happiness is Being Together” that can only be described as island-esque, a pseudo-rumba that immediately evokes the Caribbean. The primary contribution to “fusion” on these tracks seems to come in the form of unexpected pairings of genre and instrumentation — an “orchestration kind of idea,” as Rez puts it. Elsewhere, however, we are treated to a more nuanced approach to cross-cultural dialogue. There are several moments on “Get Down and Sruthi” where the melodic interplay between McLaughlin and Shankar once again highlights the audible differences and yet the ultimate compatibility of their distinct playing styles, through unisons where they move between straight pitches and more ornate South Asian accents with careful precision, as well as in solos where they each allow their individual styles to shine while simultaneously responding to one another's ideas. We are even treated to a quite traditional *ghatam* solo from Vinayakram with *konnakol* accompaniment from Hussain, while McLaughlin maintains the pulse. The entire piece is contextualized against a wonderful grounding polyrhythm that is neither South Asian nor Western, with McLaughlin's guitar

¹⁷⁸ See Trần Văn Khê's 1977 article, “Is the Pentatonic Universal? A Few Reflections on Pentatonism” for one example of the way the pentatonic scale has been persistently characterized as a ubiquitous across cultures and genres, despite significant variations in approach.

accents fitting snugly against a 6+6+4 *ghatam* subdivision in a very literal example of what Rez describes as “putting ideas together into another idea, rather than...just putting ideas together”:



Fig 13

As McLaughlin easily settles into a groove that dialogues playfully with Vinayakram’s emphatic accents, I am reminded of *dhhol* player Sunny Jain’s claim that rhythm is perhaps the “universal language” that ethnomusicologists loathe and musicians embrace. Sunny tells me:

When you talk about language, as a drummer, I always go to rhythm. It’s like, to me it’s like that’s the one thing that transcends. Whenever I travel anywhere it’s like okay, we can, we can play a rhythm, we can play — we can play music. But it to me can always come back to just rhythm. We can vibe on a rhythm, whether I’m dealing with a West African tradition, or an East African tradition, Sri Lankan, whatever, wherever you’re going, you can kind of get into some vibe, and figure out communication that way.

I read Sunny’s emphasis on “vibe” through the work of ethnomusicologist Luis Manuel Garcia-Mispireta, who credits the “vibe” with “bringing a dancing crowd into synchrony and solidarity”;¹⁷⁹ in this case, Sunny suggests that the “vibe” is also about co-articulation, as the band works to collectively produce an “affectively binding force.”¹⁸⁰ In the case of Shakti, we might read these moments of rhythmic cohesion as sounding a particular kind of interracial dialogue in which neither party is being constrained by or bending to the other’s whims, but in which the very act of “syncing up” effects a kind of cross-cultural solidarity.

¹⁷⁹ Garcia 2020:22

¹⁸⁰ *ibid*

It is not my goal here to qualify Shakti and *Natural Elements* as definitively “good fusion” or bad. I suppose I do implicitly hope to make a case for L. Shankar as an unsung hero of this collaboration. But what I ultimately propose is a model for listening to cross-cultural and interracial music that takes into account the social positionings implied by particular sonic interactions. For Rez, McLaughlin’s separation from Shakti’s overall texture reproduces an “us versus them” dynamic in which sonic miscegenation is limited at the expense of true cultural fusion. As I hope to have shown, however, there are also notable moments of productive interracial dialogue, in duets where McLaughlin reacts to Shankar’s *gamakka* with his own South Asian-inspired ornaments and slides and Shankar allows McLaughlin’s more discrete approach to shape his *swarakalpana*. Indeed, in these moments we see both performers attempting to speak across difference at risk of sacrificing so-called authenticity, as T. Roberts describes: “With an emphasis on interaction and dialogue, there can be a loss of monocultural fidelity and the strength of cultural resource available in a more insular environment.”¹⁸¹ We hear this in the moments that register as neither explicitly South Asian nor explicitly Western, such as when Shankar’s attempt to translate the South Asian structure of *graha bhedham* results in a sacrifice of Carnatic verisimilitude. Yet Roberts goes on to clarify that not all is lost; instead, “value is placed on sincere attempts to gain new perspective and speak across difference, rather than how authentically someone sits within it.”¹⁸² The ability to meaningfully engage with another performers’ ideas is thought to create a more balanced and socially cohesive sound, even if this means translating imperfectly across genre lines.

It also feels important to situate any critique of this collaboration against McLaughlin’s documented investment and proficiency in South Asian classical music. I am reminded again of Talal Asad’s discussion of dialogic ethnography, in which he stresses the importance of allowing the Other to exert a reciprocal influence on the self.¹⁸³ The sonic interactions on *Natural Elements* with

¹⁸¹ Roberts 2016:50

¹⁸² *ibid*

¹⁸³ Asad 2018

McLaughlin as featured soloist sometimes reinforce a top/bottom, us/them dynamic that does not ultimately live up to the aesthetic and ethical standards for “good fusion,” while from another perspective McLaughlin’s situatedness in the South Asian musical community and tradition is sufficient to justify the space he takes up throughout the album. Just as Anupam stresses his own fraught relationship with South Asian culture as a limiting factor in his relationship with Hindustani music, he emphasizes McLaughlin’s embrace of South Asian culture as a relevant factor in his artistic practice. “It [can’t just] be about the music,” he insists. As fusion musicians perform their relationships to their source materials and to one another, their cross-cultural transgressions sound intercultural dialogue and exchange. “Good fusion” is thus from the outset both an aesthetic and an ethical provocation — one that, ideally, allows cultural harmony to be enacted in the course of performance.

Gestures of Cultural Harmony

The above analysis, which puts Western and South Asian approaches to Indo-jazz fusion in conversation, primarily centers my own and my interlocutors’ experiences of Shakti as listeners. In addition to offering a listener perspective, however, my fieldwork afforded the opportunity for engagement with contemporary performers of South Asian fusion, whose deliberate incorporation of multiracial and multi-ethnic sounds effects a particular experience of collaborative music-making that further highlights this music’s role in fostering and depicting cross-cultural dialogue. Performers’ careful engagement with South Asian musical structures such as *rāgā* and *tālā* provides a lens into their attitudes towards cross-cultural engagement more broadly, as these structures are translated and modified in dialogue with their multicultural listeners’ and performers’ abilities and needs.

I recognize Sunny Jain immediately by his ample mustache. I’m certain he’s gotten that before. He, on the other hand, walks right past me to the counter of the café where we’ve agreed to

meet. A quick phone call sets things right, and together we step outside holding coffees and pastries to enjoy one of the first warm days of spring at a nearby table. I've seen Sunny's larger-than-life personality on stage; in person, he is similarly warm and affable, overflowing with a youthful energy that belies his age. "I love the energy and the cacophony of *baraats*¹⁸⁴ that you hear in India," he tells me. "Like, they're not master players, many of them, you know? It's like, they're just picking up the instruments, which is beautiful because you just hear the heart. And the need to make money. The *necessity* — you know what I'm saying? — the *necessity* of playing music. And to me that's also New York. That's the streets of New York."

Red Baraat was first conceived in 2005 when Sunny gathered a group of musician friends to perform at his own wedding. The band's driving mission has always been to deliver what Sunny calls a "boisterous" sense of energy and community: "We're on the ground, we're with people, we're interacting, we're in the mix." At the Red Baraat show I attended in March 2022 at Brooklyn Bowl, any barrier between the audience on the floor and the band on stage seemed to dissipate the moment the group started playing. It's very hard not to dance and sing along with Sunny, who encourages this participation with frequent call-and-response segments and keeps the energy at a high by bounding across the stage as he sings and beats the *dhhol*. The rest of the ensemble is no less enthusiastic; even the sousaphone player manages to incorporate full-body gyrations into his routine.

Sunny was born and raised in Rochester, New York. Outside of the Punjabi wedding band tradition for which his ensemble is named, his musical influences are diverse and many. Formally, he was a student of jazz percussion starting at the age of ten; but his also was a household that regularly included the soundtracks of *bhajans*¹⁸⁵ on cassette and Bollywood on vinyl. Meanwhile, Sunny's older brother was a guitarist who collected "everything from Rick Astley to Ice T." That brother, along with an older sister, was steered into a career in medicine by Sunny's parents. "By the

¹⁸⁴ The groom's processional entrance in many South Asian wedding traditions, usually accompanied by music

¹⁸⁵ Hindu devotional music

time it was my turn,” Sunny divulges, with a combination of slyness and sheepishness, “they were slippery with it.” He himself was allowed to pursue a degree in Jazz Studies at the Mason Gross School of the Arts, where he found that he was one of the only South Asian students in what was otherwise a racially diverse program. Composition was one of the primary ways Sunny sought to reconcile his lack of community and his feeling of not quite fitting into any particular scene, either culturally or musically: “Composition allowed me to throw everything at the page.”

This philosophy of “throw[ing] everything at the page” has carried through into Sunny’s role as the leader of Red Baraat. Critics, alongside Sunny himself, struggle to categorize the band in terms of genre. Reviewers are careful to emphasize the jazz, hip hop, and other influences that work alongside the Punjabi party band tradition. Despite the haphazard method implied by Sunny’s phrasing, these reviewers seem to particularly valorize the intentionality behind the band’s blending of multiple cultural influences. *Songlines Magazine* credits the band with having “a studied multi-ethnic cool”¹⁸⁶; *Stereogum* goes further, saying:

Red Baraat aren’t throwing bones to Western audiences to attract a crowd; there are no ham-fisted compromises to tone down their source material or crossover attempts based on Bollywood caricatures. The funk, ska-punk, and other American forms that make their way into the music are layered intricately within the same threadwork as the ragas on which these songs are pulled from. Each piece is a gesture of cultural harmony, rendering not only genre irrelevant, but the geographic placement of those sounds.¹⁸⁷

High praise, indeed — and praise that seems to focus on the *interactions* between constituent elements, woven together so as to form a cohesive tapestry of cultures and sounds. Furthermore, at least according to this reviewer, the genres and influences that are incorporated into Red Baraat’s sound are each treated with an individual respect that cannot be taken for granted in the context of cross-cultural fusion. This review, which is characteristic of the way critics tend to describe Red Baraat, speaks again to Roberts’ theory of sono-racial collaboration, “intentional engagements in

¹⁸⁶ Hickson, Jim. “South Asian Jazz — The Essential 10 Albums.” *Songlines*. August 16, 2019.

¹⁸⁷ Trewin, Pranav. “Red Baraat’s *Sound The People* Is A Boisterous Love Letter To Cultural Harmony.” *Stereogum*. June 27, 2018.

which artists employ racialized sound to form and perform interracial rapport.”¹⁸⁸ This is not simply a matter of performing multiple genres in tandem, but of sounding their productive coexistence, “suggesting an affinity between sounds that are deemed incompatible in standard racial logic.”¹⁸⁹ Sunny’s ensemble includes South Asian, Black, white, and Latinx performers, all of whom perform in a variety of languages and musical idioms, sounding interracial collaboration while resisting the body-culture determinism of mainstream multiculturalism. Crucially, this performance of cultural harmony is explicitly tied to the *musical* interactions between geographically disparate forms.

As far as the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, then, cultural harmony might be said to be Sunny’s driving artistic value. He is “methodical” about the musicians who make up his band, attempting to avoid too much overlap in skill set and background while also seeking out artists who can take on multiple roles within the ensemble. As best he can, he resists the authority vested in him as bandleader, inviting his bandmates to join him as co-composers, lyricists, arrangers, and conductors. “[The music] can have a shape and a vision and a foundation that’s driven by me [...] but at the same time I don’t want to limit, I want everyone to feel [included], I want everyone to feel a part of it,” he insists. Beyond this musical versatility, Sunny prioritizes the hustle and the lived experience that he identifies in South Asian *baraats*: “You gotta have some street in you, and understanding of playing with different people.” This emphasis on street smarts emerges as both a cultural and an aesthetic value, as the ability to shift between different artistic roles and work with different collaborators shapes Sunny’s evaluation of his bandmates’ musicianship. Red Baraat’s mission, both musically and culturally, is to bring people together. In this way, social harmony and street smarts are both understood as musical as well as cultural values.

The band’s crowd-pleasing “Shruggy Ji,” their most popular track on Spotify and a feature of most live performances, in many ways exemplifies their ethos of inclusion. The opening lyrics,

¹⁸⁸ Roberts 2016:6

¹⁸⁹ *ibid* 5

sung in unison over a driving *dhhol* rhythm and triumphant, blaring chords from the brass section, immediately call upon the audience to join in the multi-ethnic celebration:

*Shrug your shoulders and twist your wrist,
Move your body and shake those hips.
Just feel the rhythm all up under your skin,
Drip drops of sweat, Shruggy Ji, let's begin.*

The dance described in the band's pedagogical, step-by-step instructions is so pervasive in the West as a parodic representation of South Asianness that its performance by non-South Asians feels almost unavoidably charged. I can recall any number of white people "twisting the lightbulb" to Bollywood music whenever it infiltrated their sonic landscape. Yet Sunny not only gives his audience permission to participate (Jake: "yes, you're allowed to dance like that!"), he insists upon their participation, taking control of the crowd's engagement by explicating the "right" way to perform moves that are more often than not used to caricature the culture they emanate from. Not only do the lyrics describe the way the infamous Bollywood dance is meant to be performed, they ask the audience to go a step further by internalizing the rhythm that guides the dance, locating the crowd's unifying energy "under [the] skin."

But this is no facile utopia. Sunny clearly understands the singularity of his band's ethos in an increasingly divided nation. The titular track on Red Baraat's 2018 album, *Sound the People*, introduces a pointed degree of dissonance and unrest, with references to closed borders and mass incarceration rapped over a crunchy, unrelenting minor second interval from the sousaphone. In a memorable feature, Punjabi-American rapper Heems makes the album's relationship to racism and anti-immigrant sentiment explicit, pronouncing: "I pray to God in English, she don't hear me no more [...] tried to scrub my skin so they can see if my color run." At the same time, the lyrics call in a "people" united by melanin, invoking a transnational brown diaspora that extends beyond South Asia to Latin America, the West Indies, and the United States. That all of this occurs over a

triumphant brass groove and Sunny's ever-present *dhhol* introduces a degree of radical joy into this call for minoritarian solidarity.

There is, then, an element of utopian world building in Red Baraat's performance of cultural harmony. Theirs is a performance of the world we want, not the world that is. And yet I here draw on the full strength of the word "performance," thinking with Josh Kun who theorizes audiotopias as spaces "where the performances of others [become] the stage for performances of [our] own,"¹⁹⁰ enabling a form of identification that transcends the moment of performance and moves into the realm of real-world politics. Sunny's identity as a South Asian-American translates into an attempt to construct interracial political community through his music. He understands his artistic practice as ultimately an individual expression, but situates this individual identity in the context of a broader South Asian diaspora:

I think ultimately, I'm not looking for legitimacy from anyone but myself. You know? I'm just, I'm like this is me, this is my voice, and some people like it, some don't, I'm fine with it, you know [...] I was doing it in the beginning to feel connected to the motherland [...] But nowadays it's slowly migrated to being comfortable in the fact that I'm not just Indian, I'm not just American, I'm this identity that, there's so many people like me, you know, and there's so many more folks like me that are coming out, the younger generation, that it's like there's such a breadth of expression that to pigeonhole it would be detrimental. And also I think about the idea of tradition and authenticity and relating to that, I have trouble with that in the sense that like every tradition started at a beginning point, right? [...] You can't really look for acceptance in the, in the idea of 'what is.'

For Sunny, "good fusion" is about finding a means of expressing his own hyphenated identity while also calling in a diverse community of artists and listeners who are united in their defiance of extant cultural categories. Speaking as one such listener, Sunny's music *feels good*. The spaces of performance he inhabits function not so much as alternate realities as enacted potentialities. As racialized bodies and sounds joyfully intertwine, we feel their utopian drive spill beyond the borders of the stage, and we briefly experience musical and cultural harmony as fact. *Sound the People* is all too fitting an album title from an ensemble whose artistic practice is rooted in the performance of

¹⁹⁰ Kun, Josh. *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, p. 89.

cultural community — a community driven by an ethos of interminority solidarity as well as radical inclusion.

