

Indo Chic: Cultural Appropriation, Online Activism and Diasporic South Asian Cultural Identity in Australia

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AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

This thesis contains material previously published by myself. The details are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I declare that the substance of this thesis has not been submitted already for any degree, nor is it currently being submitted for another degree.

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all the assistance received in preparing this thesis has been acknowledged.

I certify to the best of my knowledge that all sources of reference and their authors, wherever known, have been acknowledged in this body of work.

17th June 2022
Lauren Nilsson

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ABSTRACT

My research tracks and interrogates the many manifestations of the aesthetic tradition ‘Indo chic’, analysing how South Asian diasporic (desi) communities in the West interact with the trend, and in particular, how the trend has led desi women to engage in political activism online. The term ‘Indo chic’ refers to the Western production and consumption of 'South Asian/Indian inspired' commodities and images that connote a specific, yet generic, 'exotic cool' such as yoga or Bindis. Using a mixed methodology of critical visual analysis and ethnographic interviews, I examine how the aesthetics of contemporary Indo chic affect the cultural identity of desi women living in the West, with a particular focus on the experiences of desi women living in Australia. Broadening the category of diasporic South Asian identity, I also engage with mixed-race diasporic South Asian relationships to Indo chic which illuminate the messiness and constructedness of culture as embodied experience. As such, this project situates itself within wider arguments concerning the diasporic experience, whiteness and racial privilege, online activisms, and cultural authenticity.

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INTRODUCTION

Feeling ‘South Asian’/ Feeling ‘Australian’

Preface: My Motherland is a Mouthful

In 2018, I attended a wedding as the guest of my partner, Brennan. Brennan had gone to high school with the couple getting married, and he was excited for me to meet his friends. I was feeling a little uncomfortable attending a wedding where I did not know anyone save Brennan and was made more uncomfortable about an hour into the reception when I had a chance to survey the room and guests. What I noticed was that this wedding was *white*. Really white. Besides Brennan and I, there were only a handful of people of colour in the room. I felt as if I had been transported back to my suburban Australian primary school where I was one of the few people of colour not only in my grade, but in the entire school.

A few hours into the night I was hesitantly chatting with the husband of one of Brennan's friends, a newly graduated law student, who had been complaining earlier about how 'easy' it was for female law students to get a job after graduation 'because of political correctness'. I was trying to find a polite way to leave our conversation when he asked me 'what are you?', looking me up and down, trying to categorise me. I knew what he meant by this but acted as if I didn't. He continued. 'Your nationality... like, you're not Australian right?' Again, I knew what he meant. By 'Australian' he meant 'white' and by 'nationality' he meant 'ethnicity', or maybe 'race'. This question confirmed my suspicions that in this particular space I was not being perceived as white.

I am Anglo Indian and have been misidentified as every ethnicity from Middle Eastern to South American to Southern European. I am often read as an ambiguous *other* - not quite white, but maybe white, or maybe something else? I have joked with my friends that I am an 'undercover ethnic' (Nishme 2014) as I am desi but look white enough that white people tend to let their guard down around me, assuming I am white or at least white-ish, and say racist

things about people of colour, sometimes Indian people, in my presence. That day, at the wedding however, I had been discovered. The lawyer's wife joined in too. 'Yeah – are you Greek? Or Italian?' 'I'm half Indian and half Swedish', I answered simplifying the complexity of my heritage to hasten the end of this conversation. 'She doesn't really look Indian, does she?' Brennan butted in, endlessly fascinated by my ethnic ambiguity as a Chinese Australian who has never been able to blend into white spaces the way I have. So began five more minutes of conversation about my parentage and facial features which ended with a triumphant (and obtuse) 'I knew it. I knew you weren't Australian. I could tell straight away!' from the lawyer.

This experience in 2018 reminded me that I don't always pass as white. I never intentionally try to white pass, but I know that I am often perceived as white, or at least as a 'wog' - an Australian pejorative term often said tongue-in-cheek to refer to Italian, Greek and/or Lebanese Australians. As a child, I longed to have inherited my Swedish father's white skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair, along with his Swedish name. When I was about six, I asked my mother why I wasn't born as pale as my younger brother who took after my father. 'Because you look like me – and the Anglo Indians say that the oldest child gets all the colour' she told me. My mother was the oldest, too, and the darkest of her siblings by far. I therefore always felt more aligned with my Indian side than my Swedish side.

My childhood, growing up in Australia, was defined by my phenotypical differences from my, mostly white, peers. I was bullied for my brown skin, excessive body hair and a birth mark between my thick eyebrows that looked like a Bindi. At home I was raised surrounded by extended family — my Anglo Indian great-grandmother, grandmother, great uncle, and aunty — all of whom I saw on an almost daily basis, as we lived down the street from each

other. My father's family were in Sweden, and I only saw them on holidays when they would visit. As I became older, and entered high school, my racial experience shifted. I went from a hyper white primary school to an all-girls high school well known for its majority 'wog' population. On my first day I was misidentified as Lebanese and invited to join a group of Arab-Australian girls who were Lebanese, Egyptian and Armenian Australian. This immediate acceptance of my non-white body was so gratifying that it took me a few months to share I was actually Anglo Indian.

My racial experience changed again as I entered university. My skin got lighter, I removed my body hair and began wearing makeup. White people started to be nicer to me. When anyone asked me about my family name, I told them Nilsson was a very common Swedish last name and was often accepted tacitly as 'Swedish'. There were a few instances, when I worked at a Swedish clothing store in my early twenties, that Swedish tourists questioned me when I told them that my Dad was from Malmo, a city in southern Sweden. One young Swedish woman looked me up and down slowly and said 'yes... there *are* a lot of immigrants in Malmo...' while an old Swedish man asked, 'So papa is from Sweden... but your mama is not. She's from where, Morocco?'. Aside from these few instances I did not think much about feeling racially *othered* because I was experiencing white privilege as someone who was perceived as white-ish.

At this time, I was taking many gender studies classes at university and had become interested in feminism. Yet it was not until I took a class called 'Race and Representation' that I was exposed to women of colour feminism. I was so taken with the work of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and Sara Ahmed (to only name a few feminists of colour that we studied) that I sought out women of colour (hereafter, WOC) feminist activist

groups at university and online, eager to learn more. I felt seen by the words of these women who provided me with the language to describe my experience growing up ambiguously Brown in a white majority nation. I felt the transformative power of critical race theory as it at once made me feel seen, and justified, and opened me up to the experiences of other racialised groups – leaving my worldview permanently altered. I understood for the first time how institutional racism worked and where I sat within that system, making me reflect on my own racial identity in relation to whiteness, and gender, and Australian society.

As I was learning more about race, a term was becoming popular online: cultural appropriation. In 2014 this concept was the central focus of all the WOC activists around me, and I became curious. I completed my Honours year in 2015 writing a thesis that provided a cultural examination of Indo chic, a term that described a fashion trend that referenced my own cultural background, and that was then being called out as culturally appropriative. Indo chic is a Western fashion style that incorporates select South Asian fashion items and accessories with Western clothing staples, so it interested me. Not quite satiated by my historical and theoretical exploration of Indo chic I began my PhD thesis in 2017. I was interested in learning more about how young South Asian women, like myself, felt about the trend, and how their feelings connected to their own experiences of racialisation.

Situating this thesis

This thesis provides a multifaceted perspective on how Indo chic has affected the cultural and political identities of young, South Asian Australian women. Concentrating on the most recent iteration of Indo chic in visual media from 2012 to 2018 —specifically in fashion, social media, and music videos— it considers how these images and narratives have affected South Asian women across the digital diaspora. Using a mixed methodology of ethnographic

interviews, auto-ethnography, and textual and media analysis I pose the following questions: How do contemporary forms of mediated Indo chic make younger generations of South Asian women *feel*? What is the relationship between these women's emotions about Indo chic and those of belonging in the dominant culture as well as in the South Asian diasporic community? Finally, how have their individual and collective responses to Indo chic helped these women to develop new forms of community? I answer these questions while also complicating them through my inclusion of mixed-race South Asian women, for whom discourses of cultural authenticity and experiences of whiteness and racialisation, are often more complex. Born from my own interest in this topic, as an Anglo Indian Australian woman, this thesis centres the perspectives of mixed South Asian Australian women as they grapple with these complexities through their relationship to Indo chic.

While my honours thesis gave me more background into the formation of Indo chic, I was still left with questions. What was missing from my honours research, I felt, were the voices of people like my family and my South Asian friends, and how we felt about Indo chic. I centre these voices in this thesis - exploring the relationship between diasporic South Asian women's political and personal subjectivities through their exposure to and critique of Indo chic. This led me to think about the role of affect: Why is Indo chic so emotionally charged for diasporic South Asian women? What kinds of affects does it elicit and why?

Seminal affect scholar Lauren Berlant (1997) argues that our social and political infrastructures are held afloat by 'specific constellations and economies of affective investments' (Duchinsky and Wilson 2015, 188) and these affective investments are anchored for the individual by 'institutions and modes of injustice'. It therefore follows that my respondents would relate to their experiences of Indo chic through an articulation of specific

affect/s. As will be demonstrated throughout the coming chapters, the affective responses felt by many of my participants followed a recognisable pattern – anger, fuelled by shame, which then motivated them to make themselves ‘feel better’ about Indo chic. All the experiences shared by my respondents are pierced by strong affective undercurrents, told in semi-biographical style that link together significant moments in their lives as diasporic people, and people of colour, in a white settler nation. Melvin R Lansky (1999) posits that ‘affect and cognition are never fully separable—if for no other reason than that thought is itself a body, embodied’ (350). It is therefore unsurprising that an embodied trend such as Indo chic can bring out feelings of the body in diasporic South Asian women such as those embedded in family history, cultural knowledge, and racialisation.

I was originally interested in comparing intergenerational perspectives of the trend, as I had been anecdotally aware that Indo chic was significantly more upsetting to millennial and Gen Z South Asian diasporic women. While this thesis does provide context for intergenerational differences, my ethnography led me in a different direction. In their storytelling many of my participants articulated that their involvement in the critique of Indo chic, and cultural appropriation more broadly, functioned as a form of ‘training wheels’ for their growing, ongoing activism as feminists of colour. Indo chic therefore had a galvanising function for many diasporic South Asian women of my generation, in that it motivated us to engage in critical thinking about race and racism. It forced us to think about race and racism and our experiences as racialised subjects because of the strong emotions – primarily anger and shame - that it triggered in us. Furthermore, most of my participants became involved in anti-racist political action beyond the South Asian diasporic community.

By considering how participants have expressed their critique of this trend in social media, my study also examines the importance of online activism for this group of politically progressive South Asian Australian women, contributing to existing scholarship that chronicles how WOC use the internet for racial justice (in particular, Gajjala, 2003; Varghese, 2003; Alaoui, Basnet, Coleman, Chan, Charmaraman, Gunn and Richer, 2015; Nakamura 2015; Vrikki and Malik 2019 and Clark 2020). My study therefore builds on contributions to both critical race studies and social media studies in which racially minoritised communities utilise social media activism to seek accountability and foster connections that spread across global digital diasporas.

Finally, my original mixed methodology combines textual analysis of popular cultural texts and cultural history of Indo chic with digital ethnography of activist sites, auto-ethnography, and ethnographic interviews with South Asian Australian women. I have developed this framework, discussed in detail in Chapter Two, to provide a comprehensive understanding of how diasporic South Asian Australian women negotiate their complex cultural identities through their consumption and critique of Indo chic. My research is organised through case studies which feature various manifestations of Indo chic – fashion, social media, and music videos in Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six respectively. Before delving into those case studies, I will provide historical and cultural context to frame the reactions my participants had to the examples of Indo chic I chose. I will begin, however by exploring the question what is Indo chic?

Defining Indo chic

A considerable amount of scholarship has accompanied the phenomenon of Indo chic since its emergence in the 1990s. Scholars have located the trend historically within an ongoing

aesthetic tradition of Western engagement with South Asian fashion, part of larger forms of cultural appropriation and exchange (Jones and Leshkovich 2003). Indo chic also has prompted discussions about the relationship between cultural representation, celebrity, fashion, and cultural identity, eliciting multi-disciplinary approaches within fashion studies, postcolonial theory, and diaspora studies. The bulk of scholarly literature on cultural appropriation and Indo chic comes from the 1990s and the United States (Maira 2000, 2002; Mannur and Sahni 2011). Although more recent studies have been useful to this project in mapping the changing sentiments around Indo chic in the West, there has been no single study of this trend in its more recent manifestation as it affects diasporic South Asian women living in Australia. My study is the first to do this.

Originally, Indo chic emerged within a wider fashion trend of ‘Asian Chic’, which describes a hybrid Western/Asian fashion trend including mainly Western style clothing with small elements of ‘Asian’ signifiers (Jones and Leshkovich 2003). Popular clothing during this time included Chinese calligraphy and Ganesh print T-shirts, cheongsam style silk shirts, and sarong style midi skirts. These styles were designed, produced, and distributed by high street American fashion companies such as GAP and American Eagle prolifically in the 1990s (Durham 2001). The term ‘Indo chic’ was first used by Virinder Kalra and John Hutnyk (1998) to examine the links between the use of South Asian fashion and accessories in the West to older, orientalist tropes of a ‘mystic India’. They ascribe the term ‘Indo chic’ to a hybrid Western fashion trend that extracts specific elements of South Asian fashion such as the Bindi, Tikka, or Henna, and incorporates them with Western fashion staples. Kalra and Hutnyk (1998) analyse how Indo chic styles are predominately marketed to, and worn by, people who are not South Asian, and the ways in which they are seen as ‘fashionable’ on white bodies, while read as ‘exotic’, ‘traditional’ or ‘unassimilated’ on the bodies of South

Asian people in the West. They illuminate the power dynamics behind this stark contrast in the following way:

In bald terms understood by Asian audiences, but totally overlooked by other commentators, the message here says ‘no-one from your group is capable of representing your culture here, and we are who is in control of the market and care little about offending your sensibilities. We have the power and so fuck you.

(Karla and Hutnyk 1998, 349)

Their study traces the popularisation of Indo chic by celebrities, including a detailed analysis of Madonna and her 1990s ‘Indian boho’ performance identity, arguing that Indo chic is problematic when popularised by white celebrities not because they are white, but because, rather than use the privileged space they occupy to disrupt outdated images of a mystic India, they instead proliferate the fantasy of South Asia(ns) as Orientalised other (Kalra and Hytnuk 1998, 348). Indo chic as it intersects with Western celebrity characterises this period of scholarly enquiry, with many of the early scholars critiquing the wearing of Indo chic by Western celebrities in addition to the production of Indo chic styles.

Another common line of enquiry during this time examines how the trend was marketed through advertisements selling Indo chic products. One example is Sunaina Maira’s (2000) analysis of the 1990s Indo chic advertisement that reads: ‘It’s not a look, it’s a feeling.’ This text appeared on a fashion catalogue advertisement featuring a white model wearing Indo chic fashion styles complete with Henna on her hands and feet, and a Bindi on her forehead. Maira deduces that this advertisement succinctly describes what is so desirable about Indo chic to the North American, non-South Asian audience it targets. She states, ‘India may still be used to connote the counter-cultural ethos of “chill out,” but the fashion catalogue credo, “It’s not a look, it’s a feeling,” gives away part of the answer’ (Maira 2000, 360). Maira

argues here that the felling of nostalgia for 1960s Indo chic is what makes 1990s Indo chic desirable, alluding to the paradoxical nature of Indo chic styles. This representation of Indo chic references the mystic Orient through its ‘luridly orientalist’ (Maira 2000, 60) signifiers, while visually divorcing the trend from that same Orient, situating the trend within America’s own 1960s hippie subculture.

Another instructive analysis of this paradox is offered by Meenakshi Durham (2001) in her analysis of an advertisement for Liz Claiborne featuring a blonde model wearing a silk sarong made from a gold-bordered pink sari, and a Henna design on her foot. From Durham’s analysis we can conclude much the same thing about representations of Indo chic as Maira’s example. She describes the advertisement as follows:

Let the sunshine in. A sixties’ ‘innocence’ oozes out of the image of the barefooted, white woman in a red barn-like room, the chiffon curtain billowing languorously in the window. Hippiedom meets haute couture, with the appropriation of Indian fabrics and motifs by American and European fashion houses and multinational design companies. (Durham 2001, 205)

The link between 1990s Indo chic to 1960s Indo chic is one examined by most of the authors in this period who argue that 1990s Indo chic is marketed using the same orientalist images that characterise 1960s countercultural consumption of a ‘mystic India’. In these advertisements any pursuit of a genuine portrayal of South Asia is replaced with items or images that evoke a generic feeling of ‘boho’ or ‘exotic cool’. In Chapter Three, I extend this analysis by exploring how this nostalgia is replicated and proliferated in the contemporary iteration of Indo chic. Early work on Indo chic also examined the popularity of 1990s Indo chic in relation to the mass migration of South Asians to the US and Canada between the 1960s and 1990s. This migration period rendered South Asian cultures and people more

visible than in the past. Maira argues that the pervasiveness of 1990s Indo chic, especially amongst youth cultures, could be read as a nod to the dissatisfaction with Western consumer culture in the 1960s, which North American youth were also experiencing in the 1990s (2000, 360).

