BEYOND “COVID CONCEPTS” OF RACIALIZED STRUGGLE: “ANTI-ASIAN RACISM” AND THE ECLIPSE OF INDIAN “SOUTH ASIANS” IN CANADA

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Abstract

The Canadian state has historically engaged in institutionalized forms of racism that have targeted and positioned "Asiatic" immigrants as threatening and suspicious, a pattern that is echoed in contemporary immigration discourse and multiculturalism (Bhandari, 2025; Ward, 1978). Within this context, this dissertation argues that state categories are not neutral descriptors but function as mechanisms for governing populations that shape visibility, recognition, and exclusion. In particular, it examines how "South Asian" functions as a bureaucratic subcategory that is marginalized within the broader category of "Asian," which has significant consequences for those of Indian origin in Canada. Although there was an increase in scholarship on "anti-Asian racism" during the COVID-19 pandemic, most of this has largely centred around East Asian experiences, resulting in less attention to how "South Asians" are positioned within and excluded from dominant understandings of "anti-Asian racism" (Chen & Wu, 2021; Guo & Guo, 2021; Kim, 2024; Tran, 2021). To address this gap, this dissertation draws from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and critical anti-racism to conceptualize how the categories of "Asian" and "South Asian" are active sites of governance that shape belonging within Canadian multiculturalism.

Based on semi-structured interviews (n=32) with individuals of Indian origin in Canada, this study seeks to understand how participants interpret "Asian" and "South Asian," experience racialization, and negotiate their belonging within social and state frameworks. This dissertation reveals three central findings. First, the framing and representations of "Asian" as aligned more with East Asian identities produces uncertainty and marginal positioning for "South Asian" identities. Second, participants experience multiculturalism as a form of racialized governance, where crossing the implicit threshold of tolerable and manageable cultural difference shape their everyday experiences of conditional inclusion. Third, during the COVID-19 pandemic, participants' experiences of racism were obscured and less visible within dominant narratives of "anti-Asian racism," revealing how these categories produce intra-group hierarchies and uneven forms of recognition and representation even beyond the pandemic. In response, participants call for conceptual frameworks that better account for experiences and visibility in Canada. This dissertation contributes to scholarship on anti-racism and Canadian multiculturalism, by providing a critical account of "anti-Asian racism," placing it conceptually within the hierarchies of recognition and representation that are produced in Canada.

Dedication

To my parents

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

On June 12, 2025, Air India Flight 171 departed from Ahmedabad, India, towards London, United Kingdom (UK), and crashed 32 seconds after takeoff (Biget, 2025). This resulted in serious casualties both on board and on-the-ground: 12 crew members and 229 passengers were killed aboard, leaving one survivor, and 19 people were killed and 67 seriously injured on-the-ground (Sharma, 2025).[1] While the investigation remains ongoing, an interim report stated that the crash resulted from a loss of thrust in both engines, which was caused by the fuel control switches (Sharma, 2025). Support from the United States (U.S.)-based Foundation for Aviation Safety (FAS) and Safety Matters Foundation, an Indian-based organization that works to promote safety in aviation, have highlighted concerns that the spotlight on the pilots' actions is a deliberate attempt to divert attention away from potential issues with the Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner (Leggett, 2025).

This same day, I landed in London for a conference, and while waiting for my luggage, I received several frantic calls and text messages from family and close friends wanting to confirm my safe arrival. This was when I learned about the Air India crash. While looking online for more information across social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, it was disheartening to see racist comments appearing on posts about the tragedy. Comments I saw included suggestions that Indians "can't drive a plane," mockery of the victims by implying that there would finally be fewer "scam calls," and dehumanizing remarks about how the plane must have "smelled." Many Canadian and U.S.- based Indian content creators[2] pushed back and highlighted how these comments framed the crash as deserving to happen or less tragic because it involved Indians, and

[1] Among the victims on the flight, the passenger manifest notes that 169 were Indian nationals, 53 British, 7 Portuguese, and 1 Canadian (BBC, 2025).

[2] My focus is on Canada and the U.S. as many of the videos observed on social media during the first few days after the crash were from content creators based in these countries.

therefore "less Indians is a good thing" (Silva, 2025b, para. 17).[3] This incident is one of many recent examples of how hate and racism are experienced both online in digital spaces, predominantly on platforms like 4chan, Reddit, and X, as well as offline in everyday experiences, where Indians have increasingly reported incidents of exclusion, violence, and targeted hostility. Although this crash occurred abroad, the responses and reactions, especially from the Indian[4] diaspora, demonstrates that racism transcends national boundaries and is deeply personal matter felt by many.

1.2 SETTING THE SCENE: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Experiences of online and offline hostility reflect a broader, ongoing intensification of racism and anti-immigrant sentiments targeting Indian communities in various countries. In July 2025, Indians were subjected to harassment and a series of physical attacks in Dublin, Ireland (Borpukari, 2025; Caroll, 2025). In response to these attacks, the Indian Embassy issued an advisory to its citizens to take the necessary precautions to protect themselves, while Indians in Dublin held a silent protest outside of the city's Justice Department (Carroll, 2025; Embassy of India Dublin, Ireland, 2025). In Wolverhampton, England, a shocking video emerged in August showing two Sikh men being kicked and assaulted by three teenagers outside a railway station (Times of India, 2025). In Australia, solicitor Nayonika Bhattacharya was subjected to racist verbal abuse in public spaces, including such as "you curry muncher, smelly Indian, and Mrs 7/11 truck driver" (Silva, 2025a, para. 2). In the U.S., online platforms such as X and public spaces have seen an increase in targeted racism against the Indian community. When Kash Patel, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), wished his X followers a Happy Diwali, far-right Christian, and white

[3] There are very few articles that discuss the flooding of racist comments in the aftermath of the crash.
[4] Diaspora refers to the dispersal (or spread) from their geographic place of origin – i.e., 'homeland' (Brubaker, 2005; Clifford, 1994).

nationalist accounts left comments such as “Go back home and worship your sand demons,” “Get the f**k out of the country,” and “This is America. We don’t do this” (Kaur, 2025, para. 2).[5]

Canada has not been immune to these trends. In online spaces, Indians have faced judgement, harassment, and false accusations. This includes TikTok videos that spread claims of public defecation in Wasaga Beach, or videos mocking the suicide of Charandeep Singh, a former Niagara College student, with many celebrating his death and calling for other Indians to follow (Liddar & Pallapothu, 2024). Viral videos circulating in cities that are immigrant dense, such as Brampton, include captions asking, “Is this Toronto or India,” or ridiculing Tim Hortons as “Singh Hortons,” creating a space for commenting and supporting racist narratives (Bhandari, 2025, para. 5). Incidents in offline spaces have continued to escalate: in Scarborough, a Sikh man had his turban forcibly ripped when he was heading home from the *gurdwara*[6] (WSO, 2024). Other incidents include verbal harassment, which are accompanied by (familiar) comments to “go back to India” or that Indians are “taking over Canada” (para. 6). These examples signal a shift towards more targeted and overt forms of everyday racism that “South Asians” are experiencing.

These racist attacks happen to coincide with the implementation of increasingly restrictive immigration policies, such as the series of changes introduced by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) in October 2024, which appear as seemingly neutral, yet in practice, target “South Asians,” especially immigrants arriving from India. This includes reductions in student visas and Post-Graduate Work Permit (PGWP) eligibility, which have disproportionately

[5] A recent addition in September 2025 to President Trump’s already excessive deportations and immigration arrests was the announcement for the increased feeds for the new H-1B visa applications, where fees increased from $2,000-$5,000 to $100,000 for new applicants (Aggarwal et al., 2025). The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa that allows U.S. employers to hire foreign workers in specific occupations, such as for tech giants not limited to Meta, Google, Amazon, alongside consulting firms like Deloitte and Accenture (Aggarwal et al., 2025). Most grantees of this visa are born in India. This decision was followed by statements made over the summer where Trump called for American tech giants like Google and Microsoft to stop hiring workers from India and “put America first” (Bhatt, 2025, para. 3).

[6] Sikh temple.

affected Indians wanting to come to Canada, who constitute a significant portion of the country's international student population (IRCC, 2025; Mann, 2025). Public debates, including the Canada First movement[7] protests at Queen's Park, frame immigration as a problem with racialized narratives about Indians (Sahni et al., 2025; Todd, 2025). Such policies perpetuate a longstanding pattern of "anti-Asiatic" racialized gatekeeping that legitimizes a climate of hostility in which those arriving from India, or of Indian origin, are being negatively targeted, with concomitant effects on long-established communities in Canada.

1.3 FROM "ASIATIC" TO "SOUTH ASIAN"

Historically, Canada qualified all diverse populations arriving from Asia as "Asiatic." Migrants from China, Japan, and India, amongst the first non-European groups to arrive in the late 1700s onwards, were collectively positioned as a threat to 'White Canada,' despite their vast differences in language, religion, and national origin (Ward, 1978). An orientalist category, "Asiatic" carried with it explicitly racist connotations used to homogenize distinct communities, and to justify exclusionary policies and practices such as the Chinese Head Tax (1885), the Continuous Journey Regulation (1908), and the Chinese Exclusion Act (1923) (Johnston, 1979; Mawani, 2018; Munro, 1971; Paupst, 1977; Pirbhai, 2015).[8] These measures reveal how the racialization of "Asians"[9] function through broad, homogenized constructions of Asianness to regulate migration and codify social and racialized hierarchies. Here, racialized hierarchies refer to systems where racial

[7] The Canada First movement in October 2025 was formed to "protect Canadian and Christian values," and about the misuse of the immigration system, mass immigration, and 'illegal' immigration (Sahni et al., 2025, para. 2). Although the group was met with counter-protestors who accused them of spreading anti-immigrant rhetoric and hate, recent opinion polls have shown that over half of Canadians believe that 1) there are too many international students in Canada, and 2) that Canada cannot cope with mass immigration and thus are in favour of reduced numbers (Todd, 2025). The Liberal government has used public anxieties to garner support.

[8] These will be discussed further in the next chapter.

[9] Quotation marks will be consistently applied when using Asian, South Asian, and anti-Asian racism throughout this dissertation as these are being interrogated. I use quotation marks around "Asiatic" to highlight both its historical connection to "Asian" and its contemporary transition to "South Asian."

categories are socially constructed and situated in institutional practices whereby status, resources, and power are distributed unevenly (Omi & Winant, 2014). These hierarchies are historically rooted systems of inequality that are reinforced through both institutions and through the everyday actions of individuals (Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 2026). How these hierarchies operate and why they persist are important to understand racism beyond individual prejudice to show how race remains central to organizing our everyday lives (Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 2026). Despite a shift towards multiculturalism, race continues to mark "Asian" communities in Canada, where a broader pattern of racialized state governance is echoed in contemporary immigration policy and public discourse (Frideres, 1996; Thobani, 2000).

National shifts to emphasize culture over race through multiculturalism, still ignore the way race impacts "Asian" communities in Canada. According to the 2021 census, there is no formal "Asian" category but rather it includes "South Asian," Chinese, Filipino, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, and Japanese (Government of Canada, 2023). When accounting for overall data on "Asians," these populations are then grouped together. However, East Asian identities, particularly Chinese and Japanese, dominate in public perceptions around Asianness. "South Asian," which emerged as a transition from "Asiatic,"[10] operates as a distinct category that is frequently equated with Indian (Ashutosh, 2008). This reflects immigration trends, bureaucratic classifications, and demographic visibility of some groups over others. While this differentiation between the diversity of the "Asian" category signals some change, it does not signify a reduction in racialized exclusion. Instead, these contemporary processes demonstrate a continuity of

[10] "Asiatic" was a term used to describe immigrants from China, Japan, and India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Mackie, 2017). Policies such as the Continuous Journey Regulation (1908) and the Chinese Immigration Act (1923) explicitly used this language (Mawani, 2018; Munro, 1971). This will be further discussed in chapter two.

historical forms of racialization that are now negotiated through institutionalized classifications[11] and social mechanisms.

Panethnicity is an important conceptual framework to understand how broad (regional) labels become socially meaningful. Espiritu (1992) defines panethnicity as the grouping together of diverse populations into a larger, collective identity. This occurs not through pre-existing cultural unity but emerges because of intergroup interactions and shared experiences in institutional, discursive, or political processes (Espiritu, 1992). Panethnic categories like "South Asian" were constructed in response to racialization, state classifications, and through collective mobilization with increased immigration from non-European countries after WWII (Lopez & Espiritu, 1990; Okamoto & Mora, 2014). However, panethnic categories, while attempting to complement, not replace, ethnic identities, can obscure the diverse cultural and historical differences within these groups. At the same time, these panethnic categories become socially significant because they are reproduced in advocacy movements, institutionalized classifications, and within public discourse. The emergence of "South Asian" reflects both pressure from activism and policy needs. Many activist organizations and members of "South Asian" communities advocated for the recognition of shared experiences of discrimination beyond the "Asian" category in the mid-1970s and 1980s (Ashutosh, 2014; Day, 2008). The term was then specified in the Employment Equity Act (1986) and first appeared as "South Asian origins" in the census (Abu-Laban & Gabriel, 2002; White et al., 1993).

[11] In this study, I use the term institutionalized classification or bureaucratic classification/practices to refer to "Asian" and "South Asian" as they appear in census forms, the self-identification form used by York University that participants reference, and during Asian Heritage Month. These are bureaucratically produced and standardized classifications that make populations legible within institutional contexts and shape how participants understand and describe their own self-identities and positioning.

Scholars have emphasized that "South Asian" is not culturally coherent as there is no singular cultural identifier (see Fernandez, 2001; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). The region consists of diverse languages, religions, and cultures, and a shared history of British colonialism does not equate to a uniform experience, as pre- and post-colonization differs both between and within states (Ghosh, 2013; see Riaz, 2010). If a shared history of colonialism was to be considered as the unifying factor, then "South Asian" should include indentured migration by British colonizers to the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, Pacific Islands, and Africa (Kurien & Purkayastha, 2024). Thus, "South Asian," as Palat (2002) argues, reflects a Eurocentric cartographic unit more than it does self-defined identities. This instability is further evident in how institutionalized classifications have historically categorized migrants from British-India in the U.K. as "Black" until the 1960s (Ghosh, 2013).

Throughout this dissertation, I use "Asian" and "South Asian" as heuristic categories to analyze these processes. It does not imply homogeneity, but rather emphasizes how meanings are produced, applied, and mobilized in Canadian society. This framework allows for a tracing of shared vulnerabilities across "Asian" communities and situating the distinct experiences of "South Asians," particularly Indian migrants, as they navigate targeted hostility, conditional belonging, and exclusionary policies embedded in a longer history of anti-Asian exclusion. Additionally, I use Indian as a national origin descriptor to refer to those of Indian origin or when participants self-identify as such. This acknowledges the important history of how the term first emerged and was used in the Western context, with Christopher Columbus mistakenly believing he had arrived in Asia, and its ongoing legal significance under the Indian Act (1876) (Bartlett, 1978; McCue, 2020). This helps to situate Indian identities within a broader settler-colonial framework. Additionally, I approach identity not as a fixed attribute but one that is relationally and historically

produced and shaped by institutional classifications and political projects that aim to be inclusive. Although in 'multicultural' states racial difference is re-framed as cultural difference, this study sees race as a central organizing principle through which power and inequality are structured, therefore maintaining itself as a racial state. Distinguishing between race and culture, therefore, will be important to understand how "South Asian" identities are produced and managed. These concepts will be further developed in chapter two, "Mapping the Problem." Lastly, I want to highlight that in this study, I exclusively focus on the ways immigrants from India, and/or descendants of immigrants from India perceive and respond to the categories of "Asian" and "South Asian," and how they situate these categories more broadly in their identity negotiations. I expand on limitations in the conclusion chapter.

1.4 MULTICULTURAL FRAGILITY: THE LIMITS OF BELONGING

Canada is often celebrated as a model of multicultural inclusion, with official narratives that frame diversity as the nation's strength, and policies promoting immigration, tolerance, and managing difference. Belonging to the national community for racialized communities remains conditional, even in phases of 'normalcy.' During moments of crisis, this conditionality becomes more blatant and obvious.[12] This conditionality became visible in the aftermath of the 1985 Air India Flight 182 (Kanishka) bombing. Although this was the deadliest aviation attack involving Canadian citizens, the victims were mostly of Indian origin, and the tragedy received limited recognition within dominant narratives of a national loss. There was no declaration of "we are all Canadians" by any foreign leader in its aftermath (Macklin, 2001, p. 399, as cited in Abu-Laban, 2002).[13] Despite the

[12] The use of belonging in this dissertation is not only about formal inclusion or citizenship, but recognition, legitimacy, and the ability to be in the national space without having to constantly justify one's presence. While officially, Canadian multiculturalism formally endorses diversity, it operates within a framework where belonging for some is conditional, while guaranteed for others. Racialized communities are welcomed as contributing to Canada's economic growth and a symbol of diversity, yet are vulnerable to exclusion when their presence becomes perceived as threatening or disruptive.

[13] This bombing is not as known to many Canadians as is 9/11.

severity of the attack, rather than framing it as a national tragedy, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney sent a letter of condolence to the Indian Prime Minister (PM) for *their* loss (Blaise & Mukherjee, 1988).

In contrast to the Air India bombing, the attacks on September 11, 2001, produced a very different and rapid response that overwhelmingly targeted Muslims or those perceived to be Muslim. Muslim bodies were framed as foreign and incompatible with Western values, which in turn legitimized necessary state intervention and restrictive policies aimed at protecting the nation (Abu-Laban, 2014; Dhamoon & Abu-Laban, 2009; Hogarth & Fletcher, 2018). Additionally, measures such as Quebec's Charter of Values, which proposed to enforce state secularism and ban public sector employees from wearing religious symbols, illustrates how cultural difference is framed as threatening to national cohesion (Hogarth & Fletcher, 2018).[14] Even when inclusion is granted, it remains tied to conforming to dominant norms.

These selected crises reveal the fragility of multicultural belonging. The presence of migrants is celebrated for convenience, yet they are subject to exclusion and blame when fear and anxieties emerge. This historical pattern helps to understand the contemporary increase in (overt) anti-immigrant sentiments in Canada and the targeted racism against the Indian community. This is not a rupture from Canada's past, but a continuation of longstanding dynamics where racialized groups are positioned as outsiders who need to be managed or entirely restricted. During the COVID-19 pandemic, existing dynamics of conditional belonging were intensified as persons of "Asian" descent faced heightened discrimination and hate speech, due to the supposed origins of the virus in Wuhan, China (Reny & Barreto, 2020). Public and media discourse overwhelmingly framed the threat as associated with "Chinese" or "East Asian" bodies, obscuring the

[14] This controversial Bill (60) was proposed in 2013 by Parti Québécois but then was abandoned after the Party's loss in the 2014 election (Duboyce, 2014).

vulnerabilities of "South Asians," and reinforcing existing hierarchies around the visibility of particular experiences (Chen, 2024; Theivendrampillai et al., 2023). Although East Asian communities were disproportionately affected by this hostility, the broader notion rendered all "Asians," which geographically includes "South Asians," as susceptible to harassment, violence, and suspicion.

1.5 COVID-19: A RACIALIZED CRISIS

"Anti-Asian racism" significantly increased during COVID-19, contributing to widespread verbal and physical harassment against East Asians and those perceived as or mistaken for Chinese (Ho, 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). Longstanding "Yellow Peril" tropes were reactivated during a public health crisis, casting "Asians" as an "existential threat to the West..." (Luo, 2021, p. 142). Police-reported hate crimes targeting East or Southeast Asians more than tripled (301%) in 2020 in comparison to 2019 (Wang & Moreau, 2022). Reports from the Chinese National Council (CCNC) and Project 1907 documented 943 incidents in 2021, although these numbers are likely higher due underreporting (Balintec, 2022). Over half of these reported incidents were against women, and involved verbal harassment in public spaces, including being coughed on or spat at (CCNC, 2022). Collectively, these patterns reveal how the pandemic reactivated longstanding stereotypes of "Asians" as perpetual foreigners and carriers of disease.

At the same time, "South Asians" experienced hostility shaped by overlapping but distinct racial logics that complicate dominant understandings of "anti-Asian racism."[15] Reports documented an increase in workplace harassment and verbal abuse that was justified through

[15] This distinction is not intended to suggest that there is an equivalence to or competition between East and South Asian experiences. The East Asian community was disproportionately targeted by anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather, the aim is to highlight how "South Asians'" experiences of racism, while shaped by similar and distinct racial logics, were frequently excluded from dominant frameworks of "anti-Asian racism," despite also being significantly affected during this period.

assumptions around cultural practices or failing to comply with public health measures (Liddar & Pallapothu, 2024). As Bahia (n.d.) observes, incidents involving "South Asians" "quickly cycled out of the news," evident in the aftermath of the 2021 FedEx shooting in Indianapolis, where four Sikh men were killed one month after the Atlanta spa shooting that claimed the lives of six Asian women (para. 8). The Indianapolis shooting quickly disappeared from media and public discourse, and there was minimal recognition on the increasing violence against the Sikh community (Bahia, n.d.). In Canada, police-reported hate crimes against "South Asians" increased by over 47% in 2020, and by 143% between 2019 and 2022 (Sahota, 2024).[16] Cities with a significant "South Asian" population, such as Fraser Valley, Calgary, and Brampton, were labelled as "hotspots" (Gupta & Nagpal, 2022). Religious and cultural gatherings like Diwali, Bandi Chhor Divas,[17] and Ramadan were singled out as the sources for the spread of the virus, ignoring the role of structural conditions such as a concentration of migrants from these cities who work in essential work, and are front-line workers who do not have the privilege to work from home as reasons for the increased infection rates (Bahia, n.d.; Mazzucco, 2020).[18]

Debates around the increased cost of living, high unemployment rates due to labour market competition, and housing shortages have contributed directly to the increased, targeted racism against Indians, or those who are perceived to be Indian. This reflects broader, anti-immigration backlash that has been shaped by contemporary immigration discourse in Canada and elsewhere (Bhandari, 2025; Kukreja, 2024; Paperny, 2024). Recent policy changes, although framed as neutral, have disproportionally affected Indians as they immigrate to Canada at higher rates than

[16] These numbers are likely higher when we account for underreporting.
[17] This is a Sikh holiday that takes place on the same day as Diwali.
[18] South Asian advocacy groups and non-profit organizations worked to help their community combat the spread of the virus by directing attention to the needs and vulnerabilities of the South Asian population through establishing the South Asian COVID-19 Task Force (SACTF). These efforts led to the South Asian community becoming the highest-vaccinated (96%) ethnic minority group who received at least one dose of the vaccine between June 2021-February 2022 (Samina et al., 2024).

any other nationality (Risdon, 2024). These policies are embedded in the familiar history of "anti-Asiatic" gatekeeping that has contributed to the creation of a climate where both new arrivals and long-established migrants are being negatively targeted for the problems many countries are currently facing.

1.6 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

In situating these experiences post-pandemic, a key area of concern is about how "Asian" is commonly understood and deployed. In dominant discourse, "Asian" is frequently conflated with Chinese, and/or East Asians, but this implied congruence can potentially obscure the distinct experiences of Canadians of "South Asian" origins, whose historical and contemporary experiences of racism have led to particular narratives within the framework of Canadian multicultural belonging. Although "Asian" refers to the continent, it symbolically narrows to East Asians, an association that became more prominent during the pandemic as "anti-Asian racism" re-emerged. While "anti-Asian racism" is not strictly limited to the pandemic, it does currently remain tied to pandemic-era logics and, consequently, East Asian experiences. This raises important questions about how racism against other "Asian" subgroups, such as "South Asians," is situated when it is not linked to the virus.

The Government of Canada defines "anti-Asian racism" as the "historical and ongoing discrimination, negative stereotyping, and injustice experienced by peoples of Asian origin, based on others' assumptions about their ethnicity and nationality" (2025a, para. 2). Despite this definition, the framing of "anti-Asian racism" during the pandemic risks reinforcing a formulaic Asian=Chinese prescription. In this process, "South Asians" are treated as separate, rather than a sub-category of "Asian," which makes their inclusion within "anti-Asian racism" discourse complex. This narrowing occurs alongside the bureaucratization of "South Asian" in Canada.

"South Asians" arrive as workers, family members, students, and refugees, reflecting Canada's reliance on immigration for its demographic and economic growth. Although India remains the largest source country of new permanent residents (PR), other countries, including the Philippines, China, Nigeria, and Cameroon, closely follow, but public and political attention remains disproportionately focused on Indians (Risdon, 2024).

Objective of Study and Research Questions

This dissertation takes its cue from scholarship concerned with addressing the experiences of Indian migrants and their descendants living in Canada (Das Gupta & Nagpal, 2022; Kapadia, 2013; Malhi et al., 2009; Raj & Suresh, 2024). It interrogates how "anti-Asian racism" is conceptualized within Canadian multiculturalism in a post-pandemic world. Much of the current literature has centred around pandemic-related "anti-Asian racism" and its impact on the East Asian community. However, this has simultaneously raised broader questions around how "Asian" is defined, and how racism is experienced differently by other segments of the overall "Asian" population in Canada, and how these meanings change over time. Research on intergroup relations demonstrates that majority (white) groups tend to preserve systems that are advantageous for them, often through inclusive discourse that still leaves power relations intact (Dovidio et al., 2009). In contrast, minority (racialized) groups navigate both pan-ethnic solidarities and distinct group identities in efforts to secure status and recognition (Dovidio et al., 2009). These dynamics explain why some racialized experiences are marginalized even when frameworks claim to promote inclusion.

Hence, this project uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) and critical anti-racism scholarship to examine the relationship between the categories of "Asian," multiculturalism, and "anti-Asian racism." It additionally relies on the conceptual frameworks of groupism, the politics of belonging,

recognition, and representation to examine the experiences of "South Asians." "Asians" continue to experience everyday racism, and this study does not aim to minimize or diminish the role that the pandemic played in intensifying anti-Asian hate. Rather, it asks how the pandemic, along with dominant representations of Asianness, reshaped its meaning, and subsequently, understandings of "anti-Asian racism." I argue that although Indians experience "anti-Asian racism," their experiences are rendered as less visible due to how "Asian" and "South Asian" are recognized and subsequently represented. Experiences of racism during the pandemic reinforced "Asian" as synonymous with East Asian, while "South Asian" has increasingly become equated with Indian, therefore producing a hierarchy in which certain experiences become representative of the entire group. Additionally, increasing visibility of Indian migrants has generated more overt and explicit forms of hostility, where individuals are increasingly targeted not simply because they are immigrants, but specifically because they are Indian (or perceived to be).

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Indians interpret the category of "Asian?" How has its meaning changed over time?
2. How do Indians interpret "anti-Asian racism?" How has its meaning changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. How do participants' lived experiences complicate dominant understandings of "anti-Asian racism," and what do they reveal about multicultural belonging?

These questions are situated within a broader critique of institutionalized classification systems, such as the census, which beyond simply describing populations, actively define, govern, and manage racialized populations (Anderson, 1983; Goldberg, 2002; Kertzer & Arel, 2002). These classifications shape how communities are represented and how social problems are framed (Day, 2008; Stone, 2011; Thompson, 2020). From a critical anti-racism perspective, the state is not neutral, but central in reproducing racial inequality through policies and 'neutral' administrative

practices (Banting & Thompson, 2021; Jiwani, 2006; Razack, 2002; Tator et al., 1998; Thobani, 2007).

Drawing on critiques of the 'anti-racist state,' this dissertation seeks to examine how Canadian multiculturalism celebrates diversity yet leaves structures of white supremacy and settler colonialism unquestioned and intact (Bannerji, 2000; Kyriakides, 2008; Lentin, 2004; Lentin & Titley, 2011; Thobani, 2007). The bureaucratic classification of positioning "South Asians" as a subcategory within "Asian" diminishes their internal diversity and obscures their specific histories of racialization and exclusion. To build on these critiques, this dissertation applies a critical anti-racism lens to explore how Indians are positioned within nation-building projects that seek to situate Canada as multicultural and welcoming, and how this positioning is contested in meaning-making practices. Although there is substantial literature that examines state practices and racialization, there is an absence of work that examines the contemporary meanings of "anti-Asian racism" as a focus of anti-racist mobilization and state intervention. This was especially visible during the pandemic, when institutional and public recognition was centred around the experiences of East Asians (Chen & Wu, 2021; Guo & Guo, 2021; Kim, 2024; Tran, 2021). Consequently, this dissertation situates participants meaning-making practices within the state's discriminatory policies and practices, and in parallel, examines how "anti-Asian racism" is operationalized within multiculturalism in ways that become selective, especially in a post-pandemic context.

Research Contributions

This dissertation will make three contributions to existing literature on: 1) the meaning of "South Asian," 2) Canadian multiculturalism, and 3) "anti-Asian racism" during and beyond the pandemic.

1) This study contributes to scholarship on the meaning of "South Asian" in Canada by examining how bureaucratic-driven racial categorization shapes lived experiences (Ashutosh, 2008; Elcioglu, 2025; Ghosh, 2013; Sahoo & Sangha, 2010; Sodhi, 2008). It analyzes how the institutional positioning of "South Asians" as a subcategory of "Asian" informs how Indians understand themselves in relation to the broader "Asian" category, while attending to how these understandings vary across class and generations. The meaning of "Asian" itself remains underexplored in the Canadian context, especially when compared to the U.S. This analysis traces the shift from the historically racialized category of "Asiatic" to contemporary bureaucratic classifications and representations of "South Asian" to show how essentialized understandings of race are reproduced through multicultural governance, even when they are reframed through a cultural lens.

2) This study contributes to existing scholarship that is critical of Canadian multiculturalism by examining how tolerance is experienced as a form of racialized governance. Racialized governance refers to how policies, state practices, and institutions organize and manage populations through racial categories that reinforce racialized hierarchies and produce unequal outcomes (Power & Baxter, 2024). In the context of multiculturalism, rather than work towards eliminating racial inequalities, racialized governance functions as a mechanism for managing difference, shifting from overt to subtle forms of exclusion to uphold the 'racial state' (see Goldberg, 2002). While most of the literature has focused on how multiculturalism manages difference through individual rights, inclusion, and recognition, this study is situated in how tolerance can function as a deliberate form of social control that quickly casts entire communities negatively (Donnelly, 2021; Harris, 1982; Hervik, 2012; Kymlicka, 2018; Sala, 2010; Taylor, 1992).

Drawing on critical anti-racist perspectives that recognize racism as structural rather than individual prejudice, I show how multiculturalism institutionalizes inequality that aims for inclusion but produces exclusion. By shifting the focus from tolerance and towards intolerance, this dissertation examines what happens when racialized communities are seen as crossing the boundaries of what is recognized as acceptable difference – i.e., that difference becomes intolerable and unmanageable. This includes the ongoing negotiations participants navigate in the context of increased hostility towards immigration, with considerations around recent changes introduced by IRCC in October 2024.

3) Lastly, this study contributes to anti-racism scholarship by critically interrogating how "anti-Asian racism" is conceptualized and operationalized. Although it has been recognized as an important site for state intervention, as seen through funding for hate-crime prevention, support services, and campaigns, the category remains implicitly coded as East Asian. This framing draws heavily from model minority myths and the heightened scapegoating of East Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen & Wu, 2021; Eizadirad et al., 2025; Fang et al., 2024; Guo & Guo, 2021; Luo et al., 2024; Xiaobei, 2025). As a result, the racialized violence and exclusion experienced by "South Asians" has remained, in comparison, minimized. From a critical anti-racism perspective, this dissertation aims to question whether "anti-Asian racism," as it is currently deployed, adequately captures and represents the experiences of "South Asians." By mapping how bureaucratic classifications shape anti-racist interventions, I demonstrate how meaning-making practices produce both inclusion and exclusion, and govern whose experiences are recognized as legitimate and hence deserving of support. Although "anti-Asian racism" challenges the historical "Asiatic" label, it does not engage with how "South Asians"

continue to be racialized through cultural particularization that operates as a homologue for race. This analysis reveals how anti-racist frameworks reproduce intra-group hierarchies.

1.7 OVERVIEW OF DISSERTATION CHAPTERS

This dissertation begins with a literature review of the relevant scholarship, including works on early immigration policy when migrants from Asia first arrived in Canada, changes to immigration policy over time along with current, important changes to policy, with a focus on multiculturalism. I additionally discuss scholarship on the pandemic, anti-racism, and "anti-Asian racism." I then move into the literature review theory section of this dissertation, which is rooted in CRT and critical anti-racism, and the conceptual frameworks of 'groupism,' the politics of belonging, recognition, and representation. This is followed by a methodological overview where I conducted semi-structured interviews (n=32) with participants from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). After this, I move into my analytic/results chapters, which are comprised of the following: 1) the first analytic chapter examines the meaning of "South Asian" for participants in Canada, followed by 2) multiculturalism being experienced as a form of racialized governance, moving into 3) the experiences of the "Asian" community during the pandemic, and ending with the last analytic chapter, that 4) examines the meaning of "anti-Asian racism," and a proposition for an alternative, more specific concept that, according to participants, will better encapsulate their specific experiences of ongoing racism, discrimination, and hostility. Finally, I provide my concluding remarks, along with potential directions for future research, and the limitations of this study.

CHAPTER TWO: MAPPING THE PROBLEM: BELONGING & DIFFERENCE IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter develops the theoretical and conceptual tools used in this dissertation in order to show how "Asian" and "South Asian" are not natural or culturally coherent categories by situating them as historically and state-produced markers of difference among populations. In Canada, groups labelled as "Asian" have been racialized through varying shifting logics that moved from biological (mis)understandings of inferiority to contemporary forms of racism centred around culture. Changing immigration policy alongside bureaucratic classifications and the discourse of multiculturalism have and will continue to play central roles in constructing "Asian," and later, "South Asian," as categories through which populations, nationhood, and belonging are managed. This establishes the analytic foundations for examining the research problem this dissertation aims to address, how "South Asians" are positioned within the broader category of "Asian," and how this positioning results in racialized hierarchies that shapes their recognition, representation, and marginalization. This approach treats belonging, recognition, and representation as effects of racialized governance rather than neutral processes of inclusion.

CRT and critical anti-racism scholarship are used to conceptualize how multiculturalism is experienced as a form of racialized governance, through which inclusion is extended in ways that may reproduce essentialized understandings of race and culture. This includes a focus on intersectionality as an analytic framework to examine how social identities intersect to create unique experiences of privilege and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2015). These are further used to understand how "anti-Asian racism" shapes the experiences of "South Asians." Drawing from Brubaker's (2002) critique of "groupism," it further interrogates the emergence and deployment of "Asian" and "South Asian" as distinct, racial categories shaped by colonialism,

bureaucratic classification, policies, and diasporic meaning-making. Additionally, the significance of the politics of belonging, which centres the role of power in constructing boundaries to determine who is recognized as belonging to the nation and under what conditions, is important when examining how Canadianness is conceptualized and represented. Additionally, the politics of recognition and representation are discussed.

Building on these theoretical and conceptual frameworks, key bodies of literature on immigration policies, multiculturalism, racialization, and anti-racism are reviewed. I begin by tracing the historical evolution of "Asian" categorization from "Asiatic" exclusions with policies that specifically targeted migrants from China, Japan, and India, to post-WWII immigration reform that sought to move beyond race-based exclusions and towards contemporary multicultural policy, highlighting the limitations of liberal approaches to celebrating, managing, and tolerating cultural difference. I then move into examining how "anti-Asian racism" in particular has been conceptualized and subsequently operationalized in ways that centre around East Asian experiences, thereby rendering "South Asian" experiences of racism as less visible, especially during times of heightened racialization, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and more recently, with growing concerns around immigration.

In doing so, this chapter aims to identify the conceptual gaps and tensions that this dissertation seeks to address. It shows how "South Asians" occupy a seemingly ambiguous position within broader understandings of "Asian." This is where they are included yet marginalized within multicultural frameworks that demonstrate an ongoing persistence of racialized hierarchies that reinforce whiteness, especially in societies like Canada that claim to have moved beyond race – i.e., are 'post-racial.' It additionally highlights how anti-racism at times may reproduce unbalanced forms of recognition and representation. This mapping provides the

foundation for following chapters, which are centred around how these dynamics operate in practice and are experienced, followed with what this means for "South Asian" belonging in Canada.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The primary theoretical framework that this dissertation is anchored in is CRT. CRT centralizes the role of race and systemic racism in shaping social structures and sees value in the lived experiences of racialized communities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solorzano, 1997). This dissertation centres participants' narratives to reveal how historical and contemporary policies structure their experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and belonging. These narratives function as counter-stories that seek to challenge dominant constructions of multiculturalism and *Canadianness* to demonstrate how exclusion is shaped and institutionalized through policy, discourse, governance, and power. Drawing on the aspect of narratives, this dissertation engages with critical anti-racism analytically and empirically as an extension of CRT, and is particularly fitting to examine multicultural governance, state practices, and anti-racist interventions in Canada.

Additionally, there are several conceptual frameworks and analytic lenses I adopt that perform distinct yet complementary functions. Brubaker's (2002) critique of "groupism" is used conceptually to challenge how "Asian" and "South Asian" come to appear as if they were naturally occurring, static categories. The politics of belonging is deployed as a conceptual framework to analyze experiences of inclusion and exclusion, paying attention to how governance, power, and identity intersect (see Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Lastly, the concepts of recognition, how participants conceptualize and name their experiences of racism, and representation, to understand how they navigate the meaning of "Asian" and "South Asian," are introduced as analytic lenses.

These show how belonging is mediated, structured, and contested. These clarifications are important in helping to guide the literature in this chapter, and the lens through which the empirical analysis in later chapters are situated.

CRT & Intersectionality

CRT is the primary theoretical framework used in this dissertation.[19] A key element of this theory is that racism is seen as "endemic" and "permanent," and reproduced through 'neutral' institutions and practices rather than through overt acts of prejudice (Solorzano, 1997, p. 6). It seeks to expose white privilege within state institutions (Sanchez & Romero, 2010). Racism is understood not only as individual prejudice, but as a structural, historical, and ideological force that maintains hierarchical systems of dominance. Scholars have also emphasized the multiple dimensions of racism. Solorzano (1997) identifies four dimensions: 1) racism has *micro* and *macro* components, 2) it appears in institutional and individual forms, 3) it possesses conscious and

[19] AsianCrit, an extension of CRT that centres around the realities of Asian Americans, is not meant to replace CRT, but to provide a space for Asian American experiences to be analyzed within the broader CRT framework (Chang, 1993). It has been used primarily to advance scholarship in education to examine Asian American experiences (see An, 2017; Chu, 2025; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Kim, 2022; Yoo et al., 2021). While this provides an important theoretical intervention, much of this work remains grounded in the U.S. context and tends to focus on East Asians. In the Canadian context, "Asian" has its own historical specificities that have been shaped by immigration policy, ongoing forms of settler colonialism, and multicultural discourse. As will be shown in later chapters, almost all participants in this study did not identify themselves as "Asian." AsianCrit thus limits its applicability to "South Asians," while CRT provides a broader framework to examine how whiteness and settler colonialism structure the meaning of race in Canada. CRT allows for an analysis into how categories like "Asian" are constructed and resisted, rather than assuming that its meaning is universal, and offers the flexibility to capture the complexities of their racialization. There is also "DesiCrit," which Vinay Harpalani (2013) introduced to focus on "South Asian" Americans as "racially ambiguous beings," contributing to LatCrit, AsianCrit, and TribalCrit. Other scholars have contributed to further elaborate on the theory (see Haque, 2025; Joshi, 2006). Unlike AsianCrit, DesiCrit has attempted to analyze the racial ambiguity of South Asian Americans by focusing on their racial classifications as both white and non-white. However, like AsianCrit, it has remained largely U.S-centric and has not yet been used as widely in Canada (though it is starting to, but primarily still in dissertations). For the purposes of this dissertation, the very idea of "Desi" is seen as problematic by participants. As Kavya, a participant, explains: "I don't use Desi, I see it as being limiting and describes north Indians, and I'm from the South." Additionally, Nikita states, "Hmm... In India, we don't use Desi really, we use *desh* to refer to our country, our homeland, I didn't know that people use it here, I haven't really heard people who I talked to and were born here using it." Disha adds, "I see South Asian as a better option than Desi, Desi I don't think includes all Indians, so we shouldn't use it." Thus, CRT provides the broad framework in ensuring that participants do not feel left out. For further information: Harpalani, V. (2013). DesiCrit: Theorizing the racial ambiguity of South Asian Americans. *NYU Annual Survey of American Law, 69*(77), 77-184.

unconscious elements, and 4) it has a "cumulative impact" on both individuals and groups (p. 6; Davis, 1989; Lawrence, 1987, as cited in Solorzano, 1997). Davis (1989) distinguishes between macro-aggressions (formal, legal exclusion), and micro-aggressions (subtle, everyday expressions of racism)[20] to illustrate how racial inequality persists through the interaction of social norms, policy frameworks, and bureaucratic classifications. Sociologists Omi & Winant's (2015) racial formation theory[21] further shows race as evolving through "historically contingent racial projects" (cited in Christian et al., 2019, p. 1734). Similarly, Feagin (2010) describes racism as systemic and reproduced through a white racial frame, where interpreting and seeing the world centres around the interests, values, and experiences of the dominant, white majority. Rather than simply about individual prejudice, Feagin notes that this 'framing' encompasses a larger system of ideas and assumptions that shape institutional decisions and operations.[22] This contributes to the normalization of whiteness, and the marginalization of racialized perspectives and worldviews.

Additionally, intersectionality, which explains how multiple forms of oppression intersect to shape lived experiences, when applied as an analytic framework, transcends traditional categories and identities to examine the relationship between systems and those who interact with them (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). It rejects the notion that social categories are distinct and seeks to identify how systems of power are co-constructed (Crenshaw, 1989). For this dissertation, intersectionality provides a critical lens to uncover how race is co-constitutive with social

[20] Davis built on Chester Pierce's concept of micro-aggressions, who defined micro-aggressions as subtle, non-verbal, and "often automatic" exchanges "which are 'put downs' of blacks by offenders (Pierce et al., 1976, p. 66, cited in Sanchez & Romero, 2010).

[21] Omi & Winant define "racial formation" as a process in which social, economic, and political forces determine the importance of racial categories, which in turn shape racial meanings. This perspective highlights how race operates at both micro and macro levels. For further reading: Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1986). *Racial formation in the United States: From 1960s to 1980s.* Routledge.

[22] Feagin (2013) describes the "white racial frame" as an "overarching white worldview that encompasses a *broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations, and narratives, emotions, and reactions to language accents, as well as racialized inclinations to discriminate"* (p. 3). [italics in original]

categories such as culture, religion, gender, class, and migration status to shape participants' experiences of racialization in Canada.

Both frameworks are important for analyzing multiculturalism and immigration governance, as they highlight the role of the state in how racial meaning is produced. From a CRT perspective, policies that promote diversity or inclusion cannot be race neutral and must be analyzed in how they structure racialized hierarchies, manage difference and tolerance, and distribute recognition unevenly. From an intersectional perspective, it shows how this analysis can differ when considering the interconnectedness of social factors in shaping experiences for racialized persons. In anchoring the analysis for this dissertation in CRT, I approach "Asian" and "South Asian" not as geographic descriptors, but as racial categories produced through historical and institutional processes that have shifted over time. This is essential to understand "South Asian" positionality.

Critical Anti-Racism

This dissertation draws on critical anti-racism as an analytic and empirical tool. While CRT provides the theoretical and structural foundation, critical anti-racism is focused on how these structures operate in policy, institutional practices, and within public discourse. Anti-racism seeks to understand how institutional and cultural mechanisms produce and maintain racialized hierarchies, especially in 'post-racial' societies, aiming to challenge inequality and promote justice by moving beyond individual prejudice (Bonnett, 2000; Paradies, 2016). Critical anti-racism takes an action-oriented approach by pushing for institutional systemic change to address racism and other (intersecting) systems of social oppression (Dei, 1996). Issues of race and social difference are seen in relation to power and equity, not ethnic or cultural differences (Dei, 1996). In the

Canadian context, critical anti-racism helps to show the tensions within multiculturalism, where the existence of racial inequality and the push to recognize diversity are in conflict.