Case Study: “Take the ‘A’ Train”

For practitioners of Indo-jazz and other cross-cultural performance genres, “good fusion” represents a practical as well as an ethical challenge. How does one actually go about listening and performing across genre lines? What are the musical skills required to navigate the collision of disparate artistic idioms? My earlier analysis of Shakti’s *Natural Elements* emphasized dialogism and deep study, while Sunny and Red Baraat prioritize street smarts and political solidarity. In the following section, I take a somewhat more didactic approach to exploring the mechanics of cross-cultural collaboration, asking how South Asian and jazz musicians might go about putting their respective art forms in conversation.

In choosing his musical collaborators, Sunny looks for a kind of “street” knowledge that goes beyond musical training. Rather, artistic flexibility — the ability to quickly adapt to the conventions and digressions of the musical moment — is prized, as it enables collaboration with different kinds of artists and genres:

I know classically trained vocalists, a lot of them don’t know how to translate to jazz when I’m trying to do something. You know, but when I find the ones that do I’m like oh, shit, you got it. And we can change the chords and it doesn’t mess ‘em up, we can change the tonal center and they get it and they can shift and they can move and they understand how it relates to the *rāg* we’re in.

There are, to my ear, three distinct musical skills addressed by Sunny’s ideal collaborator. First, there is the ability to hold one’s own — to not get “mess[ed] up” by, say, the introduction of harmony into a classical South Asian idiom, or in more general terms, by the introduction of unfamiliar sounds or frameworks into any particular musical genre. This implies a musician who is comfortable enough in their own individual sound to not be reliant on conventional supports, and who likely

possesses at least a passing familiarity with the other constituent genres so as to not be caught off guard by their integration. Secondly, Sunny looks for the ability to “shift” and “move” — to jump into an idiom one is not well-versed in, such as when a jazz musician without training in South Asian music is asked to improvise in a Carnatic or Hindustani *rāgā* or, more likely, a related mode. This ability is directly related to the valorization of “street” knowledge over classical training, as Sunny insists on the importance of strong intuitions rather than deep formal knowledge. Sunny’s perspective represents an important departure from Anupam’s evaluation of John McLaughlin based on the guitarist’s intensive study of classical South Asian music over many years; for Sunny, a good ear and an adaptable playing style can compensate for differences in formal training, while classical training can in fact be a hindrance in a fusion context.

Finally, the third criterion Sunny prioritizes is the ability to “understand how it [all] relates.” A performer of classical South Asian music should be able to hear and respond to a harmonic shift *within the context of the rāgā at hand* — not as a disparate or unrelated idea, but as a direct response to and provocation for the *rāgā*-based melodic structure. *Rāgā* is, perhaps, the central defining aspect of South Asian music on a global scale, to the extent that Brooklyn Raga Massive often frames their curation of non-Western music under the umbrella label of “*rāgā* music.” Meanwhile, neither Carnatic nor Hindustani music incorporate chordal harmony, at least not explicitly. I caveat that statement for two reasons: first, from a cross-cultural listening perspective the ever-present tonic drone performs a partly harmonic function, allowing for example a *suddha rishabam* (flat two) to sound dissonant when contextualized against the tonic. Second, as I have learned in the process of harmonizing South Asian music in my own cross-cultural undertakings, a well-organized melody will often imply an accordant harmonic progression, even in the absence of explicit harmonies guiding the composition. Still, in many Indo-jazz collaborations harmony represents something of a challenge when coupled with the concept of *rāgā*. Jazz musicians find themselves having to harmonize melodies that evade Western tuning while using only a limited part of their melodic

toolkit; South Asian musicians find themselves improvising against ever-changing combinations of notes and chords as opposed to a constant drone, usually throwing the *rāgā* out of character. Both sides must find ways of making the concepts of harmony and *rāgā* compatible.

Sunny suggests one simple method of incorporating harmony and *rāgā*: “Something I will do is I take the *rāg* and look at chord clusters I can form with that, if I’m really basing a melody strictly off of *rāg*. And by *rāg* I mean a collection of notes.” The caveat is essential: this is effectively a translation of *rāgā* as scale or mode, stripping away elements such as *sancāri* and *gamakēka* to instead focus only on the notes that are included or omitted. This modal approach would be quite accessible to jazz musicians who are familiar with the likes of Miles Davis or John Coltrane; and indeed, at jam sessions I have often glossed specific *rāgās* in terms of their equivalent modes for a jazz rhythm section, to our mutual benefit. For listeners and readers with a passing familiarity with *rāgā* and mode, this particular strategy might seem too obvious to even bother stating; and yet a definition of *rāgā* in terms of the notes that make up the scale is almost wholly removed from the lived experience of many South Asian listeners who have grown up with *rāgā*-based music. My father can identify the *rāgā* of a Carnatic composition or improvisation within seconds and with remarkable accuracy, but when pressed, he is usually at a loss to articulate the *swara* contained within the *rāgā* in question. The simple translation of *rāgā* as mode, then, emerges as a key first step in Indo-jazz fusion collaboration, wherein *rāgā* is treated a collection of notes that can then be approached using the logic of functional harmony.

Meanwhile, Anupam discusses a method of navigating harmony from the other direction, as an South Asian musician sitting in with a jazz combo:

If there’s like, somebody calls out, you know, “Take the ‘A’ Train,” then you just figure out how to play over those changes at that point. And then if you don’t play over it, just hang and do whatever you can, or maybe move to a key that you’re comfortable and play over that one key, you know, using that as a drone, not necessarily playing over 2-5-1 changes, you know, with tritone substitutions, but you’re kind of doing, like, not more of a traditional jazz thing, [but] more of *your* thing, which is like a modal thing, you know, and try to fit it in, and it all works.

In the event that playing over changes is not in your toolkit, Anupam suggests that melodic improvisation around a fixed tonic — the traditional approach in Carnatic and Hindustani music — can be deployed even against Western harmonies, resulting in a collaboration that “works,” but that may lead to “a loss of monocultural fidelity,” as T. Roberts describes. Still, like Roberts, Anupam seems to believe that the value of the collaboration outstrips the importance of genre authenticity. For a South Asian Indo-jazz performer, this approach would likely involve choosing a *rāgā* that works with the melody in question (for “Take the ‘A’ Train” I might suggest *Rishabapriya* — more on that in a moment) and improvising in that *rāgā* in the given key. In this case, the guiding melody is more important than the accordant chord changes in determining the structure of a *rāgā*-based improvisation. Choosing the right *rāgā*, meanwhile, emerges as a key consideration in the context of an Indo-jazz collaboration.

Certain *rāgās* made repeat appearances at the many jams I attended over the course of my fieldwork, as well as in conversations with musicians later. The Carnatic *rāgā* *Ābhēri*, described earlier as an approximate blues scale, was cited repeatedly as a *rāgā* that could be easily introduced at a jazz jam, alongside its Hindustani equivalent *Bhīmpalāsi*; the Carnatic *rāgā* *Mohanam* and its Hindustani equivalent *Bhōopālī*, both often glossed as pentatonic scales, were also popular choices. These are *rāgās* that have, as demonstrated, ready translations in a cross-genre context. They are also, I will add, *rāgās* that can be played with minimal *gamakke* without losing their central flavor, or else whose performance with the accordant *gamakke* and *sancāri* would not detract from their translatability. A Carnatic *rāgā* such as *Thodī* could perhaps be glossed as a Phrygian scale (or at least, it is on Wikipedia), but it would almost certainly fail to register as *Thodī* if played without the appropriate *gamakke* or *sancāri*, or as a Phrygian scale if played in the Carnatic style.

The implication that *rāgās* are sometimes rendered unfaithfully in fusion performance is intended, but not as a critique. Even classically trained South Asian performers sometimes play fast

and loose with *rāgās* in cross-genre settings. Sunny tells me how he breaks down an *ālāpana* for one of his bandmates with a background in jazz:

If we're dealing with [an] *ālāp* moment, I might try and figure out a way to relate it to Coltrane [...] I was like for the opening, I want you to try and sit here, you know, in this realm. These are — I'll put notes in parenthesis meaning like, don't really play it that much. If you're ascending you can play that, you know. If you're descending, maybe touch that. But don't sit there. This is not key. These three tones, these four tones are key. And, and sit in that realm. But at the same time she also brings jazz to her background. She brings a whole other element. So I want that to come together.

Sunny teaches his collaborator which notes are emphasized and deemphasized in the *rāga* at hand, but also encourages her to draw on her own training and instincts as a jazz musician, citing Coltrane, whose unique approach to *rāgā* and *ālāpana* is explored in Chapter One of Elliott Powell's monograph, *Sounds from the Other Side*.¹⁹¹ Importantly, this jazz-inspired interpretation of an *ālāpana* would almost certainly render the *rāgā* unrecognizable to a Carnatic or Hindustani listener. Almost by way of justification, Jake Charkey identifies a similar approach to harmony among Bollywood music producers:

They do harmonic things that sound super cool that somebody who had years and years of theory might never think of. Cuz they're willing to break the Western thing so it fits into their *rāgā* idea or whatever, like 'oh, it's fine to have two thirds and two sevens, big deal, whatever.' And I'm not — voice leading? *laughs* You know? It's all color, it's all color! And actually, like that's a cool approach to harmony.

The politics of this “fast and loose” approach will be discussed in greater detail later on. Still: choosing *rāgās* that can handle some roughhousing is an essential aspect of Indo-jazz performance, while from an audience perspective, said roughhousing comes to be expected and, usually, accepted.

In the following section, I take up Anupam's stated example of “Take the ‘A’ Train,” speaking from my own perspective as a Carnatic musician to analyze the ways an Indo-jazz performer might approach this piece in performance. I do not mean here to state my aesthetic preferences as definitive. Rather, I attempt to use my own creative process to demonstrate the kinds

¹⁹¹ Powell 2020

of multidirectional decision-making that often go into Indo-jazz performance. As I have said, the act of selecting a *rāgā* is a key moment in establishing an Indo-jazz musician’s interpretation of and intentions for the piece at hand. *Rāgā* is, at its core, a melody-structuring principle. Without a clear relationship to chord changes to guide us, it is the melody of a composition that is usually the starting point for *rāgā* improvisation. Let’s start by taking a look at the melody of “Take the ‘A’ Train”:

“Take the ‘A’ Train”



Fig 14

In trying to determine the *rāgā* that might best accompany this melody, several immediate considerations emerge. For improvising on a jazz standard, especially one that does not readily lend itself to either of the previously identified options of *Abhēri* or *Mohanam*, I tend to lean towards *melakartā rāgās*, meaning *rāgās* that contain all seven notes and a linear organization. *Varjā rāgās* — scales with fewer than seven notes — prove somewhat limiting in the context of jazz improvisation, while *vakra rāgās* — literally “crooked,” meaning the scale is not linear — often have more specific *sancāri* that need to be attended to, which can furnish an additional challenge in a cross-genre context. For this particular tune, the *rāgā* of choice should likely include *antāra gāndhāram*, the natural third, as E appears only in its natural form throughout the melody. Beyond this, the contrast between the natural and raised fourth is highlighted in mm. 9-16, where the same melodic cell is repeated with only this note altered (Fig 14). The flat six is also accented repeatedly throughout the melody, particularly in m. 3 and m. 16 (Fig 14). In selecting a *rāgā*, then, I might opt for something that includes *prati madhyamam* and *shuddha dhaivatam*, sharp four and flat six.

Aside from natural three, the only other note that might appear unambiguous is *shuddha rishabham*, flat two. However, in the context of a scale that also includes *prati madhyamam*, *shuddha rishabham* creates a dark drama; a flat two against a sharp four begs for resolution, leading to perhaps a more dissonant interpretation than has been standard for this particular tune. To achieve a more appropriate color, *suddha rishabham* might want to be paired with *shuddha madhyamam*, natural four; given that the flat two occurs only on unaccented upbeat throughout the melody, however, I would likely choose to deprioritize this note in favor of including the sharp four. I might also here appeal to the authority of Ella Fitzgerald, who audibly uses a natural two in place of a flat two in her canonical rendition of this tune.

This leaves us with a few options. Neither flat seven nor natural seven are particularly significant notes in the melody above, occurring with equal frequency and only in the context of a chromatic ascent; either option could be acceptable when improvising. The two *rāgās* we are left to choose between are *Lathāngi* and *Rishabapriya*.

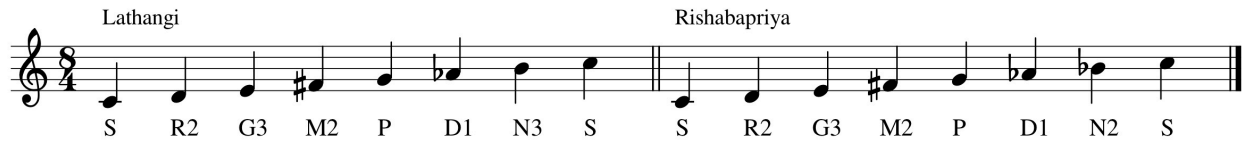


Fig 15

In terms of color, *Lathāngi* is brooding and mysterious. Its close proximity to *Kalyāni* and *Pantuvarāli*,¹⁹² both exponentially more popular *rāgās* in the Carnatic tradition, means that the ear is constantly led to expect certain pitches and then surprised, denied. It is a *rāgā* about finding joy and beauty in dark places and about acknowledging the potential for darkness in even the lightest

¹⁹² *Kalyāni* can be described as *Lathāngi* with a natural six, while *Pantuvarāli* is *Lathāngi* with a flat two. Of course, *Lathāngi* is much more likely to be defined in terms of these other two *rāgās* than the other way around, due to their infinitely greater popularity. My father, when he read this footnote, accused me of “going from the child to the parent.”

atmosphere. This is not, I will argue, the appropriate tone for “Take the ‘A’ Train,” whose lyrics Ella delivers with her signature playfulness:

*You must take the "A" train
To go to Sugar Hill, way up in Harlem
If you miss the "A" train
You'll find you missed the quickest way to Harlem*

Rishabapriya, meanwhile, is the *prati madhyamam* equivalent of *Chārukesī*, a *rāgā* that exists in both Hindustani and Carnatic music — always a nice touch when improvising in a cross-cultural setting. *Rishabapriya* is no less surprising than *Lathāngī*, but has a longer temporality; rather than individual notes (flat six and natural two) unexpectedly altering the texture, the raised, elevated first half of the scale is contrasted with the darker, flattened second half, allowing for a certain deliberate mischief as one moves between pitch areas. Unlike *Lathāngī*, *Rishabapriya* can also be played with minimal *gamakka* and still retain its essential character. On “Take the ‘A’ Train,” then, I would — and sometimes do — choose to improvise in *Rishabapriya*.

This is in no way meant to be a conclusive assessment of the *rāgā* of “Take the ‘A’ Train.” The song itself is not in any particular *rāgā*, and a performer could easily opt for a different color to express their interpretation of this composition. They could choose to go further astray from the main melody than I myself tend to do as a Carnatically-trained improviser; they could justifiably prioritize the natural six over the flat six, leading to a different set of melodic options; or they could choose to use a *rāgā* with fewer than seven notes, possibly leading to a lighter and more playful approach to improvising, by no means a bad thing. Through this analysis, I merely hope to demonstrate some of the considerations an Indo-jazz performer might take into account when matching a *rāgā* with a jazz standard. And even this technique of improvising within a particular *rāgā* is not universal practice among Indo-jazz performers; often, *rāgās* serve merely as “jumping off points,” to again quote violinist Arun Ramamurthy. Indeed, while improvising on this chart I would likely introduce elements of *Chārukesī* and *Vāchaspati* to highlight the contrast between the natural

and raised fourth and the natural and flat six respectively. And even this framing of “blending” *rāgās* is a relatively conservative tack used to justify what is in fact the introduction of blue notes, essential to maintaining the jazz character of the performance.