Alternatively, fashion scholars Carla Jones and Anne-Marie Leshkovich (Jones and Leshkovich 2003) theorise that the popularity of the trend was a Western orientalist mission to emasculate the rising economic powers of Asian nations such as India, China, and Japan. They argue 1990s Indo chic functions as a spectacle of the commodity fetish, through which ideas of Western cultural superiority and neutrality are reinforced, and symbols of Asia are made strange. In addition, they assert that communities which produce their own traditional designs within Asia for export do not benefit from the financial spoils brought about by the trend, with large Western retailers instead seeing financial profit. This, they argue, renders 'Asian chic' styles disposable trends that can be 'in' one season and 'out' the next with Asia serving only as a bountiful site of inspiration and commodification (Jones and Leshkovich 2003).

Fashion scholar Bonnie English (2007) adds that with globalisation in the 1990s non-Western cultures became more visible and exoticised sites of inspiration and production for Western cultural industries. This production benefitted fashion producers in the Global South, including South Asia. She argues that during this period, India was in the preliminary stages of transforming its fashion industry from being a global textile producer, and exporter, to a designer-based industry with its sights set on the West. English's view overlooks the affectual response diasporic South Asian communities felt towards the trend and downplays the complex power and race relations in play when Western countries borrow cultural styles from the 'third world' (English 2007). Durham argues that it would be 'naïve in the extreme to

consider representation in fashion as a purely aesthetic site; its links to capital and identity render it an arena of power and politics' (2001, 205) asserting the differences with which Euro-American white bodies and South Asian bodies engage Indo chic. She argues that whiteness, not South Asian-ness, lies at the centre of this trend, revealing that images featuring Indo chic are almost exclusively sold on white bodies rather than non-white or South Asian ones (Durham 2001, 221).

More recently, Anita Mannur and Pia Sahni's 2011 article, 'What Can Brown Do for You? Indo chic and the Fashionability of South Asian Inspired Styles' chronicles the rise of the Indo chic aesthetic and examines the environment in which the contemporary manifestation of the fashion trend is situated. It questions the continued fetishising of Indian-inspired items and clothing in post 9/11 North America when brown bodies increasingly were being labelled as suspect. Their overall argument is that these Indo chic media texts, despite the fetishistic representation of South Asian culture and people inherent within them, cannot be understood through the Orientalising white gaze alone.

Instead, Mannur and Sahni argue that diasporic South Asian people should seek out counter narrative media produced in the face of Indo chic. They argue that this kind of media practice, which either acknowledges, critiques, or mocks Indo chic, should be consumed and celebrated by diasporic South Asian people as they 'serve an important pedagogic function of teaching new(er) generations of consumers how to resist the structures of commodified racism from within the cultural arena' (2011, 188). Their work chronicles the process by which South Asian cultural items became signifiers of 'exotic cool' through the popularisation of orientalist tropes. In their analysis, they critically examine cultural sites that contain the stereotypic renderings of Indo chic, examining a series of 1990s advertisements

and a 2010 fashion *Marie Claire* editorial to illustrate how the Indo chic aesthetic can be used by marketing companies to still evoke a generic ‘exotic cool’.

Like Mannur and Sahni, my study focuses on South Asian responses to Indo chic, chronicling the feelings, experiences, and opinions of mostly millennial, diasporic South Asian Australian women on Indo chic, including contributions from different generations and mixed-race South Asians, some of whom white pass, like myself. There is little contemporary ethnographic work that exists on the topic of the South Asian Australian identity, and no work currently exists that examines how the women of this community feel about Indo chic. Along with the dearth of scholarship that features millennial South Asian women in Australia (Srinivasan, 2019; Ramachandran, 2020; Singh and Sidhu, 2020 are exceptions), there have been no studies so far that analyse the messiness of white passing mixed-race South Asians as they engage in political debates around cultural appropriation, appreciation, ownership, and cultural legacy. My thesis contributes to this scholarship by focusing on Indo chic, a cultural trend embraced by the mainstream that a young and vocal diasporic group has found harmful to their sense of belonging as minoritised subjects in Australian society. Vital to understanding this is understanding the term cultural appropriation, which is inherent to the way Indo chic is understood today.

Defining Cultural Appropriation

Cultural appropriation, defined as the taking of intellectual property, traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, and/or artifacts from another culture without permission or reciprocity (Brown 2003; Scafidi 2005; Young and Brunk 2012; Riley and Carpenter 2015), is a multifaceted phenomenon that describes various consumption practices that are commonplace in the West. Inherent in the framing of cultural appropriation is the imbalance of power between the two (or more) cultures involved. The theorisation of cultural

appropriation concerns issues of both propriety (i.e., is it appropriate for x person to consume x item?) and identity (cultural practices as significant arbiters of identity for both the self and the Other). Peter Shand posits that:

The initial phase of modern cultural heritage appropriation was underscored by the twinned ages of Enlightenment and Empire, during which all the world was made over to fit the intellectual, economic, and cultural requirements of first Europe, then the United States. All manner of tangible cultural heritage of indigenous peoples (from design patterns to artifacts to body parts, even the people themselves) were looted, stolen, traded, bought, and exchanged by colonials of every status (from Governors General to itinerant sealers) (2002, 49)

These cultural items were consumed by the ‘very colonizers who had initially dislocated them’ (Shand 2002, 50) and the value of these items were therefore translated through the colonial lens for a colonial audience. The legacy of this is that even today, consumption of these items is linked to colonial conceptions of the cultures from which they originate, imbuing these items with particular tropes of ‘Otherness’.

One conception of Otherness that marks many culturally appropriated items from ‘Third world destinations’ (Redden 2017) such as South Asia, is the myth of the ‘unchanged’ – a country, culture and people that have retained a traditional way of life. As Guy Redden explains, this sense of timelessness suggests a place, and culture, that is ripe with discovery in which a Western consumer can ‘relive colonial style adventures in places implicitly different from home, coded through a range of colonial stereotypes, from the exotic opulence and mystery of the Oriental to the uncivilised primitive of frontier Africa’ (2017, 4). Additionally, in settler colonial nations, Indigenous cultural forms have been marketed for consumption

through a similar exoticised gaze (Brown 2003). While this thesis is concerned specifically with cultural appropriation in fashion, I am not interested in making one-size-fits-all judgements about the propriety and use of South Asian fashion and accessories by people who are not South Asian. I believe cultural appropriation in fashion is a fruitful intellectual concept as it brings together embodiment, identity and affect to tell a story about dominating systems in Western nations and the continued effect these systems have on groups who are already socially marginalised.

Scholarly inquiry into cultural appropriation in fashion began with an interest in the legality of fashion appropriation, specifically, the rights that Indigenous groups in the United States had to their own cultural motifs, names, and styles as they became trendy amongst non-Indigenous designers (Shand 2002; Scafidi 2005; Rogers 2006; Riley and Carpenter 2015; Pham 2017). A key moment that sparked queries into the propriety of Indigenous cultural appropriation, is the 2011 lawsuit against U.S.-based retailer Urban Outfitters, filed by the Navajo Nation after the retailer produced a ‘Navajo’ line that included clothing and homewares (Nicolas 2017). Another was the wearing of a Native American-style headdress by a white model at the Victoria’s Secret fashion show in 2012 (Riley and Carpenter 2015). Concerns about the popularity of Native American-style headdresses at music festivals, such as Coachella, also circulated around this time, sparking some of the first online articles that discussed the cultural appropriation/ cultural appreciation debate (Shand 2002).

This debate links contemporary appropriation practices to those of colonial appropriation practices by focusing on the positive affect of White people as they wear the costumes of the Other. This debate will be explored further at various points of this thesis, and in Chapters Three and Four in-depth; however, it is important at this stage to foreground that the

appropriation of South Asian fashion, Indo chic, is not the only type of cultural appropriation taking place during the period of time that I examine - 2012- 2016, with Native American, African American and East Asian styles also popular clothing choices for the Indo chic consumer.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One

Chapter One ‘Model Minority to Online Activists: Theorising South Asian Diasporas in Australia and Beyond’ consists of two related sections. In the first section, I give an overview of theoretical approaches to diaspora then go on to broadly map the contours of the South Asian diaspora, considering similarities, and differences among groups in the UK, US, and the Antipodes. This segues into a brief migration history of Indians in Australia from the 1700s to the present, considering how it has led to the development of contemporary South Asian culture and identity in this country.

I focus on three main similarities between South Asian diasporas in the Anglophone world, while recounting significant literature in this field. The first is the effect the consumption of South Asian cultural goods —such as cuisines, or Bollywood films and music— has had on South Asian diasporas in Anglophone nations. The second is the effect 9/11 has had on South Asian communities as brown bodies were, and continue to be, rendered increasingly suspect. The third, most significant, similarity I examine is the complicated diasporic experience of belonging/not belonging in the UK and British settler colonial nations, a phenomenon that is amplified in Australia by the racist logic inherent in multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism has been the dominant policy governing migration from the twentieth century to the present. Anthropologist Ghassan Hage sees multiculturalism as an inherently racist policy, arguing that:

Both white racists and white multiculturalists share in a conception of themselves as nationalists and of the nation as a space structured around a white culture, where Aboriginals and non-white 'ethnics' are merely national objects to be moved or removed according to a white national will (1998, 18).

While multiculturalism is often framed as a more inclusive alternative to the previous, explicitly discriminatory policy of assimilation epitomised by the white Australia policy, Hage posits that Australian multiculturalism is actually assimilation in disguise (Steains 2016). While skilled migration from South Asia was, and is still, encouraged in Australia, the positioning of South Asians as a 'model minority' provides a good example of how white Australia continues to 'impose a specific national order in which they [white leaders and citizens] have a dominant position' (Hage 2010, 65) and act to maintain that dominance. Inherent in this dominance is a constant effort to position any other group population 'where they deem them to belong' (Hage in Indelicato 2017, 160). Rathana Saran (2016) interrogates the commonly held belief that South Asians are considered 'good migrants' due to their scholastic achievements and contributions to the work force, working jobs that are highly skilled and require tertiary education such as engineering and medicine. When South Asians do not excel in the conventional manner, so goes the myth, they do not rely on social welfare or turn to crime but instead seek low-paying, respectable jobs such as taxi driving. In Saran's study she observed South Asian students lumped together into 'a singular, high-achieving category' (2016, 220). In this way South Asian people are compared to other people of colour living in the United States and are measured by their conventional achievements which do

effect American society positively.

In Australia, it can be argued, that South Asian migrants occupy a similar space within collective national imaginaries; however there has been much recent debate around the scholastic achievements of diasporic South Asian students. South Asian students, lumped together with east and south-east Asian students, are argued to be ‘pushing out’ white students and ‘taking over’ secondary schools. People from Asian countries represent the largest contribution to overseas migration in the last fifty years, and their communities are highly concentrated in Australia’s major cities. The influx in migration coupled with the ‘model minority’ myth has bred the belief that South Asian people are occupying positions and roles that should ‘rightfully’ be held by Australian born white people. As Rathan Saran articulates:

The phrases ‘pushing out’, ‘taking over’, and ‘willing to break their back’ used by whites and other minorities express the intense anger and hate for Asian students who are competing with white students in school (2016, 77).

Multiculturalism undergirds the logic of cultural appropriation as minority cultures become available for mainstream consumption through the positioning of minority cultures and products in relation to the white gaze.

In the section ‘South Asians in Australia’, I rely on Sukhmani Khorana’s (2014) characterisation of South Asian diasporas as heterogenous in nature as ‘differences in caste, region, religion, profession, and the like’ make it difficult to assign a singular identity which encapsulates all members of the diaspora. Turning to the Indian Australian diaspora, Khorana argues that ‘the liberal media’s new racism discourse’ (2014, 251) has elided these differences, casting South Asians in Australia as stereotypical characters — from model

minorities to impending threats to the nation. The shift to impending threat has been difficult for the historically assimilationist South Asian diaspora in Australia who have used their ties to colonial Britain at various points to argue for equal treatment in Australian society (Allen 2018). Chapter One examines this shift to contextualise the responses verbalised by my participants in the remainder of the thesis.

Chapter Two

In Chapter Two ‘Observing/ Researching South Asian Millennial Feminists: A Mixed Methodological Approach’, I outline my mixed methodological approach of textual analysis, digital media ethnography, auto-ethnography, and ethnographic interviews with twelve South Asian Australian women of differing generations. In this chapter, I employ the work of sociologists, including Roland Yeo and Sue Dopson (Yeo and Dopson 2018) Teuku Zulfikar (Zulfikar 2014), Derek Aldridge (Aldridge 2003) and most significantly, Kalwant Bhopal (Bhopal 2018) to theorise my ethnographic praxis.

I begin by reflecting on my decision to employ auto-ethnography throughout this thesis, highlighting my role as an insider/outsider ethnographer. The analysis of my respondents necessarily involves interrogating my own embodied position as their interlocutor, a mixed-race, Anglo Indian woman. Anglo Indian scholar Rochelle Almedia (2015) argues that controversies surrounding the definition of ‘Anglo Indian’ are ‘as old as the community itself’ (6). The first Anglo Indian recorded in history was born in India in 1601, the year after the British East India Company arrived (Almedia 2015, 2), and the ethnic group that evolved from interracial encounters and relationships between Indigenous people and the British colonisers created a cultural identity that is as complex and varied as other cultural and religious groups in India. I explore how my hybridised identity is not necessarily

representative of the wide array of lived experiences of fellow diasporic South Asian Australians.

I then move on to introduce my twelve diasporic South Asian Australian female participants, who have been anonymised, providing details about who they are, and how this contributes to the way they feel about Indo chic. The ethnographic interviews consist of two sections — a long form interview and a reaction study in which two music videos featuring Indo chic were played for the participant, who then responded. Results yielded from this study are as diverse as my participants and are examined throughout the remaining chapters to illustrate how diasporic South Asian Australian women *feel* about Indo chic. This chapter provides the context for my decision to employ such a varied mixed methodological approach to tackle Indo chic as an object of study, while also surveying the participants of my study.

Chapter 3

Chapter Three ‘Indo chic in Fashion and South Asian Australian relationships to South Asian clothing’ examines the space of fashion where most of my respondents first witnessed Indo chic. In this chapter, I explore the historical development of Indo chic in fashion, considering the ways in which traditional South Asian styles have been worn in the West by non-South Asians. As mentioned earlier, Indo chic is not a new trend, it has been a popular fashion trend during various points of the 20th century. Here I examine previous iterations of the trend including 19th century Parisian masquerade parties; the subcultural ‘Hippie chic’ of the 1960s and the mainstream ‘Asian chic’ of the 1990s. Supplementing this analysis is an examination of the complicated, conflicting feelings that traditional dress —the same items recoded as Indo chic— have evoked in my respondents for whom traditional dress has been a point of

tension.

Some of the respondents articulated not *feeling* Australian when wearing traditional dress and experienced racist bullying directly about their wearing of a traditional cultural style. Due to this, most expressed discomfort wearing the same cultural items that had been co-opted by Western designers who produce and market Indo chic styles. One major finding from this chapter is that when the respondents encountered Indo chic, they felt their complex diasporic identities to be threatened or erased, a feeling triggered by the ease with which non-South Asians can wear Indo chic styles daily, in white settler space. My respondents reported feeling surveilled or hailed as Other while wearing traditional South Asian styles in mainstream white space, leading to the development of both a resentment and coveting of the non-South Asian wearer of Indo chic.

Chapter Four

These ambivalent, contradictory feelings about Indo chic led many of the respondents online to critique the phenomenon and search for others who felt similarly. In Chapter Four:

'youarenotdesi.tumblr.com: Indo chic Online' I closely examine this process by looking at three virtual communities of diasporic South Asian people centred around the issue of Indo chic. A virtual community can be defined as a social space 'in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both 'meet' and 'face' ... virtual communities [are] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that unite people who were physically separated (Gajjala 2003, 42).

The three virtual communities I examine in this chapter bring together South Asian diasporic women from across the digital diaspora, galvanised by their complex feelings towards Indo chic. In this chapter I employ online discourse analysis to examine the effect of online activist

spaces on the development of a social justice praxis for millennial diasporic South Asian women, broadening my methodology to include digital media ethnography. I begin by examining the private Facebook group I used to recruit most of my participants — the South Asian Dreamboats group. This group is comprised of South Asian-Australian women interested in their cultural identity, feminism, and anti-racist collective action. I then extend my object of study to include the contributions of diasporic South Asian activists beyond my interview participants, examining two virtual communities centred on Indo chic: Tumblr shame blogs and the multiplatform hashtag *#reclaimthebindi*.

