From Diasporas to Multi-Locality:
Writing British Asian Cities

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On the 20th September 2007, the Writing British Asian Cities network convened at the Peepul Tree Centre, Leicester, for the fourth of its five City workshops. Organised by Pippa Virdee in, as had become customary by now, a locally significant community space, the Leicester workshop also acknowledged the trends cumulatively visible within the network’s programmes by incorporating a final section on ‘Religion, Ethnicity and Dance’. This section included, furthermore, a performance and discussion of Gujarati dance by Leicester-based dance artist and teacher Nayana Whittaker. Such performances were not new to the network. In Manchester, a few months before the Leicester workshop, the network and invited guests had heard two poets Shamshad Khan and Basir Kazmi, perform their poetry in English and Urdu respectively at the close of that day’s proceedings. In Leicester, however, something rather extraordinary happened. Not only did Nayana and her assistants demonstrate and explain the Dandiya and other Gujarati folk forms to the network, composed of a predominantly academic audience; this audience was, in fact, asked by her to get up and join her in dancing the Dandiya. After an initial response of incredulity mixed with embarrassment, we complied; we had little choice. As we shed our inhibitions we participated in a group dance whose raison d’etre was the forging and consolidation of communitas. Our own sense of being a network was thus reinforced in a most unexpected fashion, even as the seminar room transformed momentarily into a dance floor. Instead of asking each other theoretical, often abstruse, questions, we now found ourselves synchronising hands and feet and looking to Whittaker for cues. We had indeed come a long way as an academic network interested in the cultural production of ‘British Asian Cities’; so, too, had our initial conceptualisation of that cultural production primarily in terms of ‘writing.’

This episode in Leicester is paradigmatic of the ways in which our network has opened up new avenues for rethinking ‘cultural production’ among British Asian communities in the context of specific urban locations that are themselves situated within what Rajinder Dudrah calls ‘webbed connections’ linking Britain and ‘elsewhere’. In the case of Leicester, the motions of the Dandiya enacted the severed links between Gujarat, East Africa and Leicester itself, links that were sought to be re-forged, momentarily, through and in dance. When we, as academics, shared that process and moment, our standard ontologies were destabilised and refashioned. In the words of James Clifford, ‘participant observation obliges its practitioners to experience, at a bodily as well as an intellectual level, the vicissitudes of translation.’ I would want to push this comment further into thinking about not ‘participant observation’ but about the ‘observer’s participation’ within a diasporic dance practice such as Dandiya in Leicester. As Barbara Browning explains in the context of writing academically about Brazilian dance and martial art traditions, one has to learn to dance to learn in order to write about dance: ‘when one begins to learn through unfamiliar pedagogies and acknowledges other forms

of intellectualism, one’s own intellectual training comes into question.\textsuperscript{3} Like the Samba, which Browning discusses in detail, the Dandiya is ‘a history without closure; it is both a story and a poem’.\textsuperscript{4} Later in this chapter, I will return to the issue of dance as history and resistance. First, though, I wish to highlight some facts which the Dandiya episode helps foreground, and which offer this chapter on cultural production in the British Asian city, a starting point.

As has been suggested in the Introduction, the network’s five workshops enabled a progressive reconceptualisation of what was initially considered ‘literary and cultural production’ within the network’s remit. As a network, we made physical journeys to five cities and five specific locations, but we also embarked on journeys in terms of rethinking what is of value to British Asian communities in the cities we focused on. I want to think through the relationships between these two kinds of journeys. What did we learn as we moved from Bradford (our first workshop) to Birmingham (our final one)? With food, music, sport, dance and performative poetry comprising, together with the more obviously visible ‘novel in English’, the full range of cultural productions displayed and discussed, the very notion of ‘writing’ the British Asian city demanded interrogation, even critique. Notwithstanding the emphasis on ‘writing’ in the network title (‘Writing British Asian Cities’) the experience of the workshops, as dramatically demonstrated by the Leicester event, provoked us to consider anew what ‘writing’ meant, particularly from the perspective of literary studies. Did focusing narrowly on ‘writing’, and its attendant politics of publishing and marketing, close us off from the most vital and dynamic spaces of cultural production and contestation? How did ‘writing’ need to be supplemented (if not supplanted) by the evidence of other discourses concerning creativity, community and cultural capital that emerged as we organised, participated in, and reflected on the workshops? An early turn to the phrase, ‘cultural production’, whereby the breadth of the ‘cultural’ was meant to have countered the narrower implications of ‘writing’, represented a conscious attempt to work through such questions. Through ‘cultural production’, we signalled our desire to explore a range of self-expressive, self-consciously cultural practices that we imagined emerging from the communities under discussion—of which ‘writing’, even ‘writing back’, would have been only one. The network aimed to assess the importance of such practices within five British Asian communities located within five British cities, and to track the ways in which the city-spaces we trained our interpretative lens on were formulated and reshaped by them.

