

The Gays Aren't All White, The Desis Aren't All Straight: Exploring Queer Subjectivity in the Toronto South Asian Diaspora

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Dedication

To my late Father– thank you for giving me your brown skin, your Islam, and your love and pride that sustain me long after you’ve gone. It has taken me too long to understand these as gifts.

And to all the Brown women who teach me, inspire me, support me, and make me proud to call myself a Brown woman as well – Nanima, Mum, Azeezah, Rajinder, Simran, my supervisor Soma, and many more.

Abstract

The purpose of this research project is to approach a better understanding of queer South Asian diasporic identity and experience as it exists in Toronto, Canada. It attempts to do so through the narratives of five individuals who self-identify with this subjectivity .

A review of literature found that our current sexual subjectivities have emerged in co-production with our racial ones – demonstrating both the social contingencies of ‘sexuality’ as we understand it today, and the current utility of sexuality discourse towards racializing ends. This review also found that South Asian queer diasporic individuals – in the negotiation of their multiple Otherizations – have the potential to be both complicit in, and resistant to, the overlapping structures of race and sexuality through which human difference is organized and hierarchized.

Given this theoretical context as a foundation, this project found that queer South Asian diasporic individuals encounter both racism and homophobia/transphobia, and yet lack the availability of community spaces in which to process and heal from such incidents – and as such, experience feelings of loneliness, displacement, and invisibility. Further, many subscribe to a belief in a conflict between their racial and sexual identities – a conflict that has inspired different and opposing strategies for reconciliation. All participants found both value and limitations in the frameworks and languages available for organizing their subjectivity – including in the concept of ‘queer’ that is increasingly adopted as a catch-all for non-normative sexualities worldwide - but differed in their conceptualization of the self as ‘essential’ versus context-dependent. An unanticipated finding was a common distancing from the institutionalized religions they had been socialized into.

These findings elicited further analysis on the complicity of queer South Asian diasporic individuals in processes of racialization, the limitations of Western queer ‘Pride’ movements, and both the elusiveness and hope of a ‘home’ for those Otherized on multiple grounds. Finally, and importantly, this project found that the stories of queer South Asians living in Toronto are ones of savvy, resilience, creativity, resistance – and indeed, of joy.

Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to approach a better understanding of queer South Asian diasporic identity and experience as it exists in Toronto, Canada. It will attempt to do so through the narratives of several individuals who self-identify with this subjectivity – analyzing their accounts through literature on the co-constitution of race and sexuality, and on the inhabitation and performance of sexualities in the diaspora. I argue for the importance of this research on two grounds. Firstly, I wish to participate in making visible the narratives of those who are often unregistered in a White-normative and heteronormative society – one in which we are expected to be Otherized by *either* race or sexuality and not *both*. In troubling a public imagination of who constitutes the racial Other, and who the sexual Other, these accounts have the potential to disrupt multiple narratives that create and maintain social hierarchies. Secondly, queer South Asian diasporics occupy an under-explored space in public discourse - space that should be interrogated for its possible complicity in, and resistance to, the multiple and overlapping structures of race and sexuality.

Given the analytical framework of post-structuralist (queer) theory – which seeks to historicize and hence denaturalize identity categories - I recognize the limitations and contradictions of premising my research on the legitimacy of ‘queer’ and ‘South Asian’ constructs.

While ‘queer’ has become popularized as a non-identity – hence supposedly avoiding the normalizing and disciplinary effects that identities are vulnerable to - it “has become increasingly identitarian and institutionalized...[becoming] synonymous with gay and lesbian” (Sabsay, 2013, p. 86). As Sabsay (2013) argues, ‘queer’ thus “loses all of its critical potential” (p. 86). As she notes, Spanish activists previously involved in radical groups self-identified as ‘queer’ throughout the 1990’s no longer use this term: “what is at stake for them is ...the homonormative

trend by which they are normalized” (p. 88). Andrea Smith (2010) finds further issue with ‘queer’ for its “exceptionalist desires” (p. 49). By this, she means that the queer’s self-projection as ‘free from norms’ “resonates with liberal humanism’s authorization of the fully self-possessed speaking subject, untethered by hegemony or false consciousness” (Smith, 2010, p. 49). As such, the ‘queer’ is implicated in a failure to recognize the norms governing its own behaviour/experience, thus participating in the invisibilization of the partial and non-universal nature of its ways of being, thinking, and behaving. Finally, Massad problematizes the focus of sexuality within study and activism. Regardless of the constructs used to describe this sexuality, such a focus participates in “reducing difference to the diverse ways in which sexuality can be lived... [thus elevating] ‘sexuality’ to the status of an ontological category” (Sabsay, 2013, p. 85).

I recognize that the geographical space commonly referred to as ‘South Asia’ is not a naturally pre-existing entity, but one that has been created through historical processes that include violence, colonialism, and racism. Further, as explained in a following section, the uncritical usage of ‘South Asian’ reproduces the centring of Western subjectivities, wherein non-Western subjectivities are collapsed, and lose distinction.

Nonetheless, I justify the usage of ‘queer South Asian’ as the basis for my research on philosophical and practical grounds. In problematizing all identity categories, post-structuralism can preclude any investigation of particular subjectivities. This would be limiting, given that the labels of ‘queer’ and ‘South Asian’ subjectify in common ways those who have been included/include themselves within them. Put otherwise - regardless of a *pre-existing* ‘legitimacy’ of such labels, they *become* legitimate in the co-constitutive process of their application and inhabitation. As such, they are of relevance in organizing relationships, directing

behaviour, and shaping experience. A failure to acknowledge this reflects a problematic 'multiculturalist' view of society, wherein all difference is attributable to individual and equally-valid variance, without any regard for the hierarchies within which this difference is organized.

Before proceeding, I wish to make explicit my own self-identification as a queer South Asian diasporic. I think this is important for two reasons. Firstly, I am aware of how institutions of knowledge production reproduce the universalization of White Western subjectivity - through the assumption that the entire world is best understood through knowledge produced by Whites, and in the language/epistemologies of Whites. As such, I think my own subjectivity as a queer South Asian diasporic is a relevant *credential* in my study of this subjectivity - even while acknowledging that I am greatly informed by my upbringing and scholarship in the West, and thus cannot fairly situate myself entirely outside of a Western subjectivity. Secondly, as Foucault (in Hall, 2006, p. 172) warns us, power is most insidious and potent when it is accepted as 'truth' - i.e. universal, objective, disinterested - and hence, above/outside of power relations. As such, I wish to make unambiguous my own provincality, subjectivity and interest - so as to distance myself from this 'truth' regime through which systems of power are maintained. As a reminder of my own subjectivity to both myself and to readers - one that is of course not fully encapsulated in the label of 'queer South Asian diasporic' - I refer to myself throughout this paper (i.e. by writing in first person) whenever possible/appropriate.

Review of Literature

The purpose of this literature review is to better prepare myself and my readers for an interrogation of racialized queer subjectivity in the diasporic context. To do so, I begin by accounting for the historical conditions through which our current sexual subjectivities have emerged in co-production with our racial ones – demonstrating both the social contingencies of ‘sexuality’, as well as how sexuality discourse is galvanized today towards racializing ends. After providing this context, I continue with an overview of literature exploring how South Asian diasporics negotiate their queer and racialized subjectivities in their White-normative/racist and hetero-normative/homophobic diasporic contexts.

The Historical Construction of Sexuality

As Ann Stoler (1995) notes, “sexuality was ... a social construction of a historical moment...a result and an instrument of power's design” (Stoler, 1995, p. 3). As both a ‘result’ and an ‘instrument’, sexuality is co-constituted with “prior and continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration” (Gopinath, 2005, p. 3). As such, any interrogation of queer subjectivity must first attend to how modern sexuality – defined here as “discourses, procedures, and institutions in metropolitan and colonial societies that distinguish and link primitive and civilized sexuality and gender, and define racial, national, gendered, and sexual subjects and populations in biopolitical relationship” (Morgensen, 2010, p. 110)- has arisen from settler societies and historical colonies of the West.

As Morgensen (2010) notes, “modern sexuality arose in the United States amid the colonial conditions of a settler society” (p. 110). Specifically, “it has been through sexual violence and through the imposition of European gender relationships on Native communities that Europeans were able to colonize Native peoples” (Morgensen, 2010, p. 108). In defining Native people as gender and sexually perverse, colonial regimes rendered them queer, thus justifying – even

retrospectively – the violence exacted upon them. This justification was convenient for the colonial power, given that many Indigenous societies “had multiple genders and people did not fit rigidly into particular gender categories” (Morgensen, 2010, p. 108). As Zaborskis (2016) argues, the sexual education of Indigenous children via residential schools was critical towards a successful colonization. Through an inculcation into the norms of a white heterosexuality that was unavailable to them, Indigenous children were directed “away from futurity and away from reproductivity” (Zaborskis, 2016, p. 605). Ironically, then, heterosexualization was the mechanism for the queering of Indigenous children.

With respect to the historical colonies, Ann Stoler explains how colonial societies were normalizing with respect to sexuality – or, in her words, colonial societies were based on an “education of desire” (Morgensen, 2010, p. 110). In this way, colonial power was deployed as a disciplinary force separating “normative subjects of life” (Morgensen, 2010, p. 110) from “subject populations” (Morgensen, 2010, p. 110) (read: sexually deviant) destined for death/control. The impacts of this colonial ‘sexual education’ are felt in the present. In the South Asian context, as Giti Thadani (in Shah, 1998) argues, “Indian middle-class acceptance of “homophobia”” (p. 147) is a legacy of British colonialism, with its enforcement of heterosexuality and sexual prudishness. Indeed, scholars of pre-colonial South Asia reveal a landscape of sexuality seemingly unlike the one of today. As several excavations reveal:

Within the history of the subcontinent there has always been homosexuality. Sex between those of the same gender is discussed in many Hindu texts and sex manuals. Homosexual activity was also depicted in religious statues...;...Tantric initiation rites, Hindu festivals and sects ...celebrated homosexual acts; there are descriptions of sodomy in the Kama Sutra...;...there are references to women loving women in the Mahabharata and Ramayana...; [and there is evidence of a] pre-1500 B.C. feminine world where sexuality was based on pleasure and fertility (Shah, 1998, p. 146 and 147).

Nayan Shah (1998), however, cautions us against retrospectively reading sexual behaviours in historical South Asia (and elsewhere) according to modern liberal sensibilities of today. He notes the inherent contradiction of one such effort that encourages “Indian gays [to] ... discard disruptive Western models. In light of our own tradition, we must build a new movement for acceptance of gay love by our society” (p. 147). As Shah notes, “he still relies on the notion of an “Indian gay” movement, which is itself a Western construct” (Shah, 1998, p. 147). Indeed, we may be fundamentally *incapable* of restoring our ‘queer pasts’, as we are “inherently constrained by the language of gay identity and desire derived from a completely different cultural and historical context” (Monteiro, 2010, p. 343). Thus, the problem with such retrospective queer readings is that they are inauthentic; reproduce Western ontologies as *the* ontologies; and reify the West as the site of progress by which we must measure and restore dignity to our own ways of being.

The purpose of this section is thus not to romanticize the pre-colonial subject as somehow sexually enlightened and advanced, but rather to understand the current racialized subject in the West - supposedly defined by a ‘backwards’ homophobia and rigid heterosexuality - as a colonial one as well. In the words of South Asian queer writer Alok Vaid-Menon (2014), “my [homophobic] family is just as broken as I am but they never had the time and space to really process and heal from the violence of colonialism, the terror of Partition, the trauma of diaspora”. Further, through this historical reading, we can denaturalize the frameworks in which we understand sexuality today – and thus, how they may not be universally applicable. This is the focus of the next section.

‘Universal’ Sexuality?

As alluded to above, our understandings of sexuality are not ‘natural’ nor do they merely describe our pre-existing sexual ‘reality’. ‘Sexualities’ are *productions* that emerge from and are relevant to specific *contexts* – including ones, as described above, involving histories of colonialism – and are *productive* of particular sexual subjects. Indeed – context creates “the necessary conditions of [the subject’s] possibility....[and] the very processes and conditions that secure her subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 17).

As John D’Emilio has argued the ‘homosexual’ as understood today has not always existed: “Gay men and lesbians...are a product of history, and have come into existence in a specific historical era. This emergence is associated with the emergence of capitalism” (Islam, 1998, p. 77). Put otherwise, the notion of sexual desire and behaviour as ‘who we are’ is not a given but a phenomenon born of specific historical conditions – ones not present everywhere. Indeed, “the fact that there is no word for lesbian in Bengali, Hindi or Urdu is a linguistic clue to cultural and structural organizations of sexuality in the respective societies” (Islam, 1998, p. 72)– specifically, ‘cultural and structural organizations’ that do not revolve around sexuality as being. Additionally, the *individualistic* nature of a sexual identity should not be taken for granted. As Naheed Islam (1998) found in her study of South Asian immigrant women in the United States who engage in ‘lesbian’ behaviour: “the issue of individualism versus extended self is another reason for the conflicts the South Asian immigrant women in this study have with identity politics” (p. 86). Some of these women referred to the nature of their ‘lesbian’ relationships as *joda ban gaya hai* (we have become a pair). As Islam (1998) explains, these women, “do not embody their sexual identity but rather experience sexuality with other women as an extension of

the self (and not simply with one another)” (p. 87). In other words, individualistic identity labels may be unappealing and even incomprehensible for those who primarily make sense of themselves as relational – rather than isolated – beings.

A universally common classification of individuals into this relatively new homo-hetero sexual order depends upon a common understanding of the distinction between ‘erotic/romantic’ and ‘platonic’ - one that makes it possible to clearly allocate acts to the realm of the ‘sexual’ versus the ‘social’, and hence, assign individuals into the categories of ‘homosexual’ versus ‘heterosexual’. As Naheed Islam (1998) suggests, such a universal distinction between the two does not exist:

what may be considered as signs of homosexuality in mainstream U.S. culture does not carry such meaning in India. People of the same sex hold hands in public. They put their arms around each other, and women comb each other’s hair and share the same bed. One cannot clearly demarcate friendships and sexual relations. Intense emotional and physical relationships are not necessarily named as lesbian desires or acts (p. 75)

Another contingency of our current sexual order is in the symbolism attached to ‘marriage’. In a current Western context, a presumption of marriage is the presence of erotic/romantic love - and yet, throughout history and today in many non-Western societies, marriage has been/is considered a contractual relationship for the purposes of reproduction, and for consolidating economic wealth and social relationships. As Islam (1998) claims: “According to the cultural norms of South Asia, homosexuality does not negate marriage....Especially the men are frequently asked, So what has that got to do with marriage?” (p. 89). As such, there exists a discrepancy between the expectations accorded to marriage – i.e. about whether it is supposed to confirm and validate our sexual identities or not.

Through a provincializing of modern Western sexualities, we can also provincialize Western measures of sexual progress – ones in which the West will always represent the most

advanced. Firstly, given the recent emergence of sexual desire/behaviour as constitutive of identity, we can challenge the belief that : “until Gay liberation, Lesbians and Gay men were always the victims of systematic, undifferentiated, terrible oppression” (Islam, 1998, p. 77). On the contrary, homosexual behaviour has been defined differently through time, and “has not occupied the lower rung in the hierarchy of sexual order in all societies, at all times...in certain cultural and historical junctures sexual heterarchy existed or exists” (Islam, 1998, p. 77). Indeed, ‘homosexuality’ does not necessarily *precede* ‘homophobia’. Rather, it is the very production of the ‘homosexual’ subject that makes possible her Otherization on the basis of her sexuality. As such, evaluations of sexual progress based upon ‘homosexual visibility’ and ‘homosexual acceptance’ are limited – as they do not account for the ways in which a perceived need and possibility for ‘visibility’ and ‘acceptance’ is the product of a particular form of sexual Othering. Secondly, equating a refusal to identify according to our sexual preference to ‘self-denial’ (i.e. ‘internalized homophobia’) or a ‘homophobic’ environment in which this identity would be rejected, fails to appreciate how these Western categories for self-sense-making are not universally applicable. As one study on ‘homosexuality’ among women in India found, “most of the subjects had not heard of the word lesbian and asked what language it was from. They were uncomfortable with and unaccustomed to naming themselves” (Sharma, 2007, p. 244). Thus, for these women who did indeed engage in behaviours we call ‘lesbian’, the concept of self-identifying according to these behaviours was foreign. Further, it was *unappealing* - in that it validated a framework in which their sexuality is deterministic of their self. As one participant in Naheed Islam’s (1998) previously-mentioned study remarked: “like so many other people, I felt that calling myself a lesbian amounted to reducing my whole being to my sexual preference” (pp. 84-85). Finally, we must also contest the bases through which we name the ‘homosexual

subject', and determine her society as either facilitative or hindering of this subjectivity – as the very logics through which we define sexuality are not universal; nor are the functions of the social institutions (such as marriage) and their relationships to this 'sexuality'.