Chapter Five

The final two chapters utilise responses from the media reaction section of my ethnographic study to analyse how diasporic South Asian Australian women feel about the portrayal of Indo chic in music videos. The two music videos chosen – Iggy Azalea's *Bounce* and Coldplay ft. Beyoncé *Hymn for the Weekend* were both criticised for the cultural appropriation inherent within them and are well-known examples of Indo chic. Both music videos were shot in India and feature famous Western recording artists in the role of an Indian goddess. Both performers –Azalea and Beyoncé– wear Indo chic, appear in India, and dance in a stereotypical Bollywood style. Neither song is about India or South Asia but instead about dancing, drinking, and partying. Despite these similarities however my respondents had drastically different affectual responses to these clips. When the non-South Asian viewer watches *Bounce* they see Iggy Azalea in beautiful, colourful costumes in India amongst locals who are all dancing and celebrating in jubilation. They see familiar images of India – saris, temples, marigolds, elephants, slums, Holi, Varanasi, Vishnu. It is bright, colourful, and full of life. When my respondents watched *Bounce*, however they saw inaccuracies and ludicrous excess. In Chapters Five and Six I examine the difference in

response to the music videos and illustrate why diasporic South Asian women may read the two clips —and performers— so differently.

In Chapter Five, ‘Performing the Indian Goddess: Gendered Indo chic and the Western Gaze in Iggy Azalea’s *Bounce*’ I explore the career trajectory and performative identity of Iggy Azalea — a white Australian rapper who in ‘Bounce’ raps in a ‘Dirty South’ style in a sari on an elephant. All of the respondents, regardless of age, or feelings about cultural appropriation, reacted to *Bounce* with laughter and ridicule. In my analysis, I suggest that the reactions of my respondents are due in large part to most respondents’ previous knowledge of Azalea and her performance style and celebrity persona, all of which have been marked by constant accusations of cultural appropriation. To understand all this we must first account for Azalea’s career trajectory on her journey to *Bounce*. Azalea has been interpreted as inauthentic throughout her career as a white Australian rapper who performs with a ‘Dirty South’ American accent, which has brought her legitimacy as a performer into question. Whereas Beyoncé is admired by many of my respondents, especially those of the second-generation who have an interest in WOC politics, Azalea is universally unpopular.

Chapter Six

In the final chapter I turn to *Hymn for the Weekend* a Coldplay song featuring Beyoncé. This chapter considers the dynamics of cultural tourism and Indo chic explored in the last chapter but asks, what happens when these dynamics are split and embodied by an Anglo British man and an African American woman, respectively? Like *Bounce*, *Hymn for the Weekend* was critiqued online by South Asian diasporic communities for being culturally appropriative, glorifying the Western gaze and for perpetuating ubiquitous images of India as exotic, poverty-stricken and colourful. The participation of Beyoncé in such a video is of particular

contention online, with devoted Beyoncé fans unsure how to justify her involvement with an Indo chic project. These online sentiments were in many instances echoed by my respondents in this study, pressing me to ask, how does Beyoncé's racially ambiguous Blackness and her star persona, which has become aligned with Black feminism, complicate the narrative of cultural appropriation that Azalea perpetuated so easily in *Bounce*? Through my analysis of the responses of my participants, I offer insights into how South Asian diasporic women of varying generations feel about Western representations of India on screen; white masculinities in contrast with Brown masculinities; WOC feminist politics and Beyoncé as a representative of these politics.

CHAPTER ONE

Model Minority to Online Activists: Theorising South Asian Diasporas in Australia and Beyond

Introduction

As my great-grandfather looked out the plane window over Bangkok, he saw the Temple of the Golden Buddha lit up against the darkness. Seated next to him were his wife and children, all excited about their great adventure moving to Australia. He felt a pit of dread in his stomach and wondered if he was doing the right thing for his family. Looking back at the quickly fading temple, it struck him that he was leaving behind everything he knew for a risky and uncertain future. Many years later he told my mother that he had been the most scared of his entire life that night on the plane from Calcutta to Sydney.

In 1966, my Anglo Indian great-grandfather Brian Montgomery (née DiCosta) was asked to retire early from his job at the Shell Oil company in Calcutta. Since 1948, India's University Education Commission had been taking steps to reform India's tertiary education system, funding universities more generously, with increasing enrolment numbers as a result. By the late 1960s the number of university graduates had ballooned, and the government offered incentives to large companies to hire recent graduates who were finding it difficult to secure employment due to a new oversaturation of skilled workers in the country (Jayaram 2007). These initiatives left numerous Anglo Indians fearful of being pushed out of the companies they worked for as many had been university educated under the British Raj and were favoured employees by international companies due to their mixed heritage. This group also felt culturally lost in India after independence without the favouritism they had enjoyed under British rule. As a result, many Anglo Indian families fled India for other British colonial countries to start new lives as immigrants. My grandfather first thought of moving to Canada, as he had cousins who had migrated there, but his application was rejected for unknown reasons. His second choice was Australia. A few of his close friends from the Anglo Indian

community in Calcutta had moved to Sydney and extolled the pleasant climate, safe streets, and friendly locals.

Prior to 1964, my family would have been rejected from Australia due to the White Australia Policy, which banned all non-European people from immigrating to Australia. However, the policy had recently introduced an amendment which allowed for the eligibility of 'mixed-race' applicants provided they could prove some European ancestry. As part of his application to migrate, my grandfather had to meet the following criteria. First, he and his family members were required to take English language tests, which they all passed easily since they were fluent in the language. Next, he had to demonstrate he was able to contribute to the Australian economy by proving his family was educated. My great-grandfather and great-uncle were both university educated, and my grandmother had been to secretory school. The family members then had to undergo extensive medical examinations to ensure they were free of diseases, such as tuberculosis. And finally, perhaps most significantly, they had to pass as 'European' (coded language for 'white'). Under the 1964 Policy for Mixed-race Migration applicants highlighted the importance of phenotype in this process:

Appearance will remain a factor for applications from mixed-race persons (in the sense that it is relevant to the capacity of the applicant readily to integrate into the Australian community, and the need to maintain the predominantly European character of the Australian population). However, it should be weighed against other factors (National Archives of Australia, 1946).

The application document in fact noted, by name, the Anglo Indian community as one of many 'clearly defined mixed-race communities (examples of this are Ceylon - the Burgher and other mixed-race communities of English, Portuguese, Sinhalese origin), India, Burma,

Mauritius and Seychelles’ (National Archives of Australia, 1946, 2) that were able to seek migration to Australia, in spite of ‘appearance’ as they ‘may have claim to hardship on the grounds of discrimination (political, social, economic)’ (National Archives of Australia, 1946, 2). Thankfully, my great-grandmother had documents chronicling her father’s English heritage, and my grandfather could prove he had a Portuguese grandfather. This proof, in addition to their economic ‘hardships’ in India, granted them access to Australia, perhaps despite their swarthy olive complexions and notable ‘non-European’ facial features.

By late 1966, they had settled in Ryde in Northwest Sydney, and my great-grandfather got a job with Dow Corning where he worked until he was 71 years old. My family lived near other members of the small Anglo Indian community, visiting each other’s houses for potluck dinners, and attending ‘clubs’ — large dance parties where members came together to eat and socialise. My grandmother got re-married to a kind white Australian man and had two children, my aunt and uncle who easily passed as white, unlike my mother Tammy who started primary school and promptly forgot how to speak Hindi. When I was a child my uncle Bull often told me that the kids at school called her ‘Tim Tam the little chocolate biscuit’ after the popular Australian biscuit. Whenever he brought it up, I remember sensing the discomfort in my mother’s sarcastic retort — ‘ha ha ha you are *so* funny, Bull’ I noticed that she subtly changed the topic or left the room whenever he mentioned this. I have never asked her about her childhood nickname for fear of dredging up a memory she has clearly tried to forget.

I begin with my family history to position myself and my respondents within the South Asian diasporic community in Australia — a community that is part of a global diaspora which has been studied extensively by scholars in the US and UK. This community has played and

continues to play a central role in the formation of my cultural identity and those of my participants whose lived experiences and emotions are foregrounded in my thesis. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding this community by providing crucial historical and cultural context on the Indian diasporic community in Australia. I open with an exploration of theoretical approaches to diaspora then go on to broadly map the contours of the South Asian diaspora in the Anglophone world, considering similarities and differences among groups in the UK, US, and the Antipodes. The chapter ends with a brief migration history of Indians in Australia from the 1700s to the present, considering how it has led to the development of contemporary South Asian culture and identity in this country. The following chapter, which discusses my research design and methodological approach, further explores expressions of South Asian and particularly Indian Australian diasporic identity through its focus on the young female participants of my study.

Part One: Theorising Diaspora

The word ‘diaspora’ refers to a group of people settled far from their ancestral homelands (Brazier and Mannur 2003). The term was first used to refer to Jewish people living outside of Palestine but has come to refer to any national and/or ethnic group living outside their home nation. In the introduction to their collective volume of essays on diaspora, Jane Evans Brazier and Anita Mannur (2003) note two important ways in which the concept of diaspora unsettles and critiques dominant modes of nationalism and globalisation:

First, diaspora forces us to rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism, while refiguring the relations of citizens and nation states. Second, diaspora offers myriad, dislocated sites of contestation to the hegemonic, homogenizing forces of globalization (Brazier and Mannur 2003, 7).

Here they highlight the cultural richness of diasporas in cementing markers of identity (religion, ethnicity, nationality) through their formation, while also questioning the illusory nature of such rigid categories as people who embody such categories move and change. They argue that despite increasing international mobility, the world has not yet reached a post-nationalist state. Nation states, therefore, still play a significant role in identity formation, which is exemplified by the diasporic experience. A subsidiary benefit of studying diaspora is that by studying a community grouped by nationality, researchers can question the significance of nation-states in identity formation. By definition, a diasporic group belongs to at least two nation states and expresses their identity in relation to belonging/not belonging to those nation states in various ways. This belonging/not belonging often manifests as questions of cultural authenticity such as — do I *feel* x nationality?

As second-generation diasporic subjects, my participants understand their cultural identity to be multi-layered, at times not feeling ‘Australian’ or ‘South Asian’ enough. This is further complicated by their activism against Indo chic — itself a product of globalisation as a hybridised South Asian/Western trend. Propelling their critique is the assertion that non-South Asian people should not wear Indo chic as they do not possess the correct national, cultural and/or religious knowledge to do so. As the non-South Asian person only consumes Indo chic products as commodified ornaments from a culture that is foreign to them, the respondents argue they should not wear Indo chic. This critique inevitably evokes the question ‘who then can wear Indo chic?’ and unintentionally points to the irony of hybridised diasporic subjects critiquing a hybridised fashion trend. Inherent in the argument against cultural appropriation is the idea that one’s national and/or ethnic origins gives one cultural authority. Assumptions about the existence of a ‘pure’ or ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ culture that is shared by a group of people who have all had the same experiences has been explored and critiqued by prominent scholars of diaspora. Cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall (1996) and

Homi Bhabha (1994) complicate this idea of cultural authenticity that undergirds nationalist models of diaspora.

In his classic 1996 essay, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', Stuart Hall provides two distinct definitions of 'diaspora'. The first is as a group of individuals characterised by a 'pure' homogenous identity composed of two or more nationalities, who are at 'home' in two or more cultures (Hall 1996, 190). This is the traditional nation-based definition of diaspora which Hall extends and critiques in the second definition below:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here to be defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference, by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference (Hall 1996, 6).

According to Hall diasporic identity is fluid and constantly changing, sharing both points of similarity and difference with the 'host' and 'home' cultures, and ultimately critiquing the idea of cohesive nation-states with stable cultural borders. Instead, he asserts that each diasporic formation consists of a multiplicity of different 'creolised' cultural identities. Hall defines creolisation, based on historical contexts marred by 'slavery, transportation and colonization' as 'precisely the fusion and mixing of forms (hybrid) which arise from cultures that are required to interact and cohabit with others (diaspora)' (2015, 191).

While Hall's theory of diaspora is based on the historical and cultural contexts of the Caribbean, its focus on cultural hybridity resonates with those of South Asian diasporas. According to Hall, hybridity describes 'emergent cultural forms of minoritized diasporic groups, and the possibilities of cultural production and political resignification that arise as

result from this unsettled, in-between “site of enunciation” (2015, 190). Diasporic subjects become hybridised as they adjust and adapt to different cultural contexts. In the process they reinvent themselves and their identities, mixing influences from different times and spaces to form something new and different.

Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) similarly explores how diasporic subjects understand their cultural identity and takes up this idea of cultural hybridity. Inspired by the work of Edward Said, Bhabha describes hybridisation as an effect of new cultural forms born of postcolonialism, focusing specifically on British India. Inherent in his conceptualisation of hybridity is an acknowledgement of colonial discourses that characterise hybridisation as something more complex than simple cross-cultural exchange. Bhabha argues that the effects of colonialism are ever-present in contemporary renderings of hybrid identities. He argues that lay understandings of diasporic subjects in the West exoticise diasporic people while also propagating the myth of multiculturalism — that all cultures are understood, equal and considered valuable within Western nation states (Bhabha in Hage 1998). He posits that ‘interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or proposed hierarchy’ (Bhabha 1994, 4).

Instead of the idea of multicultural harmony within a society operating within a colonial hierarchy, Bhabha proposes the idea of a ‘third space’ in which hierarchical colonial beliefs about culture (including the idea that cultures are pure and static) can be complicated:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory . . . may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the

exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity. (Bhabha 1994, 38)

This 'third space' could change the way we understand culture and its ties to nation-states, emphasising the hybridity and flexibility of cultural experience. Bhabha suggests that considering a third space challenges our historical conception of culture as a homogenising and unifying force and leads us to question those that reinforce the notion of culture as homogenous (Bhabha 1994, 37), with diasporic subjects the living manifestation of cultural hybridity.

Both Hall's understandings of culture as fluid and hybrid and Bhabha's articulation of the third space are interesting theoretical ways of approaching Indo chic. As explored earlier, the hybridised nature of diasporic subjects is further complicated when examining an issue like Indo chic, itself a hybridised aesthetic form emerging within a colonial framework in which Western stakeholders are consuming and transforming South Asian goods. When we recognise the concept of cultural authenticity, itself, as a construct, the question 'why does Indo chic make many young diasporic South Asian women angry?' becomes more complex. The debates about cultural appropriation occur within the binary of cultural authenticity/inauthenticity on the surface, but at the level of *feeling*, the debate is more deeply felt for diasporic South Asian women. In the chapters that follow I will argue that most of the respondents in this study fluctuate uneasily between their Western-ness and their South Asian-ness, and that these constant fluctuations compose the very nature of their cultural identity and inform their responses to instances of Indo chic.

South Asian Diasporas across the Anglophone world

In this thesis I use the term ‘South Asian’ to identify both myself and my research participants as we and/or our families migrated from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh — all countries in South Asia. The majority of my respondents have Indian heritage (9 out of 12 participants). Therefore, in the sections that follow I focus on the Indian diaspora, while taking care not to collapse the experiences of its members with those of other South Asian diasporas.

The Indian diaspora is the second-largest overseas population worldwide, following the Chinese diaspora. Approximately 20 to 25 million Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and People of Indian Origin (PIOs) live in more than one hundred countries across the globe. Most of these expatriates live in firmly established communities in their countries of residence and have formed strong connections to their new home (Chandra, Arora, Mehta, Asnaani and Radhakrishnan 2016). Many have also enjoyed socioeconomic successes and made important cultural contributions to the multicultural host societies that have become home. There is a wealth of scholarship that examines the lives of people within the Indian diaspora at large. Contributions from, and about, North America, and the United Kingdom, in particular, make up a large portion of this scholarship.

In this section I survey key findings from these studies to compare and contrast South Asian diasporas there, and in the Antipodes. While the cultural traditions of the host nation influence the affect the character of each national diaspora, they share certain characteristics in common across continents. In large part, this is due to the shared history of colonial violence in all South Asian nations exemplified in events such as the partition, which divided the former British colony of India into present day India and Pakistan in 1942, and the

colonisation of Sri Lanka by both the Portuguese and British from 1505 to 1948.

Furthermore, common religious, culinary, language, music, arts, and dress practices throughout South Asia pre-date Western presence in the region.

These key aspects of cultural identity become heightened when South Asians migrate out of the region and to the West. Despite historical, and ongoing political tensions between different countries in South Asia, feelings of exclusion and conditional belonging in the host nation has brought together many South Asian diasporic communities, whose members choose to bond over their similarities, such as their common racialisation in the host country, rather than their differences - nation, religion, caste for example. In addition, many South Asian diasporic communities have been settled in the host country for generations such as the Punjabi community in Woolgoolga, in rural New South Wales, in Australia, who first arrived in Australia in the 1850s (McCarthy, 2013). Members of such communities are connected to their ancestral homeland only culturally, with no remaining physical links, making their allegiance to the original nation-state even more fragile. The Punjabi community of Woolgoolga is not alone in their tenuous connections to the nation state, with many groups within South Asian diasporas identifying more with a diasporic understanding of their South Asian identity.