This framework shows how anti-racist initiatives themselves rely on simplified or essentialized categories, reproducing the very same hierarchies they are attempting to address. Critical anti-racism is useful when analyzing how state-led anti-racism frameworks, initiatives on diversity, and national moments of crises, such as COVID-19, are experienced by participants. It provides the foundation to connect the institutional aspects of CRT to this study's empirical analysis, examining how racial categories are deployed in practice, how anti-racism is framed and implemented, and how the experiences of certain racialized groups, which for this study are "South Asians," are rendered less visible within dominant anti-racism narratives.

Identity, Race, and Culture

In CRT and critical anti-racism, identity is seen as being historically and socially produced. Multiculturalism plays a key role in this process by framing difference in cultural terms and thus obscures the role that power plays in shaping inclusion and exclusion, despite claims of diversity. Throughout this dissertation, I maintain a distinction between race and culture. Culture is typically seen as being tied to a set of values, traditions, and practices, while race is seen as a hierarchical based system that classifies individuals into groups based on shared physical traits (Omi & Winant, 2014). Through multicultural governance, race is frequently reframed as cultural difference that can be 'managed,' which allows for this difference to be recognized without having to confront the ways that racism is embedded within institutions (Malik, 1996; 2008). This demonstrates the ways in which the state then produces and manages difference. In the case of "South Asian" identities, this distinction is important, as they are recognized through cultural markers such as language, tradition, or culture, yet their experiences of racialization are obscured when they are

placed in a general category such as "South Asian" or more broadly, "Asian." This contributes to the misrecognition of their experiences and differences in racialization in comparison to other "Asian" communities, such as East Asians. Through CRT and critical anti-racism, I critically interrogating the role of power in shaping our social realities and understanding that cultural difference emerges from specific historical, political, and social contexts is important (Dei, 1996).

Groupism

I use Brubaker's "groupism" as a conceptual tool to interrogate the categories "Asian" and "South Asian." Groupism involves the "tendency to take discrete, sharply differentiated, internally homogenous and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, child protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis" (Brubaker, 2002, p.168). It reflects the assumption that ethnicity is an unchanging entity rather than a variable that can change and be redefined over time. Brubaker argues that groupism involves the "process in which individuals are reduced to specific group characteristics which are politicized as boundaries" (p. 171). In ethnic groups, individuals are understood primarily through collective representations and social norms associated with their assigned group identities. Brubaker is critical of this approach as it risks minimizing individual needs in favour of protecting the collective interests of political groups or institutions. Through groupism, the ways that the existence of these groups is produced and institutionalized is given attention.

This framework is especially useful to analyze bureaucratic practices such as census classification, institutional forms of recognition, and policy categorization. It shows that while these practices reflect social reality, they actively shape these realities by producing seemingly neutral categories that play an active role in defining, governing, and managing racialized populations (see Anderson, 1983; Goldberg, 2002; Kertzer & Arel, 2002). This dissertation uses

groupism as a conceptual critique to examine how these racial categories function as mechanisms of governance, rather than being treated as natural, already existing categories for classifying individuals and groups. These fixed categories are through which society is then organized and managed, and through which state institutions organize resources, rights, and policies.

Groupism complements CRT by highlighting the ways that power is enforced through these categories and highlights the importance of intersectionality. According to Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969), race, ethnicity, and nationhood are categories that involve processes of self-identification and external categorization at both institutional and individual levels. Ethnic boundaries are socially constructed and reinforced through interactions. For Brubaker (2002), racial, ethnic, and national categories should be understood as forms of classification that intersect and co-exist.

The Politics of Belonging

In this dissertation, the politics of belonging serves as a conceptual framework to examine how boundaries of belonging are not fixed, but actively constructed within broader social and political structures, emphasizing processes of (re)negotiation that are (re)defined by those in power and shape inclusion and exclusion (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 2011). It additionally highlights how racialized groups resist against these exclusions to assert alternative forms of belonging. Belonging is understood not as fixed, but as an ongoing, conditional process shaped by public discourse, institutional recognition, and state practices, examining the role that power, governance, and identity play in shaping different forms of membership (Antonsich, 2010). This conditional belonging means that groups may be included symbolically but excluded structurally. The role of symbolic boundaries, or "conceptual distinctions" used by social actors to categorize people, practices, and spaces, shape perceptions of who belongs and to which group, and social boundaries,

which are "objectified forms of social differences," that manifest in unequal access to and distribution of resources, recognition, and opportunities, are central to this framework (Lamont & Molnar, 2002. p. 169).

Using this framework, this dissertation examines how "South Asians" are included within multicultural narratives around diversity, yet experience marginalization within racialized hierarchies. Crowley (1998) characterizes the politics of belonging as the "dirty work of boundary maintenance," where political communities draw lines to divide the population into 'us' and 'them' (p. 17). For Crowley, tensions between everyday notions of belonging and the formal boundaries of the nation reveal that national communities may not always align with the territorial boundaries of the state. Instead, belonging remains a constant negotiation, especially in debates around immigration, where this "dirty work" is performed *on* the boundary, usually by those who are in power, align with or are on said boundary, creating a "fantasy of neatness," an illusion of unity that marginalizes and excludes those who do not fit (p. 24). Thus, anti-immigration discourses are not only about expressing racism, but reflect a "specific model of *politics*" where belonging itself becomes a mechanism for maintaining the boundaries of the nation-state (p. 37). The boundaries drawn around national identity, as this dissertation will explore, are reproduced through public discourse surrounding race, culture, and immigration to produce "South Asians" as outsiders.

The Politics of Recognition and Representation

Lastly, I use the politics of recognition and representation as analytic lenses to examine how belonging is facilitated. Recognition refers to struggles in attempting to secure institutional, social, and cultural acknowledgement of the identities and experiences of marginalized individuals or groups that often function in selective and essentializing ways (Taylor, 1992). Representation is about the power relations involved in how groups are named, categorized, and made (Hall, 1997).

It centres around examining who is speaking on the behalf of others within various social, political, and institutional contexts, which critical theorists and postcolonial scholars such as Spivak (1987) & Hall (1997) have highlighted is not a neutral process. Instead, representation is about dominant groups controlling whose voices are heard and how these groups are constructed, which when uneven or exclusionary, can maintain structural inequalities (see Young, 2000). In later chapters, I use these concepts not as theories, but as tools for the empirical analysis of this study, to show how belonging is structured and experienced in practice, especially in relation to "South Asian" positioning within the "Asian" category.

Throughout the remaining chapter, these frameworks are applied when discussing historical and contemporary scholarship on immigration, multiculturalism, and anti-racism. I begin first with discussing the foundations of "Asiatic" classification and immigration restrictions, and the transition towards "South Asian" with the introduction of multiculturalism in 1971 and its limitations. I then move into literature on racialization and anti-racism, to situate the positioning of "South Asians" within the dominant "Asian" framework, followed by concluding remarks.

2.3 FROM "ASIATIC" TO "SOUTH ASIAN:" AN OVERVIEW

Foundations of "Asiatic" Immigration Policy

> To admit Orientals in large numbers would mean in the end the extinction of the white people, and we always have in mind the necessity of keeping this a white man's country.
> – Sir Richard McBride, Premier of British Columbia, May 1914
> (Grace & Helms, 1998, p. 85)

Documentation on Canada's earliest immigration policies towards "Asians" were structured through explicit race-based categories, beginning with Chinese men, who were the first to arrive in Canada (then British North America) in the 1780s (Holland, 2007). Although Chinese labour was key to the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) in the 1860s, they were framed as the "Great Menace," a threat to white labourers and national identity (Goutor, 2007). The

Chinese Immigration Act (1885) became the first piece of "anti-Asiatic immigration laws and arrangements" that used ethnic origin as a basis for restricting immigration to Canada (Anderson, 2007; Kelley & Trebilcock, 1998; Munro, 1971, p. 42).[23] Paupst (1977) notes that the Chinese Head Tax and later the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act institutionalized single life for Chinese men who were unable to afford to bring their spouses and children to Canada with the increasing cost ($50 in 1885 to $500 in 1904). Anti-Chinese hostility and a need to protect the "white man's country" led to these legislations (Munro, 1971, p. 42; Paupst, 1977).[24] This hostility included the creation of the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL), which aimed to restrict "all Asiatics" from the "Dominion of Canada," promoting anti-Asian riots and the 1907 Vancouver riots (Mackie, 2017, para. 3; see Mar, 2010).[25] This scholarship argues that Chinese exclusion operated as a nation-building project designed to protect the "Anglo-Saxon race" as "Asiatic" immigrants, unlike eastern and southern Europeans, would not be able to assimilate (Paupst, 1977, p. 55; Eagle, 1989; Ryder, 1991).[26]

Early Japanese immigration to Canada was met with a similar emphasis on race where the first wave of (first-generation) *Issie* immigrants (1877-1928) were deemed as "undesirables" and kept from voting and working in the mines, or on projects that received provincial funding (especially in British Columbia, BC) (Marsh 2012). Anti-Japanese racism further intensified during WWII, when they were labelled as "enemy aliens," stripped of their homes and businesses,

[23] Mar (2007-2008) states how colour became "a criterion for legal entry into Canada" (p. 19).
[24] The restriction and regulation of Chinese immigrants was due to an increase in anti-Chinese hostility in British Columbia, where most arrived and settled in. As Paupst (1977) notes, this hostility was "partly bound up with the notion of the province as a white man's outpost" (p. 54).
[25] The 1907 Vancouver riots were part of a series of uncoordinated, anti-Asian riots in Canadian and U.S. cities that opposed "Asiatic" immigration (Gilmour, 2012).
[26] Stanley (2016) The 1885 *Electoral Franchise Act* was a key moment in forming Canada as a racist state, where John MacDonald took the right to vote away from Chinese men on the grounds of their biological inferiority to 'Canadians,' and as "threatening the Aryan character" (p. 26).

and sent to internment camps under the War Measures Act (Coloma, 2013; see Hickman & Fukawa, 2012; Oikawa, 2012).

In the early 1900s, "South Asian" migration to Canada was met with earlier patterns of race-based restrictions. Studies show that despite being subjects of the British Empire, Sikh migrants, the first "South Asians" to arrive, were constructed as a racial threat and denied political rights (Muchignani, 2010; Rahim, 2014). Two key pieces of legislation aimed to restrict immigration from India: the first was the requirement that immigrants of "Asiatic origin" have a higher cash requirement upon arrival of $200, and the second was arrival via 'continuous journey,' which was nearly impossible with sea travel,[27] eventually ending Indian immigration (Mawani, 2018; Pirbhai, 2015). The Komagata Maru incident of 1914 is widely analyzed as a site for contestation that reveals how discriminatory policies operated to exclude "South Asians" and shape the (racialized) boundaries of Canadian citizenship (Dhamoon et al., 2019; Pirbhai, 2015; Roy & Sahoo, 2016).[28]

Across this literature, scholars have noted that "Asiatic" immigration restrictions were central to Canada's nation-building project. Colonialism structured the relationship between race, labour, and nation-building. Policies such as the Chinese Head Tax, the forcible internment of Japanese Canadians in World War II (WWII), and the infamous Komagata Maru incident, beyond being discriminatory, were part of a broader colonial logic that aimed to maintain a white settler demographic while simultaneously exploiting racialized labour and creating social hierarchies to shape who was included in the nation and under what conditions (Munro, 1971; Coloma, 2013).

[27] At the time of this regulation (1908-1947), there was no direct passage to Canada from India. All routes required at least one stop.

[28] The Komagata Maru was a Japanese steamship that arrived in Vancouver, Canada on May 23, 1914, carrying 376 Punjabi immigrants hoping to settle in Canada (Government of Canada, 2016). Immigration officials did not allow the ship to dock, and after two months, the ship was ordered to leave, with most passengers returning to India (Mawani, 2018; Roy & Sahoo, 2016). The continuous-passage regulation was removed in 1947, and was replaced with annual immigration quotas in 1951 (Buchignani, 2010).

Colonial systems of knowledge additionally shaped public discourse through the production of stereotypes that continue to shape immigrant recognition and multicultural policy. Shifting away from explicitly race-based criteria in the 1950s led to the points system and the 1988 Multiculturalism Act. This shift did not end racism, but rather configured it into newer, subtler forms. This context will be important for understanding contemporary narratives of Canadian multiculturalism and will guide the analysis in the chapters to follow.

Post-WWII Shifts in Immigration Policy

A post-WWII era[29] brought economic expansion along with growing fears of communism, reshaping Canadian immigration policy and marking a transition away from race-based exclusions. Scholars note that although most immigration was from Europe, anti-communism and increased demands for labour in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in a more receptive approach to the arrival of non-European immigrants, a sharp contrast to Canada's "stony rejection" in the 1930s (Kurian, 1991; Thompson & Weinfeld, 1995, p. 189). The introduction of the points system in the 1960s, a merit-based criteria that centred around education and skills, was seen as a critical turning point (Abu-Laban, 1998). This shift facilitated new migration streams, including a second wave of Japanese migration and the arrival of Southeast Asians fleeing from their homes during the Vietnam War (Ferzacca, 2011).[30] However, although the points system is seen to have reduced the discretionary powers of immigration officers through the establishment of a selection criteria, and with the increase in non-European immigration, Li (2001) notes that immigration discourse

[29] Green & Green (2004) explain how Mackenzie King's statement after WWII in 1947 shaped immigration regulations during the 1940s and 1950s where concerns about the discriminatory process of selecting immigrants were raised. However, King made it very clear that "Canada is perfectly within her rights in selecting persons whom we regard as desirable future citizens. It is not a "fundamental human right of any alien to enter Canada. It is a privilege" (cited in Green, 1976, p. 21). This statement had components which included a continued focus on selection, expanding and promoting population growth, immigration as a domestic concern, and lastly, that immigration must not change the national identity of Canada (see Hawkins, 1972).

[30] For further details on the Indochinese refugee movement and the resettlement of 60,000 Indochinese refugees in 1979-1980, and the private sponsorship program, see Casasola, 2016; Molloy & Simeon, 2015.

continues to rely on "coded language," such as public concerns about cultural preservation as a justification for restrictive policies that result in the privileging of certain individuals while others are rendered as conditionally acceptable or excluded entirely.

From a CRT perspective, immigration law historically functioned to preserve whiteness. Johnson (1998) shows how immigration legislation from its inception sought out its "ultimate goal" to punish and exclude non-whites from what legally constituted a 'citizen' (p. 186, as cited in Sanchez & Romero, 2010). This resonates strongly within the Canadian context, where citizenship and belonging have long been structured through whiteness (see Thobani, 2007). Immigration law "becomes another way to impose whiteness onto people of colour" (p. 781). This difference in treatment reveals how domestic minorities may be treated by the majority if "legal constraints were lifted" (p. 182). A focus on immigration status rather than race leads to a result where social frustrations and hatred are displaced more publicly onto immigrants, seen in anti-immigration campaigns targeting "Asiatics," and as will be explored further below, in debates surrounding multiculturalism (Sanchez & Romero, 2010). Additionally, CRT exposes how the shift from explicitly race-based criteria ("Asiatic") to 'neutral' policies continues to reproduce racialized outcomes, laying the foundation for contemporary "Asian" categories that appear to be descriptive and address diversity, such as "South Asian," but remain situated in earlier race-based thinking, even when race is not explicitly mentioned. This can be seen with the changes made by IRCC to restrictions on temporary and permanent resident numbers in their 2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan (Government of Canada, 2025e; Stojicevic, 2025).[31]

[31] This will be further unpacked in chapter five, "Racialized Governance and Multiculturalism."

Multiculturalism Policy

Announced by the Trudeau administration in 1971, Canada's official multiculturalism policy is seen as a response to the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (B&B) and growing cultural diversity with increased immigration (Government of Canada, 2022a; Jedwab, 2011).[32] Framed as being "within a bilingual framework," the policy positioned cultural difference as compatible with national unity, presenting Canada as having two official languages (English & French) but no official culture (Laing & Cooper, 2019, para. 19). Scholars have identified this policy as central to Canada's representation as tolerant and inclusive, promising cultural freedom, symbolic inclusion, and group recognition (Abu-Laban & Stasiulis, 1992; Haque, 2012; Simpson et al., 2011). However, others have argued that multiculturalism is limiting as it reinforces institutional structures that define Canada as a white settler nation (James, 2008). There are four limits that will be discussed: 1) racism and the power of the state, 2) liberalism, equality, and cultural difference, 3) tolerance and managing difference, and 4) whether Canada is the exception to ongoing concerns of multiculturalism in 'crisis.'

1) Limits of Multiculturalism: Racism and the Power of the State

Scholars argue that multiculturalism masks racialized hierarchies by treating culture as difference rather than as a site where power operates (James, 2008; see Henry et al., 2016).[33] Li (2000) argues that "codified concepts" such as diversity obscure racial tensions by "substituting" anxieties around non-white immigration as legitimate cultural concerns rather than as forms of racism (p. 91). This "softer version" of racism and discrimination "maintains racial distinctions" and

[32] The final report for this Commission led to the passing of the *Official Languages Act,* which legally required the federal government to provide services in English or French, officially making Canada a bilingual country in 1969, and later being "enshrined" in the *Charter* (Government of Canada, 2026c; see Laing & Cooper, 2019).

[33] Henry et al. (2000) coin the justification of racism in democratic societies as 'democratic racism' (as cited in Li, 2001).

Canada's image as tolerant and opposed to racism (p. 91). Similarly, Thobani (2007) conceptualizes multiculturalism as a "communalizing" state project to highlight how these policies classify groups into cultural categories that are symbolically included within the state's territorial boundaries but outside of its symbolic boundaries (p. 149). Hage's (2000) *White Nation*[34] demonstrates how multiculturalism reinforces whiteness by using tolerance as a mechanism for preserving the idea of Australia as heterogenous, but that white Australians remain in control over *how* tolerant to be and to who,[35] a dynamic also noted by Himani Bannerji (2000) in Canadian multiculturalism. Additionally, others highlight the role of class dynamics, where Skeggs (2004) notes that support for multiculturalism in Britain acts as a marker by the elite middle and upper class to distinguish themselves from the racist, working class (cited in Thobani, 2007). Táíwò's (2022) *Elite Capture* shows how 'elites,' by uplifting the voices of marginalized persons, provide short-term attention, which can lead to the masking of overall power dynamics and issues of systemic inequalities intact. CRT helps to show how inclusion via multiculturalism is structured in ways that show the role of state power, revealing that racism is not an anomaly, but is an institutional mechanism for governance.

2) Limits of Multiculturalism: Liberalism, Equality, and Cultural Difference

In addition to the power of the state, others have questioned whether equality can best be guaranteed through universalism or by recognizing group-based differences. Proponents of differential rights such as Kymlicka (1998),[36] Taylor (1993), and Young (1989), argue that formal

[34] Hage's study, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society,* explores the anxieties of white Australians towards the increasing racialized population in the 1990s.

[35] Sara Ahmed's work in Australia shows how multiculturalism allows the nation to present itself as homogenous and argues that although the 'cultural stranger' may be welcomed, the stranger is still associated as being a point of difference from the majority.

[36] Further, Kymlicka argues that in multicultural societies, cultural groups should be provided with rights and protection to maintain their cultural practices and identities. By accommodating for these cultural differences, 'minority' groups can participate in political and social matters without having to lose their cultural identities (see Kymclicka, 1995).

equality reproduces existing hierarchies. Instead, they propose that minority groups require protection and recognition to overcome systemic disadvantages and oppression they may face (see Fierlbeck, 1996). Critics like Goldberg (1993; 2002) argue that liberalism's[37] commitment to race-blind universalism itself is a form of power, as it allows the state to deny the role of race while maintaining whiteness.[38] Studies show that multiculturalism privileges symbolic expressions of culture that appear in the form of dance, festivals, and culture (Ameeriar, 2012; Moodley, 1983). This form of recognition can operate as misrecognition due to its failure to engage with lived experiences of racism and leave unaddressed, structural inequalities. Groupist assumptions rooted in policy discourse contribute to the reinforcement and production of these limiting categories.

3) Limits of Multiculturalism: Tolerance and Managing Difference

Tolerance has been celebrated as a form of progressive liberalism that includes the coexistence of multiple, diverse cultures within a shared civic framework (Taylor, 1992; Modood, 2005). However, tolerance reflects a form of conditional belonging that is shaped by the very subtle, but persistent, regulation of racialized bodies as perpetual outsiders where difference is contained and managed within the boundaries of what is characterized as 'acceptable' (Breton, 1988; Kallen, 1982; Kymlicka, 2018). From a critical anti-racism lens, such assumptions demonstrate that the state's commitment to tolerance functions more as a mode of conditional inclusion than it does in recognizing substantive equality for all, legitimizing dominant norms and marginalizing 'outsiders' (Taylor, 1992). Although official multicultural discourse symbolically embraces diversity, scholars argue that racialized hierarchies are masked through this inclusivity, as is the

[37] Liberalism involves the idea that individuals should have autonomy, and everyone should be treated equally no matter race, religion, gender, culture, etc. This is a main premise of the basis of multiculturalism in Canada.

[38] Thobani (2007) highlights how multicultural whiteness, by reorganizing itself as pluralist "and racially innocent, uncontaminated by its previous racist history" can "recast itself as uniquely committed to pluralism" (p. 154). Blatant forms of racism exhibited in the present by right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis are different from those who have embraced multiculturalism.

re-centring of dominant cultural norms (Bannerji, 2000; Ghosh, 1994; Mackey, 2002; Thobani, 2007). Through the politics of belonging, this means that recognition through difference is contingent on not having full membership to belonging, as the default national figure remains to be a white, English-speaking individual (Abu-Laban & Gabriel, 2002). This raises the question of what this means when difference shifts from tolerant to intolerant, and from manageable to unmanageable. These two areas remain underexplored and are key to understanding how participants in this study experience multiculturalism as a form of racialized governance, and what happens when difference becomes intolerant and unmanageable.

4) Limits of Multiculturalism: Canada as the Exception?

Canadian multiculturalism, in contrast to perceived European failures, is seen as the exception, internationally known as inclusive and tolerant. In 2010, former German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that multiculturalism in Germany had 'failed' because it produced "parallel societies" (Johansson, 2022, p. 75; Lentin & Titley, 2011). Similar statements were made by UK Prime Minister David Cameron & former President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, who linked multiculturalism to creating isolated societies with immigrants refusing to assimilate (May, 2022). These claims contributed to the emergence of more assimilationist and anti-immigration policies in addition to a rise in right-wing populism (Johansson, 2022; see Joppke, 2017). Described as being exempt from this backlash, this framing of multicultural 'success' in Canada is obscured by presenting it as an achievement rather than an ongoing, contested political project (see Thobani, 2007). Others stated that earlier forms of global anxieties around multiculturalism had indeed reached Canada, and that the backlash against multiculturalism in Europe should "serve as a wake-up call to Canadians" (Banting & Kymlicka, 2010, p. 44).

However, this outright rejection did not materialize in Canada (except in Quebec) because its official stance towards multiculturalism indicates that the national community is aware of the important contributions that immigrants make (Banting & Kymlicka, 2010; May, 2022). By expressing Canada as the exception, and multiculturalism failures as a European problem, the Canadian state avoids critically engaging with its own historical past and the ongoing exclusion of racialized persons. Indigenous peoples,[39] although symbolically recognized through legislation, treaties, and land acknowledgements, are structurally excluded from the national narrative (Thobani, 2007). Instead, they are mixed into multicultural discourse as being one of many cultures, erasing their sovereignty and obscuring the role of colonialism (Coulthard, 2014; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; see Simpson, 2014). On the other hand, racialized immigrants are welcomed for their cultural and economic contributions, yet remain as outsiders, and their claims to belonging are denied by the dominant majority despite generations of settlement.[40] This exceptionalist image can constrain claims and experiences of racism, which are rejected as being incompatible with Canada's welcoming image. There is an absence of current literature that examines Canada's current climate surrounding multiculturalism, and whether the continued backlash being witnessed in Europe has now entered Canada. I attempt to fill this gap by arguing that anti-immigration sentiments are gaining both visibility and popularity, indicating a shift that threatens Canada's image as exceptional. A rise in resentment towards immigrants that has been fueled by a perceived 'unmanaging' of diversity reveals that the narrative of tolerance does not necessarily translate to social acceptance. Discourse around fears of "immigrants taking over" has

[39] In Canada, Indigenous refers to the "original peoples of North America and their descendants" (Government of Canada, 2024b, para. 1). There are three "recognized" groups in the Canadian constitution: First Nations, Inuit, and Métis (para. 2).

[40] In the analytic chapters at times I do note generational differences, primarily consisting of first, 1.5, and 2nd-generation immigrants. First-generation immigrants are those born outside of Canada, 1.5-generation are those who arrived as children or teenagers, and 2nd generation are persons who were born in Canada with at least one parent born outside of Canada (Government of Canada, 2021; Muller, 2019).

found its way to Canada, making immigrants a demographic threat when they cross the boundaries between what is (in)tolerable. These changes point to an emerging crisis of multiculturalism in Canada, challenging assumptions of its multicultural success, resisting against this exceptionalist narrative.

2.4 RACIALIZATION AND (CRITICAL) ANTI-RACISM

Racialization

Race emphasizes biological notions of race, where difference is treated as being natural or fixed, based on phenotypes and external categorization (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Brubaker, 2009; Hall & Mercer, 2017; see Banton, 1977; Goldberg, 2002). Racialization is a dynamic process where certain biological characteristics are given social meaning, which leads to individuals being classified into broad categories that are treated as fixed (Miles, 1989). It helps to understand how institutional, social, and political processes are constructed to organize and maintain hierarchies, even when 'race' is not explicitly mentioned (Omi & Winant, 2015). Racialization is a process where "racial meanings are attached to particular social issues," bringing attention to how social groups are defined (or redefined) as "racial" in specific social, political, and historical contexts (Murji & Solomos, 2005, p. 3).

Lentin (2000; 2016) and Malik (1996) refer to "culturalist" or "new" racism to point to how individuals and groups may be categorized and treated differently based on perceived traits such as culture, religion, or language. In Miles' (1989) definition, his conception of racialization involves the role of culture to highlight how racial categories are socially constructed and reinforced through public discourse, state policies, and institutional practices that establish hierarchies of belonging through inclusion and exclusion. Goldberg (2002) argues that race is central to the emergence, development, and transformation of modern nation-states, which "mark"

and "order" social life by inventing races as technologies of control and governance (p. 177). Here, the racial state maintains interests of dominant groups while institutionalizing unequal power relations, and asks: is the racial state inherently a racist state? (Goldberg, 2002). Within CRT, racialization is understood as being structurally embedded, and shapes access to resources and recognition. For this dissertation, this framework is useful when analyzing the experiences of "South Asians."

The Origins and Impact of "Asian" and "South Asian" Meaning-Making

Bureaucratic, colonial, and diasporic processes play a crucial role in the production and maintenance of racial categories. In *Orientalism,* Said (1994) argues that identities are constructed through 'opposites' and 'others,' with research showing that seemingly neutral geographic-based categories such as "Asian" obscure major ethnic, linguistic, and cultural differences (Khoo, 2017; Lee & Zhou, 2004). These distinctions are important as ethnic boundaries are not naturally occurring, but historically and politically produced. Said's (1994) framework helps to emphasize how "Asian" and "South Asian" emerged from social, political, and institutional contexts for administratively convenient purposes, and not as neutral categories for demographic purposes. This shows how representation operates as a form of power, determining whose experiences are counted and to what extent, and whose are rendered as less visible.

Studies that examine institutional classifications demonstrate how census categories are not simply a means of bureaucratic process, but they actively construct social identities and realities where populations are divided in distinct racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic categories that render them 'legible' (Kertzer & Arel, 2002; Scott, 1998; Urla, 1993). Anderson (1991) describes the census as imposing a "totalizing classificatory grid" that facilitated colonial governance to impose boundaries (p. 184). Approaches to classifying identities, however, varied.

Appadurai (1993) describes how the Mughal Empire (who conquered the Indian subcontinent prior to the British) acknowledged group identities but did not "enumerate" them (p. 329). In contrast, Britain imposed racialized categories in the Indian subcontinent which later shaped diaspora classifications by producing categories that were not naturally existing, but were instead created to govern populations, extract labour from the colonized, and to exercise its colonial control (Appadurai, 1993). For example, earlier arrivals from the subcontinent, primarily India, appeared in the census and were miscategorized as "Hindoos," "Asiatic," "East Indians," or "Indo-Pakistani/East Asian" (Ashutosh, 2008; Indra, 1979; see Buchignani et al., 1985). These shifts reveal how state practices homogenized the diversity of the subcontinent and reproduced colonial methods of classifying populations from British India (Appadurai, 1996; Ashutosh, 2008).

Colonialism involved the creation and implementation of hierarchies that relied on whiteness as the standard, casting Indigenous peoples and racialized immigrants as the Other (Bannerji, 2000; Coulthard, 2014; Thobani, 2007). Contemporary census categories continue to reflect these colonial regimes (Ashutosh, 2008; Ghosh, 2013).[41] In 1986, the Employment Equity Act introduced "visible minority" as a policy category that aggregated diverse racialized groups without a shared meaning (Kertzer & Arel, 2002).[42] This has reproduced "facelessness" when individuals become tied to the state, with the enactment of "Eurocentric knowledge production process" when diverse ethnicities become lumped (Bannerji, 1993; Ghosh, 2013, p. 45). As Day (2008) cautions, bureaucratic classifications on the surface may appear as objective, but in

[41] As per the 2021 census, the categories for population groups are "South Asian," Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Korean, Japanese, White, and Indigenous (Government of Canada, 2023).

[42] This *Act* required employers to provide annual reports on employees represented as "designated groups," which included women, Aboriginal people, persons with disabilities, and "persons who are, because of their race, or colour, in a visible minority in Canada" (Kertzer & Arel, 2002, p. 15). During the release of the census in 2021, Statistics Canada used 'racialized persons' and 'racialized groups' when reporting on data (Government of Canada, 2022b).

practice, the categorization of *subjective* identities is about political *negotiation* [original in emphasis], and not an objective assessment.

In connecting "South Asian" as a bureaucratic classification to diasporic identities, studies have shown that while some may accept the category as both practical and situationally appropriate, many view it to be externally imposed (Ameeriar, 2012; Ashutosh, 2008; Ghosh, 2013). Diasporic identities fit between bureaucratic classifications (pedagogic) and everyday identities (performative), which produces a tension between imposed groupings and individual (or community)-based identities (Ashutosh, 2008). Debates over the use of "South Asian" as creating political solidarity through an alliance, in comparison to others who place importance on the preservation of specific ethnic identities, highlight differences within communities over its use (Kurien, 2007). While much research has examined the meaning of "South Asian," less attention has been paid to how this category relates to "Asian" and how it functions as an imposed, seemingly natural classification, especially in the Canadian context, and compared to the American context. This dissertation aims to fill this gap, by showing how the positioning of "South Asian" as a contested, bureaucratic category has implications for how "South Asians" are then racialized: it places them at the margins of dominant representations of Asianness, and is treated as distinct from, rather than as a sub-category of "Asian," which then consequently frames them outside of these dominant framings of "anti-Asian racism."

Anti-Racism and "South Asian" Positioning

Critical anti-racism seeks to understand how institutional and cultural mechanisms produce and maintain racialized hierarchies, especially in 'post-racial' societies, aiming to challenge inequality and promote justice by moving beyond individual prejudice (Bonnett, 2000; Paradies, 2016). It is any idea or action that attempts to challenge racism: it is not simply that anti-racism is the opposite

of racism, as what one may see as racist another may see as anti-racist (Bonnett, 2000).[43] Within anti-racism, a key tension is around whiteness, where anti-racists often treat it as a static, unchanging entity, leaving it unexamined (Bonnett, 1996). Anti-racists avoid using outdated language when describing racialized groups, yet assume that "white" and "whiteness" do not require a definition. "New" or "culturalist" racism that is centred around perceived cultural differences shows how racialized hierarchies remain even when explicit references to race are removed. Hence, anti-racism must engage with newer, more subtle forms of exclusion (Lentin, 2000; 2016). Focusing on overt and extreme instances of racism overlooks the importance of examining the systemic inequalities that are embedded in everyday discourse, institutions, and national identity (Gilroy, 1990). It additionally highlights that racialized individuals cannot be seem as victims or powerless, as this neglects their struggles resisting against the various forms of oppressions they experience, as well as the potential for social change (Dei, 1996).

There is a difference between the geographic meaning of "Asian" and its racialized usage in practice. Although "Asians" are associated with 'positive'[44] stereotypes such as being a 'model minority,' these narratives distort the reality of many-working class "Asians" by denying the existence of systemic barriers and discriminatory policies (Kawai, 2005; Lee-Ann & Chen, 2021). The role of the state is key to this racialization, as contemporary immigration policies maintain earlier patterns of exploitation where "Asian" labour is both necessary but simultaneously "unattractive" (Chen & Wu, 2021, p. 10; Lentin, 2004). This shows the conditional inclusivity of racialized groups, where they are valued for their labour but devalued as members of the

[43] Racism and anti-racism can often exist together, which Hage (2014) refers to as "racist anti-racism." This is where people stand up for their own group while being racist towards others (as cited in Paradies, 2016).
[44] Although presented as 'positive,' the model minority myth itself operates as a form of racism by placing an implicit, underlying pressure on "Asians" to succeed, so that they are viewed and treated as 'good' immigrants.

community, echoing earlier logics that casted "Asiatic" migrants as both necessary and threatening (see Chen & Wu, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, "anti-Asian racism" against the East Asian community in particular increased exponentially, with repeated references by right-wing media of the virus as the "China virus" or the "Kung flu," reflecting long-standing tropes of the "Yellow Peril" and the positioning of "Asians" as perpetual foreigners (Guo & Guo, 2021; Lee, 2023; Man, 2024). Anti-racist responses through public awareness, diversity initiatives, and police reporting worked to address individual incidents of racism but continued to obscure the structural and historical elements of racism (see Lentin, 2020). This discourse exposes the exclusivity of the "Asian" category. Some scholars have noted that "Asian" often did not include "South Asians," as was seen during the pandemic, whose experiences of racism went unrecognized in conversations around "anti-Asian racism" (see Kibria, 1998; Kurien & Purkayastha, 2024). This is consistent with Kyriakides' (2008) argument that recognition is important for incidents of racism to be classified as such. As this dissertation will show, "South Asians" do not fit dominant representations through which "Asian" has been constructed, which has implications for how racism is recognized, represented, and subsequently (un)addressed. Beyond the pandemic, recent public surveys show an increase of anti-immigration sentiments directly targeting "South Asian" immigrants of Indian origin, who are being blamed for structural issues Canada is facing, not limited to employment competition, housing shortages, and a strain on public services (Kukreja, 2024).[45] However, these incidents are not typically being classified as concerning nor as forms of

[45] For example, an Environics Institute survey (2024-2025) found that for the first time in 25 years, 58% of Canadians believed that there were too many immigrants. Police-reported hate crimes increased by 227% between 2019-2024, and social media posts containing anti-South Asian slurs experienced an over 1350% increase in 2024 alone (ISD, 2025). Additionally, results from an analysis conducted by Canadian Race Relations Foundation (2024) revealed that hate crimes against South Asians increased by 143% between 2019 and 2022 (Liddar & Pallapothu, 2024; Neuman, 2024, para. 4).

"anti-Asian racism." With the frequent connection between "anti-Asian racism," East Asians, and the pandemic, I attempt to fill a research gap by situating the experiences of racism for "South Asians" who, while a subcategory of "Asian," are treated as distinct from, rather than part of the broader "Asian" category, in a post-pandemic context. Furthermore, I explore the shift from celebrating diversity to one that now encourages racialized blame, and how misrecognition reflects a broader environment where "South Asians" are constructed as being culturally incompatible and outside of the Canadian national community.

2.5 CONCLUSION

Drawing on CRT, critical anti-racism, and groupism, this chapter has shown how immigration policy, multicultural governance, and the bureaucratic classifications of "Asian" and "South Asian" have produced these identities in uneven and hierarchical ways. The analytic lenses of belonging, recognition, and representation highlight how these processes contribute to the misrecognition and differential inclusion of "South Asian" populations, who remain ambiguous within the broader "Asian" framework. Highlighting the role of race, especially in the Canadian context, is key to this dissertation as it challenges the assumption that Canada is 'raceless.' As Goldberg (2002) notes, the idea of racelessness represents "state rationality regarding race" (p. 203). In Canada, this denial is embedded in multicultural and race-neutral policy discourse that overlook the lived realities of racialized groups.

By providing the historical and policy contexts that shape the positionality of "South Asians," this dissertation builds on existing scholarship and research gaps to show how the ongoing, persistent racism against "South Asians" is masked in relation to increasing anti-immigration sentiments. Although public discourse has acknowledged "anti-Asian racism" during the COVID-19 pandemic, this recognition has often been limited to East Asian communities.

"South Asians," in contrast, are racialized through immigration status or national origin and excluded from contemporary understandings of "anti-Asian racism," especially in a post-pandemic context. This selective recognition reproduces racialized hierarchies that validate some experiences while obscuring others. Additionally, the state's silence on this further normalizes this exclusion, allowing for racism to persist in both subtle and overt ways. By framing Canada as post-racial and multicultural, the state dismisses experiences of racism and prevents opportunities for interventions and policies that would address these issues (see Béland & Lecours, 2008; Turgeon et al., 2019). Importantly, it shows how racialization operates unevenly: in Canada, "Asian" is often equated with East Asians, rendering "South Asian" experiences as less visible or separate from "anti-Asian racism." As the analytic chapters that follow will show, this highlights how racialized meaning(s) operate hierarchically even within pan-ethnic categories, consequently affecting how experiences of racism are recognized and subsequently, represented.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This dissertation draws from two sets of methodological approaches: the first is from three specific classification based systems that interview participants draw from when sharing their perspectives: 1) the 2021 Canadian census, 2) an identity-based form used by York University, and 3) Asian Heritage Month,[46] and the second is the interviews (n=32) themselves. Although these classification systems are embedded in the interviews, I begin with a brief overview before discussing the interview experience.

3.2 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

In this study, I approach "Asian" and "South Asian" as categories that are not natural, but rather institutionalized classifications that are bureaucratically produced and reinforced through institutional recognition and administration. By bureaucratic, I am referring to systematic processes through which identities are made legible to institutions (Anderson, 1983; Banting & Thompson, 2021; Goldberg, 2002; Kertzer & Arel, 2002). Bureaucratic processes involve collated, standardized, and documented procedures to enable comparison, aggregation, and administration (Day, 2008; Stone, 2011; Thompson, 2020). In particular, the Canadian census shows how certain categories are nationally standardized by grouping diverse ethnic populations under broad categories to make them legible and administratively convenient for institutions, the government, and policy-making – i.e., *who* counts, and *how* they count (Day, 2008; Ghosh, 2013). This can be seen with the collective grouping of "South Asians," "Southeast Asian," and "West Asian" in

[46] Although Asian Heritage Month is not itself a classification system, and operates more as a celebration, Statistics Canada does use official classification systems to organize the data, which is then used to highlight the various contributions made by the overall "Asian" community (for more information: https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/asian-heritage-month/about.html). Thus, I classify the Month as a classification system as it relies on official categories. This is something that participants themselves speak to in chapter 4, "South Asians" in Canada. Additionally, participants were provided with the Government of Canada's description of Asian Heritage Month.

comparison to specific sub-categories for Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Japanese (Government of Canada, 2023). Census categories reveal how administrative processes produce and reinforce classifications to shape how individuals and groups experience and interpret their identities. It is the main classification tool that all participants (to an extent) were familiar with.

In contrast, the York University self-identification form and Asian Heritage Month emerged during interviews, which participants saw as significant to shaping their understanding of "Asian" and "South Asian." The example of the York University form functions similarly at the institutional level, structuring how students report their identities in alignment with equity- and diversity-based initiatives. Asian Heritage Month functions as an officially recognized, symbolic space where both categories (Asian Heritage Month – Canada, South Asian Heritage Month – Ontario) are enacted and made visible in cultural and institutional practices. Taken together, these examples show how bureaucratic categorizations circulate across institutional, administrative, and symbolic spaces, shaping participants' formal recognition, representation, and everyday engagement with their identities through these categories. By treating "Asian" and "South Asian" as institutionalized classifications that are reinforced through bureaucratic processes, this study aims to analyze identity not as a fixed entity, but one that is continually being socially and administratively produced. Additionally, I acknowledge my own positionality in using these terms. While I aim to problematize "Asian" and "South Asian," I recognize that my use of these categories contributes to their normalized usage. However, in the Canadian context, both categories carry important cultural and social significance beyond geographic concepts, and hence are central to understanding how participants navigate and make sense of these categories.

3.3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH: INTERVIEW DESIGN AND PARTICIPANTS

The Value of Interviewing

Interviews are a valuable method for data collection in qualitative research that focuses on gaining insight into individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they draw from them (Creswell, 1994; Mosselson, 2010; Seidman, 2006).[47] Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to explore topics and categories that are predetermined, while also remaining open to exploring new themes introduced by participants. This method includes a written list of key questions and areas for exploration that provide the researcher with a guide while allowing the flexibility needed to discuss more sensitive and complex topics that otherwise may not emerge in more structured formats (Mosselson, 2010).

Overview

I conducted a total of 32 semi-structured interviews with participants from the GTA[48] who met the following criteria: 1) must be 18+; 2) Must have immigrated from India **or** have family who immigrated from India;[49] 3) Currently live in the GTA;[50] and 4) Must either be born in Canada **or** have lived in Canada for at least one year.[51] My decision to focus on those whose families immigrated from India was primarily due to a specific focus on the acknowledgement and recognition that the Indian population is very diverse. Persons of Indian descent live across the

[47] See Van Manen (1990) for a discussion on phenomenological interviewing.
[48] The GTA is Canada's most populous metropolitan centre, and includes the country's most populous city, Toronto. This includes the regional municipalities of Durham, Halton, Peel, and York (Destination Ontario, 2025).
[49] Two participants were not born in India or Canada: one participant (Rohan) was born in Kenya, but both parents were born and raised in India, and the participant immigrated to Canada with his family at age two. For the participant born in the Philippines (Juhi), both parents were born and raised in India, and the participant moved back to India during adulthood before going to the USA and eventually immigrating to Canada.
[50] Two participants do not currently live in the GTA: one participant (Kavya) recently moved back home to Hamilton after living in the GTA for one year and had valuable experiences during her time in North York. Another participant (Khushi) is currently in St. Catherines for graduate school, but her home and where she grew up is in Brampton, which she frequently visits.
[51] A breakdown of participant demographics can be found in Appendix A.

globe: most can trace their roots to immigration from India. To ensure that my findings were relevant to this demographic, I chose to limit my scope rather than generalize findings across the global diaspora. Participant selection was limited to those currently living in the GTA, as it is Canada's largest metropolitan region and remains a central region for both newly arrived and long-term settled communities (Destination Ontario, 2024). The fourth inclusion criterion explores varying experiences of racism for participants born (or raised) in Canada alongside recent arrivals and long-term residents.

Interviews were conducted through Zoom and in-person over the course of six months from April-October 2024. Twenty-seven interviews were over Zoom, and five were in person, with each participant receiving a $30 honourarium[52] for their time. Twenty-five of 27 interviews over Zoom were conducted in English, with one conducted in both English and Punjabi, and one was conducted solely in Punjabi. For interviews in English, I used the live transcription tool on Zoom.[53] For the remaining interviews, I translated the Punjabi portions into English to the best of my ability.[54] Five interviews were conducted in-person in neighbourhood parks in Brampton. All transcripts and documents with participant information are password protected. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity, which will be used throughout this dissertation. One important aspect of ensuring a positive relationship between the researcher and participants involves a need to create a safe and supportive environment (see Rosenthal, 2003). This is especially crucial in contexts where participants are retelling and sharing experiences that may

[52] Participants were given the opportunity to choose between cash, e-transfer, or an electronic gift card to a store of their choosing. Most participants chose e-transfer, a few chose the electronic gift card option, and only the five interviews conducted in person were given the honourarium in cash.
[53] For Zoom-generated transcripts, I reviewed each one to correct any spelling errors and re-listened where needed to edit and adjust particular wording. No changes were made to the style of writing to preserve participants' voices.
[54] It is important to note that the translations may not be exact, as certain Punjabi words or phrases may not have a direct equivalent in English. For example, there is no direct translation for 'racism.' Instead, I had to provide a definition to the best of my ability for participants.

have had a negative effect. I acknowledge that I do not have the skills required to assist participants who may experience discomfort and wish to speak to someone. Considering this, I provided a list of local service organizations in the GTA on the consent form that participants could contact.