This denaturalization of Western sexualities - and to its trajectories of sexual liberation – provides an initial troubling to the construction of the West as the ultimate site of progress, sexual and otherwise. The ways in which Western sexualities are galvanized today towards racializing ends is the topic of the next section.

Current Queer Subjectivities & Racialized Violence

Homonationalism

Numerous scholars have noted the heterosexual nature of the nation-state: M. Jacqui Alexander writes that the “nation disallows queerness,”; V. Spike Petersen locates “nationalism as heterosexism” (Puar & Rai, 2002, p. 127). The state is constructed, and sustains itself, in reference to the ideals of the heteronormative home. “The nation is constructed in terms of a familial and domestic metaphor...to denote something to which one is naturally tied...and to evoke an archaic past and authentic communal identity in order to assert and legitimize its project of modernization” (Gopinath, 2003, p. 138). Since this 'family' and 'domicile' are premised upon heterosexuality and fixed gender roles, the stability and futurity of this nation relies upon – and demands – “heterosexuality as a prerequisite of good citizenship” (Gopinath, 2003, p. 139).

The queer rights movement in the West in the mid 20th century disrupted the regulatory heterosexuality of the state but was formed on “normatively white and national terms” (Morgensen, 2010, p. 106). Thus, the effect was not to 'queer' the state but rather to integrate the homonormative (read: white cis male) into the national imaginary. Indeed, as Jasbir Puar

(2007) argues, “the ascendancy of whiteness is [not] strictly bound to heterosexuality, though it is bound to heteronormativity” (p. 31).

The effect of this integration has been what Puar (2007) terms ‘homonationalism’ – or, a nationalism engendered among queer Western subjects. The benefits of this for ongoing Western domination are two-fold. Firstly, there exists a new class of citizens invested in the (colonial, imperial and capitalist) projects of the state: “the project of whiteness is assisted and benefited by homosexual populations that participate in the same identitarian and economic hegemonies as those hetero subjects complicit with this ascendancy.” (Puar, 2007, p. 31). For example, as noted by Alexandra Chasin in *Selling Out: The Lesbian and Gay Movement Goes to Market*:

advertising to gay men and lesbians has played on ideas about national identity in two significant ways. First, such advertising has often appealed to gays on the basis of their identification as Americans. Second, advertising to gay men and lesbians has often promised that full inclusion in the national community of Americans is available through personal consumption. (in Puar, 2007, p.63).

Thus, heteronormative capitalist behaviour is both the *means* of inclusion into the nation, and an *effect* of such inclusion among homonormative queers. Puar (2005) has noted the Western queer movement’s pre-occupation with gay marriage, and inclusion into the military. This demonstrates how, even in supposed opposition to the state, the homonormative queer is invested in validating its institutions (i.e. marriage), and advancing its imperialist interests (i.e. the military) – and as such, demands the right to participate in them.

The second benefit of ‘homonationalism’ is that the assertion of Western exceptionalism in the area of ‘gay rights’ (i.e. ‘sexual exceptionalism’ (Puar, 2005)) provides a mechanism through which Western imperialism can be pursued: through the framework of ‘human rights’. Massad summarizes this ideology (adapting Gayatri Spivak’s famous phrase):

brown women (gay and straight) and brown gay men (located in the Euro-American metropole and those who work for NGOs with Euro-American funding in their home countries), and their white allies of all genders and sexualities, are engaged in saving brown women (“straight” and “gay”) and brown “gay” men (in the Third World and in Europe and the United States) from brown “straight” men (Ewanje-Epee & Magliani-Belkacem, 2013).

As Leticia Sabsay (2012) has noted, while US foreign interventions under President Bush were overtly motivated on grounds of self-defense and nation-building, President Obama based his policies on ‘humanitarian solidarity’: “in this context, the motive of the protecting of LGBT people across the world started to play a central role in the justification of his foreign policies” (p. 609). Thus, as Sabsay argues, a US hegemony that sustains itself through violent activities abroad can survive a change in the logic justifying that violence – i.e. from one of self-interest to one of paternalistic concern.

This global activism for LGBTQ rights has the added effect of erasing oppressions and hierarchies related to other subjectivities. As Puar and Mikdashi (2016) note, “homophobia is a homogenizing and flattening discourse...[that has the effect of]...universalizing particular injuries” (p. 6). Thus, in the rendering of sexual identity as *the* basis for oppression, racial/classed/other forms of violence are glossed over.

The Terrorist Queer ‘Monster’

This expansion of Western nationalism has led to a fracturing of queer subjectivity: the homonormative subject is now one who is officially celebrated at home and abroad, while narratives of queerness are projected onto Western ‘enemies’ (namely, the ‘Muslim terrorist’). Further, this queering is contradictory in that it produces the enemy as both sexually perverse *and* averse (Puar & Rai, 2002).

The queered terrorist enemy is a current manifestation of a pre-existing figure in nationalist discourse – the ‘monster’, as described by Foucault. The ‘monster’ is the “opposite of all that is

just [and] human” (Puar & Rai, 2002, p. 118) – separated by an absolute morality from what is good. Within this logic, the ‘monster’ – as irredeemable - must be destroyed. Through the creation of simple dichotomy between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ (i.e. the ‘monster’) along the depoliticized matrix of ‘good’ versus ‘evil’, nation-states justify their violent activities – on the premise that only violence can neutralize such irrational and depraved criminality.

As Puar and Rai (2002) note, “sexuality is central to the creation of a certain knowledge” (p. 117) of this terrorist ‘monster’. Indeed, ‘monsters’ throughout history have always been sexualized, and specifically, queered. Within literature on counter-terrorism, the terrorist mind is commonly constructed as psychologically damaged - the product of inconsistent family structures and sexual frustration. The phenomenon of the female suicide bomber is seen to result from an individual’s rejection of traditional gender and sexual formations – i.e. lesbianism - which then disposes her towards violence. Thus, terrorism is a mental illness, supposedly born of a failure to be properly initiated into the norms of the heterosexual family, to satisfy heterosexual urges, and to embody/perform heteronormative sexuality. Further, the terrorist activity itself is understood through the metaphor of queer sexual violation. As Puar & Rai (2002) put it, the September 11 2001 attack on the Twin Towers represented a “penetration of white Western phallic power by bad brown dick” (p. 137)

The benefits of this queerness for ongoing Western imperialism is that the complex social, political and historical grievances that manifest themselves in terrorist activity are ignored. As Puar and Rai (2002) argue, “that is precisely what terrorism studies intends to do.”(p. 124). Further, this queering engenders a heteronormative patriotism among the Western subject, as a means of aggressively distinguishing itself from the ‘monster’. Thus, heteronormative

nationalism is reproduced in the production and galvanization of the ‘monster’ (Puar & Rai, 2002).

As mentioned above, the queer ‘monster’ is paradoxical, in that, he is also constructed as sex averse. This construction directs the forms of violence that are exacted upon him. For example, in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison, inmates were tortured through acts of anal penetration (Puar, 2007). This was seen as the most denigrating kind of behaviour that could be performed on them, based on the Orientalist belief that the East is particularly prudish and homophobic. Thus, the West uncritically mobilizes homophobic logic to disarm its ‘enemy’ - through demonstration of his penetrability, the West renders him homosexual, and thus, emasculated and futile.

Given a historical and current imbrication between constructs of race and sexuality, this next section examines how South Asian queer diasporic individuals inhabit and perform their subjectivity in the racialized and sexualized spaces they inhabit.

Queer South Asian Diasporic Subjectivities

Although the focus of this research is on the sexualities of those who claim their origins in ‘South Asia’, it would not be productive to speak in detail about sexual identities and performances in the sub-continent. As Gopinath (2005) suggests, a desire to do so draws upon and reproduces an understanding of the diaspora as a mere *satellite* of the ‘back home’. This fails to account for the ways in which the diaspora can and does engender new experiences and identities dissimilar from those present in the pre-migration space. As such, I choose to limit myself to an examination of queer subjectivity as it exists in the racialized diasporic context.

Queer or Brown?

As Jasbir Puar (2007) has said, the “the homosexual other is white, the racial other is straight” (p. 32). The queer racialized subject in the West experiences invisibilization and/or rejection from both the queer and racialized communities that supposedly represent her.

Perhaps nothing makes this point more clear than through the spectacle of celebratory parades, which demonstrate both what a community knows about itself, and what it wishes the outside to know about it. The recent controversy during the 2016 Pride events in Toronto regarding the activism by Black Lives Matter; and previous controversies about the inclusion of the Queers Against Israeli Apartheid contingent, bely a queer community that fundamentally sees itself as white, and that does not believe that issues of race/issues affecting racialized people are ‘queer issues’. In New York City during the 1990’s, the ongoing battle by the South Asian Lesbian and Gay Association to be included in the annual Federation of Indian Association’s India Day Parade demonstrates the “impossibility of imagining such a subject [i.e. a queer one] within dominant diasporic and nationalist logics” (Gopinath, 2003, p 140).

Research that has included the voices of queer racialized individuals have noted that lack of belonging is a common experience. Ayisha Al-Sayyad’s work with Arab and South Asian queer Muslim women living in the West, for example, found that participants experienced a “double pressure...[to be both an]...ideal Muslim daughter...[and a]...liberated queer” (p. 378). The perception that it was impossible to simultaneously do both was held within both mainstream queer communities, as well as participants’ religious/ethnic ones. Surina Khan (1998), whose discussions with queer South Asian diasporics in the West are presented in the essay *Sexual Exiles*, noted how: “the feeling of isolation for South Asian lesbians seems to be universal – both from the South Asian community of family and friends...and from the Western lesbian

community” (p. 67). She offers an explanation for this double-bind: “we have one foot in a culture where people structure identities from sexuality and the other foot in a subcontinent culture where women are not seen as sexual beings” (Khan, 1998, p. 66). Thus, a fundamental incompatibility may exist between how we are encouraged to subjectify ourselves in mainstream Western spaces versus in our racial/ethnic diasporic sub-spaces – making our own self-identification conflicted. Additionally, as one participant in Naheed Islam’s study of South Asian lesbians in the West suggested, the thorough construction of Western queer subjectivity around White norms poses another challenge to our belonging among queers, as queers:

As a lesbian of Indian origin with an active relationship to India and to my family, I was struck by the conformity to androgyny that appeared to be the norm of white lesbian beauty. Having grown up with a body and an aesthetic value system that was utterly different than this white androgyny, I struggled to accept my Indian woman’s body against all heterosexist odds (Islam, 1998, p. 85).

As such, our presentations – which may not align with the commonly understood image of ‘the queer’ - may render us impossible, or at least unintelligible, in mainstream queer spaces.

Further, as Jeffrey Weeks argues, individuals may subscribe to this belief of supposed conflict between different elements of themselves: “each of us lives with a variety of potentially contradictory identities....The problem is that these...are often patently in conflict, not only between different communities, but between individuals themselves” (in Shah, 1998, p 142). Khan (1998) reflects on her own internal strife regarding her dual identities as ‘Pakistani’ and ‘lesbian’. As she admits, “Pakistan became synonymous with homophobia” (p. 64).

‘Diaspora’, ‘Queer’ – and ‘Home’

This section outlines several ways in which the constructs of ‘diaspora’ and ‘queerness’ have been conceptualized in relation to one another – and specifically, their relationships to ‘home’.

One way has been to understand the queer as diasporic - that is to say, the 'diaspora' is a fruitful analogy for describing the queer experience. For example, as Alan Sinfield writes: "most of us are born and/or socialized into (presumably) heterosexual families. We have to move away from them and...into the culture of a minority community. 'Home is the place you get to, not the place you come from'." (Fortier, 2003, p. 117). In this conceptualization, both queers and diasporics share similar experiences of : exile/migration, a home of 'origin' and a home of 'destination', and loss as well as gain of 'home'. In this way then, queer migrants can be understood as doubly-diasporic – displaced both geographically and familially.

As Fortier (2003) explains, however, this conceptualization is limiting in that it both presumes a fixed heterosexual nature of the familial home (that is thus un-'home'ly to queers), and the availability/accessibility of a queer destination 'home' to all queers (which, as mentioned above, may not be the case for many, including racialized queers). Further, it relies on a white Western notion of an 'authentic' trajectory of individualistic queerness – ones that culminates in a highly visible 'coming out' and 'staying out', and that requires an emancipation from the 'home' of origin. As Alok Vaid-Menon (2014) explains, this does not always speak to the trajectories of the non-Western subject: "our turn towards our families of origin is ...a type of political work that often gets erased or dismissed by dominant white and masculine standards of queer visibility".

An alternative framework for theorizing on this subject is to understand the diaspora as queer. Such an analysis is found in Italian-American author Mary Cappello's work. As Fortier describes, "Cappello finds queerness within the very space of betweenness typically attributed to the 'diasporic space' located between here and there...home is intensely queer and queer utterly familiar" (Fortier, 2003, p. 125). Thus, in her reading, the diasporic home is itself inherently

queer. Queer is used here not only in the metaphorical sense to indicate a divergence from norms, but in a literal one as well: “Capello refuses to situated her queer Italianness either in an essentialized conception of sexuality as identity – that’s who I am – or within an essentialized US-Italian ethnicity that is relentlessly heterosexual, staunchly patriarchal, and deeply homophobic” (Fortier, 2003, p. 125). Thus, in reading the diasporic home as queer, Capello makes space for the queer in the diasporic home.

Yet another suggestion is that the queer diasporic subjectivity is productive of experiences entirely *different* from those who are ‘queer’ or ‘diasporic’ and not both. Specifically, if we ‘come out’, we lose access to the ethnic/racial communities that “give us a base, a refuge, from racism” (Islam, 1998, p. 88), and yet if we do not ‘come out’, “we feel that sense of exile because we are unable to share a very important part of ourselves with them” (Islam, 1998, p. 88). Thus, our subjectivities are *unique*, in that they may render us without the possibility of *any* ‘home’.

Finally, as Puar (1998) says, the relationship between the constructs of ‘queer’ and ‘diaspora’ can be read in what they both absent – namely, “complicities with the concepts of the nation-state” (p. 407). For example, the terms “Queer Nation” and “Lesbian Nation” indicate what Gopinath (2003) refers to as “uninterrogated assumption of queer citizenship” (p. 407); and diasporas often act as a source of support (ideological, financial, political) for nationalist movements seeking a renewal of the ‘homeland’. In this analysis – queers, diasporics, and queer diasporics do not necessarily subvert nationalist logics, but on the contrary, appeal to it in their quest to create their own ‘home’.

Radical Possibilities of the Queer Diasporic

Gayatri Gopinath (2003) is hopeful about the radical possibilities of the queer diaspora, arguing they can have the effect of disrupting norms and dominant narratives within the multiple sites they inhabit. Indeed, the existence of a queer diaspora can both queer the diaspora, and racialize the queer. Gopinath explains numerous ways this can happen.

Firstly, queer diasporics destabilize the ‘back home’ nation to which diasporics refer. As explained in a previous section, the nation-state sustains itself on the metaphor of the heterosexual family. By destabilizing notions of a ‘home’ and ‘family’ around which the nation organizes its identity and advances its interests, diasporic queers challenge the integrity of the nation (Gopinath, 2003).

Secondly, queer diasporics resurrect a “forgotten but not gone” (Gopinath, 2005, p. 4) history and present of violence, colonialism and racism that is submerged in the nostalgic renderings of ‘back home’ by diasporics:

If conventional diasporic discourse is marked by an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for ‘times past’, a queer diaspora mobilizes questions of the past, memory, and nostalgia ..to remember a time/place riven with contradictions and the violence of multiple uprootings, displacements, and exiles (Gopinath, 2005, p. 4).

Thus, the existence of queers helps to de-sanitize histories based on a “fiction of purity” that “lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies” (Gopinath, 2005, p. 4).

Thirdly, queer diasporics challenge racialized narratives in the West that position non-Western sexualities as “anterior, pre-modern, and in need of Western political development” (Gopinath, 2003, p. 142). As Manalansan explains, for example, for Filipino gay communities in NYC, drag is “inextricably intertwined with nostalgia in that it evokes the image and memory of the Filipino homeland while at the same time acknowledging being settled in a new home” (Gopinath, 2003, p. 145). Thus, through the integration of ‘cultural’ artifacts into queer

performances taking place in the U.S., these individuals challenge the supposed mutual exclusivity of 'queer' and 'Filipino' - i.e. by demonstrating how these 'cultures' can indeed be the means through which their queerness is expressed and actualized. In so doing, they also simultaneously disrupt the cultural purities of 'American' and 'Filipino', by bringing 'back home' performances to the diasporic setting.

Finally, queer diasporics de-naturalize White Western homonormativities as prescribing the required trajectories for an 'authentic' queerness:

The narrative goes that we are supposed to 'come out' (read: leave our blood families) and participate in the 'movement' (read: public visibility) and join 'alternative kinships' (which are necessarily supposed to be more radical and more supportive than our families of origin) (Vaid-Menon, 2014).