As Dwivedi (2014) and Rajan (2018) note, global contemporary events have united many diasporic South Asians in the West regardless of their national origins. For instance, significant studies such as those by Dwivedi (2014) and Khorana (2014) discuss the consequences of 9/11 as a unifying world event that negatively impacted South Asian communities. The US 'War on Terror' had global implications that normalised Islamophobia. South Asian bodies, Islamic or not, were vilified as a result. This form of racialised religious

and cultural discrimination was exacerbated during the Trump presidency and continues to influence the lives of South Asians and those interpellated as Muslim in the West (Rajan and Panicker 2020).

Another phenomenon that has solidified a global sense of South Asian diasporic identity is the popularisation of Bollywood, yoga, and South Asian food since the 1990s (Khorana 2014). Described by Amit Kumar Gupta (2008), as an example of India's 'soft power', the widespread embrace of these cultural items, has impacted positively on South Asian communities living in Western nations, despite the specifically Indian origins of Bollywood. Various studies have examined the positive effects that the increased visibility of these cultural products has had on the lives of South Asian participants (Maira 2002, Gupta 2008, Beal 2010, Mannur and Sahni 2011, Khorana 2014, Rajan and Saxena 2019). The consumption of such products has fostered interest in South Asian cultures as members of dominant culture. South Asian fashion and accessories are the most popularised cultural form of South Asian culture available for consumption in the anglophone West, for reasons this thesis will explore in depth in the following chapters.

The third common phenomenon of the South Asian diaspora is the shared experience of having a dual South Asian and Western cultural identity among members of the South Asian diaspora, which differs significantly across generations. Participants in studies situated in the global North expressed certain reflections about their hybrid cultural identity that deeply resonated with the Australian South Asian women in my study. For this reason, and because intergenerational perspectives are central to this research project, I turn now to examine these reflections more closely.

In 'Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora' Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan (1991) interweaves personal history, literary criticism, and commentaries on the contemporary political scene in India, carefully navigating a series of questions that allows us to see how different generations of Indians, living in the United States, understand their ethnic and national backgrounds. His essay argues that cultural identity, far from being static, unchanging, and immutable, is always in a state of flux, while at the same time, having certain experiential cultural practices that have a unifying function. Radhakrishnan suggests that understandings of ethnicity are always determined by contact to the ancestral homeland. For instance, identifying as a hyphenated Indian-American is distinct from being a domestic Indian citizen¹. He observes an emerging ideology of 'global Indianness' or 'a set of beliefs and practices that are at once tied to a global lifestyle and to a deep sense of belonging to the Indian nation' (Radhakrishnan 1991, 9) to define the global Indian diaspora.

His study interrogates intergenerational understandings of 'authentic Indianness' and why such a concept occupies a central role in the diasporic imaginary. Cautioning against an essentialist definition of the 'nation' that would privilege the experiences of those who have spent time in India, Radhakrishnan makes a distinction between possessing information and knowledge about India and having an emotional investment in India, ultimately suggesting that everyone of Indian descent can lay claim to an Indian hyphenated identity. He exposes the inner workings of Indian communities in the U.S. and their degrees of identification with India and Indian culture based on generational difference. More specifically, he found that second and third generation Indian-Americans had a very different understanding of an 'ideal' India from that of first generation Indian-Americans who connected with their culture

¹ It is important to note that hyphenated identities are linguistic and experiential signifiers unique to the United States. While the experience of hybridity is not unique to Americans, hyphenated identities have a particular recognition in the American public sphere that does not carry the same significance elsewhere, such as in Australia as articulated by Jane Chi Hyun Park (2019).

through the consumption of cultural products and performing of cultural and religious rituals. Radhakrishnan theorises that India means something different to members of each generation and that selective memory has contributed to the multifaceted object of the 'ideal' India for each Indian diasporic subject. Members of the first generation were attached to particular memories of their lives in India, whereas the American born Indians understood India more abstractly, through stories, visits, and the cultural practices of their family.

Shinder S Thandi's (2018) work interrogating the experiences of the South Asian diaspora in the United Kingdom tells a similar story. Thandi argues that the British-born second generation of young South Asians first gained attention from the academy in the 1970s, with studies published that chronicled their transnational identities as the settled in Britain, bringing elements of their home cultures with them. He recounts that academics and policy makers of the time first described this new generation of British South Asians as 'between two cultures', as they were born into an environment created by their parents, who made efforts to rapidly assimilate into British society. At the same time, this generation was the first to create widespread South Asian religious, cultural, and artistic spaces and events for the diaspora, thriving in an increasingly multicultural Britain. He articulates that the 1980s heralded in equal-opportunity laws in Britain that allowed for a 'vibrant, urban, multicultural, multireligious and multi-racial Britain' (Thandi 2018, 41) in which Indian communities could thrive. Beginning in this era, the cultural products of British South Asians were first introduced for widespread consumption by domestic Britons, and South Asian religious and cultural festivals, food, art and literature, cinema and music were largely embraced by mainstream British culture (Thandi 2018, 49). This period of migration and settlement has shaped many British South Asian diasporas that exist today including those of the Pakistanis,

Bangladeshis, and both the Sikh Punjabi and the large Hindu Indian communities (Thandi 2018, 387).

Another common theme between the South Asian diasporas in Britain is the economic success of many in the diaspora, with large numbers of people from the community graduating university, as well as successfully founding small businesses. The result was a ‘widespread perception that it [the South Asian diaspora] was a hard-working, aspirational, tolerant, and well-integrated community, almost a model minority’ (Thandi 2018, 49). South Asian diaspora scholars across the Atlantic and the antipodes note the racial positioning of South Asians in the West as ‘model minorities.’ This term refers to the stereotyping of Asians (East, South-East and South) as a group of people who are visible racial minorities, but do not face the high levels of discrimination aimed at other non-white groups. The labelling of South Asians as ‘model minorities’ within these countries is due to the dominant modes of engagement by various South Asian diasporas which see members assimilate by speaking the host language, enrolling in higher education, and becoming employed in middle class professions (Bhatia 2014).

In ‘Finding Refuge in Culture: Race, Place, and Immigrant Identity in the Indian Diaspora’ Sunil Bhatia (2014) notes that this model minority status does not shield South Asian communities in the United States from experiencing varying levels of racism and discrimination in their workplace. Bhatia argues that American-born South Asians of the post 1965 generation re-created their identities through the discourse of the model minority, measuring themselves as model citizens. The Indian American respondents he spoke to in 2014 had experienced disparate instances of racism and discrimination in the workplace, which made them feel ‘unwanted in the society they now called home’ (Bhatia 2014, 140). In

the face of this, his respondents aspired to develop a temporary ‘universal identity’ that would position them as ‘race-less’ in their workplace and community amongst white co-workers and friends. These respondents expressed the desire to be perceived individually, rather than belonging to a larger ethnic or racial category. One such way they did this was through leaning into the neoliberal notion of being defined through ‘individual merit’ and using this to rise above instances of racial discrimination and assimilating into white society (Bhatia 2014, 145). His respondents were members of the baby boomer generation (born roughly from 1946 to 1964), and generation X (born roughly from 1965 to 1979), generations shared by three respondents in my study.

On a related note, Vijay Agnew’s 2011 study on South Asian communities in Canada also explores the cultural identity of that group in relation to Western stereotypes about South Asia. Rather than the ‘model minority’ stereotype, Agnew’s participants reported emotional and psychological struggles when adjusting to life in Canada amidst representations of India that focus on negatives such as poverty, illiteracy, superstition, gender oppression and religious conflict. His respondents were aware that they were racialised through ideas of a poverty-stricken, imagined India that Western media is invested in perpetuating. This view of India, Agnew argues, is an alternative ‘imagined India’ to those constructed and admired by diasporic Indians and therefore results in the imperative to try and communicate more positive imaginings of India and Indian culture to ‘mainstream’ (white) Canadians (Agnew 2011, 145). These images of India as poverty-stricken, and unchangingly ancient, contribute to assumptions about Indians and other South Asians that are harmful to the diasporic community as they aim to be perceived as model minority.

In Canada, as in Australia, assimilationist attitudes prevail in conversations about multiculturalism. Both nations are multicultural in nature but racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse groups are discriminated against in both contexts when they are perceived as not 'Canadian'. The diasporic subject in this context is not able to be both (as in the case of hybridised identities US born of civil rights activism in the 1960s and 1970s) and therefore must choose.

Finally, Wardlow Friesen's 2008 study on Indian communities in New Zealand is useful in contextualising the experiences and feelings of my respondents in Australia. Friesen echoes the work of Thandi, exploring the experiences of South Asians who moved to New Zealand at a relatively young age and who therefore considered themselves as 'living between two worlds.' He describes their experiences as follows:

The former [world] is characterized by parental and communal expectations about behaviour, dress, marriage partners and filial respect, while the latter [world] emphasizes individuality, freedom, and choice, often resulting in identity-confusion and resentment at parental restrictions (Friesen 2008, 50)

Friesen uses Arjun Appadurai's (1990) idea of the 'ethnoscape' to describe the communities created by these South Asian communities in New Zealand, as in this context too, South Asian cultural manifestations such as film, theatre and literature are accepted and consumed by mainstream New Zealand society.

The concepts and feelings explored in these studies of the South Asian diasporas outside of Australia – hybridised identities, feeling in-between two cultures, the model minority myth – were all expressed by my respondents in Australia, as will be discussed in later chapters. The

commonalities of the South-Asian diasporic experience within the Anglophone world are useful in foregrounding the specific history and experiential examples of South Asian Australians which is explored in the next section.

Part Two: South Asians in Australia

Sociologist Supriya Singh's (2016) book recounts nearly five decades of Indian migration to Australia from the late 1960s to 2015, through the eyes of migrants and their families. Singh tracks changes in the Indian Australian relationship to their homeland as generations are born into the Indian Australian way of life in Australia. The first wave of Indian migration to Australia began with male sojourners from British India in the first half of the nineteenth century who arrived to work as camel drivers, hawkers, and labourers. This was followed by a wave of migration in the late 1960s, as amendments were made to the White Australia Policy to allow doctors, teachers, and other professionals from Asia entry into Australia. The number of Australian persons born in India quadrupled during this era, as Indian professionals found Australia to be an appealing new home. These migrants were from metropolitan parts of South Asia and had a fluent knowledge of English. The following sections provide more detail about each of these waves of migration.

Pre-Federation (1901)

The first British fleet landed on Australian shores on 26 January 1788, and established a colony including marines, seamen, government officials and convicts from Great Britain. Settlement was based on colonising the land of the Indigenous communities who had lived in Australia for centuries prior to British arrival. This colonisation became the foundation of a myth-building tradition that would cast Australia as a white nation, a tradition that has become naturalised in the years since early settlement (Moreton-Robinson 2000). Later that

year the first Indian crews from the Bay of Bengal came to Australia on trading ships and some Indians settled here. The 1881 Australian census records 998 people who were born in India, which grew to 1700 the following year. In the 1860s many Indians, mostly Sikhs from the Punjab region, of then British India, worked as merchants who operated throughout outback Australia, with some working in the goldfields. Later, Sikh migrants from India and Sri Lanka settled around Woolgoolga and Coffs Harbour in New South Wales, helping meet the needs for workers on banana farms. Today the Sikh settlement in Woolgoolga is one of the largest rural South Asian communities in Australia and many families own their own banana plantations (Jupp 2001).

In her 2018 article ‘I am a British subject: Indians in Australia claiming their rights, 1880-1940’, Margaret Allen recounts a number of verbal attacks upon Indians in Australia during this time as ‘the objectionable dirty Hindoo hawkers who infest many districts’ and attempts to ban them from being licenced as hawkers a common occurrence (Allen 201, 139). Drawing on files in the National Archives of Australia (NAA), Allen tells the story of Indian residents in Australia as people who were politically active on their own behalf. She states that Indians in Australia were aware of Indian nationalist struggles in colonial India and of the struggles in wider South Asian diaspora.

South Asian hawkers (often misidentified only as Indian or in this case ‘Hindoo’) travelled from town to town selling a variety of products, therefore coming into contact with many areas of the sparse Australian population. These hawkers, mainly men, spent their years living and working in Australia interspersed with lengthy trips back in India, with many of these workers first coming to Australia as indentured workers. What united these workers, however, was their knowledge of, and involvement with, international politics and their rights

as British subjects. Allen notes that Britishness was conflated with whiteness during this period, and the communities of British South Asians (and some British Chinese) in Australia complicated the ideology of Australia as a white nation-state. During this period there were numerous protests by Indians in Australia ‘in relation to immigration restrictions and to discrimination, including in employment, in shipping, right of domicile, freedom to own land, to enter particular occupations and to be enfranchised’ (Allen 2018, 502).

In historical documents recording these protests we can observe the seedlings of both South Asian assimilationist attitudes and also the beginnings of the model minority myth as Indians attempted to position themselves with white Australians in opposition to other communities of colour. Allen notes that they rejected categorisation with Chinese and Japanese communities by arguing that they were racially superior and should be considered equal to other (white) British citizens (2018, 502).

The Australian government referred to South Asian migrants as ‘aliens’, a significant term which ‘was an important language tool in the creation and maintenance of White Australia. In law, the term ‘alien’ means one born outside the British Empire, not a subject “of the British sovereign” which was therefore incorrectly applied to Indians in Australia (Allen 2018, 140). Indians in Australia therefore sought to defend their status as British subjects as assaults upon their status unfolded. Being a British subject in Australia promised equality before the law, freedom of religious expression, the right to own property, to engage in economic activities without restriction, to participate in political life, and the freedom to reside and travel throughout the British Empire.

In order to ensure they were afforded such rights, Indian Australian communities protested their treatment in the form of liaising with the Indian National Congress, the All Indian Muslim league and with the Indian Overseas Association and sought to exert leverage by working with Indian representatives in legislative councils and imperial bodies (Allen 2018, 43). They also wrote to the Australian press and the press in India, including nationalist publications such as *Young India* and *The Indian Review*. Alexander Yarwood has argued that ‘the Indians in Australia had been granted a civil status superior to that of any other Asian minority’ attributing this status to ‘the pressure of imperial considerations and of their small numbers’ (1964, 33). I would note here that these roots lay the groundwork for how the South Asian diaspora would be viewed in Australia in the years to come —as a model minority paving the path for future South Asian generations to ‘succeed’ in the Australian systems of education and skilled work.

This existed, then and now, alongside the notion of the South Asian diaspora as a threat to the white nation state. South Asia scholar Kama Maclean (2018) has argued that ‘the presence of Indians was central to the parliamentary debates leading up to the passing of the Immigration Restriction Act’ (114). She points out that Atlee Hunt, who was crucial in both the creation and administration of the Immigration Restriction Act (legislation that would lay the groundwork for the White Australia Policy), investigated the strength and relevance of British promises to Indians included within the 1858 Proclamation, indicating that Indian political agency was a threat to hegemonic white rule in Australia. South Asians of many different national origins desired to move to Australia, particularly after the collapse of British rule in India and partition in the 1940’s (Allen 2018). However, from federation in 1901 until 1973 the White Australia Policy halted the immigration of all South Asians to Australia.

White Australia Policy (1901-1973)

The White Australia Policy was a restrictive series of immigration laws that made it impossible for people outside of Great Britain and Western Europe to enter Australia. This explicitly racist policy was motivated by the intentions of the Australian government to ideologically align the nation with Britain and by extension, Western Europe. While it was officially in place until 1973, amendments were made to the policy from the 1940s, which allowed some students and workers to enter the country for a short period of time under the Colombo Plan. The Colombo Plan was first proposed by Indian diplomat K.M Panikkar in 1949, who urged Australian and British ambassadors to join him in creating a programme that would allow the movement of skilled migration (and students) throughout the British empire, strengthening ties between the British states of Asia and the Pacific and those of the West (Park 1957). Australia, Britain, Canada, Sri Lanka, India, New Zealand, and Pakistan would all join the plan, allowing simpler migration to Australia for eligible migrants who would not have been able to migrate otherwise under the White Australia policy. An amendment, added in 1964, also allowed mixed-race South Asians into Australia along with mixed-race people of other nationalities to help aid the nation's dwindling population in the years following World War 2.

This period was complex for the mixed-race Anglo Indian communities in India for whom Australia had become a favourite destination during the 20 years following Indian independence in 1947 (D'Cruz 2000). Although an officially identified Indian minority group, Anglo Indians led a decidedly more British cultural existence than other Indian groups during British rule in India. They were, and continue to be, an ethnic group of mixed-race Indians who were Christian and spoke English (in addition to other regional dialects, usually Hindi). After Indian independence, many Anglo Indians fled India for other British colonial

states after feeling abandoned by the British to whom they had held an allegiance. The British colonial state favoured Anglo Indians in employment due to their mixed heritage, leading to their socioeconomic success and privilege over monoracial Indians. Australian economist Kenneth Rivett argues that over 33,000 ‘part Europeans’ (including Anglo Indians) migrated to Australia in the years between 1964 and 1973. In the period between 1970 and 1971, for example, about half of the 5794 ‘part European’ migrants that moved to Australia were Anglo Indian (2454 people) (Rivett 1975, 76).