Revisions and Recruitment

After receiving approval from the Research Ethics Board, I revised my interview guide and began testing it by conducting three mock interviews with my personal contacts, which resulted in an adjustment to the "Asian" section category. I added a scenario-based question where participants were asked to pretend that they were partaking in a survey and identify the category that best described them. This approach encouraged a space for open conversations between the researcher and participant, enriched the data, and addressed a gap in the original interview guide, which did not explore the factors that influenced participants' reasoning for preferring certain identities over others. I began the recruitment process in March 2024, posting a call for participants at the York University (Keele) campus.[55] Unfortunately, this did not result in any responses, so I expanded my recruitment efforts through personal networks, ultimately securing four participants.

I also contacted 29 community organizations via email, which comprised of a mix of "South Asian," religious, and culturally specific groups. I received responses from 22 organizations who shared the study with their professional and personal networks, and I sent a follow up email in April and May 2024 to the organizations who did not respond. From these efforts, I received emails from 14 interested persons who met the eligibility criteria and relied on snowball sampling to assist with the recruitment of additional participants. Snowball sampling involves the recruitment of initial participants who refer others known to fit the criteria, resulting in an increase in the sample size through continued referrals (Noy, 2008; Parker et al., 2019). I

[55] I received approval from the Temporary Use of University Space (TUUS) office.

received seven emails, with one of seven not meeting the eligibility criteria as they lived in Thunder Bay and had never lived in the GTA, and secured an additional interview through snowball sampling, bringing the total 25.

Around July 2024, I did not receive communication from any other interested candidates. After discussions with my colleagues, they suggested the possibility of engaging with older adults in the Brampton area. Looking at the representativeness of my existing sample, I realized that I had a limited number of participants who had immigrated to Canada during adulthood. This realization led to a consideration of in-person recruitment as a valuable avenue to pursue. During earlier stages of recruitment, I had no specific targeted age group in mind. However, looking back, I noticed that many participants often referenced the experiences of their parents or extended family members, especially when discussing racism and belonging in Canada. This led to a reflection on the possibility of targeting older adults through purposive sampling to explore their experiences.

Warmer weather provided more opportunities to meet and engage with seniors in local parks. With this information, I visited Brampton over a weekend in mid-July, hoping to conduct more interviews. By the end of the visit, I had a total of five new interviews (n=30). During my visit, I approached residents to share with them details about my project. While some kindly declined, I provided my personal business card along with the project details in case they later became interested. Following my visit, in August, I received two emails from recent immigrants: after confirming their eligibility, I scheduled the interviews over Zoom (n=32).[56] Once I reviewed all transcripts, I noticed that I was approaching saturation, as no new perspectives or themes were identified. Additional interviews were beginning to produce repetitive responses which indicated

[56] Due to scheduling conflicts and prior commitments, interviews were scheduled in October.

that the sample size (n=32) was sufficient in capturing the diverse experiences of participants.[57] I then made the decision to conclude the data collection phase after consultations with my supervisor.[58]

3.4 REFLEXIVITY & POSITIONALITY: INSIDER, OUTSIDER, OR BETWEEN BOTH?

> Without some degree of reflexivity any research is blind and without purpose.
> (Flood, 1999, p. 35)

In this section, I discuss some of the challenges I faced in the recruitment process, with a particular focus on in-person recruitment and reflexivity, asking "how one's self and one's methods are implicated in the knowledge one produces" are important (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016, p. 43). Reflexivity is seen as an ongoing "process of critical self-awareness" (Day, 2012; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Smith, 1999, p. 166). It involves the researcher reflecting on their own position and influence on the research process, which involves the participants, the questions being asked, what data is gathered, and how that data is interpreted, and challenges the notion that the knowledge produced is independent from the researcher and objective (Berger, 2015; Finlay, 2002; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). It is an awareness that the researcher and the study affect one another as "ways of seeing which act back on and reflect existing ways of seeing" (Clegg & Hardy, 1994, p. 4, as cited in Haynes, 2012).[59] McCorkel & Myers (2003) state that in social science research, it is essential to analyze the context(s) in which discoveries are made and to identify the researcher's

[57] For example, the final two interviews conducted highlighted similar experiences to previous interviews. The main new element added was the recent changes made by IRCC, which was coincidental as the interviews had been scheduled prior to these changes being announced.
[58] At this time, I did not receive any further communication from individuals expressing an interest in participating.
[59] Alvesson & Sköldberg (2000) further state that reflexive research involves two key elements: interpretation and reflection. Interpretation is about recognizing the influence that the researcher's values, political position, language, etc. have on the research that they conduct (i.e., 'pre-understandings). The second element, reflection, is when the researcher brings attention onto themselves and their 'research community.' Reflection is seen as a 'form' of interpretation, which makes the research reflexive. Hence, reflexivity involves a multiplicity of levels and layers, thinking about knowledge production (epistemology), processes of knowledge production (methodology), and the impact of that knowledge (ontology) (as cited in McCorkel & Myers, 2003).

positionality to understand the role of power and privilege in shaping social science research. However, Smith (1990) argues that the acknowledgement of one's positionality does not eliminate power differences or the researcher's self-interests (as cited in McCorkel & Myers, 2003). Instead, Smith emphasizes that "standpoint epistemology" requires that researchers examine their own beliefs, stereotypes, and assumptions to understand their identity and the identities and "differences of others" (as cited in McCorkel & Myers, 2003). This emphasis on situated knowledge and reflexive engagement is central to Black feminist epistemology. Collins (2000) argues that knowledge is situated within relations of power, where Black women's lived experiences constitute an important standpoint from which dominant assumptions about social reality and knowledge can be critically examined. Similarly, Lorde (1984) cautions against treating women's experiences as homogenous. Lorde emphasizes that differences in class, age, sexuality, race, alongside other dimensions of one's social location shapes how individuals experience and negotiation the role of power. Together, these perspectives highlight the importance of reflexivity during the research process, by highlighting that researchers must consider their own positionality and assumptions, along with the multiple and intersecting social locations through which participants themselves understand and experience their own worlds.

Questions around reflexivity involve considerations of the insider-outsider debate (Bischoping & Gazso, 2016). Insider research is when researchers engage with populations they are members of, to build a sense of legitimacy, trust, and acceptance (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Kanuha, 2000). Outsider researcher is when researchers do not share any characteristics with the population that they are studying and hence may experience challenges in gaining access (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). While there are benefits to incorporating subjective elements in insider research, Asselin (2003) cautions that 'insider' status can potentially result in role confusion such as

analyzing data from a non-researcher perspective (as cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Fay (1996) suggests that group membership alone does not guarantee understanding, as knowledge requires both interpretation and explanation (as cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Sherif (2001) argues that insider and outsider roles are fluid, not fixed, describing researchers as 'partial insiders' who move between blurred, shifting boundaries.

Dwyer & Buckle (2009) argue that the insider-outsider divide is overly 'simplistic' and 'restrictive,' as identities are shaped through relationships with others. Fay (1996) emphasizes that self-understanding relies on understanding others, which means that positions are fluid and can shift over time, and individuals can occupy both the insider and outside roles simultaneously (as cited in Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; see Merriam et al., 2010). As someone who identifies as Indian and is researching the Indian population, I would be seen as an insider to an extent, sharing similar characteristics with the group I am studying. However, having been born and raised in Canada, I might also be considered an outsider. I found this to be more prevalent during my interviews with those who immigrated to Canada during adulthood. When these participants asked about my background, or details on which regions my parents were from, when identifying myself as Indian, it was often met with remarks that I am Canadian. This dual identity as both an insider and outsider reflects the complexities involved in positionality. However, at the same time, my identity as an Indian was of assistance when I tried to recruit more participants through snowball sampling. Some participants highlighted that their parents would be interested if I was able to speak to them in a mix of English, Hindi, and/or Punjabi, which resulted in two additional participants over Zoom. Additionally, other participants, especially 1.5- and 2nd generation, expressed a feeling of comfort when speaking with me about their experiences because we were of a similar ethnic background,

or because we were born and/or raised in Canada, and therefore could relate on shared experiences without having to provide more background information.

Mosselson (2010) argues that it is essential to critically reflect on the ways researchers' background shape interpretations of participants' experiences. In her interviews with Bosnian refugees in New York City, Mosselson highlights how interpreting participants' stories requires ongoing reflexivity and examining the role of power. She shows how researchers exercise power at every stage, such as when setting eligibility criteria, choosing the research focus, and creating interview questions. Although the intention is to centre the voices of participants, these decisions can unintentionally position them as the Other. Mosselson additionally reflects on how setting limits to the amount of personal information to share is another form of power, where researchers control what and how much to share while participants are expected to be open. Similarly, in my own research, I did not initially consider how power and privilege shaped my interview guide and eligibility criteria. By excluding individuals based on location or length of residency, I, too, actively shaped whose voices were included and which narratives were constructed. Additionally, when discussing their experiences of racism, I maintained the privilege of choosing what aspects of my identity to disclose, thus reinforcing the researcher-participant power dynamics that influence both the research process and subsequent analysis.

While recruiting participants in Brampton, I became aware of how power and insider-outsider status shape the research process. I chose to approach seniors in Punjabi and Hindi rather than in English, as I believed this would create comfort and strengthen my position as an insider based on my own experiences with older adults. With the help of a local friend, I visited neighbourhood parks to introduce my project. However, responses varied, where some ignored me or declined to engage further, while others spoke to me but chose not to participate, often involving

family members in their decision. Despite my assurances of confidentiality, most chose to decline. This experience of in-person recruitment challenged my assumptions that emphasizing my Indian identity would easily position me as an insider, therefore revealing the complexities and limits that shared identity brings.

Identity is a socially constructed phenomenon, a fluid concept, and "who the individual is matters less than what the individual is perceived, in relation to others, to be" (Mosselson, 2010, p. 486). In some cases, identities are imposed onto us, "the box on the census form of the self does need to be checked … and it would be better if you could always do it yourself, but too often other people's pencils get there first" (Gorra, 1995, p. 437, as cited in Mosselson, 2010). One of the biggest challenges I faced during the in-person recruitment process was the perception of being perceived as an outsider. Despite efforts to connect with the elder community by speaking in Hindi and Punjabi, greeting them with "namaste" or "sat sri akal" instead of a simple "excuse me" or "hello," addressing them as "uncle" or "aunty" to show politeness on a cultural level,[60] and folding my hands as a customary greeting, it was not enough to be seen as an insider. Throughout my life, I have always introduced myself by pronouncing my name in a non-traditional manner so that it is easier for others to pronounce. This is largely because I have been told that my name is difficult, and so I tend to only introduce myself with the correct pronunciation around other "South Asians" (Indians and beyond). This is one example in which my identity shifts based on interactions with others.

In migration research, Carling et al. (2014) observe that a person's name can be a significant indicator of their background and connection to particular groups. I kept this in mind during my research, especially because elders in my own life have expressed concerns about

[60] It is culturally impolite to refer to someone older than you by their name or anything other than uncle and aunty unless they are related to you (which is when you would refer to them by a different name based on that relationship).

children with ethnic names in Canada losing the cultural importance of proper pronunciation. However, despite my very best efforts, many individuals I spoke with said it was "very obvious" that I was Canadian. My accent when speaking Hindi and Punjabi, my mannerisms, and my attire positioned me as an outsider. When I eventually secured participants, they asked whether I had interviewed others in surrounding neighbourhoods. After I mentioned that I had not, one participant suggested that some individuals may have been afraid and perceived me as someone in a position of authority. While initially surprising, reflecting on this made me realize that mentioning that my research focus was on immigrant experiences may have caused fear that participation could affect immigration status, despite this not being part of the study or conversation. Thus, although I identified as Indian and felt a connection to the community, I was still perceived as a Canadian outsider. Foley et al. (2021) suggest that such challenges can be addressed through online interviews, especially when accessing participants who are at a distance (see Archibald et al., 2019). Online interviews can provide a sense of intimacy and result in participants feeling more comfortable in disclosing information, especially in cases where sensitive and personal topics are discussed (Tomás & Bidet, 2024; see Jenner & Myers, 2019).[61] These challenges highlight how identity perception has an impact on researcher-participant relationships and recruitment. Reflexivity is essential, as biases and perceptions shape both trust and openness. Despite my best efforts to emphasize my Indian identity, being perceived as an outsider remained a barrier in recruitment.

3.5 THE VALUE OF INTERVIEWING

CRT and discourse analysis propose that stories are not only individual creations but are shaped by cultural and ideological influences (Bell, 2003; see Delgado, 1995; van Djik, 1993). Bell (2003)

[61] This can include fears around repercussions on immigration status or the application process, which were evident in my efforts with in-person recruitment in Brampton.

explains that because stories are produced and communicated within social contexts, the narratives we share are those that are "culturally available for our telling" to reflect and reinforce existing social structures (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, as cited by Bell, 2003). Stories around race and racism highlight cultural assumptions and patterns of thinking that serve as connections between individual experiences and broader social systems (Bourdieu, 1999, as cited by Bell, 2003). One aspect of storytelling is how stories represent particular social positions.

Stories, Social Positions, & Power

In racially diverse societies, the stories shared about race and racism are shaped by cultural and historical frameworks that often operate unconsciously (see Shipler, 1998; van Dijk, 1984). Bell (2003) notes that white Americans, for example, tend to frame U.S. history as progressively improving, and emphasize fairness. Additionally, they recognize attempts to acknowledge and correct past injustices as a step in the right direction (see Cose, 1997). In contrast, racialized persons often understand their experiences through the lens of historical and ongoing frameworks, often viewing history as "continually repeating through oscillating cycles of progress and retreat on racial issues" (Bell, 2003, p. 4). These differing perspectives shape how stories about race and racism are then interpreted and narrated.

This is illustrated in Khushi's account of a racist incident during her part-time job at Lululemon, where her reaction was significantly different from that of her white co-worker:

> I was cashing this East Asian lady out. Like we were talking like making small talk and she asked what I did. And I was like, doing my PhD in like [redacted]. And she was impressed. And then, to pay she used like a gift card and she asked how much money was left. And she's like, oh, like what you should be really good at math because you're doing your PhD and you're Indian. And I was like, oh, my math's weak. I just can't do mental math that quick. And then she made like this weird comment where she was like, she has a son and she's like, "I don't understand like my son's always like, he wants to be with an Indian girl. Like I don't understand what he sees in them. Like, why can't you just be with like a Chinese girl?" She told me how her son goes to school in America or dentistry and like I guess he has or had an Indian girlfriend at the time.

> Because she was like oh like she's not even like that pretty like there's so many like Indians at Stanford like how do they get in kind of thing? And I was like, well, you know, we're pretty educated and at point I was kinda like. Uncomfortable because I didn't expect it from her. I was also working, so I don't know what the appropriate thing is to say or not say is.
>
> ...then I tell my manager and my coworker and my one white coworker was like, "you should've told her to f*** off," but I'm like, you're a white man. You'd probably get away with it. Like I'm a brown girl, I'll get fired. It's not the same. I have a lot to lose.

This incident highlights how power dynamics and the consequences of responding to racism shape behaviours. For racialized persons, speaking up can be accompanied by risks, such as being labelled as 'aggressive' or 'disrespectful,' and can potentially result in disciplinary action. This reinforces the model minority myth, where racialized individuals are expected to remain obedient and adhere to social conformity. In contrast, white individuals are socialized to express themselves without having to consider potential consequences, as their actions are seen as individual rather than a representation of their group. Historically and even today, racialized persons frequently remain silent about racism due to the threat of punishment, reinforcing the notion that advocating for oneself can be framed as "talking back." This encounter demonstrates how broad cultural and ideological forces determine which voices are heard or silenced.

Qualitative interviews provide researchers the space to examine how social identities and positions shape how participants interpret their experiences (Bell, 2003). Even when participants may not explicitly connect personal events to structural forces, their storytelling reveals these connections and enables researchers to situate these individual experiences within broader systems of power (see Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Storytelling, then, becomes a method for inquiry and potentially, resistance, by offering visibility to experiences that are otherwise excluded from dominant narratives. Additionally, reflexivity is also important. In this experience, I can understand Khushi's decision to weigh the potential risks if she were to respond, and not view it as an act of passivity. As a racialized woman, I recognize the silent negotiations at play, including

the power imbalance, potential consequences for speaking up, and the use of silence as a deliberate form of protection and control.

3.6 ANALYTIC STRATEGIES: THEMATIC CODING IN GROUNDED THEORY

From Data to Theory: The Grounded Approach

To make sense of the data collected from the interviews, I engaged in thematic coding through a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is a methodological strategy that was developed by Glaser & Strauss (1999) to discover theory from data. In sociology, Glaser & Strauss state that theories are to:

> (1) enable prediction and explanation of behaviour; (2) be useful in theoretical advancement in sociology; (3) be usable in practical applications—prediction and explanation should be able to give the practitioner understanding and some control of situations; (4) to provide a perspective on behavior—a stance to be taken toward data; and (5) to guide and provide a style for research on particular areas of behavior (p. 3).

Theories function as strategic tools for organizing empirical data to describe and explain social phenomena. Glaser & Strauss note that for a theory to be effective, it must present clearly defined categories and hypotheses that can be tested in both current and future research. A theory must be accessible and easy to understand by other sociologists from varying perspectives and be compatible (i.e., 'fit') within the context it is being applied to. By 'fit,' Glaser & Strauss are referring to how the theory's categories align (accurately) with the data and to effectively explain the behaviour(s) being studied (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Malagon et al., 2009).

Grounded theory methodology does not provide specific guidelines regarding "research priorities, theoretical presumptions, or normative standpoints" (Malagon et al., 2009, p. 263). Instead, it is seen to be an evolving process that reflects social interactions within broader structures of power and domination (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, as cited in Malagon et al., 2009). Central to grounded theory is acknowledging that researchers' prior knowledge, experiences, and

perspectives are both influential and analytically valuable in interpreting data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Charmaz (2012) argues that the strength of grounded theory lies in its 'distinctiveness' from other qualitative approaches. Unlike many qualitative approaches that focus on identifying themes to explore 'what' and 'how' questions, grounded theory offers analytic tools to explore 'why' questions from an "interpretative stance" (p. 4).[62] Through ongoing, reflexive engagement with the data, researchers can move beyond description to develop theory-driven understandings of social processes (Charmaz, 2012).

There are two key features that distinguish grounded theory coding in practice. First, going beyond summarizing data or coding for topics, grounded theory breaks data into properties that capture actions, meanings, and processes to allow researchers to identify relationships between and within the data (Charmaz, 2012; Thomas, 2003; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Second, coding is guided by analytic questions, such as what the data is studying, what it suggests or assumes, and whose perspective is being represented, thereby promoting analysis from descriptions to identify significant insights earlier in the research process (Charmaz, 2006; 2012; Glaser, 1978). Key to these practices is grounded theory's inductive approach, where categories and themes emerge from the data rather than being imposed from the start (Charmaz, 2008). Unlike deductive reasoning, which applies predetermining rules to cases, inductive analysis identifies patterns across a collection of cases to build a broader understanding of theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This inductive process helps to ensure that participants' voices and experiences remain central, and that findings are grounded in lived experiences, rather than preconceived notions or assumptions.

[62] Charmaz goes on to cite Gubrium & Holstein (1997), who suggest that qualitative researchers incorporating a naturalistic perspective can explore 'why' questions "by considering the contingent relations between the *whats* and *hows* of social life" (p. 200).

Constructing Meaning: The Development of Codes and Analytic Focus

In working towards developing the coding framework, I returned to my research questions as the foundation for identifying broader patterns and themes I noticed during the data collection stage. These included asking myself questions that would help guide me in determining the important areas of focus for my analysis. The analytic questions that emerged as an ongoing process would form the basis of my codes, some of which are listed below:

1. Which experiences, if any, shape how participants interpret "Asian" as a changing membership category?
2. How might interpretations of "anti-Asian racism" contribute to and challenge existing definitions of "anti-Asian racism?"
3. Which experiences, if any, shape how they interpret the meaning of "anti-Asian racism" as representative of their personal (and collective) experiences?
4. How do participants describe their interpretation of Canadian identity? What key elements and themes emerge from their understanding of Canadianness? In what ways, if any, might the experiences of "anti-Asian racism" impact a sense of national identity and belonging?
5. In what ways do personal experiences with racism shape and re-define the conceptual boundaries of "anti-Asian racism?" What might these boundaries reveal about the limitations of current definitions and understandings?

Keeping these questions in mind, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously (Maher et al., 2018). During this time, a preliminary coding template was created based on emerging topics and themes when looking back at the interview notes. Initially, more broad codes were created such as 1) representations of Asianness, 2) representations of "anti-Asian racism," and 3) representations of Canadianness. As the data collection process continued, additional parent codes including 4) advocacy and 5) state intervention were added, in addition to child codes such as media portrayals, interactive experiences, and in/direct experiences of state intervention for a total of 13 codes. These assisted in guiding the analytic focus for this dissertation.[63] Next, I turn to the empirical chapters, where I analyze these interviews.

[63] Please see Appendix C for the full list of codes.

Given the size and richness of the data set, different subsets of interviews were drawn from for each analytic chapter. This allowed for the analysis to be tailored to the specific focus of each chapter. In chapter four, ""South Asians" in Canada," I draw from 23 of 32 participants for an in-depth analysis to examine the meaning(s) of "Asian" and "South Asian" in Canada. This approach allowed for closer engagement with participants' narratives based on how familiar they were with each category. Although all interviews were examined prior to selection, the decision to focus on these interviews allowed for a more detailed exploration across different age groups, ways of self-identifying, and generations to understand how identity is articulated. In chapter five, "Racialized Governance and Multiculturalism: Critiques from a Critical Anti-Racism Lens," 19 of 32 interviews were selected to capture the diverse experiences of multiculturalism across participants. This allowed for a comparative analysis of how participants understood, experienced, negotiated with, and contested Canadian multiculturalism in both the public and private domain, and in relation to the boundaries of belonging. In chapter six, "Hierarchies of (In)Visibility During the COVID-19 Pandemic," I draw from 16 of 32 participants who described experiences and encounters with racism during the pandemic. This led to a focused analysis of how the pandemic shaped their perceptions and interpretations of "anti-Asian" racism and its relationship to racialized hierarchies within the "Asian" identity. Interviews that briefly touched on questions related to the pandemic during our interviews were less central to the chapter's focus. Lastly, in chapter seven, "The Limits of Recognition: Re-Thinking 'Anti-Asian Racism,'" I draw from 23 of 32 interviews where participants extensively engaged with their experiences or incidents they witnessed. This includes participants who reflected on the increased racism towards "South Asians," and considerations around naming and its broader implications. Across all four chapters, all interviews were reviewed and contributed to the coding and analysis. Chapter-specific subsets

of interviews were drawn from based on their relevance to each chapter, to ensure that a diverse sample of experiences was captured, while maintaining consistency.

3.7 CONSIDERATIONS AND LIMITATIONS IN SAMPLE REPRESENTATION

There are several important considerations and limitations that shape this dissertation. India is a diverse, multiethnic country, home to 22 official languages, hundreds of regional dialects, and thousands of ethnic and tribal groups (Wolpert et al., 2026). Several different religions are practiced, including Hinduism, Sikhism Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Jainism, and tribal religions (Wolpert et al., 2026). India has a history of colonialism most prominently under British rule (who called it the "Jewel in the Crown), and is shaped by Britain's political, economic, and social structures (Zahoor, 2022). For this study, I am focusing on individuals from India, and have excluded West Indians, used to describe those from the Caribbean, including the Indo-Caribbean community, and from Southern and East Africa, along with other countries in the subcontinent. While these individuals share ancestral ties to India, their historical experiences and identities have been shaped by legacies of migration through colonization and indentured labour, and thus conflating these groups would obscure their distinct experiences and histories (Ramdin, 2000). Similarly, although other "South Asians" may be perceived as Indian and therefore targeted, this study is centred around those with direct ties to present-day India to maintain a targeted, analytic focus and to avoid conflating experiences.

Additionally, I do not examine the role of caste for the purpose of this study, which is a social hierarchy that plays an important role in India. In Canada, there is no legally defined caste system, but among the diaspora, caste is important and in recent years has been recognized as potential grounds for discrimination (Murphy & Yengde, 2024). For example, both the Toronto District School Board and the Ontario Human Rights Commission have recognized casteism as a

form of discrimination (Murphy & Yengde, 2024).[64] Participants' accounts indicate that their experiences of racism are not tied to their caste, but their national origin. From a demographic perspective, most participants in this study are from northern India, particularly the state of Punjab, and reside in Brampton. This aligns with the 2021 census, which reports that approximately 180,295 Brampton residents identified their ethnic or cultural origins as Indian (27.7% of the total population), with Punjabi (57,075 responses, 8.8%) and Sikh (40,085, 6.8%) representations (Government of Canada, 2025c). Among participants, most of their religious affiliation is either Hindu or Sikh, and again, reflects demographic trends in Canada, with about 36% Sikhs and 32% Hindu (Government of Canada, 2025c). Hence, this sample is consistent with trends seen within the diaspora in Canada, but it does not capture the full diversity of Indian identities. Additionally, this dissertation is centred around experiences that are tied to Indianness, rather than experiences of religious discrimination, such as anti-Hinduism, anti-Sikhism, and Islamophobia.[65] This is because participants indicated that their experiences were tied to their visible Indian identity, rather than their religion. Although visible religious markers, such as the Sikh turban, may attract attention, participants reported that this targeting is a result of its link to Indianness. It is important to clarify these boundaries, and to caution that experiences may differ for others or in alternative contexts. I now move into the discussion chapters of this dissertation.

[64] Of further interest: Mégret, F., & Dutta, M. (2023). Transnational discrimination: The case of casteism and the Indian diaspora. *Transnational Legal Theory,* 13(4), 391-430.

[65] In November 2024, the Hindu Sabha mandir [Hindu temple] in Brampton was the site of violent clashes between the Hindu and Sikh community, which ended in arrests. It included car damage, brick-throwing, and hitting with sticks and flagpoles, with individuals displaying either the Indian or Khalistan flag (Bowden, 2024). The protests followed a visit by Indian government officials who were conducting consular sessions at local mandirs and gurdwaras [Sikh temple]. Tensions were heightened after Canadian authorities linked the assassination of Khalistan advocate, Hardeep Singh Nijjar, to the Indian government, which escalated diplomatic tensions, and led to the expulsion of diplomats from both sides (Saaliq, 2024). This incident in November 2024 occurred over a month after interviews concluded.

CHAPTER FOUR: "SOUTH ASIANS" IN CANADA

> Identities are different names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall, 1990, p. 225, as cited in Ghosh, 1994).

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Much of the existing scholarship examines how "South Asian" communities construct their identities through interpersonal connections, in everyday practices, or through cultural negotiations, rather than examining their negotiations with state-sanctioned, official classification systems that are imposed and treated as inherent and unchanging[66] (Ashutosh, 2008; Elcioglu, 2025; Ghosh, 2013; Sahoo & Sangha, 2010; Sodhi, 2008). Building on this literature, this chapter interrogates how the Canadian state's institutionalization of racial categories, particularly the reconfiguration of the "Asiatic" label into the contemporary bureaucratic category of "South Asian," retains a central place in the experiences of self-positioning. While the Canadian state no longer explicitly generates overt forms of biological or phenotypical markers of racialization, cultural descriptions of identity are frequently mobilized in ways that continue to treat difference as inherent and unchanging. State practices are experienced as legitimizing and reproducing fixed assumptions about group identity that are now framed in cultural terms. This shift does not result in the rupture of racialized essentialism but rather rearticulates it through the language of cultural difference (Bannerji, 2000; Lentin, 2014). Here, race is not erased but reproduced through state-sanctioned forms of visibility and recognition within a multiculturalism framework.

This chapter draws from interviews with 20 of 32 participants to explore how they negotiate a social space for themselves within various experiences of racialized positioning, which

[66] For the purposes of this dissertation, I am referring to how participants experience and negotiate their racialization. One of the ways is through their interface with the state as experienced through their negotiation with official ethnic classification categories and systems.

historically situates them from "Asiatic" to "South Asian." There are two pillars of focus that reflect the problems with the institutionalization and representation of "Asian:" the first is focused on institutionalized policy mechanisms for classifying populations around self-identification in the context of Canadian multiculturalism, and the second involves media representations. In my research, negotiations with official racial classification systems includes: 1) the census, 2) self-identification forms used by universities, and 3) Asian Heritage Month. These sites operate at different institutional scales for different purposes: the census produces standardized categories for state governance, self-identification forms use these categories of self-reporting for institutional needs (admission policy, measuring diversity), and Asian Heritage Month functions as a symbolic space through which the "Asian" identity, and contributions made by those of "Asian origins," are made public. Together, these various sites produce frameworks that shape how individuals are asked to identify themselves. This analysis does not assume a shared meaning of "Asian," but rather examines how the category is produced, constrained, and interpreted in different ways across these various sites. In examining the second pillar, media representations, racialized understandings of "Asian" are shaped by popular discourse and represented as East Asian.

This chapter begins with a discussion on the transition from "Asiatic" to "South Asian" in state attempts to move away from biological understandings of race, showing how contemporary multicultural and anti-racist discourse maintains racial thinking through culture, by treating cultural difference as fixed and inherent, and tied to specific groups. In doing so, race is re-inscribed rather than dismantled. Interview participants interrogate the categories of "Asian" and "South Asian" by discussing how power operates to organize and manage them through self-identification in official categorizations. Then, participants are asked a scenario-based self-

identification question to examine how official classifications are navigated, and discussions around the various categories. This includes their understanding of "Indian" in a settler colonial context, to examine both the active rejection and embracing of the term. This is important as there is a specific colonial history tied to "Indian" in the Canadian context, which prevents participants from primarily using the term and choosing "South Asian" instead. Following this, the next section examines the role of media in meaning-making and the privileging of certain groups in dominant discourse. It shows how understandings of what constitutes "Asian" vs. "South Asian" is not limited to administrative categories but actively shapes everyday realities. Comedian Ronny Chieng's claims that "Indians are not Asians" is interrogated, which then leads to a discussion on the role of recognition, representation, and boundaries, where participants highlight that what we *see* is important in shaping dominant understandings of both groups.

I argue that "South Asian" produces a dual process of (in)visibility.[67] On one hand, "South Asians" are made visible through multicultural policy frameworks that appear to celebrate difference. On the other, this visibility is incongruent with the internal diversity which constitutes people categorized as "South Asian." Though officially grouped within the broader "Asian" category, in practice, "South Asians" are treated, and expected to perform, as separate and distinct from "Asians." Their visibility becomes conditional and externally defined, based on institutional logics that aim to manage diversity. From this emerges recognition and representation that is paradoxical: "South Asians" are seen as culturally distinct but remain racialized under the guise of inclusion.

[67] By (in)visibility, I mean that "South Asian" produces both visibility and less visibility.

4.2 FROM "ASIATIC" TO "SOUTH ASIAN"

Historically, "Asiatic" functioned as a racialized marker of foreignness used in immigration policy to refer to and restrict arrivals from Asia beginning in the 1880s, including immigrants from China, Japan, and India (Matas, 1985).[68] The transition to a points-based system in 1967 and the subsequent adoption of multiculturalism, which led to a move away from "Asiatic" and towards alternative categories like "South Asian" suggests a shifting away from biologically grounded understandings of race. However, the bureaucratic formalization of "South Asian" continues to perform the essentializing work of racialization through cultural distinction: although contemporary frameworks such as immigration policy or the census no longer explicitly categorize "Asiatic" as a racial group, they reinforce racialization by institutionalizing labels that overlook intra-Asian diversity, embedding race into cultural markers such as language, national origin, and religion. Intentions to identify and name diverse populations in an effort to govern, manage, and monitor them follows existing racializing logics. This is especially visible when we consider the purpose and implementation of policies that are enacted in efforts to combat racism or to promote diversity.

Official anti-racism initiatives often categorize racial and ethnic groups as if they are internally cohesive and externally bounded, relying on cultural or geographic markers for race. This 'official' categorization is evident in the Federal Anti-Racism Strategy (2024-2028), that uses "Asian Canadian," "South Asian," "Asian descent," and "Asian origin" when discussing "Asian" racialized communities experiencing racism (Government of Canada, 2024a).[69] These terms are used interchangeably throughout the Strategy, without any clear definitions or justification for who

[68] This transition is discussed in detail in chapter two, "Mapping the Problem," where I trace the genealogy of "Asiatic" and the transition to "South Asian" with reference to specific policies.

is being included. At times, the Strategy attempts to provide specificity in reference to those of Chinese origin, but "South Asians" ultimately remain categorized as one. This selectiveness, as interview participants will note, raises questions about which forms of racism are rendered legible and recognized within official frameworks and which are obscured or diminished. The Strategy's approach to religion further highlights this uneven recognition, where Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism are (rightfully) explicitly identified, but racism targeting other major religious communities such as Hindus and Sikhs who are racialized as "South Asian" is absent (Government of Canada, 2024a). These omissions demonstrate how religion functions as a site of specificity when it aligns with recognized categories of racism, rather than a broader space where processes of racialization operate.

This recognition can additionally be seen in the Strategy's definition of "anti-Asian racism." While it acknowledges that experiences vary across those of "Asian descent," it remains tied to the pandemic (Government of Canada, 2024a). There is no mention or comparable recognition of the increased racism against those of Indian descent in recent years.[70] This indicates that while there is an attempt to recognize diversity within "Asian" communities, it reproduces a narrow and static understanding of "anti-Asian racism." This is similarly present at the provincial level, where Ontario's Data Standards for the Identification and Monitoring of Systemic Racism (also known as Ontario's Anti-Racism Data Standards) categorizes "South Asian" as a racial group (Government of Ontario, 2018). Even in cases where data collection is described as disaggregated, the process involves breaking down racialized categories "into their component parts" while

[70] Part of the implementation of the Strategy includes the Disaggregated Data Action Plan, which aims to improve disaggregation of data collection to better address systemic racism and gender gaps (Government of Canada, 2025b). However, this Plan does not resolve the issue of racial categorization discussed above. As shown with the 2024-2025 accomplishments report (within this Plan), individuals of Indian descent continue to be broadly categorized as "South Asian," with no attempts to be consistently identified as a distinct group within data collection frameworks that pay attention to the group's diversity (Government of Canada, 2025b). As such, efforts towards disaggregation remain rooted in the continued treatment of "South Asian" as a homogenous category.

leaving intact the singular category of "South Asian" (p. 69). These framings treat "South Asian" as a singular racial category rather than a grouping of diverse communities that are shaped by religion, language, history of migration, culture, and other common identifiers. Such initiatives can reproduce racialized logics even when they attempt to address inequality, in defining which groups need support. For the population I am studying, this means navigating spaces where multicultural-based inclusion can create forms of erasure or marginalization, especially in instances where individuals may not necessarily conform to dominant narratives of model minority success (Kawai, 2005; Osajima, 2000). This dissertation additionally shows that the continued institutionalization of "South Asian" shapes how experiences are recognized and represented.

Ahmed (2012) & Sharma (2006) highlight that diversity and inclusion policies often centre forms of visibility that are officially acceptable and tend to exclude 'disruptive' expressions of identity and belonging. Malik (2008) shows how contemporary multicultural and anti-racist discourses have moved away from biological understandings of race but have not abandoned racial thinking. Instead, racial difference is expressed through the culture of language, where race is repackaged as culture, and understood as fixed to bounded group identities. Malik refers to this as the culturalization of race, where inequality becomes not about power, but about identity and recognition, where populations continue to be governed in aggregated groups. This is evident in the reflections shared by Rohan, who self-identifies as both Gujarati and "South Asian," where he expresses that state-imposed categories are constructed from above but internalized and "accepted by us:"

> The way I see it, we are such a large population, and South Asia is not just India, right, it's diverse, so many cultures involved…the government finds it easier to group us all together… they've decided this, and we accept it, we don't realize that we call ourselves this because the government has essentially told us to do so. Then it's like, normal to use.

Rohan continues by discussing how an emphasis on "culture" rather than "race" is a defining feature of Canadian national identity,[71] used to position us as "different" from the U.S., where race is more overtly acknowledged. However, he challenges the assumption that culture can be substituted with race in discussions of identity and belonging. For Rohan, the notion of assigning "the same traits" to an entire, diverse region is "problematic when you think about what that means and then looks in action." His critique highlights how pan-ethnic identities like "South Asian," and to a larger extent, "Asian," homogenize varying experiences under state-imposed labels that are designed for bureaucratic purposes. When asked if "South Asian" is a better alternative, Rohan explains that while he is "accustomed" to using "South Asian having grown up in Canada" and largely due to it being how others (including the state) perceive him, he does not view "South Asian" as separate from "Asian." However, he recognizes that the deployment of "Asian" in practice very much excludes "those like me." On a larger scale, his use of "South Asian" reflects a broader dynamic whereby state-defined categories are accepted and normalized by those who they were created to govern. "South Asian" serves a dual purpose: 1) it regulates identity through racialized cultural coding, and 2) in this process, becomes a means of recognition for those navigating (in)visibility and belonging in multicultural Canada. Adding further, second-generation Canadian Varinder finds that both "Asian" and "South Asian" are problematic:

> Well, to be honest, that's the problem I have with these categories. Asian is broad, but so is South Asian. Like in both cases it's describing so many people that it's essentially describing nothing. How can billions of people be the same?

Varinder negotiates a social space for himself by choosing Canadian because he was born and raised here, despite being bureaucratically categorized as "South Asian." For him, his ethnic Punjabi background does not hold the same meaning as does Canadian.

[71] National identity will be further unpacked in the next chapter.

For others, "South Asian" was an unfamiliar category first encountered when filling out forms, which led them to not regard it as a meaningful cultural identity. Daler, who arrived in Canada in 2015 in his late 60s, explains that his first encounter with "South Asian" happened when his son was filling out a form for him and saw that he had chosen "South Asian:" "I asked why he [his son] did not pick Indian, and he told me in Canada, I am South Asian on the forms. I still do not understand why." Similarly, 64-year-old Kulbir, who arrived in 2018, explains that "big [broad] labels" are uncommon in India:

> "All my life, we just refer to the language we speak or talk about our culture to show where we are from. In India I say Punjabi, it's no problem, but here I am South Asian, then Punjabi. Asian means something else here. It's different but I don't really like to use it."

Adding to this further, 71-year-old Dilraj explains that his first experience with "South Asian" was met with confusion, but that he chose the category because "it says India beside it." When asked whether he would use this category daily, Dilraj, who has lived in Canada since 2006, stated that he would only choose the category when filling out forms, that "I always use Indian or Punjabi, and that is what I tell people first. I am old now… not going to change myself."[72] All three of these participants self-identify as Punjabi or Indian.

Their responses show how identity is not simply transferred from the 'home' to 'host' country but actively negotiated, revealing intergenerational differences (see Brah, 1996). For participants who are first-generation, "Asian" is defined in strictly geographical terms, i.e., India is part of Asia, and therefore they are "Asian." In contrast, their racialized positioning as "South Asian" is a state-sanctioned identity that overlooks their diverse cultural identities. Their preferred and familiar ways of self-identifying are grounded in the region they are from, the language they speak, or on a national level. They self-position within the categories and are not reducible to the

[72] Interview excerpts from Daler, Kulbir, and Dilraj were translated from Punjabi to English.

state-sanctioned practices of belonging they must negotiate, especially because their proximity and exposure to these categories is not common. Meanwhile, for 1.5- or second-generation participants, their adoption of "South Asian" is shaped by Canadian multicultural discourse, where state-defined racialized positioning become internalized differently because of their interactions with and proximity to Canadian institutions.

Maya, who arrived in Canada with her parents in 2000 at the age of 4, reflects on this proximity by sharing her parents' early encounters with "South Asian:"

> They shouldn't be forced to adopt South Asian when they've previously always used Asian or Indian or something else that better represents them. There's an unfamiliarity to government categories... For us it's easier because it's all we've ever known, but to assume that applies to everyone is where the problem lies.

She reflects on the differences in how "South Asian" may be unfamiliar and externally imposed, while "Asian" holds no meaning aside from geography. In contrast, those routinely interacting with institutions that employ this designation are more likely to self-position themselves as "South Asian." As Disha explains, "over time South Asian becomes natural because it's what everyone else expects of you, it's what you tick on those forms, right, and people understand that label." Like Maya, Disha is a 1.5-generation Canadian and arrived in Canada when she was nine months old. Both identify as "South Asian."[73] In contrast, those with limited interactions often questioned or reinterpreted these imposed identities. 68-year-old old Jashan, who arrived in 2018 and self-identities as Indian, sees "South Asian" as a "government term," explaining that, "it only is important to fill out government forms... so I will keep saying Indian even if to someone else it is not right."[74] These discomforts reveal a central component of racialized governance, where race in multicultural societies is expressed through culture.

[73] Maya also identifies as "Indian," but this will be further unpacked later in the chapter.
[74] Interview translated to English from Punjabi.

As Hall (1990) notes, cultural codes are used in the place of race to mark difference. Similarly, Goldberg (2002) shows how the state manages racial difference through cultural essentialism. "South Asians" are recognized by the state, but their visibility is determined by official categories of racial classification, where individuals with ancestry from the Indian subcontinent are aggregated into a single, seemingly coherent category, that reproduces racialized logics through multiculturalism. A consequence is that "South Asians" are separated from the broader category of "Asian" and rendered as different, and second, "South Asian" itself erases internal diversity which results in another process of racialization. As Harman, who self-identifies as Punjabi, explains:

> I have lived in Canada for 20 years now, since I was 28, and I know all of us fall under South Asian, so we are forced to use it… the government sees us like this, but we are removed from Asian, even though simple geography can tell you that this is wrong... and even India is so diverse and different, so it is a problem to say we are all one by the government...

This reinforces boundaries within the "Asian" category, while demonstrating that bureaucratic recognition is conditional and structured by power. As a result, identity then becomes less about how one may self-position, and more about navigating the limited visibility and belonging that the state offers.

4.3 STRUCTURES OF RECOGNITION: THE POLITICS OF CATEGORIZATION

> Due recognition is not just a courtesy we owe people. It is a vital human need. (Taylor, 1992, p. 26)

To understand how boundaries of recognition are produced and maintained, the role that technologies of governance, through which individuals are classified and managed, becomes important. Technologies of governance refer to the everyday mechanisms through which power operates to organize and manage populations (Deacon, 1998).[75] This includes the deployment of

[75] I am focusing on texts that discussed Foucault's governmentality and technology.

administrative tools such as the census and forms used in universities, as well as institutional policies such as Asian and South Asian Heritage Month. These tools are not simply used for collecting information, but actively shape how populations are recognized, classified, and subsequently governed. By defining and institutionalizing certain categories, these practices establish which forms of identity and belonging are legitimate. Power works through these classifications by embedding these distinctions into structures of governance and everyday understandings (see Dean, 1999). At the same time, these systems are engaged with in complex ways, where participants may adopt or reinterpret them, and at times even challenge these imposed categories, revealing how identity can be constrained by and negotiated within these classifications.

The Canadian census is a tool through which the state actively regulates and produces identity. By limiting individuals to choose from predetermined categories, the census asserts authority over which groups are 'officially' recognized and made legible. The classification of "South Asian" as being reduced to state-administered ordering minimizes diverse histories, cultures, languages, and experiences into manageable forms (see Day, 2008). The census reflects and reinforces state-sanctioned notions of identity. Using the visible minority categories under the Employment Equity Act, "Asian" categories include "South Asian," Chinese, Filipino, Southeast Asian, West Asian,[76] Korean, and Japanese (Government of Canada, 2023).[77] I provided participants with these categories as listed on the 2021 census and asked them about their thoughts, along with whether they would want to add or change anything. All but one were familiar with

[76] Arab, which includes people with Middle Eastern origins, such as Syrians, Lebanese, Egyptians, are grouped as separate in visible minority statistics and the census. However, geographically, it is part of West Asia and may at times be grouped under the broader "Asian" category.