It also feels pertinent to mention that this elaborate decision-making process is rarely explicit, and rarely takes more than a few seconds. I often wander into the right *rāgā* after several false starts. When I do land on something that works, however, I find that the jazz composition and the *rāgā* are in dialogue, with the jazz melody imposing its salient characteristics on the choice of *rāgā* but the choice of *rāgā* allowing us to hear the different emphases that characterize the guiding melody. In other words, *rāgā* and harmony work best when they are allowed to exert a reciprocal influence, despite their frequent characterization as antipathetic. Dialogism and reciprocity, then, emerge as both ethical and aesthetic values for cross-cultural performance. In a successful Indo-jazz collaboration, South Asian and Western elements work together to produce a fully hyphenated soundscape, one that is accessible for performers and listeners of either inclination but particularly salient for artists working at their intersection.

“Rewriting the Rules”: Aesthetic Competence as Cultural Competence

In this final section, I want to address what may seem to be a contradiction in this chapter so far. For many of my interlocutors, cultural competence is a key factor in aesthetic evaluation. And yet the definition of cultural competence itself feels slippery, as Sunny emphasizes intuition and adaptability while Anupam stresses deep study and intentionality. The definition of a “good” fusion performance from both an ethical and aesthetic standpoint seems to be open to interpretation. And indeed, in the fields of education and medicine where cultural competence is most frequently discussed, the term is yet to be clearly defined beyond understanding cultural competence “as a set

of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies” that enable effective cross-cultural care.¹⁹³ Meanwhile, in the context of musical performance, cultural competence as an ethical provocation is wrapped up in aesthetic competence, to the degree that aesthetic competence often functions as a *kind* of cultural competence; an aesthetically successful performance might even be liberated from the ethical charge of cultural appropriation, such that the definition of cultural competence is contingent on variously emphasized musical competencies.

To this point, Jake Charkey reemerges as a troublesome figure in this dissertation. Jake’s particular brand of white male confidence led to an intriguing discussion about the role of ethics in cross-cultural collaboration. Our interview spanned the better part of an afternoon, partly because we had a lot to say and partly because we were simply enjoying one another’s company. And yet I remained aware throughout our conversation of Jake’s willingness, even eagerness, to provoke. He took obvious pleasure in playing devil’s advocate at every given opportunity, particularly when it came to appropriation. He clearly agreed with the premise that there were aesthetic and ethical distinctions to be made between different kinds of cross-cultural performance; but we kept returning to the idea that there was value to be found even in fusion music that espoused blatant ignorance of its constituent forms:

For me, embracing that it’s, that you’re rewriting the rules when you do something like that, is important, and this is why actually some politically bad fusion is aesthetically good fusion. Because the people who are making it are ignorant enough not to have those restrictions. Like, they just make it because it sounded cool and they’re not worried about if they’re doing it the right way, or whatever. It’s just like, that sounds cool, this thing and this thing sound cool together. *pause* Well, lot of Bollywood works this way! They’re not — I mean, from the other end of the spectrum, they’re not necessarily that trained in Western music. And it sounds *laughing* awesome.

As the world’s largest commercial center for film music production, Bollywood is something of a fraught example of “good fusion” for many artists, even those who specialize in fusion or have

¹⁹³ Cross, T. L., Barbara, J. B., Karl, W. D., & Marcasa, R. I. “Towards a culturally competent system of care: A monograph on effective services for minority children who are severely emotionally disturbed.” CASSP Technical Assistance Center, Georgetown University Child Development Center, 1989.

otherwise diverse musical sensibilities. (As Anupam says: “So, Bollywood — this is my biggest beef, that’s one of the reasons I moved to the States, to get away from that shit. There was one music that was not allowed in our house, that was Bollywood. Fuck Shah Rukh Khan.”) The Westernization of South Asian culture via Bollywood has been lamented by South Asian news outlets and cultural commenters for decades; indeed, Jayson Beaster-Jones cites a widespread perspective among critics who consider Bollywood film songs “inauthentic, if not destructive, representations of Indian national ideals.”¹⁹⁴ Beaster-Jones himself does not share this perspective. Discussing the inclusion of a wide variety of global music genres including flamenco, tango, rumba, mambo, samba, bossa nova, jazz, rock, and disco in *filmi* music, he suggests instead that “the ostensibly heightened use of international music styles in film songs has become metonymic of the Indian nation in an era of globalization.”¹⁹⁵ Beaster-Jones characterizes Bollywood music as fundamentally cosmopolitan, defining cosmopolitanism as “a set of ideologically driven orientations that transcends borders (of any kind) in the performance of particularly rooted kinds of locality.”¹⁹⁶ The international influences in Bollywood, then, are ideologically distinct from the other kinds of cross-cultural collaboration discussed in this work in that they are meant to index the relationship between the local and the global writ large, rather than a specific relationship to any particular cultural community.

Much of Jake’s experience as a fusion musician comes out of his work in the Bollywood industry. In his own creative endeavors, however, he emphasizes collaborations with artists who “have a foot in both worlds,” whose training and artistry are informed by deep cross-cultural engagement between South Asian and Western spheres. His current album project includes commissions from artists like Akshaya Tucker and Michael Harrison, both of whom have trained for decades in both South Asian and Western classical forms. As such, there is a contradiction

¹⁹⁴ Beaster-Jones, Jayson. *Bollywood Sounds: The Cosmopolitan Mediations of Hindi Film Song*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 8

¹⁹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁹⁶ *ibid* 11

between the free-for-all ideology Jake claims to espouse and the clear intentionality behind his own artistic practice. Jake himself freely acknowledges these contradictions:

Yeah, it's complicated. I don't know, like, you know, the contradictions that you're hearing are because I don't have easy answers, and it's just my — philosophically, I am American. So I'm like, fuck it, you know? But on a more personal level who I am comes out of deep tradition and study and like, really serious study and respect for a tradition. I mean even every other type of thing I did too. Like I didn't just fuck around with reggae music, I grew my locs out, I lived with Rastas, I went to Rasta church, I played that music every day, I know those riddims by name.

In light of his pattern of immersion in non-white cultures, the ungenerous read on Jake's stated ideology is that he is simply a white man who doesn't like being told that he can't have something. I do believe that there is an element of this sentiment at play. But I also believe that there is a bigger point to be made about the definition of "good" when used to qualify "fusion." Jake describes the fusion-makers in question as "ignorant" while also implicitly endorsing their musical sensibilities, so that "ignorant" might here imply uninformed but by no means unintelligent. To this point, we cannot understate the importance of intuition in cross-cultural performances, particularly those that occur spontaneously or on a short time frame. We might return to Sunny's emphasis on "vibing" on a rhythm in international collaborations, or even to my own experiences in cross-cultural jam sessions where I regularly perform *rāgā* music alongside musicians who have no training in and limited exposure to South Asian musical structures, often to remarkable effect. It would be foolhardy to exclude these collaborations wholesale from any definition of "good" simply because the musicians in question are relying on musical intuition, broadly construed, rather than a deep understanding of South Asian musical grammars.

I am likewise intrigued by the emphasis on intuition and embodiment in Jake's relationship with South Asian music and culture. He tells me how he unconsciously code switches into Indian English when speaking with his *guru*, a vernacular he only picked up by spending time in India (as if

formal training in regional vernaculars were even readily available).¹⁹⁷ This osmotic acquisition of the local dialect parallels Jake's early studies in Hindustani music, which he says involved "minimal explanation" from his *guru* — a description that, while far from uncommon in the context of Hindustani pedagogy,¹⁹⁸ reminds me once again of my father's intuitive proficiency in *rāgā* identification compared with my own more grammatically driven expertise. The ability to hear that something "sounds cool" based on intuition alone is not far removed from the experience of studying South Asian music with a *guru*, whose task might be described as one of honing these intuitions. We might also here remember that *rāgās* are not static entities, but are subject to mutation over time, so that something that merely "sounds cool" in one era might well become canonical in the next.

Indeed, much of what makes "good fusion" sound good can be achieved through strong musical intuitions, even at the expense of rigorous formal training. Active listening and dialogism, respectful intentions and social harmony, and, crucially, trusting your ear and instincts in the genre you *do* know well, can all contribute to a successful fusion performance. And, as in any cross-cultural interaction, we must be prepared for missteps, and be prepared to recognize them as such. As Jake says: "The new things that I do, I think of them mostly as experiments. Some of them make something new, using the, the bits and parts from other things, you know. The best of it understands what is broken and understands what things actually communicate, and the worst of them are usually dumb."

As one final point on what makes "good fusion" good, I feel the necessity of making one thing clear: I like Jake very much, and I respect him completely as a musician. How much of my willingness to engage him as an interlocutor, both academically and artistically, has to do with the

¹⁹⁷ In a noteworthy exception to this statement, in 2016 Harvard University began offering language classes in Jamaican patois, an event that was unexpected enough to warrant attention from multiple media outlets including the international Caribbean news platform *Loop News*. As such, this detail perhaps functions as an exception that proves the rule.

¹⁹⁸ See Neuman 2012

simple fact that we get along as people? I would be remiss not to discuss a shared sentiment among almost all of the artists I interviewed: to quote Mir Naqibul Islam, “the hang has to be good.” Mir in particular seems to take the responsibility of hosting a jam session extremely seriously: after the first jam I attended at his apartment, the entire group was treated to a home-cooked dinner and Mir’s signature kombucha-based mocktail. Rachna emphasizes the artistic value of this sort of hospitality, commenting on the importance that eating together has played in all of her artistic collaborations. Anupam makes some light of this level of extramusical socialization, but similarly stresses the importance of “vibing” with the artists you choose to collaborate with: “I mean, you don’t have to go out for drinks and enjoy family dinners with them, but at least there has to be some sort of, you know, some sort of X-factor connection that just makes it tick.” Sunny, meanwhile, identifies interpersonal comfort as the single most important factor when choosing his collaborators:

I mean first of all it’s like, the hang and the relationship needs to be there. You know, that, that comfort level because you have to have that trust to play with someone. You know, you’re playing music and you want to be able to just be open, and not be second guessing anything and feeling insecure or anything, and you want everyone else to feel secure.

For Sunny, this emphasis on “the hang” has a direct impact on the music itself, allowing performers to play with less reserve. In other words, social compatibility is, in fact, a musical value.

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate how ethics and aesthetics intertwine in evaluations of “good fusion,” as the goals of dialogism and cross-cultural proficiency influence musical choices and preferences among both listeners and performers. Cultural competence is the defining criterion for fusion evaluation, and is understood as simultaneously an aesthetic and sociomusical value. In the final chapter, I employ a sociolinguistic perspective to further analyze how musicians go about performing these values, treating the fusion jam session as a space of conversational exchange and identity-based expression. The chapter begins, appropriately, with the narration of a very good hang.

Hyphenated Musical Epistemologies in Aditya Prakash's "Joy"

At the risk of tooting my own horn — I promise it's for a good reason — I've always been a strong sight reader. From early on in my musical career, I've found myself capable of sight singing choral masterworks in concert and sight-transposing random combinations of jazz lead sheets on the flute. Excepting some atonal repertoire, I can generally find my way. I have always maintained that it is my Carnatic training and, more importantly, the way this training intersects with my relationship to Western music that is to thank for this handy skill. Given a melody in a particular key, the mental translation to *sargam* is more or less intuitive; and if I can internalize the *sargam*, I can externalize the melody.

Of course, engaging with modal music or with charts in multiple keys requires a certain flexibility as far as *sargam* and solfège are concerned. The key signature is not the only means of determining where the tonic, *sa*, is located; in the absence of clear harmonies — and, equally relevant, in the absence of the training or the ear to identify harmonic progressions — the difference between hearing a melody in F major versus C Mixolydian is, in my experience, primarily about *feel*. Certain melodic movements between scale degrees make different kinds of sense in equivalent modes. When I assign a particular *swara* or scale degree to a particular note in a harmonically unstable composition, I am influenced in equal parts by the designated key signature and by my own intuition; sometimes the perceived tonic shifts mid-measure, in an effort to arrive at the most singable way of conceptualizing of a given melodic phrase.

This emphasis on singability is intimately tied to Carnatic values. The success of an instrumental performance of a *kṛitī* is often related to how closely the performer manages to imitate the fluidity and text-based articulation of the human voice. The durability of the *veena*¹⁹⁹ and the

¹⁹⁹ An ancient South Asian stringed instrument

open-hole flute in the Carnatic repertoire as well as the ubiquity of the violin since its introduction to the genre in the 19th century suggest that Carnatic instruments are valorized specifically, if not primarily, for their ability to approximate the human voice, as the instruments that have gained precedence within this tradition are those that enable fluid rather than discrete relationships between pitches. In lessons with my *guru*, singing is paramount; indeed, he rarely takes up his flute when demonstrating a new melody or phrase, but instead sings, allowing me to hear the phrase in its most authentic form and calling upon me to make the translation from sung melody into playable notes. Occasionally, if my interpretation is wanting, my *guru* will perform the necessary translation into *sargam* for me, singing the relevant pitches by name. There is, however, always a moment's hesitation as he works out the correct translation; the connection between melody and gesture, *swara* and *gamakka*, is so intimate and immediate as a Carnatic performer that the act of verbalizing this translation process requires a level of remove that is far from intuitive, but that itself becomes a form of “doing theory.” The takeaway, as far as understanding my own musical epistemology, is that while discrete *swara* ought not to be my starting point for understanding a vocal melody, they are a productive tool for conceptualizing complicated melodic contours, whether within the Carnatic context or beyond; and that “hearing” the accordant *swara* can help us arrive at an understanding of a melody that may have previously eluded us.

I had long suspected that I was not the only Carnatically-trained musician to think in these terms. Conversations with other South Asian practitioners of Western music revealed that many Carnatic musicians routinely use *sargam* as a tool when learning Western melodies. Still, this particular epistemological maneuver, and specifically the technique of mentally deploying a shifting tonic over the course of a composition, seemed niche enough to escape sustained analysis. I had rarely seen or heard this method discussed explicitly, beyond my own casual conversations. The surprise of hearing this unique mental process laid bare in Aditya Prakash's “Joy” was, perhaps, the most excited I had ever been about an expressly music theoretical undertaking. Here was a music

theory that squared with my own heretofore unanalyzed mode of conceptualizing melody, a music theory grounded not in Western notions of harmony but in the vocality, the fundamental singability, valorized by the Carnatic tradition.

“Joy” is the sixth track on Prakash’s most recent album, *Diaspora Kid*, released in 2020 via Ropeadope Records to critical acclaim. In the materials describing the album on Prakash’s website, there is an emphasis on diasporic identity as a cohesive “third thing” emerging out of sustained cross-cultural encounter: “One can hear the influence of both sides, but like all truly groundbreaking projects, we can identify with the result on its own, as an entirely new and wonderful experience. In this way the music mirrors Aditya’s experience and the experience of so many who are physically, but not spiritually, separated from their cultures.”²⁰⁰ This description feels like the kind of acknowledgement new musicologists dream of, explicit permission from the composer to project ideas about culture and identity onto “the music itself.” Even without this express invitation, however, I heard something kindred in Prakash’s music, the way *solkattu*²⁰¹ recitations revealed a conceptual breakdown of jazz rhythms that squared with my own intuitive understanding of the same, even the indulgent excesses of reverb and driving cymbals under soaring vocal lines that only someone who grew up on Bollywood soundtracks could justify.

“Joy,” however, introduced a heretofore unprecedented level of identification. The opening melody is, effectively, a run-on phrase, a long, uninterrupted string of rapid-fire notes that don’t initially appear to be in any particular key or *rāgā*, at least not in the traditional sense. When I played this opening melody for a group of music theorists at a party (killing the vibe in the process), they collectively failed to identify any clear pulse or rhythmic subdivision, nor did they hear any immediately apparent modal or harmonic structure. When the riff is repeated with rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment later on in the song, the underlying 4-beat cycle as well as the relatively

²⁰⁰ <https://adityaprakashmusic.com/aditya-prakash-ensemble/>

²⁰¹ South Indian percussion vocabulary, also known as *konnakol*

uncomplicated harmonic structure become much easier to identify. However, to the right listener, both the 4-beat pulse and the guiding harmonic structure are audible from the very beginning.

