

Talking Race, Claiming Space: Interrogating the Political Practice of Desi Hip-Hop

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They say I act white, but sound black, but act black/ But sound white, but what's my sound bite supposed to sound like?

Das Racist, "Shut Up, Man"

Desi hip-hop occupies a changeable and very unique space in American hip-hop. It is not a cohesive movement, nor a genre with definable characteristics. It might instead be best described as a network of numerous self-constructed and self-conscious political actors. The discourse on South Asian American hip-hop has grown in the last decade, increasing the visibility of this large artistic and political milieu. In particular, the work of Nitasha Sharma¹ and Sunaina Maira,² along with a recent collection of essays published in the book *Desi Rap*³ take significant steps towards exploring Desi hip-hop as a musical phenomenon in which racial identities are expressed, stereotypes are subverted, and aesthetics rooted in Black nationalism are appropriated – along with the complex ways in which these issues intersect. These works carry out the significant labor of making visible the ways in which Desi hip-hop engages with notions of cultural Othering, and how artists assume political identities both through their lyrics and through the weaving of traditional music samples into the fabric of hip-hop rhythms.

In this article, I will similarly explore the work of Desi hip-hop artists and the political identities manifest in their music, but I aim to go further by demonstrating that race consciousness is not solely explicit in artists' lyrics, but implicit and equally important in the way Desi artists take up space in hip-hop and command representation. Within this argument I hope to make visible not just the plurality and complexity of Desi hip-hop identities and approaches, but also the

¹ Nitasha Tamar Sharma, *Hip-hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

² Sunaina Maira, *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in NYC* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).

³ *Desi Rap: Hip-hop and South Asian America*, ed. Ajay Nair and Murali Balaji (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

multiple ways in which political identities emerge. That is to say, I hope to demonstrate that social change is manifold and not just explicit in the rhymes and rhythms of Desi artists, but sometimes more implicit via the manner in which Desi artists intercept hip-hop and carve their identities into mainstream channels of communication as a means of countering limitations instilled by a dominant culture.

Desi is a self-ascribed title that refers to the South Asian diaspora.⁴ Many South Asian American narratives and experiences largely revolve around the “model minority myth”: both how this reductionist racial stereotype is expected from South Asians, as well as how it is resisted.⁵ The model minority myth has come to suggest that Asian Americans are somehow culturally and intellectually superior – but politically passive – and relies on contrasting stereotypes of Blacks and Latinos as inferior. The myth operates as a faulty social construct instilled by White patriarchy, and maintains power by promoting insidious tensions between already marginalised groups.⁶ A growing number in the South Asian community seek to actively defy this, utilising the vocabulary, methodology and consciousness of hip-hop to disrupt these seemingly fixed ideologies, harnessing the political potential of hip-hop as a response to racism, and as a method to explore the full complexity of immigrant and Asian American lives. Here, investment in hip-hop is a political act of race consciousness, working to reshape community consciousness as

⁴ A term meaning “of the land” or country, from the Hindu/ Urdu *desb*. It is a title that refers to the diaspora of South Asian immigrants from countries including India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal. I want to make clear that when I make reference to the Desi or South Asian diaspora, I am not assuming homogenous experiences, and recognise diverse experiences and oppressions within the South Asian and immigrant communities. I also use these terms with the acknowledgment that not all people feel comfortable with these titles, and experiences that I discuss may not resonate at all.

⁵ Sharmila Rudrappa, *Ethnic Routes to Becoming American: Indian Immigrant and the Cultures of Citizenship* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004). Ruben Rumbaut and Alejandro Portes, *Ethnicities: Children of Immigrants in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁶ Scot Nakagawa, “Model Minority Suicide: Five Reasons, Five Ways” *Racialicious*, (2014).

well as come to terms with one's place in a world heavily inscribed with racial categories.

Yet using hip-hop as an expressive tool carries with it the weight of appropriating an expressive form rooted in Black Nationalism. This complex issue looms large in much of the work of Desi artists. It is pervasive in the crafting of Desi hip-hop identities and informs the larger social background of Black and Asian American relations. It is imperative to recognise this, and how these issues continually and mutually construct each other if we are to fully understand the political action achieved by Desi hip-hop participants.