[77] The visible minority categories are: South Asian, Black, Chinese, Filipino, Latin American, Arab, West Asian, Southeast Asian, Korean, and Japanese (Government of Canada, 2023). I opted to include the categories that would classify as "Asian" in the interviews – i.e., in alignment with the continent of Asia.

these categories. However, I still went over the different categories and provided the names of the countries that would fall under each.[78] In sharing their thoughts on the various meanings of "Asian," 27 participants expressed a collective agreement on the inconsistencies that "Asian" presents. As Navneet explains:

> I think the fact that we have these separate categories for East Asians and then we are lumping those from the subcontinent into one category makes no sense. I get that there's an entire history with the East Asians arriving first but, should we not be changing with the times? Look at the number of immigrants from India alone arriving, maybe it's time to update the categories?

Adding to this, Sagar notes that "Asia" typically indicates that "South Asians" are "Asian," given that all are from the same continent. However, in practice, he understands that there is confusion, "…an effort to keep us all as separate. This is where the government is saying one thing on the forms, but in practice it's different. We're different."

Both Navneet and Sagar, who are second-generation Canadians and identify as Punjabi-Canadian and Punjabi respectively, note contradictions situated within institutional classifications, where distinct categories for East Asians are implemented, and "South Asians" are grouped into a single, homogenous category. The specificity involved in separating the East Asian category is rooted in a long history of these groups being targeted by specific immigration laws and policies which required the Canadian state to regulate and exclude these groups (Munro, 1971).[79] In contrast, "South Asians" arrived in fewer numbers, and were classified in earlier records under labels like "Hindoo," "Asiatic," or "East Indian" (Ashutosh, 2008; Indra, 1979). However, it can be argued that there was a similar, deliberate attempt to restrict and exclude migration from India, with the Continuous Journey Regulation (1908) and the $200 cash requirement upon arrival (Mawani, 2018). Despite these, there were no attempts to create distinct labels in efforts to regulate

[78] This was only necessary for "South Asian," Southeast Asian, and West Asian.
[79] The Chinese Head Tax and the internment of the Japanese during WWII to name a few.

immigration from India. With changes to census categories over time, "South Asian" was introduced for administrative manageability and governance, not to ensure that attention was given to the diversity present within this category. As the history of the Canadian census shows, the government did not simply measure pre-existing populations, but instead created 'populations' through administrative tools like the census to define social order, citizenship, and representation (Curtis, 2001).[80] While it may appear that statistics are simply about describing society (through numbers), they actively engage in creating and shaping social realities through the repeated administrative use of these categories. Kobayashi's "statistext" (1992) shows how state-produced categories by statistical systems (such as the census) that may appear as neutral actively shape how people are governed, named, and understood, arguing that their purpose is not simply descriptive, but productive. Statistexts are powerful because of the language that emerges from it; census categories are embedded in law and policy, and are reproduced by NGOs, the media, and researchers, and used for recognition and resources by groups (Kobayashi, 1992). Hence, over time, once these categories become statistically significant and presented as objective, they become harder to contest and are treated as 'real,' rather than constructed (Kobayashi, 1992).

Navneet noted how current classifications may not accurately reflect the demographic shifts within Canadian society, especially with an ongoing increase of immigrants from India. Samar, who identifies as Gujarati and is a second-generation Canadian, notes how the census functions as "a deliberate method that the government uses to keep track of us," highlighting how these bureaucratic classifications work to manage populations (see Anderson, 1983). In the

[80] Although Curtis (2001) examines the census until 1875, and large-scale migration from Asia, especially Chinese migration to BC increased after the 1870s, Curtis does help to explain how their increased presence would become numerically significant, resulting in their governance and racialization. Although Asians, like the Indigenous peoples (who Curtis does discuss), were not treated as citizens and seen to fall outside of the imagined national population of Canada, they were counted in the census 'population' as a mechanism of governance and regulation.

Canadian context, where culture functions as a homologue of race, the treatment of "South Asians" via the census points to broader logics of erasure and control. They may be made visible through this subcategory, but only through categories that are externally imposed on them.

Sonia, a 1.5-generation Canadian who identifies as "South Asian" extends this critique by discussing the classification of Russia:

> When I see these listed categories, I wonder where Russia falls… it spreads into the continent of Asia, but Russians are not considered Asians, so there's this kind of selectiveness to it and how to understand it… It becomes about how we look. So, it's not even simple geography, there are other factors involved.

As Sonia explains, the census does not officially categorize Russia as "Asian." Instead, persons of Russian origin are classified under the broader category of European, despite the country spanning into the Asian continent (Government of Canada, 2026b). Sonia sees this as a demonstration of how Russia's classification goes beyond "simple geography," and extends into "how we look," a phenotypical demarcation where individuals who look similar are believed to belong to the same group(s). This disjuncture reflects a broader logic within the Canadian state, where racialized positioning determines how visibility is situated. It additionally demonstrates that although the purpose of the census is for the governance of populations and not for individual meaning-making, as interview participants have expressed, their interpretations of these categories reveal how these intersect with their everyday experiences. This extends into other institutional domains, as shown in the next section.

Bureaucratic Alignment: The Limits of 'Official' Labels

I now move onto two participants' interactions with a different mode of racial classification, identity-based questions when filling out an application form at York University to explore how they experience and negotiate their racialized positioning. This highlights how demographic surveys and identity-based questions that ask about 'origins' operate as technologies of governance

that reproduce racialized boundaries through culture. What may appear as a choice results in restrictions on self-positioning. Additionally, it demonstrates how externally imposed labels over time become mundane and expected. These experiences show how state sanctioned multiculturalist discourses of visibility as seen, for example, in self-identification forms used by publicly funded institutions such as universities, are a problem for participants in this study. Maya below recounts her experience in filling out a York University form for a scholarship application:

> …most of the time if I do use Asian it comes from things like surveys or forms where you kind of see the Asian category as a whole and then you're asked to like select one of like the 5 or 6 different categories. But like I first have to select Asian first, then I can get more specific but it ends up being me having to choose South Asian.

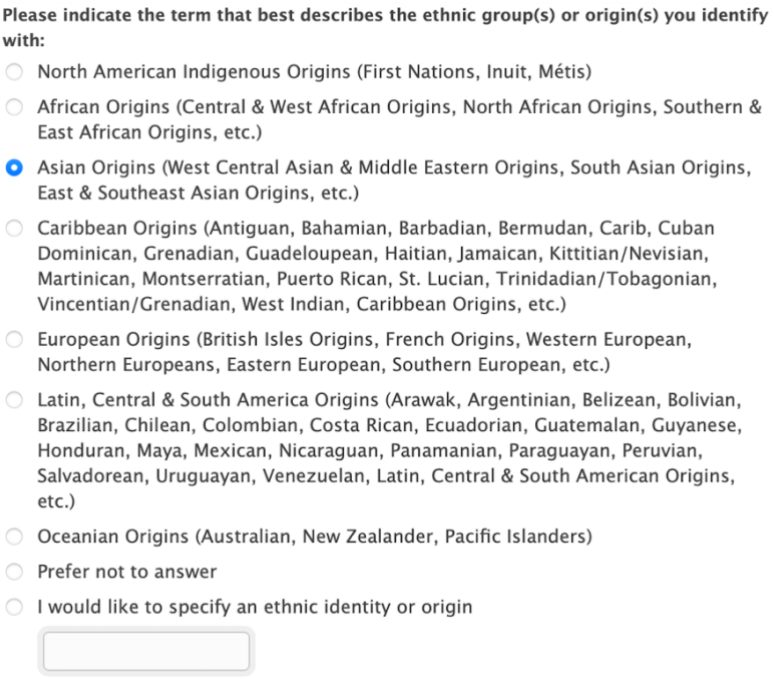


Figure 1: Origins Question[81]

She reflects on contradictions in state-driven multicultural categorization. While "South Asian" is intended to foster inclusion and accurately represent demographic patterns, the category functions as an imposed identity that eventually becomes normalized and is embraced. As Maya explains,

[81] This image was retrieved from the specific scholarship form used by York University that Maya was referring to. Its purpose is to show the question she discusses.

she is expected to pick the broader category of "Asian," where "South Asian" appears as a subcategory. For her, she feels "forced" to choose "South Asian" because it better aligns with how the category is bureaucratically deployed. This results in classification systems failing to consider the ways individuals may self-identify, such as culturally specific descriptors over broader labels. At the same time, this reinforces racialized hierarchies by merging complex, diverse identities into administratively convenient categories, resulting in the reproduction of exclusions.

Ishaan, who arrived in Canada as an international student in 2016 and identifies as Indian, was confused at first when asked if he was "Asian" or "South Asian" in an application he was completing at York University:

> So then the question that came up was asking me, like are you Asian or South Asian? So I was like, that's so dumb, I didn't know the difference. In India there is no one who is called South Asian, we don't know that part. But why would I not be Asian? India is part of Asia… then I found that here [in Canada] I am not Asian, but South Asian. It was new. Now if a question like this comes up I know I don't choose Asian. If someone asks me if I am South Asian, I have to say yes. It's a new identity for me. All Indians are the same type then. You pick South Asian to describe yourself, not Indian.

Despite having been in Canada for eight years at the time of our interview, this interaction explains how "South Asian" is not universally recognized but socially constructed within a specific institutional and national context. As Ishaan explains, "South Asian" is not commonly used or known in India, but migration to Canada exposes new frameworks for understanding and expressing identity, often shaped through state multiculturalism. These state-enforced frameworks tend to reproduce essentialized notions of culture: static categories that individuals must navigate, even if they may feel unfamiliar, imposed, or separate from one's understanding (Malik, 2015). Additionally, his remark about "all Indians being the same type" points to how institutional categories reduce internal diversities into a single identity. Scientific racism classified individuals into 'types' based on perceived biological differences among different persons (Malik, 1996). As

Malik (2008) argues, while race has been widely discredited, its classification continues in modern forms, especially in the context of state institutions (like the census) that organize individuals into identity categories. These systems may appear as an attempt to emphasize cultural differences but ultimately rely on a similar typology used in earlier race-based thinking. In this context, "South Asian" appears in place of an imagined racial 'type,' obscuring the complexities involved of those it claims to represent. These examples show how our identities are "dialogical," formed through interactions, and dependent on recognition from others (Taylor, 1992). In these cases, recognition is being shaped by interactions with an administrative classification system that relies on the bureaucratically deployed category of "South Asian." When filling out these identity-based forms, both Maya and Ishaan are pointing to the category they must choose for recognition.

Constructing "Asian" Identities: Heritage Months as Institutional Policy

Beyond institutional forms, participants experience and negotiate their racialization through another official racial classification system. As a policy-action of state-endorsed multiculturalism in Canada, Asian Heritage Month, celebrated annually in May, "recognizes" and makes visible the contributions of the "Asian community." Unlike the examples provided above, Asian Heritage Month institutionalizes recognition by relying on official classification categories, where "Asian" becomes an identity to celebrate, and its boundaries, uneven. Initially, I had not considered exploring the meaning of Asian Heritage Month. However, during earlier interviews, two participants referenced Asian Heritage Month, suggesting the significance of this Month, and prompting me to include a specific question about it in subsequent interviews. Not all participants were familiar with Asian Heritage Month. Of the 32 participants, 24 had heard of it, while eight participants, who were recent immigrants or those who arrived in Canada[82] during late adulthood,

[82] Within the last 10 years.

had not. All participants were provided with the Government of Canada's (2025d) description, which frames Asian Heritage Month as a time to learn about the histories and diverse cultures of "Asian communities in Canada," and acknowledge the "contributions of people of Asian origin" (para. 1). Despite providing this description, the eight participants unfamiliar with the Month chose to skip this question, reflecting on the limited awareness of a national celebration among newer or older-age immigrants. Among the 24 participants aware of this Month, 15 critically noted that in practice, Asian Heritage Month is exclusionary.[83] This perception highlights a tension between how Asian Heritage Month is officially framed as an inclusive celebration of culture and history, and the lived experiences of those it claims to represent. Participants' responses suggest that although this Month may bring awareness to the contributions of the overall "Asian" community, it centres around East Asian narratives and cultural practices,[84] leaving "South Asian" experiences on the margins. Juhi explains how she was asked to host an Asian Heritage Month event at her workplace where several stakeholders and alumni were present:

> When I looked at the proposed programme, I was shocked to see that most of the speakers invited were Chinese, which to me, is incomplete if we are celebrating Asian Heritage Month, right? I felt that my community [Indian] is being left out. We should be making sure its representative of everyone...

Juhi, a first-generation Canadian who self-identifies primarily as Punjabi Sikh,[85] introduced herself as such because she "wanted that identity out. That we are also part of the larger Asian population, even if others may not see it like that." When asked whether Asian Heritage Month accurately reflected her experiences, she stated that "it could, but we have to advocate and push for it the

[83] The remaining nine participants stated that South Asian Heritage Month (celebrated in Ontario) in the month of May, was their version of Asian Heritage Month, which better represented them.
[84] In Ontario, the month of May has been declared as South Asian Heritage Month under the South Asian Heritage Act in 2001, and May 5 is South Asian Arrival Day (Ontario, 2012). During this time, parts of the Ontario community had worked to establish an 'Indian Arrival and Heritage Month.' The government rejected this name as it would be confused with existing laws relating to Indigenous populations (Ameeriar, 2012).
[85] Juhi further explained that she also identifies as "South Asian," Indian, and Canadian, but that Punjabi Sikh is her primary identity.

same way other groups don't need to." South Asian Heritage Month (Ontario), on the other hand, is more suitable, given that "most people associate South Asia with Indians anyway." Juhi is being asked to engage in what Ahmed (2012) refers to as "diversity work," to perform inclusion on behalf of an institution that has already rendered her community as invisible. As Ahmed argues, diversity work extends beyond merely promoting diversity but involves challenging the very structures producing that exclusion. In this interaction, Juhi was selected to organize this event but then was positioned as a symbolic figure of "South Asian" representation. The public assertion of her Punjabi Sikh identity becomes a deliberate attempt to insert her identity and community into a space that claims to be inclusive but reproduces internal racialized hierarchies. Yet, spaces like South Asian Heritage Month are often reduced to Indian identity, demonstrating how panethnic categories can at times reproduce internal erasures, where less dominant groups are rendered invisible by the privileging of identities that are more visible and dominant, despite claiming to be an inclusive representation of the entire community (Espiritu, 1992; see Kurien, 2007).[86] While there have been studies that examine the (in)visibility of South Asian Heritage Month for particular groups, less attention has been given to how these erasures operate for "South Asians" in the context of Asian Heritage Month (see Ameeriar, 2012).[87] This study works to address this gap.

Growing up in Etobicoke, Disha notes how her elementary school celebrated Asian Heritage Month but always felt "confused" because they had images and decorations that primarily celebrated "Chinese heritage, which doesn't include me." She wondered that given the significant

[86] Here, greater visibility of Indianness shapes dominant perceptions of what "South Asian" means, which minimizes the experiences of those with ties to other countries within the region, such as Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, and Nepalis, among others. Kurien (2007) explains that the meaningfulness of "South Asian" in the U.S context varies, where some argue that the category can bring forward the addressing of common interests while others are keen to maintain individual identities under more specific labels.

[87] Ameeriar (2012)'s study on ethnographic research in Toronto at *Masala! Mehndi! Masti*!, a cultural festival that takes place in August in the city demonstrates how "tropes of "India" stood for an imagined "South Asia,"" revealing how specific categories such as "Pakistani" were preferred to "South Asian" as the interests of these various groups under "South Asian" were too many to ignore (p. 513).

Indian and "South Asian" population, why important events like Diwali were not celebrated. At the same time, when asked if South Asian Heritage Month was a better fit, she states:

> Is South Asian not causing the same problem as Asian then? As an Indian, I would say, yes, absolutely, South Asian is great, as are the celebrations, but if you were to ask a non-Indian South Asian, they might have a similar experience to mine when it comes to Asian. The problem is that both Asian and South Asian are so diverse, that in the process of trying to include everyone, one group ends up being dominated and included more. With Asian, it's East Asians. With South Asians, it's us.

Like Juhi, there is an acknowledgement that South Asianness is commonly associated with Indianness. Although panethnic labels may work to unify groups, they can at times erase the experiences of others (Espiritu, 1992). Both examples show recognition and inclusion in one space (South Asian Heritage Month), but unrecognition and exclusion in another (Asian Heritage Month), demonstrating the close relationship between how we self-identify and the role of recognition or its absence in particular spaces (see Taylor, 1992).

4.4 TICKING THE BOX(ES): IDENTITY UNDER CONSTRAINTS

To explore how this racialized positioning is experienced every day, I asked participants to imagine filling out a survey that asks them how they might self-position (Figure 2):

Imagine you are taking part in a survey and asked the following question:

Please choose <u>one</u> category you feel best describes you:[88]

[ ] Asian	[ ] Indian	[ ] Indian-South Asian
[ ] Asian-Canadian	[ ] Indian-Canadian	[ ] South Asian
[ ] Canadian	[ ] Indo-Canadian	[ ] South Asian-Canadian

Appendix B: Question #5 from Interview Guide

[88] I deliberately did not include an 'Other' category as participants explained that forms and surveys they completed in the past restricted the number of categories they could choose from. My attempt was to replicate existing surveys and forms while also providing specificity to see how participants' selection(s) might change based on the available options.

This exercise revealed a diverse range of responses across generations, showcasing how participants negotiate a social space for themselves within this experience of racialized positioning. When asked which categories they would not choose, all participants pointed to "Asian" and Asian-Canadian. Twenty-four of 32 participants, comprised of various ages and generations, did not believe that "Asian" referred to the continent of Asia, but rather its social meaning in a North American context – i.e., East Asians. For them, these two categories described them the least. In contrast, eight participants, all of whom were first-generation Canadians who otherwise saw themselves as "Asian" in a geographical sense, chose Indian as their primary choice. When asked why they did not choose Indian-Canadian, they stated that despite living in Canada for years or holding citizenship, their identity remained rooted in their home country. Only one participant, Jasvir,[89] selected Indian-Canadian and linked this decision to him recently acquiring Canadian citizenship, which for him marked an "important milestone." Prior to this, Jasvir primarily identified with Indian because his identity is tied to the country he comes from. The decision to not choose Canadian after acquiring citizenship was because his first "home will always be India, Canada second."

Twenty-four of 32 participants preferred "South Asian" over South-Asian Canadian or Indian and Indian-Canadian, but their responses reveal that more than being meaningful categories, participants' choices were strategic and a response to how others might perceive them. When asked why they refrained from picking South-Asian Canadian, Samar notes that "…as someone born and raised in Canada, South Asian means something here, so it's safe to say the Canadian part is assumed… I see that option as repetitive." Further discussions revealed that the process of selecting "South Asian" is shaped by how they are described on forms (i.e., Indian being listed

[89] Jasvir is also a first-generation Canadian, age 68.

under "South Asia") and socially perceived. Maya states "I end up having to default to South Asian anyway because that's how others see me too," while for Rohan, "that's what you have so choose anyway, so it becomes a habit... societal expectations in a way." These responses show how the act of checking a box becomes a negotiation of social space for participants through this experience of racialized positioning around self-identification in the context of Canadian multiculturalism.

The decision to pick or avoid categories such as Indian or Indian-Canadian was influenced by the placement of national or ethnic identities. As Maya highlighted, "I've lived here since I was four, so I would probably characterize myself as more Canadian with Indian aspects rather than Indian with Canadian aspects." Varinder shared a similar view: "being born in Canada means to me, Canadian first, then Indian. If you had Canadian-Indian, I'd probably choose that aside from Canadian." These responses reveal how identity is shaped by the placement of terms that affect which aspect(s) of identity feel more familiar or are prioritized. The hyphen acts not as a neutral symbol for connecting two distinct identities, but as a symbol of cultural hierarchy, whereby Indian-Canadian may function as more exclusionary, and is a space for participants to assert national belonging within the dominant culture.

Naming in a Settler Context

For 21 of 32 participants, Indian within the Canadian context significantly influenced their decision to choose "South Asian." These participants were aware of the historical significance of the term and learned about it in school. Thirteen participants, all of whom arrived in Canada during adulthood, required information of its meaning in the Canadian context.[90] Although Indian is commonly used to refer to individuals with ties to India, in Canada, it is also associated with the country's history of colonialism, and remains a legal category under the Indian Act (1867), which

[90] For these participants, I provided a brief summary of colonialism in Canada, and the emergence of the term with ties to Christopher Columbus, who all participants had heard of.

is used to define and regulate Indigenous identity. The Government of Canada (2026a) acknowledges that the word "Indian" is rooted in racism and colonialism, despite its continued use for determining entitlement to Indigenous rights and status. Often, Indian (from India) is used by the government to highlight the distinction between Indian (Indigenous) and Indian (with ties to India). Keeping this important history in mind, 18 participants found that selecting Indian was problematic, as it risked reinforcing or being conflated with colonial terminology. They attempted to resolve this by selecting Indian-South Asian as a form of clarity, while others felt that adding "South Asian" from India was insufficient in addressing the deeper-rooted issue. The decision to instead choose "South Asian" was not necessarily about accuracy but maintaining distance from terminology that remains embedded within a settler-colonial framework. As Samar explains:

> Growing up, all I remember is through school, it was like First Nation or Indian, even if that is a loaded term. So, I would typically just straight away to avoid confusion, be like I'm South Asian… I know the Indian label has a lot of history associated with it, and officially too, I am South Asian first. It just makes more sense that way.

Similarly, Amita, a 1.5-generation Canadian, notes that she identifies as South-Asian Canadian in professional settings as there is a "huge history with the term." However, Amita does explain that if someone were to personally ask her, only then she would say Indian-Canadian. On the other hand, both Maya and Juhi explained that they would continue to use Indian or Indian-Canadian. Maya asks:

> …why should I change who I identify as because someone in history misrepresented people here, right? Like I'm not going to take away my identity because of misrepresentation and if anything I think that indigenous people should not be labeled as Indian. It's a term that has been very controversial throughout history.

Adding to this, Juhi asks:

> Why should I adjust my identity? To fit into what Canada thinks an Indian means. That's the way I look at it. I don't refer to my brothers and sisters from the indigenous communities as Indians, even if the legal paperwork on the legalities of it does… when I go to other

> countries, I'm Indian. When you when you look at me, I'm Indian. So that's the way I assess that.

At the same time, Juhi did acknowledge that she may change how she introduces herself if she finds herself in a space with many Indigenous peoples:

> If I am amidst like, you know, a bigger group of indigenous people, will I say that I'm Indian Canadian? Perhaps not, right? Perhaps I will say that I'm a Canadian who has roots in India. I probably would say that or South Asian Canadian.

Maya and Juhi assert their right to use Indian by arguing that the misidentification of Indigenous persons should not take away from their own cultural identity. For them, using Indian while being mindful of its history is a step towards reclaiming the actual meaning of Indian. This challenges the idea that the "responsibility for misnaming lies with us," as Maya explains.

Additionally, participants navigated other available options, such as Indian-South Asian and Indo-Canadian. Although Indian-South Asian was seen as offering clarity, "South Asian" was better suited for how participants saw themselves as typically being institutionalized in the Canadian context. Twenty-five participants were not familiar with Indo-Canadian, and four participants, like Sonia, found the term to be "outdated." Seven participants noted that East Indian was historically used to avoid confusion with Indigenous groups but found that continuing to use it would reinforce this misidentification, essentially being used as a code for the country of India, as seen through organizations like the British East India Company (Koehler, 2017). These varying approaches shed light on the complexities involved within the diaspora, where participants are actively negotiating a social space within various experiences of racialized positioning. As suggested by strategic essentialism, identity markers can be mobilized purposefully (even ones that are flawed) to assert agency and visibility within dominant frameworks (Spivak, 1987). Here, participants' choices reflect on responses to historical legacies and acts of resistance, whether by

deciding to distance themselves from terms embedded within Canada's settler-colonial framework or to reclaim them.

Thus far, this chapter has shown how the shift from "Asiatic" to "South Asian" continues to contribute to the (in)visibility experienced by participants. As this dissertation attempts to show, although "South Asian" is formally recognized as part of the broader "Asian" category, in practice, it functions as distinct or separate, leaving participants feeling that "South Asian" is excluded from both institutional and cultural understandings of "Asianness." The bureaucratic use of "South Asian" continues to reproduce forms of racialization by framing difference through cultural markers, rather than challenging the structures that continue to maintain racialized boundaries. It additionally contributes to showing how identity relies on recognition from others (Taylor, 1992). Although Taylor (1992) is focusing primarily on recognition from significant others – i.e., "those who matter to us," I highlight the importance of recognition as experienced through negotiations with official ethnic classification systems and categories, primarily "South Asian" (p. 32). These systems and categories, participants note, shape recognition from interpersonal connections. Their experiences show that the imposed category of "South Asian" becomes necessary to adopt when self-identifying so that recognition (from the state, from others) is possible. Without this category, exclusion contributes to the absence of recognition.

Although institutionalized systems of categorization group "South Asians" together, how this category shapes meaning in everyday life is not adequately captured. Representation operates as key site of meaning-making, where what is and is not seen across media and popular culture shapes how "South "Asian" identities are recognized and understood. Media discourse actively constructs and circulates ideas around who counts as "Asian" through visibility, stereotypes, and erasure. Unlike the institutionalized sites discussed above (the census, university forms, and Asian

Heritage Month), media representations do not call for identification through formal categories but rather circulate meaning through images and narratives. These forms of representation influence both public perceptions and how individuals understand their own identities in relation to how they might be represented. I now move into examining how "Asian" and "South Asian" identities are constructed, contested, and negotiated through public discourse, with a focus on the role of media in (mis)representing these communities.

4.5 MEDIA, MEANING, AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY

Public discourse around "South Asian" immigration, particularly from India, often echoes older racial tropes, though they are now expressed in coded, culturalist terms. As Hall (1997) argues, discourse is about meaning making: "Words don't mean; people mean" (as cited in Griffin, 2012, p. 346). Griffin (2012) notes that Hall argues that meaning does not reside inherently in words themselves but is constructed by people through shared cultural understanding(s). Language gains significance through the ways that individuals and groups use it within specific social and cultural contexts. For Hall, culture is about "the giving and taking of meaning" (Griffin, 2012, p. 347). People may feel that belonging to the same culture entails shared worldviews, which allows them to communicate ideas, emotions, and experiences. Thus, how we understand and interact with the world is constructed through discourse, moving beyond language to include power relations and social practices. This can result in dominant discourses that shape what is acceptable, privileging some groups while marginalizing others. In the case of immigration from India, concerns about overrepresentation, differences in values, or Canada becoming "unrecognizable" revives the idea of "South Asians" as outsiders who are disrupting the national community. As 26-year-old Naina, who arrived in 2018, explains, "a lot of us came all at once and so people say it's Indian immigrants, like making things worse... ruining the image, making the country to be

unrecognizable from years before...” Yet, exclusionary discourse not only positions “South Asians” as threats to national stability but operates through the language of identity itself. Even within broader pan-Asian categories, “South Asians” are symbolically excluded or left (in)visible. This is especially evident in popular culture, where representations naturalize hierarchies to reduce individuals and groups into fixed images.

After becoming the Prime Minister of England in October 2022, Rishi Sunak was media-recognized in various ways: as “the first Indian-origin Prime Minister of Britain,” “the first Hindu Prime Minister of Britain,” and “the first Asian Prime Minister of Britain” (Ramachandran, 2022, para. 1). This was regarded as a significant moment as Sunak became the leader of the very same country that once colonized the subcontinent. A news anchor for Zee News, one of India’s news channels, stated that “India was [once] under the governance of Britain. Now an Indian-origin man has become the Prime Minister of England” (Mogul, 2022, para. 5). India’s Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, congratulated Sunak’s appointment by highlighting the “historic ties” between India and Britain, while India’s leading English-language news channel, NDTV, referred to this celebration as an “Indian son rises over an empire” (Frayer, 2022, para. 3-4). While individuals of Indian origin across the globe celebrated this historic moment on Diwali, which occurred 75 years after the end of colonial rule, some had a different response. Ronny Chieng, a Malaysian-born American comedian for the Daily Show, received significant criticisms after his segment on Rishi Sunak. During his segment, he made the following remarks: “I know everyone is excited that this is the first Asian Prime Minister, but let’s be clear: Indians are not Asians, OK? They’re still people – great people – just not Asian people” (Kaur, 2022, para. 3). Continuing his segment, Chieng adds:

> When I was down at the Dim Sum Palace this morning, me and the fellas weren’t like, ‘Oh… that’s me up there! I feel seen.’ I love how Indians try to have it both ways, like

> being Indian and Asian. Pick a lane, OK? I bet if I show up in a Bollywood film, I'm just going to blend right in, right? Because we're just one people just having a good time (para. 5).

Rather than considering cultural and semantic differences in the meaning of "Asian," Chieng plays with stereotypes for comic value: in the U.K., "Asian" refers to those from South Asia (or of "South Asian descent") due to their large representation and the long history of the colonization of India (De Pacina, 2022; Kaur, 2022).

On Twitter,[91] people were quick to criticize Chieng's comments: one user wrote, "It's tone deaf of @ronnychieng to make jokes about Indians not being Asian. He's a Malaysian Chinese that grew up in Singapore. These countries actively discriminate Indians and dark-skinned minorities," while another asked, "so you're telling me the Daily Show just let a Chinese Singaporean American rant for several minutes about how Indians aren't real Asians and he can't relate to them?" (Kaur, 2022). Another added, "@ronnychieng this was racist af! Have you seen the map of Asia? Just because Hollywood treats East Asians as mainstream Asians, does not give you the right to strip us of our identity!" (De Pacina, 2022, para. 6). Participants were asked to share their thoughts on Chieng's objection to Sunak being described as "Asian." While I provided some context on why Chieng made these comments, and quoted his remarks, only 26 participants spent time discussing their thoughts, with 22 of them having seen the segment or criticisms that followed on social media. Although this study is centred around the Canadian context, this British example that operated transnationally provides a widely discussed moment in the media to show how the meaning of race travels and reveals assumptions about who (and what) counts as "Asian." Participants' reactions to Chieng reveal how similar dynamics exist in both the Canadian and U.S. context, where "South Asian" identities are rendered invisible in media contexts, and East Asian

[91] While now known as *X,* at the time of events, it was known as Twitter.

features operate as the standard for "Asian" representation. It shows the false assumption that the meaning of race is universal. Reactions to Chieng show how "Asian" is a category consistently being negotiated with, and shaped by the media, institutional practices, and public discourse, and is experienced through recognition, representation, inclusion, and exclusion.

Amita, who had seen videos of the segment, stated that Chieng is "not in a position to tell somebody how they identify and how they don't," adding that when she went to London, England to visit family, people used the term "Asian" to categorize Indians, and so his comment is about "how language is used." Similarly, Nitin, who had not watched the segment but reacted to the context and quotes I provided, noted Chieng's "ignorance" and his "inability to know basic geography," adding that "I grew up in India watching the Asian Games, India participates in them…so why wouldn't Indians be Asian? They're part of the continent of Asia. It's not that complicated." These responses to Chieng's comments exemplify how boundaries around the category of "Asian" are context-specific and shaped by public discourse. Amita emphasizes that identity is not simply imposed but undergoes active negotiations, while Nitin challenges Chieng's statement by bringing in geography. These responses show tensions between racialized understandings of "Asian" and its geographic meaning, where popular discourse shapes (and narrows) the meaning of "Asian" as being relegated to the bodies and cultures of East Asians. Hence, "Asian" is not neutral nor universal, but shaped by dominant discourse to produce social meaning (Bannerji, 2000; Hall, 1997).

However, others had a different reaction. Kavya spent some time during our interview dissecting Chieng's remarks: "I know it's a joke, it's for comedy. But jokes are loaded, and everything you say, especially if you have a platform, there's a hidden message there." While acknowledging that this is a "joke," Kavya notes that comedians with a platform often include

hidden messages in their humour. In this case, “Indians are not Asian” raises debates around who is represented and included within the “Asian” label, especially because in the North American context, the default is typically East Asians (see Lee & Ramakrishnan, 2020). Kavya acknowledges that as a Tamil-Canadian and “South Asian,” remarks like this can shape perceptions by reinforcing narrow definitions or failing to consider the diversity of the continent itself and their exclusion, “where according to Chieng, I can’t call myself Asian.” Chieng’s remarks act as a subtle intervention into contested questions of identity and belonging, alongside cultural visibility. Building on her previous statements, Kavya shifts towards the idea of social meaning:

> I don't know if it comes from a place of ignorance or a place of not knowing your geography or I think it might be a 3rd option where it's like it doesn't matter the geography, it matters the social context in which we use this word and how it’s being represented, and that's where it differs... I see it as the other two. But I think most people just go for the social meaning and rely on that. It’s about what they see… and I think Ronnie is somebody who desperately only relies on the social meaning of what Asian means, and in a very North American context.

The significance of statements like Chieng’s lies in how representation stretches beyond geography. Kavya points to Indians as geographically “Asian” but that the dominant North American understanding reflects cultural codes such as media images and phenotypic traits that tend to privilege East Asian identities. Chieng’s “joke” stems from a socially constructed meaning of “Asian” rooted in a specific framework. “Asian” becomes a racialized construct that is learned and reinforced through representation, which Chieng’s humour relies on. These varying responses demonstrate how participants negotiate a social space for themselves within a media representation they are excluded from. In this situation, participants actively position themselves as belonging to the broader “Asian” category, despite Chieng’s remarks.

‘Seeing’ “Asian:” Media, Representation and Social Meaning

Others noted the importance of representation in shaping the social meaning of “Asian.” Varinder places importance on the difference in what we “see” when using “Asian” vs. “South Asian:”

> If you look at the photos that pop up on Google or even Netflix, both of which I know most people use pretty much everyday, it’s obvious that it affects our idea in who comes to mind when we think of Asian and South Asian… When we consider that representation and what it ends up meaning, I’m not surprised that we exclude those who don’t fit these images. That’s what to me keeps us South Asians separate from Asians altogether.[92]

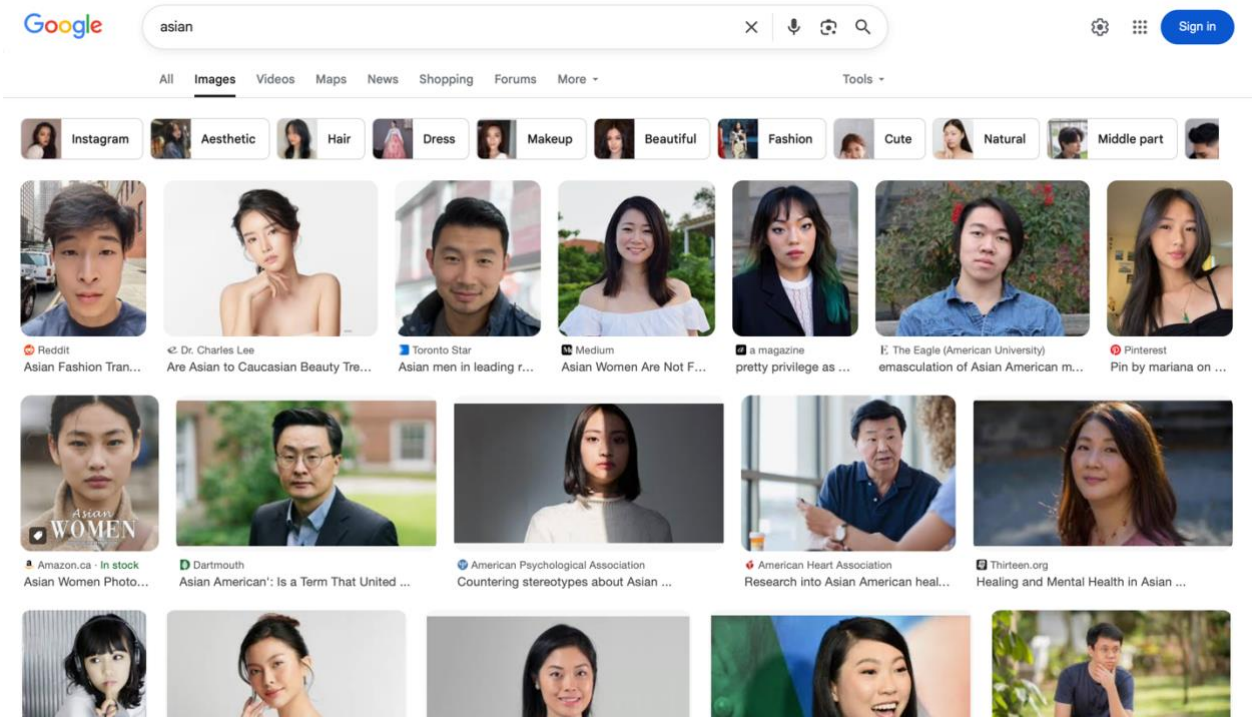


Figure 2: Google Images for “Asian” [93]

[92] The following four images are strictly to provide examples of what Varinder is referring to.
[93] These images are based on results from August 2, 2025, and are subject to change. Google image results can change depending on the day or time.

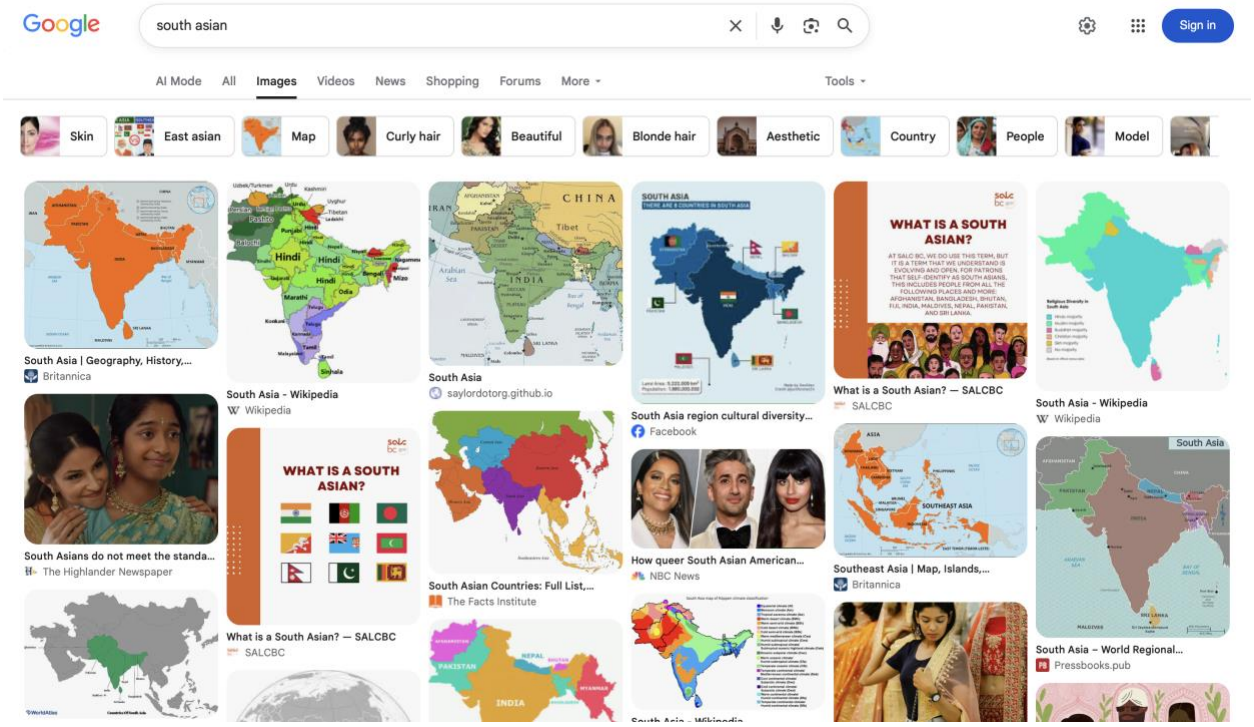


Figure 3: Google Images for “South Asian”

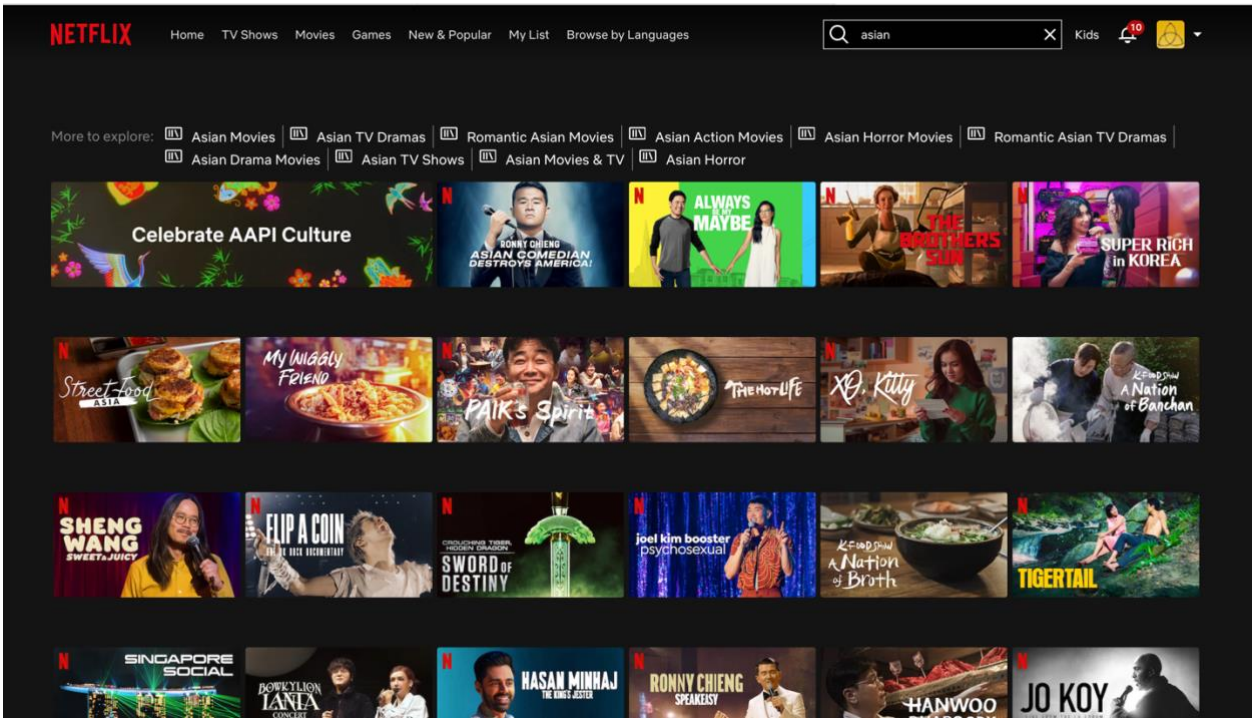


Figure 4: Netflix Results for “Asian”

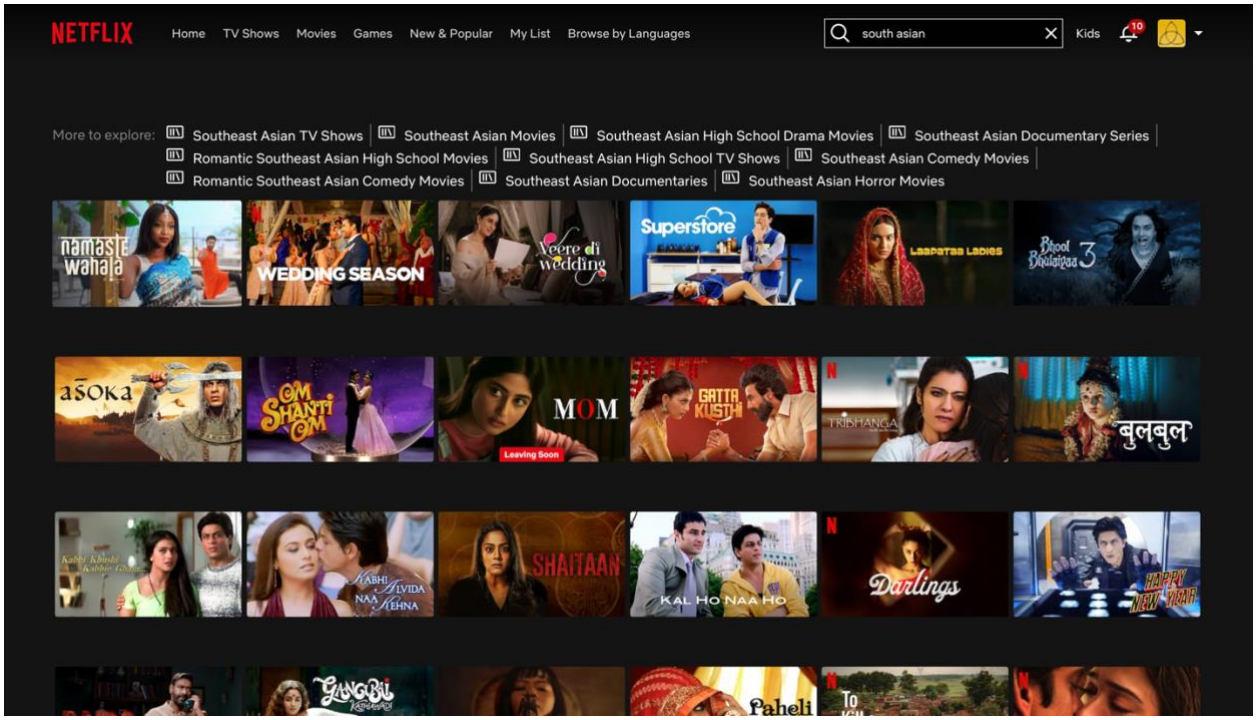


Figure 5: Netflix Results for "South Asian"

Adding to this, Maya explained:

> We know that Asian broadly doesn't just include East Asians, but I think my understanding of the term Asian comes from a lot of the stereotypes that are out there that kind of portray Asians to represent East Asians or East Asians to represent Asians rather. So I think a lot of what I have kind of learned… comes from that understanding of this is who it represents. And this is because of what I've heard from interactions from people and I think I've developed this understanding of okay this is what it means, that I am not included.