The use of *sargam* on this opening riff immediately demands a particular way of hearing the phrase at hand. The opening *ni*, the Carnatic syllable for the seventh scale degree, sung on a Bb, puts us in C Mixolydian. However, we don't stay there for long: Prakash dislocates the tonic via *sargam* and introduces accidentals freely, shifting the tonal center seemingly at random. My decision to notate the excerpt in 4/4 was at first based solely on the placement of Prakash's vocal accents, but quickly justified itself further by making visible the fairly regular introduction of new accidentals, once per measure:

“Joy” 0:00-0:30



Fig 16

Starting in C and 4/4 makes the excerpt markedly less random, but it still doesn't quite lend itself to any one interpretation. One jazz theorist heard the whole excerpt in C but in rapidly shifting modes; a more classically trained theorist found himself searching for applied dominants. As it turns out, however, Prakash tells us exactly what he wants us to hear. At the start of each measure (save for some slight variation towards the end of the segment) the use of *sargam* suddenly shifts to imply a different tonic than the preceding measure. The effect is of an immediate cognitive dissonance; the

solfège syllable sung at the beginning of each measure is different from the syllable we expect to hear based on the previous measure, forcing us to shift our understanding of the tonal center. In Figure 17, I have marked each moment where Prakash interrupts the implied tonic by introducing an unexpected scale degree with regards to *sargam*:

7 2 1

NDSNDPND PMGM R MG RSGRS NDPDNR S NDP MGR MGR S NDP DN

4 5 1 3

P D N S R G M P N D P M G R S N S RGR GMG MPM P G MPM PDP DND S

7 4 6 1

MGR S NDGRS NDS DPMG D S N RS MGR SN SRGSRGMSRGMP SRGM

10 2 2 4

RGRG MRGMPRGMPD ND RG SR NSD SPD MPGMPD MPDGM PRGM SRGMPD N

13 1 5 6 4 3 3 6

S SNDPMG ND PMGRSN DPMGRSND GMPDRGMPDG DN

16 5

S S R G M P D D N S P M G M P N

Fig 17

Taking our cues as to the key signature for each measure from Prakash's use of *sargam*, the following harmonic organization becomes apparent:

7 2

N D S N D P N D P M G M R M G R S G R S N D P D N S R

3 1 5

S N D P M G R M G R S N D P D N P D N S R G M P N D P M G R S N

5 1 3 4

S R G R G M G M P M P G M P M P D P D N D S M G R S N D G R S N D S D P M G

8 6 1

D S N R S M G R S N S R G S R G M S R G M P S R G M

10 2 2

R G R G M R G M P R G M P D N D R G S R N S D S P D M P G M P D

12 4 1

M P D G M P R G M S R G M P D N S S N D P M G N D

14 5 6 4 3 3 6

P M G R S N D P M G R S N D G M P D R G M P D G D N

16 5

S S R G M P D D N S P M G M P N

Fig 18

Not random at all; in fact, downright conventional — a descending circle of fifths repeats every four measures. More important is the fact that the entire excerpt is sung in a Mixolydian mode, roughly translatable as *Harikamboji*. In other words, what we have here is harmonic progression but modal stasis — or, functional harmony within the context of *rāgā*.

Having been thusly illuminated, I sent my advisor my frantically cobbled together set of transcriptions, as seen above, walking her through my discovery. Mostly, I told her, I was looking for validation and for her permission to proceed down this line of inquiry: was this as cool as I thought it was?

Less than 24 hours later, she responded.

“Hi Nina,

I think you’re spot on!!! And it IS super cool! This would make a great interlude! In fact, Aditya Prakash discusses this piece and how he modulates up by fourths in [this video](#)²⁰²...”

It was the kindest possible way of letting me know that Prakash himself had already done all of this work for me, very helpfully laying out the piece’s use of the Mixolydian mode and the shift in tonic every four beats. The video even included a slowed-down rendition of the melody that would have infinitely facilitated my transcription, had I done my homework. Alas. I had been scooped. Still, the analysis itself was in many ways not the point. What *did* interest me was the way Prakash deliberately indexed a particular way of hearing the melody at hand, a way of hearing that squared with my own Carnatically-driven approach to non-Carnatic music. Essentially, what Prakash demonstrates through his use of *sargam* is an extraordinarily helpful way of breaking down a melody that, on first listen, might even be described as atonal. For someone trained in a tradition that emphasizes melody over (or even to the exclusion of) harmony, shifting tonal centers provide a

²⁰² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yARfSILvJo>

much more intuitive way of hearing and singing this harmonic pattern than a more vertical, chord-based mode of analysis.

“Joy” thus demonstrates how hyphenation as a musical epistemology can create new possibilities for composition and analysis. A *sargam*-based approach to a relatively simple harmonic structure makes this harmonic motion audible in the context of melody-based Carnatic music, as well as opening up Western harmonic structures for different kinds of melodic movements and improvisations that rely on a shifting tonal center rather than predetermined sequences of the sort favored by Western tonality. Prakash’s abilities as a jazz musician are richly enhanced by his reliance on Carnatic *sargam*, while my own ability as a listener to comprehend an excerpt that doesn’t fit into either Carnatic or Western modes is enhanced by thinking through the interactions and intersections of these two analytical frames. Prakash’s example makes these interactions explicit, but as my own varied musical career has shown me, the applications of a hyphenated musical epistemology are wide-ranging and directly responsible for the comfort I often feel in unfamiliar musical territory, whether Indo-jazz fusion or something more traditional. Hyphenation is a musical *skill*. The following chapter stages a close reading of hyphenation as a musical process, revealing the artistic possibilities afforded by living at the intersection in cross-genre musical interactions — as well as the possibilities, found at this intersection, for the formation of cross-cultural community.

Chapter 3

Translation, Conversation, Speech: Cross-Cultural Music and the Negotiation of Meaning

“Language is a convention, and the nature of the sign that is agreed upon does not matter.”

— Ferdinand de Saussure, “On the Linguistic Object”

*Un petit d'un petit
S'étonne aux Halles
Un petit d'un petit
Ah! degrés te fallent
Indolent qui ne sort cesse
Indolent qui ne se mène
Qu'importe un petit d'un petit
Tout Gai de Regennes.*

— *Mots D'Heures: Gousses, Rames: The D'Antin Manuscript*

January, 2022. I’ve only been in the field for a couple of weeks at this point, but I’m already frustrated by the slow (okay, nonexistent) pace of ethnographic activity, which is due in equal parts to the dearth of concert opportunities thanks to the recent Omicron wave and the natural ramp-up to inserting myself in the local community. On a whim — or rather, in an attempt to get started — I text Jay Gandhi, a *bansuri*²⁰³ player I met during my last fieldwork stint in 2019. He generously invites me over. I cannily bring my flutes. It takes me over an hour to get to his apartment, first the J train into Manhattan and then the Q train back to Church Avenue, giving me plenty of time to build up the encounter in my head. I have a list of interview questions scrawled in my field notebook, residuals from my IRB application, but I’m hoping I won’t be needing them; I envision a free flow of conversation and music and chai. Either way, I haven’t framed this as an interview, just as a friendly hang between musicians. I’m planning to use this meeting to establish a solid artist-to-artist relationship, out of which I’m optimistic that interviews and invitations to jam sessions will organically proceed.

²⁰³ A South Asian bamboo flute

What I haven't accounted for, of course, is how objectively awkward the whole situation is. It is my first month in the field. I haven't spoken to Jay in over two years, during which the world has mostly been on lockdown. The post-pandemic return to socialization has been, frankly, painful. I haven't figured out how to conduct interviews yet, and Jay clearly has no idea what to make of me or what I want from him; after slipping off my shoes and politely complimenting his living space, I'm not sure what to say beyond: "So...how's New York?"

"Yeah, it's good!" he responds. He chuckles. He pauses. "How's New York for you?"

And so it goes. We sit, mostly in silence, avoiding eye contact and desperately grasping at random threads of small talk, pandemic talk. I'm inwardly cringing, chastising myself for not being better prepared, wondering how soon I can leave, when Jay looks at me out of the corner of his eye and asks — hesitantly, hopefully — "Do you smoke weed?"

Post-spliff, everything is much easier. We settle into a comfortable dialogue; there are still moments of silence, but they feel relaxed, intentional. We do some pandemic talk, but it's an intimate sort of pandemic talk, as we discuss our changing relationships with our instruments and our respective musical communities over the last two years of isolation. Finally, we turn to the real reason I'm there, and he asks with enthusiasm, "Do you want to play?"

It is my professional opinion that Jay Gandhi ranks among the best flautists in the nation. Self-taught until the age of eighteen, he went on to receive a degree in Jazz Performance from Oberlin College, where he designed an independent major on the *bansuri* flute and worked under jazz luminaries Gary Bartz and Marcus Belgrave. Around the same time, he began spending extended periods of time in India, where he became a disciple of *bansuri* master Hariprasad Chaurasia. Depending on the performance context, his style alternates comfortably between Hindustani and jazz; left to his own devices, he moves fluidly between genres, allowing elements from each musical universe to "creep in" as he plays. He says he prefers to let this happen organically, rather than manipulating his style to fit any given genre aesthetic.

In some ways Jay is my ideal collaborator. I don't have his training or credentials as a jazz musician, but I have enough familiarity with the genre to keep up. Moreover, my *guru* has worked with Hariprasadji and is a frequent collaborator with his nephew Rakesh Chaurasia, so that in playing with Jay I don't feel any of my usual anxieties about moving beyond the Carnatic tradition into Carnatic-Hindustani *jugalbandhi* territory. We are, effectively, in the same *parampara*.²⁰⁴ We have deep mutual respect as artists and just enough passing knowledge of one another's primary genres to believe that we will be able to find common ground, a common language. We sit facing each other in the spacious, comfortable room he has dedicated to his *riyaz*. Not wanting to put him on edge, I refrain from recording the session. We begin.

Step one: select a *rāgā*. He leaves the choice up to me — I am the guest, after all — and I opt for *Behag*, a *rāgā* that exists in both the Carnatic and Hindustani traditions but with some subtle differences that neither of us knows how to articulate in words. Jay motions for me to begin. I start with a typical phrase that outlines the lower half of the *ārōhanam* and markedly demonstrates the use of both *suddha madhyamam* and *prathi madhyamam*, the natural and raised fourth; I also echo the opening line of a popular Carnatic composition in *Behag*, “*Narayanathe Namō Namō*.” Jay makes a sound that seems to connote approval, or at least active listening. I'm nervous, playing in front of Jay. I've heard him perform, and I know the caliber of musician he regularly collaborates with. Still, I go on, allowing the *rāgā* to slowly unfold as I've been taught, drawing on my favorite *sangatbees* from my favorite compositions, lingering on different pitches as I slowly make my way up the scale while allowing myself to indulge in long, sustained tones, knowing that this is common practice in the Hindustani tradition.

Jay takes longer than I expect to jump in. When he does, he surprises me: rather than taking over the *alāpana*, he plays the same pitch I am currently holding but an octave lower, adding a powerful resonance to the sound while allowing me to maintain my lead. He continues to insert

²⁰⁴ A lineage of teachers and students in the South Asian classical tradition

sustained harmonies in the bass register, motivating me to lean even further into long tones so that we can both enjoy the sound of two bamboo flutes together, a rare combination for what is typically a solo instrument. After a few minutes of this more meditative approach, I allow my improvisation to splinter off, traversing the full scale and playing a rapid phrase that Jay immediately imitates but without quite capturing the *gamakka* that mark the Carnatic style. I smile and play the phrase again. He repeats it, slowly, lingering on the circularity of my approach, the way various pitches emerge from and return to the tonic *sa*. He laughs. “I have an accent,” he says, “a Hindustani accent on the flute.”

The speed with which I drop my flute and snatch up my notebook startles him. “Say that again,” I demand, pen in hand. He hesitatingly obliges. I scribble down the quote and return to my flute, newly attuned to the ways in which we might read our performance as conversation, as speech.

This chapter belabors the metaphor of “music as language” beloved of my interlocutors, borrowing frameworks from translation studies and conversation analysis to read collaborative musical interactions as performative agents of cross-cultural community. Indeed, where Jay and I simply could not manage to communicate in words without psychoactive intervention, our flutes mediated the exchange with grace. Our encounter reveals both the usefulness and the slipperiness of the linguistic metaphor in discussions of cross-cultural and cross-genre collaboration: when it comes to communicating across divides, music often succeeds where language — or perhaps, other languages — do not. In conversations with my interlocutors, the linguistic metaphor appeared again and again, often in service of demonstrating music’s fundamental *difference* from spoken language, at least since the Fall of Babel. In one demonstrative example, Anupam colorfully recounts:

I did this record in Milan a few years ago, in this studio that a friend of mine just decided to put me, a bunch of musicians from Sardinia, some frame drummers, and they didn’t speak a word of English, and my friend, a fantastic soprano sax player from Milan, and we just like, just pressed record, just pressed the record button and like, let’s go. And it was — you know, some parts were a complete train wreck. But a lot of it was like, woah, how the *hell* did that happen? And mostly I felt that happened when the pauses were there. When things came down. When people were listening to each other and reacting with the spaces, with the

negative spaces, rather than everybody's like, look what I can do, look what I can do, look what I can do, you know? All the virtuosic bullshit, you know. And when, when people really started to whisper.

The metaphor of music as language that pervades both Jay and Anupam's speech has been explored by ethnomusicologists in considerable depth, by Ingrid Monson in her landmark jazz ethnography *Saying Something*²⁰⁵ as well as by Steven Feld and Aaron Fox, whose career-long advocacy for a "musico-linguistic anthropology"²⁰⁶ has contributed to a sustained interest in the intersections between these two fields. However, when confronted with the old aphorism about music as a "universal language," ethnomusicologists, like my "fusion" interlocutors, tend to cringe and deflect. The cultural specificities of music in context — arguably the driving concern of ethnomusicology as a discipline — belie the claims to universality that I learned early on in my academic career to dismiss as a facile analogy. And yet I find it essential to honor the significance of this analogy for my interlocutors in the music world, for whom music *does something* akin to language in a way that enables particular kinds of border crossings and cross-cultural solidarity, that in fact enables the very construction of cross-cultural community.

To return to an idea from Chapter One, then, cross-cultural performance is also *performative*, in the vein of J. L. Austin's theory of speech acts: the sounds we produce in the moments of collaboration have the impact of enacting actual change in society. Cross-cultural performance *makes something happen*. Deborah Kapchan explores the nature of this "something" by way of what she calls "the promise of sonic translation," or "the belief that music can translate affect across cultural and linguistic divides." Kapchan extends Derrida's notion of translation's "promise" to point out the transitive exchange carried out by the speech act of promising: promiser and promisee are bound in an affective contract, one that extends beyond the moment of the utterance to produce

²⁰⁵ Monson, Ingrid. *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

²⁰⁶ Feld, Steven and Aaron A. Fox. "Music and Language." *Annual Review of Anthropology* Vol. 23 (1994) pp. 25-53.

“transnational communities of affect.”²⁰⁷ Crucially, Kapchan’s argument is not built on the premise of musical universality, quite the opposite; rather, it is the *belief* in translatability, a belief embodied by the very act of translating, that lends the promise its performative weight. If we accept the belief espoused by Kapchan’s — and my own — interlocutors that translatability is built into music as an aural code, this promise and its performative impact are also an intrinsic part of collaborative musical performance. These performances, I argue, do a particular kind of work towards engaging participants in cross-cultural community — a community that comes into existence through the act of making musical meaning together.

At risk of allowing the metaphor to grow even more unwieldy, let me briefly clarify how I understand cross-cultural translation as an act of meaning-making. A concept and its expression have distinct ontologies. This is a familiar premise in semiotics; Saussure theorizes a binary model of signifier and signified,²⁰⁸ while Peirce’s triadic model emphasizes the relationship *between* sign and object as the locus of meaning.²⁰⁹ In both cases, there is a fundamental separation between the idea being expressed and its mode of articulation. Translation, meanwhile, operates on a “promise”: while the expressive tools available to us might differ, the very act of translating implies that meaning can be reconciled across languages (and cultures, and individuals). For Derrida, the very possibility of this meeting in the middle, this reconciliation, is translation’s performative power.²¹⁰ Translation *invents* the third space between languages where meanings are negotiated and agreed upon. Walter Benjamin calls the meanings produced in this space “pure language” (“*die reine*

²⁰⁷ Kapchan, Deborah. “The Promise of Sonic Translation: Performing the Festival Sacred in Morocco.” *American Anthropology* Vol. 110 No. 4 (2008) pp. 467-483.