On one hand, engaging with a musical form rooted in Black Nationalism helps weave together Desi and African American experiences of being stereotyped, whilst simultaneously demonstrating the great difference of these experiences. This presents an ambiguity that drives the aesthetics of many Desi hip-hop works. In other words, artists often focus on the ambiguity of being "Brown" in America – of having to straddle tradition and the pressure of assimilation into American society while bearing the brunt of racism. Such ambivalence reflects the nature of living in a social context that conflates the experience of race into dichotomies of Blackness and Whiteness. The centrality of Othering themes in the hip-hop form provides Desi artists a platform to express their different experiences of race and to counteract hegemonic essentialism while simultaneously drawing on allusions (whether explicit or implicit) to Black Nationalism for support.

This alignment performs a political act by helping Desi hip-hop artists resist not only traditional Desi norms and expectations, but those of the dominant White society as well. That is to say, drawing on race conscious rhetoric which inherently alludes to a particular social struggle around identity (Black Nationalism) allows young Desis to similarly forge new identities in relation to their own experiences of being stereotyped. As Nitasha Sharma explains, Desi artists conjure the race consciousness of early rap music, transforming "Black Power into Brown Pride in response to racism and their attempt to... [transcend their ascribed status as] model

minorities, eternal foreigners, or deracialised ‘honorary Whites.’”⁷ Sharma in turn illustrates how legitimate “Brown creators of Black popular culture” offer up the potential for cross-racial alliances.⁸ Such action is particularly necessary in a post 9/11 era in which racism toward and the profiling of South Asians remains rampant.

Yet using hip-hop to these ends is complicated by the fact that appropriating hip-hop has a tendency to work against the agency of Black artists. As I will show in my analysis of selected works below, this constant tension is present in the emerging politics around Desi hip-hop, and plays out in artists’ music and conceptions of Blackness. When N.W.A. says “Fuck the Police” for instance, they are referring to a state system of anti-black racism and violence – a system that Asian Americans benefit from to a certain degree.

Part of the challenge therefore in interpreting the political action undertaken by Desi hip hop artists is understanding the ways in which Desi hip hop works to both reify and challenge U.S. racial dynamics. That is to say, when South Asians’ enter hip-hop, they bring with them a degree of privilege in being non-Black, and however well meaning, are profiting (whether through pleasure or money) from Black labour. It is a harsh truth but a lived reality, and I believe any discussion of non-Black, race conscious hip-hop is unproductive without recognising this. As Vijay Prashad has pointed out, when Desis come to America, “they sign a social contract with a racist polity by making a pledge to work hard but to retain a social life at some remove from US Society... the social retreat sanctioned by US Orientalism provides a space to develop a life, even if this is a space under constant threat from educational and other institutions.”⁹ Prashad’s point seems to be that even those who resist the roles in which they are cast benefit from this contract and are therefore allowed to inhabit radically different social spaces to their African American counterparts.

From here, I aim to tease out in more specific terms how a variety of Desi hip-hop artists forge racial identities amidst this tense and paradoxical backdrop.

⁷ Sharma, xi.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), viii.

The model minority myth, described above, has created a link between race and the notion of success and is a value fashioned by broader US society media. Prashad declares that many South-Asian immigrants are too quick to uncritically adopt the role of the model minority without conscious reflection on the political and racial project to which it exists.¹⁰ It can be difficult to be critical however, as often immigrants families are forced to imagine their lives as part of the racial formation and seek to mediate between the dream of America and the realities of racial oppression. Because of this model, many second-generation immigrants are torn between following more desirable unbeaten paths, opposed to the predetermined path set for them.

The group Karmacy have blatantly responded to these social expectations in their album *The Movement*, and force the listener to understand how racism is internalised and exists in the very structure of the South Asian American community. In the song “Outkasted,” rapper KB expresses a disdain and disillusionment of this stereotype and the dangers the model minority myth poses for both South Asians and other marginalised communities.