A starting assumption of the network was thus that ‘cultural production’ and ‘the British Asian city’ existed in mutually constitutive relationships, and our academic task was to understand what these were. The city-specific workshops would showcase some of these ‘products’ by inviting appropriate community members/practitioners/cultural producers, with whom we, the academics, would be in hopefully fruitful dialogue. Our working model was thus undergirded by the binary between ‘insider’ productions, and the academic as ‘outsider’ observers (who had possibly ‘earned’ partial or even near-complete access to the ‘inside’). Two years and five workshops on from Bradford, certain clarifications attendant on ‘cultural production’ emerged. Firstly, it became clear that more complex relationships between author/producer, audience and community needed

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{3} Barbara Browning, \textit{Samba: Resistance in Motion} (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995), p. xv.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{4} Browning, \textit{Samba}, p. xxi.}
to be triangulated. Furthermore, these productions were both witnessed by the workshop participants and made the subject of academic discussion. These double dynamics of the cultural product that is simultaneously performed and analysed stretched the insider-outsider axis. In turn, this distortion of the binary separating ‘us’ from ‘them’, a binary that even when breached, seemed to be in our control, has generated reflections on the workshop as a methodological space, and on questions of vernacular and multiple voices, the body in performance, and the relationship between the space of the workshop and the practices in question. In this chapter I mobilize these reflections into a considered understanding and reappraisal of the phrase ‘cultural production’ as a fruitful complication of the network’s pivotal focus on ‘Writing British Asian Cities’. My discussion will devolve, accordingly, on three broad issues: firstly, the problematic assumptions that ‘writing’ entails, particularly within the domain of literary critical scrutiny; secondly, the movement away from writing as a dominant and privileged mode of cultural production to other modes that the workshops revealed as valued and charged expressions of what I shall term ‘BrAsian vernacularities’; and, thirdly, the theoretical implications of this movement for analytical terminologies that now function as interdisciplinary tools through which the cultural potency of British Asian cities may be calibrated and assessed. These terms not only include the ‘diasporic’, the ‘transnational’ and the ‘translocal’, but also the network’s privileged term, ‘multi-locality’.

The problematics of ‘writing’

The most visible form of British Asian cultural production has unquestionably been the novel in English about the individual negotiating the simultaneous demands of his or her ‘community’ and those of life in mainstream Britain; such visibility is also shared by the novel’s handmaiden, the narrative film. Hence the novels of Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali and the films of Gurinder Chadha have conquered the High Street, as it were. This popularity extends to novels by what one critic terms high profile ‘Anglophone migrant authors’ such as Salman Rushdie, whose subject matter moves between the South Asian homeland and the post-imperial Britain as a diasporic space. Generally speaking, these novels and films portray diasporic subjectivity and location as celebratory, liberating and empowering, in particular through a focus on what has been theorised as ‘hybridity’ arising from the in-between third space location of its authors and subject-matter. This location is usually metropolitan London; in the case of a writer like Rushdie, it turns out to be a composite metropolitanism straddling London, New York, and Bombay. Along with these shared characteristics of form and content, whose appeal I shall explicate shortly, such fictional depictions of a certain kind of British Asian experience benefit from the pedigree and reception history of the novel form within modernity, and its intimate relationship to bourgeois capitalism and the rise of Empire. In the post-imperial

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period, the Booker Prize and other rituals of the global publishing industry augment this nexus of prestige and visibility, pointing inevitably to commodification and appropriation. There is now a veritable cultural industry around these novels which, whether written by British Asian or Indian authors, offers audiences the confirmation of a hybridity that seems to navigate effortlessly between the ‘authentic’ and the ‘cosmopolitan’. This industry includes scholarly writing on British Asian cultural production. In particular, there has been a productive synergy between studies of these novels and the development of Postcolonial Studies, a discipline which has supported the elaboration of a sophisticated theoretical discourse around hybridity.

This focus on what has been disparaged as the ‘hype of hybridity’ has coalesced with the issue of narrative literacy. Novels, like films and television serials, are avidly consumed in general, because the pleasures of narrative plotting render these genres understandable, enjoyable, domesticated, and portable. Narrated and packaged within the novel or the film, the British Asian Other becomes subsumed with relative ease into a version of the Self, while the satisfactions of closure dictate the resolution of real life complications into a fantasy ‘happily ever after’ scenario, or, indeed, dispense with resolution altogether. These pleasures are, equally, available to British Asian consumers. Thus Pnina Werbner has discussed two different kinds of diasporic public spheres in Britain—one that publicly enjoys the hybridity typically presented within such novels and films and the other, that defends a purity, typically Islamic, as authenticity, and is figured in the mostly male community leaders; furthermore, as she argues, both groups challenge each other through the triangulated gaze of the ‘white liberal middle class’.