In living and loving differently from the homonormative Western subject, the queer diasporic expands the range of possible choices/behaviours that can be included in an imagination of the 'queer life'. Further, the narratives of queer South Asian diasporics – such as the ones documented by Shah (1998) in his essay *Sexuality, Identity, and the Uses of History* - challenge Western 'realities' of queerness as innate ("I was born this way") and integral to identity ("queerness is who I *am* rather than what I *do* or what I *like*"). For example, as he notes, some queer South Asian diasporic narratives "suggest that sexual identities and expressions are a choice – pleasure choice – not something prescribed by biology and certainly not by the hypothalamus" (p. 144). Queer diasporic existences thus offer all of us alternative possibilities for conceptualizing of the 'queer'. This is no small feat given how the West "so thoroughly shapes what queer is [and] what it can do" (Puar & Mikdashi, 2016, p. 4)

With this said, Puar (1998) cautions us against assuming an automatic radical nature of a queer diaspora. As she says, "a diaspora could simply be yet another multiculturalist version of a disciplinary incorporative movement of the state" (p. 409). That is, to say, that the queer

racialized subject can occupy a space in the nation that is neither queer nor anti-racist, accepting entry into this nation on the heteronormative and White-supremacist conditions upon which it is granted (Puar, 2007). For example, queer South Asian diasporic individuals are not immune from the essentialist logics that reproduce Western hegemony. As Islam (1998) found in her examination of South Asian diasporic lesbian subjectivity: “women within the community see themselves as always having been lesbian but merely having come to the “realization” through an acknowledgement of their inclinations, that is, in the coming-out process” (p. 83). As such, we are also vulnerable to a belief in our ‘fundamental nature’ as queer – one in which the West has given us the language to understand ourselves and live as ourselves, and thus, is ‘superior’ (with the non-West, by extension, cast as ‘inferior’).

Queer South Asian ‘Community’?

As Nayan Shah (1998) points out, the premise of a common social history and identity among lesbians and gay men with origins in South Asia has governed the politics of South Asian queer organizations. But is such a premise valid?

Firstly, as he notes, migration generates experiences and identities different from the ones of those who have not been displaced. Thus, diasporic and non-diasporic realities can not necessarily be equated. Secondly - since identity not only marks us as *different* from some, but the *same* as others - the naming of a ‘queer South Asian community’ elides differences between its members based on class, location, colour, ability and other differences (Shah, 1998). The creation and the naming of a community are co-constitutive – wherein the process of *naming* the community seeks to reify and reproduce the *existence* of such a community. A ‘South Asian queer’ community thus becomes incapable of responding to the varying marginalizations that its members differently experience – the act of calling it such enforces a common set of interests

that are primarily those of the most privileged (e.g, cis men) within its folds, to the exclusion of most others (e.g. lesbians and trans people). Further, it can be argued that a presumption of queer South Asian community reproduces the centring of white heterosexual masculine subjectivities, in that the grouping of all queer south Asians into a single ‘community’ is only possible/desirable because, as one moves further away from the centre, detail and distinction become less important. Shah (1998) suggests that the desire for such a community is attributable to the fact that racism is seen as the defining experience of the queer diaspora. As such, all other forms of oppression are eclipsed and made less urgent in comparison. This again points to the problematics of the Whiteness of mainstream queer movements in the West – they discourage nuanced coalition-building on queer issues along multiple intersecting marginalizations.

For Khan (1998), the problem with a queer South Asian community is not in its politics but in its ability to be actualized. Specifically, she suggests that the silence around sexuality in South Asia/South Asian diasporic communities makes more difficult the task of building networks between us in a diasporic context – one in which our sexualities are indeed relevant towards our identity and experience.

Queer South Asian Settlerhood

Giving a diasporic context of colonial North America, an analysis of queer South Asian diasporic subjectivity must attend to the role of the queer racialized subject in ongoing colonialism. Indeed, Indigenous anti-colonial scholars implicate both racialized and queer communities in an amnesia of colonialism and reproduction of colonialist logic.

In *Decolonizing Anti-Racism*, Lawrence and Dua (2005) explain how racialized communities fail to adequately account for the context of colonialism within which they experience racism, as well as their own position as settlers. As such, anti-racist movements and academia often both

naturalize colonialism and reproduce colonial logics within their analyses and activism. For example, the elevation of the ‘diaspora’ as the embodiment of a progressive politics within critical anti-racism de-legitimizes anti-colonial struggles which aspire to *reclaim* a stolen ‘home’ (rather than *disperse* from it), and which seek to *resurrect* a denied nationhood (rather than *destabilize* it).

In *Decolonization is not a Metaphor*, Tuck & Yang (2012) articulate various “settler moves to innocence” – or the ways in which settlers absolve themselves of their participation in colonialism. One of these ‘moves’ includes the ‘Indigenization of the non-native’ – a settler’s claim to owning or approaching Indigeneity, that then distinguishes them from settlerhood and hence legitimizes their existence. As Morgensen (2010) says:

Non-Natives may think that as queer subjects, they inherit ties to Native histories of gender or sexual diversity that grant them a kind of kinship with Native peoples. Identifying this way, non-Native queers may think that the terrors of sexual colonization visited on Native peoples were caused by persons unrelated to them or that those same violences were visited on themselves, either of which may obscure their specific non-Native relation to Native peoples and settler colonialism (p. 121).

In this way, then, the queer settler subject is implicated in a dual offense – enjoying settler privileges while simultaneously failing to acknowledge such privileges. In so doing, they fail to accept their settler responsibility towards anti-colonial ally-ship. Furthermore, as explained in a previous section, the queer subject is vulnerable to the ideologies of the liberal humanist’s self-projection as self-possessed, agentic, and universal - one desiring to be freed from the confines of place and time. This can have the effect of delegitimizing Indigenous struggles for nationhood, which are intimately bound to space. As Hart (2009) describes:

their “place” is the foundation of cultural mooring and values; it is not simply “the environment” that they accidentally “occupy” – they are children of that place. There is no artificial distinction between themselves and some alien “other” that is termed “nature” (p. 33).

Thus, the queer diasporic subject is doubly vulnerable to a naturalization and reproduction of colonial logic. Such a critique does not re-orient the primary responsibility/culpability for colonialism onto this subject but rather, demonstrates the need for an *acknowledgement* of their settler subjectivity, one that cautions them to not reproduce colonial logics in their movements.

Queer South Asian Diasporics & Western Sexualities

Nayan Shah (1998) revisits the narratives of queer South Asians presented in various South Asian lesbian and gay newsletters and support groups in his essay *Sexuality, Identity, and the Uses of History*. Several interesting points on the question of sexual identity emerge from these readings.

Firstly, Western sexualities are adopted by South Asian diasporics for their positive effects. Indeed, “identity is about belonging” (Shah, 1998, p. 142). As such, Western identities offer a context within which individuals can make sense of their desires and experiences; celebrate themselves; and create the basis for building community.

Secondly, these Western categories of sexual identity are re-configured and translated to better reflect the needs of the South Asian queers they are intended to describe. As Manalansan (2006) explains:

unable to be easily located in normalized acceptable identities and categories, these migrants of color are establishing multiple hybrid cultures and creating spaces for community activities and new cultural “traditions” that depart from both their own migrant communities and from mainstream “straight” and “gay and lesbian” cultures. (p. 236).

For example, instead of using the English term ‘gay’, some South Asians instead use the Hindi and Urdu word ‘khush’ (meaning ‘happy’). The appropriation of the word ‘khush’ is not a mere exercise in linguistic translation of an available Western construct, but additionally connotes ‘ecstatic pleasure’ (Shah, 1998). In this way then, South Asian diasporic queers find

ways to describe themselves by adopting Western sexualities while simultaneously customizing them to better reflect their subjectivities.

Thirdly, present adoptions of Western sexualities provoke a revisiting of the past: “through a language of lesbian relationships learned in the United States, Kamini is able to name friendships between women in India “romances”” (Shah, 1998, p. 144). In applying the knowledge/language of ‘lesbianism’, Kamini’s past interactions, previously understood in platonic terms, *become* romantic and sexual. This demonstrates how ‘experience’ is a product both of *activity* as well as *understanding*, rendering the past, in fact, mutable. Indeed, as Stuart Hall reminds us, “Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves, within narratives of the past” (Shah, 1998, p. 148). Thus, ‘identity’ is the means through which past and present become co-constituted – the question of “who *am* I?” is answered by referring to “who I *was*”; and “who *was* I?” is reworked in light of “who I *am*”.

Finally, this “export of identity” (Ewanje-Epee & Magliani-Belkacem, 2013) via uptake of Western sexuality constructs activates what Joseph Massad refers to as an “incitement to discourse” (Massad, 2002, p. 371). By this, he means that Western influence – which previously led to a rejection of non-heterosexuality and erasure of non-heterosexual memory in the non-West- creates sexually diverse subjects according to Western sexual categories. These Westernized subjects are then rejected by non-Western subjects and/or in non-Western contexts. In South Asia, “heterosexuals have often denied the authenticity of queer-identified South Asians by labelling homosexual relations a white disease, insinuating that our presence in the US and Britain has contaminated our minds and desires” (Shah, 1998, p. 146). As explained here, the non-Western ‘queer’ is rejected on the grounds of in-‘authenticity’. Indeed, as described previously, “gay men and lesbians have *not* always existed. Instead, they are a product of history,

and have come into existence in a specific historical era” (Ewanje-Epee & Magliani-Belkacem, 2013). This is to say that, even though the homo-social behaviour that supposedly defines the ‘queer’ has always been present, the *frameworks* within which this behaviour is understood has not – and what is rejected today is, at least in part, the *Western nature* of the ‘queer’. Important to note, however, is that this rejection is even from those who engage in same-sex romantic/erotic activity . As one narrative account goes: “I remember Rita often saying ‘we love each other but we’re not lesbians, are we?’ There were all these negative connotations to lesbianism – that it was bad and wrong and that as long as we weren’t lesbians, it was OK” (Shah, 1998, p 144). As this narrative demonstrates, the same-gender romantic/sexual practice was considered acceptable – whereas the application of the Westernized term ‘lesbian’ to describe it was not. Shah (1998) argues that “South Asian lesbians and gay men are present now. On that alone, we demand acknowledgement and acceptance” (p. 149). Massad queries, however, whether this is ever possible. He suggests that these identities are not universalizable, and that their imposition/adoption outside of the West will always reproduce Western hegemony and violence (Ewanje-Epee & Magliani-Belkacem, 2013).

Diasporic Interracial Romance/Sex

In *Impossible Desires*, Gayatri Gopinath (2005) argues: “The barely submerged histories of colonialism and racism erupt into the present at the very moment when queer sexuality is being articulated. Queer desire does not transcend or remain peripheral to these histories” (p. 2). For Gopinath, the supposedly private, personal, and intimate activity of sex – when it occurs in an interracial context, specifically between White and racialized Other - is intensely political. Does this preclude a legitimate sexual encounter between the White and the South Asian queer? Gopinath refuses to castigate these encounters. On the contrary, she points to the fruitfulness of

them: “these histories cannot be told or remembered without simultaneously revealing the erotics of power” (Gopinath, 2005, p. 2). Thus, the interracial sexual encounter is actually indispensable to the remembering of submerged histories of violence, colonialism, and racism.

In a witty tongue-in-cheek essay *Curry Queens and Other Spices*, Sandip Roy (1998) argues for the legitimacy of interracial sex on different grounds. While acknowledging that the sexual desires of ‘curry queens’ – or those white gay men who lust specifically after South Asian men – are embedded in colonial mindsets of conquest, arrogance, and wide-eyed adoration, he nonetheless accepts this reality “as long as he doesn’t expect me to clean his boots or perform levitation” (Roy, 1998, p. 258). Thus, for Roy, the colonial logics governing desire are acceptable, as long as they do not play out perceptibly in interaction. Part of his acceptance of these dynamics are that interracial encounters are *mutually* beneficial (or ‘exploitative’). For the South Asian, a White man may offer “help with that green card...[and/or] and financial stability” (Roy, 1998, p. 259). To deny this truth is to also deny the agency of the non-White in interaction with the White. As he says, “after all, it will ultimately be my decision whether I let myself be lured into his arms” (Roy, 1998, p. 259). Additionally, the categorization of White desire for South Asians as ‘fetish’ already situates this desire within the realm of ridiculous, rendering it either impossible or perverse/exploitative. Thus, if such desires are automatically cast in these terms, they will always produce the South Asian body as inferior (both sexually and otherwise).

Nonetheless, Roy does bemoan the internalized racism that directs the desires of queer diasporics. “I fear that the white man is offering his whiteness. I have met many Asian men who will not sleep with another Asian” (Roy, 1998, p. 259). This points to the ways in which histories of colonization and racism continue to shape the most seemingly interpersonal aspects

of our existences. Given this reality, however, Roy refuses to deny the sexual pleasures of South Asians, even as they manifest in racialized desires.

The Queer Racialized Migrant at the Border

Manalansan (2006) explains how, at the border, the queer diasporic is the site for the enforcement of the racialized agendas of Western states. US immigration history demonstrates how laws restricted entry of particular groups on the basis of their supposed sexual deviancy. For example, Chinese migration was restricted via the Page Law of 1882 which barred Chinese women for allegedly being prostitutes; the McCarren-Walter Act barred homosexuals on the grounds that homosexuality was akin to an infectious disease.

More recently, the inclusion of sexuality as a basis for acquiring asylum status has had two racializing impacts. Firstly, “the laws required the asylum petitioners to assert and document the horrible conditions that existed in their home countries....thereby creating an East-West dichotomy that was morally and culturally hierarchical” (Manalansan, 2006, p. 232). Secondly, in deploying sexual labels like ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, and ‘homosexual’, these asylum legal proceedings participate in ‘exporting’ Western identities, thus reproducing the ontological hegemony of the West. This is not to castigate the queer migrant subject for her participation in Western imperialism. Rather, it is to demonstrate how the queer migrant is forced into the roles of ‘native informant’ – required to vividly testify against her country of origin – and ‘Western ontology exporter’ – required to speak in the language of the West in order to make herself intelligible in its spaces.

Informed by the analyses presented in this Review of Literature, I now proceed to an introduction of my own research – one that will hopefully engender more insight into these discussion of race, sexuality, and queer diasporic subjectivity.

Research Design

Research Question

The problem statement of this research paper is: how do South Asian diasporic individuals understand and experience their queerness in the racialized context of Toronto, Canada?

Participant Recruitment

For the purposes of my research, I required access to 3-5 individuals who self-identified as queer South Asian diasporics. Participants were recruited via social service agencies, Facebook groups/pages concerned with ‘queer’ and/or ‘South Asian’ identities/issues, and by appealing to personal contacts. I choose this diversity of recruitment techniques so as to attract the widest diversity of participants – i.e. those who are accessing social services, those who are present online, and those who may not be/doing either. I acknowledge the socially constructed – rather than biological – nature of these identity categories, and hence, view their applicability only to the extent to which individuals consider themselves included by them. As such, *self*-inclusion into the categories of ‘queer’ and ‘South Asian diasporic’ was the only measure used to determine eligibility for participation. Additionally, in the participant call-out (see Appendix), I chose not to elaborate on the possible identities that could be encompassed by the terms ‘queer’ and ‘South Asian diaspora’. This was so as to not unintentionally delimit these terms (hence discouraging possible recruits), and to avoid participating in their increasing institutionalization.

Participant Selection

Through the recruitment process, during which I received more interest than I had anticipated, five individuals who identified as ‘queer’ and members of the ‘South Asian diaspora’ were selected as research subjects. Those with whom I had a pre-existing relationship

were automatically excluded from participation. This was to minimize, as much as possible, any obstacle to meaningful and open conversation on this potentially sensitive and fraught topic. Ultimately, my selection was driven by a desire to include the greatest possible diversity – and hence representation – of voices in this project. As such, my determinations were based on demographic markers such as: age, sexual identity, ethnic/racial identity, gender identity, religious identity, occupation, and geographies. I recognize the inherent limitations of such an approach, as the means through which I determined an appropriate amount of ‘diversity’ were based on my own presuppositions about the relevancy of different elements of the self towards experience. Further, even within my own metrics for diversity, I was unable to reach my desired variety in terms of age. This is suggestive of a possible relationship between immigration and self-identification as ‘queer’ - as those more likely to identify as ‘queer’ may be those who have been primarily socialized in the West. This is a suggestion meriting further exploration, but unfortunately one that cannot be accounted for in this project.