To all the menaces kickin’ their subtle prejudice/
addressin’ us with stereotypical references/
still oppresin’ us by fillin’ the syllabus with lessons
of how we get the best of us in ancient fisticuffs/
malicious messages taken from history texts and such/
keep us locked in mental prisons for unprecedented sentences/
supposedly what I’m supposed to be and what is meant for me is told through the odyssey of my ancestry/
instead I choose to separate destiny and heredity/
and bomb everybody’s perception of my identity.¹¹

The verse also alludes to external, systematic racism with references to education and prison. It concludes with the potential choice to stray from these stereotypes and the rippling influence of the “destiny and heredity” of the model minority.

Throughout the album *The Movement*, there are evocations of Karmacy’s Desi identity through the use of multiple languages and

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹¹Karmacy, “Outkasted” in *The Movement*, Rukus Avenue Records, 2004.

the sampling of Punjabi folk music and instruments. This is a common trope that draws on the tradition of the preceding Desi dance music scene and Bhangra dance parties of the nineties, which were no doubt formative for Desi hip-hop culture. In New York, second generation Indian American popular culture was centred on music and dance, specifically the fusion of American hip-hop, rap techno and reggae with Hindi film music and Bhangra (a folk dance music of Punjab, in north west India). In concurrence with the fusion of musical genres, this subculture also involved the performance of a culturally hybrid style. This included the wearing of bindis and nose rings and the performance of ethnic identity through dance (by borrowing folk-like moves while gyrating to club mixes). This can be seen somewhat as a cultural stamp and a way in which Desis borrow and expand upon an originally black expressive form by “empowering rather than denigrating”¹² their ethnic and racial identities.¹³

Other artists like Emcee Chee Malabar from Himalayan Project, refuse to have their artistic credibility based on ethnic identity. Though his music is perhaps “less ethnically identifiable”¹⁴ his lyrics indicate a counter-hegemonic resistance that critiques racial profiling in the criminal justice system (Cause I’m young, brown and look Middle Eastern, yeah ... He’s like, ‘Dude, your face is probable cause’),¹⁵ and draws connections between minority communities who face varied racism and disenfranchisement. His album *Oblique Brown* is an aggressive manifestation that stems from – and interrogates – the American “culture of fear,”¹⁶ and subsequent cultural and political Othering of the Desi community, after 9/11. This album in particular represents the hopes, frustrations and ideals of underground Desi hip-hop as a response to these attacks.

Chee Malabar also offers a type of racialised hip-hop that transcends the Desi identity and speaks to an audience that is in anyway isolated by Anglo-centric, White hegemony. In a sense, his

¹² Sharma, 2.

¹³ Sunaina Maira’s ethnographic work of the Desi hip-hop and Basement Bhangra subcultures explains how these have been important in the “performance” of racial and ethnic identities, and for the revitalisation of traditional dances, music and fashion.

¹⁴ Nair and Balaji, 26.

¹⁵ Chee Malabar, “Oblique Brown” in *Oblique Brown*, Independent, 2006.

¹⁶ Chee Malabar, “Four More Years” in *Oblique Brown*, Independent, 2006.

work typifies the form of racial hip-hop that is translatable to various racial, political and geographic communities. It emphasises the fluidity of Desi hip-hop music and the radical potential of it. It reflects the diversity of the South Asian identity amidst the reductive stereotypes, and the varied way these identities can be expressed through lyrics and productions.

It proves useful to look at multiple Desi artists to observe how race consciousness manifests itself in different ways, and how political engagement arises in nuanced and – perhaps unexpected – ways. For Brooklyn trio Das Racist – rappers Himanshu Suri and Victor Vázquez, hype man Ashok Kondabolu – approaches to both race and hip-hop thrive on the kinds of off-hand jokes that actually wield weight and truth, but are perhaps less explicit and antagonistic compared to someone like Chee Malabar. Their work is not cited in the few sources on Desi hip-hop, despite their internet fame and acclaim from the likes of *Pitchfork* and *MTV*.¹⁷ Loose talk about race is scattered throughout their interviews and work – it is an element so central to their work it gave the band its name, a play on the tiresome “That’s racist!”