Moreover, while audiences outside the ‘community’ might receive with enthusiasm the novelistic presentation of a space and habitus marked as ‘ethnic’, those inside it tend to view that successful reception with hostility, if not suspicion. This divergence arises from the sensitivity of those on the ‘inside’ to the appropriative politics of multiculturalism: as Koushik Banerjea observes blisteringly, ‘managing diversity becomes simply a containment strategy for those committed to holding on to their institutionalised authority. Invoking the language of multiculturalism is a useful alibi for liberals of all persuasion to authorize a selective appreciation of pluralism… what is particularly disturbing is the way this semantic code, ostensibly committed to a celebration of multiculture, conjures out of sight the fractious contours of class, race, even gender.’


8 Provoked chiefly by Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 2nd ed 2004).


Banerjea’s critique was provoked by the sudden popularity, during the 1990s, of the so-called Asian Underground music scene. I will return to music in the following section; here I want to emphasize the not dissimilar popularity that a national audience, hungry for a sanitised multiculturalism, has accorded the novel in English on British Asian life, and its handmaiden, the popular film.

Thus, the very popularity that has made these cultural forms amenable to literary critical treatments needs simultaneously to be made the object of materialist critique. Literary scholarship on the British Asian novel and film has to pay greater attention to the complex relationships between memory, history, locality and contested claims to ‘community’ embodied within diverse forms of British Asian cultural production, and in fact the competition that exists between these and the novel or film that gains more mainstream visibility: a fact made apparent by the impossibility of avoiding a discussion of Monica Ali’s novel Brick Lane during the Tower Hamlets workshop. Such complexities became apparent within all our workshops which increasingly departed from the novel in English to showcase instead sport, dance, music, performance poetry and children’s books.12 Thus the workshops prompted us towards acknowledging that the popularity and mainstream reception of some novels and films in English have eclipsed the viability, vitality and significance of other forms of cultural production. In fact, hierarchies were revealed even within the novel genre, with some kinds of diasporic novels clearly appearing more marketable, palatable, and, indeed, more fashionable, than others.13 Deriving from the traditional subordination of the ‘North’ to the ‘South’ of England, this power differential shapes and restricts the market that British Asian novels about locations other than London are able to command, a fact confirmed by the discussion with novelists Tariq Mehmood and Yunus Alam during the Bradford workshop.14 Both authors offer valuable representations of Bradford Asian life, eschewing the pleasures of the traditional romance plot for grittier depictions of confrontations between Asian youth and the Police, drug-dealing, petty crime, and inter-generational misunderstandings. Yet the circumstances of their marketing and publishing keep their novels more or less hidden from a national reading public. While this reading public shies away from novels that reveal to them the more disturbing aspects of British Asian lives, its reluctance is further manipulated within diasporic struggles for representation and legitimacy within the British public sphere.

Literary scholarship on the diasporic novel and film has tended to replicate these patterns of exclusion, focusing on more ‘accessible’ novels both within criticism and pedagogy. Thus Susheila Nasta begins her discussion of Hanif Kureishi by referencing his ‘suggestive essay named after the northern town of Bradford’, where he explores ‘the uncomfortable terrain of a hybridity which is “Englishness” for a new generation of Asians born and raised in Britain. Kureishi’s portrait of Bradford as a “microcosm” for what he calls the potential of a “larger” Britain, a Britain that might acknowledge its cultural and racial diversity as being inside rather than outside its border, points to some

12 Cross refer to city chapters or intro.
13 See Nasta, Home Truths, pp. 183-5.
14 Mehmood, T., Hand on the Sun (London, PRESS?, 1983); While There Is Light (Manchester: Commapress, 2003), M.Y. Alam, Annie Potts is Dead (Castleford, PRESS?, 1998); M.Y. Alam, Kilo (Castleford, PRESS?, 2002). Cross refer to Bradford and Manchester chapters?
of the major preoccupations of his art.¹⁵ Nasta’s starting point erases the distance between Kureishi’s London location and the Bradford he describes- a distance that has, in fact, been discussed by Sean McLoughlin within this volume. Thus when Nasta speaks of ‘Kureishi’s Bradford’, she fails to register the circumstances that separate South from North, and a British Asian writer with a particular metropolitan performance of hybridity, from another hybridity whose terrain is as uncomfortable for him as it is for the audience he writes his essay for. Furthermore, Nasta’s discussion reveals another problem that creeps into literary criticism: the tendency to subsume the British Asian novel within formalist agendas, particularly the scholarly preoccupation with the forms and tropes of fiction. When, for instance, she observes that ‘home in these British Asian fictions… can no longer be a single place, but represents instead a series of locations, an imaginative fertile ground for new improvisations’,¹⁶ ‘home’ as place is conjured into the non-material space of the text. As ‘home’ begins to operate as a trope or governing metaphor, the material force of locality is evaporated. This danger is also apparent in John McLeod’s defence of a literary critical methodology in his pioneering work, *Postcolonial London*, and defence, too, of that phrase: ‘Postcolonial London’ does not factually denote a given place or mark a stable location on a map. It emerges at the intersection of the concrete and the noumenal, between the material conditions of metropolitan life and the imaginative representations made of it. It is as much a product of ‘facticity’ as it is a creation of the novels, poems and other texts explored in this book.¹⁷