²⁰⁸ Saussure, Ferdinand de. “The Object of Linguistics.” 1916. In *Course in General Linguistics* ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

²⁰⁹ Turino, Thomas. “Signs of Imagination, Identity and Experience: A Peircian Semiotic Theory for Music.” *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 43 Not 2 (1999) pp. 221-255.

²¹⁰ Derrida, Jacques. *Des Tours de Babel*. In *Difference in Translation* ed. Joseph F. Graham. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 165-248.

Sprache”²¹¹); Jay and I might be in search of a “pure *Behag*.” In any case, for both Benjamin and Derrida — and, I would argue, for Jay and myself — the act of bringing a semantic or aesthetic concept from one communicative register into another allows us to brush up against some sort of fundamental ontological truth that can only be discovered at the point of intersection.

As such, I understand cross-cultural performance, as an act of translation, to be doubly performative. Translation promises reconciliation, and thus plays a role in the construction of cross-cultural community; but beyond this, when we translate, we actively participate in the construction of cross-cultural meaning. In many ways these performative effects are intertwined. Indeed, Saussure understands language as a fundamentally social bond: he defines “language” as a societally agreed-upon system in which a particular sign is tied to a particular image or concept, while “speech” encompasses the ways individuals iterate on this shared framework in service of self-expression.²¹² Cross-cultural performance, meanwhile, emerges a process of speaking across genre divides in order to arrive at a mutually intelligible system of signs — to build a language and thus, a society.

In the following section, I analyze my cross-genre improvised collaboration with Jay through the sociolinguistic lenses of translation and conversation. Revitalizing the ossified metaphor of music and language through these less-explored disciplinary intersections is one part of my goal; but more importantly, I find that the fundamentally social bond created by both translation and conversation reflects an essential goal of music and language alike, particularly in a cross-cultural context. Collaborative music is, at its core, about the creation of community, however fleeting. When we co-articulate a musical idea, we participate in the mutual production of meaning, a process that can only be about mutual understanding. In the second half of the chapter, meanwhile, I introduce the final character of this dissertation, whose particular mode of cultural and musical hyphenation

²¹¹ Benjamin, Walter. “The Task of the Translator.” 1923. In *Illuminations and Reflections* ed. Hannah Arendt. New York: Houghton Mifflin & Houghton, 1968.

²¹² Saussure 1916

complicates every argument about identity, community, and meaning I have made thus far — and whose creative process offers the perfect opportunity to think through hyphenation as a tool for performance, in addition to analysis.

“Die Reine Behag”

It is not a coincidence that many of my fieldwork stories feature the sharing of a meal or the passing of a joint, usually as the precursor or coda to an intensive artistic experience. Indeed, in many ways these shared sensory experiences serve the same function as the music itself: they bring us into an affective contract, a moment of collective sensation that dialogues with the musical collaboration as a form of collective expression.

As Jay and I settle into our mutual exploration of *Behag*, we enter into the affective contract of *rāgā*, an aesthetic idea that comes into existence through constant rearticulation and reinterpretation. *Rāgā* is one of the foundational concepts that unites Carnatic and Hindustani music, but the relative degrees of similarity and difference between the Carnatic concept of *rāgā* and the Hindustani concept of *rāg* could provide source material for many dissertations. The derivation of *rāgās* in the Carnatic tradition is fairly mathematical and systematic, while Hindustani *rāgs* are often tied with natural phenomena such as circadian time and seasons. *Rāgās* that contain the same collection of notes exist across the Carnatic and Hindustani traditions, but they usually have different names and differ markedly in their treatment, including in the individual notes that are emphasized as well as the ways musicians move between pitches. The elaboration of a single *rāg* in the Hindustani context might span the duration of an entire concert program, while a Carnatic concert might move through up to a dozen *rāgās*, with different weight afforded to each. The structures in place for guiding *rāgā*-based improvisation in each genre have some clear parallels, particularly the idea of the *ālāp*/*ālāpana*. Stylistically, the Hindustani approach to *ālāp* generally favors

a more meditative quality, emphasizing long tones and slow movements between pitches; this approach would not be out of place in a Carnatic performance, but is one of multiple approaches a performer might take to an *ālāpāna* alongside more rapid flourishes and references to the canonical body of Carnatic compositions, which are themselves more standardized than compositions in the Hindustani tradition.

This brief explication comes alongside other key differences in performance structure, instrumentation, vocal quality, sociopolitical history, and so on. Suffice it to say that it is very rare to find a performer who can claim to be an expert in both the Carnatic and Hindustani traditions. At the same time, it would be somewhat foolish, at least for the sake of this discussion, to overemphasize the differences between these two genres at the expense of underscoring their mutual intelligibility. The scale of the negotiations taking place between Jay and myself is, at least in part, predicated upon the fundamental *similarities* between Hindustani and Carnatic *Behag*, or at least on the assumption that the core aesthetic and affective ideas that guide Hindustani and Carnatic performances of *Behag* can be understood across the divide — Benjamin’s “kinship of another order” between languages.²¹³ The phrases we choose are different, but the *concept* is necessarily translatable; we are telling the same story, co-constructing a narrative out of the intersection between our two *Behags*. Furthermore, in this particular jam, *Behag* is a calculated choice on my part, intended to level our playing field by selecting a *rāgā* that is equally common in both Carnatic and Hindustani genres, and over which we can be expected to have equal command.

As such, as we move into playing together, the subtle points of difference between our individual and genre-specific approaches to *Behag* become a point of fascination. We make no verbal agreements as to the structure or goals of our performance, beyond the selection of a *rāgā*; our session takes on the unstructured, meandering arc of an improvised conversation between two people who are just getting to know each other. As we negotiate the musical options available to us

²¹³ Benjamin 1923

in our bijou improvising ensemble, we also negotiate our budding relationship, through conversational choices that enact a range of possible interpersonal dynamics.

Conversation, long neglected as an object of analysis by linguists and anthropologists alike due to its lack of formal structure, becomes useful in the context of musical improvisation for this very amorphous quality. Conversation analysis centers on the premise that “talk itself is social action.”²¹⁴ Each utterance can be treated as what conversation analysts call a “social object” — a “move” around which an interaction is organized and a relationship is formed. Without a predetermined narrative format to structure the conversation as a unit of communication, conversations can also be studied sequentially, with utterances understood in relation to one another and in tandem as multiplex, higher-order units of meaning. Conversation is thus a useful tool for the study of collaborative musical interaction, as a project of co-constructing social and musical meaning in real time. To somewhat complicate things, however, Jay and I are performing in two distinct idioms, with different parameters and expectations to structure our experiences of the interaction. Our cross-genre ensemble thus participates in an *intercultural conversation*, where formerly intuitive conversational structures such as turn-taking and transitions must be renegotiated across the boundaries of Hindustani and Carnatic norms.²¹⁵ Jay and I do not have a shared social script to follow. We are, even within the context of the structuring melodic principle of *rāgā*, playing free.

This does not, however, imply that there is no logic to structure our cross-genre performance as it unfolds. If my readers will indulge just one more analytical lens: the “free” sociolinguistic structure of the intercultural conversation pairs productively with Graeme Wilson and Raymond MacDonald’s studies of group “free” musical improvisation, in which participants must work to identify and define some sort of guiding structure to facilitate their decision-making. Even within a “free” context, Wilson and MacDonald identify a limited set of options available to

²¹⁴ Duranti, Alessandro. *Linguistic Anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 247.

²¹⁵ Tannen, Deborah. “Turn-Taking and Intercultural Discourse and Communication.” *The Handbook of Intercultural Discourse and Communication*. Hoboken: Blackwell, 2012.

individuals within the improvising ensemble: they may (1) maintain the status quo; (2) initiate a new direction; or (3) respond to others' contributions by adopting, augmenting, or contrasting their ideas (Fig 19).²¹⁶ These metrics, particularly the options available within the “response” category, are helpful in analyzing both the musical and sociomusical interactions that shape my encounter with Jay. Each new interjection is predicated upon a particular interpretation of our dynamic as artists and individuals; the music plays a role in building our understanding of *Behag*, but also in helping us figure out who we are when we come together in community.

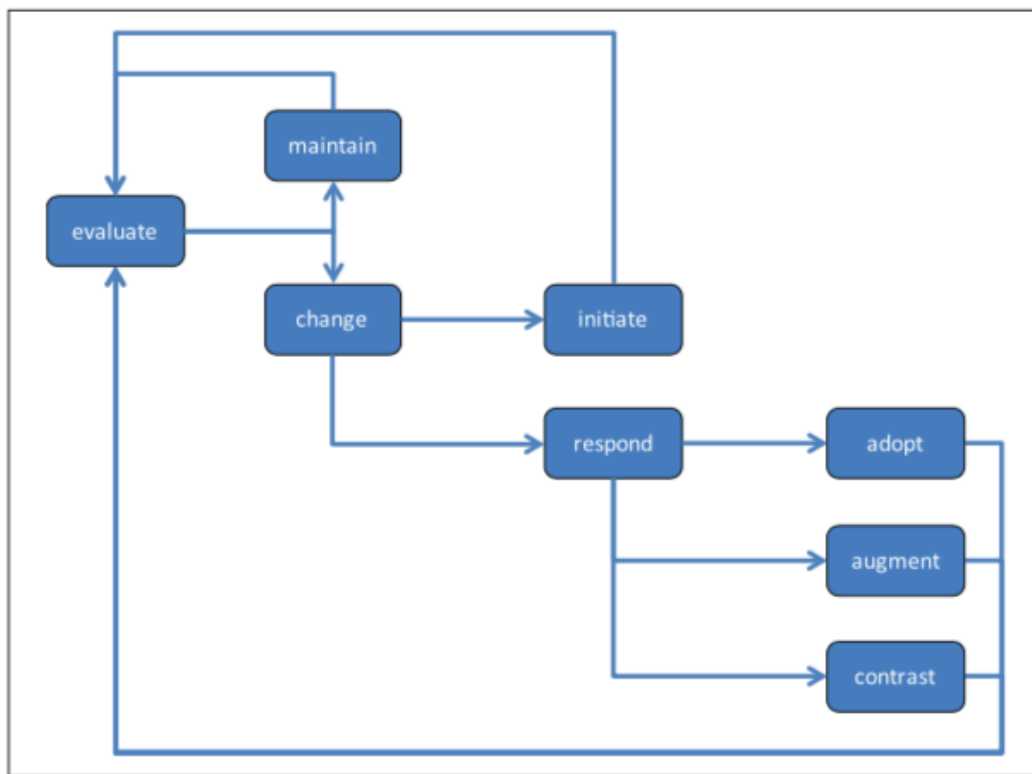


Fig 19. Model for the process of individual choice during group musical improvisation (Wilson and MacDonald 2016)

When Jay “adopts” my Carnatic idea in the gambit described earlier, a particular social order is momentarily established: he is playing the role of student to my teacher, follower to my leader.

²¹⁶ Wilson, Graeme B. And Raymond A. R. MacDonald. “Musical Choices During Group Free Improvisation: A Qualitative Psychological Investigation.” *Psychology of Music* Vol. 44 No. 5 (2016) p. 1035.

Sociolinguist Harvey Sacks and his colleagues introduced the concept of “adjacency pairs” to define a complex unit of speech comprised of two utterances produced by two different speakers back to back, so that the “meaning” of the linguistic unit is collectively determined.²¹⁷ In a traditional Carnatic dialogue, a typical adjacency pair might look like an accompanist echoing the tail end of a soloist’s improvised phrase, forming a “statement/echo” unit. With Jay and I playing in two distinct idioms, the kinds of adjacency pairs that can emerge from our collaboration are unique to the cross-genre, bilingual context. When Jay plays my own words back at me, it is with a different inflection; I speak Carnatic and he responds in Hindustani — a “statement/translation” pair. The impact of these moments is to emphasize the mutual intelligibility as well as the subtle differences between our respective idioms. As we slowly move from “statement/translation” to “statement/echo,” we navigate the middle space between our musical languages, so that the meaning of each utterance has as much to do with the relationship between our genres writ large as with any specific musical idea.

As we move further into the performance, we take turns trying on different sociomusical roles. At times I express a Carnatic idea and Jay parses my utterance, first in Hindustani terms to understand the sequence of notes and then in an “accented” Carnatic modality; at other times this dynamic is reversed, as I attempt to echo Jay’s Hindustani pronunciation. As we approximate the subtleties of one another’s phrasing, each subsequent translation carries with it a greater understanding of the ways Carnatic *Behag* differs from its Hindustani counterpart. We are careful to alternate playing the role of teacher, careful to make sure neither of us ever feels like we are in a lesson for too long. This explicitly pedagogical function of the “adopt” maneuver, absent from Wilson and MacDonald’s study, is a frequent presence in the context of the cross-cultural or cross-genre jam, as the goal of co-articulation routinely compels performers to cross into one another’s sonic territory. The egalitarian impulse to make music *together* must actively work against the hierarchies implicit in a student-teacher dynamic. Jay and I use “adopt” sparingly, and though neither

²¹⁷ Duranti 1997

of us is overtly keeping track of who leads when, a delicate balance is maintained. Interestingly, we seem to have a tacit agreement to attempt these negotiations using only our flutes. At one point Jay explains how I should feel the Hindustani rhythmic structure of *tintal* by using the Carnatic definition of *samam*, the downbeat. But when he interrupts our instrumental back-and-forth to verbally translate for me where the downbeat should fall, it feels like cheating somehow, like breaking the unspoken rules of our encounter.

My use of translation as an analytical lens on these interactions is based on an understanding of translation as a living, multidirectional process that stages a dialogue between two languages, rather than a one-way process of moving an idea from one language into another. This understanding of translation comes primarily from my lived experience as a translator and interpreter, but it can also be seen in various global literary discourses. One somewhat mainstream example comes from Japanese author and translator Haruki Murakami, who famously wrote the opening pages of his first novel in English before translating them back into his mother tongue of Japanese. Among literary translation circles, Murakami is often cited as an example of the bidirectional impact of translation, with the commercial prospect of translation into English causing a preemptive anglicization of the Japanese text. A second such example comes from the work of linguistic anthropologist Paja Faudree, who discusses “double texts” where Latin American indigenous language writings are debuted alongside more widely intelligible Spanish language translations in service of expanding the global reach of the former, turning the original text “into a double entity whose meaning is housed in neither language alone but, rather, in both languages at once as well as in the spaces between them.”²¹⁸ As Jay and I move back and forth across the hyphenated space between Carnatic and Hindustani music to understand what *Behag* sounds like on

²¹⁸ Faudree, Paja. *Singing for the Dead: The Politics of Indigenous Revival in Mexico*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013, p. 200.

either side of the divide, we create a living text whose meaning becomes more intelligible and more nuanced through our competing modes of articulation.

Meanwhile, when we trade phrases quickly while remaining in our preferred idioms — the “contrast” category in Wilson and MacDonald’s framework — a different hierarchy is established. We talk around the idea of *Behag*. Sometimes we talk past each other, remaining squarely in our own languages for brief or extended periods. That’s to be expected. As improvisers, we both tend towards introspection; I am only too happy to let Jay explore his artistic instincts in monologue, and he does the same for me. These moments have some pedagogical value, but more often than not they feel self-indulgent: we are performing for each other, not together.

Then there are moments when our playing approximates something that can only be described as fusion, as hyphenation. In order for us to “augment” one another’s utterances à la Wilson and MacDonald, we have to move past our individual idioms into a third language. In this third language, our conversation is at its most dynamic and free. Sometimes it looks like one-upmanship, changing one note, adding an extra beat, trying to see who can keep the “bit” going the longest; sometimes we disagree, inverting or reversing a phrase, contradicting one another, but in jest. Musical banter is a central feature of an effective concert performance in both Carnatic and Hindustani contexts; in a cross-genre context, meanwhile, these moments of successful conversational play are harder won. We are bantering in a language of our own invention. The meaning of each phrase is dependent on both players.