Blurring the lines between critical race talk and self-parody, is the “instinctive speciality”¹⁸ of the trio – race consciousness guised by the perennial rap tropes of talking about girls and doing drugs (lots of drugs), but there nonetheless. Whether they acknowledge it or not, Das Racist is making its own contribution to America’s endless wrangling with origins. Vazquez, who is Black, Cuban, and Italian from San Francisco, and Suri and Kondabolu, Indians from Queens, occupy an “ambiguous Brown zone”¹⁹ from which they can issue wry commentary based on experience (“Puerto Rican Cousins,” “Who’s the Broooown?” and the surprisingly candid “Rapping 2 U”) while also remaining detached and ironic. Das Racist seem to exploit the

¹⁷ Ashok Kondabolou, Himanshu Suri and Victor Vasquez, “Das Racist: Thanks Internet!” *Village Voice* (2010): <http://www.villagevoice.com/2010-01-19/music/das-racist-thanks-internet/3/> (accessed 22 November 2014).

¹⁸ Siddhartha Mitta, “Das racist is not your typical rap story,” *Boston Globe* (2011): <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy2.library.usyd.edu.au/docview/893695121/abstract?accountid=14757> (accessed 17 November 2014).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

possibilities of their ambiguity, their work is often provocative and harnesses their blog-rap platform to talk about race and antagonise Whiteness. At its surface their work is catchy and enjoyable, but once decoded, all of a sudden lowbrow humour gives way to subversive social commentary and a culturally literate wit.

Das Racist approach the idea of Otherness in a way that feels both playful and provocative, asserting their identities in a way that reinforces their individuality and mocks their stereotypes. Their work is hyper-referential, weaving ramblings and in-jokes with pop culture references, cross-genre name drops, and cultural studies references – “W.E.B. DuBois/ We be da boys ... model minority/ no Dinesh D’Souza,” from “Hugo Chavez” is one of their cleverest. Their production is also littered with Bollywood samples (the work of Suri), as well as sampling from a wider rap lineage including Jay-Z, A Tribe Called Quest and working with other artists including Danny Brown, Childish Gambino and Tyler the Creator. Despite this, it is a wonder why Das Racist (at Suri and Kondobulo) are embraced as part Desi rap artists. Though their selling point may be their humour, the vague sense of empowerment they offer as “Brown men making Black music in a White world,” surely cannot be underrated.



The work of all hip-hop Desis is embedded in racial power relations that have multiple meanings and outcomes. No doubt the process of commercialisation and corporate cooption of hip-hop has increased the visibility and accessibility of the form whilst simultaneously obscuring, subjugating and often erasing the importance of the Black experience. In their negotiation of racism, hip-hop Desis – be they artists, consumers or writers – must therefore uphold a critical consciousness that recognises hip-hop as rooted in a Black experience. Indeed, Desi artists wield a certain amount of privilege in taking up space and representation within hip-hop and must not obliterate its primary cultural stewards. This in itself could be an important step towards counteracting anti-blackness within the Desi community.

Notwithstanding these tensions, it is clear that within Desi hip-hop, artists work to enact identities that hold political consequences. This reclamation and reconfiguration of race works against parochial narratives even when it elides with certain hegemonic positions – and

it is this paradox that I have sought to illuminate in this article. To be clear, such action does not undermine dominant understandings of political activity in hip-hop. Rather, it demonstrates an expansive view of the revitalising ways in which we might enact social change while breaking down the contentious and superficial divide between “more” or “less” political hip-hop that so often works to pit artists against each other.

ABSTRACT

Desi hip-hop occupies a changeable and very unique space in American hip-hop. It is not a cohesive movement, nor a genre of definable characteristics. Rather, it is a compilation of numerous self-constructed and self-conscious political identities. Investment in hip-hop is an important act of race consciousness-identification, but also carries the weight and knowledge of appropriating an expressive form rooted in Black Nationalism. Within this essay I hope not just to identify the plurality and complexity of Desi hip-hop identities and approaches; but also the multiple ways in which political identities emerge and the manner in which artists negotiate cultural appropriation. Through this, perhaps we can recognise that social change is manifold and not just explicit in the rhymes and rhythms of Desi artists, but sometimes more implicit via the presence of Desi artists intercepting hip-hop and carving their identities into mainstream channels of communication as a means of countering limitations instilled by a dominant culture.

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