The focus on the aesthetic and formal dimensions of the already-popular British Asian novel (and film) is susceptible, therefore, to several problems: firstly, it can relegate the study of other forms of cultural production through the prism of literary representation; and secondly, it can unwittingly replicate mainstream homogenising tendencies— for instance, the privileging of London at the expense of other urban spaces, or on the novel and the film as hegemonic cultural forms. This, then, remains the abiding problem of subscribing to literary critical methodologies in order to analyse British Asian cultural productions: these methodologies seem intrinsically tied to issues of hegemony deeply embedded within structures of power that ultimately derived from the meta-power structures of Enlightenment and Empire, and named themselves through and as ‘modernity’.¹⁸ Under this regime, the binaries of written/oral, literature/orality, history/myth remain resolute and functioning. And yet, as McLeod reminds us, ‘it is not possible to conceive of representations as simply mimetic of, determined by or antecedent to urban realities.’¹⁹ Rather, ‘postcolonial London’, as he goes on to elaborate, ‘may be considered as a stratagem intended to foreground the consequences of metropolitan restructuring as they have been represented by authors who have arrived from, or have ancestral links with, countries with a history of colonialism… it admits the facticity of London’s colonial and diaspora histories to the study of cultural production, and also

¹⁶ Nasta, *Home Truths*, p. 211.
recognizes that the experience and understanding of the city cannot free itself from imaginative and discursive modes. McLeod is correct to suggest that literary critical methodologies, more than any discipline, are able to retrieve the psychic landscape of longing, belonging and affect that cuts through all diasporic negotiations. The challenge is to marry these methodologies to the insights and foci of other disciplines, in order to ensure that hierarchies determining the popular reception of British Asian cultural production are dislodged rather than replicated through scholarship.

**BrAsian vernacularities**

The most obvious sister discipline that literary scholarship might look to for such insights is sociology, primarily because of the attention sociologists have paid to the only mode of British Asian cultural production that has generated a standard of critical attention comparable to that lavished on the novel and the film: Bhangra music. As a cultural phenomenon, British Bhangra has been around for at least three decades, and it now even boasts of that mandatory sign of maturation—the recognition among aficionados of its epiphenomenon ‘post-Bhangra’. This long history notwithstanding, the Bhangra archive is marked by its ephemeral and seemingly esoteric nature. Operating in the early days on the margins of cultural visibility, and attracting a fan base beyond the calibrations of mainstream music charts, the history of British Bhangra can be an elusive trail for a non-insider to follow. Consequently, it has not been subject to consistent and wide-ranging academic scrutiny, apart from that conducted by a group of sociologists writing both as critics and fans, and whose work on Bhangra has, in fact, constituted pioneering studies of British Asian cultural production. We may note, therefore, a curious division of academic labour here: while literary historians have examined the novel and the film seeking to represent British Asian experience, focusing in the process on the aesthetics and affect of these genres, the sociologists writing on Bhangra have, in keeping with their methodological propensities, looked to questions concerning authenticity, commodification and ‘selling out’. This divergence between disciplinary concerns is, moreover, the result of a separate convergence: that of the new sociology of Bhangra and the moment of ‘Asian kool’ in the early 1990s. Born precisely out of the moment when Bhangra burst on the national and international scene as the suddenly visible product of long historical routes of transnational transmission of Punjabi culture, this sociological work is relentlessly pugnacious in its exposure of the fetishisations and appropriations that underwrite these multiple sites of new modes of multicultural consumption.