The Participants

The following chart is a summary of the participants, according to the demographic metrics I used to select them. I also include one column sharing their answer to my question: “Who am I?”. I felt that this was important to include, and for it to be shared in the body of the paper. Given that the following sections will deconstruct their narratives in ways that may not resonate with them, I felt they should each be offered the opportunity to share with readers who they are in their own words:

	Age	Sexual Identity	Religious Identity	Ethnic/Racial Identity	Gender Identity	Occupation	Countries Inhabited	Who are you?
Layla	23	Queer	Born/raised Muslim; Spiritual	Bangladeshi	Cis gender woman	Arts Administrator	Canada, Bangladesh, United Arab Emirates	“I am a queer emerging artist, exploring marginalized identities...a Canadian... the most important thing about me is how I spend my time...I want to make the world a better place”
Iman	33	Lesbian	Born/raised Muslim; Agnostic	Pakistani South Asian	Cis gender female	Human Resources Employee	United Arab Emirates, Canada	“It depends on where I am...I’m someone who tries to be a good person, who cares a lot about grassroots efforts, and tries to work hard to strengthen community...I’m also a lesbian, political and conscientious, a leftist, and a goofball.”
Michael	28	Queer	Born/raised Catholic; Spiritual	“Culturally-confused” South Asian	Queer	Therapist	United Arab Emirates, India, Canada	“I’m a South Asian trans guy, husband, a caretaker, sex animal. I’m a therapist, I like to think I’m someone who people come to, a leader in a lot of the spaces that I’m in”
Arjun	19	Gay	Spiritually Hindu	South Asian	Male	University student	India, Canada	“It depends on the situation. If you asked me in a very business setting, I’m a student at U of T. If you asked me in a straight casual situation, I would also say I’m a student at U of T. Max I would say I’m a gay male. But if you put me in a queer situation, I would say I’m brown, I’m queer, intersex, identified gay man.”
Yasmin	27	Queer/Gay	Born/raised Muslim; Non-religious Muslim	West Indian South Asian	Non-binary	University student, working part-time in retail	Canada	“I am a queer West Indian South Asian woman.”

Data Collection

Data was collected via audio-recorded semi-structured interviews. This method facilitated the accessing of rich and detailed accounts of people's experiences - ensuring both a direction to the information being collected, as well as the opportunity for interviewees to suggest other important topics of discussion, ones that I had not yet considered, but that may have been fruitful for analysis. Because my intention was to explore subjectivities of queer South Asian diasporic individuals, interview questions included those that inquired about: self-understanding; their relationships to the identities of 'South Asian' and 'queer'; experiences of racism and homophobia/transphobia in the diasporic context; and how they inhabited and performed their racial/ethnic and sexual subjectivities (see Appendix for question guide).

Ethical Considerations

As with all research projects - particularly ones involving human participants - there were ethical concerns to be considered and responded to. Firstly, the concern of confidentiality – all data has been/will be kept privately and maintained securely in a password-protected audio-recording device and on encrypted computer files; interviewee names were changed and any potentially-identifying information was removed or obscured/changed. The data (recordings and transcripts) will be destroyed one year after the end of the project (i.e. April 2018). Secondly, concerns about interviewee awareness regarding the research process - all participants were sent a copy of the Informed Consent document (see Appendix) electronically, as well as given a hard copy in person that we went over in detail. Prior to the interview, they were also made aware of the purpose and aims of the research project. Thirdly, the possible concern of interviewees being triggered into mental distress after discussing emotionally evocative subjects – there were

frequent check-ins before and during the interview process to inquire about the well-being of the participants; all were offered the opportunity to have follow-up discussions if more processing was required; and were also given information for the 519 Community Counselling program, which offers up to six sessions with a professional therapist free of charge. It was also re-iterated that consent is an ongoing process and that they have the opportunity to withdraw from participation at any time before, during or after their interviews. All participants were given \$25 - a small token of appreciation for their time and contributions to this project. This was intended to hopefully reduce the problematics of a research process that implicates individuals in the creation of knowledge for personal and institutional gain without adequately recognizing/compensating them for this effort (see Appendix for documents detailing ethical considerations, and approval of this project by the York University Faculty of Social Work Ethics Review Committee).

Data Analysis

This is qualitative research project informed by a constructivist theoretical framework, the goal of which is to understand “*how* social realities are produced, assembled, and maintained” (Silverman, 2013, p. 107). To achieve this, narrative inquiry - which “treats the accounts that people offer as *stories*...to understand their function in particular contexts or sites” (Silverman, 2013, p. 109) – was employed. The narrative inquiry methodology was chosen because it allowed for the ‘stories’ of these research participants, as both individual and collective accounts, to be understood in the broader social context outlined in literature. This was also seen as contiguous with my theoretical framework of post-structuralist queer theory - which understands sexual identities and acts as socially constructed rather than biological, with the meaning attributed to them as being specific to context. After verbatim transcripts of the

interviews were created, they were analyzed as individual documents, and then coalesced to find broader themes. This made it possible to understand the various narratives/discourses operating in participants' lives, in ways that were both similar and different from one another.

The remaining sections highlight what I found most compelling in the narratives of those I interviewed, and attempts to make meaning of these narratives through literature on race, sexuality, and diasporic experience/identity.

Findings

Without a Community?

For the participants in this project, belonging to a community responsive to their needs as both sexual and racial minorities was important. As Arjun said: “For me, representation is one of the main things that inspires people to be what they want to be”. Thus, the mere visible presence of South Asian queers was considered important to self-actualization – *seeing* one’s self made it possible to *become* one’s self. This desire for community was additionally a desire for space in which to exist alongside those with similar racial and sexual subjectivities - space in which to commiserate over experiences of both racism and homophobia/transphobia; and in which they could feel safe from experiences of either.

All participants expressed disappointment in the mainstream queer and mainstream South Asian diasporic communities currently made available to them, in that both were deemed incapable of fulfilling these needs. As Iman lamented, “I’m not in a community that specifically caters to my needs as a queer South Asian”. Specifically, mainstream queer communities were considered to be White; and mainstream South Asian spaces, heteronormative. However, the problematic nature of these two community spaces – i.e. queer and South Asian – were perceived differently.

Queer Communities

With respect to mainstream queer spaces, as Yasmin said: “Queer South Asian voices are often unheard...in mainstream queerness, a lot of queerness is very White”. This does not necessarily suggest that queer South Asian bodies are not *present* in queer spaces but that their presence is *unregistered*. Indeed, in the past, Michael was heavily involved in mainstream queer initiatives – and yet:

Michael – “When I was transitioning, a lot of the white trans guys, got a lot of attention. There was a lot of forgiveness for any kind of f***-up they had...[because] like, white guys are hot...I don’t feel attractive because I’m not being given that feedback.”

Thus, despite his active participation, Michael felt both unseen and unvalued. Further, even while being able to adapt and find value in these spaces to a certain extent, Michael felt required to consciously subsume his Brown identity in order to access them: “the racial dynamic...was really intense. So I could only bring my trans side, the fact that I was Brown didn't give me a lot of power”. Thus, mere presence of racialized bodies in queer space is not sufficient to indicate a space’s responsiveness to queer racialized subjectivity – entry of racialized bodies may be premised on the condition that their racial identity be separated from, and remain marginal to, their queer one; and that their queerness be performed according to White norms.

Iman highlights another disappointment experienced by Brown queers in mainstream queer spaces. She recounts an experience at a queer march in which she confronted a homophobic protester:

Iman - Some Caucasian folks – and it was a primarily Caucasian space, I don’t know why – they came to my defense very quickly; they came and stood in front of me. They demanded that that guy apologize to me. ...And then he apologized because there was quite a few of them that came to my defense. ...And they they turned to me and said: ‘Are you okay, do you feel safe? And I said yea and then they just kind of left.

This experience provides a strong visual for the multiple marginalities experienced by racialized queers - Iman was quite literally ‘caught’ between homophobia and racism. While the homophobia she experienced was explicit, the racism was less so - “I felt like they took away my power. I mean I appreciate it, [but] I wasn’t in danger at all”. Thus, Iman felt disempowered by a White paternalistic concern that seemed to deny her capacity to care for herself and defend her own interests. This paternalistic concern was nonetheless fleeting, as “they just kind of left”.

This exposes the motivations often lurking behind these acts of performative solidarity – those of *visibility*, rather than of *allyship*. Iman’s need to explain how she appreciated the gesture points to the insidiousness of racism that manifests in this way – while it still reproduces the racialized Other as unagentic and inferior, we are nonetheless required to qualify our criticisms with ‘appreciation’, constantly aware that less ‘altruistic’ expressions of racism also abound.

As not only Brown, but also a recent immigrant, Arjun exposes another deficiency experienced in mainstream queer spaces:

Arjun – I’ll say I was discriminated against for my immigration status, I’m not a citizen. And people who are Canadian will be like ‘no, nobody would do that’. Like, ‘do you realize even in my tuition I’m discriminated against because I’m not Canadian? That’s like the simplest example I can give you.

Arjun’s immigration-related challenges point to the various sources of marginalization relevant to queers, including ones that exist at the institutional level. These are challenges not *specific* to queers, nor are they ones applicable to *all* - but they are nonetheless a part of ‘the queer experience’. As discussed briefly in the Review of Literature, a tendency to limit our understanding of the ‘queer experience’ to the marginalizations we face *as* queers is “homogenizing and flattening” (Puar & Mikdashi, 2016, p. 6) – failing to account for the multiple and overlapping sources of discrimination that affect us. The reactions Arjun received in mainstream queer spaces to this disclosure point to not only an *ignorance* but also a *denial* of our narratives. This is one mechanism through which racism self-perpetuates – the delegitimization of our voices mean that our testaments to racism remain unregistered and hence unincorporated into public discourse. Arjun provided a possible rationalization for the refusal of queers to integrate his experiences around immigration into their story of the queer experience - “queers mostly look for liberation in sexual and gender fluidity...But they fail to realize there are other folks in the world, like people of colour, who don't even have equal rights in the first

place.”. Thus, White queer activist movements resist being informed by racialized queer narratives – as this both challenges the privileged position they hold as Whites, and may defer the achievement of their own unrealized aspirations. As such, mainstream queer activism is unlikely to ever willingly be made responsive to the concerns of queer racialized people qua queer racialized people.

South Asian Communities

For the participants in this project, South Asian diasporic communities were similarly disappointing, and yet differently so. During the course of our conversation, Arjun mentioned off-hand about a job working in a fast food chain: “It was a super South Asian environment so I had to cancel out my queer and gay identities.”. This casual synonymization between ‘South Asian’ and ‘straight’/‘heteronormative’ demonstrates a belief in the inherent inhospitability of South Asian spaces to queer subjectivities, one shared by other participants: Yasmin - “a lot of South Asian culture ...isn’t really accepting of queerness.”; Iman - “I do feel a little excluded from a lot of South Asian communities because every now and then some communities are a little homophobic, about different things, like different identities.” Such beliefs informed how participants engaged in mainstream South Asian communities. Iman, who generally considers herself to be an ‘out’ queer, in that she participates heavily in queer activism, said: “if its around aunties, I’m not bringing it [i.e. my sexuality] up”. Participants in this project choose to *pre-empt* a homophobia/transphobia they expected to receive by withholding their queerness in spaces considered ‘South Asian’ in nature. To translate a perceived inability to disclose our queer identities in South Asian spaces as ‘homophobia’ is, however, simplistic - failing to appreciate how non-Western conceptualizations of sexuality from which these communities may draw cannot be easily translated into Western binaries of ‘homophobic’ versus ‘non-

homophobic'. Describing her Bangladeshi family, Layla said: "they don't even acknowledge sexuality in the first place. So, like asking them to acknowledge sexuality in a different way is a challenge and I've never done it before." Thus, the silence surrounding 'the homosexual' cannot be understood only in terms of an aversion to the 'homo', but to the 'sexual', as well.

None of the participants recounted explicit incidents of 'rejection' from South Asian diasporic spaces based on their sexual orientation, and yet they still felt excluded by them. This points to how exclusion does not occur only at the point of outright rejection, but is experienced through the activities that one must engage in to *avoid* it. Further, the effects of this should not be minimized, as it engenders genuine feelings of pain and isolation. Speaking about significant same-genders relationships she had, Layla lamented:

Layla –I didn't get to process all my feelings about the people who broke my heart with my cousin, which is what you're supposed to do with your cousin. Meanwhile she can tell me anything she wants because she is in a straight relationship with a Bangladeshi boy in Bangladesh. And while it's very taboo for her to be dating, it's still something she can talk about with me. Whereas I was in love with a woman for a very long time, and I didn't say a word to anybody about it.

For Layla, the secrecy of her queerness also meant an inability to receive emotional support in ways that she 'should' have been able.

Heightened Expectations

While those interviewed might have equally expected fulfillment in both 'South Asian' and 'queer' spaces, they generally felt more disappointed with mainstream queer communities for what they failed to offer them. As Iman said, her dual subjectivities as queer and South Asian seemed: "incompatible *even in the areas it shouldn't* be. In Pride Toronto, there's not enough representation." (emphasis added). Thus, heightened *disappointment* with the deficits of queer spaces is a function of heightened *expectations* of them. Indeed - queer communities not only represent themselves as *social* but also *political*, in that they charge themselves with

countering heteronormativity/cisnormativity and homophobia/transphobia present in the mainstream; in contrast, South Asian diasporic communities are sometimes only ever experienced at the level of the familial – and hence are not always organized around political motivations. Additionally, queer communities are spaces in which we are required to opt *in*, unlike familial South Asian spaces in which we must opt *out*. As such, queer spaces are implicitly and explicitly suggested to be a gathering place for *all* of the queers who have actively journeyed to them, ones concerned equally with *all* of their struggles. Their failure to perform as such thus represent a violation of their mandate, their self-perception, and their self-projection.

Queer South Asian Community?

For most of the participants, many of the shortcomings they perceived in terms of community could be addressed via a queer South Asian community, which as yet seemed elusive or at least underdeveloped. Yasmin: “I would prefer it if the [queer South Asian community] was bigger. But I do feel like I fit into that South Asian community for sure.” Michael believed his transition would have been made easier if he had better access to Brown trans mentors; regarding the previously-mentioned interaction at the Pride March, Iman expressed: “if it was people of colour who came to my defense I would feel so much stronger and a really huge sense of solidarity”, rather than the feelings of disempowerment and isolation she felt at being ‘rescued’ by Whites. Indeed, Arjun offered testament to the validation available in queer South Asian spaces, referring to a queer South Asian support group that was more responsive to his experiences of immigration: “a lot of them are Canadian but they've also shifted to different places. . So they'll be like 'I totally understand that, I know that situation, I'm familiar with that situation'.”

Racism Versus Homophobia/Transphobia

South Asian diasporic queers are vulnerable to marginalization based on their race, sexuality, gender, and other means through which which humans organize and hierarchize difference. As elaborated on in the above section, mainstream queer and mainstream South Asian diasporic communities are not immune from reproducing the same oppressions that are present in society at large.

For participants in this project, race was articulated as more deterministic in terms of social experience than was sexuality. Each participant shared multiple experiences of racism, both within mainstream queer communities and society at large. The diversity of participants' experience mirrored the diversity in manifestations of racism – i.e. being read as suspicious (Layla – “When the SARS epidemic happened, a lot of people thought I had SARS because I was Brown”); internalizing racialized narratives (Michael – “the racism was so deep, but the self hatred for that kind of stuff, I didn't realize how deep it was until I started doing my own work around it”); lacking access to power and representation in decision-making bodies (Arjun - “The diversity is more in specific communities but when there's a system involved, like governance, even the simplest levels like municipalities, I feel like the diversity just vanishes.”); experiencing institutional discrimination (Arjun - “even my tuition, I'm discriminated against because I'm not Canadian”); experiencing violence (Iman - “Somebody ...across the street from me ...started saying things like "go back to your country".... Then he starts running down the street towards me.”); and feeling a lack of sexual desirability (Yasmin -“If you're a femme white woman, you're queer gold. And if you're femme woman of colour or a masculine woman of colour, good luck. Its much harder.”).

Participants' perceived experiences of homophobia/transphobia were more limited, and primarily manifested in the need to withhold disclosure of queer identity depending on context. Indeed, for Arjun, racial liberation was considered so much more urgent than sexual/gender liberation, that homophobia/transphobia could not even register as a concern for him until racism had been adequately addressed. As he said:

Arjun – I say I'm a Brown queer person because the term 'Brown' shows how my first goal is to get equal rights. Because compared to white folks, I don't even have that. And then talk about gender fluidity and sexuality.

The difference in experiences with racism and homophobia/transphobia shared by participants point to the differences between race and sexuality as constructs through which violence and oppression are organized. Unlike sexuality, race is a subjectivity that we inhabit our whole lives (Yasmin – “Its what you're born with”); that is applied to us externally and without our consent (Yasmin - “you don't choose your race”); that is shared by many of those closest to us (Iman – “When my dad and I went to the mall and needed to buy a cellphone nobody...would help us...Its embarassing, and you feel more upset for your dad than for yourself”); and that is hyper-visible (Arjun – “I was probably the only Brown person in the space”). As such, racialized individuals come into consciousness, and engage in the world throughout a lifetime as marginalized beings – in ways that those Otherized primarily by their sexuality (i.e. White queers) do not.

‘Feeling’ Queer and South Asian

Given a context for South Asian diasporic queers in which they are vulnerable to both racism and homophobia - and in which they feel unable to find communities in which to find respite from this violence - it is unsurprising that participants listed loneliness, displacement, and invisibility as defining sentiments associated with the queer South Asian diasporic experience.