When Jay and I play together, particularly in this third modality, listening is paramount. The temporality of the cross-genre jam, Jay later suggests to me, is an eternal present. In a fusion context, it is impossible, or at least difficult, to know what your collaborator might do next. Thinking ahead to what one might play next as an individual diminishes the efficacy of the collaboration, the degree of influence we allow ourselves to exert on one another. A good conversation is a real-time process of co-constructing meaning, wherein the semantic value of our individual statements is not

only augmented but transformed by the other's response. Even in moments of monologue, this dialogism is present: one of us might respond vocally or physically rather than musically to the other's statement, signaling our approval and our encouragement to continue; one of us might sustain the final pitch or echo an entire cadence when the other arrives at a natural stopping point, indicating that it is now our turn to take the lead. Together we negotiate the language of our encounter. Together we invent a language that draws influence from each of our individual traditions, but makes perfect sense in neither.

We play *Behag* together for what feels like hours. Having exhausted this, we move on to jazz standards; I try my hand at singing along to a backing track while Jay takes a solo on the flute. He grows animated as he shows me how to use beeswax to delicately tune the bamboo instrument, something I hadn't previously thought possible. At some point we both realize our highs have worn off. Silence reigns. I check the time. "I guess I should go."

The awkwardness of our farewell is less jarring than the start of our encounter, but no less acute. Should we hug? We both seem to feel that we have just gone through something together, something that demands a certain intimacy and gravitas in its conclusion, but without our flutes to mediate the exchange it is stilted, clumsy. We decide to go in for the hug. It's uncomfortable, but correct. I make a hasty exit. My future interactions with Jay will be colored by a similar awkwardness, but a less dire version thereof: we now know that we have a shared language through which to communicate. Cross-cultural performance affords a kind of communication that starts as bilingual and slowly turns into something else. I often joke that my native language is Tanglish, a comfortable medley of the two languages I grew up speaking. There are emotions that only Tamil will allow me to fully express, images that I only have words for in English, jokes and inflections that are out of place in either idiom but that make perfect sense when I consider their convergence. An understanding of the cross-genre jam session as an intercultural conversation and an analysis of the translation process that makes this conversation possible affords unique insights into fusion as the

musical language of diaspora, as the process of negotiating meaning across a divide — across a hyphen — allows us to carve out a collective identity definable only at the point of intersection.

“What is My Tradition?”

For many months after returning from the field and beginning the process of turning my data into a dissertation, I resisted writing about Shubh Saran. At the time this was because I wasn't sure how, if at all, Shubh fit into my project. Born in India to diplomat parents and raised between six different countries before coming to the United States for college, Shubh only uneasily accepts the mantle of hyphenation. “We were always Indian,” he tells me clearly. “We never immigrated anywhere. My parents were just expats. We were Indian, and very aware that we were Indian.”

Shubh's musical trajectory likewise belies some of the claims I have made so far about musical value as a function of cultural authenticity. His family's self-proclaimed Indianness notwithstanding, Shubh was raised mostly on Queen, ABBA, and the Beatles, with occasional exposure to Bollywood soundtracks from recordings his parents played in the car and movies watched on visits to his grandparents in India. The South Asian influences in Shubh's own music, which is otherwise an eclectic blend of jazz, neo-soul, and rock, came later — as part of a conscious effort to Indianize his sound as a student at Berklee College of Music. He admits: “For a long time it was, yeah, it was me trying very hard — and not even to sound Indian but just to sound, unique. At Berklee it was like, everybody's so good at everything that they do, I didn't grow up with a tradition, what is my tradition? I guess it's Indian, I guess Indian tradition is classical music so I'm going to sound like that.” He goes on:

My relationship with tradition and stuff is so fraught because like, definitely I co-opted it to a certain degree. Like it does resonate with the fiber of my being because like, I grew up Indian, I didn't grow up listening to these sounds, but like, no one taught this to me, it was me trying to figure out, okay well, if I have to be deep, and traditional, I guess this is my tradition?

Throughout this dissertation, I have subjected cross-cultural performance to various forms of scrutiny, hinging these evaluations on the assumption of some intrinsic connection between cultural authenticity and aesthetic value. Of all of the artists I have discussed so far, Shubh presents a unique and troublesome case. He does not have the legitimacy that comes with Rachna, Anupam, or Jay's years of traditional study; but as an Indian by blood and citizenship, Shubh also does not approach South Asian music with the anxious reverence that accompanies Galen and Jake's transgressions of racial lines. He feels perfectly justified in the turn towards classical South Asian melodies, rhythms, and inflections that has shaped his cross-genre explorations, and indeed feels a sense of innate ownership over this source material. Shubh's lack of qualms around bringing South Asian influences into dialogue with his background in prog rock and jazz provides an interesting contrast with my white interlocutors from Chapter One, whose attitudes towards South Asian fusion are considerably more fraught. Indeed, Jake explicitly cites his own whiteness as a reason to tread carefully when it comes to experimenting with the classical Hindustani tradition:

One of the things that I've noticed also, just because I am a white person doing this music, is my own, like, I'm slower to give myself permission to do that. Like I'm much more like, I can do the authentic one as I learned it, you know? I think that's slowly changing as I spend more and more time in the music and the tradition, but I do think probably me and a lot of other white people *inaudible* being a little stricter with these things [...] figuring out what's okay and what's not, you know, what can we, giving the permission to — to speak it fluently enough to alter it.

The threshold of “fluency” that Jake feels he must reach as a practitioner of Hindustani music before he can legitimately innovate within the genre is here directly tied to his sense of being a racial outsider to the South Asian community, and to the subsequent sense of insecurity he feels around his “right” to adapt the South Asian classical tradition. Meanwhile, Shubh has no such reservations, despite having only superficial knowledge of Carnatic and Hindustani music. The South Asian classical tradition is his birthright, to use freely as he wishes.

The tension, for Shubh, arises when he feels compelled to cultivate and perform this birthright at the behest of a white American audience. At Berklee and beyond, Shubh has frequently felt driven to perform his Indianness according to the demands of his American context, as a means of understanding his role in an otherwise Black-and-white society. This sometimes means contradicting his own lived experience. He tells me that he recently suggested to his Indian-American partner that they host a Diwali celebration for their friends in New York. “But, I didn’t grow up doing Diwali! My parents didn’t do Diwali at home, who’s gonna come to Diwali in Geneva?” In contrast, Shubh’s partner grew up celebrating Diwali with the tight-knit, intergenerational community of the New Jersey South Asian diaspora. To Shubh, this community is something of a marvel. He speculates that the intimacy of diasporic communities is born of necessity, as immigrants work to recreate family structures in their new homes and to invent safe spaces free of code switching and micro-aggressions. For Shubh, however, the emphasis on cultural tradition in the South Asian-American diaspora bears little resemblance to the version of Indian culture he grew up with as a child of expats, for whom Diwali was little more than a day off at the Indian embassy and an excuse to open a bottle of wine. Speaking more explicitly to his musical context, meanwhile, Shubh describes an attempted collaboration between Berklee’s South Asian ensemble and Indian composer Clinton Cerejo in terms that vividly highlight the very same paradox:

He [Cerejo] sent us a bunch of songs that he did, that are his that we’re supposed to play with him. And, uh, some of them were just straight up gospel songs. And I remember we were like, when we were discussing it and we were like yeah, we can’t do this, cuz it’s English and it’s a gospel song. And I remember thinking then, I was like oh, what is then Indian music, like, if this guy is Indian, he’s from India, all of the musicians are Indian in this video, they’re singing gospel music that is sung in India, is this Indian music? You know. Then we obviously did the more Bollywood stuff cuz that’s...we let, basically, Berklee define what Indian was for us.

In 2021, Shubh released *inglish*, described on his website as “a longform message that pays tribute to the difficult process of assimilating while embracing your own culture.” The nod to brownness on the album’s cover is far from subtle, featuring Shubh in a beige-toned shacket against

a fleshy tan background with barely discernible letters a shade lighter spelling out the title. This title, which is a portmanteau of “Indian English,” reflects Shubh’s fraught relationship with English as both his native language and a foreign inheritance: “It’s the language I grew up with, it is my authentic reality of what I speak, how I think, and this and that. But it also is a language I’ve come to with an immense amount of historical baggage.” In India, English is first and foremost a colonial language, and operates as a class signifier of the privileged elite, among whom the language is effectively ubiquitous. Meanwhile, Shubh describes the repeat experience after moving to the United States of being complimented on his English in a way that rarely felt like a compliment, gesturing instead towards the mainstream depreciation of his native dialect. In both contexts, the English language is authentically his and yet not his own. The name “inglish” is meant to evoke this simultaneous sense of belonging and exclusion and of privilege and disempowerment. Shubh puts this lived perspective in dialogue with global flows of culture and imperialism:

Don’t be surprised that there’s English in Mongolia — of course there’s English in Mongolia. Of course there’s a jazz club in Vietnam. I mean, of course. Like, it’s everywhere. So like, you being surprised that like, you know, the dominance of Western culture... *laughs* like, don’t be surprised by it, it’s a very real thing. So like, don’t be surprised when an Indian kid comes to Berklee and plays rock and roll better than *rags*, you know?

The tendency of white people and neoliberal institutions to fossilize the cultural practices of the non-white Other has been explored in considerable depth, particularly by anthropologists working on indigenous sovereignty such as Elizabeth Povinelli²¹⁹ and Philip Deloria.²²⁰ Non-white traditions are often seen as frozen in time, leading to a patriarchal protectiveness at best and a dangerous reductiveness at worst as these traditions are shielded from the corruption of Western influence. For Shubh, meanwhile, Western influences such as jazz and the English language are not post-hoc additions to his Indian identity or indeed his identity as a global citizen; rather,

²¹⁹ Povinelli, Elizabeth. *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

²²⁰ Deloria 1998

globalization, Westernization and modernization are all inextricably intertwined in the formation of South Asian identity. The relationship between modernization and Westernization is a central concern of Bruno Nettl's seminal study, *The Western Impact on World Music*, where he describes the imposition of Western musical thought on the rest of the world as "the most significant phenomenon in the global history of music" over the preceding century.²²¹ Likewise, Shubh argues that the near-total ubiquity of Western and specifically American culture across the world as a result of global imperialism means that Westernization should not be read as external to the organic development of local traditions, so that the jazz and rock influences in his music do not make it any less Indian. Philip V. Bohlman describes these processes of globalization similarly in his edited volume *Jazz Worlds/World Jazz*, which "[brings] together voices from countries as far flung as Azerbaijan, Armenia, and India to show that the story of jazz is not trapped in American history books but alive in global modernity."²²² To Shubh, jazz — alongside the English language — is an authentic part of his Indian identity.

What it actually means to hear Shubh's music as "Indian music" is a different question. When I initially reached out to Shubh as a participant in this dissertation, it was under the impression that the South Asian influences I heard in his music were an intrinsic part of his musical training. To my Carnatic ear, the South Asian influences across *inglish* are undeniable. Shubh's guitar melodies incorporate bends, glides, and ornaments that immediately resonate as *gamakka*; the melodic sound worlds occupied across the album are much closer to South Asian *rāgās* than any Western mode; bhangra beats and odd meters are integrated throughout the album, often performed by the accordant South Asian percussion instruments. And I am not alone in projecting South Asianness onto what is effectively a prog rock/R&B/jazz fusion album. Shubh tells me that listeners frequently convey their enjoyment of the "Indian" elements in his music, only to then describe a riff

²²¹ Nettl, Bruno. *The Western Impact on World Music*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1985, p. 3.

²²² Bohlman, Philip V. and Goffredo Plastino. *Jazz Worlds/World Jazz*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

pulled from R&B. Shubh's own Indianness, alongside the global hegemony of Western music, support a reading of his music as South Asian regardless of genre affiliation. But the way this South Asianness gets defined and perceived is, sometimes, a warped reflection — another version of the funhouse mirror effect I described in Chapter One. Just as the brown gaze exerts a defining influence on Galen's "anxious" performance practice, the brownness of Shubh's music is, in this case, defined by his white Western audience.

In the following sections, I stage an analysis of Shubh's play with the South Asian concepts of *rāgā* and *tālā*, incorporating my own perspective as a listener alongside firsthand accounts from Shubh and his uniformly non-South Asian bandmates. How do different listeners and performers hear South Asianness in Shubh's music, and what assumptions guide these listenings? How do the South Asian elements in Shubh's music feel to perform — for Shubh as well as for the members of his band? What tensions arise between these sometimes contradictory experiences of South Asianness? My work with Shubh demands a renewed understanding of South Asianness as a globally situated identity in dialogue with transnational cultural flows. I conclude the chapter by staging a penultimate conversation with my interlocutors about the ethics of cross-cultural fusion in this necessarily global context.

Case Study: "postradition"

"Postradition" was released as a single roughly a month before the release of the full album *inglish*. Like several tracks on the album, "postradition" is centered around a single repeated melodic cell, interspersed with ambient fills and vibrant solos and subject to subtle developments that resemble the trajectory of Carnatic *sangatbees*. This central melody goes something like this:



Fig 20

In Figure 20, I have transcribed this melody as I hear it, omitting *gamakka*. In other words, I have notated the phrase according to the *swara* I would sing if performing this melody as a Carnatic vocalist. I have also highlighted the notes that contain audible *gamakka*. The word *gamakka* is often translated as “ornaments,” both in T. Viswanathan and Matthew Allen’s canonical *Music in South Asia* as well as in *Grove Music Online*. I have always struggled with this translation, primarily because I feel that it fails to capture the centrality of *gamakka* to the identity of each *swara* within the context of a particular *rāgā*. Ethnomusicologist Lara Pearson offers a similar critique of this common translation: “The term *gamaka* is usually translated as ornament, however in Karnatak music *gamakas* cannot be considered mere embellishments, as they convey fundamental information regarding the *rāgā* and its associated *bhāva*...While in theory *svaras* and *gamakas* are separate concepts, in practice *svaras* are inextricably linked to the *gamakas* with which they are played.”²²³ The total imbrication of *swara* and *gamakka* makes the latter one of the chief complications in Western transcriptions of Carnatic melodies. One has the option of transcribing each “note” in terms of its scale degree, as I have in Figure 20 — treating each *swara* according to its pitch function, independent of the actual mechanics of its execution — or in terms of the micro collection of pitches that would actually need to be played to produce the appropriate, multiply-constituted sound. Indeed, Shubh’s score for “postradition” is much more explicit in its attention to *gamakka* than my own transcription, depicting the *gamakka* that I subsumed into the core pitches as 32nd-note turns:

²²³ Pearson, Lara. “Coarticulation and Gesture: An Analysis of Melodic Movement in South Indian Rāgā Performance.” *Music Analysis* Vol. 35 No. 3 (2016) p. 281-284.



Fig 21. Original score provided by Shubh Saran.

Comparing my own transcription with a score might seem a flawed analytical maneuver were it not for the fact that Shubh explicitly understands his own scores as transcriptions: they are usually produced late in his compositional process, and with the intent of being used as little more than mnemonic devices. Aural methods of transmission are much more central to his band’s learning process, including voice notes and MIDI files but also including frequent moments of live demonstration between band members, which I had the opportunity to witness during several rehearsals. The melody in Figures 20 and 21 in particular seemed to cause some consternation, as I watched Shubh’s usual sax player Brian Plautz demonstrate these *gamakka* for a new sax player, Jim Piela, who was sitting in with the band for an upcoming tour. On Shubh’s podcast, Brian describes the journey of developing his approach to this phrase in terms that essentially render the score irrelevant:

The very first, you know, statement of this melody is kind of a turn or some expressive thing, so like, is it a super fast triplet, is it a super fast sixteenth note or thirty-second note, just like, getting the right feel of like, being on top or behind or something was, took a lot of, just repetition and call and response to get it in our ears. And there are a couple of moments where it’s like that, where it kind of, flips around, so it’s just a matter of trying to emulate the guitar. Which is funny cuz it’s like saxophone trying to emulate guitar, but to my ears it sounds like a guitar melody that’s trying to emulate something else. You know, it doesn’t even sound like a guitar melody per se.²²⁴

To me, Brian’s description of this phrase as “a guitar melody that’s trying to emulate something else” speaks to the fundamentally vocal quality of South Asian music and of *gamakka* in particular. Indeed, I would posit that *gamakka* are one of the primary limiting factors that restrict the

²²⁴ *Offstage with Shubh Saran* Episode 4, “Making an Album During a Pandemic.” 14:18-15:14.

adoption of new instruments into the South Asian classical canon, as *gamakka* demand a fluidity between pitches that is not a common affordance of most Western instruments.²²⁵ The saxophone in particular has a special but highly limited place within the South Asian classical canon, with Kadri Gopalnath introducing the instrument into the Carnatic repertoire in the mid-twentieth century and training a so-far-singular lineage of Carnatic saxophonists. We might take care to note that Gopalnath did in fact modify his instrument to better account for *gammaka*, in particular tightening the springs under individual keys to slow their response times so that the spaces between notes could be better explored. I understand Brian's experience of playing *gamakka* on the saxophone — an emulation of an emulation — as an experience of the distance between Carnatic vocal production and Western musical instruments, and the distinct and perhaps irreconcilable affordances of each.