23 See the discussion of bhangra in Tony Ballantyne, *Between Colonialism and Diaspora: Sikh Cultural Formations in an Imperial World* (Duke University Press, 2006).
Bhangra’s entry into that ambiguous space where community rhythms are both made visible and emptied of meaning by the cannibalizing label of ‘world music’ was squarely assessed by these critic-fans in terms of an active politics of resistance: ‘South Asian musicians bear the burden of representation, whether they want to or not. And so strategic “authenticities” are often deployed, inverted, contested and appropriated.’ The label ‘BrAsian’, signaling an abrasive, non-hyphenated collision of modes of belonging, emerged first from within this scholarship as a gesture of self-ascription as much of critical evaluation, and was later taken up in earnest within the edited volume, A Postcolonial People, to which the ‘Bhangra sociologist collective’ handsomely contributed. Thus Bhangra as a cultural practice born out of diasporic exigencies encouraged academic scrutiny of the fluidity and agency inherent in the act of picking up the label that suited a particular cultural producer at a particular conjuncture; whether these identities- British/ Asian/ British-Asian/ BrAsian—nested within or jostled with each other itself became the subject of enquiry. While probing this cat and mouse game of playing with, as much as playing out, of authenticity through the commodification and performance of Bhangra, sociological research also shed valuable light on the constitutive significance of place, and, moreover, place other than London. In particular, Rajinder Dudrah’s work on the soundscapes of Birmingham as ‘the more ephemeral cultural productions of the BrAsian Street,’ revealed the ‘ongoing making and remaking of identities invested with meanings of “home” straddling the different parts of British South Asia, and the Indian subcontinent.’ But although such research trumps literary scholarship through the nuanced examination of place within British Asian cultural production, it does not stop to uncover circuits of affect through close readings of Bhangra’s structures of feeling, as, for instance, embedded within its lyrics. A rare attempt to do so is Kalra’s little-quoted essay on how the lyrics of Bhangra reconfigure Vilayet (‘abroad’) as the privileged space of emotion; but then, Kalra’s focus on these lyrics neglects to weave in the specifics of locality that must nuance the general invocation of ‘Vilayet’.

Sociological modes of analysis and its Arts and Humanities counterparts would therefore mutually benefit by looking to each other’s methodologies and primary sources in order to unravel fully the relationship between affect and place. This dual mode of analysis is particularly important because the most charged and vibrant modes of British Asian cultural production are those that draw on a simultaneous trajectory of inheritance and loss—a trajectory that can only be discerned by considering, in tandem, where communities draw cultural traditions from as well as where these traditions develop in unpredictable directions. Thus, as Philip Lewis comments on the status of South Asian Sufi music traditions in the diaspora, ‘One of the richest worlds to which many young people have only limited access is that of the qawwali, Sufi devotional music. For the past 600 years this tradition has provided consolation and spiritual nourishment for the faithful in a form accessible to all, lettered and unlettered alike…. This devotional

tradition is valued as a custodian of Islamic humanism, and valued by progressive writers in Pakistan as a vehicle for dissent. Typical of this perspective is an article in Viewpoint, a popular left-wing weekly, which cites the Punjabi Sufi writings of Bulleh Shah (d. 1750) as a ‘jihad against the tyranny of establishments’ both political and religious. Similarly, in his recent novel about the politics of racism and anti-racism in Bradford, Tariq Mehmood can still rehearse village banter at the mullah’s expense and refer to Hir Ranjha as the archetype of romantic love. To understand Mehmood’s invocation of Hir Ranjha, or indeed Aki Nawaz’s militant invocation to Ali, we need to know both something of the Sufi traditions of the Punjab, and the political context of 1980s Bradford. At the same time, as Lewis reminds us, ‘as command of Urdu or Punjabi declines among young Muslims in Bradford, and with it access to this devotional tradition.’ Despite this decline in linguistic proficiency, the sub-linguistic register of music (and dance) ensures that it remains a contradictory vehicle for both transmission and loss. Scholarship needs to be able to analyse language for what words say when understood, and for what it transmits despite their opacity, and through being fused with the embodied histories of rhythm and melody.

My comments here derive from observing how practices of music became increasingly important from workshop to workshop, with questions raised in one often returned to and answered in another. For instance, the Tower Hamlets discussion of Baul music, the equivalent of Sufi music in the Bengal region, included commentary on its decreasing popularity among the current generation of British Bengalis. The suggestion was made that only popular culture that gets commodified gets transmitted, again reminding us of the loss of certain cultural practices in diaspora. In contrast, two years later in Birmingham, Dudrah traced the genealogy of British Bhangra from a rural folk music with spiritual and festive resonances (not unlike Baul music), rooted in a particular region, and its increasing commodification in and through diaspora. The question thus arises as to the communities and socio-cultural-economic nexus that enable Bhangra to be thus commodified, and Baul music to be relatively less so. But the gain that Bhangra has made in terms of visibility and popularity has also brought in its wake a community disquiet that was very apparent during the discussion at Birmingham: the Nishkam centre flatly refused to allow any Bhangra performance on its premises, explaining the sense of spiritual depletion that was now associated with the music—‘Bling Bling culture’ was repeatedly referred to, pointing to the other syncretism between Black and Asian youth cultures that exist on the BrAsian Street. As against the pull of these youth (sub)cultures, a yearning for a renewed, South Asian spirituality was powerfully and insistently articulated in Birmingham, by both Sikh and Muslim participants, suggesting a very interesting dimension to the question of the move from ethnicity to religion as markers of belonging. In a similar way, the exposure to dance at Leicester, and the discussion of the role Garba and Dandiya played in consolidating a sense of Gujarati community, suggested a new mode of understanding the success of Leicester as a multicultural city. The twice-displaced East African Gujaratis who comprise a bulk of its population rely on

dance and music to sustain and transmit Gujaratiness despite their progressive loss of the Gujarati language; and nevertheless the Dandiya and Garba remained more tied to Hindu ritual than Bhangra, that has somehow floated free but yet transmits ‘Punjabiness’ in a much more evidently commodified sense.