Loneliness

For Layla, her inability to find spaces in which to relate to others in terms of *both* her minority sexual and racial subjectivity meant that she felt understood in *neither* - and hence alone. As she said: “being in a space where these feelings that I'm sharing with you aren't really acknowledged...I feel very alone in the world.” Indeed, Layla’s sexual subjectivity does not exist outside of, or in isolation from, her racial subjectivity – they are co-constituted, and hence, are productive of unique trajectories and experiences, ones she feel are not widely acknowledged or understood.

Displacement

As Yasmin said: “I feel like I don’t always belong in Canada”. Even having been born here, and having lived here her entire life, Yasmin feels ‘displaced’ on account of a failure to meet the criteria for ‘authentic’ (read: White, straight) Canadian-ness – and lacking a community within Canada that could disrupt narratives of Canadian ‘authenticity’ and hence make her belonging possible.

Invisibility

For Michael, the marginalities he faces along the lines of race and gender/sexuality are not isolatable but interactive, and engendering of the specific experience of invisibility - in the mainstream White heterosexual sphere, as well as in spaces structured around queer and South Asian subjectivities. As he said: “I wouldn't want to separate out those two things because I think they are so intertwined. I think my main thing was around invisibility.” Indeed, the surprisingly high response rate to this project’s call-out is possibly indicative of an overwhelming desire to share our narratives in the face of our invisibilization.

Being 'Queer' or 'South Asian'?

Participants suggested that there existed a mutual exclusivity between an identity of 'queer' and that of 'South Asian'. More specifically, they expressed a belief that 'South Asian'-ness precluded a 'queer'-ness:

Layla - I think queer in my family doesn't co-exist with being South Asian.

Arjun – my distant auntie, my only relative who is here, is like "I have so many gay friends, but none of them are brown". And like "I go to the Pride Parade every year".

Iman - I don't think there *should* be [an incompatibility between my racial/ethnic and sexual identity]. Is there? I think there currently is.

As these excerpts demonstrate, South Asian diasporic communities are charged with an incapacity to integrate the 'queer' into their renderings of the 'South Asian'. This is not attributable to a simple *rejection* of queers, or a 'homophobia' – Arjun's "distant auntie", for example, engaged in mainstream Western queer activities such as the Pride Parade - but rather a *disbelief* in the existence of queers who also identified as South Asian. Further, a belief in the incompatibility between these two identities is held even by those who do hold them both – even if such an incompatibility 'shouldn't' exist. This is in alignment with the experiences of other South Asian diasporic individuals mentioned in the Review of Literature.

All of those participating in this project, however, managed to reconcile for themselves a sexual identity of 'queer' with a racial/ethnic identity of 'South Asian' – at the very least, allowing them to respond to a call-out for this project. They employed different strategies for doing so.

Rejecting a South Asian Identity

For Layla, 'queerness' is a subjectivity she inhabits *in spite* of any connection she has to being South Asian:

Layla – The fact that I’m not as South Asian as I might look...goes hand in hand with being queer...I think I really wouldn't have known I was queer if I didn't like grow up the way that I did. Like spending time in Canada, being born and raised here.

Layla thus effectively rejects the ‘South Asian’ identity as “there was no part [of it].. that helped me to get to where I want to be“. As such, Layla’s relationship to being South Asian is limited to an explanation to others for the colour of her skin – and even these she will qualify by saying: “my mom is from Bangladesh”. Thus, Layla is always conscious to articulate a distance between herself and being ‘South Asian’ – making it possible to call herself queer.

Withdrawing From Community

For Michael, the possibility of a queer South Asian subject does not precede its existence – it is possible *because* it is:

Michael - I'm living it. So clearly something works..... Its all a part of me. And I need to figure out a way to make that work. Yea like I think to just disown a part of myself, to make another part fit right, that doesn't make sense to me.

Michael acknowledges a social context in which this legitimacy is not recognized,

however:

Michael - There was a lot of tearing in identities...which is why at one point, I was just like f*** it all, I'm going to be a therapist and do this work individually with people... like why are certain parts of me not accepted here and so I'm not bringing that out here. And that didn't feel good.

Thus, for Michael, reconciling his queerness and his South Asian-ness was a matter of removing himself from communal space, and hence, communal negotiation of identity – allowing himself to settle into a subjectivity that is not contingent upon the authorization of others.

Resurrecting a Queer Past

Yasmin – I’ve read stories and about traditional Hindu practices and stuff, that years and years ago, being a trans woman was a normal or accepted thing. But now in the Western view its not really accepted.

Arjun – I was like 'let's research more into queer activism'....at the end I was like, basically, pre colonialism of any space, everyone had sexual and gender fluidity. That's how we're meant to be... this is not our values, its colonial values

Yasmin and Arjun's reconciliation strategies involve resurrecting a South Asian past that would be understood today as 'queer' - demonstrating the indigeneity of the 'queer' to South Asian societies, and hence, her legitimacy in a current context. This strategy involves comparing in 'unfavourable' terms a Western past that introduced a rigid heterosexuality to non-Western societies via colonialism, and a Western present in which queerness is still "not really accepted". This is a reconciliation that is appealing on multiple grounds. Firstly, it challenges racialized narratives that position the West as the ultimate site of progress, and the non-West as backwards. Secondly, it responds to South Asian communities who may refer to 'authenticity' and 'values' to justify their rejection of queers. As mentioned in the Review of Literature, however, this approach is problematic in that it reads a South Asian past according to current (Western) ontologies, and deems them to be 'advanced' according to current Western measures of progress. However, it may still be productive of its desired result to disrupt the mutual exclusivity of being 'queer' and 'South Asian' and, at the very least, makes it possible for these participants to reconcile these two aspects of their identity.

Queering South Asian & South Asian-ing Queer

Arjun - The guys are supposed to do the *shogun*, and the girls are supposed to do the *bhajan*....I was like f*** that I'm doing *bhajan*. And I did two years of Bharat Natyam dance, which is predominantly done by girls.

Iman - I was at this dance party, the majority White queer folks. And they played a song that had like a Bollywood mix in it...I started doing weird Bollywood moves. I just felt like I had to take ownership of it.

For Arjun, participating in the religious rituals typically reserved for girls/women, and foregoing those for boys/men, is one of the means through which he 'queers' his South Asian-

ness and his religious practice – displaying his association with femininity while existing in a body typically read as masculine. In taking “ownership” of Indian music in a predominantly White queer space, Iman participates in ‘South Asian’-ing queer spaces – by forcing others in the space to register her queer presence as a South Asian one as well. For both Arjun and Iman, they consciously interweave their South Asian and queer subjectivities, rendering them inextricable from one another. As such, they inhabit a queer subjectivity that is distinctly South Asian; and a South Asian subjectivity that is distinctly queer.

Increasing Visibility

Michael – when I was transitioning here, there were no other brown guys that I knew... I was like, if there is no one else who I can find that can be my mentor, then I'm going to be that for other people.

Arjun - I feel like the best way to like bring your voice out there is through actually like participating in research projects because being in Toronto made me realize that people put like so much worth on academics.

For both Michael and Arjun, a perceived incompatibility between queer and South Asian identities is attributable to their lack of visibility – and rectifying the discrepancy between existence, and public proof of that existence, would help to resolve this. For Arjun, increasing visibility requires strategic engagement – which for him means participating in institutionalized knowledge production via research projects (like this one), given the legitimacy ascribed to academia in his diasporic context.

Naming One's Self and Others

A theme common to all of my conversations was the relevance of labels towards the production of identity, and the shaping of experience. Participant responses suggested both the utility/value of labels, as well as their limitations.

Prioritizing/Shaping Political Struggle

Arjun – I say I'm a Brown queer person. Because they term 'Brown' shows how my first goal is to get equal rights because compared to white folks...and then talk about gender fluidity and sexuality.

Iman – it depends on which part of my identity is under attack. So, with Pride for example... I feel like our [South Asian] community is under attack...so I might want to emphasize it sometimes.

For Arjun and Iman – involved in activism concerned with liberation of themselves as both racialized and sexualized beings – attaching themselves to the terms 'Brown' and 'South Asian' make it possible for them to: inject an intersectional analysis into their activism; register themselves as non-White in White queer spaces; and articulate publicly their own priorities for addressing the varying marginalizations they face.

Adapting to Context

Arjun - In business setting,...I will definitely play up that I'm gay, because gay means that you're for capitalism...And in queer settings, you have to say you're queer and not gay....So in different settings, you have to use different terminology

Arjun's selective self-projection depending on context demonstrates the subversive possibilities of labelling – their utility in making spaces accessible, and facilitating integration into/habitation of that space according to the norms that govern them.

Joining Community

Arjun - Taking on the identity of South Asian is very powerful.... Here [i.e. in Canada] we have so much more in common [than in India], there are so many more grounds on which you can be attached and similar.

Yasmin - For me, I would say I strongly identify with being South Asian.... Its just saying I'm a part of the South Asian community and identifying with people who originate from that part of the world.

As the only participant who was also a recent immigrant, Arjun has indeed 'become' 'Brown', 'South Asian', and 'Indian' – identities that were not available in his previous context

of India, where they were not helpful in organizing human difference. In adopting these labels, Arjun is able to orient himself towards a community in an unfamiliar diasporic context. For Yasmin, similarly, the appeal of ‘South Asian’ as a self-descriptor is in its facilitation of her claim to *community* rather than to an individual *selfhood*.

Understanding the Self

(On discovering the term ‘trans’) Michael -There's a word for this, now I know who I am.

Yasmin - I feel like I wouldn't have figured it out if I didn't have the Internet to google what I was. I wouldn't know ‘why am I attracted to girls’. That definitely helped.

For Michael and Yasmin, labels are the means through which they are able to translate unnamed feelings and desires into identity - giving them legitimacy, and helping them to secure a sense of self and place in the world. This is of particular importance to them in the heteronormative societies they were socialized into, as these are feelings and desires that largely remain unspoken and unnamed.

‘Diagnosing’ the Self

Michael – I started volunteering...and met a bunch of people through there and like heard the word trans and understood it. And was like 'holy s***. like that's happening for me'. I had my last semester of university, then I started T [testosterone supplements] in December

For Michael, learning the term ‘trans’ was a welcome ‘diagnosis’ for his ‘symptoms’ of gender dysphoria, and made it possible for him to find a ‘prescription’ for resolving them. I choose here to use the bio-medical language of ‘problem’ and ‘solution’ because it serves as an additional commentary on the dominance of bio-medical logics in explaining/responding to all aspects of the human condition. This is not intended to delegitimize those trans individuals who seek out medical intervention, but rather to comment on the increasing synonymization between the trans experience and the desire for bio-medical ‘solutions’.

Invisible Complicity

Arjun - And then I remember one conversation with this employee from TD bank, and he was like "im the LGBTQA officer", and I was like hmm you're gay. And you cut off the queer part. I kind of get why they do it, because 'queer' is based on anti-capitalism and banks function on capitalism. So cutting off the q makes more sense

As a business student, Arjun is exposed to the operation of 'homonationalism' described in the Review of Literature – in which the integration of the homonormative queer into the nationalist imaginary has meant that identities previously connoting *otherization*, and hence *non-collusion*, no longer preclude a *complicity* with the state and its institutions/activities. The historical relegation of 'gay' to the 'Other' functions to elide this – rendering this complicity invisible.

Imposed/Unagentic

Layla - Like the most South Asian I am is pretty much my skin colour

Iman, on the need to identify - Its on their terms in a weird way. Because I'm responding.... you can't just go up to them and be like 'I'm a good person, I'm trying to make this world a better place'. Like, who is this person.

For Layla and Iman, the labels attached to them are inaccurate reflections of their subjectivity, and are distractions from it – and yet they are incapable of escaping definition by them, and as such are unagentic in the naming of themselves. As described in the Review of Literature, we have not selected the categories deemed most relevant about our selfhood, nor always how we are labelled within those categories. Indeed, the names imposed upon us – which we may or may not adopt for ourselves – are the means through which we are accorded (lack of) power and (lack of) well-being.

Restrictive

Layla - [intricate labelling] is also limiting in the fact that now we have to name every single facet of the human condition. And that's not realistic and that's just such a waste of time.

Michael - Ok but now I know what I am, but this word is also really limiting. Because now I think about, like you saying the term FTM [female to male]...so if I just say that I'm male, I feel like it erases the majority of the years that I spent female... But if I identify as FTM, it doesn't feel like it reflects of my experience as a man.

While having *access* to labels can be empowering, the *necessity* to label oneself is nonetheless limiting. If our subjectivities are only legitimate to the extent to which they can be captured in terms of named identities, and if labels are as yet incapable of encapsulating the breadth and depth of human experience, then we will be forced to sacrifice a complexity in our subjectivity. This is a sacrifice that is reproductive, in that the way we describe ourselves is also how we self-subjectify, perform in the world, and are read in the world. The increasing addition of letters to the 'LGBTQ+' acronym is intended to respond to the inadequacy of current labels – and yet, while increasing the *number* of possible names for ourselves, it does not escape the *need to name*. On the contrary, it reproduces this necessity.

Lost in Translation

Michael - I don't know 'queer' is hard, because queer is such a North American concept. For sure there is a gay community, a party community [in India], that does whatever the hell they want. I just don't know about the word 'queer'.

Michael points to the lack of transportability of North American concepts of sexuality to other parts of the world. As explained in the Review of Literature, a belief that the world is most naturally understood through Western logics is a function of Western hegemony - which falsely renders these logics as 'universal' (and hence 'universally' applicable). This function of hegemony is self-reinforcing, in that it hierarchizes the world according to Western measures of 'progress' – a measure in which the West is always at the fore.

An 'Incitement to Discourse'

Michael - when I was 8 years old, I refused to be in my cousin's wedding unless I got to wear a suit and was a page boy. Because they wanted me to be a flower girl and I was

like 'f** that'... it was okay with them. Yea like looking back it was pretty amazing. Um when I was 10, the whole family would go to Goa in the summers...and my mom came to look for me at some point and asked some kid where I was. And he was like "I don't know who that is, but Anthony is over there". Because I looked like a little boy. And so my mom didn't say anything, she just let me keep playing. And laughed about it a little bit later. When I went to [blanked – social service agency], I came home with all of their orientation stuff. And I gave it to her and said, can you read this because this is something I'm figuring out for myself and I think it would be helpful. And she came back and was like "as long as you're a lesbian and not like trans"

Michael's journey towards assigning himself a trans identity, and the response to doing so from his mother, provide insight into an issue with Western labels of sexual and gender identity. While Michael's mother did not object to the *activities* typically associated with the 'trans' label –she even found it funny when her 'daughter' (at that time) adopted a name typically reserved for boys – she responded negatively to the *label* under which those activities congregated and formed the basis for identity. As explained in the Review of Literature, this can be described as an 'incitement to discourse' – whereby sexual configurations and labels produced in the West elicit a response of rejection from non-Western subjects, based on the foreignness and hence 'inauthenticity' of such sexualities to their non-Western contexts. To package this reaction as a simple rejection of non-heterosexual and non-gender-normative behaviours is limiting – failing to account for the ways in which they were made possible prior to these labels; and the ways that these sexualities, as embedded in Western logics, are possibly also unappealing on the grounds of their Western-ness.

The Nature of the Self

Although not explicitly discussed, participants suggested opposing philosophies on the nature of the self. Specifically, they differed in their conceptualization of the self as 'essential' – i.e. as possessing an eternal and unalterable nature neither tethered to, nor determined by, context. This was a debate explored in the Review of Literature, which found that South Asian

queer diasporics may subscribe to a belief in the ‘essential self’ – one that is contradicted by a history of sexuality that reveals the contingency of sexual identity.

Essentialized Self

Michael – I've called myself different things, used different words to identify parts of myself over the years. But at the end of the day, its like the outside changed but the inside never did.

Layla – I think I really wouldn't have known I was queer if I didn't like grow up the way that I did. Like spending time in Canada, being born and raised here..... I think I would have been very very miserable, and I wouldn't have known why.

For Michael, the words he attaches to himself are mere *descriptors* of a fundamentally-unchanging self. Indeed - even while the language used to describe this self has evolved, the self has supposedly remained static. This self-perception is difficult to reconcile with his chronology of: discovering and adopting a ‘trans’ identity, the medical interventions that this made possible, and a transformation to the way he is generally received in the world – i.e. from ‘Butch Lesbian Brown Woman’ to ‘Straight-Presenting Brown Man’. This chronology suggests a co-constitutive relationship between application of identity labels and the self – in that, through the *adoption* of a ‘trans’ identity he was able to engage in the activities associated with it (such as alterations to his appearance according to norms of ‘man’-hood), and as such further *inhabited* this ‘trans’ identity. Through this mutually reinforcing process of adoption-inhabitation, Michael’s selfhood was inevitably altered. Indeed, his disappointment with the term ‘FTM’ (i.e. female-to-male) is in its inability to adequately encapsulate the specific selfhood that is created through the medical gender transition journey – a journey that would not have unfolded as it did without access to the ‘trans’ label made available to him through his particular context.