If we return to Chieng's comments, it is evident that his humour relies on a narrow definition of "Asian," reinforced through media and cultural stereotypes. Platforms like Google and Netflix, Varinder explains, show East Asian faces and cultural representations that shape "who and what comes to mind." Likewise, Maya connects this absence of other "Asians" to how portrayals and stereotypes rely on images that are primarily reflective of East Asians. Both note how representations operate visually and socially to produce a dominant North American identity of "Asian" that many, like Chieng, assume is applicable to the rest of the word. Hence, in these experiences, participants note that they are positioned as being separate from "Asian." Chieng's

comment shows how physical differences do not automatically carry meaning, but that social meaning is constructed to organize these traits into racial categories that constitute who is then represented within each category (Hall, 1997). For Chieng, the physical traits of "South Asians" are not a representation of East Asians, which for him, are the only sub-group representing "Asians." Although these may appear as 'natural,' these images reveal the (subtle) ways that symbolic power is operationalized in practice to produce hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1989).

'Being' "Asian:" Media, Sameness, and the Contesting of Boundaries

Rohan, Disha, and Kulwinder pointed to cultural aspects and values that challenge the boundaries between East and South Asians. As Rohan explains, "Growing up I had a lot of Chinese friends… we'd talk all the time about how much our parents value education and respecting elders It created a sense of sameness." Disha, an avid watcher of Chinese (C-dramas) and Korean dramas (K-dramas) notes that there is a level of representation that stretches beyond the confines of physical appearance, stating that "the way we don't say the names of our elders or even just taking off our shoes before going inside, as an Indian, to me that is a level of representation in values worth sharing, even if I don't necessarily look like them that I see in these shows." Like Disha, Kulwinder refers to the importance of shared values that helped him to connect with other "Asians" when he first arrived in Canada in the 1970s:

> I meet some people who were from Japan, and like me they come here for a good life to build for our children. We want to make sure our children get a good education, a good job, get married, have their own children. These are traditions and values we agree are important, and it brought peace to know there were others like me, who want the same things.

Although of different generations, the emphasis on culture as shared by Rohan and Disha, both 1.5-generation Canadians, and Kulwinder, a first-generation Canadian, demonstrates how their lived experiences and interactions with other "Asians" create feelings of shared "sameness" that moves away from treating East and "South Asians" as separate entities. However, in practice,

sameness is complex: on one side, it creates a sense of solidarity and shared belonging within the larger "Asian" diaspora, ways of connecting across these various ethnic lines. However, on the other side, it can also lead to the oversimplification of distinct histories, religious practices, languages, and traditions, among others, that shape these communities in specific (and different) ways. This runs the risk of dominant narratives essentially reproducing the same problem they are attempting to address by reducing culture to generalized traits rather than context-specific traditions.

While creating a sense of inclusion, for others, no matter the common ground, they would still not fit that image of "Asian." Kavya shares an encounter:

> There was a Chinese girl in my masters and we were talking about putting plastic bags into other plastic bags and keeping them at home for future use. And she's like, "I thought only Asian people did that." And I said to her, "well I'm Asian too." And she's like, "yeah, I guess so, maybe… never really thought of you that way."

Adding to this, Disha recounts a conversation she had with her Chinese and Korean friends in high school where they shared the pressures of picking a degree in STEM because their parents were "very particular" about their majors:

> They [friends] went on to say that Asian parents are very strict... When I agreed that I could relate, they told me that, "yeah, South Asian parents probably are the same as Asian parents…" And I thought to myself, wouldn't it mean the same thing?

This disconnect reveals that cultural similarity on its own does not guarantee acceptance into the dominant category as shaped by public and media perceptions. Even in instances where traditions, values, and lived experiences align, negotiating a social space within "Asian" for participants still positions them as outsiders, where the standard remains as embedded in representation. Ultimately, this reluctance demonstrates the weight assigned to phenotypic traits for inclusion within the "Asian" category. In many ways, *how* "Asian" appears is more important than *what* "Asian" is.

Recognition is important for representation to value these (un)seen cultural aspects and move beyond surface-level understandings of Asianness.

4.6 CONCLUSION

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how "Asian" operates in a hierarchical and uneven manner, where "South Asians" experience a dual process of (in)visibility with a focus on two pillars: 1) through institutionalized policy mechanisms around self-identification in the context of Canadian multiculturalism, and 2) through media representations. The shift from "Asiatic" to "South Asian" within a multicultural framework does not mean that racialized essentialism is abandoned; instead, race is rearticulated in new ways that continue to govern racialized identities. Although officially grouped within the broader "Asian" category, "South Asians" are treated as separate and distinct from "Asians." In official categorization, participants explained that the "South Asian" category is one that is imposed upon them and over time has become an important aspect of their identity. For others, the category is an inadequate representation of their self-identity.

The second pillar where this (in)visibility operates is through media representations. Dominant discourses that shape what does and does not count contribute to the privileging of some groups while marginalizing others. Ronny Chieng's reliance on stereotypes for humour demonstrates how popular discourse links the bodies and cultures of East Asians as representations of "Asian" to shape and narrow its meaning. This is evident in Varinder's discussion on the images of "Asian" and "South Asian" that appear on popular platforms like Google and Netflix, thereby showing how categories are shaped by dominant discourse (Bannerji, 2000; Hall, 1997). Participants found that when negotiating a social space for themselves within "Asian" through both pillars, their racialized positioning remained to be "South Asian," and separate from "Asian."

A continued emphasis on East Asian visibility as a marker of "Asian" contributes to the resistance "South Asians" face when attempting to claim recognition to "Asian" identity. Despite cultural values in some instances creating a sense of solidarity, it can at the same time obscure internal diversity. A reliance on phenotypic demarcations reveals an ongoing challenge of broadening this recognition. Consequently, this chapter has worked to highlight the need to critically question how official categorization of self-identification and media representations continue to produce and regulate racialized bodies. By acknowledging these complexities and the relationship between recognition and representation, we can work towards a more inclusive understanding of "Asian" and "South Asian."

CHAPTER FIVE: RACIALIZED GOVERNANCE AND MULTICULTURALISM: CRITIQUES FROM A CRITICAL ANTI-RACISM LENS

5.1 INTRODUCTION: RE-THINKING MULTICULTURALISM

Canadian multiculturalism obscures the underlying power structures that regulate belonging, framing inclusion as a universal ideal while rendering it conditional. This chapter critically interrogates multiculturalism through a critical anti-racism lens, arguing that rather than dismantling structural inequalities, it rearticulates them in more acceptable terms. Central to this critique is the concept of tolerance, which in multicultural recognition politics is presented as a neutral way of acknowledging and recognizing cultural difference (Galeotti, 2002; Taylor, 1992). Although recognition is important for minority rights and identity, this recognition operates within existing frameworks to manage diversity (Galeotti, 2002; Taylor, 1992). However, participants describe experiencing tolerance as a form of racialized state governance that upholds dominant norms and positions them as outsiders. This chapter interprets interview participants' experiences of Canadian multiculturalism as negotiations of this governance, a state-based national project that intersects with national identity to shape their boundaries of belonging. Although official multiculturalism emphasizes inclusion, participants' accounts reveal a more complex reality, one where their claims to belonging are conditional and their cultural practices are subject to surveillance and negative targeting in both public and policy discourse.

The previous chapter examined the reconfiguration of the "Asiatic" label into the contemporary bureaucratic category of "South Asian," where participants expressed negotiating a social space for themselves within this racialized positioning. Using a critical anti-racism lens, this chapter examines how 19 of 32 interview participants describe racism as being restructured within the Canadian racial state to sustain existing racialized hierarchies that shape how they negotiate

and understand their sense of self (Jiwani, 2006; Razack, 2002; Tator et al., 1998). Within Canadian multiculturalism, tolerance operates as a mode of governance that regulates difference and reinforces majority authority (see Ahmed, 2000). Participants describe feeling hypervisible, particularly during periods of increased attention to immigration, where they perceive themselves being represented as culturally distant from the imagined Canadian norm. Their accounts highlight how these representations have negative evaluative components within public and policy discourse that position them as conditionally belonging to the nation. Through their experiences, it becomes evident that Canadian multiculturalism outlines and governs boundaries of belonging, where conditional and full recognition is negotiated within the nation, by defining which differences are tolerable and manageable and which are not (Yuval-Davis, 2011).

This chapter demonstrates that participants experience the regulation of diversity as exclusion: they are positioned as crossing the limits of what is tolerant and manageable. It extends the dissertation's argument that "Asian" is constructed and operationalized within Canadian multiculturalism through an East Asian lens, a process that shapes the governance of racialized difference by creating racialized hierarchies. By focusing on the narrowing of the "Asian" category, which renders the experiences of "South Asians" as less visible, this chapter explores how participants engage in meaning-making practices in response to everyday practices and interactions, along with discriminatory policies that govern their presence and their (conditional) belonging. Through this analysis, the chapter investigates how participants see their positioning within nation-building projects, and how these positions are actively contested, negotiated, and reshaped through the enforcement of boundaries.

I begin by examining how participants experience belonging within the framework of Canadian multiculturalism. Their accounts reveal three interrelated dimensions of this

conditionality. The first dimension, experiences of inclusion and exclusion through Canadianness, is where participants draw on familiar, and at times, stereotypical forms of Canadianness, highlighting the importance of dominant narratives such as appearance, that continue to operate as boundary markers for belonging. The second dimension, negotiating Canadianness, examines how participants 'perform' Canadianness by navigating elements of the dominant culture and their heritage, a performance that must be conducted under conditions set by society and structures that determine what is 'too much' and what is manageable, and thus, acceptable. The third dimension, the regulation of Canadianness, explores how participants' experiences of Canadianness are enforced in institutions such as the workplace or in schools that require a modification of their identities. I then move into extending the conditional nature of belonging by situating participants' experiences within the limits of multiculturalism, with a focus on recent changes to immigration policy that have tightened the number of temporary and Permanent Residents (PR) admitted to Canada under the 2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan, which two participants (Naina and Vikrant), see as relying on racialized language that positions them as threatening and incompatible (Government of Canada, 2025e). I then discuss how multiculturalism's failure to directly engage with race results in silencing its realities, before ending with concluding remarks.

5.2 NATIONALISM AND CONDITIONAL BELONGING

Multiculturalism operates within an imagined national community that defines what Canadianness is, who counts as Canadian, and how those deemed as different are to be managed and governed (Bannerji, 2000; Fleras & Elliot, 1992; Fleras, 2019). Participants' experiences involve navigating an in-between space where they must align themselves with dominant expectations of Canadianness while being visibly and culturally different, conditionally welcomed as productive subjects for their economic contributions and their cultural additions to Canadian society. Instead,

despite years of living in Canada, they remain positioned as foreign, their claims to belonging constantly negotiated and denied by the dominant majority. It is within this tension between official narratives of inclusion and the everyday experiences of exclusion that participants struggle with. There are three dimensions of this conditional belonging that demonstrate how multiculturalism is experienced as a form of racialized governance that is embedded within Canadian national identity: 1) experiences of inclusion and exclusion through Canadianness, 2) negotiating Canadianness, and 3) the regulation of Canadianness.[94]

Constructing Canadianness: Boundaries to Belonging

Beginning with the first dimension around inclusion and exclusion, I asked participants to imagine they were asked to define and describe to someone what it means to be a Canadian. In their descriptions, appearance, language, culture, and values emerged as central markers of Canadianness. Their responses drew on familiar (and often stereotypical) markers that circulate in Canadian society, from multicultural ideals to more well-known symbols of national culture. As Khushi explains:

> …accepting to all cultures and races and ethnicities in open arms… I remember seeing, you know, in kindergarten and like grade one and two, those banners that say 'welcome' in school, written in so many different languages.

In comparison, Sagar refers to more traditional forms of Canadianness:

> Honestly, for me, I would have to describe us the way you might expect someone else to, you know, like loving hockey, skating, snowboarding… and can't forget the maple syrup, that's another important one.

However, for Priyanka, one's appearance is important:

> I think most people would want to point to our values, you know, respect, being polite, things like that. While these are all important, the default is someone who is white, we can pretend that it's not, but deep down we all know still it to be true.

[94] Regulating Canadianness was the area that was least discussed by participants, but nevertheless, an important element to highlight. Most spent time recounting their experiences that centred around how Canadianness was constructed and the role of internal (domestic) boundaries, in addition to how they negotiate Canadianness.

Although all three participants are second-generation Canadians, they draw from different elements of Canadianness. Khushi's description reflects the dominant narrative of Canada as a multicultural haven, where difference is welcomed with 'open arms.' By highlighting her early exposure to symbolic practices like multicultural banners, Khushi draws favourably from official discourses of diversity, even if these overlook the structural exclusion that is faced by minority groups. In comparison, Sagar refers to more traditional (and stereotypical) forms of Canadianness, which become associated with cultural symbols and seasonal practices that often circulate in popular media, while Priyanka notes the importance of appearance. Although seemingly neutral, these symbols and elements help to normalize a particular image of a Canadian, where access to specific experiences is not necessarily shared by all. In contrast, Suhana and Harman, both of whom are first-generation Canadians, expressed that Canadianness was centred around values of politeness, holding the door open for others, and saying thank you. Both highlight the significance of characteristics that symbolically[95] are attributed to Canadians, and reinforce an image of kindness and tolerance, but mask and fail to interrogate how inequalities remain embedded within structures of power.

These descriptions show how participants draw on familiarity when imagining what inclusion to Canadianness is and draw on the importance of dominant narratives that often circulate in popular culture and in institutions such as schools. At the same time, these images are not neutral, but privilege certain cultural practices and experiences as *true* markers of belonging, while others are seen as 'foreign' or 'less' Canadian, or at specific times, as aligning with Canadian

[95] Symbolic boundaries are distinctions made by social actors to categorize people, objects, practices, that individuals and groups come to terms with (and struggle over) how to define reality (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). In this case, participants grapple with how to define Canadianness through symbolic representations, according to their realities and experiences.

multiculturalism. There was a strong consensus among these 19 (of 32) participants that the default image of Canadianness is "someone who is white," as noted by Priyanka, highlighting how racialized assumptions and the maintenance of boundaries continue to shape perceptions of national identity. These boundaries were especially prominent when participants reflected on whether they saw themselves as fitting these descriptions of Canadianness, revealing that being included (or not) is contingent upon the boundaries drawn by the majority. In their descriptions, racialized hierarchies shape their experiences, where whiteness remains the central defining feature of Canadianness in contrast to racialized Others.

While participants referenced familiar symbols and values to describe Canadianness, when I asked them whether they personally felt Canadian, race, cultural backgrounds, accent, and length of time spent in Canada were cited as factors that would position them as Canadian or foreign. This points to a central tension: although multiculturalism is often celebrated as an important aspect of national belonging, alongside it remain unspoken assumptions that operate around boundary-making. As scholars have noted, national identities are constructed though external boundaries, where nations distinguish themselves from others, and internal boundaries, where conditional and full recognition is negotiated within the nation (Anderson, 1983; Yuval-Davis, 2011). In the context of multiculturalism, these internal boundaries, which are the focus for this chapter, complicate the façade of multiculturism by exposing how Canadianness continues to be racialized and unequally distributed (Bannerji, 2000; Thobani, 2007). Here, symbolic representations create a space where lived experiences, and the boundaries of Canadianness, come into focus. The reflections shared below highlight both the internal logics of inclusion and exclusion within the national community, and the restructuring of racism. Experienced as a form of racialized governance, multiculturalism manages diversity where participants, such as Varinder,

view themselves as "evidence" of Canada's inclusivity but are simultaneously regarded as culturally distant from the imagined national community, therefore positioned as conditional members.

Kajal and Kavya recounted similar experiences when travelling, having to ensure that their behaviour aligned with expectations of Canadianness. Kajal shared an experience while travelling to the east coast alongside her family, where she engaged in behavioural modifications for safety and protection. Kajal explained that in her experience, the east coast was not "as diverse" in comparison to the GTA, where she has lived all her life. This difference in diversity made her (along with her family), "hyperaware that changes were needed:"

> …once we got there, it was like, be careful how you speak. My parents were like, "try not to speak on your own language when you're around other people. Others need to know we speak good English, especially the kids because the kids English sounds different than ours…" When I reflect back on that it's sad to think that this happened and it was so automatic once we got there. I didn't feel any need to question why cause we had to try and show that we belong here.

This experience reveals the limits that multiculturalism holds in the value of knowing languages other than English or French (see Bannerji, 2000). For Kajal and her parents, speaking a language other than English, especially with an accent, was a problem that would distance them from claiming belonging. The instruction of "be careful" signals an implicit sense of surveillance, with non-English languages marking individuals as suspect or foreign. This cautionary, "automatic" switching reinforces the extent to which Kajal sees herself as internalizing boundaries that require behaviour modifications under the guise of racialized governance. In this case, Kajal's parents place an emphasis on their children speaking "better" and "different" English than them. She "prepared herself" (alongside her brother) to be the ones to ask for help or when ordering at restaurants to prevent any potential issues that may arise if her parents were to speak in their accented English. While her parents feared judgement from others, Kajal, who has lived in Canada

since she was three months old, similarly adhered to the necessity of speaking "perfect English"[96] as a marker of her right to belong.

Similarly, Kavya recounted her experience visiting Cobourg, Ontario,[97] a predominately white town:

> It's like we have to modify our behaviour and really show we have no accent because you feel like you have to prove yourself to these strangers who you don't even know that you belong here. I think anyone who isn't white has to probably deal with this on a daily basis, especially if you're in an area with not as much diversity as the GTA. I really just remember overexaggerating my English to show like, hey, no accent… Especially right now with us [Indians] being seen as problematic.

Kavya describes the labour associated with language-based assimilation, reflecting on the explicit, racialized governance of internal boundaries. A perceived need to show "no accent"[98] demonstrates how whiteness is constructed as the (un)marked norm of Canadian identity, while speaking 'accented' English is a marker of foreignness. The need to "prove yourself to strangers" reflects how belonging is still not guaranteed if one has formal citizenship or can speak English, but that one is deemed foreign based on appearance and must "prove" they belong. This governing leads to situations such as the one experienced by Kavya and her family, who were ignored by residents when they needed help. As Thobani (2007) argues, exalted subjects of Canadian citizenship require that those marked as non-white continue to demonstrate their worthiness of being included, which ultimately can become a daily burden. This is reinforced through Kavya's story, where despite being born and raised in Canada to parents who are Canadian citizens, and

[96] In the participant's words, "perfect English" is the one "with no accent."
[97] According to the 2021 census, the total population of Cobourg was 20,519 with a total of 900 visible minorities – 160 of which were reported as "South Asian" (Townfolio, 2022).
[98] During the interview, Kavya went on to state that it's interesting that there is such an emphasis on not having an accent when in reality, everyone has an accent. Further, she notes that there is indeed a Canadian accent, yet those who police ideas of who can claim belonging to Canada tend to believe that no accent = Canadian.

having lived in Canada for 25+ years, the experience was described as "excruciating" because "they [the majority] don't care how we feel."

Together, these accounts highlight how multiculturalism is experienced as a form of racialized governance. Rather than work towards dismantling racialized hierarchies, these hierarchies are restructured by producing internal boundaries, where language and accent, for example, function as a key criterion for conditional recognition (see Haque, 2012). As the first dimension exemplifies, constructions of Canadianness centre around boundaries that participants believe they must navigate. This shows that racialized hierarchies materialize in their daily lives through their encounters with differential assumptions of belonging that are centred around their ability to speak English, which points to their cultural compatibility surrounding dominant perceptions of Canadianness. Whiteness, which remains at the top of this hierarchy and is embedded in Canadianness, operates as the unmarked norm, while South Asianness is positioned as incompatible. Participants then work towards trying to align with these dominant perceptions to create a place for themselves. These boundaries are similarly present in broader patterns of appearance, behaviour, and self-representations which are similarly governed by the dominant national community.

The Politics of Appearance

Extending the first dimension further, the importance of phenotypic characteristics as powerful identifiers which positioned participants as foreign was discussed. Their accounts reveal that Canadianness stretches beyond a national or cultural category to one that is policed by the dominant majority. Here, national membership and the internal boundaries experienced by Disha are about whether the dominant group sees her as possessing the image of Canadianness:

> …I think the more central question here is whether others find me to be Canadian. Sure, I can say that I feel Canadian, but that doesn't mean anything, especially if others are suspicious or deny that someone who looks like me could make that claim.

These suspicions are experienced as a form of racialized governance, where participants find themselves continually positioned as potentially foreign, and their claims to membership embedded in doubt (Abu-Laban & Gabriel, 2002; Sharma, 2006). From a critical anti-racism perspective, simply acknowledging diversity does not address the issues participants experience. It is necessary to interrogate the structural conditions that continue to maintain whiteness. A focus on conditional recognition and suspicion beyond formal citizenship raised important considerations about other countries, and how Canada may compare. Varinder compared formal belonging in Japan to Canada to highlight that "how someone looks can hold more weight than any other measure of belonging:"

> …if somebody moves to Japan, and they somehow manage to get Japanese citizenship, they speak the language, they get used to the culture, but they don't look Japanese… Nobody would say that they are Japanese just cause on paper they are, right? I could have kids, grandkids in Japan, but they wouldn't even be accepted because they aren't ethnically Japanese, even if Japan is all they've known. Like there's more to being part of a nationality than simply like legally being a part of it. Just because you are legally a citizen, doesn't mean other Japanese are going to agree with that. Same goes for other countries.

Varinder continues by stating that like Japan, "most of the countries in the world are ethnostates,[99] or have a dominant ethnic majority, they aren't multicultural." He cites European countries as an example to show that although they may have started to welcome more immigrants, there is still a

[99] While there is no singular definition that explicitly defines what an ethnostate is, an ethnostate is where the state is understood as belonging to a particular ethnic group through shared ancestry (Connor, 1994). This is where states will define political belonging through a single ethnic nation, where the state becomes the expression of that nation (Connor, 1994). Varinder's reference of Japan as an 'ethnostate' points to his understanding and representation of Japan as the state for the Japanese nation, which is defined in ethnic terms.

clear dominance of a particular majority and citizenship through naturalization is incredibly difficult, with most relying on *jus sanguinis* (see Pogonyi, 2022; Voutira, 2021).[100]

Adding further, he explains how "Canada, the U.S.,[101] and Australia present a unique case" where "ideas of nationalism and belonging are very different:"

> …we're settler societies, right? Ever since we were founded, and I use that very loosely because indigenous peoples were already on these lands, we've been a nation of immigrants. European settlers were immigrants, even though today they may claim not to be, so there's never been one ethnic mainstream in Canada… we've always been multicultural. It was just more white, European cultures first… We're now defined, united by a shared ideology, shared set of beliefs…

Varinder makes a comparison between ethnostates states like Japan where belonging is often tied to bloodline and phenotype, in comparison to civic participation like in Canada (Bloemraad, 2006; Chung, 2010). Although he presents Japan and Europe as a contrast to 'multicultural' nations, the comparison reveals how multiculturalism is experienced as a form of racialized governance, where the state outlines internal boundaries of belonging based on who is to be recognized, which Priyanka calls "authentically Canadian." This is situated in Canada's history of settler colonialism, where national identity is structured through both racialized hierarchies and through the ongoing rejection of Indigenous sovereignty (Coulthard, 2014; Stoler, 1995). Unity through multiculturalism fails in its attempt to 'end' racism because it does not acknowledge the colonial discourse involved in its construction and identity (Aujla, 2000). Daniel Meister (2021) argues that cultural pluralism, celebrated as foundational to multiculturalism, was (and is) entangled with settler colonialism and whiteness because it normalizes racialized exclusion and Indigenous

[100] As increasingly seen today, *jus sanguinis* is not the guiding principle for citizenship in comparison to naturalization. However, the enduring effects of racial boundaries in the context of nation-making remain evident through cultural appropriateness, civicism, etc.

[101] Varinder acknowledged that the U.S does not refer to itself as multicultural as it emphasizes assimilation – i.e., a melting pot. However, Varinder notes that despite its denial, the U.S. is indeed multicultural because it is a "blend of immigrants just like us [Canada] and Australia."

erasure. Like Varinder's suggestion that in Japan one could be born and raised there yet never accepted as Japanese, in Canada, he explains that racialized individuals are seen as conditional members. The difference is in the mode of governance, where Japan, which is ethnically homogeneous, enacts overt and explicit forms of exclusion while Canada, although diverse, operates this exclusion in subtle ways. In both cases, the state maintains a key role in determining the criteria for belonging through racialized logics that uphold the legacies of colonialism to maintain the myth of a 'tolerant' Canada (Mackey, 2002; Razack, 2002).

This first dimension helps to explain how constructions of Canadianness involve the role of internal boundaries, where inclusion for participants involves constantly negotiating their identities, how they present themselves, and their cultural expressions, among others. These negotiations are structured responses to a social order where difference is contained and limited to certain spaces. It shows how participants engage in meaning-making practices that govern their presence and belonging. The next section examines negotiations around Canadianness, where participants resist dominant expectations to secure recognition while managing the risks of being seen as intolerable through alignment with expectations of *acceptable* Canadianness.

Negotiating Canadianness

Moving into the second dimension that explores how conditionality around Canadianness is experienced, I asked participants whether they would describe themselves as fitting these images. In our conversations, participants point to adopting elements of the dominant culture while maintaining aspects of their heritage. This reveals tensions between formal inclusion and their everyday experiences in how national identity is governed through the reproduction of internal boundaries that require them to 'perform' Canadianness under conditions set by broader structures and society.

Participants found that balancing their family's cultural expectations with a desire to assimilate into the dominant culture remained challenging. To combat this, participants pointed to various strategies used to navigate these dual identities, including code-switching between public and private spaces to not cross the threshold of what is acceptable, and selectiveness around cultural expressions (see Sundar, 2008). Aujla's (2000) study of second generation "South Asian" Canadian women shows how her research participants experienced being "others in their own land," where strong desires to 'fit in' after experiencing discrimination led them to internalize that racism. Participants negotiated these complexities when trying to move between different cultural contexts. Their experiences show the subtle negotiations of visibility and belonging at play in everyday contexts. As Saanvi reflects, wearing "Indian clothing" sheds light on the deeper-level processes that are at play when cultural pride and pressures to assimilate collide:

> Listen, I love wearing Indian wear. I get so excited... I go all out. But, every time I'm full on decked out and I have to maybe go off route and get out of the car for a stop to get gas or something, I get out and I feel so embarrassed. Because I feel like everybody's staring at me even though I know I shouldn't care because the GTA is so diverse. And I know most of the population isn't white, and they know if I'm this dressed up I'm clearly going somewhere. But I would for the life of me never wear a *ghagra choli* [traditional Indian wear] to a restaurant or even to run errands, no matter how much I love the traditional wear. I can't stand out even more than I already do. I've gotta be like everyone else as much as possible right now.

This reflection shows the everyday negotiations Saanvi makes when navigating her identity, describing how she loves to wear Indian attire but admits not wanting to "stand out more" and be "like everyone else." Her experience reveals deeper processes of visibility, belonging, and engaging in self-regulating behaviours, particularly in the public sphere. Additionally, this reveals a gendered process, where racialized women are positioned to be outside of the nation, and greater visibility through cultural attire, especially as seen in public spaces, can present as threatening (Bannerji, 2000). To prevent this, Saanvi works hard to negotiate where and when to wear cultural attire to minimize fears of being casted as an outsider when engaging in mundane behaviours (see

Thobani, 2007). This shows that bodies that do not reproduce whiteness experience these same spaces in different ways, where racialized bodies must work harder to take up space in environments that are structured around dominant norms. Unlike in the private domain where this clothing brings happiness and comfort, it becomes a marker of cultural difference and hyper-visibility once she crosses the threshold into to the public sphere, where the governing of her identity becomes more prominent. Saanvi becomes aware of how her body and dress are being perceived through a racialized lens, where she is positioned as different or separate from dominant norms. Visibility is not neutral, but rather is attached to the possibility of being labelled as out of place or crossing the threshold of 'manageable' difference, thereby reinforcing whiteness as the default marker for belonging.

Saanvi makes further judgements based on anticipation of how she may be perceived and governed by others: not wearing Indian clothing in public spaces, when possible, operates as a form of preventative self-policing. Stating that "she can't stand out even more," she points to her phenotypical characteristics and wearing cultural clothing as leading to further exclusion. This illustrates how Saanvi quietly negotiates which aspects of herself to express publicly and which to keep relegated to the private sphere. This decision indicates how Saanvi takes the necessary steps to protect herself and minimize potential exclusion. Her statement to "be like everyone else" reveals how her understanding of belonging is imagined as "white," placing her on the outside. Her experience shows negotiations around Canadianness, where self-identity cannot be expressed freely as there remains a subtle pressure to assimilate (see Aujla, 2000). Similarly, it shows how gendered processes can lead to different experiences and modifications when sharing similar spaces. Saanvi's definition of multiculturalism is one where she should not have to engage in these constant negotiations around what aspects of her identity to share or conceal in public spaces if

cultural difference is welcomed in the ways that official multiculturalism narratives claim to encourage.

At times, negotiating Canadianness involves resisting these pressures and asserting the right to belong. For example, Juhi shared an experience at a Walmart in Bolton (2012):

> …we were the only brown people there. And my husband decided to wear a turban that day. It's all white people shopping there. The cash register is white, everybody's white. And we got a lot of people turning their heads. You know, it's one thing to turn your head… you know, "oh, I'm fascinated," but, it's another when you're looking like you're giving the look like, "are you lost?" … And my husband felt so insecure that day, and he just had landed so imagine his first thoughts of Canada. Can we just go to the Brampton one he asked? I was like, no. There's no sign on this Walmart that says that this is only for white people. We will come here. We will always come here and you will wear your turban. And so that was one instance that I definitely felt like I was being judged or questioned for why I'm coming to this area to shop because there is no other Indian or brown person here... we were being watched the entire time.

The turban, positioned as out of place in a predominately white space, leads Juhi to engage in negotiations through resistance. In comparison to Saanvi, whose negotiation involves limiting cultural difference in public spaces, Juhi asserts the right to belong through resistance, "…we will always come here and you will wear your turban." Here, Canadianness is redefined, and difference is seen as fitting within the Canadian social fabric, rather than concealed or minimized. It also reveals the intersection between gender and religion in shaping this experience. In Sikhism, the turban represents commonly worn religious attire by men[102] that brings visibility to religion and gender, and as Juhi notes, "brought more attention than if he didn't wear it." Her husband's request to go to Brampton was due to the significantly higher Sikh population, where he would not stand out as much when wearing his turban in comparison to Bolton, as other men wearing a turban would be "more common." Juhi's interaction illustrates how negotiation for her is experienced through both visibility and accommodation, while challenging the limits that may be forcibly

[102] Some Sikh women traditionally wear a *keski,* which is a shorter turban in comparison to men, who typically wear a larger, main turban, called *dastar* (SikhSangat, 2010).

imposed by dominant expectations of Canadianness. She sees multiculturalism as a space where difference is to be welcomed, and accommodations around accepting this difference are the responsibility of others around her, which in this case, would be the other customers at Walmart questioning her and her husband's right to belong. This dimension demonstrates how multiculturalism is experienced as a mode of governance, but it also reveals generational differences where acceptable difference requires the management of cultural expressions: for Saanvi, a 1.5-generation Canadian, this appears as careful selection and concealment, while for Juhi, a first-generation Canadian, this management "requires" and "demands" resistance.

Others expand on this second dimension by discussing how they balance both the expectations of the dominant culture with their own cultural expression. Bhabha's (1997) concept of mimicry captures this, where individuals adopt aspects of the majority culture to appear 'almost the same, but not quite.' Here, participants' use of mimicry is a strategy of negotiation in taking the necessary steps to adhere to dominant norms wherever possible. Some participants recalled arriving in Canada and learning about the various celebrations, while limiting their own cultural celebrations to their homes. As a first-generation Canadian, Suhana explains how:

> ...after coming to Canada, I learned about Christmas and Halloween and Easter, because back in India we didn't really celebrate because we are Hindu, my kids didn't also, but now with my kids growing here, I try to help them feel more at home because at school they also celebrate these things, maybe that can help them to fit in Canada better with their friends. It shows, you know, we are happy to be here, we are learning about the culture.

In contrast, others described growing up with these traditions that included seasonal decorations, gift exchanges, school parties before winter break, among others, while their ethnic holidays were often more selectively or privately celebrated. As a 1.5-generation Canadian Kajal notes:

> I've grown up celebrating Christmas and Halloween, not something my cousins back in India celebrate because they aren't Christian. It's one way to try to match Canadian holidays, but I doubt that it's enough to make me seem like I belong here as a Canadian... it's a start, though.

These patterns reflect mimicry, where participants explain adopting dominant cultural practices but are never truly regarded as belonging to the majority, despite making the conscious effort to participate in these traditions. This is the case for both first-generation and 1.5-generation Canadians, as highlighted by both Suhana and Kajal. While this mimicry allows them to navigate various social spaces, try to gain legitimacy, and participate in everyday social life, there is a careful negotiation of identity and the limiting of certain cultural practices to particular spaces.

Building on mimicry, participants describe aspects of blending different cultures, which Bhabha refers to as cultural hybridity (1994). Bhabha argues that cultural hybridity moves beyond fixed identity categories to create new, fluid spaces where cultural practices and meanings undergo constant negotiation. Participants see cultural hybridity as a creative and strategic form of negotiation that enables them to manage tensions between inclusion and difference, while also challenging, as Maya notes, the "strict boundaries" of Canadianness. Participants described maintaining a separation between their own traditions with what they would use in more public and social settings to better align with Canadianness. As first-generation Canadian Nitin explains, "I say I am Indian-Canadian, because then I can mix both my identities and don't have to choose just one…" For Nitin, this hybridity provides the space for a dynamic, rather than fixed identity that situationally evolves.

Extending negotiating Canadianness further, Sweta views the adoption of dual identities as "a response to external pressures." From one angle, participants see these dual identities as providing the flexibility needed to move between contexts, which is important when trying to socially navigate in spaces where cultural difference is (symbolically) celebrated but carefully governed in practice. Alternatively, dual identities can prove as empowering: participants share how this helps them move away from being confined to a single, fixed identity, redefining

Canadianness under their own terms (see Bhabha, 1994). Navneet describes how she navigates between different contexts:

> I've learned over time that I can't just say I'm Canadian. I usually have to add Punjabi or Sikh to it, which I don't mind, I'm proud to be Punjabi Sikh and I always keep a part of my Punjabi culture on me as a visual representation, but then some people may not know what this means... if I just say Canadian, people will be very confused, right, because I am not white. So then I think that I'm not doing enough to represent myself accurately based on how others maybe see me. Saying Punjabi-Canadian gives me access to both parts of me, even if I feel more connected to my Canadian roots. To me, Canadian is about blending cultures, but I know for others it means something very different.

Similarly, Tanya states that the question of Canadianness tends to arise when interacting with the dominant majority:

> I don't find that other brown people ever question that I'm Canadian when I talk to them. If anything, we spend more time talking about our ethnic background and growing up in Canada, it's always something that comes after my Canadian identity…. It's really only with white people that I end up using my ethnic identity first, otherwise it's like very suspicious when I don't.

Both experiences reveal to how to them, cultural hybridity to them functions as their attempt to adapt to how they are being perceived by the white gaze, where it acts as a tool of clarification surrounding their Canadianness. Without it, their attempts to claim Canadianness are met with suspicion and further questions. By blending both identities, Navneet and Tanya assert a self-determined sense of belonging, where they redefine Canadianness beyond racially coded norms. At the same time, this reveals generational differences, where despite Sweta, Navneet, and Tanya being second-generation Canadians, their experiences of being questioned about their self-identities exposes the limitations of this empowerment to show this racialized governance in practice. Hybridity functions in two ways: 1) it operates as a survival mechanism to navigate the

exclusion that participants experience, and 2) as a form of resistance that creates a 'third space' for them to negotiate, contest, and re-define the boundaries of Canadianness (see Bhabha, 1994).[103]

Another aspect of this tension involved questioning why the burden of adopting dual identities fell on them. As a 1.5-generation Canadian, Priyanka explains that she must constantly prove her right to be seen as Canadian, as otherwise this assertion would be met with suspicions:

> ...it's unfair that the responsibility falls on us to clarify our identity, and we have to add our ethnic heritage to Canadian in order for it to matter. I'm essentially forced to say Indian first, even though I think that Canadian should be sufficient. If a white person says they're Canadian, no one will ever challenge them... in India or when I travel, they don't care that I'm Indian because to them I'm not, I'm Canadian first, and I don't find myself explaining like I do here.

Priyanka's experience shows that hybridity may not be voluntary but is a response to an imposed expectation to constantly prove belonging. Adopting this dual identity is experienced as labour that shows the unequal relationships embedded within multiculturalism, where chosen identities may be interrogated. Rather than empowering, cultural hybridity for Priyanka reflects the ongoing structural pressures that limit claims to belong. Adding further, she recounts how Canadian is her primary identity when travelling; in India, there is no weight to her Indian roots, as her Canadian identity functions as her only identity. Similarly, her ethnic identity operates as a secondary identity which shifts depending on situation and context.[104] In transnational spaces, ethnic identity carries cultural significance and recognition, while in Canada, it operates as a marker of difference. These differences highlight a paradox of national belonging, where diasporic identities are never

[103] The concept of 'third space' refers to an in-between space where various cultural identities can interact with one another to create new meanings, moving beyond the "binary thought and essentialist identities produced by colonial knowledge" (p. 276). These include deconstructing binaries such as the self/other, east/west, and colonizer/colonized (see Bhandari, 2022).

[104] One example Priyanka shares is the answer to the very common question of "where are you from" is always Canada when travelling. However, in Canada, she must rely on her ethnic identity, noting that when speaking to someone from the same country, it is reasonable to expect to provide a bit more detail. The problem, however, is that the primary identity – i.e., Canadian – is met with suspicion. It becomes less about genuine interest and more of an "interrogation" to "find out the truth."

singular or fixed but constantly negotiated: abroad, this identity is legitimized, while ethnic identity may hold more value domestically than in transnational spaces (see Gilroy, 1993). Priyanka's experience illustrates how multiculturalism is governed through processes of negotiating her legitimacy through hybridity. In this context, Priyanka sees hybridity less as a space for cultures to blend and more as a disciplinary framework that determines when and how she can claim her Canadian identity.

In further discussions around travelling and claims to Canadianness, Sonia explains how there is typically a reliance on physical characteristics as the benchmark for understanding the boundaries involved in negotiating belonging. However, she notes everyday behaviours that stem beyond appearance, accent, and clothing:

> I saw something online that said, apparently people in Canada and the U.S., when we usually stand, we lean on like one leg or another, right? ... but people in different parts of Europe they don't lean on one another like they will stand upright or they will have a certain posture, they don't just lean on anything like we do here. If we Canadians find a wall, we will certainly lean on it when waiting in line, so this is just one micro example of the ways that our body language, our posture, defines us without us even realizing. It goes beyond the typical idea of appearance as being the default.

Definitions of Canadianness for Sonia vary, where she negotiates Canadianness through an embodied understanding of postures and gestures. These subtle yet observed behaviours show how identity may not always be deliberate, but that acquired habits become natural over time. At the same time, she reflects on the lack of a universal definition or marker of Canadianness: what may be seen as natural marker domestically may present as something different elsewhere. This reinforces Canadianness as being continuously performed and negotiated through interactions with others, an ongoing process that is reproduced through context-dependent practices. This dimension, therefore, shifts across contexts and borders. The 'labour' to claim recognition and legitimacy as belonging to the national community is one that Sonia shares alongside other participants.

This ‘labour’ is present in their everyday lives, where participants describe being caught between being ‘too Canadian’ within their ethnic communities and ‘not Canadian enough’ in dominant, majority spaces. This is consistent across generations. Attempts to navigate external exclusion and internal demands for validity demonstrate a need to perform a balancing act between both spaces, showing that national belonging is governed and negotiated on an interpersonal level while being structurally regulated. The very standard of who counts as ‘Canadian’ is shaped by broader systems of racialized governance that operate through policy, institutional practices, and everyday interactions. In the next section, I move to discuss the third dimension, the regulation of Canadianness. This dimension centres around the conditions under which recognition is granted to those who fit outside the boundaries of the national community.

Regulating Canadianness

Multicultural policies and norms are meant to promote the celebration of difference. In conversations around whether experiences of racism or discrimination changed participants’ understanding of belonging to the Canadian national community, the third dimension examines how Canadianness is regulated. These regulations are especially visible in certain contexts, such as in schools and the workplace, or when experiences of racism become especially significant and encourage (or require) a modification of one’s identity.

Fanon (1967) argues that racism produces feelings of inferiority and guilt, which leads individuals to embrace the new culture while rejecting their own (as cited in Aujla, 2000). Conditional inclusion does not only enact a system of racialized governance that is specific to institutional regulation but rather manifests in everyday social interactions. Sweta recounted her experience at an Indian restaurant with her “South Asian” friends. She had chosen to wear

jhumkas,[105] but immediately felt self-conscious and "embarrassed" when she noticed that she was the only one wearing something "visibly Indian." She experienced discomfort when other "South Asians" were staring at her, explaining that she felt more discomfort because she was being regulated by individuals she believed to be a part of "her community." Adding further, Sweta questioned why "Indian wear cannot be worn in an Indian restaurant... what other place would it even be considered more fitting?" This led her to reconsider how she should navigate overt forms of cultural expression in public spaces, even when being governed by those from "her community." In this interaction, her earrings became a symbol of visible difference that violated unspoken expectations of integration into the dominant culture, revealing how racialized governance is internalized and reproduced when self-expressions misalign with performing belonging according to societal expectations. If that cultural expression becomes too loud or too visible, and crosses the boundaries of manageable difference, it is no longer a site of celebration, but rather is contingent upon the ability of the individual to self-regulate their expressions.

For others, their interactions with the dominant majority presented others forms of this third dimension of Canadianness. Suhana notes that shortly after arriving to Canada in 2015, while studying at a college for her medical administrative certificate, she was advised to change her name and reflected on her teacher's suggestion:

> ...I was taught in my private college during class for resume making, that I won't get any call back for the interview. My teacher tells the class, and many of us were new immigrants in this class... "don't make your name your Indian name on your resume. If you do, don't think that you will get a call back." That is the number one rule. For me she suggest to change my name to Susan.
>
> I know it was advised to change my name, but that is my name, it is my identity, I will not change it. If I get a call back and the job, it will not be because of my name, but because I know what my job is, I have the qualifications. For me, that is success... but yes, I did feel the pressure because when I ask the other people in the class, many did say they will write

[105] Traditional Indian earrings.

> a different name. At first after I thought maybe I made a mistake, but the job I have right now, I got that with my Indian name, and I am proud.