Glen D’Cruz (2000, 2006) recounts that Anglo Indian immigration to Australia generated significant debate. As Anglo Indians were mixed-race Indian and white (British or Portuguese usually) the community felt that they were exempt from the ‘White Australia policy’ and therefore entitled to migrate to Australia, a nation within the British colonies. In 1964 the rules for entry of persons of mixed descent were eased and Anglo Indians became admissible to Australia (Richmond and Rao in Gilbert 1996), and it was under this amendment that my family was able to move to Australia.

However, Anglo Indians did not slip quietly into the country and assimilate unproblematically with the locals. Politicians, journalists and concerned citizens conducted passionate debates about these new ‘dark skinned immigrants’ in the Australian press (D’Cruz 2000, 130). This is interesting as Anglo Indians were racialised in India as white-adjacent (not ‘white’ like the British, but closer to whiteness than Indian-ness). Upon their arrival in Australia, however, their darker complexions categorised them as definitively non-white. After learning of the existence of a highly visible settlement of Anglo Indians in the Perth suburb of Highgate, Arthur Caldwell, perhaps Australia’s most passionate advocate of the White Australia Policy, described the area as the ‘Durban of Australia’ (D’Cruz 2000,

130).

Durban, a city in South Africa, is considered the ‘largest Indian city outside of India’.

Caldwell claimed that ‘men and women with ten children go there [Highgate, a suburb of Perth] to live on the smell of an oily rag and breed like flies’ (D’Cruz 2000, 133). D’Cruz notes that Anglo Indians were also considered to be ‘sexually promiscuous, alcoholic, indolent and morally corrupt’ in India (29) aligning the Anglo Indian community with other racialised communities around the world who had been maligned through the use of similar damaging stereotypes. Responding to Caldwell, *The Australian* journalist Piers Ackerman noted that Anglo Indian migrants were highly visible in Highgate as it was ‘the jumping off point for new dark arrivals in Australia’ (1972). He went on to provide a different assessment of this group to Ackerman, quoting Mr J. Poole-Johnson, a leading immigration officer in Western Australia as follows: ‘many of the Eurasians who come here have greater skills and a greater command of the English language than many of the assisted migrants from southern European countries’ (Ackerman 1972). D’Cruz finds Poole-Johnson’s statement significant because it indicates the extent to which Australian policymakers in this era viewed Anglo Indians as model migrants because of their fluency in English, and their British social customs. Once again, this debate demonstrates the dialectic nature of stereotypes of Indian Australians —as national threat and/or model minority— which underlines their conditional belonging in the nation.

Post White Australia Policy (1973 to the Present)

Indians are currently the largest migrant group in Melbourne, and Adelaide, and the second and fourth largest in Sydney, and Brisbane, respectively. According to the 2019 census, the majority of South Asians living in Australia are Hindus followed by Sikhs, Muslims,

Buddhists, Christians, Jains and Zoroastrians. The same census also revealed that 54.6% of Indian migrants in Australia hold a bachelor's degree which is more than three times the Australian national average of 17.2% (Singh 2016). This last statistic has come to define the South Asian diaspora in Australia, contributing to their status as a 'model minority'.

The abolition of the White Australia Policy saw a boom in migration of middle-class, skilled professionals from South, Southeast, and East Asia. The current wave of Indian migration began in the 1990s when Australian immigration policy reflected Australia's need for skilled migration. Supriya Singh (2016) asserts that the Indian Australians almost tripled between 2004 and 2014 in response to the Australian governmental focus on education and skills as a pathway to migration. Indians who came to Australia between the 1970s and mid 1990s were professionals, mainly from the metropolitan cities in India. International students who had graduated from Australian universities could gain permanent residency with increasing ease. In his research on Australia's skilled migration policies, Jon Stratton (2009) argues that those who identified as 'Asian' (including South Asians) during this period were granted an 'honorary whiteness' as long as they accepted 'Australian values and an Australian way of life' (17).

The contemporary era of Indian migration began in the late 1990s when India was rising as a new global power. South Asian nations expanded their information and communication technology sectors and the middle classes in these nations grew in wealth and scale. The new information technologies available made for more affordable, instantaneous communication and easy travel (Singh 2016, 33) which, in conjunction with shifting Australian migration policy, created an ideal environment for South Asians wishing to immigrate to Australia. This era has been defined as the 'student migrant' era of South Asian migration to Australia

(Singh 2016, 30) as Australia became an attractive option for younger, mobile South Asians to complete their tertiary studies abroad. Singh argues that this era is defined through impermanence.

Whereas South Asian migrants of the earlier twentieth century moved with the intention to settle, most of the student migrants face long periods of precarious mobility dependent on visas, university semesters, and employment opportunities upon graduation. Another aspect unique to this era of the South Asian diaspora is that the increased information technologies has allowed for instantaneous, constant communication with loved ones back home. Many of the early migrants, particularly those without siblings, or parents in Australia felt a sense of loss, of partial one-way communication with their families in South Asia, visiting their families at home perhaps once every five or six years (Singh 2016, 26).

In her article ‘“De-wogged” Migrants to ‘Rabble Rousers’: Mapping the Indian Diaspora in Australia’, Sukhmani Khorana (2009) examines the changing symbolic status of the Indian diaspora in mainstream Australian social imaginaries over time, using the 2009 attacks on Indian international students in Melbourne and Sydney as a case study. Khorana does note the heterogenous nature of the Indian diaspora globally, as ‘differences in caste, region, religion, profession and the like’ make it difficult to assign a singular identity which encapsulates all members of the diaspora (Khorana 2009).

Migration scholar Michiel Baas (2009) has argued that by 2009, ‘Anglo-Saxon Australians’ had begun to think of Indian international students differently. Once welcome guests who could bring economic prosperity to Australia, now they were increasingly seen as ‘profiteers, having come into Australia under false pretences, competing unlawfully for local jobs and

taking up public space where they were supposed to feature in the background' (Baas 2010, 45). As the Indian student population began to balloon in major cities such as Melbourne, some white Australians started to feel as if Indians (and other South Asians, likely misidentified as 'Indians') were 'everywhere', 'crowding the streets', 'not getting out of the way', 'always in groups' and 'filling up trains' (Baas 2010, 4), reiterating racist stereotypes held about Asian Australians that predate the White Australia Policy. Baas argues that the emergence of this newly held public opinion legitimised the mistreatment of Indian students, which in turn led to the hate crimes.

By 2010, there were 120,569 Indian international students in Australia, making up one third of the country's Indian community. Khorana's work echoes Baas' as it tracks the shifting perception of Indian students in Australia through close analysis of mainstream Australian media coverage from May 2009 to early 2010. Using this media coverage, she maps a history of the Indian diaspora in Australia from 'wog' to 'model migrant' to 'threat'. In the late 20th century, South Asian popular cultural forms and images began to enter the popular Australian imaginary 'with Bollywood parties, curries on pub menus and with the sheer visibility of Indians serving in supermarkets and driving city cabs' (Khorana 2014, 9). During this period and before 9/11, the 'liberal media's new racism discourse' rearticulated the ideology of 'multicultural Australia' through the selection of assimilationist Indian migrant perspectives for mainstream stories. What emerges from the media coverage of this era is a curated selection of assimilated, middle-class, Indian Australian voices whose views echo mainstream Australian values. The expressions of these members of the Indian Australian diaspora mirror, most importantly, institutional denial of racism in Australia as they lean in and embrace the role of the model minority (Khorana 2014).

In May 2009 a string of stories began to appear first in Indian media, and then in the Australian media about allegedly racist attacks targeting Indian students in parts of Melbourne and Sydney. With the emergence of these hate crimes, Australian news representation of the South Asian Australian diaspora shifted from model minority to impending threat (O'Loughlin 2009; Waters and Mcbean 2009). While most of the hate crimes started with verbal abuse directed at male Indian students, the incidents quickly escalated to physical abuse and robberies. 32 students died between 2003 and 2010 as a result of the violence directed towards them (Singh and Cabraal, 2010, 20). Quoted in news articles were new South Asian Australian voices of younger student migrants whose views of life in Australia, migration, and racism complicated previous media rhetoric of the South Asian Australian experience. Those in the South Asian 'model minority', that is, those 'staying under the radar and avoiding controversy' actively voiced their concerns about the student attacks across a range of public forums (Khorana 2014, 12) for the first time. The Indian Australian community therefore jeopardised the 'honorary whiteness' that they were afforded as a 'model minority' expressing their shame and anger directed towards the mainstream Australian public for the first time since the nineteenth century.

In 2011, the Australian government commissioned a report on crimes against international students in Australia that found around 1477 assaults and robberies had been committed against Indian students in 2009 (Das 2010). The Victorian state police refused to release these numbers, stating that it was 'problematic: as well as 'subjective and open to interpretation' (Das 2010). The report showed male Indian students encountered a higher rate of threat than other international student groups or the general population due primarily to housing affordability and unstable employment (Larsen 2011). Most South Asian students work part-

time, evenings and night shifts, in Melbourne, and live in overcrowded residences poorly serviced by public transport, in the cheaper Northern and Western suburbs.

Maria Elena Indelicato's 2010 thesis chronicles how 'Australian authorities had to not only frame the attacks as an expression of urban violence but also attempt to dismiss the anger of Indian students and media as an inappropriate, unjustified, and excessive affective response to the events' (Indelicato 2017, 160). Reports such as the above cemented the perception that the attacks were 'opportunistic' in nature and therefore not rooted in anti-Indian racism, undermining the victims' statements of the attacks who reported with certainty that they were racially motivated. They also blamed the victims by noting that they were in 'dangerous' areas of Melbourne 'after dark' therefore, ostensibly, putting themselves in harm's way. In response, India's then prime minister, Manmohan Singh, addressed the Indian parliament saying that 'he was "appalled" by the senseless violence and crime, some of which are racist in nature' (Das 2010). Indian students in Australia held protests in Melbourne, and Sydney in response to what they perceived to be the Australian government's inaction.

Academic writings concerning the attacks focus predominantly on student experiences (Gunawardena et al 2010; Singh and Cabraal, 2010), international student safety (Johnson and Kumar, 2010; Mason, 2010; Nyland et al., 2010; Shekhar and Saxena, 2010), and the impact on, and politics of the education industry (Dunn et al., 2011). This event constitutes a significant moment in South Asian Australian history as the trauma it evoked contributed to collective awareness and knowledge of anti-South Asian racism in Australia and its violent consequences.

Conclusion

The 2009 hate crimes against international Indian students led to the emergence of contemporary South Asian political consciousness both amongst young international students, who encountered racist violence at a bodily level, and also amongst members of the established Indian Australian diaspora. This moment was vindicating for South Asians in Australia who did not espouse assimilationist rhetoric and self-identify as a ‘model minority’ or ‘honorary white’ as it made clear the existence of anti-South Asian racism in contemporary Australia. This moment of political consciousness tacitly informs the subsequent period, triggered by the popularity of Indo chic from 2012 onwards. My respondents, motivated into political action for the first time in the wake of the popularisation of Indo chic were young, female, and all raised (most also born) in Australia. I introduce them and my research design in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO:
Observing/ Researching South Asian Millennial
Feminists: A Mixed Methodological Approach

Introduction: “Do You Have Some Indian Heritage?”

Viola was sitting on Jasmine’s front veranda when I arrived to interview her and her two girls, Jasmine, and Asha. The sisters were running a little late she said, but they would be here soon. This was my first interview for my PhD project, and I was a little nervous. Jasmine and I were friends; we had met at university and bonded over our shared mixed Indian/ white heritage. I was excited to talk to her about Indo chic in this formal way, and to meet her younger sister and her mother Viola, who immediately reminded me of my grandmother – a smart, accomplished, no-nonsense brown matriarch. ‘So, do you have some...Indian heritage?’ Viola asked me, looking me up and down. I laughed nervously ‘yes, my mother and her family are from Calcutta’. ‘So, they are Christians?’ she asked. ‘Yes, they are. Anglo Indians, actually’ I responded. She nodded her head slowly, looked around and asked, growing annoyed, ‘where are those girls?’. They arrived a moment later.

Viola would not be the only participant of mine to ask for specific details about my cultural heritage. I made a point of introducing myself as ‘a mixed-race, Anglo Indian Australian woman’ to my respondents within the first five minutes of our meeting. As many of my respondents were mixed themselves, many asked where my father was from. I in turn, asked about their non-South Asian parent. We intuitively situated ourselves by trying to find commonalities in our shared experience of being mixed and South Asian. An interesting piece of information I gleaned from undertaking this research is that it is hard to pinpoint what mixed South Asian people look like. None of my mixed participants, myself included, looked alike. You could say that we all look generically ‘ethnic’ or maybe generically ‘Brown’ in the sense that our features and sometimes our pigment reflect phenotypical tropes of South Asian people. My skin pigment is light, and my features are ambiguous. So, I understood Viola’s intention when she asked me, a little suspiciously, if I had Indian heritage.

Indo chic as an object of scholarly enquiry is an aesthetic phenomenon that affects South Asian people in the diaspora. Therefore, it is important that I am South Asian, and specifically, that I am not a white woman asking brown women why Indo chic makes them upset. This dynamic – of white people interrogating the actions, and feelings, and beliefs of South Asian people – risks replicating a painful colonial dynamic of the anthropological gaze. Additionally, the debates online about Indo chic take place this way, with white wearers of Indo chic expecting South Asian people to explain to them why they see their behaviour as ‘cultural appropriation’.

It was, therefore, personally gratifying to have such open, rich, conversations with my respondents who were vulnerable and honest and spoke to me about their traumatic experiences of racialisation. As explained in my introduction, I grew up experiencing racial othering in the white environments I grew up, so I was able to share this and build rapport with my respondents during the interviews. I learnt from various mixed-race respondents in this study that their involvement in activism around Indo chic was gratifying for them, as Jasmine noted ‘a nice recognition’ feeling like they were a fully accepted, part of the South Asian community, despite being mixed.

It was a moment like this, a moment of recognition, in my interview with Jasmine, Asha and Viola – the Kentwoods - that led me to the majority of my participants in the first place. At the time of my interview with the Kentwood family, I had only three additional interviews lined up, one of which was with my own family, another with a friend, and a third with a friend of my supervisor. Jasmine mentioned that a South Asian friend had added her to a Facebook group for South Asian Australian women that was informally a brown feminist group called ‘South Asian Dreamboats’, and sent me the link to the group, certain I would

find other diasporic South Asian women who wanted to talk about Indo chic. I went home and looked up the group, but found myself confronted with another situation in which the South Asian administrator would judge my authenticity before letting me in. ‘Do you identify as a South Asian woman or non-binary person?’ the webform asked me. ‘If so, why?’. I answered the questions, describing myself as a mixed-race, Anglo Indian woman. It took a few days for the admin to accept my application to join the group. At the time I was nervous that my profile picture, featuring my pale skin and Scandinavian name was causing the delay, however, I later found out in my interview with the administrator, Rena, that she does not check the group everyday which may have explained the delay.

I introduced myself to the group when I joined, as per the recommended guidelines of the group, and read through all the old posts. I then posted my research proposal call out, explaining that I was an Anglo Indian Australian PhD student at the University of Sydney who was interested in how Indo chic was affecting South Asian Australian women, with a specific interest in intergenerational differences of opinion to the trend. I received twelve comments on the post with people volunteering their time, and I was able to interview five of the commenters in the following months.

Situating this Project: Interviewing my community

In the previous chapter I chronicled the commonalities between South Asian diasporas in the Anglophone world. Most of the studies I drew from were situated in the global north and featured ethnographies of South Asian diasporas from the United Kingdom and North America. I then turned to an examination of the character of the South Asian diasporas present in Australia – using studies that relied on historical analysis and/ or contemporary media analysis to draw their conclusions. As mentioned in my introduction, I was originally

interested in Indo chic because the popularisation of this trend seemed to trigger conversations about cultural identity, cultural authenticity and belonging, in diasporic South Asian households. It also illustrated that South Asian cultural items still elicit orientalist ideas about South Asian cultures in the Western public sphere, which will be explored in the next chapter.

Like Radhakrishnan (2011), I was interested in changing understandings of cultural identity and belonging for different generations of South Asian diasporic people. The conversations I was having within my own family about Indo chic echoed the conversations my other South Asian friends were having with their families. Something about this trend —the anger it elicited in the younger generation’s compared to the ambivalence (or complacency) it elicited in the older generations — dredged up feelings about how comfortable South Asian Australian women were with identifying as ‘Australian’ and/or ‘South Asian’. These differences were not just age related, they also aligned with where the person had grown up, and their experiences of racial othering and/or belonging in their society during their developmental years. Many of the young women who were angry about the trend, worldwide, were born in the West, or had migrated at a very young age. They, therefore, did not grow up being a part of the majority culture or ethnicity, like their parents or other generations had. This meant that, despite being arguably the most ‘removed’ from South Asia, or furthest from ‘authentic Indianness’ (Radhakrishnan 2011) for those in the Indian diaspora, as Radhakrishnan would describe them, South Asia was more important to them, as it represented a constructed other space, different from the Western space they inhabited, where they were being told - by mainstream racist Western society from a young age - they belonged.