Layla doubts whether she would have ‘known’ she was queer had she not had the upbringing that she did. For Layla, then, the *truth* of her queerness, as a supposed element of her

‘essence’, would not have changed - only her ability to *access* that truth. This belief in an unalterable self-truth is troubled by some of her other remarks: “I never questioned my gender until other people started to”. As this statement suggests - Layla may have easily *not* been a person who questions her gender had she existed in a different context, as this was a question posed to her by the people in her surroundings. Indeed, determinations on the nature of our ‘essence’ can only be approached through methods for understanding ourselves – methods made available to us via our particular context. These socially-contingent determinations form the bases for our relationships with ourselves and our world, and as such, our unique subjectivities.

Through the narratives of both Michael and Layla, we are introduced to a disjoint: a self-perception as essential and experiences suggesting otherwise. This is a contradiction that participates in the problematic production of the ‘deficient’ cultured Other – one that will be explored in more detail in the Further Discussion section.

Non-Essentialized Self

Arjun’s journey from India to Canada was not only *corporeal* but *existential* – i.e. productive of a change in self-conceptualization.

Arjun - In India, I would say I'm from Mumbai. Like, I'm *Mumbaikar*... 'South Asian'; is a term I came to know here. Like we know the term 'South Asia' - there's like an alliance between the South Asian nations. So I knew it as a legal term, like South Asia is this bloc. Even the term Brown. So like Brown? What's up with that. We knew the term Black because there were a lot of Black people in Mumbai. Or White, because we recognize that. But the term Brown, we'd be like why would he say Brown?

As this excerpt suggests, Arjun *became* ‘Brown’, and ‘South Asian’, in moving to Canada. In India, these terms had no relevance – and indeed, he was not even aware of them - because they were not a useful basis for categorizing people. In this act of ‘becoming’, Arjun did not simply gain new language with which to describe a self that always existed – i.e. an ‘essential’ one - but *became* a racialized subject and experienced the world accordingly (“my

first goal is to get equal rights because compared to White folks, I don't even have that.”); learned to provincialize his way of seeing and engaging with the world (“Its only when I came here, I was like, my culture is...so different”); and developed political and social community with others on the basis of this shared identity (“In India, we never really identify ourselves as Brown.... Here we have so much more in common, there are so many more grounds on which you can be attached and similar.”). Thus, Arjun’s self-hood *changed* - as marked by his adoption of these labels recently made available and relevant to him.

‘Queer’ – Value & Limitations

As suggested in previous sections, while the concept of ‘queer’ has gained popularity internationally as a ‘non-identity’ – one that signifies a rejection of the politics of normalization by which we are regulated and distributed within a hierarchy – it has also been charged with an increasing identitarianism without an accompanying self-awareness of such. Participants in this project did indeed find value in the *concept* of ‘queer’ but nonetheless often took issue with its *actualization*.

Value

Layla - Yea I use the word 'queer' because its more of an umbrella.....Queer as in, ‘I'm not like the norm or like ‘I dont abide by these ridiculous definitions or expectations of what I should be doing.’I think its to accept where you're at and just roll with the waves, and um, create an inclusive environment, and not condemn anybody at all.

Michael – it means not thinking of things in terms of a binary. And I don't just mean specifically around sexuality or gender. Generally across a board trying to put people into boxes doesn't work....I also really like that it is a reclaiming of a word that used to be an insult and could still be used as one, and now its something that I take on and identify myself with.

Arjun - queer basically comes from the idea of anti-capitalism, anarchy, and being gender and sexually fluid. So for me, its more about not living by the 'rule'.....For me, being queer is just like liberation of your identity. Just like being who you are.

Iman - I think that restricting yourself to a binary like 'straight' 'gay' or whatever is pointless. Because like gender, sexuality is very fluid. And I think the term 'queer' engenders that fluidity.... But myself in a weird ironic way, I definitely identify as a 'lesbian' even though its very rigid.

Yasmin – I use the term queer because it lets me be part of the LGBTQ community without restricting myself to a particular label, like gay or bi etc... . I don't really identify with the term 'lesbian' because of my own gender identity.

For the participants in this project, the 'queer' philosophy and subjectivity offered possibilities on numerous fronts. It facilitated access to community; summarized their critique of hierarchical societies sustained by violent capitalism and enforcement of identity; and, in appropriating a word previously used as an insult, allowed them to respond with agency to their own Otherization.

Limitations

Layla – I hate being in queer spaces and people ask me what my love life is, and I say 'he' because those are Chris's pronouns, and then feel like 'oh but..", and then I feel like I have to say "but im queer". Like I've dated women, and I've fallen for trans men, and blah blah blah.... But now that I feel like I won't be accepted as queer because I don't look it or because I'm not behaving like it.

Michael - Plus, us getting married, like she's taking on my last name, things like that - to be 'queer' is to not be traditional in those ways... Its weird to think where the oppression comes from. Because there's not a safety in those queer places.

Arjun - The only thing I hate about white queer spaces is that they're built on fluidity, but they try to be like 'but like you're not hippy enough for us, you're not this enough for us'. Which is basically creating binaries or creating divisions.

The participants in this project reacted to the ways in which 'queer' communities are nonetheless vulnerable to the regulatory functions of the mainstream that they develop in response, and in opposition, to. Indeed, while legitimizing themselves on their resistance to the processes of enforced normalization, they often ultimately participate in a similar policing - albeit of an alternative set of norms. This points to the possible contradiction of a concept such as 'queer' – which is appealing on the premise of its supposed positionality outside of systems of

power, including those of rigid identity – becoming adopted by, and increasingly associated with, particular spaces and subjectivities. These spaces develop their *own* systems of power, in which behaviours also become consolidated into identities. As discussed in the Review of Literature, this compromises the liberatory value of ‘queer’, while also dangerously immunizing self-projecting ‘queer’ spaces from critique.

Religion: Race, Gender and Sexuality

All participants in the project named an institutionalized religion that they were socialized into from birth – and yet none of them fully identified with this religion, and indeed, when asked ‘who are you?’, none of them listed religious identity as defining elements of themselves. Nonetheless, participants all participated in some sort of religious identification and practice, in ways that aligned with, or consolidated, their sexual/gender and racial/ethnic subjectivities.

Racial/Ethnic Consolidation

Yasmin - a lot of family friends I have, that’s how they identify [i.e. as Muslim]. And the mosques we go to are South Asian, West Indian. To me I associate the two [i.e. religion and ethnicity], like when you fast during *Ramadan* [i.e. the Muslim holy month] you have curry. So to me, religion and ethnicity are pretty closely related.

For Yasmin, religious ritual is important to her - not specifically because it solidifies her *spiritual* relationships (such as with ‘God’) but her *communal* ones. ‘Religion’ is the nexus around which her racial/ethnic communities form, and thus are inextricable from the rites and activities of these communities.

Sexual/Gender Consolidation

Arjun- I like when I read the actual written mythology and not the imprinted version of it. Like how Vishnu had to once turn himself into Mohini and then slept with Shiva. That's kind of empowering. Its kind of like my religion too. Like talking about gender fluidity. In a way. I kind of like how Hinduism is all about gender and sexual fluidity

Yasmin - I feel like for a long time they were pretty conflicting, where I didn't really identify as Muslim because I didn't reconcile the fact that I was queer and Muslim. But now I'm fine with it. Yea like now I would say they're pretty similar or related. Like I'm fine with identifying with both.

For Arjun and Yasmin, dominant interpretations of religious texts have obscured their original philosophies, which include an acceptance of – or even appreciation for – diversity in gender and sexual expression. For Arjun, Hinduism gives him religious legitimation for his gender/sexual subjectivities, and a means through which they can be performed. He qualifies his 'Hindu' identity as 'spiritual', however – asserting a distinction between his own practice of Hinduism, and the common practices that have come to publicly define 'Hinduism'. For Yasmin, Islam now *allows* for her to be queer - meaning she is not required to denounce either her queer identity or her Muslim identity, even though she chooses to not fully inhabit a Muslim one.

'Queer' Religion

Iman - I think there is a lot of overlap with my religious identity and my views on sexuality and gender identity. I feel like its all very fluid. Like agnosticism to me is just admitting that you don't know, there's no way you can know. And that's OK. Right like its fluid.

Michael – I think it [i.e. spirituality] benefits me in terms of just thinking of myself as one being. Like regardless of my skin colour, identity and all that stuff. I think of all of us as just different forms of energy that exist forever. So if I think of myself that way, then I can get to know you then the differences don't have to be so prevalent in the room. I'd rather not have identity systems that are divisive or things that, like, so I think about our differences as things that are amazing. Like things to learn about each other. And things that I'm curious about. So when I think about racism, I think about our differences being used to divide us. And I'd rather celebrate our differences, rather than use it as ways to be in a hierarchy.

For Iman and Michael, religious identification as 'agnostic' and 'spiritual' respectively, are continuous with their 'queer' politics and philosophies – i.e. those of fluidity, uncertainty, and a resistance to the hierarchies within which humans organize difference. As such, these

identifications allow them to articulate their relationships with a *non-material* world in ways consistent with their analysis of the *material* one.

Based on these findings, I now move towards Further Discussion, in which I engage more intricately with the themes drawn out here.

Further Discussion

On Racism *or* Homophobia?

“Discourses of sexuality are inextricable from prior and continuing histories of colonialism, nationalism, racism, and migration” – Professor Gayatri Gopinath (2005, p. 3)

Participants often distinguished between their experiences of racism and those of homophobia. To understand these two forces as operating discretely from one another, however, is to deny the co-constitution of race and sexuality – i.e. how narratives about the racial Other and the sexual Other overlap and sustain one another. Indeed, as elaborated on in the Review of Literature – current phenomena of ‘homophobia’ and ‘transphobia’ emerge from colonial strategies of racial Othering via sexual and gender Othering, strategies still deployed today; and global Western hegemony partially sustains itself through the West’s capacity to define the ‘truth’ of sexuality, and justify imperialist violence based on the non-West’s failure to meet its measures of sexual progress. Even though not articulated explicitly, participants brought evidence of such a collaboration between systems of sexuality and race into our conversations.

Iman - To be a queer South Asian, within Pride, especially after Pulse [i.e. the shooting at a queer nightclub in Orlando, perpetrated by a Muslim man]. I felt it so acutely right after Pulse because there was so much pushback and xenophobia happening.

As Iman points to, Western anti-homophobic activism often draws upon and reproduces racialized narratives about the homophobic ‘backwardness’ of the non-West. These narratives sustain global Western hegemony by justifying imperialist projects internationally, and reproduce Western cultural hegemony in defining the terms of global discourses on sexuality . For the South Asian diasporic queer, these narratives additionally: erase their subjectivity as *both* queer and racialized, suggesting a mutual exclusivity between the two; make them increasingly vulnerable to dehumanization based upon both their race and sexuality; and render even less hospitable the White queer and straight South Asian diasporic spaces that are available to them.

Iman - I don't know your situation but my situation, I'm not going to go up to my dad and talk about my sex life....I'm not 'closeted' in the sense that I'll say "Dad I'm going to the Pride Parade", "Dad I'm going to the Pride meeting". I have Pride flags all over my car. Like I'm very open. I'm not 'hiding' but I'm not talking about it with my dad.

Arjun: I feel like in a white space, they say you have to come out or else you're not being authentic to yourself. But I feel like you can be authentic to yourself just by being yourself in the first place.

Michael – And she [i.e. his mother] came back and was like "as long as you're a lesbian and not like trans"

Iman and Arjun point to how narratives of 'authentic' queerness are embedded in White-normative trajectories – trajectories which involve a 'coming out'. The impossibility of the White queer subject to imagine an alternative journey – and hence 'authenticity' – for queer existence, mean that our queer South Asian narratives are more vulnerable to perception as stunted and delegitimate; and that our South Asian communities are more likely to be cast as 'homophobic' and thus backwards, based on their inability to know and accept us as 'queers' on White terms. Further, as demonstrated in Michaels' previously-discussed interaction with his mother regarding his trans identity, it is indeed this very embeddedness of queer subjectivity within Whiteness that make less possible the co-existence of our ethnic and sexual identities.

Michael – the further along I come in my transition, the more people assume my gender is male....its, nice in some ways, where like I don't experience a lot of the homophobia and transphobia that I used to experience....But there was something about transitioning from being brown female to brown male where it goes from hypersexuality, or being hypersexualized, to being asexual... being perceived as unsafe or being being perceived as a smaller man who people can take their shit out on.

For Michael, an *end* to the experiences of homophobia/transphobia that he experienced in being perceived as a lesbian butch/gender queer woman, coincided with a *beginning* to an experience of racism that was both different (i.e. from being hypersexualized to asexualized), and possibly worse (i.e. to being perceived as an 'unsafe' Brown man) than he had experienced previously. This points to the fallacy in 'additive' approaches to understanding oppression – i.e.

an analysis that marginalized identities produce isolated forms of oppression, that can be ‘added’ together to calculate the ‘sum total’ of one’s oppression - in that they do not account for a gendered racism that often is more immediately harmful to racialized individuals read as straight men, than it is to those deemed queer and/or women. This is not to suggest that racialized women and queers do not also experience racism, but that they serve a different *function* in narratives of race – specifically, as described in the Review of Literature, as the subjects of a concern invested in their ‘rescue’ from the violence perpetrated by their men.

The discrepancy between individual *perceptions* of how racism and homophobia/transphobia operate in their lives (i.e. as discrete), versus contradictory evidence of their operation in *actuality* (i.e. as interactive) alert us to a possible problematic in queer South Asian diasporic subjectivity, one that merits further exploration. While I had devoted significant space in the Review of Literature to the way that Western sexualities are galvanized today for imperialist agendas, this did not factor into my conversations with any of the participants. Thus, we should ask ourselves : if we are unaware of how narratives of race and sexuality are co-conspirators in the creation of the Other – that makes possible the dehumanization and violence directed at them - are we vulnerable to a complicity in either or both?

On 'Pride' and 'Shame'

“When diversity is limited to an account of how different cultures or eras experience their sexuality, sexuality is confirmed as an inalienable fact. The result is that pluralist versions of sexual progressivism reinforce sexuality as an ontological reality” – Professor Leticia Sabsay (2013, p. 85)

Iman recounted her introduction to the term ‘lesbian’ – one that inspired her own adoption of it:

Iman - I said something to my friend's sister and all of them started laughing and calling me 'lesbian'. I was like ‘is there a label for this, that's awesome’. It felt good, but at the same time, I was a little embarrassed.

The labels used to capture non-heterosexual subjectivities function as more than neutral descriptors of our desires and behaviours, but additionally carry with them the shame of non-conformity. Indeed, Iman developed an embarrassed self-awareness of her non-heterosexuality at the exact point of its naming. As explained in the Review of Literature, this shame is the legacy of a colonial history – one which equated non-heterosexuality to punishable deviance – and in which the naming of the ‘homosexual’ made possible her Otherization on the basis of her sexuality.

‘Pride’ movements born of the West and increasingly existent worldwide are efforts to counter the shame attached to sexual non-conformity. In this section, I ask however, *is* ‘pride’ actually the antidote to ‘shame’? An interrogation of the narratives shared by those interviewed for this project elicit an analysis that suggests it might not be.

Yasmin - I feel like for me, if I didn't tell people in my life I was queer...its an important part of who I am. If I didn't tell my family or friends I would kind of be denying a part of myself.

For Yasmin, ‘coming out’ as queer was important because it is an important part of who she is. Indeed, the importance of ‘coming out’ is one element of the mainstream Western ‘pride’ narrative. Implicit in Yasmin’s statement is, as described in the Review of Literature, the

relevance of our romantic and erotic inclinations to our *identity*. In this logic, sexuality is who we *are* – rather than just what we *do* or who we *desire*. This is the product of Western supremacy, whereby the ontologies that organize self-perception and social relations in the West are increasingly distributed across the globe - ontologies that originate from the Otherizing requirements of colonialism, among other things. Through ‘coming out’, Yasmin both reproduces this logic of ‘sexuality as ontological reality’, as well as heterosexuality-as-norm – since those who do not ‘come out’ will continue to be presumed heterosexual. Further, in defining herself in terms of her sexuality - in ways that heterosexuals do not, and are not expected to – Yasmin participates in the explanation of non-heterosexuals according to their erotic and romantic desires and behaviours. As such, what is considered most relevant about us is our sexual inclinations:

Yasmin - I did this project, you had to research poets or something and everyone was assigned a poet and of course I had to be assigned the only lesbian poet out there, Sappho....and that was the only thing that was there, that she was lesbian

As Yasmin herself alludes to, the construction of sexuality as a defining element of the self is disproportionately applied to non-heterosexuals – making it less likely that they will be understood/self-understand through different means.