While this may appear as potentially "helpful advice," Suhana argues that its deeper meaning reveals how Indianness is incompatible with Canadianness. By marking "Indian names" as decreasing the likelihood of receiving a call back for job interviews, her teacher's suggestion reinforces whiteness. Canadianness is regulated through daily interactions where symbolic boundaries are constantly drawn. Suhana sees this advice as "necessary" to succeed in the job market based on how it has been suggested to her. However, her refusal to do so constitutes an act of resistance to this regulatory pressure by insisting that her merits should suffice in receiving a call back. Unlike her classmates, she asserts a definition of Canadianness that is grounded in her capability and her contributions, rather than her conforming to whiteness. Suhana's experience reveals the limits of multiculturalism, and her resistance challenges its boundaries, as her version of Canadian multiculturalism is one that is inclusive.

However, others saw compromise as necessary, even when it remained situated along the boundaries of Canadianness. Although multicultural policies promote the celebration of cultural difference, in practice, participants explain how it rewards those who manage this difference in ways that align with dominant norms. The act of altering one's name, choosing a nickname, or pronouncing it non-traditionally are some of the many ways where identity may not necessarily be erased, but is adjusted to a social order that continues to privilege whiteness. Harman sees these modifications as "necessary" when being regulated by "other Indians" and the majority.

Together, these three dimensions illustrate how participants experience the construction, negotiation, and regulation of Canadianness through intersecting social processes. In constructing Canadianness, national identity is shaped around assumed norms that emphasize whiteness to establish internal boundaries that determine *true* belonging. Within this framework, participants

express having to engage in constant, varying negotiations to balance their cultural identity with careful and necessary adjustments to align with dominant expectations of how they must present themselves. The familiarity of engaging in compromise shows how participants navigate pressures to adhere to dominant norms, revealing how multiculturalism is experienced as a form of racialized governance: diversity is celebrated, but inclusion is embedded in conditionality. Consequently, belonging in Canada is a dynamic process shaped by construction, negotiation, and regulation.

5.3 THE LIMITS OF MULTICULTURALISM

The conditional nature of belonging points to a broader debate surrounding multiculturalism and its future. While in Europe multiculturalism was framed as a crisis and outright failure, Canada's international reputation remains centred around its model of multicultural success (Banting & Kymlicka, 2010; Johansson, 2022; Lentin & Titley, 2011; May, 2022). However, participants view this 'success' as obscuring the ways that racism, which is fuelling anti-immigration sentiments, affects them. Immigration becomes the language through which racism is made socially acceptable, where diversity through immigration is no longer a site of tolerating and managing difference, but one that is no longer manageable and tolerant. Participants view this as exposing the limits of the commitment of Canadian multiculturalism through the racialized politics of 'crisis.' They describe a perceived transition from an earlier open-door immigration stance to current restrictive policies. Within this shift, they recount experiences of racism and the silencing of their efforts to claim belonging under Canadian multiculturalism. Their narratives suggest that belonging is seen to be conditional and shaped by political and institutional forces at the national level. These accounts of exclusion reflect broader national discourses that shape who is perceived as belonging in Canada. Racism sets the boundaries of Canadianness, and it is through anti-immigration sentiments that these boundaries are being actively policed and monitored.

Participants' narratives reveal an awareness of how such discourses are produced and maintained through public debates about immigration, which rely on the use of racialized language that positions them as threatening and incompatible. They connect these representations to changes in immigration policies that, through the mechanisms of multicultural governance, reinforce or challenge existing boundaries of belonging. The following section examines how participants see their positioning with nation-building projects, illustrating how multicultural governance, particularly during perceived crises, shapes their presence and everyday experiences of belonging in Canada.

Racialized Politics of Crisis[106]

> History never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme.[107]
>
> – Mark Twain

In October 2024, IRCC announced its 2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan, promising "sustainable growth" by reducing the number of temporary and permanent residents (IRCC, 2025).[108] Among these changes was the 10% cut to international student admissions, including a 31% decrease in study permits issued to Indian nationals. Historically, Indian students have dominated the largest share of Canada's international student population,[109] yet Naina, who arrived as an international student herself in 2018 and now has her permanent residency, describes these policy changes as a response to concerns around "too much immigration from India." She explains that "Indian students are being blamed" for housing shortages, job scarcity, and social tensions, finding that

[106] Only Naina and Vikrant's interviews were conducted in October, and hence when referring specifically to these immigration changes, I am drawing from their interviews only.
[107] As cited in Lagarde (2018, para. 1).
[108] From the original target of 500,000 permanent residents from 2025-2027, the numbers decreased to 395,000 (2025), 380,000 (2026), & 365,000 (2027) (Government of Canada, 2025e).
[109] As Anderson (2024) notes, favourable immigration policies were often cited as a significant factor for why Canada was seen as a more attractive destination for international students than the U.S: Anderson, S. (2024). Indians immigrate to Canada in record numbers. *Forbes*. https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2024/04/25/indians-immigrate-to-canada-in-record-numbers/

public frustrations with structural issues are being redirected towards those who are visibly Indian (Mann, 2025).

Participants describe their belonging as conditional because immigration is seen as a crisis. Maya notes that now immigrants have transomed from "contributing to Canada's economy to scapegoats of its problems." This transformation is evident in emerging slogans like "deport them all" and "end mass immigration," which Varinder and Khushi, respectively, reported seeing circulating widely.[110] What appears as an objective realignment of immigration levels functions as a selective form of exclusion that disproportionately impacts them further, as Maya explains, where "we [Indians] are already the main people discussed when it comes to anything immigration-related, there's a lot of us." Through these experiences, participants reveal how these changes alongside public discourse produce a racialized regime of belonging. Redefining who is seen to 'fit' the Canadian imaginary exposes a contradiction: Canada promotes itself as a multicultural society, yet simultaneously reorganizes the boundaries of inclusion in ways that reinforce racialized hierarchies. Immigration emerges as a site where promises and limits of multiculturalism are exposed.

Rohan recounted feeling "watched" in everyday spaces, described as "too visible" and "incompatible" with the Canadian national community, finding such language as quietly marking him as an outsider even as official policies celebrated diversity. Tanya explains that being welcomed as symbols of multicultural success, but then being treated as reminders of why "multiculturalism is failing" reveals how belonging is made conditional through the subtle insistence that some bodies are less compatible with the nation's imagined community than others.

[110] Varinder, Khushi, and Maya's interviews were conducted prior to these changes to immigration levels. However, their responses reveal potential causes for what led up to these changes even if they were not directly aware of these incoming changes.

Situated within this contradiction, Naina exposes how visibility becomes a burden, even when presented in a neutral language:

> I came to Canada in 2018, because back then, it was very trendy and a cultural thing in Punjab, you know, everybody moving to Canada. So I hopped on the trend and I pursued my own field of study here. Now I have a good job I like and I keep working to move up into higher positions to show that I am here to contribute to Canada. But the government is making it harder to get PR, and people don't think I deserve to belong here. I'm worried about what others think of me, and right now we can see more of this hate to us.

Naina's concerns reveal how policy changes reshape opportunities for new immigrants while undermining the legitimacy of those who already have formal membership. Despite receiving permanent residency status, she sees her belonging as precarious, marked with concerns of how she is governed by others. Her anxieties demonstrate how racialized suspicion remains beyond one's legal status, even in the absence of the language of race. A contradiction between formal recognition while simultaneously having her presence questioned highlights how multiculturalism is about the conditional acceptance to belong. This experience exemplifies the current crisis of multiculturalism in Canada, where participants see themselves as being positioned as crossing the threshold of tolerant and manageable difference.

When asked whether she felt more Canadian now with PR, Naina responds:

> I see myself as Indian. I think if you asked me this question a few years ago, maybe I have a different answer. But right now Canadians do not like us Indians, and they are not hiding it either. Even the government has brought these changes because they also don't like us, so why should I feel Canadian when no one will agree that I am?

Her words reveal that belonging is relational, not simply personal. Multiculturalism promises recognition alongside retaining cultural roots, yet Naina's refusal to claim membership shows how that promise can break when recognition is denied. Public discourse and policy that casts Indians as outsiders does more than regulate newcomers – it erodes a sense of belonging for those already here. In her disidentification, Naina illustrates the crisis of multiculturalism, a system that

undermines the very people it portrays as symbolic of its 'success.' For others, Canada is no longer viable as their permanent home, as expressed in this excerpt during my interview with Vikrant:

> Vikrant: I don't plan to stay in Canada for much longer. I came two years ago to study, I've been working now, but I have a family business back home in Gujarat that is successful, and I see coming to Canada as an experience, but it is not my permanent home... this country is not what I thought it was, and India holds more potential for me, more security.
>
> Ritika: What did you think about Canada prior to coming? How has it shifted?
>
> Vikrant: I thought Canada will welcome me, lots of cultures living and being together, a space to be yourself, but maybe that was the old Canada. The new Canada does not want us to be who we are, and the government is making it harder to get the PR and stay long-term. Lots of my friends plan to go back home to India and I will too... with lots of people not liking more immigration, it means they do not want different people coming to Canada. Adjusting is harder now, it's more pressure. The [Canadian] people have changed...

This conversation illustrates how Vikrant experiences Canada's multicultural reputation as representative of the "old Canada," whereas the "new" Canada has "changed" into one that is anti-immigration. Prior to arrival, Vikrant saw the "old Canada" as a land of opportunities where individuals could retain their cultural identity and still belong to the national community. However, recent changes to immigration policy have led Vikrant to feel as an outsider. This comparison between Canada and India reveals how withdrawing from recognition affects belonging and leads to a reimaging of futures elsewhere. His decision to return to India after experiencing an unwelcome Canada shows how multiculturalism, rather than securing inclusion, regulates and constrains it, resulting in distance from, not proximity to, belonging. At the same time, this potential avenue reveals the role of class, where Vikrant, if he follows through with returning to India, would have the means and resources to live a comfortable life, explaining that there will "always be a place in the business for me." This demonstrates that the effects of recent changes and the potential alternative avenues that newer immigrants may need (or choose) to pursue

involves examining the role of class when considering what life may potentially consist of if returning to India.

Participants describe how they experience the exclusionary effects of changes to immigration policy, while government narratives frame these reforms as neutral responses to rising immigration. In this framing, participants see Indian immigrants being positioned as the problem, while the state possesses no responsibility. Restrictive policies, Sonia states, legitimize the "monitoring of Indian immigrants." Zian reaffirms this, by noting that some must prove their right to belong and are seen as "threatening, and others are welcomed with no problem." Participants' experiences reveal how multicultural policy and public discourse together define and govern who is an insider, and expose belonging as a political process that is shaped by state-sanctioned hierarchies and national anxieties (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

5.4 MULTICULTURALISM, BELONGING, AND THE POLITICS OF SILENCE

Multiculturalism often avoids directly engaging with the realities of racism by framing inequality as cultural difference (Lentin, 2005). In participants' accounts, recognition feels conditional, and belonging depends on performing culture in alignment with dominant expectations of Canadianness. Tolerance is experienced as containment, where participants describe their identities being celebrated when rendered as non-threatening. When difference becomes too visible or unsettles dominant norms, the limits of multiculturalism are exposed. These accounts shift attention away from Canadian multiculturalism to the lived realities of navigating conditional belonging within these silences. The following sections explore: 1) the silence of multiculturalism on racism, 2) the conditional nature of belonging within a multicultural state, and 3) critical anti-racism as necessary in revealing how multiculturalism restructures rather than eliminate racialized hierarchies.

Silence(s) of Multiculturalism

As argued by Stoler (1995), multiculturalism conceals the fact that "the discourse of race was not on parallel track with the discourse of the nation but part of it" (p. 93). Participants explain that Canadian multiculturalism has changed, with a growing number of anti-immigration sentiments and fears of 'Indians taking over.'[111] These tensions expose the limits of multicultural tolerance, where difference is now being criticized and disciplined because it exceeds the boundaries of manageability and tolerance. A critical anti-racism lens uncovers these silences and draws attention to systemic hierarchies that are otherwise overlooked by celebratory discourse and insists on examining how belonging is organized, monitored, and ultimately, denied. Greater visibility of "Indian immigrations as a whole" for Ishaan has come at a cost, where difference is recasted as divisive, rather than celebratory.

Zian explains how greater visibility can be "both good and bad:"

> A really good example of multiculturalism here [in Canada] that like, opened my eyes as someone born here, was on Omni TV when the hockey commentary was in Punjabi.[112] I remember watching and thinking that this is a really great way to involve a whole other community into a sport that's predominantly white. Like older Punjabis like my grandparents who may not be able to understand English that well would now have access and can watch and listen... but this representation, not everyone sees it like that.
>
> ...representation only means something to the community being represented. So it's a win for us, right? But for white people, it's like something is being taken away from them... so

[111] "Taking over" is a key tenet of the great replacement theory (sometimes referred to as great replacement), which is a far-right, white nationalist conspiracy theory that has primarily been discussed in Europe and in reference to the Muslim population. The theory states that there is a cooperative effort among non-white populations to 'replace' and 'take over' white, European populations, driven by mass migration and dropping birth rates among white populations. Participants do not reference the theory specifically, but they do note that there is a fear that Canada is becoming "less white," and that immigration is the cause for it. See: Ekman, M. (2022). The great replacement: Strategic mainstreaming of far-right conspiracy claims. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, 28*(4), 1127-1143; Obaidi, M., Kunst, J., Ozer, S., & Kimel, S. Y. (2022). The "Great Replacement" conspiracy: How the perceived ousting of Whites can evoke violent extremism and Islamophobia. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 25*(7), 1675-1695; Sedgwick, M. (2024). The great replacement narrative: Fear, anxiety and loathing across the West. *Politics, Religion & Ideology, 25*(4), 548-562.

[112] Hockey Night in Canada: Punjabi Edition is hosted on OMNI Television every Saturday during hockey season (OMNI, 2024). It was created in October 2008 by the Canadian Broadcasting Network (CBC) to accompany the weekly traditional English language broadcast (Szto, 2016).

> they get upset and say this is Canada so the language should be English. But... are they forgetting that their privilege is everywhere? Why don't they see that?

Zian was excited about Hockey Night in Canada (HNIC) in Punjabi, as family members and friends could now enjoy and partake in a "Canadian classic." This programming, which provides access for Punjabi-speaking communities, signals inclusivity in a national sport that has been historically white and English-speaking (see Aulakh, 2009). However, Zian notes that this initiative was not met with a warm reception, as the majority felt threatened. Although HNIC Punjabi has been on air since 2008, Szto's (2016) study that examined reactions on Twitter shows how tweets such as "Hockey Night in Canada in Punjabi??? Really????? Is nothing sacred?" and those that challenged the existence of the show, "What the fuck is this…" to replies such as "absolute insanity," "something is wrong here," "Punjabi people don't even know hockey why CBC whyyy?" demonstrate how for these individuals, HNIC Punjabi is not a celebration of Canadian multiculturalism, "but rather an encroachment on Canadian values and tradition" (p. 214).[113] This points to a central element of silence within multiculturalism, where racialized inclusion is made hypervisible and contested. This discomfort experienced by the majority disrupts whiteness as the (un)marked norm, exposing its fragility by making this difference noticeable in spaces previously assumed to belong exclusively to the majority. Applying a critical anti-racism lens reveals how multiculturalism does not eliminate racialized hierarchies but restructures them by permitting difference when it adheres to the rules and regulations of the majority, and when it does not take away from their entitlement. The next section examines how participants navigate this conditional belonging, where expressions of difference points to disruptions in the national community.

[113] Szto's (2016) study examines tweets from October 1, 2013, and April 5, 2014, the 2013-2014 National Hockey League (NHL) season.

Unmanageability and Conditional Belonging

Cultural difference in Canada is regulated by expectations of legibility and conforming to dominant norms. However, when that difference is positioned as intolerant and unmanageable, it is portrayed as excessive, threatening, and disruptive to the national community. Participants explain that this has created a space for anti-immigration and negative sentiments that are disrupting Canada's embrace of multiculturalism. Saanvi captures this tension:

> I took a class on Canadian studies in uni, and the one thing I took away from that class was basically like Canada does not actually have its own identity. It's a mishmash of people who have decided to settle here and so the culture is actually many different cultures together, and that includes European cultures, so mostly immigrants... why do people always seem to forget that? If you take away these different cultures, then what are we to the world?

By framing Canadian culture as pluralistic, Saanvi unsettles the (un)marked position of whiteness and challenges the assumption that immigrants are an addition to a pre-existing culture that they must adapt to. Instead, she brings forward the view that immigrants make "important contributions to Canadian culture." By defining Canada's identity through multiple cultures, Saanvi disrupts the majority's imagined image of the nation and reveals that multicultural tolerance is conditional and selectively applied. From a critical anti-racism lens, these interventions expose the structural hierarchies that are obscured by multiculturalism and shows how inclusion is regulated, belonging is contested at various levels, and whiteness remains central to defining what is legitimate (or too much) difference. Additionally, when alternative understandings of national identity or cultural practices that question dominant norms are introduced, critical anti-racism uncovers how these responses are embedded within institutions and social imaginaries to reveal the conditionality of belonging as an ongoing structural phenomenon rather than simply isolated incidents.

A Critical Anti-Racism Lens

Lastly, a critical anti-racism lens is necessary because it redirects the focus from surface-level inclusion to examine how systems, norms, and institutions engage in the reproduction of hierarchies of power. Critical anti-racism emphasizes that the failure to talk about race directly is part of the problem and seeks to expose structural inequalities that are otherwise silenced in multicultural discourse. Tanya observes how the preoccupation of Canada being distinct from the U.S takes away from direct engaging with the realities of race:

> I have a lot of family in the U.S., and when visiting it as someone born and raised in Canada, it's different… it's interesting to see just how different we are. We work really hard to prove that we're different, and I'm guilty of this too, but I think when it comes to what is going on at home [Canada], the reluctance to talk about the impact race has takes away from the issues that are a result of race... like in the U.S race is a thing, they're very direct, and here we say culture, but, race still operates... it takes away from the challenges that need to be addressed here, the real issues and experiences people are having...

Tanya sees this as a "failure" in directly engaging with the realities of race. On the surface, not 'seeing' race can appear as aligning with Canada's multicultural ideals, but in practice this diverts attention away from systemic inequalities that contribute to the challenges participants have experienced when claiming belonging. By hiding behind this "moral superiority of at least we're different from Americans," Tanya continues, the nation and its members avoid having to confront structural forms of racialized disadvantage and hierarchies because it is "uncomfortable to discuss." Critical anti-racism provides the tools needed to move beyond a symbolic recognition of diversity so that the challenges that are otherwise left undetected and intact can be recognized.

5.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that participants experience multiculturalism not as inclusion, but as a form of racialized governance, where difference in managed through tolerance and control. I attempt to move away from viewing multiculturalism as tolerant and managing difference to one that critically interrogates what happens when that difference becomes intolerable and

unmanagaeable. Participants describe how certain cultural expressions are welcomed in public spaces, while others are deemed as intolerable and pushed into private spaces. In recounting their experiences, participants reveal how Canadianness is constructed, negotiated, and regulated. Anti-immigration discourses that portray 'Indians taking over' or Canada becoming 'unrecognizable' re-racialize participants by positioning them as incompatible with the nation, where they are positioned as crossing the limits of what is tolerable and manageable. This shows how participants engage in meaning-making practices in response to discriminatory policies and in their everyday experiences, where their presence and belonging are governed. Participants recount how they position themselves within these nation-building projects, where they negotiate, contest, and reshape their positioning. However, as participants emphasize, these tensions experienced by "South Asians" are often overlooked within dominant narratives of "anti-Asian racism." The next chapter turns to discuss this gap in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, examining how "anti-Asian racism" has been framed around the experiences of East Asians. Participants explain how this framing overlooks their struggles and exclusions as "South Asians."

CHAPTER SIX: HIERARCHIES OF (IN)VISIBILITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In Canada, multiculturalism and anti-racism policies have served as attempts to address issues of inequality and promote social inclusion, functioning as a commitment to diversity. However, far from neutral, these frameworks operate within broader social and political contexts that are shaped by selective recognition, histories of exclusion, and the ongoing marginalization of racialized communities. The ways in which racism is defined, and the types of interventions that emerge reveal which experiences are deemed as legible and which (including whose) experiences are rendered less visible. In this manner, policies that may appear to be progressive can obscure the structural conditions that reinforce inequalities and reproduce hierarchies within racialized communities.

Within this context, multiculturalism and anti-racism policies have recognized "anti-Asian racism" as an important site for state intervention (Berman & Paradies, 2008; Figueroa, 1999). However, in practice, "Asian" is often coded as East Asian, drawing from narratives of model-minority success and more recently, their experiences of scapegoating during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chen & Wu, 2021; Fang et al., 2024; Guo & Guo, 2021; Luo et al., 2024; Xiaobei, 2025). As a result, the distinct forms of racialized violence and exclusion faced by "South Asians" has remained less visible. I am in no way claiming that "anti-Asian racism" experienced by members of the East Asian community has been adequately addressed by the Canadian state, but rather I aim to reveal how these seemingly inclusive frameworks can reinforce intra-group hierarchies by centring the experiences of East Asians and overlooking the experiences of "South Asians," especially in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. This analysis examines the experiences of 16 of 32 participants during the COVID-19 pandemic and argues that "anti-Asian racism" from

a pandemic-specific lens obscured their experiences of racism and structural marginalization. Participants' accounts reveal how "anti-Asian racism" is experienced differently across communities, and how their experiences are often rendered less visible. This chapter builds on the groundwork established in previous chapters, where the reconfiguration of the "Asiatic" label into the contemporary bureaucratic category of "South Asian" does not result in a shared understanding of "Asian." Rather, institutionalized policy mechanisms and the media present and portray "South Asians" as distinct from, rather than a part of, the broader "Asian" category. This construction of "Asian" is then deployed through an East Asian lens that shapes the governing of difference through racialized hierarchies, evident most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these findings illustrate how the pandemic became an important site where racialized hierarchies within "Asian" identity were reproduced and subsequently, intensified. The reduced visibility of "South Asian" experiences is not an indication that there is an absence of racism or discrimination but rather reflects the uneven ways that harm against racialized communities is recognized and governed.

This chapter begins by examining the re-emergence of "anti-Asian racism" during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly against the East Asian community. It then discusses participants' experiences during this period, including the emergence of the Delta B.1.617.2 variant in India and the subsequent increase in racism. Participants described being labelled as responsible for the spread of COVID-19, with cities like Brampton, who have a higher "South Asian" population than other cities in the GTA, were singled out as being non-compliant with provincial and municipal restrictions. They emphasized that this individualized blame obscured systemic issues and negated the importance of essential, front-line workers (healthcare and non-

healthcare), highlighting that rapidly growing cities required adequate infrastructure, funding, and support to minimize the impact of the pandemic.

6.2 "ANTI-ASIAN RACISM" AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront the experiences of "anti-Asian racism" in Canada and across the world. Increased incidents of physical assaults, verbal harassments, and the scapegoating of individuals perceived to be 'Chinese' increased exponentially, highlighting the ways in which xenophobic violence remains pervasive in Western countries (Chen & Wu, 2021, p. 6; Reny & Barreto, 2020). In sharing their experiences of this hostility, the pandemic marked a shift in the widespread recognition that "Asian" communities were being subjected to racialized violence and exclusion.

"Asians" in Canada have long faced systemic discrimination since their early arrival to Canada, including exclusionary immigration laws such as the Chinese Head Tax and the Continuous Journey Regulation that led to the infamous Komagata Maru incident, ongoing surveillance, labour exploitation, and violence (Buchignani et al., 1985; Buchignani, 2010; Cho, 2021; Roy & Sahoo, 2016). The pandemic did not create these dynamics, but instead exposed them to make visible a form of racism that continues to exist in different historical contexts. However, the framing of "anti-Asian racism" during the pandemic through public and media discourse and institutional responses centred around the East Asian community, reflecting narratives of scapegoating tied to China, the purported origin of the virus (Reny & Baretto, 2022). Participants noted that their experiences of racism did not receive the same level of visibility during this period, despite being a subgroup within the broader category of "Asian" racialization in Canada.

This chapter seeks to examine how "anti-Asian racism" experienced by interview participants has been recognized, and subsequently mobilized, as a category during the pandemic.

Although the recognition of this impact has led to important awareness of the increase in targeted instances of racism, it has also produced intra-group hierarchies by privileging certain experiences over others. Through participants' experiences, I interrogate how "anti-Asian racism" is defined and deployed to highlight its limitations as a pandemic-specific concept. In doing so, I argue that the category itself requires critical re-thinking, not only as a response to pandemic-specific racism but as a framework for addressing the exclusion faced by other "Asian" communities in Canada.

A (Re)emergence of Anti-Asian Racism

The pandemic proved as a turning point in how "anti-Asian racism" was recognized in North America. Participants described seeing and hearing about the increase in fear and hostility towards the East Asian community (Gover et al., 2020). Additionally, many were aware of public narratives that positioned East Asians, a diverse group, being perceived as Chinese, and thus responsible for the spread of the virus (Reny & Barreto, 2022). These narratives circulated through media discourse and in political rhetoric, which participants described as creating an environment where racism against the East Asian community became normalized and accepted (Macdonald, 2021). This surge in anti-Asian sentiment produced a new wave of visibility, where many participants saw institutions, the media, and the government explicitly use "anti-Asian racism" in campaigns and initiatives to combat hate and provide support to the "Asian" community. When asked to define this racism, Harman, Kulwinder, and Sonia described it as being tied to the pandemic:

> Harman: I think anti-Asian racism is to describe the Chinese community's experiences during COVID-19.
>
> Kulwinder: I am not familiar with this before, but I hear first a lot on the news when there was COVID.
>
> Sonia: ...it's funny you ask because I had honestly not heard of it before until I was seeing all of these posts online, and even just watching the news at the start of the pandemic was when I was like, okay, there's this way to describe what's going on. So, I'd say anyone

> East Asian who isn't liked and experiences like, violence... like it's typically always tied to the pandemic.

As described above, the pandemic was both a turning point in the visibility of "anti-Asian racism" and their first encounter with it. The pandemic became the lens through which participants interpreted the targeted experiences of East Asians. Others connected their first encounter with the concept through news coverage and social media. As Sonia explained, she had not heard of the term prior to the pandemic:

> There was a lot about stopping Asian hate, and I just remember seeing a bunch of hashtags in relation to that, and then on CP24, it's like all they would use when they would talk about the attacks against anyone who looked Chinese, that there's this huge increase overall in anti-Asian racism.

These accounts point to how participants' recognition of the concept was through public discourse, where the availability of the concept in wider circulation shaped their interaction and understanding of "anti-Asian racism," rather than prior historical awareness of racism that was directed at the East Asian community. When asked whether they were aware of "anti-Asian racism" prior to the pandemic, Disha noted that:

> ...no one is saying that there was no racism against East Asians before the pandemic, but no one really called it that before like the way we do now. It's always related to the pandemic... they go together. That's what a lot of us associate it with.

Adding to this further, Zian believed:

> No one really heard of the term as much as they did during the pandemic, and then when you see something on like social media or even the news, a lot of others are seeing the same thing... #StopAsianHate became so popular... So, the two events became linked.

A reliance on public discourse brings forward two important dynamics: 1) it reveals the erasure of a long-standing history of "Asian" exclusion, and 2) it highlights how meaning(s) of racism are shaped through the media. Beginning with the first dynamic, public narratives surrounding "anti-Asian racism" during the pandemic presented experiences of discrimination as

something new, rather than as a new wave, which emphasizes how the historical exclusions previously discussed in chapter two ("Mapping the Problem"), such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, the "Yellow Peril" discourse, the internment of Japanese Americans and Canadians during World War II, were absent from dominant accounts of Canadian (and American) history (see Lee, 2015). This absence reflects the invisibilization of "Asian" racialization, serving to affirm the myth of progress by moving away from race in a multicultural society (see Coloma, 2013). The media's focus on "anti-Asian racism" and hate demonstrates how discourse shapes attention and memory, with resources on "Asian" experiences being largely mediated through these platforms (Hall, 1997). The pandemic did not create "anti-Asian racism" but produced an event where it became a key topic of discussion, as media coverage circulated the concept consistently. The erasure itself became visible through this contrast: the urgency of the pandemic forcing recognition additionally reveals how deeply anti-Asian histories have been silenced. As Kajal explains:

> Kajal: I will be honest and say that I did not know about their [East Asians] experiences of racism prior to the pandemic, let alone it being called anti-Asian racism... I think it's hard to separate the two though, because we saw it being used everywhere... and for a lot of us, we were actually seeing it happen in real time versus like WWII, where none of us was alive, so it's different. Now we can go back and say sure, these other events that happened in history are also examples of anti-Asian hate, but in the future if you ask me the same question again, I'm gonna say COVID.
>
> Ritika: Are there any other examples that come to mind when you think of anti-Asian racism aside from the pandemic, and the forced internment of Japanese Americans and Canadians during WWII?
>
> Kajal: Not that I can think of... the pandemic is obviously the most recent example, we've lived through it. It's not like in school they went into detail about Asian history, and so for a lot of us, we wouldn't turn back that far to look at what Asian hate is.

The significance of this erasure involves the distorting of the public's ability to recognize "anti-Asian racism" as an ongoing, structural process, rather than a temporary condition. By treating the pandemic as a unique event, mainstream discourse risks framing "anti-Asian racism" as a

temporary ‘crisis’ to be managed rather than a new addition to an ongoing system that has positioned “Asians” as threatening and foreign. Additionally, it highlights how the media’s contribution in racializing East Asians as threatening is not new: from press campaigns in the late 19th century on “Yellow Peril” to the wartime propaganda that justified the incarceration of Japanese immigrants, media discourse has reinforced these narratives for a long time (Chun, 2020; Oikawa, 2012). Kajal not being able to recall other examples of “anti-Asian racism” aside from the pandemic reveals the role that media framings play in defining what racism may look like, typically being framed around overt acts of violence or hostility rather than institutional forms, and as sudden, rather than ongoing (van Dijk, 1991). Participants’ definitions reflect this pattern, where news and social media highlighted the hostility and harassment tied to the pandemic, which resulted in “anti-Asian racism” being narrowly defined as related to hate incidents during the pandemic. Media coverage of the pandemic revealed the resurfacing of familiar stereotypes, making visible what had always existed: representations of exclusion surface during times of national insecurity and disappear as quickly when public attention shifts away. Thus, erasure is not simply about forgetting the past but about the repeated framing of racism as something out of the ordinary, so that its historical and systemic dimensions remain hidden.

Participants saw the media as a key facilitator in bringing visibility to the heightened levels of hostility and discrimination that East Asians experienced. However, at the same time, participants, like Sagar, noted the limitations of the concept based on its meaning through public discourse and media representations:

> During a video call with my friend... this was during COVID restrictions we couldn’t meet face-to-face... from China, explaining about the increase in racism against them... and I also thought, I have heard some stories about you know, like one Indian friend, he experienced racism during this time, but then my friend on the video call... go on to say that “it’s worse for us.” But racism is racism, right, so like there’s no need for any competition. But I didn’t say that to them.

As Sagar explains, when sharing a friend's experience, his friends on the video call dismissed the incident by stating that it was "worse" for them. However, he found that because there was a significant increase on discussions around East Asians especially, it contributed to a perception that other "Asian" communities were not being targeted to the same degree, creating a sense of "competition." Despite his reservations, Sagar did acknowledge feeling uncomfortable because he did not want to appear as minimizing their struggles. This interaction illustrates a tension between solidarity and difference within pan-Asian identities, where increased visibility of one subgroup can unintentionally generate feelings of exclusion for others (see Espiritu, 1992; Kibria, 2002). Sagar's reluctance to share his perspective on that comment points to the role that legitimacy and recognition play in silencing certain perspectives. Similarly, other participants noted that they were supportive of an overdue recognition of the East Asian experience during the pandemic, but they felt that there were severe limitations that continue to affect the experiences of other "Asian" groups. Many felt that the visibility of "anti-Asian racism" was tied narrowly to the pandemic and to the scapegoating of the East Asian community. For Disha, recognizing "anti-Asian racism" highlighted the pervasiveness of anti-Asian hostility and the selectiveness of state and media attention. Disha adds:

> ...It's great that there was so much government action and recognition during COVID to make sure that the experiences of racism against East Asians received the attention it deserved, nothing wrong with that, and it was obviously important because they were being targeted left and right, it was a lot ... but, what about us? If anything, we were targeted, too.

In the next section, I move into a discussion of the participants' experiences of racism during COVID-19. However, as participants will share, their experiences were not recognized as "anti-Asian racism" in the manner they were for East Asians. This demonstrates how intragroup hierarchies at times can shape the boundaries of pan-ethnic solidarity.

Shadows of Visibility: The "South Asian" Experience During COVID-19

Scholars such as Espiritu (1992) & Kibria (2002) have shown that pan-Asian identity is experienced unevenly, with certain sub-groups being privileged due to their larger presence and closer alignment with dominant representations of Asianness. In chapter four, ""South Asians" in Canada," participants noted how the category of "Asian" is often equated with East Asians, whereas the default image for "South Asian" is often Indian. These framings reflect social recognition and demographic patterns, highlighting how attention can be diverted away from the diversity present in "Asian" experiences when these identities are simplified. During the pandemic, these dynamics became more visible, where participants felt that their experiences were excluded from the broader narratives of "anti-Asian racism." It is within this context of absence that participants shared and reflected on their own positions, while navigating the silencing of their experiences that shaped this (in)visibility.

Kajal found that less attention was paid to the framing of the Delta co-variant that was said to have originated in India in comparison to the purported origins of the virus in China:

> ...Do you remember when Trump called it the "Chinese virus," and "kung flu" at one point. People were rightly outraged because it's another reason for racism against [East] Asians... it's obviously wrong. But where was the outrage like this when Delta comes out, you know, from, India, the media is like, linking it very clearly to India and Indians, but I don't remember the same level of being pissed off, like maybe it didn't fit the agenda of what's important to give attention to...

Kajal is referring to the emergence of the Delta B.1.617.2 variant first detected in India in October 2020 (Zhan et al., 2022). While acknowledging that Trump's racist remarks contributed to an increase in racism against the East Asian community, at the same time, the silence that followed with the Delta variant being associated with India generated little public outrage. She did not find that others outside of the Indian community had much to say about this variant in comparison to the connection being made with China. This illustrates how for Kajal, Indians were made to be

hyper-visible as carriers of the disease yet rendered invisible in the matter of their deserving of recognition and solidarity like the East Asian community. This difference in response reveals how certain expressions of harm gain attention while others are overlooked, often centred around political and cultural narratives. Silence works to position "South Asians" as an unquestioned site of contagion rather than as communities subject to racism. Maya echoes this: "East Asians were seen as causing the virus, but we Indians, were seen as its spreaders, nothing else." By highlighting this disparity, Kajal, alongside Maya, unsettle dominant accounts of "anti-Asian racism" that privilege East Asian experiences, drawing attention to the uneven recognition that shapes their visibility. Following this, Tushar explains:

> ...I know Delta was big, but there was also this other co-variant from South Africa too, yet India, aside from China, seemed to be singled out quite a bit... both countries have the largest number of people both there and here... interesting to see how different the response was to the one from South Africa.[114]

Tushar makes a comparison between China, India, and the emergence of the Beta B.1.351 variant that was detected in South Africa in December 2020 to show that for him, pandemic discourse did not treat all the various co-variants that emerged in the same manner. Whereas China was singled out originally, a focus on India with the detection of the Delta variant became more prominent in comparison to the Beta variant. This emphasis on China and India, for Tushar, reflects the fact that both countries are the most populated and make up a significant portion of the immigrant population here in Canada. In comparison, South Africa occupies a marginal place in Canadian society (in terms of visibility based on immigration numbers) which could be a contributing factor for why the Beta variant was not discussed in the same manner. Adding to this, Samar felt that:

> ...people see India as unhygienic, so the idea that there is a variant coming out of there for a lot of people just seems to make sense, because to them, India is not a clean place... and then with China, there's a lot of wet markets there that are unsanitary, so people tend to come up with reasons for why it could have originated in China, so it can be seen as less

[114] Interview translated from a mix of English and Punjabi.

surprising but at the same time for Indians, all Indians are seen as carriers, even if we are taking important steps to protect ourselves and those around us.

Building on earlier reflections on variant-related discourse and pan-Asian hierarchies, participants felt that their experiences were being continuously shaped by global narratives of disease, revealing how (in)visibility was negotiated in uneven and complex ways. Experiences of misattribution reflected broader patterns in media and public discourse, where India's Delta variant was linked to contagion and its members seen as potential carriers of the virus yet invisible when targeted. For example, in April 2021, *Journal de Montréal* published a picture of Justin Trudeau from his trip to India in 2018 on their front page, with the headline (translated from French), "the variant from India has arrived" (Nerestant, 2021).[115] Sonia reflects on this:

> When I saw that magazine cover on Twitter, I cannot believe no one was talking about it, even a lot of my friends had no idea until I sent it to them. I just don't remember many people even being upset about the fact that something like this could even be approved to then be circulated. Maybe the Indian community, but others I don't know... Did they end up taking it down?



Figure 6: *Journal de Montréal* Cover Page

[115] Image has been added to show the cover page being discussed by the participant, retrieved from CityNews Montreal (2021).

Adding further, a subheading (translated from French) asked, "So Justin, do we move quickly to cut links with India this time?" (CityNews Montreal, 2021). On the cover, Trudeau is wearing traditional Indian clothes and holding his hands together in prayer with a line that questions Trudeau's reluctance to stop all incoming flights from India (Nerestant, 2021). As Sonia asks, it was indeed taken down, but the editor-in-chief, Dany Doucet, refused to apologize, stating, "Our Prime Minister has often demonstrated a personal attachment to India, as evidenced by pictures of him that have circulated around the world during his official trip there... Other countries, like New Zealand have already taken the decision [to cancel incoming flights from India]" (Nerestant, 2021, para. 22). Nitin added: "I remember the stopping flights because it happened to my relative, but did they stop flights from the other countries too? Not like India."

In Québec, several politicians condemned this, including Liberal Leader Dominique Anglade, who called it 'very dangerous,' Benoit Charette, Québec's anti-racism minister who shared concerns about the 'consequences' of this, as well as Manon Massé, Québec Solidaire's parliamentary leader, who saw the cover page as "unnecessary" (para. 10-11). Massé added further that, "I think this front page doesn't put the focus in the right place... When we talk about the U.K. [variant], they don't use this kind of picture, this kind of expression" (para. 16-17).[116] Most underwhelming, critics noted, was Québec Premier François Legault's response: when meeting with reporters and asked about the front page, his response was, "Listen, we always have to be careful when we talk about certain communities," avoiding the question when asked whether the journal was careless (CityNews Montreal, 2021, para. 4). This uneven treatment illustrates how the origins of a variant shaped the response it received: participants found that the Delta variant's association with India casted them as carriers of the virus while rendering their experiences of

[116] Massé is referring to the Alpha (B.1.1.7) variant first detected in the U.K. in December 2020, with authorities warning that it was rapidly spreading (GVN, 2024).

overt racism less visible, thereby reinforcing the broader dynamics of racialized narratives during the pandemic.

Juhi describes when her cousin from the Philippines was arriving as an international student, many were quick to assume that he was coming from India because of his Indian heritage, warning her to "be careful:"

> In 2021 my cousin had to quarantine at a hotel with the federal government policy, get testing and all that. Each time he tests negative right, but then we got so many calls from people like "make sure he's in a separate room, don't get too close." It was funny because like, he's coming from the Philippines and they assumed he's probably coming from India and they're like "things are so bad in India, you're gonna get sick." And I thought, okay, but the virus is everywhere, and even though I did correct them, it shouldn't matter where he's coming from, like come on guys, it could happen to anyone.
>
> ...after a few weeks of him coming my husband and I started getting the symptoms, it was pretty bad... and everyone's like calling us, saying "see that boy definitely brought it, I told you so..." but we go grocery shopping, to work, it would've happened anyway... Do you know what the worst part is? This all came from my own [Indian] people...

This was interesting because Juhi's experience was composed of assumptions and warnings that came from members of her own community, highlighting how racialized ideas around disease can circulate both within the diasporic community and in broader society. Although she tested positive later, she acknowledged that it "would have happened anyway," and there was no definite way to know that it was due to the fault of her cousin. Such assumptions reinforced perceptions of Indians as being inherently more susceptible to being carriers of the virus, regardless of actual exposure to it. Furthermore, Samar returns to the connection between frequently imagining India as "unhygienic" and China's association with "unsanitary wet markets" that framed the high rates of infections as unsurprising. At the same time, the detection of co-variants such as the one in South Africa demonstrates how silence operates unevenly, where both attention and inattention become meaning-making processes. Narratives surrounding fears of disease reactivated colonial thinking that historically has framed the non-West as a site of disorder (Said, 1978). The association of

India as unhygienic and China's "wet markets" draws on colonial-era tropes that pathologized colonized populations and deemed them to be unsanitary and dangerous to the health of the Western world (Said, 1978; see Bhabha, 1994). This reaffirms already existing hierarchies between the civilized and 'clean' West and the 'contaminated,' non-West. Together, these varying dynamics reveal that pandemic discourse was not only about potential public health risk(s), but about reproducing racialized hierarchies through selective visibility and erasure.

Tensions around (in)visibility were evident in Brampton's[117] portrayal during the pandemic. Frequently labelled as a COVID "hotspot," it had high rates of infection, hospitalization, and mortality in comparison to other cities in the GTA (Gill et al., 2022). Additionally, the city was subject to increased criticism, with little attention being paid to the structural conditions that shaped these elevated rates of infection. Navneet, a resident of Brampton, expresses frustrations with the 'blame-game:'

> You're blaming the community for not listening to the COVID protocols and having social gatherings and saying that's their fault that rates are so high, but violating protocol is not just happening in Brampton, it's everywhere, but only Brampton is to blame, which has a lot of Indians, why?... There are bigger issues that are happening at the top, it's not us, it becomes a game where only one side seems to be at fault...

The blaming of an entire community for failing to adhere to safety measures during the pandemic obscures the lived realities of Brampton residents and reduces their narratives to that of cultural blame. As Navneet states, Indians were especially targeted despite other [non-Indian] communities breaking protocol themselves. This type of framing is important because it shifts the responsibility and blame for these high rates from systemic factors onto cultural ideas of individual or community failure (see Das Gupta & Nagpal, 2022). In doing this, it reinforces the notion of being non-

[117] Brampton is the primary focus for four reasons: 1) it has the highest number of Indian origin individuals in the GTA (over 60% as per the 2021 census, Government of Canada, 2025c), 2) most of the participants interviewed are from Brampton, 3) Brampton remained an important site of focus for most participants regardless of whether the participant was from that city and lastly, 4) Brampton was an epicentre of COVID-19 in the province.

compliant, rather than bringing to the forefront the implications of structural inequities that make them more susceptible to being potentially exposed to infection in the first place. These structural concerns are echoed by Juhi:

> Brampton is a city that will always be close to my heart, it's my home, and I will defend it... what we fail to understand is the statistics here that Brampton is like one of the fastest growing cities in the country. It's growing at a very fast pace, but it's also a city that does not have all of the requirements to function as a city... and I applaud the leadership at the city level who continue to request for the funding needed to really accommodate the rapid growth, the health minister, local organizations... so let's start looking into that, before pointing fingers at a particular community, who seems to always be targeted lately.

Juhi sees a clear misalignment between the rapidly growing city and the infrastructure needed to help it function, which during the pandemic, became starkly evident. Important public services such as healthcare and public transit have not expanded at the same rate as the city's population has, which has led to situations where particular communities have been disproportionately exposed to the virus more than others. For both Navneet and Juhi, their explanation for the increased infection rates is not evidence of non-compliance with regulations but an outcome of systemic factors where important services are underfunded and subsequently experience strain. At the same time, this narrative is complicated with Juhi "applauding" the city's leadership for pushing for funding to accommodate the city's growth, especially during the pandemic, when it was obvious that the healthcare system was underfunded. Gurpreet Malhotra of Indus Community Services, which provides health services and other support to seniors and new Canadians in their "preferred languages," highlighted that the Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), which was the area's local health authority, had the "poorest per-capital funding in the province" (Weikle, 2020, para. 4).[118] Additionally, Juhi referenced the efforts of the medical officer of health for Peel

[118] Juhi did not reference the LHIN but referred to it as the "health agency for our [Brampton] area," noting that in comparison to other major cities, Brampton does not receive the same level of funding. This CBC Radio article is used to expand on the participant's discussion. Malhotra explains in numbers that the average individual in Brampton

Region, Dr. Lawrence Loh, whose department was advocating for better worker protections, workplace inspections, and paid sick days in efforts to reduce the spread of the virus (Raza, 2021). This recognition disrupts dominant framings where Brampton was positioned as irresponsible and mismanaged, instead highlighting the city's proactive efforts to advocate on behalf of its residents. Juhi's account in explaining the high infection rates is a result of the actions of provincial and federal institutions, who have failed to provide adequate support at the local level.