What these diverse dance and music practices of British Asian cities share, therefore, is a bodily dimension, a fact that was emphasized at the Leicester workshop with parallels emerging between community dance practice and Asian sports clubs such as the rather oddly-named Nirvana Football Club. These conjunctions insist that we see sport, dance and music as embedded within a larger affective complex of orality-vernacularity-performance-somatic memory. This complex also includes practices such as Mushaira, or the recitation of Urdu poetry, as Basir Kazmi’s presence in Manchester reiterated through his excellent exposition on the experience of writing in Urdu while living in England. His account, interspersed with the recitation of his own couplets, offered an illuminating context for Shamshad Khan’s performance of her poetry, which, although in English, echoed the importance of a bodily, performative orality, and also referred to the competition between Urdu, Punjabi and English that defines her poetry and her performance. In fact, degrees of dominance between different vernacular languages that are generated through sociolinguistic hierarchies ‘back home’— Urdu, Punjabi, Pothwari on the one hand, Bengali and Sylheti on the other— are loosened through the new hierarchies, alignments and opportunities that Diaspora makes available, as Tariq Mehmood’s children’s books in Pothwari attest.  

Thus an effective methodology for the interpretation and assessment of this cultural production has to move beyond established binaries— between writing and music, between orality and literacy, between language and dialect— towards a strategic deployment of insights derived from a range of disciplinary foci. Only such considered eclecticism can explicate the full range of British Asian cultural production. In this task, the concept of ‘BrAsian vernacularities’ emerges as a useful way of signalling the expressive, often antagonistic idioms of cultural production that develop out of the encounter of various vernaculars, and I use the term both linguistically and culturally, in specific multi-local circuits. Each workshop gestured towards the city in which it was located as spaces of a particular axis that links the oral, the expressive, the vernacular, and the performative. Performance as expressive resistance then becomes the key to understand and analyse comparatively the otherwise differentiated vernacular expressions from diverse multi-localities, which are thereby drawn fruitfully under the banner of cultural production.

From the transnational to the multi-local: the body in the city

The body as the ultimate performative resource for the enactment, perpetuation and transformation of such vernacularities, thus becomes a potential a site of emancipation: a

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30 Not in Bradford but in Manchester, where he was also present—and where he spoke about the necessity of children’s books in Pothwari, the mother tongue of a large group of British Pakistanis.

31 The recuperation of the loaded term ‘vernacular’ within recent scholarship on South Asia is itself an interesting phenomenon here: see, for instance, the discussion of ‘vernacular capitalism’ in Kajri Jain, Gods in The Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007).
sub-linguistic reservoir of transmitted knowledge and self-expression. Nevertheless, the body is also always inscribed materially and historically. To decipher these processes of performance and inscription, we need to return it, and our modes of analysis, to space/place. In this task, the term ‘multi-local’ is a useful tool for navigating the implications of other possible terminologies such as the diasporic, the transnational, and even the ‘glocal’, and it is to an examination of how these terms measure up against each other, that I now turn. While ‘diaspora’, it is now acknowledged, appears too restrictive in its originally valid suggestions of a departure from the ‘homeland’ and an unequivocal embedding in the ‘host country’, the ‘transnational’ has been proposed as articulating a welcome move beyond traditional associations of diaspora that were being rendered defunct by the accelerating processes of globalisation supported by rapid advances in communication technologies.  

‘Transnationalism’ thus comes to signify ‘the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement’. Several levels of meaning have been discerned as operating within the ‘transnational’: it signals, firstly, ‘networks based in two or more nation-states and who maintain activities, identities and statuses in several social locations’, secondly, it is itself a product of world capitalism; thirdly, the ‘trans’ gestures towards a ceaseless linkage of cultural flow, social relations, multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states. Yet this discourse around transnationalism is in danger of evaporating the importance of spatial constructs, particularly that of the nation. An evaluation of this discourse reviews these implications in somewhat caustic terms: ‘just as ‘space/place has often suggested “nation”, so it often does seem that the discourse of transnationalism supersedes and leaves place/space behind’; ‘the national is about place, territory, landscape, rootedness, belonging; the transnational connotes space, de-territorialization… other global–scapes, uprooting, rootlessness and routes of travel, and exclusion and longing.’