‘Pride’ discourse disrupts the association of ‘shame’ with non-heterosexuality, but nonetheless reifies the *importance* of sexuality – and in particular to queers – as well as the assumption of heterosexuality. As such, it is fundamentally incapable of overcoming the Otherizing narrative it develops in response to. By locating ‘pride’ and ‘shame’ within the same paradigm, we are better positioned to embark on two critiques that sustain our current racial order. Firstly, a Western imperialism that is premised upon the ‘rescue’ of queers and gender non-conformers. Given our intense socialization into this Western regime of sexuality – one in

which our movements to counter enforced heterosexuality actually reproduce its very premises – we can recognize our fundamental incompetence at understanding and engaging with the landscapes of sexuality in other parts of the world. This was alluded to in the Review of Literature, which noted that Western frameworks of sexuality cannot be neatly applied to other contexts. Secondly, an automatic synonymization between being ‘closeted’ and ‘homophobia’ – one which is often deployed to mark the racial Other as sexually backwards. On the contrary, could our *refusal* to step out of our ‘closets’ be our most radical move yet –not because we remain inside it, but because we were never in one?

On ‘Home’

“[The desire for home and belonging] is not so much about the connection with a country as it is about the creation of a sense of place, which is often uttered in terms of ‘home’” – Professor Anne-Marie Fortier (2003, p. 116)

As explained in the Review of Literature, the metaphor of ‘home’ has been considered fruitful to the theorizing of queer and diasporic subjectivities and trajectories. I find this metaphor of ‘home’ to be similarly useful in analyzing the stories shared by those interviewed for this project – a way to uncover and organize narratives of exile/arrival and displacement/belonging that are central to many of our queer South Asian diasporic journeys.

“Your ‘Home’ is Over There”

Layla – I realized last year actually, everywhere I go, I’m always going to be a minority. No matter what. ...no matter where I go.

Racial minorities lack a geography – and the accompanying social context – to call ‘home’, as there is no physical locale structured around hosting our unique set of subjectivities. As such, our ‘belonging’ is not socially recognized, wherever we are:

Layla - Even my sense of belonging [in Canada] isn't acknowledgedIf you dont' think I'm you, but we were here the whole time together like in this time and space, where does that leave me.if I don't belong here then where do I belong?

Layla – I definitely don't belong in Bangladesh... when I'm there [ie. in Bangladesh], I'm not Bangladeshi

For Layla, the experience of racialization in Canada involves one of *being* at 'home' – "I talk like you, I walk like you... I watch the same tv shows as you did at the same time because we have the same cable" - and yet being *undocumented* as such. Similarly in Bangladesh, Layla is considered (and also considers herself) to be 'away from home'. Being registered as 'guest' rather than 'resident' in the multiple geographic spaces she could supposedly call 'home' situates Layla in a perpetual state of non-belonging. For her, an uncertainty about belonging engenders an uncertainty about identity - "I feel like I'm in this state of not knowing who I am".

Housekeeping in the 'Home'

Layla - I realize I can't call myself a Canadian if I don't acknowledge and actively fight for the recognition of Indigenous people. And so I feel like better about calling myself Canadian when I say that

For Layla, the act of claiming Canada as 'home' activates her responsibility towards it 'housekeeping' – including an appropriate recognition of, and response to, the colonial histories and presents of it. Indeed, if 'home' is a space we call 'ours', then we accrue both the benefits of that space, as well as duties towards its maintenance and renovation. This activity of naming 'home', and hence holding oneself accountable for it, is mutually reinforcing – an assertion of responsibility for a 'home's 'upkeep' is itself an assertion to ownership. This offers an opposing theory to the one presented in the Review of Literature, which suggested a double implication of racialized queers in a failure to acknowledge and respond to colonialism in Canada. Perhaps for racialized queers - who by virtue of their subjectivity identify with 'leftist' sub-cultures - their claim to Canada as 'home' manifests not in a subscription to Canadian nationalist stories, but in an activism that critiques these stories. We are left with the question, however – who in the

‘home’ *should* bear the burden of its improvement? Is it those of us with our own histories of colonization and displacement who have been ‘evicted’ from our original ‘homes’, those of us racial Others who still do not reap the full benefits of inhabiting this new ‘home’?

Returning ‘Home’?

Participants expressed a perceived loss of ‘homes’ they once inhabited. Michael, who spent the summers of his childhood in Goa, India with his extended family, spoke to his hesitancy in returning there since his transition:

Michael - we have an apartment...and one of the balconies overlooks my aunt's restaurant house...so every year whenever we would show up, they would see us on the balcony and they would know we were there. And they'd come hang out. And now, if I'm standing there, do they know its me? And then how do I have that conversation. Do I want to?

For Michael, the physical evidence of his trans identity make uncertain the fact of a ‘home’ in Goa – an uncertainty that he will be properly identified as ‘resident’.

Arjun – Back home I had to be so conscious of everything, like my voice, my posture, every single thing that I do....[Since coming here] I told my mom, my whole walking style has changed. She's like show me... I'm like there's no change, just before when I would walk you would tell me I walk like a penguin and now I walk like I want to....My identity would be mistaken as a Western phenomena....My aunt and my neighbour would be like 'what happened to Arjun once he went there?'

While Arjun considers Mumbai, India to be his ‘home’, he doubts its ‘home’-liness to him now, given the change in his presentation to ways more easily read as ‘queer’.

For both Michael and Arjun, the development of their queer/trans subjectivities in the West rendered previous ‘homes’ to be possibly un-‘home’ly. To read this as evidence of the homophobic non-Western ‘home’ is simplistic. Indeed, Arjun and Michael performed their non-normative gender and sexual subjectivities previously in these contexts – Michael often dressed as a boy in Goa while being assigned as ‘girl’ at birth; Arjun engaged in same-gender sexual encounters. But in becoming queer subjects *in* the West – availing of its bio-medical

interventions and performing according to its norms – they became queer subjects *of* the West. For them, the question remains: can the Westernized queer subject re-enter the non-Western ‘home’?

The Diasporic ‘Home’

Michael speaks to the renderings of ‘back home’ that inform the queer diasporic experience.

Michael - My parents moved to Dubai in 1980 so their version of what India is like hasn't changed in the last 30 years. They haven't grown with the culture there. The fact that India had a first pride march, the first trans march, like all of the rights around a third gender, and things like that.

For Michael’s parents, ‘back home’ India is a place frozen in time – a place that does not include ‘queers’, particularly in the public sphere. As Gopinath (2005) explains, diasporic communities are nostalgic for this ‘back home’ - they seek to access it, and replicate it in their diasporic locales. They access it through their memories – like Michael’s parents – and through current nationalist discourse, which locates ‘authenticity’ within domesticated heterosexuality. As such, the diasporic ‘home’ is constructed in the nostalgic renderings of the ‘back home’ – a rendering that is embedded in heterosexuality. This points to a possible complication for the queer’s existence in the South Asian diasporic ‘home’ - a ‘home’ solidly constructed on a foreign prototype that does not exist, and perhaps never did.

Iman’s narrative, on the other hand, suggests a different trajectory for the queer in the diasporic home. On being asked about spaces in which she would withhold her queer identity, she said: “Yea with the aunties. Well some of my aunts I think. But its something we don't worry about. Like why would I bring it up.”

As Iman articulates, choosing to withhold her queer identity around ‘aunties’ is “something we don’t worry about”. This contradicts Western norms about the trajectory of an

‘authentic’ queer subjectivity – one which requires both a highly visible ‘coming out’, and a ‘moving out’ of the ‘home’ of origin. Foregoing the ‘coming out’ – as may be desirable for many, including non-White queers – eliminates the need for the ‘moving out’. This possibility resonates with a suggestion discussed in the Review of Literature – specifically, by ‘queering’ our understanding of the queer (i.e. refusing to conceptualize of queerness on White terms), the diasporic ‘home’ can indeed make space for the ‘queer’. As such, this ‘home’ can continue to be ‘home’ly.

Grounds for Eviction from the ‘Home’

Returning to a previously-reported excerpt from my conversation with Layla, as she said:

Layla - I didn't get to process all my feelings about the people who broke my heart with my cousin, which is what you're supposed to do with your cousin. Meanwhile she can tell me anything she wants because she is in a straight relationship with a Bangladeshi boy...And while its very taboo for her to be dating, its still something she can talk about with me

Layla’s statement points to the different ways in which straight women and gay women are disciplined through regimes of enforced heterosexuality. Specifically, straight women may be violating expectations by engaging in affairs that are not authorized by family and that are not specifically tied to marriage – and yet these violations may *still be spoken of*, in ways that same-sex/same-gender violations may not. Gopinath’s analysis about the positionality of subjects in relation to the ‘home’ is useful for understanding this phenomenon. As she says: “Woman and Lesbian [are]..mutually exclusive categories to be disciplined in different ways. Lesbian exists only outside the home, woman only exists within it” (Gopinath, 2003, p. 141). As such, Layla is subject to being disciplined differently than her cousin for her contravention of ‘house rules’ – indeed, Layla’s transgression represent a ‘grounds for eviction’.

‘Home’-o-normativity

Michael - There's something about being comfortable now with like my own family, like my wife... Home is sitting on my bed with six animals and my wife... my home is not attached to a place, its attached to people... I have no deep connection with the soil that I'm on.

'Home' is defined for Michael in terms of 'comfort', rather than physical location or other indicators of 'home'. His sense of comfort, and hence 'home', revolve around the family he has created – a family that presents as straight, and that participates in the heteronormative institution of marriage. For Michael, then, *comfortability* may indeed be a function of *conformity*– i.e. a confidence that he is abiding by 'house rules'.

An Imagined 'Home'

Yasmin - Sometimes I feel like I don't always belong in Canada but that's because I think I belong somewhere else. Like I have a strong attachment to Guyanese culture.

For Yasmin, a feeling of being 'away from home' is not a matter of the *existence* of a 'home', but a *distance* from it. Her belief in a 'home' located *elsewhere* helps to explain her inability to find 'home' *here*. As Avtar Brah (1996) suggests in *Cartographies of Diaspora*, however, this 'home' may be a *mythic* place of desire - one in which her 'residency' is only realizable in its imaginary renderings. Yet to dismiss this phenomenon as delusion is probably to misrepresent the nature of 'home'. Indeed, if the *purpose* of 'home' is to provide us 'protection', 'comfort', and 'safety' – then a 'home' that does not exist in geography or in physicality is nonetheless still capable of *being* our 'home'.

En route to 'Home'

One account of the 'queer journey', which analogizes the queer to the diasporic, suggests – “in contrast to the diaspora... lesbians and gays do not disperse from a shared home but 'assemble' in the new home” (Fortier, 2003, p. 118). For the queer racialized subjects in this study, this 'promise' of a new 'home' – a queer 'home' – remained illusive. As mentioned in the

Findings, participants expressed a disappointment in the queer ‘homes’ made available to them – specifically, in that they were primarily White, white-normative, and reproduced the racialized narratives present in mainstream heteronormative society at large. The *disappointment* experienced in the shortcomings of these queer ‘homes’ was greater than that in the shortcomings of South Asian diasporic ‘homes’ – the discrepancy between the two representing the additional disappointment of a broken *promise*, that of the all-welcoming queer ‘home’. Failing to find this queer ‘home’ as yet, they are still in transit to it – hoping to arrive to it via an as-yet unrealized queer South Asian community.

Building our ‘Homes’

Arjun – at the same time, you can build your own home. Home is built out of love, and all kinds of emotions.

Yasmin – I guess home for me is also family – given/chosen

Michael - my home is not attached to a place, its attached to people... I have no deep connection with the soil that I'm on.

Arjun, Yasmin, and Michael trouble narratives of ‘home’ conceived of in individualistic terms – as spaces of private ownership in which we can be our ‘unencumbered’ selves. They reconfigure the nature of ‘homes’ in collectivist/communal terms – as spaces structurally dependent on loving relationships.

For those interviewed, being at ‘home’ was not a given. On the contrary, most felt that ‘home’ was a place they had been exiled from, that they had been barred from entering, and that had maybe never even existed. Yet, in re-imagining what it means to be ‘at home’, they also made ‘home’ a place of possibility – one that they could build, that they could arrive to, and while in transit, dream of.

On ‘Spirituality’

“Religion, in particular Islam, has now supplanted race as one side of the irreconcilable binary between queer and something else...queer secularity understands observance of religious creed, participation in religious public spaces and rituals, devotion to faith-based or spiritual practices... as marks of subjugated and repressed sexuality void of agency”– Professor Jasbir Puar (2007, p. 13)

As discussed in the Findings, all participants named an institutionalized religion that they had been socialized into from birth – none fully identified with it; none listed it as an important element of their subjectivity; and most described themselves as ‘spiritual’. This was an unanticipated finding, but one that merits further investigation. Specifically, I am curious as to whether this urge to distance oneself from institutionalized religion emanates from a desire to be untethered by problematic social norms and, as such, in full self-possession (aka to be a ‘universal’ subject) – a desire supposedly made *possible* through an identification with ‘queerness’, but made *impossible* through religious adherence. If so, this necessitates a troubling on two grounds for its implication in racializing narratives.

Firstly, the equivalence between ‘religious practice’ and ‘lack of agency’ pre-supposes that agency can never be located within acts of religious conformity. This belief is contradicted by the work of Prof. Saba Mahmood (2005), in which she readily located agentic behaviours among members of one particular conservative Muslim women’s mosque movement in Egypt. A refusal/inability to *recognize* the agency of religious Muslim women is productive of unique forms of racialized violence directed at them (e.g. various failed and successful attempts throughout the West to ban the *hijab* and the *niqab*, garments worn by many Muslim women). Secondly, as discussed in a previous section, the queer’s ‘exceptionalist desire’ to be free from norms implicates the queer in a failure to recognize those norms that have produced its consciousness, and that govern its behaviour – and as such, makes the queer vulnerable to a false

universalization of its own subjectivity that by extension, reproduces the racialized Other as ‘culturally’ limited and inferior.

CBC.ca recently published a personal narrative intended to respond to Islamophobic assumptions, titled: “I’m queer, tattooed and Muslim. Canada needs to get used to that” (Roisin, 2017). The Islamophobic assumption being addressed here is that Islam engenders a ‘false consciousness’ among its followers - i.e. a thorough indoctrination into its norms that precludes an individual’s ability to think and act in her own self-interest. The retort offered in the article is, effectively,: “yes, I may be Muslim *but* I’m queer – and therefore I must be in full self-possession.” In other words, this argument relies upon and reproduces the logic of ‘agency’ as pre-requisite of ‘queer’ – which, by extension, allows for the (queer) Muslim to also be agentic. As demonstrated here, even in our attempts to resist Islamophobic narratives, we may concede to their very logics: i.e. that ‘traditional’ religious adherence is still problematic (i.e. unagentic); and that the Western queer represents the agentic and hence ‘universal’ subject. For those of us who are racialized - is our *distancing* from institutionalized religion and our *association* with queer an attempt to ‘overcome’ our ‘cultural limitations’ – one that allows us to approach a ‘universality’, a ‘universality’ as defined by Whites/the West? If so, this requires a further interrogation for its galvanization and reproduction of race-based hierarchies.

On ‘Culture’

“The more power one has, the less culture one enjoys, and the more culture one has, the less power one wields” – Professor Renato Rosaldo (in Park, 2005, p. 22)

Layla and Arjun subscribed to opposing narratives about ‘culture’ – specifically, about its function as either hindrance to, or facilitator of, their queer subjectivities. This merits

exploration of the alternative ways in which racialized Others conceptualize of, galvanize, and/or reject 'culture'.

'Culture' as 'Deficit'

For Layla, 'culture' was isolated as the source of her suffering, and as such, she chose to renounce it :

Layla - I feel like this part of being brown hasn't been acknowledged because I think part of the reason why I don't like identifying as Bangladeshi is because Bangladesh culture has hurt me so much.

Layla's sentiments are reflective of a 'culture as deficit' (Park, 2005) approach to conceptualizing of the performances and beliefs associated with the racial Other – one in which 'culture' represents a barrier to our well-being. In this logic, 'culture' is juxtaposed with 'truth'- representing a deviation from this 'truth', and as such, a hindrance to it. For Layla, many of the negativities in her life are attributable to Bangladeshi ways of being – the enforcement of a 'culture' that deviated her from the trajectory of 'normal' (i.e. 'uncultured' and 'true') existence. Extending this logic, 'culture' is an 'add-on' to the (otherwise unencumbered) human self that serves to disrupt the self – and as such represents an obstacle to the actualization of that self. As Layla said, "there was no part of Bangladesh that helped me to get to where I want to be".

The sentiments expressed here by Layla align with her belief in an essentialized self, as described in the Findings section. In this view, the Layla that developed consciousness in Canada – the one who 'wants to be' in the above-statement - represents the True Layla. As such, context is only relevant to the extent to which it is responsible for *repressing* or *emancipating* this essential self. Thus, to her, Canada made the True Layla possible, while Bangladesh would have cloistered it. Our contexts, however, are not merely 'repressive' or 'emancipatory', as described in the Review of Literature, but are indeed productive of the very consciousness

capable of being repressed or emancipated. Through this philosophy of the essential self, however, Layla reproduces the West as the ultimate site of progress, and the non-West as its regressive ‘cultured’ opposite. This analysis is flawed, however, as any context will be best suited to emancipating the very subjects that it produces – yet in universalizing the subject, context also becomes understood as universally repressive or universally emancipatory.