Beyond the city's rapid growth and a need for more funding, participants emphasized the everyday working and living conditions that contributed to Brampton's high infection rates, which for many, were absent from discussions around the reasons behind the city's vulnerability. Disha, Jasdev, and Tanya referred to the front-line work of residents, such as working at the airport, factories, grocery stores, large distribution centres, and on the road as truck drivers:

> Disha: My mom works at the airport, we live very close to it, so it's not like she had the privilege of working from home like others.
>
> Jasdev: My brothers all drive a truck, like other family members, and so during COVID they were still meeting a lot of people when working, and then they would get sick but we have to work to put food on the table... I work in a bakery so I cannot stay home and work on the computer like my children.[119]
>
> Tanya: ...Brampton is an important city, more than people give it credit for, like, there's a lot of big distribution centres here. I have a lot of family working in these places. That nature of work, you're bound to catch the virus, there's so many people... People are shopping online right, to avoid going into stores, so it's those people, working hard to get those orders filled... We all need groceries, right, and those stores need employees to function.

Others, like Rohan, brought attention to the fact that many immigrants rely on public transportation and therefore were at greater risk of catching the virus due to crowded buses and limited alternatives for transportation: "it's not like bus drivers are sanitizing consistently, it's just not

receives around $900 for health services, but the average Ontario resident receives $2,000, which means that they are short in $1 billion in health care annually (Weikle, 2020).

[119] This excerpt was translated from Punjabi to English.

possible." Additionally, Priyanka highlighted the importance of healthcare workers: "...just like in other cities where healthcare workers were being applauded for putting themselves in danger every day, that appreciation should have been extended to Brampton." These various accounts provide an important perspective that goes beyond the "blame game," instead pointing to exposure as being tied to economic necessity rather than individuals' irresponsibility. Participants felt that the healthcare workers in Brampton were underrecognized compared to those in other cities, as the emphasis was on portraying the city as an anomaly, rather than acknowledging the everyday risks these workers faced. A significant portion of the city's population is employed in essential sectors such as manufacturing, warehousing, healthcare, and transportation, where remote work is not possible (see Thobani & Butt, 2022). As Disha, Jasdev, and Tanya explained, working from home was a "privilege" that most residents who were concentrated in precarious and essential forms of labour did not have. Their accounts draw attention to the important role that class differences play among "Asian" communities, complicating the model minority myth that is typically attributed to them. This myth erases the experiences of working-class immigrants who were at an increased risk of being exposed to the virus, and reinforced cultural blame by assuming that the rising infection numbers were a result of the inability of the community to follow protocol.[120] In this way, the model minority myth obscured class differences by assuming that the Indian community worked in privileged positions while deflecting attention away from important structural inequities in labour and public health protection(s).

Despite an overwhelming number of negative framings, Juhi brought forward important counter-narratives that drew attention to the successes associated with the Indian community that

[120] For example, media outlets often framed large Diwali gatherings and weddings as the cause of high infection rates. Op-eds published in the Toronto Star among others openly blamed South Asians communities, which South Asian medical experts argued does not capture the reality of their experiences (Vohra-Miller et al., 2020).

otherwise remained overshadowed in mainstream discourse during the pandemic. One example was India's vaccination rollout:

> At work and even just in conversations with people, there's this huge focus on India being a problem with the high infection rates and then people travelling there and coming back here and blah blah, but, I had to get up and defend in a way, like people are forgetting that India's had one of the most effective vaccine distribution processes... like during that time they are in a position where they can vaccinate, they were vaccinating people are a high speed, and they're sending it to other countries... we're talking about a country with over a billion people in comparison to like, what, like 37 or 38 million?... so why are we not talking about that kind of success?

This reflection complicates the image of India as being the origin of the Delta variant and having had high infection rates. Rather than simply being seen as a site of contagion, India emerged as a site where it manufactured and distributed (domestically and internationally) its own vaccine, and thus was able to help its residents and other countries.[121] This dimension was largely absent in mainstream discourse in Canada as the Global South is typically portrayed through crisis and deficit, and its achievements are often minimized or erased (Said, 1978). Additionally, Juhi added that Brampton became one of the most vaccinated cities after consistently being portrayed as culturally non-compliant:

> All throughout COVID, Brampton is like an epicentre, it's a hotspot, everyone's talking about it, right? We don't listen to the protocol and all that, but Brampton became one of the major cities where most residents were vaccinated, we worked together, helped each other... but again that kind of success doesn't mean much overall to others.

This success presents as evidence of community resilience and local networks and organizations working together to reach vulnerable populations, especially those experiencing language barriers.

[121] The two vaccines used in India during the pandemic were Covishield, developed by the University of Oxford, and Covaxin, developed by Bharat Biotech in association with the Indian Council of Medical Research and National Institute of Virology (Das et al., 2022). Beginning in January 2021, the Indian government provided COVID-19 vaccines around the world in a humanitarian initiative called *Vaccine Maitri* (translated to 'Vaccine Friendship') (Ministry of External Affairs, – Government of India, 2023). Several countries received the Indian-manufactured vaccine as a grant, commercially, and through the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX). These included the U.K., countries in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, as well as Canada (Ministry of External Affairs – Government of India, 2023).

However, this success was rarely reported on when compared to the intensity of reporting earlier in the pandemic. This selective visibility reflects a consistent broader pattern, where "South Asians" are hyper-visible when associated with risk but invisible when proving as resilient. Through these positive outcomes, Juhi challenges mainstream narratives to assert an alternative framing of India and the city of Brampton beyond cultural blame.

6.3 CONCLUSION

Participants' experiences highlighted both the stigmatization and resilience of the "Asian" community and brought attention to existing structural inequalities. Additionally, participants saw the racism they experienced as an opportunity for solidarity with other affected communities. However, as their accounts show, "anti-Asian racism" in public discourse and media reporting was primarily associated with East Asian communities, leaving them feeling that their experiences were left (in)visible. Attempts to build solidarity were constrained, as participants' efforts to legitimize their own experiences was difficult, given that there were divisions among who was being recognized and who was left behind. As a result, the pandemic highlighted the importance of racialized hierarchies and the uneven visibility that is present within broader anti-racism efforts. This makes it challenging to develop opportunities for potential collective action, as participants explain that it is important to first assert legitimacy around their own experiences. Participants, like Zian, further emphasized that although the pandemic may be 'over,' racism against the Indian community has not ended. Instead, many note that it has intensified over the past few years, with "levels never seen before." While much of this discussion has centred around the pandemic, the targeted racism of the community cannot be reduced to this event. Participants explain that experiences of hostility, frustrations with the government, and ongoing negative media representations have led to Indians being targets of suspicion and exclusion. To explore these

dynamics, the next chapter examines their accounts of post-pandemic racism to understand how it operates in wider social and cultural contexts and continues to shape their lives both in Canada and beyond.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE LIMITS OF RECOGNITION: RE-THINKING "ANTI-ASIAN RACISM"

7.1 INTRODUCTION

During the pandemic, experiences of racism against the "South Asian" community were obscured due to representations of "anti-Asian racism" as specific to the East Asian community. This selective recognition erases diversity within the "Asian" diaspora and produces uneven narratives of harm. Beyond formal recognition, this selectivity has real consequences for how "Asian" communities experience visibility and protection, alongside resource allocation within Canadian society. Policies that focus on particular experiences of "anti-Asian racism" shape which forms of racism are acknowledged and which remain obscured. To explore this, this chapter draws from 23 of 32 interviews conducted with participants who have experienced or witnessed incidents of racism, with participants referencing policies and initiatives designed to address "anti-Asian racism" to highlight both benefits and shortcomings. It demonstrates how structural inclusions intersect with public narratives, lived experiences, and state interventions to shape overlooked aspects of participants' everyday realities. By centring participants' experiences and perspectives, the chapter examines how they perceive their own experiences as illegible in mainstream understandings of "anti-Asian racism." Participants critically interrogate the seemingly inclusive "anti-Asian racism" initiatives that reproduce intra-group hierarchies, and question whose experiences are being captured within dominant conceptualizations of this concept. From a critical anti-racism perspective, this analysis questions whether "anti-Asian racism" adequately captures participants' experiences. It asks whether a new, alternative concept is necessary to better understand and account for the various identities of other "Asian" communities in Canada.

7.2 RACIALIZED STRUGGLE(S) BEYOND COVID-19

Over the past few decades, immigration from India to Canada has been steadily increasing with a particular surge in the past few years. This increase has led to more concentrated "South Asian" communities in major cities such as Toronto, Brampton, Calgary, and Vancouver (Gautam, 2024). This growing visibility, along with their economic and social contributions to Canadian society has coincided with heightened scrutiny and stereotyping. Public and media narratives have often framed "South Asians" as being culturally distinct or economically driven in ways that have attracted suspicion and resentment. Historically, "South Asian" immigrants have navigated a range of social and political challenges, including labour market barriers, systemic inequalities, and discriminatory immigration policies. Further, recent media portrayals and political discourse have reinforced negative perceptions of "South Asians," who typically have been portrayed as model minorities, but are now being treated as outsiders whose cultural practices are questionable. Despite their contributions to Canadian society, the "South Asian" community has become a particular target of racism in recent years. It is important to recognize that, just as the racism directed at "Asian" communities during the pandemic was a representation of a reactivation of racism and not a new phenomenon, racism against "South Asians" is an ongoing reality. For example, the aftermath of 9/11 contributed to a visible rise in Islamophobia, pointing to the importance of recognizing how these experiences are embedded within long-standing and systemic patterns rather than isolated incidents (Nagra, 2017).

The prominence of "South Asian" communities has overlapped with a noticeable increase in social scrutiny and discrimination. Racism exists in various spaces, but participants expressed concerns about the specific targeting of the Indian community in ways that are distinct from other "South Asian" groups. Structural factors such as immigration status and city of residence have

made this community more susceptible to biases and stereotypes which have further shaped the conditions under which they are treated and positioned within racialized hierarchies. Situating participants' experiences of racism within these broad dynamics reveals that they are not isolated events, but systemic and ongoing, reinforced by institutions and cultural narratives rather than confined to moments like the pandemic. This framing allows for a closer examination of how individuals experience and navigate these challenges daily, while emphasizing that their struggles are tied to larger structures that actively maintain social inequality at the expense of racialized persons. There are three areas of focus: 1) the surveillance in everyday life and social encounters, 2) social media, and 3) the targeting of international students from India.

Public Life Surveillance & Social Encounters

Participants shared experiences of dealing with racism in their everyday life, operating through otherwise ordinary, mundane interactions in public spaces. Frequently subjected to hostility, verbal harassment, and other forms of aggression, participants saw themselves being 'marked' as unwanted outsiders. These encounters are often dismissed or overlooked, revealing how exclusion is reinforced due to cultural and institutional disregard. Examination of these incidents reveals that the challenges they face are systemic and recurring. Several shared recent stories, both personal and those they had heard from friends, of encountering verbal assault while travelling on public transportation. Rohan recounts his experience:

> Rohan: Recently, I was travelling on the TTC and waiting for the subway, and this white man, he's drunk, and very loudly yelled at me, he's like "you f***ing Indians, you're all coming to Canada, get the h*ll out of here... you [Indians] are messing everything up." I was like great, this sucks cause I take the TTC like, everyday, for work, but actually I wasn't surprised when no one tried to help, I was of course taken aback, but I stayed quiet. I was scared.
>
> Ritika: Why weren't you surprised?

> Rohan: It's quite possible those around me thought the same as the drunk man but weren't going to say those thoughts out loud. They're probably blaming "us Indians" [uses air quotes] too.

The force of this particular encounter lies in the aggressive nature of the remark, "get the h**l out," and its language, "f***ing Indians," which carries exclusionary weight. By situating this rejection on public transit, an essential and shared service that thousands must use daily, the aggressor symbolically asserts control over who has the right to move freely in the city. For Rohan, these verbal assaults disrupt his everyday mobility, revealing how language can contribute to the normalization of hostility towards "South Asians" (see Essed, 1991). Kavya shared a similar experience on public transit where she was also spat towards:

> I was on the bus... and there's this [white] guy that got on and he was like, audibly disgusted, and like spat as he's walking towards me. Like, I was sitting, and he was looking at me with actual disgust, he didn't even try to hide it... in that moment, I was literally frozen, my body was like a million degrees. He's glaring and visibly angry simply because I am existing on the bus, and I'm like, questioning myself... Like what could this man do, if he wants to escalate his thoughts and feelings... when I got home, I cried, because I can't change how I look… I know racism isn't anything new, but lately it's felt different, and way more targeted... like it's never happened where someone is like disgusted with me simply because I exist in the same space...

In this example, the bus functions as a site where the Indian body is both hyper-visible and under constant surveillance. Spitting, an action that is forceful and socially unacceptable, transforms the racialized body into something that is to be actively rejected. This is one instance of the shift from subtle, ordinary microaggressions that regulate racialized bodies to more overt forms of aggression (Essed, 1991). Similarly, hostile looks operate as a form of silent politics, where social boundaries are enforced without a need for words. This nonverbal interaction illustrates how affect circulates in public spaces to shape how bodies are positioned and policed (see Ahmed, 2004a). Taken together, both experiences show how public spaces function as sites where language and perception regulate racialized bodies. In Rohan's experience, verbal aggression makes this process clear through the language used to frame him as an outsider, threatening his right to occupy and

move freely in shared spaces. In Kavya's encounter, receiving hostile looks and spitting render her body as hyper-visible, shaping how she is positioned and interpreted without the use of words. These dynamics regulate mobility and (re)enforce boundaries and hierarchies to demonstrate that their exclusion operates through both the act of being seen and the act of being spoken to. By tracing the role of language and perception in everyday encounters, it is evident that public spaces are active sites where belonging is contested and policed.

A similar experience emerged for Samar on Bay Street, the centre of Toronto's Financial District:

> ...there's always like, unfortunately, some homeless people in this area, and this guy started spitting near me. He's like, "Paki, Paki, Paki, go back to your country." I ignored him, and walked away... but I've probably been called that over 3-4 times now over the past few years... I wasn't really reactive or anything because I'm comfortable in my skin and you can say whatever you want, it's a free country, and I don't need to prove my right to be here, but I think it was just a bit interesting to see so many people walking by and not one checks to make sure I'm okay, and honestly, I think I saw some people even smile as this was happening. Like come on, it's Bay Street!

Historically, "Paki" emerged in the U.K. as a shortened version of "Pakistani" to mark "South Asian" immigrants as foreign and unwelcome, and shifted to become increasingly derogatory, directed at anyone of "South Asian" descent, regardless of their nationality (De Sondy, 2013). Over time, the term has been used in other countries and maintains its function as a tool for exclusion. Although Samar did not respond because he felt no need to, he did acknowledge the "deeply painful history of the word Paki," and that it was "inappropriate to use." However, the reactions of those passing by, either doing nothing to help or smiling, reveals how the explicit use of racist language is normalized even in professional, "elite" spaces. This silent adherence to racism is harmful and contributes to its normalization. Samar notes that Bay Street "is literally Wall Street, so you'd think people are sophisticated and professional." However, the fact that some smiled to the racial slur signals an unspoken approval, showing the operation of subtle, silent

racism, where exclusionary attitudes persist quietly, even under the façade of civility and high social status. From a critical anti-racism perspective, this shows that racism is not always about intention, but that practices and actions can be racist because of their effects (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Dei, 1996). Hence, one can be influenced by racism without being openly racist themselves. The smile, although it may not be labelled as an overt sign of racism, does result in an effect that leads to Samar to view both silence and smiling as agreement.

Following this encounter, Sweta shared her experiences, highlighting one that particularly stood out to her, where she witnessed a "visibly Indian" security guard being verbally assaulted:

> Recently I was at the Shoppers [Drug Mart] by my work, and actually this really pissed me off, but there is a person getting trained to be a security guard by his manager, and this trainee is presenting as Indian.[122] The manager was white and basically this [white] woman comes and she was like "you dirty piece of s**t, go home," and she kept yelling that so loudly to the point where he [the security guard] told her to leave, and she kept yelling in his face as she's walking out. Then I walked up to him and I was like "I am really sorry this happened and it's not cool," and he was like, "no, it's okay." What does the manager say when he did nothing to help, "Oh, yeah, this stuff happens, they're just crazy homeless people, no big deal..." and I could tell that he [security guard] felt uncomfortable and we just smiled at each other. And then I said to the manager like "no actually it is a big deal, it's racist," and this manager just clearly did not care.

This incident illustrates how racism is enacted through the quiet reinforcement of structures that provide a space for hostility without consequences. The attack on the security guard trainee invokes a familiar narrative that Sweta aligns with "not being fully white," where full belonging is denied regardless of the contributions made (see Fanon, 1967). This framing resonates with longstanding hierarchies where whiteness is equated with national legitimacy, and racialized bodies are treated as conditional. The manager's dismissal of the incident – "it's no big deal" – demonstrates how authority figures and institutions minimize these incidents by refusing to intervene. The manager reinforces a social order where the comfort of the majority outweighs the

[122] Sweta later confirmed that the individual was indeed of Indian origin once she spoke with him after the incident.

respect of the Other. In this sense, racism does not deviate away from ordinary aspects of everyday life but instead becomes part of it (see Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Additionally, it signals the constant approval and renegotiations involved in systemic racism when examining this in micro-level interactions. The manager, who is in a power position in comparison to the security guard, plays a role in dismissing the behaviour, and in the process, reproduces structures of authority and control. For Sweta, the silence was inappropriate, and she felt compelled to approach the trainee to offer an apology "because no one else was going to." This act of recognition is a form of counter-storytelling, where challenging the institutional narrative of minimizing this experience is an attempt to validate it as significant and "a big deal" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). At the same, it reveals the uneven burden that is placed on Sweta to name harm when authority figures decline to do so.

Across these experiences, the repeated remarks to "go back to your country" and the use of Indian as an insult demonstrates how racism positions Indianness as foreign and outside of the bounds of (full) belonging. At the same time, surveillance shows how participants' accounts become records of how their bodies are monitored and marked as out of place. This everyday surveillance of Indianness reinforces a structure of being constantly watched and subsequently judged. These experiences are not confined to physical spaces but are intensified and reproduced on social media platforms. Participants discuss how social media has amplified racist speech through its targeting of Indianness.[123]

Social Media as a Site for Hostility

Social media plays an important role in circulating and intensifying racism that is reinforced by others. Participants explain that platforms such as Instagram and TikTok create environments of

[123] Participants focus exclusively on Indianness, and not South Asianness, as they find the online targeting to be directed to towards Indians, or anyone who looks Indian.

hostility where racist stereotypes and messages are circulated, normalized, and reproduced to reach larger audiences. Its users play an important role by commenting, reacting, and forwarding content deemed racist. Despite seemingly harmless, this contributes to a digital culture where Indianness is consistently marked as unwanted. In this way, social media users do not simply witness racism, but actively participate in its circulation. To understand these dynamics, Varinder, Kavya, and Sonia shared their experiences:

> Varinder: ...On Instagram I kept on seeing like Brampton referred to as like Singhdale, and then anyone who looks Indian is being called Pajeet[124] simply because it sounds Indian, and I just think how normal it has become... and then you'll see comments under these posts with Indians with all of these likes and stuff, which means everyone is using it without realizing how problematic and racist it is. And then anytime you see something related to Brampton, it's like "The Pajeets are back at it again in Singhdale, DEPORT."
>
> Kavya: ...I'm on TikTok a lot, and people are quick to be racist towards Indians, like it's second nature, and then it could be just any sort of video on immigration to Canada... People will be like "well, that's too many people from India. Deport them, get rid of them, send them back." It becomes relevant racism, right?... you'll have thousands of likes, comments, through personal or fake accounts, and when you watch one video, more pop up.
>
> Sonia: As an avid social media user, I will tell you that it really only takes one comment to start the trail, it gains attention, people reply to it, like it, repost, and they gain more followers for basically being racist because others agree with them... someone posts a video about Indians dancing at Yonge-Dundas and you can bet that the comments and likes will all say to deport them because Indians are ruining everything. There's a lot of power to it because the accountability isn't there, just create a fake account and post whatever you want.

Beyond individual use, all three participants note how social media algorithms tend to reward content that drives engagement, which means that visibly racist posts tend to spread more widely. As they describe, one racist comment can lead to thousands of likes, replies, and shares, which shows how algorithms can magnify incidents of hostility and racism into content that becomes viral. Additionally, social media platforms function as sites of digital surveillance, where

[124] Pajeet is used as a mock Indian name, first emerging on 4chan (Sandhu, 2024).

Indianness is made hyper-visible, while accountability for those spreading hate and hostility is limited. Working together, user participation and social media features create a reinforcement system where online hostility is normalized and circulated, making racism central to digital interactions. Social media reinforces similar patterns of targeting and marginalization that participants describe offline, now extending into a digital environment. Beyond the digital sphere, the central role that structural precarity plays offline, especially regarding international students from India, highlights how structural issues are understood.

Marginalization of International Students

Participants described international students from India facing a particular form of marginalization. While arriving to Canada in efforts to seek an education, they have been singled out in everyday interactions and public discourse as troublemakers or taking advantage of systems such as housing. This racialized scapegoating fails to consider that their precarious situations are largely a result of structural exploitation by landlords, institutions, and governments, rather than their own failures, as Tanya explains below.

> I do feel insanely bad for them, you're coming to a new country, most of them alone. And any college or university student will try to hang out with others their own age, especially when you don't really any family, and so because they travel in larger groups, they're targeted by others with the assumption that they're probably causing a ruckus or doing something bad... and I know we are facing issues with housing and stuff but they've been sold a dream, frauded by immigration people and even our government, where we say like yeah, come to Canada, to our universities, and it's like a school in a little office in a strip mall, not some huge university they probably got on the information pamphlet, but only the students are blamed, not the people or system who brought and welcomed them here first.

Tanya highlights how Indian international students are scapegoated for their increased visibility in public spaces, especially in an "immigrant dense place like the GTA." Travelling in groups, a strategy she sees as a necessity due to a lack of family networks, is viewed as disruptive or suspicious. Here, racism emerges based on how their presence is interpreted by others. She

connects this scapegoating to a systemic issue, where students are drawn to Canada by misleading immigration consultants and recruitment campaigns by colleges [in Canada], yet when their realities fail to match the promises made, it is the students who bear the blame, not the structures that misled them. Similarly, speaking as someone who arrived as an international student in 2018 and now holds permanent residency, Ishaan extends this critique into conversations around housing:

> I have people talking about how the Indian students all live together in these tiny basements and go against laws, but what about landlords, who should know the law, go against it to get more money. No one wants to share a small basement space with 10 other people, but they don't have the choice, so we need to also look at the system [government], and others, because there is too much assumption on students.

Public narratives around Indian students living together in a basement frame overcrowding as evidence of cultural irresponsibility or disregard for Canadian laws. Yet, as Ishaan explains, landlords exploit students and take advantage of their precarious situations by violating housing regulations to maximize their own profit. The problem lies in structural exploitation and evading accountability, while these students are stigmatized for conditions that they did not choose. This deflection allows those in positions of power to continue to profit from students' precarity without any scrutiny. In public discourse, Tanya explains that Indian students being framed as "disruptive and non-compliant" to Canadian rules and regulations, hides structural inequalities. This scapegoating becomes central to their racialization, marking them as a problem, rather than as young individuals seeking an education and making a life for themselves, like others arriving from beyond India.

Across public spaces, social media, and in institutional contexts, participants explain that racism targeting Indians specifically operates in interconnected ways. Participants experience constant surveillance in their daily encounters, being marked as outsiders through verbal harassment and social exclusion, often left unchecked by authorities. On social media, these

dynamics are amplified with the circulation of hostile messages and stereotypes that normalize the targeting of Indians. For international students from India, the pressures they experience intersect with structural exploitation, where they are scapegoated for social challenges and housing that are produced by landlords, a lack of regulation, and misleading immigration practices. Priyanka also comments that there are international students from India "who have been coming for years," yet this intense focus on them within the past few years, "I'd say like maybe 2022 onwards," has resulted in them becoming a frequent focus of blame and discrimination for structural related issues. Priyanka notes that while there are students arriving from other countries, the "greater amount from India are settling in like the big cities" which means that "increased presence = more of them to blame." Similarly, Sonia explains that the issue is not that Indian international students were not experiencing racism before, but that "recently it has become more direct, overt, and acceptable… it's not about international students, because that would include other countries, it's about the Indian ones." Together, these various spheres reveal that racism is embedded in everyday social perceptions, digital spaces, and material conditions. At the same time, although racism from outside of the community shapes participants' experiences, they also note tensions within the community itself. Disha, who arrived to Canada as a baby, expresses a need to differentiate herself from newer immigrants, framing them as separate from us and "sometimes problematic as they [newer immigrants] are giving us a bad name." It is important to understand these intra-community dynamics as they reveal how marginalization can be reinforced from within, complicating the social positioning of new immigrants, and shaping the networks available to them.

7.3 BETWEEN SOLIDARITY & SEPARATION: INTRA-COMMUNITY BOUNDARIES

Thus far, the focus has been about racism from outside of the community, but participants additionally highlighted tensions within the community itself, where established community

members often differentiated themselves from the newer immigrants. These distinctions reflect concerns surrounding reputation, social status, and perceived differences in language, economic position, and behaviours. Examining these intra-community dynamics will reveal how newer immigrants face marginalization both from wider society and from their own community, which complicates the support and belonging available to them. Participants spoke about this difference, raising concerns about how newer immigrants are not integrating into Canadian society. Established community members, like Harman, who has lived in Canada since 2004, described being frustrated because newcomers were drawing unwanted attention to the community by not assimilating into the "Canadian way of life." These accounts reveal how intra-community dynamics can reproduce broader narratives of racialization and respectability, which Sati notes is necessary to maintain her social status and avoid being associated with "problematic behaviours."

For example, six participants saw themselves as different from newer immigrants because they (or their parents) had worked hard to assimilate into the Canadian culture by learning English, securing employment, and adapting to social norms. Their accounts positioned established immigrants as responsible and respectable, while newer immigrants were disruptive or as Nitin describes, "not feeling the need to integrate." This distancing reveals how concerns about reputation and belonging shape intra-community dynamics, as participants actively sought to separate themselves from behaviours they believe were bringing negative attention to the wider community. Varinder shares the example of his parents:

> My parents came here over 30 years ago, they worked hard to build a life for themselves, learned English, gave us a good life, they've done everything right, learned the rules, and now you have these new immigrants coming, and we all as a collective, have gotten a bad name. Everyone hates us, and I think it's unfair for us to be looped in with them, when we are different from them.

Varinder's account illustrates how established immigrants draw boundaries to protect their reputation to reinforce respectability. By emphasizing his parents' sacrifices, he positions his parents as responsible, while implicitly framing newcomers as being disruptive to the overall community's image. Harman and Navneet extend this further:

> Harman: I think these issues are coming more because maybe they are missing the guidance, maybe they don't understand the rules here, so we need some classes for them so they can learn like standing in line, not pushing, not being loud in the public spaces. But then also, I am also an immigrant, I made the effort to learn about the rules here and all that, so they can too. And these are simple basic rules too, not complicated.
>
> Navneet: I mean, my parents came back in the 90s, and they learned the rules...I feel like they [new immigrants] don't quite understand the social rules and social etiquette... which leads to things just being negatively portrayed in the media and then that just expedites a lot of negative stuff about Indians in general, old or new... I'm not like saying it's their fault, but maybe there needs to be more education on the various rules of our society.

As they explain, assimilation is framed as a practical and moral obligation, where there is an expectation for newcomers to adhere to social norms; failure to do so is seen as threatening to both the respectability of the individual and the collective community. These show that distinctions between "us" and "them" are not generational but also behavioural, emphasizing everyday manners and civility. Tanya extends these concerns to cultural visibility:

> There is a fine line between integration and taking over and not assimilating. Indian culture is being celebrated which is great, we have bus ads in Brampton that are written in Punjabi, people celebrating Diwali. All of this is because of the sacrifices our parents and older immigrants went through to make happen. But they assimilated, they were respectful to the Canadian culture, and never tried to take over, and see, that's the problem. Those coming to the GTA, especially Brampton, see so much catered to them. They feel like they can act the way they do at home, and that rubs me the wrong way. It makes me mad that people do not know how to respect the Canadian culture while practicing their own, it's all about balance... and now our parents and even we must work twice as harder, to make sure they are distanced from the new ones.

Tanya shows the transition of assimilation from an individual to collective responsibility, where established immigrants feel compelled to manage the behaviours of newcomers to protect the

community's reputation. It highlights the reinforcement of social hierarchies and the complex pressures faced by both groups of immigrants. Extending this further, Navneet explains that:

> There are some aspects of integration that these new immigrants need to know because it makes the rest of us look bad, so if they want to live here, be part of society, they should learn... I think partly the issue is that depending on the area they have immigrated to or like, gravitate towards, that they feel they can hold onto traditions, cultures, rules from back home and apply them here, like that just doesn't realistically align with regulations and rules here.

On the surface, Navneet emphasizes that newcomers' behaviours can negatively impact the reputation of the overall community. On a deeper level, she illustrates how established immigrants feel responsible for their own assimilation and a need to guide newcomers, which reinforces intra-community hierarchies. It shows assimilation as a collective obligation and how respectability operates to maintain social legitimacy. While she articulates these tensions broadly, Khushi sees these dynamics playing out in everyday interactions. She shares a recent experience:

> One time I was watching a movie and waiting for the bus, and I notice this guy with his friends driving by me slowly and stop to stare directly at me, then go around in circles, and playing really loud Punjabi music. I can see why people are upset about the lack of social awareness and learning from social cues because this type of behaviour is very rude and inappropriate... part of me wants to be sympathetic because they are coming to a new country, it takes time to adjust. But if they aren't going to make an effort to learn about the rules then they can just go back... sometimes, I don't feel like I belong because things have changed, it's a lot of pressure... and I was born here, but I have to work harder to show that I'm not like other Indians... the hate, it's justified, just please don't include me in that!

This experience provides an example of the similar pressures Navneet describes, where extra pressure is placed on established immigrants to model proper behaviour when newcomers are seen to be breaking social rules. Khushi describes feeling frustrated and worried about being judged by association with the group. Saying that the "hate is justified" shows how established immigrants are expected to follow the rules while keeping an eye on newcomers and protecting the reputation of their community. However, these pressures are not limited to established immigrants.

Interestingly, Naina, who initially arrived as an international student in 2018 and now holds permanent residency, wanted to differentiate herself from newcomers:

> I did everything right, I finished my studies, got my work permit, found a job, got PR, learned the rules. But others doing wrong things, they don't have a purpose, they just care that they have freedom with no parents, and now here, they are taking advantage of that freedom... and these actions are causing problems for me. Things are really bad, no respect for the country, they [new immigrants] have ruined everything. Like, you cannot do that here, so I am not surprised we are being portrayed badly because look at the behaviour of these people... but it's not fair when I am working hard to make a name for myself but then everyone just sees me and the whole community as a problem, too, so I don't want to be associated with them.

As Naina explains, she "did everything right" and sees her efforts as markers of deserving respect, while portraying others as being disruptive and careless. Her frustrations reflect fears that the actions of some may affect how all newcomers are perceived, which leads to her wanting to distance herself. This illustrates the dual burden of maintaining personal achievements while managing the reputation of the community, as Khushi similarly shares. These internal tensions are best understood in relation to the growing divide between newer and established immigrants, intensified by heightened public scrutiny and racialized discourse surrounding immigration from India, and concerning behaviours of newer immigrants. Participants express anxieties about being judged and associated with newer immigrants, who are framed in public narratives as problematic. In this context, these internal boundaries are seen as a response to increased (external) racism against the Indian community, as participants work to protect their social status through distancing themselves and behaving 'appropriately.' Although there are social and economic differences between established and newer immigrants (such as length of time in Canada to establish oneself), current tensions intensify these divisions by racializing difference to shape how broader hostility against Indians is negotiated and navigated within the community itself.

While these examples illustrate the pressures of intra-community policing, there were reflections on how settling in predominantly co-ethnic communities, especially Brampton, shape

integration dynamics. Newer immigrants, like Daler, who arrived in 2015 and Kulbir, who arrived in 2018, described the supportive aspects of co-ethnic communities:

> Daler: Before I come to Canada I was scared, because how will I adjust, but then I come here [to Brampton] and there are so many other Punjabis. So I can speak my language, go to work, even at the stores there are items written in Punjabi, so it helps me.
>
> Kulbir: It's nice, makes it feel like I never left my home [in Punjab], this [Brampton] is little Punjab for me. I don't have to learn English properly because I am not moving somewhere else when everything can be the same for me here.

These examples demonstrate how newcomers are provided with a sense of comfort when adjusting to a new country. However, as participants note, there is no need to learn the English language or the values and rules in "little Punjab." Tushar, who has lived in Canada since 1972, notes that co-ethnic communities may lessen the perceived necessity for newcomers to assimilate: participants who have been in Canada for decades might perceive that the proximity of newcomers relying heavily on spaces where no change is needed reinforces their responsibility to model appropriate behaviour to uphold the overall community's reputation. As Tushar explains, "The newcomers don't bother to learn the rules here, but it's not my job to teach them... no one taught me, I came and learned myself, and I adjusted. So why do others expect us to be the teachers?"[125] This highlights a tension between adapting to a new society while trying to preserve cultural traditions. Although belonging to a familiar community can provide comfort and support, it is accompanied by pressures to uphold respect and reinforces social hierarchies.

Together, these various accounts reveal a layered understanding of life, where many spoke about newcomers' behaviours as concerning and negatively impacting the community's reputation. Established immigrants emphasized their own efforts to assimilate, highlighting a distinction between their hard efforts and distancing themselves from those perceived as having

[125] Interview conducted in a mix of English and Punjabi, and some parts are translated.

failed to do the same. Naina, who herself arrived as an international student, felt a need to learn and mirror acceptable behaviours to create distance to maintain her legitimacy as a member of the community. Others found comfort and support within these communities. Overall, these accounts illustrate how integration is both an individual and collective process negotiated in everyday behaviours, social hierarchies, and community expectations. At the same time, efforts to assimilate or maintain cultural roots are also influenced by class, where newer immigrants may not necessarily have the same knowledge of Canadian social norms or have access to limited resources needed to work towards assimilation. In contrast, established immigrants may be in a more stable economic and housing situations and use their community networks over time to assimilate.

All participants agreed that there has been a noticeable increase in racism directed towards Indians in particular. Vikrant states that "...if you look Indian to someone, if or you're South Asian and look Indian, assume that you will be targeted," while Disha notes, "There is a specific community being targeted [Indians], and it only seems to be getting worse." However, despite this shared recognition, participants felt that this racism was not being treated as a societal concern. They described their experiences as being minimized or rendered less visible, especially in comparison to other racialized groups. During the pandemic, participants felt that "anti-Asian racism" was centred around the East Asian community, and their experiences of racism were not captured as incidents of "anti-Asian racism." Participants note that this extends beyond the pandemic, and they continue to face social exclusion and public scrutiny. This lack of acknowledgement for Naina is "frustrating" and raises concerns about the limits of existing frameworks for understanding "anti-Asian racism" beyond the pandemic. Vikrant, Priyanka, and Kajal share their thoughts:

> Vikrant: The problem is that everyone seems to agree that we are the problem for the state of our country... and that's why it's so normalized, no one cares about racism when we are the victims. We're not wanted, people want us to go back... why just us?
>
> Priyanka: During COVID, everyone is talking about anti-Asian racism, it's the hot topic, but we also faced racism. Now we're past the pandemic, but it's still us experiencing racism, so where are the #StopAsianHate people now?... we aren't falling under that category, so what, there's no more anti-Asian racism because no more COVID?
>
> Kajal: It's quite interesting because there were specific measures from the government during the pandemic but now there's nothing, we're all technically looped under anti-Asian, and I think that is doing more harm than good because in practice we're excluded.

Beyond experiences of hostility, participants were concerned that their experiences were dismissed or ignored, and in many cases not recognized as a form of "anti-Asian racism." In situating anti-racism within the role of the state, public recognition towards racism is not always framed as a problem simply because it exists (Kyriakides, 2008). For recognition, racism must be framed as a social problem by "claims-makers," such as politicians, activists, and the media, who bring attention to it (Kyriakides, 2008). Anti-racism is shaped by how it is defined and what needs solving. The state acts as a key player in shaping these definitions by determining which forms of racism are addressed and neglected, which produces a paradox of the anti-racist state, where institutions may seemingly promote equality through multiculturalism inclusion while continuing to maintain structural inequalities and negotiating whose experiences of racism are being recognized (Kyriakides, 2008). This conceptual framing around recognition is important to examine the meaning of "anti-Asian racism," especially given that there is an imbalance in how "South Asian" experiences are represented and understood within dominant narratives. This imbalance became especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic, where "anti-Asian racism" was widely framed as a phenomenon affecting East Asian communities, despite there being evidence of violence and negative framing against "South Asians."

7.4 VISIBLE IN NAME, INVISIBLE IN PRACTICE

As identified in the previous chapter, participants felt excluded from responses to "anti-Asian racism" during the pandemic. However, equally important to this is their critique of this very framework. Although the category is intended to capture the diverse experiences of "Asian" communities, participants find that "Asian" has become closely tied to the visibility of East Asians, and the lack of recognition contributes to this lessened visibility. This narrow understanding has left them questioning whether this concept can adequately capture their realities, especially in a post-pandemic world. In discussing these concerns, participants point to the risk of a framework that claims inclusion yet produces invisibility. In what follows, participants share their insights on the meanings and limits of "anti-Asian racism" as a conceptual lens, both within the context of the pandemic and beyond.

As discussed in the previous chapter, when asked to define "anti-Asian racism," many participants immediately connected the concept to the pandemic and the East Asian community. Similarly, Nitin, Disha, Maya, and Priyanka describe below the concept as something they had noticed and heard about being discussed in relation to the pandemic, which reinforces their perspective that public recognition of the concept is context-specific and is (re)activated during particular moments:

> Nitin: Automatically, my mind is going to the pandemic, and to the Japanese, Korean, and the Chinese people... I never heard about it the way I did during the pandemic, and I don't think I've really heard the term being used since the end [of COVID-19].
>
> Disha: If you separate COVID from anti-Asian racism, then anti-Asian racism doesn't exist for most people...
>
> Maya: No one is denying that racism against East Asians didn't exist before, but in today's times, the pandemic had a huge impact on everyone's understanding of it, so it's hard to see one without the other.

> Priyanka: I saw it appearing the most during that time, politicians talking about it, all over the news... but it's disappeared just as quickly.

Participants experience "anti-Asian racism" and the pandemic as mutually constitutive; this interdependence highlights that racialized categories are not neutral, but shaped by broader historical and social contexts that influence whose experiences are recognized. This reveals the limitations of pan-ethnic frameworks, where categories may appear to be formally inclusive, but in practice are centred around particular understandings. These reflections demonstrate how the pandemic highlights and constrains understandings of anti-Asian racism, revealing that there are limitations to the concept in practice when capturing the specificity of other "Asian" experiences, as discussed by Varinder and Sweta:

> Varinder: Technically, the government uses Asian origins and so then that's like their way to include all of us, right? But also, in practice it's not like that. The way it's represented points to East Asian, not South, or other Asians, so then anti-Asian racism doesn't actually include our experiences of racism... I certainly don't see it that way.

> Sweta: ...it's hard to move beyond the pandemic and say that my experiences of racism fit under anti-Asian, because in practice, it really doesn't, it's centred around East Asians, not South Asians, for so many years and now it's supposed to automatically just apply to us?

In these accounts, both highlight a tension between the formal inclusion of "Asian" and the practical exclusion of it. They recognize that state definitions of "Asian" intend to encompass "South Asians," but that in practice, the category is centred around the experiences of East Asians. Within this disconnect it becomes evident that bureaucratic inclusion does not necessarily translate into social recognition, as dominant understandings of "Asian" remain narrowly imagined. Participants, like Sweta, thus questioned the framing of the concept and found that the pandemic reinforced this East Asian-focus and felt it inadequate that the concept "automatically apply to us."

Together, these reflections demonstrate how "Asian" as a pan-ethnic category produces (in)visibility, where there exists a contradiction between its formal and practical meaning.

Participants felt that their experiences should formally be captured within "anti-Asian racism," but that the centring of East Asian experiences and its connection to the pandemic meant that their realities were rarely being acknowledged, let alone represented. This contradiction, beyond absence, points to the reproduction of hierarchies within pan-ethnic categories, where some groups are made visible in comparison to others. Thus, "South Asians" are made visible by name, where state recognition and demographic labels position them as a sub-category of "Asian" – i.e., of 'Asian origins' – but less visible in practice because it fails to recognize their specific forms of racism. This points to the limits of "anti-Asian racism" as a framework, as it attempts to address a diverse range of experiences, the concept re-inscribes the very exclusions it is meant to challenge.

Several participants emphasized how "anti-Asian racism" rendered their experiences invisible, while others argued that the framework itself needed to be re-worked. Even if they were to be formally included, some felt that their experiences of racism differed from what the East Asian community encountered during the pandemic. As Priyanka explains, the problem was not simply the exclusion, but misrepresentation, as the language of "anti-Asian racism" did not account for the "targeting." As discussed below, their reflections draw important attention to the uneven ways that racism manifests within the category, and the difficulties of fitting diverse experiences into a framework that is exclusionary.

"It's Not the Same Thing:" Different Realities of "Anti-Asian Racism"

Varinder argued that the racism directed at them operates in distinct ways that cannot be neatly aligned with pandemic-driven hostility:

> We saw during the pandemic, right, like most of the hatred towards them [East Asians]... whereas the reasons for racism against Indians, not even South Asians altogether, but the hatred for Indians stems from concerns over us overtaking everyone else, it's economic... Like we've all seen the videos of 100+ international students lining up for jobs or whatever, and people will complain that they are taking the jobs of Canadians... and then you have

> social media pages like 6ixBuzz[126] complaining about Indian people dancing at Yonge and Dundas and then most comments agree with the racist stuff, saying like, "yeah deport and send them all back, stop immigration" because they're ruining the culture and image of Canada. ... but, it's my home, I'm born here... it's different from pandemic racism, it's like very hard to adequately describe the two as being on the same level, they simply aren't.

Varinder describes how accusations towards Indians "overtaking everyone else" and "taking the jobs of Canadians" was not about contagion, but about numbers, where visible groups of Indian international students lining up for work became symbols of economic competition, while social media further amplified these images to legitimize resentment and calls for deportation and ending immigration. Similarly, cultural practices, such as students dancing at Yonge and Dundas were framed as disruptive and excessive. Varinder asserts his belonging, "it's my home, I'm born here," but recognizes that public discourse continues to mark him as an outsider simply because he belongs to this community, revealing how belonging can be withdrawn due to visibility (see Tuan, 1998). Ishaan brings attention to the uneven ways their struggles were institutionally recognized:

> During the pandemic there was a lot of talk about measures taken to combat anti-Asian racism, yet that same government is quiet now that it's us experiencing violence and hate. So, you simply cannot include us under anti-Asian, it's not the same thing.

To Ishaan, the problem is not simply being miscategorized, but the selective silence by the government, where measures to combat "anti-Asian racism" during the pandemic did not extend to them during or beyond the pandemic. This frustration points to the existence of a racialized hierarchy that shapes which communities are seen as legitimate victims and worthy of action (see Ahmed, 2012). Thus, inclusion under a broad category does not translate into material protection, leaving him feeling structurally neglected.

[126] 6ixBuzz is a Toronto-based social media account primarily on X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram providing local news coverage and information on viral content. However, it has faced criticism for spreading misinformation and accused of perpetuating racism, particularly anti-South Asian sentiments (Wex, 2025).