The tensions of belonging/ not belonging as a diasporic South Asian person in a Western nation are documented by Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan (Radhakrishnan 2011), Vijay Agnew (2005) and Sunil Bhatia (2014) in North America, and by Shinder Thandi (2018) in the United Kingdom, and it is their interest in this tension that makes the outcomes of their studies relevant to this project. Experienced by many people in the diverse South Asian diasporas in the Anglophone world across the past two decades, this feeling is relevant to the debates that have taken place online around Indo chic, and the type of activism South Asian diasporic women have undertaken in response to the trend. The same feeling is chronicled in the antipodes as well, with Wardlow Friesen in New Zealand (Friesen 2008), Glen D'Cruz (2000, 2006), Sukhmani Khorana (2014), Supriyah Singh (Singh 2016) Kama Maclean (2018) and Margaret Allen (2018) in Australia all chronicling this experience in the different eras of Australian South Asian history they examine.

Khorana (2014) and Allen (2018)'s studies are of interest, not only in that they chronicle this feeling, and take place in Australia, but because they also note significant moments of activism that South Asian diasporic communities underwent to fight against discrimination in Australian society. In Chapter 3, I chronicle significant research into Indo chic and cultural appropriation which examine the origins of the trend; make arguments that the trend is harmful to South Asian diasporic communities; and explain the appeal of the trend to Western consumers as Indo chic re-emerges and is popular during various points in history. As mentioned in my Introduction, my study considers the relationship between contemporary Indo chic and South Asian diasporic activism and identity online. To do this, I examine the responses of Australian South Asian women specifically to this trend and how it has triggered a certain affectual response in them – anger. This anger has motivated them to first, interrogate their feelings of cultural belonging/not belonging as diasporic subjects living in

Australia (a feeling that persists as strongly today as it does in the period in which Allen examines: the 17th century) and second, engage in activism online about this issue, and also beyond the online spaces as they become conscious proponents of anti-racism.

The *how* of this study is also complex – I implement a mixed methodological approach of digital media ethnography and ethnographic interviews with twelve South Asian Australian women of differing generations. Additionally, I incorporate elements of auto-ethnography as an insider/outsider. My analysis of my respondents necessarily involves interrogating my own embodied position as their interlocutor, a mixed-race, Anglo Indian Australian woman.

The Digital Desi Diaspora

As stated in the introduction, my scholarly interest in Indo chic began while undergoing my honours year in 2015. I produced an honours thesis that focused on the history of the trend, which I then used to contextualise the contemporary resurgence of Indo chic from 2012 onwards. In this work I referred to South Asian diasporic communities as ‘desi’ communities. ‘Desi’ is a descriptor for diasporic South Asians, and a term I personally use to describe myself, my family, and my South-Asian Australian friends. It is a term I am comfortable using in its lay usage, having grown up hearing it, and a term I assumed was commonplace amongst the South Asian diasporic community in Australia. When it came time to do my interviews, however, I noticed that none of my participants had identified themselves as desi on the questionnaires I provided them before the interviews began. These questionnaires did not contain interview questions. Instead, they were practical forms I had drafted as a part of my ethics application to gather accurate demographic data about my participants. The forms featured identifying questions such as: name, age, gender, location, nationality, ethnicity which gathered basic knowledge on the subjects.

Under ethnicity, I expected at least one, if not many, of my participants to self-identify as ‘desi’ along with some sort of specific information about the particular national origins of the ethnic background (Desi- Pakistani/Australian, for example). It was only later when collating my data that I noticed that none of my participants used the word as ‘desi’ which surprised me. I was also intending to use ‘desi’ to describe the coalitions of South Asian diasporic women online who engage with debates about Indo chic located across the Anglophone world. However, upon conducting further research into the word ‘desi’, and its usage in academic texts in particular, I decided against this.

Desi comes from the Sanskrit ‘*desh*’ which means homeland or nation. It is a term that describes the people, practices, and products of South Asia. The term was developed in opposition to the Sanskrit word for Britain, ‘*vilayat*’, to describe the ethnic culture of South Asians during British colonial rule. Although Sanskrit is a precursor to the modern-day Hindi, the *desh/vilayati* antonymic pair is used in other South Asian languages such as Urdu, Punjabi and Bengali (Hussein 2018). The term gained popularity when South Asian people moved to Britain, and other Western countries, and began identifying with their native cultures and histories. Desi is therefore a political signifier for diasporic Indians. This is significant to this project as Indo chic is a *diasporic* issue. Online, domestic South Asian people engage in debates about Indo chic, with many expressing an opposing opinion to *diasporic* South Asian people. Their voices in debates around Indo chic often sanction the wearing of Indo chic by non-South Asian people in the West, espousing an ideology of cultural exchange free from the contextual circumstances that concern *diasporic* South Asian people living in the West. Yasmin Hussein (Hussein 2018) argues that ‘desi’ has morphed into an identity signifier for many U.S. based people of South Asian heritage as it

encapsulates their experiences of belonging to two cultures (Hussein 2018). In this way the term has come to unite diasporic South Asian people in the West (in North America and the UK specifically, mirroring the development and dominance of racial discourse in those countries) by foregrounding their common experience of belonging to both and neither Western nor South Asian cultures.

In their article on 1990s Indo chic, postcolonial scholars Anita Mannur and Pia Sahni (2011) use the term ‘desi’ rather than South Asian Australian, New Zealand, North American, or British to unite these diasporic communities living in former British settler colonial nations. As described below, they use the term both descriptively and politically, an approach I also incorporated in my use of ‘desi’ in my honour’s thesis:

... we use the term desi, instead of South Asian American or South Asian British, to map the convergences within a politically engaged sensibility among second-generation South Asians on both sides of the Atlantic, thus marking a form of intimacy that Jigna Desai, following Paul Gilroy, terms ‘The Brown Atlantic.’ This ideological topography, in Desai’s words, is made up of ‘twentieth century transnational South Asian diasporas located primarily in the United Kingdom, Caribbean, Canada, and the United States . . . that are similarly positioned in relation to globalization, post coloniality, and modernity’ (Mannur and Sahni 2011, 86).

They note that ‘desi’ has been appropriated by South Asian diasporic communities to describe the forms of solidarity that function as a counter-narrative to the racialisation of Indians as a ‘model minority’ in Western cultural imaginaries. ‘Desi,’ they argue, imagines South Asian diasporic identity as political rather than a purely descriptive assignation of

difference. As my work specifically engages with South Asian diasporic women living in Australia, as well as second generation Australian South Asian women, ‘desi’ works strategically to group my participants of diverse cultural and national backgrounds together under an identifier that unites their experience.

However, I began to see issues with the appropriateness of the term for my purposes in this thesis. First, none of my respondents self-identified as desi. It would therefore be inaccurate and unethical to describe them as such. Second, ‘desi’ is a contested term. The term has been criticised by some South Asian diasporic scholars and writers as a term which is mostly used by only one South Asian group – Indians, and specifically Indian Americans. Some South Asian groups, such as Sri Lankan Tamil communities, argue that India already has a monopolisation in conversations about South Asia and South Asians, with wealthier North Indians having the loudest voice (Sircar 2020). This thesis attempts to chronicle the feelings of South Asian Australians, not just Indian Australians. Upon reflection, I thought desi was a neutral term to describe all diasporic South Asians as I am an Anglo Indian woman. As an Indian person I am speaking from a position of dominance in the wider South Asian community and therefore assumed that the terms used in my national community are echoed in others.

Additionally, the term is contested even within the Indian diasporic community. In 2019, TD Canada Bank had to retract an advertisement that used the term ‘desi’ after they were told that, in India, the term is ‘used as an offensive term’. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reported that the bank received complaints that ‘...some Indians use the word to describe people as “not very modern” and “from the countryside”’ (Meerali 2019). I therefore decided

to use the term South Asian as a neutral and inclusive term to describe the participants of my ethnography, and myself as an insider/outsider.

Insider/Outsider Ethnography: South Asian Australian to South Asian Australian

Kalwant Bhopal's 2001 article 'Researching South Asian Women: Issues of sameness and difference in the research process' was an instructive text for my ethnography and for qualifying the results that have come out of the ethnography. In the paper, Bhopal interrogates the insider/outsider ethnography as it manifests in her particular ethnographic study, exploring research that is conducted by a researcher who is a member of the same community as the participants. As a South Asian woman who interviewed South Asian women, Bhopal draws on feminist methodologies that centre self reflection in ethnographic research. A great deal of literature has explored feminist methodological issues (Cook & Fonow 1990; Reinharz and Daviman 1992). Some have explored issues of 'race', class, and gender positions of the respondents and how these intersect with those of the researcher (Phoenix 1994; Bhopal 1997). Like the methods deployed in some of the aforementioned studies, Bhopal relies on the feminist tradition of letting female participants tell the stories of their lives in narrative, stream of consciousness ways so they can relay their feelings in as a part of the narrative. Additionally, she sees rich potential in the language people use to describe their daily activities, believing that interviews with women should explore emotional and subjective experiences as well as facts and experiences women have been through. Once participants have shared these reflections with the researcher, however, Bhopal argues that the power then turns to the researcher who has to interpret women's words, a task not to be taken lightly.

The power of interpretation also often effects the way in which research is reported and where it is reported. Therefore, it is helpful for the interview subjects to be interviewed by a researcher who has similar life experiences or can empathise with some experience with the subject's feelings and practices. Some studies have found that the racial phenotype of the interviewer does have an impact on the results of the study (May 1993). May explores how the notion of 'research' is itself rooted in western concepts of objectivity, ethnocentrism, and academic society. Research is a word, and a process, that might be unintelligible to some communities who do not see value in this type of practice. They may also be weary of white researchers carrying out research on minority communities who may have preconceived notions about the particular group they study, notions themselves which are rooted in their own whiteness and ethnocentrism understandings of racial groups. Bhopal writes:

As women, and as Asian women we are aware that our very physical appearance can create a barrier between ourselves and others, in ways that many white women may never encounter. This may be in a research situation, in an academic situation or indeed in everyday situations. Being a woman carrying out research on other women, I am an insider, being an Asian woman interviewing Asian women, but I am also an outsider. (Bhopal 2001, 281)

I resonate with Bhopal here in my experiences interviewing my participants. I am South Asian and white presenting. While many of my respondents were mixed-race as well, not all were white presenting. I prefaced my South Asian-ness in all of my interviews, relating to my respondents' experiences through verbally resonating with them, as I had had similar experiences to the mixed, second generation South Asian women around my age I interviewed. However, a third-party observer watching the interviews might have concluded

that I was a white woman interviewing South Asian women. This is a significant point which I will unpack throughout this chapter.

Whiteness studies has explored the implications of whiteness on researchers and research outputs, arguing that whiteness and its privileges have been historically invisible (Edwards, 2008; Frankenberg, 1993; Lipsitz 1995; Moreton-Robinson & Nicoli 2006; Yancy 2012; Hage 2012). In her book, Ruth Frankenberg (Frankenberg 1993) argues that 'race' shapes white women's lives through 'whiteness'. Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, privilege and a place from which white people look at themselves, others and society, and a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (Dyer 1997). Importantly, however, whiteness changes over space and time. So perhaps in the context of my interviews, my white passing appearance led to my respondents seeing me as white, therefore, an outsider. As noted in studies about mixed-race people who 'white pass' (or are 'white assumed', as in my case) there is sometimes antagonism directed towards racially ambiguous, white appearing mixed people from POC who are not afforded the same privileges due to their racial phenotype being further from whiteness (Piper 1996; Bueno-Hansen and Montes 2019).

My respondents may have otherwise seen me as South Asian, relying on my self-identification and anecdotal cultural knowledge and experience to qualify it. In addition to my mixed-ness and white passing appearance, I am an 'outsider' in that I am a researcher who is asking questions of members of this community, then using their answers to produce a PhD thesis. I am not a member of this community who is simply having a conversation with my participants informally. I had to undergo a lengthy ethics application within the university which put parameters on how I was supposed to be interacting with my participants, forms to

sign, and how to securely store personal information and data. The very nature of ethnographic interviews, the formality of the process, changed the dynamic I would have otherwise had with my participants, as a member of the same demographic.

African American researcher Derrick Alridge (2003) argues that producing rigorous and respectable academic scholarship is possible for insider/outsider researchers such as myself (28). He argues that this can be done if the researcher makes arguments substantiated by the data and does not let their background cloud their interpretation of the data to reflect their experience in the community they are researching, requiring a methodically self-reflective research practice. This is a consideration I have reflected on during the interviewing and writing process of this thesis, and at certain points I noticed that my interpretation of a particular phenomenon — my belief that ‘desi’ was used by all South Asian diasporic people for example — was clouding how I represented my participants. I was prepared for my mixed heritage and white passing appearance to cloud the responses I received, but I had not expected to be confronted with the privilege of being Indian and therefore being in the majority. By majority, I refer to both the size of the Indian diaspora as the largest South Asian diaspora in Australia, and also India as the most prevalent South Asian culture represented in the West. As such, other South Asian cultures are often conflated as being ‘Indian’.

Despite the assertions of Alridge, ethnographic work aims to provide knowledge about a particular group of people, and it would be unrealistic to claim that this is done without bias. In this thesis I can only represent the feelings and experiences my respondents chose to tell me, reflecting the fact that ‘ethnographic truths are partial’ (Shuter 2000, 11) while being aware that my unconscious interpretations of these experiences and feelings can colour how

they are represented here. In addition to the personal biases of the ethnographer (Shuter 2000), there is a possibility that an ethnographer may deliberately be told partial truths by interviewees. Furthermore, ethnographers Naaeke, Kurylo, Grabowski, Linton, and Radford (2011) argue that when doing insider/outsider research, a culture's body of knowledge may be revealed bit-by-bit in separate and apparently disconnected events. My intention is to mitigate my unconscious bias in researching not by minimising my role as an insider/outsider, but by acknowledging and constantly reflecting in the particular knowledges I can bring to this topic. I do this by inserting myself in this work — my family, my journey with Indo chic and my experiences as a racialised person in Australia. This is why personal vignettes and first-person narration have been inserted throughout this thesis, to self-reflect and also to position myself as a member of the community I am examining as an insider/outsider researcher.

Insider/Outsider ethnographer Teuku Zulfikar (2014) states that researching identity requires one to observe multiple discourses as identity changes across time and contexts. These complexities require researchers to take extra efforts to understand processes of identity formation, noting that insider researchers do possess the advantage of gaining trust from the participants through 'productive interaction with participants' (Zulfikar 2014). Sociologists Roland Yeo and Sue Dopson argue that 'the ultimate challenge [of the insider/outsider researcher] is not to seek a balance between the position of practical insider and theoretical outsider but rather the relational complexity of transitioning between the two positions' (2018, 334). As my ethnographic study did not require me to spend extended periods of time observing, reporting, and interviewing my family (or the wider Sydney South Asian community) I did not feel as if I was in conflict transitioning between the two positions for very long. In some instances, this insider/outsider position aided my data collection.

During the interview with my family members, I was able to use our relationship to facilitate deeper conversations with them as participants. For example, my mother Tami, was significantly less vocal about Indo chic than she had been in the past candidly when talking with me at home. She told me knowing she was being recorded was affecting her participation. Our relationship allowed me to notice that she was uncomfortable and being far less vocal than she usually is. To ease her anxiety around being recorded, I put my recording device further away from us and started engaging her in conversation completely unrelated to the study until she had warmed up to the interview questions. In this instance, being able to inhabit both the insider and outsider position simultaneously produced a better result not only for an uncomfortable participant but for the study overall as she was able to relax and answer the questions more honestly.

My position also helped build trust with all of my respondents, even the few, such as Viola, who began our interaction suspicious of my insider positioning. The way I structured the interviews, starting with watching some media together, was an effective tool to create this rapport as my response to the material, in most cases, mirrored the response of the participant. I will expand on the specifics of my research design below.

Research Design

My scholarly interest in the aesthetic phenomenon of Indo chic was first piqued when I had conversations with other young, South Asian Australian women about the trend, and noticed that we had similar feelings about the mainstream consumption of the trend in Australia and other parts of the Anglophone world. Additionally, I noticed a common experience of intergenerational difference in South Asian Australian women's emotional response to Indo

chic. I quickly realised it was not just my family where I had vastly differing opinions to my grandmother and mother about the harmfulness of Indo chic — this same dynamic seemed to be mirrored in other South Asian Australian households. I wondered why and hypothesised the following:

First, young women of my generation were more likely to have spent their childhoods in Australia and therefore experience racism from a younger, more formative age. This would explain their experience of encountering Indo chic as something akin to a racial microaggression — defined as racial slights that are offensive or hurtful but fall short of being perceived as ‘full-blown’ racism by the mainstream public (Sue et al 2007) a theorisation I shall expand upon in Chapter Three. Second, the members of my generation were more likely to have been exposed to ‘cultural appropriation’ discourse online as Indo chic was not the only popular fashion trend to borrow from minoritised cultures (I will explore this idea further in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis). I therefore thought that the best way to explore *why* Indo chic was affecting South Asian diasporic women was to ask them directly.