Nevertheless, as revealed by this caricature of the binaries that have mushroomed around the idea of the transnational, space in some form or the other is embedded within the agenda of transnational studies. Attention needs to be directed, therefore, to how that space is constituted and mobilised. If, in the words of Jackson, Crang and Dwyer, ‘studies of the economic, political and cultural dimensions of transnationalism have characteristically under-played the transformation of space that is involved in the evolution of transnational social forms’, recuperating the nation-state has frequently been the mode of returning spatiality to transnationalism. But traversing the British Asian urban site of cultural production are economic, political and cultural flows that typically connect peripheral zones of the South Asian nation (Azad Kashmir, Sylhet, East Africa as

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a prior space of displacement from South Asia) to spaces in Britain that are metropolitan enclaves, or spaces strongly marked by region rather than cosmopolis in Britain (Bradford, Greater Manchester, Leicester, Tower Hamlets, Soho Road in Birmingham). While discussing the music of protest group Asian Dub Foundation, Ashley Dawson refers to Saskia Sassen’s forceful argument ‘that the nation-state remains the crucial nexus through which globalizing cultural and economic forces must pass;’ Nevertheless, I would argue, the British Asian city space at least is prone to slip through its interstices. This, then, becomes the major problem even for models of transnationalism that ‘have been developed in different geographical spaces’ and which can ‘be distinguished by their particular spatialities’; such models have not often considered these divergent spatialities in a comparative, intra-national manner. The ‘transnational space’ formulated by Jackson, Crang and Dwyer is, they argue, ‘complex, multidimensional and multiply inhabited, so that ‘a spatial focus usefully foregrounds the contextual specificity of transnational forms’, making explicit that ‘transnationality is a geographical term, centrally concerned with reconfigurations in relations with place, landscape and space’ yet their discussion continually re-embeds these potentially diverse geographies of scale that inform transnational space within ‘the continuing power of nation-states in defining the framework and setting’ for transnational social relations.’

In contrast, I would want to insist on the power and impress of localities in which those people conducting transnational social relations are embedded. Although ‘how one separates the global and the local is difficult to decide when each thoroughly infiltrates each other’ the challenge is precisely to highlight that imbrication in specific settings, and to devise methodologies that would enable us successfully to do so. Thus I do not agree with Gupta and Ferguson that the transnational public sphere has ‘rendered any strictly bounded sense of community and locality obsolete’. If these are the connotations and expectations that have now accrued around the ‘transnational’, then we must devise alternative terminologies in order to stake a different critical claim to the material circuits of region-to-region flows observable through our workshops. Here, the terms ‘multi-local’ and ‘multi-locality’ emerge in their full usefulness, putting the ‘transnational’ back into contact with specificities of space by registering the ‘oscillation’, to return to Dudrah’s useful formulations, between Britain and several elsewhere in ‘webbed’ contact. This model of oscillation and reticulation is further vivified when mapped against flows of cultural and symbolic capital in the form of clothes, music, food, films, and even prayer: ‘while particular goods may appear to be de-territorialised in the sense that they are sourced from places that may be very distant from where they are consumed, their meanings are re-territorialised both through distinctive local contexts of consumption and through product ‘placements’ that emphasize specific

40 Grewal and Kaplan, ADD, 1994, p. 11.
geographical contents. As Escobar reminds us, ‘Culture still sits in places.’ The interest for us is, therefore, what sorts of places these may be, and the contingent nature of that ‘sitting’. Vertovec’s triadic geographies of belonging—to places of residence, myths of homelands and imaginations of diasporic communities—are the very circuits that literary studies methodologies can help illuminate, so as to explicate how places of ‘sitting’ are transformed by diasporic imaginations. We need to consider ‘grounding transnationalism’ through ‘multi-sited ethnography’. It is only through examining what Nicholas Thomas describes as ‘mutual entanglement of material objects and postcolonial histories’ that we can develop, as Glick Schiller advocates, ‘key words that reflect the dynamics of interconnection’

Michael Peter Smith declares that we need ‘an optic and a language capable of representing the complexity of transnational connections… including the shifting spatial scales at which agency takes place.’ This ‘optic’ necessitates the deployment of ‘multi-locality’ as a concept through which to reconsider the affective force of ‘diasporic materialities,’ whereby cultural products, such as the salwar-kameez styles Parminder Bhachu examines, are interrogated for the ‘social and cultural life that emerges from specific places, migration histories, and local political and symbolic economies’, including acts that ‘localize the consumption and interpretation of this garb’. Hence Dwyer asserts, ‘commodity culture is a valuable way of bridging the unhelpful separations of transnationality as an abstract cultural discourse and transnationality as a lived cultural field’; but we need to deploy, too, an understanding of the contradictions as well as the assertions inherent in the wielding of commodity culture. As our opening account of Mumtaz Restaurant in Bradford suggested, the opportunities of multi-locality enables British Asian cultural production to rework master-servant relationships on several levels; but the reconfigured dynamic between dominant and demotic modes of culture does not mean that the newly-visible dominant ceases to embody socio-cultural marginalisation. As we move from the transnational to the multi-local, within spaces where the historical marginalisation of a region such as Mirpur brushes up against the