Naina draws attention to the paradox of being both recruited and then once no longer needed, being rejected:

> ...there was a lot of us that came in a small time period but that's because the government needed us. We came to help with economy, most of us are just trying to work hard, but I think other people maybe think we are all bad... but there are bad people in every community, every culture. But it is only the Indians everyone wants out...

Here, Naina frames immigration as a state-engineered process designed to meet labour demands, yet the same immigrants, primarily from India, who were initially invited were then blamed for the conditions that they did not create. Her narrative shows how immigrants are valued when they meet economic needs, but that they can just as easily be redefined as a liability when anxieties about their visibility becomes prominent (see Bauder, 2006). Thus, the shift from being "needed" to those who "everyone wants out" captures the precariousness of belonging when it is centred around immigrants' utility rather than their recognition as equal and valued members of society.

Vikrant saw this scapegoating not as an issue of immigration, but its uneven application, where concentrated communities with a larger Indian population (such as Brampton) made them hyper-visible and blamed for national problems:

> My question is, why us?... there are immigrants coming from other countries too, it's not just us. There's just more of us, more concentrated in certain communities, but that doesn't mean all of Canada's problems are our fault. So, we're simply being used as the reason for these problems, but the government should have known better and do some preparation... it doesn't seem like this will stop any time soon.

This account points to the government's failure in anticipating and preparing for a large demographic shift, suggesting that what was framed to be a community problem was rooted in structural decisions. For Vikrant, the community was being "used as the reason for these problems," capturing how for him, Indian immigrants became a convenient scapegoat for broader economic and political dissatisfaction. Together, participants' reflections show this racism centring narratives around competition, cultural disruption, and visibility (overpopulation), not

contagion. These accounts complicate the framework of "anti-Asian racism" by showing how their experiences operate through differing logics. In sharing their experiences, participants expose the limits of broad racialized categories and advocate for the need to account for the uneven ways in which racism is lived and recognized, while being contested across various communities.

7.5 ALTERNATIVES TO ANTI-ASIAN RACISM

Participants' accounts reveal a consistent narrative of being constructed as outsiders who are threatening to "take over" Canada. Far from reflections around fears of contagion, their experiences highlight exclusionary demands to "go home" and anxieties around the visibility of, and competition with, "South Asians." These narratives position participants as hypervisible foreigners whose very presence is framed as disruptive to the nation. In doing so, their accounts draw critical attention to the inadequacy of "anti-Asian racism" as a framework to explain their distinct experiences. Maya expands on this:

> There is a dilemma, like, should we raise our voice and say that racism is affecting us too and anti-Asian racism should apply? But then are we not taking the shift away from East Asians who were so heavily targeted during the pandemic, that might cause further divisions... Do we act as allies with our Asian counterparts and say everyone from the Asian continent experiences different kinds of racism and let's support each other, or do we need a separate term because our experiences are so different from theirs, so maybe anti-South Asian racism can act as a sub-concept of anti-Asian, like South Asian is one aspect of Asian.

Maya illustrates a dilemma she confronts when navigating the potential ways her experiences can be named and recognized. She identifies a tension between claiming inclusion under "anti-Asian racism" and the risk of displacing the centrality of East Asian experiences of pandemic-related racism. Her hesitation reflects an awareness of the uneven racialization within the "Asian" community, where sub-communities are marked in distinct ways (see Kibria, 1998). For Maya, solidarity with the East Asian community is important, but there is a tension with the potential of erasing the specificity of their experiences under a generalized framework. However, she does see

the potential for anti-South Asian racism as a solution, when functioning as a sub-concept of "anti-Asian racism," to demonstrate an active effort in generating new concepts that can acknowledge shared and differing racialized experiences. Building on Maya's suggestion, others elaborated further on the concept's inadequacy. While solidarity with the East Asian community remained important, others proposed anti-South Asian racism as a more accurate, yet imperfect, concept. This was seen as better capturing both the specificity of their hypervisibility and the ways that racism collapses "South Asian" diversity into a singular, often Indian-coded identity. Varinder states:

> The way anti-Asian racism is understood is very different from the ones experienced by us, so, yeah, a new term could be like anti-South Asian racism... I know it doesn't like, differentiate, between the various communities under South Asian, but also those who want to be racist just assume that South Asian equals Indian anyway, so some people are targeted because they look Indian, when they might be like Muslim or Bangladeshi. So, it's not perfect, but it'll do a better job than anti-Asian racism can, and the government is the one who uses South Asian.

As Varinder explains, here racialization experiences a paradox, where diversity is erased through homogenization, with individuals, regardless of their actual identity, are targeted because they "look Indian." In advocating for an imperfect but more precise concept, he demonstrates how he generates insight through lived experience, balancing the demands of solidarity with the need for specific recognition. Elaborating further, Kavya explains how naming can serve as useful during particular moments:

> We would benefit from having a term, so that people can anchor themselves to that term. Like anti-Asian is tied to COVID, it'll be hard for everyone to remove themselves from that, and it's become a point of contact that makes it hard to apply to something else that is ongoing. Something like anti-South Asian racism, maybe?... it might be the better option for coming together.

Her observation shows that conceptual categories can serve important purposes. While "anti-Asian racism" for Kavya is situationally specific, anti-South Asian racism can provide more flexibility for understanding "ongoing" racialized dynamics, providing the community with a shared point of

reference for recognition and solidarity. Additionally, some reflected on the limitations associated with narrow labels when considering anti-Indian racism as a potential concept. While acknowledging that this was targeted racism, Suhana explained that "maybe there are others that look Indian who experience this [racism] but are not Indian, so anti-South Asian racism is better," therefore emphasizing that broadness can at times be a strength. Drawing on parallels with anti-Black racism, Priyanka notes that inclusive categories enable communities to advocate collectively to enhance both the recognition and the legitimacy of their claims, and push for tangible action: "...it means recognizing that there is a problem this group is facing, it gives legitimacy to the claims being made, and then it can push for action. No one is going to take us seriously otherwise."

Tensions between specificity and inclusion become even more prominent in participants' reflections on the absence of a recognized term, where Varinder questions that "other groups have concepts that define their experiences, so why not us?" Adding further, he notes how:

> We use Islamophobia to describe the experiences of Muslims, and it was so important after 9/11 because they were being targeted at a much higher rate than anyone else, like yes, Indians were targeted then, but because they were thought to be Muslim... like it's the same issue right now, people who look Indian are being targeted. So, it is needed, this new term, to anchor our experiences and make others take this issue seriously for it to mean something.

This observation highlights important dynamics. Varinder frames naming as a political resource, explaining that concepts such as Islamophobia function as legitimate concepts for capturing the experiences of Muslims and providing them visibility. Further, he explains that in the aftermath of 9/11, individuals who "looked Muslim" (such as Balbir Singh Sodhi)[127] were targeted, but through misrecognition; they were not attacked for their specific identities, but because they were conflated with others. An emphasis on 9/11 as a key moment that cemented Islamophobia shows how

[127] Balbir Singh Sodhi was a Sikh-American gas station owner who, in Arizona, was racially profiled as an Arab Muslim and murdered on September 15, 2001, as a form of revenge for the September 11 attacks. His murder became the first of many post-9/11 hate crimes.

racialized concepts can becoming "anchored" in specific historical events. In contrast, Varinder notes that such a concept is missing for "South Asians" so that they, too, can anchor their experiences to a recognized concept. The push for a new term extends beyond language to present efforts to establish a concept that can analyze and advocate for their experiences.

Building on this, Zian draws attention to the durability of racialized concepts once they become entrenched with particular events:

> A term is needed because of COVID... usually when something is associated with a big event, like Islamophobia and 9/11, it stays for a really long time, and we aren't out of the stage where its [anti-Asian racism] meaning is going to change and suddenly include us... something like South Asian discrimination or anti-South Asian racism is better.

Like Varinder, Zian notes the importance of events that shape who is recognized and excluded. Like Islamophobia becoming historically and culturally attached to the events and ongoing aftermath of 9/11, "anti-Asian racism" is tied to the pandemic. Zian is careful to note that he is not denying its existence prior to 9/11, but that those events intensified this racism. Despite "not being born at the time [of 9/11]," he illustrates how event-driven labels travel across generations and organize a collective understanding of racialized harm. Recognizing that the application of "anti-Asian racism" is unlikely to expand or change, Zian calls for anti-South Asian racism as an alternative concept that can better address his experiences. Varinder and Zian's accounts illustrate that anti-racist concepts are about recognition, where existing categories that are historically anchored and rigid require the emergence of new concepts to make visible others' experiences.

Additionally, there are practical consequences for policy and institutional action with a new, distinct term. Disha highlights how:

> ...it can push for policies focused on anti-racism, whichever ones like anti-Black, anti-Asian, also includes our experiences and how the system can then help us. If a majority of people believe anti-Asian racism is about East Asians, then what help will we get?

Supporting a new concept for bringing forth visibility, Saanvi adds:

> A new and specific term can be helpful in making policies that address certain experiences. That way the government has to acknowledge us, make us visible...

Disha and Saanvi explain that since "anti-Asian racism" in practice is largely understood as relegated to East Asians, then "South Asians" remain invisible in anti-racism initiatives that then limit access to protections and resources aimed at addressing anti-Asian racism. Thus, they advocate for a new, clearly defined term such as anti-South Asian racism. This term would force the government and institutions to acknowledge, recognize, and make visible their experiences, so that action is possible. From a critical anti-racism perspective, recognition would require this targeted racism be framed as a social problem, so that their experiences can be addressed (see Kyriakides, 2008). Additionally, Disha and Saanvi show that state responses to racism, beyond just symbolic recognition, would require a redistribution of resources for structural change (see Fraser, 1995; Honneth, 1995). They illustrate a connection between language and power, where naming a form of racialized harm signals recognition while creating the conditions for targeted policy interventions, showing that being named and seen in discourse is necessary before structural change can happen and before resources can be provided and accessed.

Thus far, most participants agreed that a new, alternative concept would be a step in the right direction to having their experiences of racism recognized. However, three participants share criticisms that question the efficacy of creating a new term to address their experiences of racism. Khushi explains that "yes, we need an alternative for some change, but I feel like the issues are going to still be there. I don't think it really matters what we call it." Similarly, Amita situates her skepticism within a broader framework, by arguing that "a new term wouldn't be the solution... regardless of what it is called." She emphasizes that meaningful engagement requires a recognition of diverse experiences and "being empathetic," while acknowledging that naming would be "one way to get the message out." Rohan situates the limitations of terms within structural power, by

asking, “What good would a new term do when the government barely acknowledges how racist it is?” He highlights that without institutional recognition, especially with the increasing anti-immigration sentiments in a ‘multicultural’ country like Canada alongside the continued denial of systemic racism, a new term alone cannot produce meaningful change (see Kyriakides, 2008). These accounts shed light on an important tension between symbolic recognition and actual change: although the creation of a new concept can raise awareness, it may be insufficient in addressing ongoing discrimination or compelling institutional and structural accountability, thus pointing to the importance of aligning strategies with broader institutional and social interventions. However, this potential recognition could contribute to performative politics, which, as Ahmed (2012) states, is where the state can appear as if it is taking action, but rather than working towards actual change, it is mostly symbolic, i.e., “being included.” Here, taking action means acknowledging its existence, but no further progress is made. Hence, Khushi, Amita, and Rohan question whether a new category will be simply performative or stretch beyond that for actual change. This is why recognition must be accompanied by redistribution (Fraser, 1995).

Overall, these varying perspectives demonstrate the contested nature of naming racism for participants. For some, a new concept, primarily anti-South Asian racism, is necessary for recognition in a post-pandemic world. They argue that this is essential for visibility and for the development of targeted policies that can better address their specific experiences. However, others are not convinced that this will deliver meaningful change. While acknowledging that it can raise awareness, these participants stress that there are deeper issues of racism and state denial that contribute to forms of structural exclusion that will continue to exist regardless of labels. These differences emphasize the dual role of racialized terminology, where it can serve as a powerful mechanism for recognition and policy intervention, but that its impact remains limited when

institutions fail to act. These point to the complexities of the relationship between discourse and material change, where naming may be a necessary first step for some, while for others, is far from a sufficient solution.

7.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter examined the complex experiences of racism faced by participants, highlighting both the overt hostility they encounter and the (in)visibility they experience in public discourse. Participants described being told to "get out of Canada," and reflected on anti-immigrant sentiments that shaped their sense of belonging. At the same time, they explained that their experiences were rendered invisible in broader conversations around "anti-Asian racism," which to them is attributed to the re-emergence of the concept during the pandemic. In response to these exclusions, participants either proposed a new, alternative concept – anti-South Asian racism or anti-Indian racism – or felt that doing so would not achieve the desired end. Many believed a new concept could provide opportunities for recognition and the possibility of institutional responses that would be specific to their distinct experiences. However, a select few cautioned that a new concept would not do much to resolve existing structural inequalities and could potentially become performative, emphasizing that racism will persist regardless of labels, and that government action alongside recognition is necessary for actual, real change (Ahmed, 2012). Overall, these findings bring to the forefront the importance of amplifying these voices in public discourse and that recognition requires institutional and policy responses that will address the multifaceted nature of racialized harm in Canada.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Through CRT and a critical anti-racism lens, this dissertation has examined how "Asian" and "South Asian" are distinct racial categories that are not naturally occurring, but historically and state-produced, bureaucratic markers of differences. It has argued that although "South Asian" is a sub-category of "Asian," its positioning as a distinct category is not neutral, but actively constructed through institutionalized classification systems, multicultural governance, and in moments of crises, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside a post-pandemic context, affecting both the recognition and representation of "South Asian" experiences. This positioning has led to racialized hierarchies within the pan-ethnic category of "Asian," which primarily centres around East Asian experiences. Throughout these various chapters, three research questions guided this study:

1) How do Indians interpret the category of "Asian?" How has its meaning changed over time?

2) How do Indians interpret "anti-Asian racism?" How has its meaning changed since the COVID-19 pandemic?

3) How do participants' lived experiences complicate dominant understandings of "anti-Asian racism," and what do they reveal about multicultural belonging?

In answering these questions, this study produced three contributions to existing scholarship:

1) The first contribution is situated in examining the meaning of "Asian" and "South Asian" through its deployment as a bureaucratically driven racial category (Ashutosh, 2008; Elcioglu, 2025; Ghosh, 2013; Sahoo & Sangha, 2010; Sodhi, 2008). In the Canadian context, "Asian" is an underexplored category in comparison to "South Asian." I argued that the institutional positioning of "South Asians" as distinct from,

rather than a part of the "Asian" category shaped how participants understood their own identities in relation to recognition, representation, and the state itself.

2) The second contribution is critical of Canadian multiculturalism and argues that it is experienced as a form of racialized governance. In addition to the role of tolerance and managing difference, this study contributes to existing scholarship by shifting the focus from tolerance to *in*tolerance, and from managing difference to *un*managing difference, to show the limits of multiculturalism (Donnelly, 2021; Harris, 1982; Hervik, 2012; Kymlicka, 2018; Sala, 2010; Taylor, 1992). This shift is key to understanding the consequences of crossing the boundaries of "acceptable" difference. This includes everyday experiences of conditional inclusion, but also policy changes that are a response to and reinforcement of increased hostility towards this 'difference' in the context of immigration.

3) The final contribution is to anti-racism scholarship through a critical interrogation of how "anti-Asian racism" is conceptualized and subsequently, deployed. It focuses on both the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond to ask whether the racism experienced by "South Asians" can be categorized as "anti-Asian racism," as it remains tied to both the pandemic and East Asian experiences (Chen & Wu, 2021; Eizadirad et al., 2025; Fang et al., 2024; Guo & Guo, 2021; Luo et al., 2024; Xiaobei, 2025). I argue that this has resulted in the production of intra-group hierarchies, where anti-racism at times reproduces uneven forms of recognition and representation. Participants point to the need for a new concept that will better capture their specific experiences.

This chapter begins with a summary of the main findings from each chapter. Next, this chapter addresses final reflections and research limitations that are important to address in the context of this study. Third, I provide a conclusion that considers potential directions for future research.

8.2 RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

In chapter one, I briefly introduced the historical evolution of "Asian." In chapter two, through a literature review, I traced this evolution, which first began with migrants arriving from Asia, such as from China, Japan, and India, who were classified as "Asiatic" (Anderson, 2007; Kelley & Trebilcock, 1998). These "Asiatic" migrants faced exclusionary immigration laws that relied in race-based categories to exclude them, including the Chinese Head Tax, the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act, and the Continuous Journey Regulation, along with the forced internment of Japanese persons in WWII (Coloma, 2013; Mawani, 2018; Munro, 1971; Paupst, 1977; Pirbhai, 2015). These various "anti-Asiatic" restrictions and policies were key to maintaining Canada as a white nation, through which colonialism structured the relationship between race, labour, and nation-building (Munro, 1971; Coloma, 2013). I then discussed the move away from these explicit race-based criteria and towards a merit-based immigration system after WWII (Kurian, 1991; Thompson & Weinfeld, 1995). This led to the adoption of the Multiculturalism Act, and from it emerged the visible minority category of "South Asian." Unlike earlier immigration laws that operated through overt racial exclusion, multiculturalism sought to move away from race and towards the managing of cultural difference. However, the chapter discussed important criticisms raised by scholars about multiculturalism that reinforce Canada as a white settler nation, where race continues to be the governing factor in determining inclusion and exclusion in the context of belonging (Bannerji, 2000; Goldberg, 2002; James, 2008; Li, 2001; Modood, 2005; Thobani, 2007). This discussion additionally included a comparison of Canada's successful

'multiculturalism' to that of Europe's 'failure' (Banting & Kymlicka, 2010; May, 2022). However, I argued that multiculturalism in Canada was experiencing a failure, and it is no longer the exception, as previously framed in contrast to Europe, which I further unpack in chapter five. The literature review identified an important gap: although there is significant scholarship on the meaning of "South Asian" in Canada, there is limited work that interrogates the positioning of "South Asians" in contrast to "Asians," especially as the category remains institutionalized in various contexts and through various forms.

In addition to the historical and contemporary discussion around this transition from "Asiatic" to "South Asian," chapter one introduced the theoretical and conceptual tools used in this dissertation, which were further developed in chapter two. These tools are interconnected at various points of the dissertation and assist with analyzing and reflecting on the various research findings presented. This dissertation is situated primarily in CRT and engages directly with critical anti-racism, both analytically and empirically, as an extension of CRT. I additionally utilized several conceptual frameworks and analytic lens that function distinctly and in complementary ways. These frameworks are: 1) groupism to examine "Asian" and "South Asian," 2) the politics of belonging on participants' experiences of conditional belonging and inclusion/exclusion, 3) the politics of recognition, and lastly, 4) the politics of representation, the latter of which are used throughout chapters four-seven to showcase how the lack of recognition of "South Asian" as a distinct form of "Asian" contributes to their lack of representation in conversations around the "Asian" identity. This subsequently affects their experiences of racism constituting as "anti-Asian racism." Thus, chapter two served as the theoretical and conceptual foundation for this dissertation, working to examine not only the category of "South Asian," but the instability of the "Asian" category, as well.

In chapter three, I described the research methodology that focused on two sets of approaches, the first of which included three specific classification systems, a) the census, b) a self-identification based York University form, and c) Asian Heritage Month, and second which was a qualitative analysis through interviews (n=32). As this dissertation approaches "Asian" and "South Asian" as institutionalized categories, I explained in this chapter that I initially began with interview questions targeted towards the Canadian census, but in earlier interviews, interactions with self-identification forms and Asian Heritage Month were presented by participants as important sites of intervention. I then discussed the interview process, which included recruitment, the interview process, coding, and analysis rooted in a grounded approach. Additionally, I discussed my positionality as a researcher affecting the various stages in the interview process, including one participant, Khushi's experience, to discuss the role of power dynamics involved in storytelling and the consequences of responding to racism. In conducting this research, I found that my position as Indian did not necessarily indicate my status as an insider, especially when attempting to recruit older adults in-person, which prompted me to explore and navigate my insider and outsider status. Interview findings consistently show that the treatment of "South Asians" as distinct from "Asian" contributes to their reduced visibility in their experiences of "anti-Asian racism," and that "Asian" typically remains tied to East Asian identities. Overall, the interview data contributed to this dissertation in several ways:

- How participants understood their relationship to "Asian" and "South Asian"
- How they experienced moments of both inclusion ("South Asian") and exclusion ("Asian")
- How racism is recognized, minimized, or reframed

By situating personal experiences within institutional discourse, chapter three demonstrated the value of interviewing in understanding how bureaucratic categories are internalized, resisted, or strategically navigated. It operated as the foundation for the empirical chapters that followed. This

dissertation additionally attempted to contribute, methodologically, to highlight the current lived experiences of "South Asians," who are facing ongoing racism both online and offline yet feel that their experiences are not being adequately recognized nor represented. Although some media coverage exists, this is among one of the first studies to conduct interviews to examine how meaningful recognition and representation may potentially be achieved, as well as what an alternative conceptual framework could provide.

I now move into the empirical chapters, chapters four to seven. In chapter four, I interrogated how the institutionalization of "South Asians," who were historically categorized as "Asiatic," navigate a social space for themselves based on this racialized positioning (Matas, 1985). Rather than adopting an approach that looks at the meaning of "South Asian" through interpersonal connections or everyday practices, I build on existing literature by examining the self-positioning of participants in this bureaucratic category through two lenses: the first lens focused on negotiations with official racial classification systems, including the census, a self-identification form used by York University, and Asian Heritage Month, and the second lens involved media representations (Ashutosh, 2008; Ghosh, 2013; Sahoo & Sangha, 2010; Sodhi, 2008). The chapter showed that official classification produces racial meaning (first pillar). "South Asians" are frequently recognized as separate from "Asian," despite geographic closeness and shared experiences of (historical and contemporary) exclusion and racism. This administrative separation creates the notion that reinforces "Asian" as "East Asian." This narrow recognition is further reinforced through media representations where popular images code Asianness visually and culturally in East Asian terms, reproducing the idea, in Ronny Chieng's words, that "Indians are not Asian" (Hall, 1997). The importance of visual representation is further displayed when Varinder uses Google Images and Netflix searches on "Asian" and "South Asian" as examples to

show how these distinctions are reinforced (second pillar). The chapter's contribution lies in demonstrating that institutional classification is not merely descriptive, but productive. It shapes who is recognized and represented in demographic data or symbolically recognized in national narratives. Institutionalized classification systems that bureaucratize these categories become important pillars for belonging and exclusion.

Building on the findings from chapter four, which examined the shift from "Asiatic" to the contemporary category of "South Asian" as representative of Canada's shift from race to culture through multiculturalism, chapter five critically examined multiculturalism through a critical anti-racism lens as a governing framework used to manage diversity through conditional inclusion. Although multiculturalism manages difference through tolerance, the chapter argued that multiculturalism is experienced as a form of racialized governance, and that participants describe the restructuring of racism within the Canadian racial state to sustain racialized hierarchies that shape their sense of self (Jiwani, 2006; Razack, 2002; Tator et a., 1998). Additionally, it extended existing scholarship on multiculturalism by shifting an empirical focus away from tolerance and managing cultural difference to the intolerance and unmanaging of cultural difference – i.e., what happens when this difference crosses the threshold of tolerance and is no longer manageable (Bannerji, 2000; Fleras & Elliot, 1992; Fleras, 2019).

Participants' narratives on navigating public and private spaces to not cross this threshold were discussed. Additionally, I briefly examined recent immigration policy shifts, announced in October 2024, that sought to significantly reduce immigration numbers, which served as an example of this multicultural tolerance in practice, and especially when demographic change, "too much immigration" or" Indians taking over" are framed as national crises (Mann, 2025). One area of discussion foused on the cap on international students, which two participants, Naina and

Vikrant, pointed to as a site where the limits of multicultural openness towards immigration is re-evaluated. Although these changes do not directly point to any specific country, the chapter reveals that they overwhelmingly target India, as the country has remained a top source of immigration to Canada for many years. Chapter five contributes to scholarship by reframing multiculturalism not as a failure, but as stratified inclusion. This is where cultural difference is welcomed when it is either economically or symbolically beneficial, but becomes intolerable when it results in strain, such as in concerns about housing, employment, and the rising cost of living. Multiculturalism, thus, does not eliminate racialized hierarchies, it simply restructures them.

In chapter six, the COVID-19 pandemic is discussed as a site of crisis, where "anti-Asian racism" against East Asians intensified (Chen & Wu, 2021; Fang et al., 2024; Guo & Guo, 2021; Luo et al., 2024; Xiaobei, 2025). However, pandemic-era "anti-Asian racism" became narratively anchored to the targeting of East Asians. In this framing, the chapter shows that the experiences of "South Asians" were comparatively less visible. Interview data revealed that participants did indeed encounter racism during the pandemic, but that their experiences did not align with dominant anti-Asian discourse, indicating how this uneven visibility reflects the narrowing of the "Asian" category. As Sagar's discussion with his friends revealed in chapter six, when he shared a friend's experience (who was Indian), his friend's response (who was Chinese), stated "it's worse for us." Participants explained that they experienced their own share of racism, from the Delta co-variant that first emerged in India and contributed to *Journal de Montréal* publishing a photo of Justin Trudeau with the headline (translated from French), "the variant from India has arrived," to the entire community being blamed for rising infection rates in COVID-19 "hotspots," such as Brampton without considering the structural factors involved in why these rates were higher in certain spaces over others (Gill et al., 2022; Nerestant, 2021). This chapter thus argued that "anti-

Asian racism" during the pandemic did not simply expose prejudice, but it revealed the conceptual limits of the concept itself.

In chapter seven, through a critical anti-racism lens, I extended the analysis from chapter six and moved beyond the pandemic to ask whether "anti-Asian racism" remains tied to the pandemic and if it can be reconceptualized more broadly. Participants' narratives reveal that for them, both the pandemic and "anti-Asian racism" remain interconnected, and that neither can be independent from the other. This raised the following question: if "anti-Asian racism" remains implicitly understood as violence directed at East Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic, how do we name the racism experienced by "South Asians?" This is especially important in a post-pandemic context. Chapter seven included participants' experiences of racism, and interrogated whether "anti-Asian racism," as is currently deployed, should be expanded, or if a new category is needed to better capture these dynamics. While there was no set consensus on a definitive label, participants suggested anti-Indian or anti-South Asian racism. Overwhelmingly, participants agreed that anti-South Asian racism was specific enough to show this distinction with "Asian" in comparison to "anti-Asian racism," as anti-Indian racism may exclude individuals who appear as Indian and are therefore, also targeted. For these participants, there are important political stakes to naming, where categories determine public recognition, media attention, funding streams, and policy responses, among others. However, three participants did not see a new term as a solution and argued that without the state recognizing that it is racist, or without actual systemic change, symbolic recognition could potentially present as a form of performative politics, of "being included" without any action (Ahmed, 2012; see Kyriakides, 2008). Despite these reservations, the chapter provides a conceptual contribution by arguing that racism is not only about acts of discrimination, but about the frameworks through which those acts are rendered as legible.

Together, this dissertation has made the following contributions:

- It has reconceptualized "Asian" and "South Asian" as administratively and culturally produced categories.
- It critiques Canadian multiculturalism as a form of racialized governance. This occurs by crossing the threshold from manageable, tolerable cultural difference, to unmanageable, intolerable cultural difference.
- It has expanded on experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic to "South Asians."
- Lastly, it has pushed for an intervention that centres the voices of Indians to highlight the racism experienced by "South Asians," along with how to conceptualize these experiences in a post-pandemic context

Although there are various contributions made, there are important limitations that need to be addressed.

8.3 IMPORTANT LIMITATIONS

As I addressed in chapter one, there are important limitations in my representation sample. Although the sample is representative of immigration trends to Canada, with most participants with ties to northern India, it does exclude those of Indian origin in other parts of the world, such as West Indians, or those from Southern and Eastern Africa, who themselves have unique histories and experiences. Additionally, accounting for differences in religion or caste may shape participants' experiences of racism and how they negotiate their belonging in Canada. This study contributes to the meaning of "South Asian." I recognize that this does not only include those of Indian origin, but my focus on Indians is for two reasons: 1) they make up the largest number of "South Asians" in Canada, and 2) as mentioned previously, "South Asian" is often tied to Indian. Additionally, at several points, participants mentioned that individuals who were not Indian, but a member of the "South Asian" community, were victims of racism because they 'looked' Indian.

In chapter five, I discussed the changes to Canada's 2025-2027 Immigration Levels Plan that was announced by IRCC in October 2024, which aimed to reduce the number of temporary and permanent residents (IRCC, 2025). Although participants shared their thoughts on the

circulation of campaigns such as "deport them all" or "end mass immigration," only two participants, Naina and Vikrant, provided their thoughts in relation to these specific changes. Their interviews were conducted shortly after the announcement, and therefore I was able to incorporate their thoughts into that chapter to highlight the politics of crisis in action. Consequently, had I interviewed more participants around this time, I may have been able to provide further details on the varying responses to these changes. Now that I have provided the limitations of this dissertation, I move into some concluding remarks with a discussion on directions for future research.

8.4 DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation is a step towards providing insight into the experiences of racism targeting "South Asians," with a focus on the Indian community, but there are several directions for future research that can further investigate these experiences.

First, future research should examine the role of online spaces, such as social media, and how they shape and facilitate racism. This is broadly discussed in this dissertation, but only to the extent that participants reflect on it. Digital platforms such as TikTok, Reddit, X, and Instagram serve as spaces where racism against "South Asians" and anti-immigration narratives are circulated, amplified, and normalized. For example, Professor Reena Kukreja at Queen's University has been conducting a study since Spring 2024 on the spread of right-wing populism and white supremacism in Canada and Southern Europe, that specifically targets racialized male migrants (Kukreja, 2024). Her preliminary findings have revealed that far-right online narratives have increasingly used the Great Replacement Theory, discussed in chapter five, to push an agenda to create fears around increases in "South Asian" migration leading to the transformation of Canada into a non-white majority (Kukreja, 2024). Similarly, a study conducted by the Institute

for Strategic Dialogue (ISD, 2025) found that hate against "South Asians" in both online and offline spaces is part of a growing trend.[128] The ways in which algorithm-driven content intensifies and reinforces racial stereotypes and spreads hate are important areas for future research. The importance of social media algorithms in rewarding content that drives engagement is briefly discussed in chapter six, with reflections from Varinder, Kavya, and Sonia, but it is important to further consider how misinformation spreads and how racialized individuals themselves use these digital platforms for resistance, and/or community-building (see Matamoros-Fernández, 2017).[129] Aspects of anonymity that are provided through social media that make users feel more comfortable in sharing, liking, or posting white supremacy, anti-immigration, and hate-related posts are significant to understanding the centrality of digital spaces.

Second, comparative research across the various other "Asian" subgroups, such as East Asians, Southeast Asians, and West Asians, each of whom have distinct migration histories, racial stereotypes, and socioeconomic status is important. This expansion would provide a more nuanced understanding of racialization processes in Canada. The very process of dividing these different groups may aim at suppressing the possibility for uniting against symbolic and material structures of inequality they collective face as "Asians," but it is important to consider differences in experiences to avoid conflating or generalizing community-specific experiences to the entire broad community. Addressing other factors such as religion, accent, class, or phenotypic traits and how they shape their experiences would assist in disentangling pan-Asian racialization from subgroup-specific dynamics. It would also enable for conversations around solidarity and resistance through

[128] For further details, the full report can be found here: https://www.isdglobal.org/digital-dispatch/the-rise-of-anti-south-asian-hate-in-canada/

[129] Matamoros-Fernández introduces "platformed racism" to emphasize a new form of racism that has two meanings: 1) it constructs and amplifies racist discourse, and 2) the modes of platform governance that reproduce, but at times can address, social inequalities.

shared experiences, while keeping in mind distinct sites of struggle. Some potential avenues include questions such as: do West Asians consider themselves as "Asian?" Do East Asians see opportunities for solidarity with other "Asian" communities? Do international students from other regions in Asia face similar concerns raised by international students from India? How might other members of the "South Asian" community, such as Pakistanis, Tibetans, or Bengalis, negotiate their belonging in the "Asian" category?

Third, future research should prioritize a more diverse and representative sample within the Indian community, as I touched on in chapter one. The Indian diaspora in Canada is diverse, with members from various regions, religions, castes, migration pathways, socioeconomic status, and genders. While I touch on aspects of gender, migration pathways, and socioeconomic status at certain points, expanding future recruitment strategies would help to capture the extensive diversity and potential intra-community conflicts that can both foster and hinder community solidarity. This diversity includes greater attention to regional and cultural variations that may shape experiences of racialization. For example, individuals from northeast India, such as Nagaland, may be categorized as East Asian rather than "South Asian" due to phenotypic features that do not align with dominant constructions of Indianness. Moreover, members of the Indian diaspora whose families were sent generations ago to the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, Pacific Islands, and Africa through systems of indentured migration due to colonialism may have distinct historical experiences, cultural practices, and relationships to the Indian identity, and their own experiences of racism (Kurien & Purkayastha, 2024). Expanding recruitment strategies to capture and compare these various experiences would highlight how identity, social positioning, and belonging shape responses in different settings.

Fourth and finally, future research should explore out-migration, and specifically, why some Indian immigrants express a desire to leave Canada. This was expressed by two participants, Ishaan and Vikrant, who during our interview explained that many of their friends were potentially pursuing the same avenue of return. Potential factors may include employment precarity, the increase in racism, limited pathways to receiving permanent residency alongside other policy changes, a rising cost of living, and challenges with having foreign credentials recognized. This addition would help in assessing whether the intention to return is due to temporary frustrations or are an indication of longer-term settlement challenges. This would provide important insight into implications of shifts in immigration policy, integration outcomes, and retention. Collectively, this emphasis on expanding methodological approaches for diverse samples can assist future scholarship towards a more comprehensive account of belonging and exclusion, and the very real effects of racism and targeted hostility.

I would like to end with a quote from Adama Dieng, former United Nations (UN) Special Advisor of the Prevention of Genocide, who states that politically strategic rhetoric about targeted groups can quickly evolve into violence that is directed at individuals perceived to be outsiders:

> We all have to remember that hate crimes are preceded by hate speech… We have to bear in mind that words kill. Words kill as bullets. (IOM, n.d., as cited in Kukreja, 2024, para. 25)

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LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sample Demographic

* These are based on how participants self-identify for each category

#	Pseudonym	Gender*	Age	Cultural Background*	Religion*	Status in Canada	Country of Birth	Immigration Year	City of Residence
1	Maya	Female	27	Karnataka	Hindu	Citizen	India	2000	Brampton
2	Varinder	Male	26	Punjabi	Sikh	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Pickering
3	Disha	Female	20	Himachali	Hindu	Citizen	India	2004	Brampton
4	Amita	Female	28	Gujarati & Sindhi	No Religion	Citizen	India	1997	Pickering
5	Suhana	Female	55	Bengali (Kolkata)	Hindu	Citizen	India	2016	Malton
6	Kavya	Female	23	Tamil Nadu	Spiritual	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Hamilton (North York for one year)
7	Samar	Male	25	Gujarati	Hindu	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Markham
8	Ishaan	Male	25	Punjabi	Sikh	PR	India	2016	Woodbridge
9	Juhi	Female	45	Punjabi	Sikh	Citizen	Philippines	2010	Brampton
10	Sonia	Female	26	Karnataka	Hindu	Citizen	India	2005	Newmarket
11	Tanya	Female	29	Punjabi	Sikh	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Caledon
12	Harman	Female	48	Punjabi	Sikh	Citizen	India	2004	Brampton
13	Kajal	Female	25	South Indian	Hindu	Citizen	India	1998	Mississauga
14	Zian	Male	19	Punjabi	Sikh	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Brampton
15	Rohan	Male	26	Gujarati	Hindu	Citizen	Kenya	2001	Markham
16	Navneet	Female	26	Punjabi	Sikh	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Caledon
17	Nitin	Male	53	Punjabi	Sikh	Citizen	India	1992	Brampton
18	Priyanka	Female	25	Gujarati	Hindu	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Brampton
19	Sagar	Male	46	Punjabi	Hindu	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Etobicoke
20	Sweta	Female	38	South Indian & Venezuelan	Atheist	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Toronto
21	Khushi	Female	29	Punjabi	Hindu	Citizen	Canada	N/A	Brampton (& St. Catherines)
22	Kulwinder	Male	84	Punjabi	Hindu	Citizen + OCI[130]	India	1976	Etobicoke
23	Dilraj	Male	71	Punjabi	Sikh	Citizen	India	2006	Brampton
24	Jashan	Male	68	Punjabi	Sikh	PR	India	2013	Brampton
25	Daler	Male	70	Punjabi	Sikh	PR	India	2015	Brampton
26	Jasvir	Male	68	Punjabi	Sikh	Citizen	India	2017	Brampton
27	Kulbir	Male	64	Punjabi	Sikh	PR	India	2018	Brampton
28	Tushar	Male	78	Punjabi	Hindu	Citizen	India	1972	Brampton
29	Sati	Female	71	Punjabi	Hindu	Citizen	India	1976	Brampton
30	Saanvi	Female	24	Gujarati	Hindu	Citizen	India	2008	Brampton
31	Naina	Female	26	Punjabi	Hindu	PR	India	2018	Brampton
32	Vikrant	Male	25	Gujarati	Hindu	Work Permit	India	2022	North York

1st generation
1.5 generation
2nd generation

[130] Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) is a form of permanent residency available to persons of Indian origin to live, work, and travel to India (no entry visa required).

Appendix B: Interview Guide

Preliminary Discussion

I. Let's begin by discussing how your family came to be in Canada.
Probe: Were you born Canada?
Probe: When did your family immigrate to Canada?

Experience(s) of the Category of "Asian"

1. When you hear the term "Asian," what images and words come to mind?
   a. Would you classify any of these as stereotypical? Why or why not?
   b. What comes to mind when you think of Asian Heritage Month?

2. Do you have any personal experiences where you may have been labelled as "Asian?"
   a. If yes, what happened? How did that make you feel?
   b. If no, what, from others, have you been labelled as? (e.g., brown, Indian, "South Asian," etc.). How does this make you feel?
      i. Would you say that such categorizations are accurate? Why or why not?

Applicability of the Category of "Asian"

3. Have you heard of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak? He became known as "the first Asian Prime Minister of the UK." In response to this, U.S based Malaysian comedian from The Daily Show, Ronny Chieng, stated "Indians are not Asians… I love how Indians try to have it both ways, like being Indian and Asian. Like, pick a lane, okay?" What are your thoughts on this?

4. In the UK, "Asian" commonly refers to South Asians. In North America, "Asian" often refers to East Asians. Canada's census uses South Asian, Chinese, Southeast Asian, West Asian, Filipino, Korean, and Japanese as ethnic categories. What are your thoughts on the various meanings of "Asian?" Would you add or change anything to these categories?

5. Imagine you are taking part in a survey and asked the following question:

Please choose <u>one</u> category you feel best describes you:

[ ] Asian	[ ] Indian	[ ] Indian-South Asian
[ ] Asian-Canadian	[ ] Indian-Canadian	[ ] South Asian
[ ] Canadian	[ ] Indo-Canadian	[ ] South Asian-Canadian

Which option would you select? Why that option?

Probe: Let's explore why the other options you feel are less applicable to you.
(Researcher will choose 2-3 options at random from the above list and discuss each further with participant).

6. The following question will be asked for participants who in the above question have chosen from the following two categories: *a) Indian* and *b) Indian-Canadian.*
    a. Historically, in Canada, Indian has been used to refer to Indigenous persons. It also holds legal significance, as the Indian Act, which first came into effect in 1876, is a Canadian federal law that governs matters related to Indian status, bands, and reserves. Individuals that fit the criteria from this Act are legally referred to as Status Indians.
        i. Are you aware that Indian has been associated with Indigenous people?
        Probe: If yes, where did you hear about it? What did you learn?
        (If no, researcher will provide a bit of background related to where the term 'Indian' first emerged from – i.e., the link to Christopher Columbus).
        ii. Based on the knowledge you have now, would you change your chosen response to the survey above?
        Probe: If yes, what would you choose instead? Why?
        Probe: If no, why not? How do you self-differentiate your meaning of 'Indian' vs. that of Indigenous Indian?

7. Would you say that "Asian" culture and Indian culture are the same or different? Why or why not? How might they be the same? If different, how would you differentiate between the two?

8. Historically, do you think that your parents/grandparents would classify as "Asian" in Canada? Please expand on why they would or would not.

Understanding of Racism

9. What does the word racism mean to you? How would you describe it?

10. Have you experienced discrimination in any form or know of anyone who has?
Probe: If yes, when did this happen? Please provide examples and explain how that made you feel.
Probe: How have these experiences affected perception(s) of yourself?

Understanding of Anti-Asian Racism & Its Applicability

11. Have you heard of the term anti-Asian racism? How would you define it?
Probe: Where did you hear this term? Prior to or during the COVID-19 pandemic?

12. During the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, several researchers and newspapers stated that there was a rise in anti-Asian racism as a result. Are you aware of this?
    a. Who, in your opinion, has been targeted most by anti-Asian racism? Do you see any patterns?
    b. Have you personally, or know anyone in your community (in either the GTA or elsewhere in Canada) who, experienced any discrimination/racism during this time?
    Probe: What happened? How did that make you feel? What was the response?

i. In your opinion, was the incident a form of anti-Asian racism? Please further expand on your thoughts.

Probe: If no, what are your thoughts on why you (or your community) have not experienced discrimination/racism because of the pandemic?

National Belonging

13. Imagine you are asked to define what it means to 'be a Canadian.' How would you describe it? What images and words come to mind?

Probe: How would you describe Canada and its national community to someone who has never been here?

a. Would you describe yourself as fitting these images and belonging to the Canadian national community? Why or why not?
b. Have any experiences of racism/discrimination changed your understanding of belonging to the Canadian national community?

Probe: Has the pandemic changed your understanding of belonging?

The Concept of "Anti-Asian Racism"

14. "Anti-Asian racism" during the pandemic has been portrayed as typically targeting persons of East Asian descent (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese). To what extent does this concept accommodate and adequately capture the experiences of those who may self-identify as "South Asian?" As Indian? Is there a need for a new concept?

Probe: In your opinion, what would this new concept be called? Why would this new concept be more accommodating?

Final Thoughts

15. Is there anything else that you would like to add that has not already been discussed?

Thank you for your time!

Appendix C: Interview Data Codes

CODE	DESCRIPTION OF CODE
Representations of Asian/ness	***How Asian/ness is represented and understood by participants***
a. Media portrayals	The ways in which Asian is represented in the media, and how that may impact interpretations of the category in either positive or negative ways
b. Interactive experiences	The ways in which Asian is represented through interactions with others, such as conversations with friends, strangers either positive or negative
Representations of anti-Asian racism	***How anti-Asian racism as a concept is currently represented and understood by participants***
a. Media portrayals	The ways in which anti-Asian racism is represented in the media, and how that may impact interpretations of the concept in either positive or negative ways
b. Interactive experiences	The role of the public in defining anti-Asian racism
c. COVID-19	The impact of the pandemic on shaping understandings and representations of anti-Asian racism
Representations of Canadian/ness	***How participants view aspects of Canadianness***
a. Definitions	Different ways in defining Canadian identity and characteristics/attributes assigned to Canadianness
b. Personal experiences	Participants personal experiences with Canadianness (e.g., racism, interactions with others…) and if they do/not consider themselves as belonging to these representations (why/not)
c. Conflicts or challenges	Whether participants experience any clashes with personal and national identity and how they navigate these tensions
State intervention	***The significance of state categorizations of Asian, South Asian, etc.***
a. Direct experiences of policy	Direct impact of state policies on categorizations such as multiculturalism policy, the census, introduction of the 'visible minority' category, employment equity, etc.
b. Indirect experiences of policy	Indirect impact of state intervention, such as changes in immigration demographics,

	Asian/South Asian Heritage month, employment practices/discrimination, etc.
Advocacy for change	***Discussion on possible shortcomings in understanding existing definition(s) and how to address these either by revising the current definition or creating a new one***
a. Critiques	Any shortcomings associated with how current definition is understood
b. Revisions	Proposing revising the existing definition to better address experiences
c. Alternative (new) concept	Proposing new concept(s) that can better address experiences