I set up my research design initially as a quasi-coding/decoding experiment — I would explore the origins and consumption of a specific Indo chic text and then go to South Asian Australian women of varying generations and ask them how that text made them feel. I applied for ethics clearance with the University and once approved, set up interviews with two friends of mine. The first friend, Jasmine, asked her mother and sister to join the interview at my behest and they agreed. I asked my other friend, Sabrina, if she wanted to be interviewed too, and she agreed, but her parents were in Melbourne, and unlikely to want to take part in this study. Later, when I secured more participants, I realised that Jasmine was an

outlier. Many millennial South Asian Australian women were willing to talk to me about Indo chic, but their mothers and/or grandmothers were not. When my participants said they had asked their family members to join, many said that they did not have the time to do the interview, and some did not have interest. This reinforced my hypothesis that Indo chic had the most impact on young South Asian Australian women and as I began to do more interviews with these millennial participants, and a new hypothesis began to form.

After conducting a few interviews, I began to realise how significant the internet was in the ‘Indo chic machine’. Most of my respondents first encountered Indo chic online (either on social media apps like Instagram, where a friend or celebrity was wearing the style, or via some other primary media source such as a music video, performance, or fashion shoot) and they had also encountered cultural appropriation discourse online. Many of them had learnt the meaning of ‘cultural appropriation’ in the comment sections, through mainstream news coverage or while engaging with anti-racist activist spaces. Additionally, the proliferation of online discourse on the topic incited many of my participants to engage in online activism on the topic as well – which then motivated many of my participants to become more conscious of racial justice issues beyond Indo chic and beyond the issues of the South Asian diaspora. This realisation marked a change in my research — I was still interested in how South Asian diasporic women *felt* about Indo chic, but I also became interested in the role the internet played in those feelings for my millennial participants.

Study Details

My research took place between March and June 2018 predominantly in Sydney, and two skype interviews with participants living in Queensland. My research consisted of group and individual interviews with 12 participants in total. Pair and group interviews were preferred

but were not possible in every case. When a group interview was not possible, I made sure to ask the individual participants their guess as to how a group interview would play out, which will be discussed in more detail later. The interviews were semi-structured and comprised of two parts. In the first part, the respondents were shown media texts that feature characteristics of Indo chic, after which I asked them to discuss their feelings and opinions about these texts.

The texts shown were the music videos *Hymn for the Weekend* by Coldplay and Beyoncé and *Bounce* by Iggy Azalea. I chose these specific examples of Indo chic from popular media to gauge South Asian reactions to both non-South Asian applications of Indo chic by one white performer and one non-white performer. This part of the interview was designed to be conducted together amongst the group interviewees as I wished to facilitate a sort of ‘family discussion’ around the text and gather from it the differences or similarities of opinions between the generations in a free flow of ideas and opinions. I decided to show my respondents two examples of western music videos set in India that feature Indo chic styling, dance, and imagery. Both Iggy Azalea’s *Bounce* (2013) and Coldplay ft. Beyoncé’s *Hymn for the Weekend* (2015) were released during the peak of discussions about cultural appropriation online. Both videos were heavily critiqued by South Asians online but also by non-South Asian people who were against the cultural appropriation of minority cultures by members of a majority culture. Some of this debate can be observed in the comment sections below the uploaded videos in YouTube. See figures below:

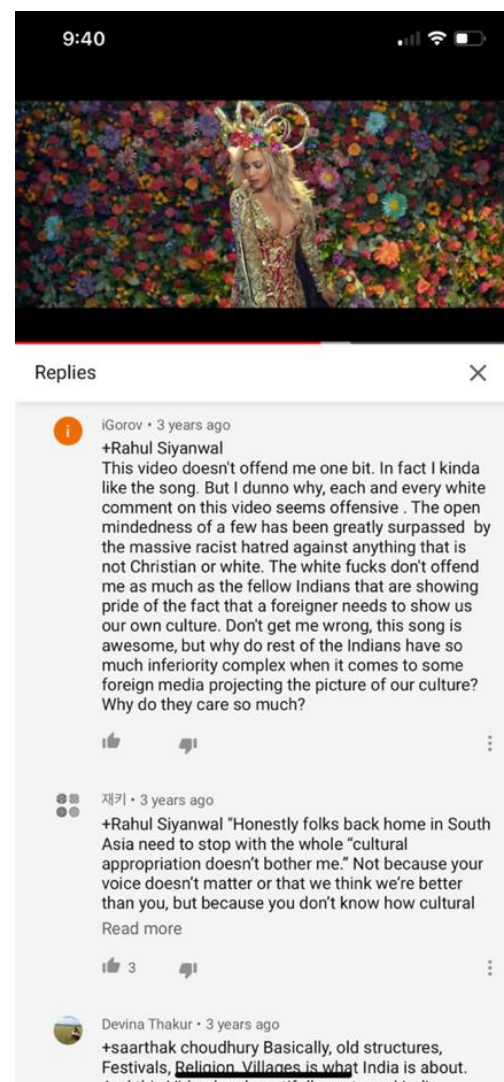
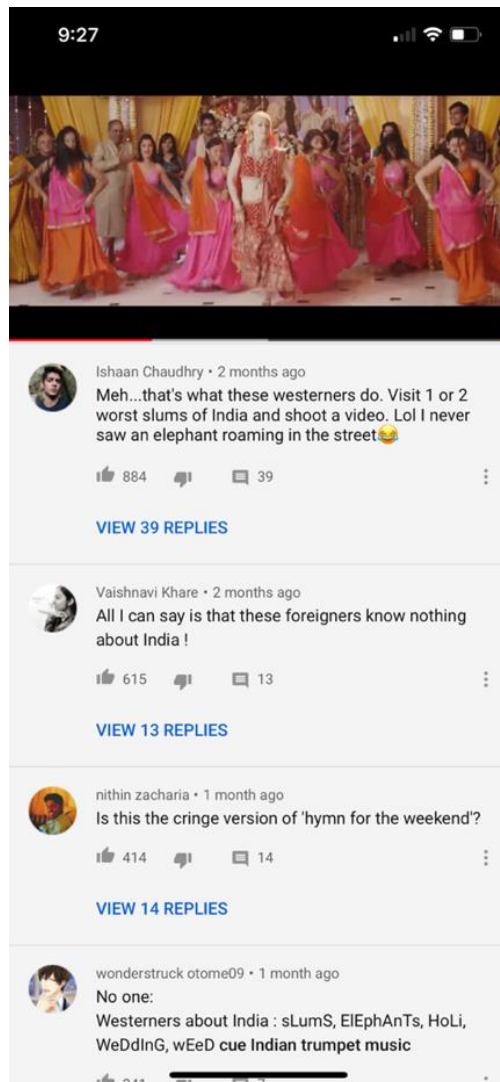


Figure 1: *Bounce* Iggy Azalea, and Figure 2: *Hymn for the Weekend* Coldplay ft Beyoncé.

I also thought that Iggy Azalea and Beyoncé were interesting figures my respondents could speak to sketch out the parameters of Indo chic cultural appropriation. Beyoncé and Azalea are vastly different performers, however in these clips they are playing the same role – the Indian goddess. I thought the videos were similar enough that respondents could compare them. This section was designed to discern diverse South Asian Diasporic feelings about Indo chic and test the political sensibilities of different generations of Australian South Asian women when it comes to Indo chic, online activism, women of colour feminism and anti-racist politics (this material appears in the last two chapters).

In the second part of the interviews, I asked questions relating to the topics on which I focus on in chapters of my thesis including: Indo chic and celebrity, Indo chic in fashion and social media and Indo chic and South Asian diasporic identity. To gather data for these chapters, I started with an open-ended question: ‘Have you ever come across Indo chic styles before? If so, when and in what context? Do you remember how it made you feel when you first saw it?’ If they had never heard of the specific term Indo chic I pointed to the music videos we watched earlier as examples of the aesthetic.

The second central question asked if the interviewee was without an intergenerational family member present, was always ‘have you had any conversations with your mother, aunty, grandmother, cousin, or other family members about Indo chic and cultural appropriation? Did they agree with you or not? What did they say?’. The questions that followed were grouped in relation to prospective chapters in my thesis. The first questions relate to Chapter Three of this thesis and are about Indo chic fashion and consumption to elucidate how Australian South Asian women feel about Indo chic fashion, and traditional dress. The next section refers to Chapter Four of this thesis and addresses the cultural appropriation debate waging online, reflecting my own musings about negative opinions towards Indo chic as informed by one’s exposure to online criticisms of the trend. The final section of questions was targeted at the respondents particular lived experience as a South Asian woman living in Australia. They were asked in order to map understandings of what it means to be South Asian and what it means to be Australian. This section was also where the respondents and I discussed the experiences of being a mixed-race South Asian Australian if the respondents identified in such a way.

The data collected from these final sections will be embedded throughout this thesis, and some of the musings of my participants have already been chronicled in Chapter One. This part of the study yielded diverse, rich, nuanced responses to the questions, which was invaluable to sketching how groups of South Asian women in Australia feel about Indo chic in its many incarnations, and also how Indo chic motivated young, South Asian women to engage in further anti-racist thought and action online.

Interview Dynamics

Two group interviews were conducted as a part of this study. The first group interview was comprised of three people in a family unit (the Kentwood family) – two daughters and their mother. The mother, Victoria was 59 at the time of the interview and her daughters Jasmine and Asha were 25 and 23 respectively. The other group interview comprised of two people – a mother and a daughter (Montgomery family). The mother, Viola was 76 and the daughter, Tami, was 56 at the time of the interview. Despite the differences in ages between the two families, the family dynamic functioned similarly with the mothers in both cases being first generation Indian migrants to Australia who moved here in their twenties. Jasmine and Asha were born in Australia whereas Tami moved with her mother when she was five years old. As such the cultural and generational dynamics were comparable between both families as both had mothers who had spent their youth in India and moved to Australia, while the daughters had spent their childhood in Australia.

Half of my individual interviews took place in a café somewhere in Sydney. A public location was decided in collaboration with the participants as I had not previously met most of my participants, I had only met them online. For the safety and security of both the participant and researcher a café or suburb familiar to both people were chosen. This meant

cafés mostly in Sydney's inner west - Newtown, Earlwood, Sydney City and on campus at Sydney University.

Two interviews were conducted via skype for those participants who lived interstate (Queensland). One interview took place in a large public park in Erskineville as it was familiar to both researcher and participant. Both group interviews took place in the houses of the families. Due to the group size, as well as members living in different areas of New South Wales, it was decided by the participants that meeting at the home of one family member would be easiest. I believe the location for the group interviews instilled a sense of comfort and calm for the participants as they were in a familiar environment. This comfort facilitated a natural flow in conversation, and we sat in the living room for both interviews. In both houses and in cafés the participant(s) and I enjoyed a beverage, and usually a sweet snack to facilitate a homey feeling and make my participant feel comfortable talking to me, simulating the environment in which one would catch up with a friend.

As the topic of my racial appearance and family experience foregrounded each interview, I firmly positioned myself as an insider/outsider in this study. Additionally, as the catalyst for this thesis was conversations with my family, I felt it was important to interview my family members as part of the ethnographic study. I conducted a group interview with my grandmother and mother (who have been anonymised as Viola and Tami Montgomery). These interviews, as well as the recounting of personal and familial anecdotes throughout this thesis contribute to the autoethnographic component of the study.

As mentioned above the catalyst for this study was interactions I had in person and online with South Asian women who mentioned that they had particular (negative) feelings about

cultural appropriation that were at odds with those of the older members of their family. At the conclusion of this study, I make the claim that there is a shared sentiment between generations of Australian South Asian women when it comes to Indo chic and cultural appropriation. All the younger respondents I spoke to expressed frustration, not only at Indo chic, but also at the different responses that they had to their mothers, aunts and/or grandmothers, who were more approving of the trend. The results from the music video part of the study were mostly uniform — all the interviews resonated with one another and therefore it was relatively simple to draw conclusions about how South Asian women felt about the cultural appropriation and representations of India in *Hymn for the Weekend* and *Bounce*. The long form question segment of the interview yielded more diverse responses.

My Participants

The respondents were recruited through personal networks, and through connections made on the private Facebook group ‘South Asian Dreamboats’. All 12 respondents were South Asian women who live in Australia. Eight respondents were in their 20s, one was in her 30s, two were in their 50s and one was in her 70s. This resulted in a study that leans towards the experiences of young South Asian women. Considering this, ten respondents stated that they accessed social media daily, one rarely (76yo) and one not at all (56yo). Six of the participants were born in Australia, with the other six being born in South Asia. Five respondents describe themselves as ‘growing up’ in Australia, five respondents lived overseas during their childhoods (before the age of ten) in places such as New Zealand and Kuwait, while the other two participants moved from India to Australia in their adulthood (over the age of 21). Six respondents articulated that they were first generation migrants to Australia, while the other six were born in Australia and therefore second generation.

As for nationality, two respondents identified as Australian, two identified as Indian, two identified as Indian New Zealander, two identified as Indian Australian, two identified as mixed-race Anglo Indian, one identified as mixed Indian/Nepali, and one identified herself as Australian mixed-race. The group was religiously diverse; four members of the study described themselves as agnostic, three atheist, two Christian and three Hindu. Each of the respondents also had differing frequencies in which they wore traditional South Asian dress: two wore South Asian dress a few times a month, four wore such styles once a month, three once a year and three stated that they very rarely wore South Asian traditional dress. About half of my respondents were recruited through personal connections, while the other half were people recruited from the ‘South Asian Dreamboat’ Facebook page who I had not met prior to the study.

As I already had a personal connection with many respondents, I could predict their general opinion on Indo chic, and their willingness to participate in this study indicated a certain level of commitment to having an opinion about Indo chic. The timing of these ethnographic interviews in 2018 also impacted the kind of interviews I had. The peak of Indo chic in its most recent iteration was roughly between 2012 and 2015, with only a scattering of significant Indo chic moments occurring in pop culture after 2015. I hypothesise that had I conducted my ethnographic interviews with the same group of participants during the years in which Indo chic was at its height; I would have yielded very different responses. Specifically, I think that the responses I would have received would have been more vitriolic in tone, as my respondents would have been witnessing Indo chic, both online and offline, more frequently. In Chapter Three I will expand on the instances in which my respondents encountered Indo chic and how it affected them, but at this stage it is important to note that in

2018, my respondents had had time to reflect on the trend without it being present in their daily lives.

The same is true for the participants recruited from the ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ Facebook page. My recruitment blurb was posted on the main message board of the page to the groups 267 South Asian members and around thirteen replied to the post saying they would be interested. In Chapter Four of this thesis, I examine the ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ Facebook page alongside other diasporic South Asian online spaces where Indo chic has been discussed. However, I will briefly introduce the group here as I recruited many of my participants from this group, significantly impacting the type of responses I received during my ethnographic study.

The ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ Facebook page is a virtual space comprising of 267 South Asian women (as of October 2021) majority of whom live in Australia, but the group includes some members from other anglophone nations such as the United States and Canada. From a cursory look at the members who are most active posting on the page, most of the group members are young women, within the 18 – 35 age range, which is reflected in the age of my participants recruited from the group. Participants Asha, Rena, Jana, Kela and Vina were recruited via my post in the group, and they were between the ages of twenty and twenty-five. I could group this cluster of participants as all being active social media users who belong to multiple social media communities focused on an aspect of their identity. In addition to being a part of the ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ group, these participants took part in online groups dedicated to feminism, queer groups and groups organised around their activities at university. All of these participants also mentioned belonging to other South Asian diasporic groups online clustered around cultural activities (such as *Bharatanatyam*, a type of Indian dance) and also anti-racist political activities beyond the South Asian diaspora.

Mixed-race / Mixed Feelings

Acting as researcher and interviewer for this study I was acutely aware of my body and how I presented when walking into these interviews. Something I had not reflected on until recently, however, was how my body affected the participants I recruited from the ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ group. As mentioned above, I made a post on the main ‘feed’ of the group page, introducing myself as an Anglo Indian researcher interested in Indo chic. Accompanying the post was my name and my profile picture. I had not considered that my respondents would judge my mixed, white-passing appearance before I met my participants in person to conduct the interview; before I was able to explain my particular mixed-ness and my relationship to my desi-ness and my whiteness. However, my profile picture featured me while I was on holiday in Hong Kong a year prior where my facial features and skin colour were visible in detail.