Indeed, I would posit that *gamakka* are one of the primary factors that contribute to what an uninformed listener might simply hear as an “Indian” or “Eastern” color when confronted with a South Asian classical melody. The glides between and around pitches that constitute *gamakka* are often interpreted by Western listeners as microtonal movements or as a “shaky” vocal quality. On the impact of *gamakka* on the novice listener, *Sangita Kalanidhi* T. M. Krishna writes: “Someone listening to Karnatik music for the first time may notice a shake, jump, roughness and toughness in the music. This leaves one with the feeling of a lack of pitch or tonality — a perception that arises from the fact that svaras are like a set of moving sounds that subtly merge with each other to create a flow of melody.”²²⁶ Meanwhile, Krishna offers a reading of the relationship between *gamakka* and *swara* that emphasizes their mutual constitution:

²²⁵ Although the popularity of the harmonium in South Asia might seem to contradict this claim, ethnomusicologist Matt Rahaim writes that “the harmonium has attracted more elite contempt than any other instrument in the history of Indian music,” due precisely, at least in part, to the instrument's inability to “glide smoothly between discrete notes” (Rahaim 2011).

²²⁶ Krishna 2013:52

Gamakas have been explained as melodic ornamentations applied to svaras, giving them mobility around their specific pitch positions. The moment we accept this explanation, our understanding of a svara turns visual. It appears as a fixed entity with a given identity around which the gamaka is devised. This would imply that each svara is a distinct musical unit that pre-exists independently of the gamaka. This is not true. As svara enters the realm of music, it acquires the shape of a micro-musical versatility. When that happens, a svara moves from being a mere sound to becoming music. The metamorphosis is complete when the svara draws the concept of gamaka into its own meaning. The gamaka becomes part of the svara's own voltaic energy.²²⁷

In Chapter Two I discussed *gamakka* as one key difference between John McLaughlin and L. Shankar's performance styles on *Natural Elements*. Namely, I argued that *gamakka* were more consistently integrated into Carnatic violinist L. Shankar's approach to melody, while McLaughlin treated *gamakka* as auxiliary to the central pitch or phrase. What I resisted saying was that McLaughlin's approach resounds to me as a distinctly white Western way of approaching *gamakka*. In my own experience, *gamakka* are not "ornamental" features that modify a core pitch; the identity of each *svara* within a *rāgā* is contingent upon the way it is approached, sustained (or not), and emphasized (or not). *Gamakka* and *svara* work in tandem to produce a *rāgā*-based phrase. The frequent translation of *svara* and *gamakka* as respectively "pitch" and "ornament" belies the phenomenological imbrication of these concepts, from the perspective of both the performer and the listener.²²⁸

What does this mean in terms of getting a group of musicians with little to no background in South Asian music to successfully perform *gamakka*? In lessons with my *guru* I have often agonized over the absolute precision required to make a slightly out-of-time *gamakka* speak. Often the correct interpretation is a matter of microseconds. At the same time, *gamakka* are something I almost never write out in my own notes. As a child, I would draw abstract, vaguely seismographic diagrams above the lyrics in my notebook to remind me of the correct *gamakka*'s shape; but it has

²²⁷ *ibid* 51

²²⁸ See Gurminder Bhogal's book *Details of Consequence* for an analysis of the way ornaments in fin-de-siècle French music similarly went beyond decoration to dialogue with composers' treatment of form, meter, rhythm, melody, and texture (Bhogal 2013).

always felt essential to let the melodic trajectory of the phrase guide the production of *gamakka*, rather than the other way around — to allow the *gamakka* to “[become] part of the *svara*’s own voltaic energy.” Meanwhile, Shubh’s approach with his band is to be as explicit as possible about the correct execution of each phrase:

I’ve also noticed that like when you’re giving this stuff to people who aren’t familiar with the sound of a *gamakka*, the sound of an ornamentation, it’s better to notate it out exactly and then have them kind of work [it] out exactly so that it ends up translating into something that I’m hearing. For me to say ‘embellish’ can be helpful, but it can also be a little tricky if it’s part of a big unison line. So [if] it’s a big unison line, it’s better that they play something that might be slightly awkward for them, that they’re not used to playing, but works in the context.

Importantly, for Shubh the score serves as a learning aid towards what ultimately becomes a more intuitive understanding of each phrase and its embellishment. There is an awareness, for both Shubh and his bandmates, of the limitations of Western notation in capturing South Asian inflections. Charles Seeger identified these limitations as a central problem of Western transcription as early as 1958, writing:

In employing this mainly prescriptive notation as a descriptive sound-writing of any music other than the Occidental fine or popular arts, we do two things, both thoroughly unscientific. First we single out what appears to us to be structures in the other music that resemble structures familiar to us in the notation of the Occidental art and write these down, ignoring everything else for which we have no symbols. Second, we expect the resulting notation to be read by people who do not carry the tradition of the other music. The result, as read, can only be a conglomeration of structures part European, part non-European, connected by a movement 100% European.²²⁹

Playing *gamakka* exactly as they are notated on the page can thus be understood as fundamentally a whitening and a Westernization of the South Asian musical structure. And indeed, the sheer amount of time Shubh and his bandmates have spent discussing this particular phrase and playing it back and forth suggests that they all understand that there is more to the expression than can be captured

²²⁹ Seeger, Charles. “Prescriptive and Descriptive Music Writing.” *Musical Quarterly* Vol. 44 No. 2 (1958) pp. 186-7.

in notation alone. Shubh suggests that *gamakka* are a question of inflection in addition to rhythmic precision:

The part written out, I think it's probably written as a, probably like a sixteenth note triplet, basically, as far as what it's written out as, but uh, it's not exactly that [...] What I realized actually, they are usually on a grid, but it's the *accent* on a particular triplet, sixteenth note triplet, that makes a difference. Like in jazz, a lot of the jazz — like, Charlie Parker lines, the accent comes later, but for me it's very downbeat heavy. *sings* It's like right on the downbeat, and a lot of jazz stuff is doing the sixteenth note triplet leading into the next note.

It is worth taking a moment to notice Shubh's faulty memory: in the official score, the ornament between beats 3 and 4 discussed above is articulated as two thirty-second notes into a sixteenth note downbeat, not a triplet (Fig 21). It matters that Shubh can accurately describe how this ornament *feels*, even while he is unclear on how he ultimately chose to represent it in notation. It is interesting, too, that his phenomenology of *gamakka* is built on a jazz foundation, as he uses his own departure from traditional jazz accent patterns as a way of building his and his ensemble's understanding of the “feel” of this *gamakka*.

To return to the linguistic metaphor that began this section and this chapter, then: by writing out *gamakka*, Shubh is effectively asking his band to learn to play with an Indian accent. “Accent” is the translation we ultimately land on together, intentionally expanding the word's musical implications to include the broader linguistic features of tone, color, and inflection that characterize *gamakka*. “Accent” becomes particularly apt as we discuss our shared experience of adapting our spoken and musical accents as we move through different cultural spaces. For Shubh, his accent is both a natural part of the way he speaks and plays and something that he has to pay deliberate attention to as someone who exists across and between cultural spheres:

Because your accent, you know, you don't think about your accent too much. And actually I think about my accent a lot when I'm switching accents. So my accent is very different depending on who I'm speaking to, but I have basically two, it's like the Indian one and the non-Indian [...] And I feel the same thing with actually playing also. I know there's situations where I can be more of like my, I guess more Indian-inflected self when I'm playing, and that's only when I get really comfortable in certain bands and when certain bands I think will

allow that. But like, in certain places, I don't do it. Because it's just not appropriate, and if I do do it, then people will be like [...] 'Ooh, that's nice and exotic,' which I don't want either. So I only do it in situations where I feel comfortable. But yeah, I think accent is probably the best metaphor.

For Shubh to ask his band to join him in performing the South Asian inflections that are integrated throughout the album requires tremendous trust. And, if my own listening experience is to be trusted — the band is, for the most part, pulling it off. The precise rhythmic turns they play in perfect unison do ultimately resound as *gamakka*, enough for listeners — myself included — to instinctively project South Asianness onto the ensemble sound. The band, effectively, plays in “inglish” — an accented linguistic modality that both is and is not authentically South Asian. Meanwhile, Shubh's nationality and phenotype authenticate this sound for a diverse audience, whose credentials and right to judge this authenticity is itself deeply fraught. “Inglish,” like any language, can be learned. Indeed, learning how and when to speak “inglish” is a critical tool for South Asians and South Asian-Americans navigating their identities in transnational context. “And maybe it's good that it doesn't sound like either of those things,” Shubh says of the triplet/thirty-second note turn debated above. “It sounds like a complication — which is what it *should* sound like.”

Case Study: “Slip”

I made the piano part. It was always triplets. And then I liked the idea of, I was like, at the time I was really into like, finishing the *sam*, like in Carnatic music or Hindustani music, always landing on a *sam* of four. That was kind of exciting for me. And so I tried to, it probably would have just been triplets in five, had I not tried to be like, ‘Oh, let me actually try to make it a 16-beat cycle’ [...] So I just wanted to finish the cycle, I did, and then I started playing a melody over it. And intuitively, the melody does sing well if you're just trying to think of it in triplets. So the melody -- but then I was so trained and hearing it with a metronome that I can't not hear it with the quarter note.

Shubh's song “Slip” from the 2017 album *Hmayra* is by far his best-known composition, with close to three million streams on Spotify and subject of a 2019 video essay by the popular YouTuber

Adam Neely. The song's appeal for lay music analysts becomes apparent within the first ten seconds of the track, as a seemingly straightforward triplet pattern in five is abruptly unsettled by the addition of an elongated sixth beat. Neely and his fans have dedicated much internet space to debating the time signature of this piece, with Neely creatively suggesting that the piece is best understood in 4/20 (much to the delight of his stoner fanbase). In reality, Shubh's score posits a much simpler 4/4 meter; but the fidelity of this notated time signature to the rhythmic *feel* of the introduction remains contested by performers and listeners alike, even leading one bassist to suggest that Shubh had sent her a faulty score before a careful re-listen assured her of his calculations.

The groove that opens the piece certainly seems to imply a 5/4 time signature, as a repeating sequence of triplets lays out a clear five-beat pattern. Accordingly, the saxophonists in Shubh's band, whose part contains sustained whole notes, are usually encouraged to feel the segment in five, with an out-of-time lift following the fourth measure. In notation, that might look something like this:



Fig 22

Shubh's drummer even manually re-notated the 4/4 score he was given into measures of 15/8, with one measure of 19/8 filling out the final part of the phrase:

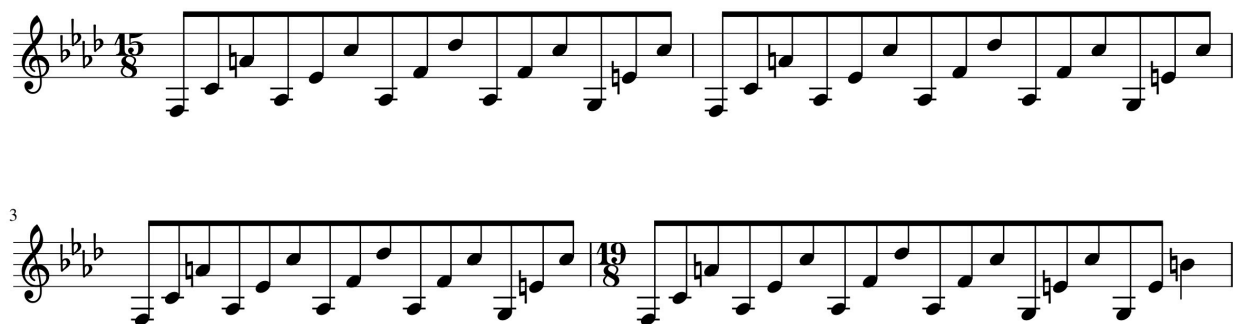


Fig 23

Shubh tells me explicitly that he likely would have notated the piece in five had he not been particularly interested, at the time of composition, in exploring the possibilities of *talā*, specifically the importance of landing on *sam* within an eight-beat cycle. The additional beat that extends the final measure was introduced into the pattern literally as an afterthought, as Shubh uses this composition to ask how a pattern in five could be made to fit within an eight-beat cycle and arrive on the downbeat. He solves the problem as would any improvising Carnatic musician: simply, he fills in the extra space. Indeed, having repeatedly drilled this phrase with a 4/4 metronome as part of the process of arranging the piece, Shubh and his band have ultimately arrived at an embodied understanding of the introduction that allows them to feel the piece in four. This feel becomes much more apparent immediately following the introduction, when the piano triplets are set against a much more audibly 4/4 guitar melody:

Fig 24

The resulting polyrhythmic feel is both endemic to and at odds with conventional understandings of *tālā*. Shubh laments the fact that writing scores in different time signatures for different instruments, while likely to greatly facilitate individual musicians' interpretations, would make ensemble rehearsal nearly impossible; still, implied in this hypothetical approach is the idea of two separate yet complimentary rhythmic streams, an idea that I will argue is central to the phenomenological experience of *tālā* as a form of embodied timekeeping.

While I have devoted a great deal of space so far to the challenges of translating the melody-structuring principle of *rāgā* into Western terms, the rhythm-structuring principle of *tālā* is seemingly more straightforward, as it can be quite readily understood in terms of time signature. Like a time signature, *tālā* demarcates the metrical units that organize a composition or improvisation, as well as indicating rhythmic subdivisions within these units. In practice, however, notating *tālā* as a time signature often obfuscates more than it reveals. In the context of a cross-cultural jam, the Carnatic eight-beat cycle of *Adi Tālam* and the Hindustani sixteen-beat cycle of *tintal* are invariably translated as 4/4 time; however, as discussed in the first *thukkada*, when notating *Adi Tālam* one runs into a

problem of scale, as depending on the tempo of the piece a single “beat” within the *tālā* cycle might be notated as a quarter note subdivided into four sixteenths or alternately as a full measure of 4/4, so that the broader *tālā* cycle often ends up translating as hypermeter rather than meter. More to the point, Carnatic improvisation almost invariably involves working within and against the subdivisions of the *tālā* cycle, particularly as performers structure their improvisations around a canonical set of rhythmic sequences. A classic exercise for early students of *kalpanaswaram* is the calculation of the *eduppu* or starting point of various rhythmic sequences including sets of three fives, three sixes, or three sevens, so that they lead into the downbeat or *samam*. In *Adi Tālam*, such calculations might look like this:

x x x x	x x x x	x x x x	x x x x		x 1 2 3	4 5 1 2	3 4 5 1	2 3 4 5	
x x x x	x x x x	x x x x	x x 1 2		, 3 4 5	1 2 , 3	4 5 1 2	, 3 4 5	
x x x x	x x x x	x x x 1	, 2 , 3		4 5 1 ,	2 , 3 4	5 1 , 2	, 3 4 5	

Fig 25

Translated to Western notation and set to *Hamsadhwani rāgām* (for the sake of simplicity as well as auspiciousness), these simple *corvais* might appear as such:



Fig 26

Simple enough so far, although the transcription does little to accentuate the tripartite repetition that defines the *corvai* as a rhythmic structure. The interplay between the underlying *tālā* and the sequences of varying complexity that overlay the broader metrical unit is a central feature of Carnatic improvisation, with the pinnacle of these improvised sequences occurring at the arrival on *samam*, the downbeat which functions as both the end of the previous cycle and the beginning of the next cycle. In the above set of *corvais*, the implied conclusion is the tonic *sa* or C on the subsequent downbeat. The lead-in to each *corvai*, meanwhile, might be filled with less structured stream-of-consciousness improvisations that needn't have any direct relation to the sequence laid out by the *corvai* — much as the tail on Shubh's introduction in “Slip” fills out the *tālā* cycle but disrupts the preceding five-beat triplet sequence.