‘Culture’ as ‘Abundance’

Alternatively, for Arjun, ‘culture’ is his conscious embodiment and performance - the vehicle through which he expresses both his queerness and his race. It was only in moving to Canada that Arjun even learned to recognize himself as a ‘cultured’ or provincialized subject (Arjun - “its only when I came here, I was like, my culture is ... so different”). Rather than inspiring a *rejection* of this ‘deficient’ ‘culture’, however, it inspired an *appreciation* (Arjun - “It taught me about collectivism, which is so rare in North America. It taught me to be kind to people - and not in doing you a favour“.)

As such, through this process of becoming ‘cultured’, Arjun solidified for himself an intentional consciousness of himself as a ‘South Asian’ subject: “for me it [i.e South Asian] means everything because its my identity. Its what I was born in, its what I grew up in. That's how I want to live my life, as a South Asian.” Arjun galvanizes this new understanding of a distinct ‘South Asian culture’ in his new context of Canada

Arjun- In India, we never really identify ourselves as Brown. We celebrate our festivals, we do our thing...But coming here, I took more joy in celebrating festivals because that was my outlet for 'oh yea Mumbai' or Bollywood or South Asia in total. And meeting folks from Bangladesh or Pakistan, they'll say 'we watch Bollywood movies too'. Here we have so much more in common, there are so many more grounds on which you can be attached and similar.

For Arjun, the adoption of a Brown identity in Canada coincided with a desire to form community on the basis of this identity. ‘Cultural’ rituals, such as celebrating festivals, are thus

the organizing force for the creation of this community – the nexus around which Brown people gather. Further, ‘culture’ serves the function of reframing the ‘deficiency’ of racialized experience. Indeed, if racialization represents a ‘failure’ to inhabit Whiteness and to benefit from White privilege, then ‘culture’ is its counterpart of ‘success’ - the means through which happiness, pride, and agency can be injected into the sad, shameful, and unagentic experience of racialization. Arjun explains the changing sources of his ‘cultured’ pride and joy, mirroring his changing subjectivity in moving from India to Canada :

Arjun - “anyone who speaks *Tulu* [i.e. an Indian language] and is out there, like for example Aishwarya Rai [i.e. a Bollywood actress] – we would always be like ‘that’s our girl’. So for us, it would be more like language based. And now here in Canada, I have Priyanka Chopra [i.e. a Bollywood actress]. And when people here are like ‘Quantico is such a good show’, I’m like ‘that’s because our girl is in it.’”

For the Arjun in India, ‘cultural’ ownership was based on language (differences more relevant within an Indian context); here, they are extended to anyone deemed Indian or Brown. Thus – the categories along which we experience racialization also determine the categories along which we desire to claim our ‘cultural’ affiliations.

Unlike Layla who *denounces* ‘culture’ for its prohibition of the queer, Arjun forces a conciliation between the two, through *inserting* queerness into ‘cultural’ performances that are currently embedded in regimes of heterosexuality.

Arjun – And at least in our community, the guys are supposed to do the *shogun*, and the girls are supposed to do the *bhajan*. So when I had my ceremony and they were telling me to do this and that, i was like f*** that I’m doing *bhajan*

Arjun - *Bharat Natyam* [i.e. a kind of Indian dance] is considered more feminine. But when you express it, you’re definitely doing a lot of feminine gestures. So that kind of helps me to express my gender identity. Rather than just dancing, that can be just freestyle.

While the strict delination in practices prescribed for women and men may be interpreted as a ‘cultural’ *regressiveness* in Indian religious ritual – signifying an archaic conceptualization

of gender/sex as an essentialist binary – it is actually *facilitative* of Arjun’s gender queerness, as it allows him to more distinctively embody his femininity, as well as perform it for others.

Layla and Arjun’s differing relationships with ‘culture’ are perhaps attributable to the differences in their diasporic trajectories. While Layla was born and primarily raised in her diasporic location, Arjun is relatively new to the diasporic subjectivity. In having immigrated recently, Arjun occupies a liminal space between two worlds – a space in which both his ‘back home’ ‘culture’, as well as his own subjectivity, are mutable. As such, he feels positioned to actively *engage* with them. Alternative for Layla, ‘culture’ is a ‘thing’ that was projected at her in unalterable form.

For Layla, ‘culture’ is a *shroud* that she must shed; for Arjun, it is a *garment* – not of his own construction but of his own adornment; one that protects him from the elements and that compliments and enhances his aesthetic. I do not mean to suggest that one position is more ‘advanced’ or ‘enlightened’ than the other. On the contrary - for both Layla and Arjun, an *awareness* of their ‘clothing’ (i.e. ‘culture’) emanates from their racialization, and their activities in response to being ‘clothed’ reproduce this racialization. As Audre Lorde (in Park, 2005) cautions us, “the master’s tool will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 25). Indeed – whether we seek to ‘shed’ or proudly ‘wear’ our ‘clothing’, it is nonetheless made of the material given to us by a system that subordinates us, and that bars us from fully removing it.

On Living in the ‘Margins’

“Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked from both the outside in and the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center.” – Professor bell hooks (2000, p. xvi)

While the ‘queer South Asian diasporic’ story narrated through these participants is one of invisibility, loneliness, and displacement; of racism and homophobia; and of not finding ‘home’ - to end here would be to leave the story incomplete. In this section, I explore the ways in which participants galvanized and found *value* in their marginalization.

Capacity in the Margins

Michael - I feel like as a therapist, its been amazing because the way it comes out is that I can identify with so many different experiences. Because I have gone through being a woman, so if I'm sitting with a client that's female, I can know what that feels like. And if I'm sitting with a client that's male, I know what that feels like. And when I'm thinking about like immigrants or being Indigenous to the land when you don't feel connected to it. Or land that you've been taken away from. Feeling colonized. Feeling like a settler. Like everything.

Layla – I'm just really committed to just opening up our world because everything around us is white. Like its just white. And its just so boring now because its been years and years and years of whiteness. Even if I was white, I'd be so bored in this world if all I saw was me..all the f*****ing time. Its also just a human thing. I'm tired and I want to be entertained. And you're not putting up anything I like. So I guess I have to do it myself.

Our marginalizations are said to *provincializes* us – rendering our knowledges and skills particularistic and unsuited for broader applicability. As bell hooks assures us, however, they actually function as the *opposite*. In our capacity to conceive of the world from multiple positionalities, we are in fact better situated to approach a *universality* . Michael and Layla give us proof of this possibility – in galvanizing this dual access to ‘margin’ and ‘centre’ to support and enhance their work.

Emancipation in the Margins

Arjun - Everyone here is like, in an interview your body language will be judged. be prepared for it. Well if you're brown, you get judged for every single thing.

For Arjun, being marginalized based on numerous elements of his being actually *emancipates* him from restrictive social norms. If access to the 'centre' depends upon our ability/willingness to conform to a particular presentation and performance, then it is also a highly *regulated* space. The margins for Arjun, then, represent the opposite – a place of *freedom* within which he can move easily. Since he has *already* been denied entry to the 'regulatory' centre, he is better able to violate *all* of the scripts that govern it.

Multiple Margins

Yasmin - Sometimes I feel like I don't always belong in Canada but that's because I think I belong somewhere else.

For Yasmin, a limited sense of belonging *in Canada* does not necessarily indicate her *ultimate* sense of non-belonging. On the contrary, existing on the periphery gives her proximity to other spaces – even if her belonging there is also on the peripheries.

Adaptability in the Margins

Arjun – In a business setting, you have to say you're gay, because gay means that you're for capitalism and queer means that you're not. And in queer settings, you have to say you're queer and not gay. Because then they'll be like he's in the financial district, he loves money, or he's looking for long-term benefits.

Iman - if its around Aunties, I'm not bringing it [i.e. queerness] up

For Arjun and Iman, selectively projecting and withholding elements of themselves depending on context allows them to exist and prosper in the multiple spaces they seek access to. This is an expression of agentic subversion made possible *by* their marginality – because their interests are dispersed across a number of spaces (e.g. the mainstream, and queer/South Asian sub-spaces), they cultivate an ability to adapt to the norms of many.

Marginal Reinforcements

Iman – During Pride Week I stood up a table at the Farmer's Market, with a giant rainbow flag, just standing there. Really nervous about people walking by, because its really rednecky. In a weird way - sorry everything I say is a little inappropriate - in a weird way, I always felt a little bit protected by my skin because if someone were to attack me, I think they would think twice because they don't want to come off as racist.

For Iman, the racialization that supposedly makes her *vulnerable* to violence, alternatively sometimes *protects* her from it - in a liberal multiculturalist society concerned with its 'post-racial' image. As such, for Iman, her 'margins' functions as reinforcements for one another, inuring her from the violence of the 'centre'.

Joy in the Margins

Arjun – The process of fighting for freedom is way more important than the result. Because you know at the end you may get freedom or you may not get freedom. But at least you tried. You were out there, at least you put in effort. You were emotionally into it, you were physically into it. You were doing your best. What you get as a result depends on other factors

For Arjun, 'process' is more important than 'result'. As such, he can find joy in his position on the margins – it is what he *does* there, not his ability to *escape*, there that matters most.

Our stories on the margins as queer South Asian diasporics are ones of marginality – but a marginality that engenders a resistance, strategic negotiation of space, and enhanced capacity; and that offers us freedom, multiple belongings, and indeed, joy. We access these benefits not *in spite* of our Otherization, but indeed, *because* of it.

For me, this project has been act of resistance articulated through conformity with, as well as subversion of, the standards of institutionalized knowledge production. As a racialized person, I have been rendered ‘cultured’ – incapable of ‘overcoming’ the limitations of my subjectivity, and entering spaces of ‘universal’ and ‘objective’ knowledge production; as a sexual minority, my personhood has been overdetermined by my erotic and romantic desires and behaviours. Yet, through this exercise, my race and my sexuality are not *just* my deficits or my weaknesses – they are *also* my passion, my strength, my tools, my insight, my intellect.

What I had not fully anticipated receiving through this project was the pleasure and wisdom from the connections I made with those individuals whose narratives fill these pages – inspiring a welcome disturbance to my own subjectivity as a queer South Asian diasporic. From Yasmin, I am reminded of the justice-oriented and loving Islam taught to me by my late grandfather and late father, and obscured by Islamophobic agendas – an Islam that can make, and has made in some ways, space for me as a queer; from Iman, I am motivated to direct my dispossession into impassioned activism for public recognition of my humanity and that of others; from Layla and Michael, I am assured that my marginalized subjectivities are not my limitations but my strengths in the work I do; and from Arjun, I am able to imagine an alternative trajectory that I have always longed for, but never lived – of developing consciousness in the land and language of my ancestors, and of not always having been Brown in a White world.

Our stories as queer South Asian diasporics are varied. However, being commonly subjectified according to our race and sexuality, we all must navigate a White-normative and heteronormative world that sustains itself through our exclusion – and yet somehow we do. My own story – and those of the others whose voices inform this project – are thus not only stories of multiple exiles without arrivals, but also ones of survival while in a perpetual state of transit. As

such, they are also accounts of savvy, resilience, creativity, and resistance. Since I am the one holding the pen, this is how I choose to write us.

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Appendices

Seeking: Participants for a Research Project

*Do you identify as queer *?*



Do you identify as South Asian?*

I am conducting a research project and am looking to speak to those who identify as queer and South Asian,. Those selected for participation will be asked to engage in an informal and confidential interview, of about one hour in length.

In appreciation for time/effort, all those chosen to participate will receive \$25.

If you think you might qualify, if you are interested in knowing more, or if you have any questions/concerns, **please contact me (Khadijah) at: khadijah.kanji@gmail.com** as soon as possible.

Thank you!

**Please note: I acknowledge that 'queer' and 'South Asian' include a multitude of identities. I choose not to elaborate on them here so that you can self-*

determine whether these labels apply or potentially apply to you.

Interview Question Guide

Pronouns:

How did you hear about this ?:

Demographic details:

Age:

Ethnic Identity:

Sexual Identity:

Gender Identity:

Occupation :

Back Home and Diasporic Locations/Time Frames :

- 1) What made you respond to a call out for 'queer South Asian' diasporic? Why were you interested in participating?
- 2) What does it mean to be 'queer' ? what does it mean to be 'south asian'?
- 3) If I asked you to say "who are you", what would you say? Would you say there are aspects of your identity that are more important than others? If so, which ones and why? Are there aspects of your identity that are in conflict with one another? If so, which ones and why?
- 4) If you immigrated here, why? How do your experiences around your sexual identity/experience/subjectivity differ between here and 'there'?
- 5) Do you have a religious identity? How is this tied to your South Asianness? How is this tied to your queerness?
- 6) If you have moved within Canada/Toronto/GTA, why? How do your experiences around your sexual identity/experience/subjectivity differ between here and 'there'?
- 7) Do you think there is an incompatibility between your racial/ethnic/religious identity and your sexual identity? If so, why?
- 8) Do you believe there is an "LGBTQ community"? Do you believe there is a "South Asian community"? Do you believe there is a "South Asian queer" community? If so, do you feel represented by them? Why?
- 9) What does 'coming out' mean to you? Would you say that you are 'out'? Do you think it is important/necessary to be 'out'?
- 10) What does 'Pride' mean to you? Would you say that you are 'proud'? Do you think it is important/necessary to be 'proud'?
- 11) Do you believe you experience oppression? In what ways?
- 12) What role has the Internet played in your sexual identity?
- 13) Do you have anything else to add? For example, were there areas you anticipated or hoped we would discuss that we didn't?
- 14) what do you see as your role in, and responsibility regarding, colonialism in North America?
- 15) What does it mean to be 'diasporic'? Where is 'home'? Do you have more than one 'home'?

Informed Consent Form

Study Name: The Gays Aren't All White, The Desis Aren't All Straight: Exploring Queer Subjectivity in the Toronto South Asian Diaspora

Researcher:

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Title – Candidate, Masters of Social Work

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Phone Number – (647) 526-0423

Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this research is to add to a body of literature that makes visible the narratives of queer-identified racialized individuals in the West. The project aims to situate these narratives within existing literature that problematizes Western queer subjectivities for their implication in racializing projects.

Thus, the research question is: how do South Asian diaspora individuals understand and experience their queerness in the racialized and colonial context of Toronto, Canada?

What you will be asked to do in the research:

You will be asked to participate in a tape-recorded interview of about 1-2 hours in length. The interview will be semi-structured, meaning that I will have questions to initiate the discussion but, based on our conversation, we may explore different areas than what I have prepared for. As a small token of appreciation for your time and effort, you will be given \$25 for your participation.

Risks & Discomforts:

-being emotionally triggered in discussing subject matter that is potentially evocative and sensitive

If you would like to access further support to process issues that arise from this interview, please consider contacting:

519 Community Counselling Program: 416-392-6878 x 4000.

This program offers up to six counselling sessions with a professional therapist free of charge.

-feeling misrepresented by the analysis read onto your personal narrative. To help mitigate this, I would like to inform your narrative will be analyzed through the theoretical lens of Queer Post-Structuralist Theory.

Benefits of the Research & Benefits to you:

-having a forum to discuss subjectivities that may be challenging, sensitive, invisibilized, and/or private

-gaining a sense of validation/community/comradery for your personal experiences -accessing the final research project, which may provide an analysis that helps to reconcile seemingly conflicting identities of 'queer' and 'South Asian'.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer will not influence the relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future.

Withdrawal from the study:

You can stop participating in the study at any time, for any reason, if you so decide. Your decision to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions, will not affect your relationship with the researchers, York University, or any other group associated with this project. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible.

Confidentiality:

Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent of the law. This means that:

- Names will be changed and all potentially-identifying information will be changed/obscured
- Only the primary researcher will have access to the data. If this should change, your consent will be required.
- Your interview will be recorded on a password-protected audio-recording device; it will then be transcribed and encrypted on a personal computer.
- Data (audio and print) will be destroyed one year after the end of the project (i.e. April 2018).

Questions about the research?

If you have any questions/concerns, please feel free to contact:

Researcher: Khadijah Kanji - khadijah.kanji@gmail.com

Supervisor: Dr. Soma Chatterjee - schat@yorku.ca

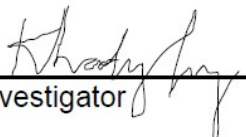
This research has been reviewed and approved by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, you may contact the Senior Manager and Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, York Research Tower, York University, telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca.

Legal rights and signatures:

I, _____, consent to participate in "The Gays Aren't All White, The Desis Aren't All Straight: Exploring Queer Subjectivity in the Toronto South Asian Diaspora", conducted by Khadijah Kanji. I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below indicates my consent.

Signature _____
Participant

Date _____

Signature  _____
Principal Investigator

Date November 30, 2016