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47 Michael Peter Smith, CHECK AND ADD.
49 Claire Dwyer, ‘Tracing Transnationalites through Commodities: A Case Study of British-South Asian Fashion, in Jackson, Crang and Dwyer, Transnational Spaces, pp. 60-77, p. 74.
other history of marginalisation that subtends a post-imperial city such as Bradford, we must be able to read those spaces as shot through with the melancholia that is produced when capitalist self-fashioning interacts with stubborn anxieties of class, race and religion.\(^{50}\) The multi-local in this reading may well be aligned to the cosmopolitan but it its parochial rootedness that infusion its actors with a ‘creative power to resist, deflect or work with social and political categories… in order to play the politics of recognition in terms not of their own making.’\(^{51}\) As Kathleen Hall observes in the context of Sikhs in diaspora, it is neither ‘the dominant national discourse’ nor ‘the nationalist politics of identity’, but ‘alternative local discourses’ that enable them ‘to appropriate popular culture’s semiotic resources both to reinforce conservative orientation towards “traditional” forms of culture and to embrace cosmopolitan views and tastes.’\(^{52}\)

Firmly emplacing this particular community within its Yorkshire location, Hall ‘offers a framework for studying identity as relational and reflexive, as produced through multiple forms and forces of discourse in relation to distinctive forms of power, and as performed as individuals negotiate multiple identifications across contexts of situated practice.’\(^{53}\) This concept of a ‘situated practice’ that is also a performance invigorates Dudrah’s analytical category of ‘the black public sphere’ that he extrapolates from the ephemeral performative space of the BrAsian street. The mobilization of Bhangra music not merely as music, but as cultural production performed to demarcate locality (in this case, the BrAsian street, Soho Road) as habitus is more usefully redefined as ‘situated practice’, a term that can encompass both the ‘black public sphere’ and the more private, hidden aspects of cultural production, as for instance, those involving the Sikh girls whom Hall studies, who perform identity through movement between specific spaces even in the home: kitchen, living room, bedroom. By returning the body back to space, where space is constituted by the overlapping and differentiated vectors of home, city, locality, homeland, we can grasp how British Asian cultural production is constituted through emergent vernacularities in performative display. As we noted from Workshop to Workshop, multi-locality was the very mobilization of space in order to perform acts of identity as utterance: in Stuart Hall’s words, ‘practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write - the positions of enunciation, a view that problematises the very authority and authenticity to which the term, ‘cultural identity’, lays claim.’\(^{54}\) It is through the utterance or the enunciation, which, ultimately, is an act emerging from the body, in conjunction with multiple material sites, that identity is produced, negotiated and ceaselessly refashioned.

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\(^{50}\) On melancholia in postimperial Britain, see now Paul Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia (New York: Columbia UP, 2004).


\(^{54}\) Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in Identity: Community, Culture, Difference (iwbooks.co.uk, 1990), p. 222.
Rethinking the British Asian city in terms of cultural production marked by multi-locality and performance as utterance thus allows us to understand that city as traversed and rewritten by different kinds of vernacular diasporic formations. Diaspora, re-interpreted through the lens of multi-locality, allows new power groupings and new arenas for older vernacular and regional forms to flourish and compete with other transnational formations (such as pan-Islamism and Hindu fundamentalism). Cannibalism and competition exists in synergy with the potential for commodification, but in the most commodified forms of cultural production, too, there remains an expression of a spirituality that is grounded in older regional forms of affect and expression. As participants affirmed within the Birmingham workshop, even as the materiality of Bhangra was being decried: ‘Bhangra on the dance floor is a spiritual shout.’ To understand these cultural dynamics as well as the shift from ethnic to religious modes of belonging we need to realize the need to belong as well as the need to believe, and align these needs to changing transnational relationships and geopolitical shifts. Reading these cultural productions as ‘texts’, we need to draw on the interpretative possibilities of the literary critical mode of reading, that enables nuanced modes of analysis attentive to issues of genre, voice and symptoms of anxiety, self-assertion and pleasure within the text, broadly defined. But we have to combine those analytical modes with a renewed attention to issues of locality, space and material lineaments of power—that same attention which has shaped, most prominently, sociological work on Bhangra. As Sneja Gunew reminds us, ‘it is not a question of either culture or politics but of retaining an alertness to the importance of cultural materialism so that questions of representation remain always linked to material conditions.’\textsuperscript{55} Moreover, to return to the words of Samba historian Browning, with whom I began this chapter, ‘to articulate means, of course, to flex at the joints’.\textsuperscript{56} In writing about British Asian cultural production, we must not write out the body, of which I regard ‘vernacularity’ as a reappropriated symptom: rather, we must strive to use materiality to reinvigorate our articulations, in all senses of that term.


\textsuperscript{56} Browning, \textit{Samba}, p. 2.