Indeed, as Shubh's composition demonstrates, the underlying *tālā* structure often comes into focus precisely and even only at the climactic moment of arriving on *samam*. The fact that *tālā* as a felt pulse often fades into the background of an extended improvisation is aided by the embodied pedagogy of *tālā*: from the earliest stages in their training, Carnatic musicians are taught to keep *tālā* through a series of physical gestures that demarcate the full rhythmic cycle along with its subdivisions. The goal of this repetitive, embodied practice, while useful for the performance of rhythmically intricate *gamakka* and *sangathees* in the context of a composition, becomes most

apparent as performers move into performing mathematically complex improvisations: to borrow Dard Neuman's phrasing, "the fingers...are trained to carry the epistemological burden such that the mind can later catch up."²³⁰ Keeping *tālā* as a physical exercise allows the body to take on a metronomic function, while the melodic instrument is freed to engage in rhythmic play. From a phenomenological perspective, in these moments *tālā* almost ceases to contribute to the rhythmic pulse, but instead simply marks the metered passage of time until the arrival at *samam*.

It would subsequently be a mistake to understand play with *tālā* as polyrhythmic. Indeed, *tālā* serves a polyrhythmic function only in the same way that the *tanpura* serves a harmonic function — by which I again mean that these functions are likely to be more apparent to an unseasoned listener than to a performer who has gone through the embodied pedagogy of performing in *tālā* and in *śruti*. To such a performer, both the *tanpura* and the *tālā* serve as grounding structures within which a melodically and rhythmically playful performance may comfortably reside, but which do not themselves contribute to this play. In fusion contexts, meanwhile, both the harmonic affordances of the drone and the rhythmic affordances of *tālā* and its subdivisions come into sharp focus, as performers who lack an embodied relationship to these musical features must more consciously negotiate their impact on the melody and rhythm at hand.

In a recent example, I composed a *corvai* in *Amritavarshini* and *Misra Chāpu* for a collaboration with my good friend John Bitoy III, a classically-trained jazz pianist with no background in South Asian music. The *corvai* was, from my perspective, fairly straightforward, built around a decreasing 5-note sequence and interspersed with 5+5+5 fillers:

²³⁰ Neuman, Dard. "Pedagogy, Practice, and Embodied Creativity in Hindustani Music." *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 56 No. 3 (2012) p. 426.

1,,2,,3,,4,,5,,
 1,2,3,4,5,
 12345,
 12345 12345 12345,
 12345 12345 12345,
 12345 12345 12345
 (x3)

Transcribed for piano in 7/4 along with the accordant *Misra Chāpu* subdivisions, however, the pattern became almost unplayable, the simple underlying rhythmic sequence obfuscated by the introduction of complex polyrhythms from the *tālā's* relentless pulse (fortunately, John is of the sort to relish the challenge, even when I asked him to sight-transpose the score below up by a half step to accommodate my preferred C# flute as well as the limitations of my notation software):



Fig 27

In the case of “Slip,” Shubh describes his and his band’s process of drilling the introduction with a 4/4 metronome in order to arrive at a more embodied, intuitive feel of the underlying pulse. “Whoever plays it, they definitely nod the quarter note,” Shubh tells me. This process and result resonate with the phenomenology both John and I ultimately landed on of feeling the *Misra Chāpu* subdivisions in seven and the overlaid sets of five as two distinct yet complimentary streams, whose polyrhythmic tensions became most apparent in the moment of transcribing (or translating) the *corvai* into Western notation — representing both a challenge and an affordance in the context of

fusion performance. The translation of the South Asian rhythmic structure of *tālā* into a Western context complicates this structure in ways that necessitate careful interpretation by non-native practitioners but that can result in an exciting dramatization of what is otherwise only an implied pulse. Shubh's etic perspective on South Asian musical structures, paired with an emic if unorthodox experience of South Asianness itself, results in renewed possibilities for sounding South Asianness in a hyphenated context. As such, the overthinking that necessarily comes with situating South Asianness in cross-cultural context needn't be a hindrance. As Shubh demonstrates, the conscious cultivation of a South Asian sound can be directly related to a deeper understanding of and connection with our transnational South Asian identity: "It's like, me discovering my Indianness or relating with my Indianness but in a way that like, I didn't study Indian classical music, in fact I rejected it and ran away from it my whole life except in like the last ten to fifteen years — and then went the opposite direction [...] in order for me to, I think prove my Indianness to my self." This "proof," Shubh tells me, has become increasingly important as he navigates his Indian identity in his new American racial context:

If you don't have the Indianness, then what are you? Because you're not white, and you're not Black [...] so you're kind of lost in your own identity. And that's definitely something I've very much felt, is I've leaned into my Indianness now more than I used to. Because I don't have anything else. Because I'm never going to be accepted as an American normal white person. You know, I'm always going to be the Other.

In Shubh's case, his brownness simultaneously validates and compels his engagement with South Asian sound. He feels legitimized drawing upon South Asian melodies, rhythms, and inflections in his music; but he also feels the tension of allowing the white gaze to play an active role in the cultivation of his own Indian identity. Meanwhile, hyphenation in his music — the explicit process of translating South Asian musical structures into a transnational context — helps him reconcile the multiplicity implicit within his diasporic South Asianness. Hyphenation thus emerges as

not only an intrinsic ontological state, but a diasporic strategy, one that can be cultivated and tooled in service of articulating a multiply-inflected, transnational identity.

Lost in Translation

In one of the first formal classes I ever took on translation, I was assigned Ben Lerner's 2011 novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Lerner's protagonist is a poet-translator whose craft delights in the blurriness of that very distinction; a back-translation of a translation of Lorca that reads "Under the arc of the sky" becomes, first, "Under the arc of the *cielo*," and later "Under the arc of the cello."²³¹ The character's journey from proficiency to fluency in the Spanish language is of driving concern throughout the novel, as his craft — and his anxiety — require him to hold the language at arm's length, while this very alienation interferes with his ability to form meaningful relationships. Even as I delighted in the questions about language, translation, and intercultural community that the book raised, I remember being aware, for neither the first nor the last time, of what would become a familiar feeling: deep, visceral irritation with a white male protagonist who — I was certain — I was intended to like.

My one and only interview with Jake Charkey spanned the better part of an afternoon. We started at the Guatemalan café with the off-menu *paletas*;²³² about halfway through our conversation, Jake disappeared to his apartment around the corner to put a loaf of sourdough that he had left resting into the oven; when he returned we made our way towards Prospect Park, pausing to sit every time we reached a bench near water and frequently interrupting ourselves to point out cool bugs. It was, genuinely, a good hang. I say all this because I feel, at this point, that Jake could use some defending. I'll acknowledge that in some ways I have set Jake up as the antagonist of this dissertation, as the carefree mode in which he engages with South Asian music and culture provides

²³¹ Lerner, Ben. *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2011, p. 16.

²³² A Mexican dessert made from frozen fruit, similar to a popsicle

a deliberately infuriating counterpart to his more conscientious peers. And yet the “fast and loose” approach Jake describes is revealed to have real artistic potential, particularly as we turn to Shubh, whose relatively uninformed approach to the South Asian musical structures of *rāgā* and *tālā* allows us to experience *tālā* as polyrhythmic and to successfully translate the South Asian “accent” of *gamakka* for Western performers, creating new possibilities for cross-cultural performance. There is, clearly, a value in engaging etic or even superficial perspectives on South Asian musical structures, in spite of or perhaps even due to their distance from “authentic” South Asianness — a term that becomes even more fraught when applied to Shubh, as his fundamental Indianness is incontestable despite his multicultural, transnational upbringing.

While I have done my best to avoid framing my arguments over the course of this dissertation in terms of “authenticity,” a charged concept if ever there were one, it is undeniable that authenticity is a specter that hovers over all of the various artists and artistic practices discussed here. Rachna and Mir’s racial and cultural South Asianness authenticates, in Rachna’s case, the heightened stakes of her performance practice, and in Mir’s, the fidelity of his practice to tradition even in nontraditional performance contexts. Meanwhile, authenticity is a constant source of anxiety for white practitioners like Galen and Jake, whose *lack* of ethnic South Asianness leads to disparate approaches to South Asian culture — in Galen’s case, a careful distancing from anything that might be considered appropriative, and in Jake’s, an attempt to fully assimilate into the South Asian community that occasionally crosses the line of ethical interracial encounter. My evaluation of John McLaughlin in Chapter Two explicitly situates the artist’s fidelity to South Asian musical structures in terms of both his phenotype and the depth of his cross-cultural engagement with South Asianness, again suggesting some intrinsic connection between racial and cultural authenticity and musical value — although the exact nature of this connection remains deliberately vague. In all cases, respect for both the genre and the community at hand is paramount, a respect that I have here tied to

evaluations of these artists' engagement with musical as well as sociomusical structures. In other words: when it comes to cross-cultural performance, it matters to do things well.

And yet, returning to Jake: our conversation at times grew heated, particularly as he insisted on the potential value of what we both referred to as "bad fusion." He cited Bollywood as an example in which technically superficial attempts to engage across cultural and genre boundaries can lead to exciting creative possibilities. Speaking to the potential affordances of "bad fusion," Jake suggests:

Sometimes the lost in translation thing is fascinating because it can have a double meaning, and I think that's the thing that's cool. Maybe not even to the person who did it, but the double meaning exists out there, and that's sort of what's fascinating. It's like, *you* think you're saying this, but to somebody else it means this, and sometimes even there's a triple meaning, or a quadruple meaning. And I guess that layering is what attracts me to bad fusion.

Jake's claims about the creation of meaning in the process of cross-cultural translation evoke T. Roberts' perspective in which "value is placed on sincere attempts to gain new perspective and speak across difference, rather than how authentically someone sits within it."²³³ The very act of coming together in cross-cultural artistic community and attempting to co-articulate a musical idea results in the generation of a surplus of meaning, a surplus that in many ways embodies the lived experience of hyphenation, as its decryption necessitates intentional dialogue across racial, cultural, and genre divides. Cross-cultural performance is as much about process as product, as the process of translating culturally-specific musical ideas can lead to innovative understandings and interpretations of a more insular "South Asianness" in its diasporic, transnational context. "These traditions, there's a reason that they stay, that they're prone to conservatism," Jake goes on. "It's not necessarily a bad thing. It's like, this is the way that you can build a temple or a, you know, some huge structure that takes generations to build [...] You stick to the master plan, and then you achieve this incredible thing that reaches back and forwards in time." Cross-cultural performance entails navigating the

²³³ Roberts 2016:50

perpetual tension between preserving an “authentic” cultural heritage and acknowledging the reality and necessity of cultural shift in a global society. Through these negotiations, we uncover new ways of articulating a diasporic, hyphenated South Asianness that ring true in its translated, transnational context. Fusion — even “bad fusion” — thus allows both parties to inhabit the space of the hyphen, and to communicate across its divide. In the process, we build a musical language that can effectively express both the contradictions and the surprising convergences of this multiply-inflected middle space, and that can ultimately lead to enhanced understanding — both of ourselves and of one another.

Conclusion



Fig 28

A lover of all things meta and a firm believer in sharing the mic, I asked Galen Passen to share space with me in this conclusion through a commissioned art piece in which he offered some final reflections on our conversations and his journey with South Asian music and culture. The collage was delayed a few times, first by prolonged jury duty for a murder trial and later by a religiously-encoded trip to rural Brazil where Galen traveled to make his own ayahuasca (make of that what you will). Still, the process of co-creating the work was highly generative, highlighting, as Galen writes in his artist statement, “not only the enrichment of cultural diffusion, solidarity, and

collaboration but also the nefarious forces of exploitation, capitalism, and power.” The images that comprise the piece center South Asian music, history, and philosophy while also working to represent the ways “this current of art has extended to influence the arts and music scene on an international stage,” through references to New York City as well as African-American cultural heritage that “symbolize the power of arts to find common ground in diversity” (Fig 28).

Indeed, taking my cues from Galen, I suppose I might consider the overall message of this dissertation to be one about cohesion in the face of transnational flows, as disparate histories and traditions collide in service of articulating a unified cultural identity and artistic vision. To briefly speak from autobiography, over the seven years during which I wrote this dissertation I have also been on a transformative journey of coming into my own voice as an artist, ultimately arriving at a genre-agnostic sound and performance practice whose efficacy, I think, resides in my deliberate attempts to translate Carnatic melodies, rhythms, and timbres across genre and cultural divides. I have a hard time characterizing this new sound, which is the result of a unique convergence of Carnatic, operatic, and jazz influences and which has enabled me to connect with artist collaborators from across the spectrum of cultural and musical inclinations. Ultimately, I see these interpersonal connections as the primary goal of my performance practice: through hyphenated music-making, I have come into a rich, multicultural, indeed hyphenated artistic and cultural community, and have discovered new possibilities for individual and collective expression across borders of various kinds.

This project’s central concept of hyphenation, then, can be read in multiple ways. The hyphen represents, certainly, an ontology, a transnational South Asianness that finds its complete expression only at the intersection of multiple competing national, ethnic, and cultural identities. The hyphen also reflects a particular musical epistemology, born of the genre-defying multiplicity endemic to the performance of traditional art in a transnational context. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, hyphenation describes both the processes and the products of diasporic music-making,

as cross-cultural translations generate new meanings and new understandings of South Asianness that can uniquely account for this genre's unwieldy global manifestations.

Indeed, this emphasis on process accounts for what has turned out to be a central goal of this project, namely that of “translating” South Asian musical concepts for a Western audience. Crucially, this audience consists of performers alongside academics; indeed, many of the translations that appear in this dissertation emphasize functionality, as I speak from the perspective of a fusion performer to go beyond merely defining *rāgā* and *tālā* in technical terms towards instead explicating how these structures might effectively be deployed in a cross-genre and cross-cultural context. In my writing as well in as my performance practice, this has involved a productive defamiliarization of these foundational concepts, with creative implications for performers on both sides of the exchange — reinforcing my understanding of translation as a living, bi-directional process and of the hyphen as an active space of negotiation.

The hyphen as a metaphor appeals precisely because of this insistence on the habitability of the space in-between. Hyphenation is messy. It is at all times unresolved. South Asian-American identity can be understood only as a process of constant negotiation between competing sets of cultural influences and affiliations, while fusion as a form of musical hyphenation achieves its significance precisely through the processes of translation that, in the best cases, ultimately serve to enrich constituent genres while also bringing musicians together in community through co-articulation. While each section of this dissertation takes a distinct approach to hyphenation as a theoretical construct, they are unified in their emphasis on process, and in refusing to treat the objects of the hyphen as fixed or static entities but instead as critical sites of negotiation.

During the process of writing this dissertation, two major global events fundamentally changed my relationship with collaborative music-making and with cultural identity. The first was the COVID-19 pandemic, which completely disrupted the world of live performance before my fieldwork even began and which ultimately reinforced our collective desperation to find community

in co-articulation. The second was the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, an event which has made anyone outside of the category of upper-class cisgender heterosexual white male a target to an unprecedented degree, and which has specifically placed immigrants, even legal citizens, in a state of acute precarity. My project toggles between internal and external challenges to South Asianness and Americanness alike in the context of musical fusion; this approach takes on a new valence in light of the fact that “American” as an identity category is now contested like never before. In the face of this ongoing precarity, I have no tidy takeaways or reassurances to offer except that for many of us, identity has *always* been messy, and community even messier; and that time and time again, across the course of history, some of the most compelling music and art have emerged precisely from this very mess.

If this work has at times seemed to contradict itself, this is at least in part due to my lifetime of learning to be comfortable in tension and in contradiction — and of finding, through the journey of navigating these contradictions, a “hyphenated” sense of artistic and cultural cohesion. Galen’s collage now hangs on my wall above my desk, a final reminder of the ways my own South Asian-Americanness has found its most poignant expression through collaboration across boundaries of race, culture, and genre. The hyphen is a celebration of convergence, but also of contradiction; and, ultimately, of the ways these convergences, contradictions, and collaborations can work together to engender a dynamic, cohesive whole.

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