Central to cultural appropriation critiques of Indo chic were the personal stories of young, second generation South Asian women who had experienced, as they saw it, racial othering at the hands of particular Indo chic items, such as the Bindi. Indo chic items, many said, were something that they wore in childhood, and paid the price of ridicule and othering by their (mostly white) peers simply for wearing such items. The Indo chic item, therefore, developed a negative affect distinct from that of its significance in their family and the wider South Asian culture in which they were located. Because of this, I was concerned that my white passing appearance and mixed-raced identity would position myself not as a fellow South Asian who empathised with their experiences, but perhaps a white perpetrator of said trauma.

As most of my respondents considered themselves politically engaged in women of colour (and specifically South Asian) politics online (and in person in some cases), I felt like most of

the participants were positively inclined towards me as a mixed-race person, and only one other participant besides Viola, a fellow white passing Anglo Indian woman named Belle, seemed unsure of my South Asian-ness. I do not know if my profile picture deterred members from the 'South Asian Dreamboats' group who would be willing to speak to a researcher about Indo chic. However, considering the racial optics of the situation, I feel confident to hypothesise that some members of the group would be more inclined to speak about this topic to a researcher who was not mixed, or less white passing. Half of my respondents were mixed-race, and all were recruited via personal networks and online spaces. In the interviews with mixed participants, my racial phenotype worked to my advantage as I could firmly cement my status as an 'insider researcher', sharing personal experiences that aligned with my participants when they spoke of the particulars of critiquing Indo chic while mixed.

Belle was the only respondent in her thirties, and as such she fit in between the two demographic groups of young millennial respondents under the age of twenty-five and the older respondents who were in their fifties to their seventies. Belle was also an outlier in that she was a white passing, mixed-race person who had apolitical opinions about Indo chic. She did not have the same intergenerational conversations in her household that many of my participants had had, as well as myself, as her mother is not Indian. Her mother is white Australian; her father is Indian. This affected the connection she had to the Indian cultural items that are staples of Indo chic – such as fashion - as these items are worn by South Asian women. Without that maternal connection to feminised Indian cultural items Belle explained that Indo chic became more of a theoretical issue to her as a mixed race person. She said 'because my mum isn't Indian, even though I am, does that mean she can't wear a sari to my wedding?' which, she explained, was an Indian wedding as she was marrying an Indian man. Belle took issue with the music videos we watched together, but because she disliked the

Western gaze of India and the reiteration of ubiquitous images of Holi, impoverished-looking Indian children and Ganesh. She did not take issue with Iggy Azalea or Beyoncé wearing Indo chic, but she said that she thought they ‘didn’t look good in a sari’. The mixed participants who were most alike to Belle were Asha and Tami, who were both ambivalent to images of Indo chic, not because it did not incite feelings of discomfort within them, but because they felt as if they did not have the right to be vocal about it as mixed-race, South Asian Australians.

Sabrina, Jasmine, and Viola were the remaining mixed-race participants and all three had cemented opinions about Indo chic. Viola was pro Indo chic and did not see the trend as cultural appropriation, but rather cultural exchange, and talked at length about her distain for ‘political correctness’. Sabrina and Jasmine sat on the opposite end of the spectrum, arguing that cultural appropriation of South Asian cultural items is a manifestation of racism and colonialism, and they felt confident critiquing the trend while being mixed-race. Sunaina Maira has argued that Indo chic has become ‘a site for waging the contest of ethnic authenticity (‘more Indian/less confused than thou’) where tradition, as in classical arts, is defined against hybridity and the disavowal of pure origins’ (2000, 351). The concept of authenticity haunts this thesis and is expressed in various ways by my both mixed, and non-mixed respondents in the chapters that follow.

Conclusion

An ethnographic approach to cultural appropriation and Indo chic is the most effective way of exploring how the trend makes diasporic South Asian women *feel*. In both academic, and public spaces, cultural appropriation has been debated in relation to whiteness. The question of whether it is ethical for a white person to wear *x* cultural item or practice *x* cultural practice

from a minority group continues to appear in the public sphere. However, by speaking to diasporic South Asians as a part of this study I am exploring the trend as it affects South Asian people living in Australia, not the U.S., which is where most ethnographic studies of this type have taken place.

This project contributes to existing literature on cultural appropriation by expanding the parameters of said scholarship in examining the most recent iteration of Indo chic and South Asian diasporic responses to it, on and offline. In undertaking this study, I follow in the steps of other South Asian scholars (such as Kalra and Hutnyk 1998; Maira 2000; Durham 2001 and Mannur and Sahni 2011) situating the issue of cultural appropriation as something that affects people of colour (POC) rather than exploring this issue in relation to how white people understand, or do not understand it.

In this chapter I have outlined my research design, emphasised my mixed methodological approach, and introduced my participants. This thesis uses ethnographic interviews, auto-ethnography, and textual analysis to present a complex, diverse representation of the feelings South Asian Australian women have towards Indo chic. I was able to do this by positioning myself as an insider/outsider researcher while approaching this scholarly subject. As an Anglo Indian Australian woman I was able to access South Asian Australian spaces, and make connections with my participants who, like me, have had their cultural identity disrupted by the popularisation of Indo chic.

CHAPTER THREE:

‘I just don’t feel comfortable wearing traditional dress in Australia’: Indo chic in Fashion and South Asian Australians relationships to South Asian clothing

Introduction

Like many of my millennial respondents, the first time I heard the term Indo chic, it was associated it with two things: blissfully unaware white women wearing Indian accessories in fashion magazines and at music festivals, and online responses to these women by diasporic South Asian women angered by their practices, which they deemed culturally appropriative. In 2013, I read a Tumblr post by a friend who was active in women of colour feminist politics online and at university. She was not South Asian but was nonetheless outraged by the popularisation of Indo chic and other non-western styles such as kimonos and cornrows being displayed on the bodies of mostly white women at music festivals and night clubs. I initially dismissed her complaints, feeling like she was ‘making a big deal over nothing’. On reflection, this reaction was probably due to several factors; my mixed-race identity, my ability to be perceived as white, and how infrequently I wore the Bindi or Henna/Mehndi, which were the main Indo chic items listed in her blog post.

I didn’t think much about this post until I went to a local music festival and saw a group of girls all wearing examples of Indo chic. They were fashionable, white, and wearing Bindis. A few weeks later I went to a club and saw even more white girls wearing Bindis. Finally, I went to a feminist party organised by a queer activist group at university, and once again Bindis were everywhere, on non-South Asian women. This strikingly consistent pattern compelled me to read more about cultural appropriation online, seeking out news articles and blog posts to get a clear picture of the issue. I then sought out diasporic South Asian authored content about Indo chic, and the more stories I read about the trend, the more I became convinced that culturally appropriated fashion trends were wrong. They were offensive, inconsiderate, and frankly, unnecessary.

The earnest, intimate storytelling by diasporic South Asian women online compelled me to consider the harm a simple fashion trend was doing to many of these women around the Western world. The decision to not wear a Bindi to a festival just seemed like a small sacrifice to me, knowing that wearing one might be harmful to someone who may have experienced racial violence or bullying while wearing that same item. One could just wear another accessory, some nice earrings perhaps, and not offend or hurt someone. As a diasporic South Asian person, I am of course entitled to wear the Bindi, or any Indian clothing comfortably, but I would not wear it in the deconstructed ‘trendy’ way it was being worn by non-South Asian people wearing Indo chic, as previously discussed.

I then became curious that cultural appropriation had not been discussed before in the mainstream Australian public sphere. I remembered my childhood in the 1990s when I wore Chinese-style dresses, tops and pyjamas and adored them. Why did no one find a mixed-race Australian desi child wearing a Qipao to be strange? I decided to ask my mother what she thought about this, and she had vastly different ideas to me. She thought 1990s Indo chic was a little odd, yes, but not offensive. When I asked my grandma what she thought, she said ‘Let them wear it! Bindis are beautiful and should be for everyone’. The difference in these generational opinions about Indo chic, as well as what appeared to be the significant role of the internet in introducing masses of millennials to the concept of cultural appropriation, fascinated me. This sparked the development of my research and compelled me to interview other diasporic South Asian women to hear their experiences with Indo chic.

This chapter explores Indo chic as it manifests in fashion, and the shifting, changing relationship my respondents have had to various manifestations of this trend. I begin by using fashion theory to examine the symbolic role that South Asian cultures play in the Western

fashion world. This work illustrates that contemporary Indo chic is not a new or original trend. This historical overview of fashion in South Asia and the West is followed by a discussion of twentieth century iterations of the trend – the subcultural ‘Hippie chic’ of the 1960s and the mainstream ‘Asian chic’ of the 1990s. I draw on these past iterations to contextualise and better understand the discursive framing and consumption patterns of Indo chic in its contemporary form - as ‘good’ festival fashion for example. I end by introducing the reactions of my respondents when they first encountered Indo chic in fashion, exploring how their relationship to traditional dress, and by extension, traditional Indian culture, informed their reactions.

Cultural Appropriation, Orientalism, and the Original Indo chic

In 2022 as I write this, the topic of fashion has become intensely and unavoidably political for consumers. An individual’s political affiliation and level of ‘wokeness’² is quickly discerned through their acceptance of, or failure to, comply with new, shifting societal rules about cultural appropriation in fashion. Due to the now overwhelming amount of public discourse on this topic, those who choose to wear Indo chic and similar styles are making a political statement that they are comfortable ‘culturally appropriating’ or consuming fashions belonging to a cultural group other than their own (Awad 2020; Cadeca 2014; Kale 2016; Khoptar 2018). That political statement could associate the wearer with white supremacy at the most extreme, or their rejection of ‘political correctness’ at the least.

As noted in the introduction, the term ‘cultural appropriation’ was first used in lawsuits against non-indigenous manufacturers and merchants of first nation cultural artefacts in the

² Francesca Sobande (2019) describes ‘woke’ culture as ‘including reference to acts of resistance and solidarity in response to systemic racism, capitalism and structural oppression, and has been the source of many media pieces that explore issues concerning privilege and social justice’ (Sobande 2019, 7).

United States. In the book *From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation*, Richard A. Rogers (2006) defines cultural appropriation in the following way:

In the broadest sense cultural appropriation is the adoption or taking of specific elements (such as ideas, symbols, artefacts, images, art, rituals, icons, behaviour, music, styles) of one culture by another culture (20).

However, Rogers' definition of 'cultural exploitation' below is more in line with how cultural appropriation is understood in its common lay usage:

cultural exploitation is the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture without substantive reciprocity, permission, compensation, understanding, or appreciation (20).

The usage of the term 'cultural appropriation' in relation to mainstream fashion emerged online in 2012 in response to the widespread wearing of Native American headdresses by non-Native Americans at music festivals. This sparked debate around the wearing of other non-Western items by those who do not belong to the cultures in which these items originated. The slogan against cultural appropriation employed by the diasporic South Asian activists featured in this thesis is 'my culture is not your costume' which implies the unequal power dynamics at play when a person wears culturally significant clothing from an ethnic or racial minority group. As noted in the previous chapter, these diasporic South Asian activists spoke of their personal experiences with cultural appropriation and Indo chic online, interpreting the trend as a harmful consumption practice that simultaneously breeds xenophobia against diasporic South Asians and fetishises South Asian culture in dominant Western culture. More specifically, they argued that Indo chic styles Orientalise non-

diasporic South Asian bodies, rendering them ‘exotic’ and ‘mystical’ when clothed in these styles.

This argument — and the contemporary Indo chic styles they critique — allude to orientalist tropes that have been performed in the West since the first encounters between European and Asian people spanning back to ancient times. Contemporary expressions, however, can be traced to popular late 19th century masquerade parties that originated in the royal courts of France and Britain (Geczy 2013). Attendees were invited to wear the bright and extravagant, exotic costumes of Oriental ‘others’ brought back from expeditions to the Middle East and South Asia. Along with these costumes came tales of the Orient — stories of deviant, mystic cultures that were deemed radically different from the West as Harold Koda (2004) explain below:

the early discoverers and traders sought a land never to inhabit, ever to see as different, a perfect ‘other’ warranting Western supremacy and segregation and vested with exotic mystery (120).

On June 24, 1911, French fashion designer Paul Poiret held a ‘Thousand and Second Night’ party to celebrate his new Oriental-inspired fashion line, the first to be produced in Europe. Guests were invited to dress in ‘Oriental’ costume, his grand fête marking the creation of a party theme popular in Paris. Peter Wollen (2005) attributes the popularity of this trend to Poiret’s strong influence over French high society. He also considers the influence of a new French translation of Dr J.C Mardrus’s canonical story of the Orient, *The Thousand and One Nights*, which was published volume by volume in the leading journal, *The Revue Blanche* from 1899 to 1904 (73).

Edward Said’s (1994) theory of Orientalism is fundamental in ascertaining the contours of ‘the Orient’ as a representational system in this historical period and others that followed and

continue to the present day. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Said examines the Occident's (the west) imagined Orient (Asia and the Middle East) and the subsequent demarcation of the Orient as something 'irredeemably different and inferior to the west' (Lewis 2002, 17). As an observable yet unofficial cultural formation, Orientalism manifests itself in art, photography, literature and, with Poiret's 1911 collection, the introduction to fashion. Said argues that Orientalist texts paint the Orient and its people as fundamentally Other — culturally and ontologically — to the West, which works to support colonial domination of those regions. Orientalism exists as a binary between the West and East; however, it is also dialectic and does not consider the actual realities, histories, and cultures of Asia. Instead, Asia and its people are constructed through projections of Western fears and anxieties. Integral to the pervasiveness of Orientalism is the repetition of Orientalist tropes in Western media texts, which inform and permeate collective western consciousness, rendering the 'East' and its people as tacitly non- or sub-human. Of this he argues:

every writer on the Orient assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself (Said 1994, 46).

This media tradition of relying on a normalised fantasy of the Orient that is repeated in various forms is of particular importance to this thesis, since South Asian nations function as a metonym for generic 'Oriental mysticism' in the visual representations of Indo chic opposed by South Asian activist groups. For the French aristocrats of Poiret's time, South Asian settings, people, and culture evoked feelings of unfamiliarity that were dangerous, thrilling, and freeing. At these parties the same aristocrats then literally embodied these imagined characteristics through Oriental clothing, which allowed them to act outside of the constricting cultural values that dictated their daily life. Fashion theorist Adam Geczy (2013)

notes that Orientalism ‘dominated the fashion world and the decorative arts’ (143) and in the wake of Poiret’s fête, the Orient became even more popular.

Inge Boer (2002), in his work on Oriental masquerade and 17th Century *turqueries* notes that Orientalist texts do not represent the East, but in fact, reflect Western values and societal pressures. As Harold Koda (2004) explain:

The early discoverers and traders sought a land never to inhabit, ever to see as different, a perfect ‘other’ warranting Western supremacy and segregation and vested with exotic mystery (Koda 2004, 120).

Geczy (2013) argues that the early key players of the Western fashion industry found both creative inspiration, and use, for many of the resources of the East. He attributes the Orient’s textile resources - including Indian silks and cotton – as pivotal to the production of the designs of the ‘atelier-creator’ houses of the late 1800s. While the earliest trade relations between South Asia and Europe date back to 3000 BC, India had a monopoly on the European fabric market by the late 17th century. However, with the rise of the British-run East India Trading Company, India’s trade power began to decline, and by the mid-19th century, Britain and Portugal had developed fabric-making technology that endangered India’s competitive edge in the European market. On this point, Ann Rosalind Jones, Jyotsna Singh and Mihoko Suzuki (2006) note:

English endeavours to open trade routes for commercial profit were recorded as narratives of wonder and discovery in which India emerges through the prism of the exotic and barbaric (26).

India began to occupy a more symbolic role in the European fashion market, becoming a source of inspiration for European designers wanting to create original designs. At this stage, Geczy is quick to mention that the British influence over India during this time meant that

Indian fashion creators used their introduction to Western styles to their own creative delights. He cites the example of a more traditional South Asian dress, the Kurta suit, that was re-imagined and re-created within India with a clear Western influence through the decidedly Western fabrication. This suggests a cross-cultural flow in which India was finding conceptual inspiration in British fashions too. However, as Emma Tarlo (1996) points out, South Asian people during this time had to consider complicated intersections before wearing Western fashions. Clothing in this period was a tool for Indian men of the higher castes to assert their social status and engage with the British colonial settlers by wearing Western-style business suits, intended to illustrate the legitimacy of their business engagements. These efforts were unsuccessful as British colonisers saw themselves as superior regardless of what their Indian counterparts were wearing (Tarlo 1996, 49).

This practice could be read as a part of what Homi Bhabha (1994) refers to as ‘mimicry’ in which a colonial subject adopts the cultural practices of the coloniser. However, as Bhabha explains, mimicry is an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners, ideas, and in this case – clothing. Therefore mimicry is copying with a difference, not an authentic copy. He argues that colonial discourse, at once demands both similarity (assimilation, or an attempt at it), and difference in colonial subjects which highlights the superiority of the coloniser and in turn, the inferiority of the colonised (Bhabha 1994, 88). High caste Indian women practiced what Bhabha refers to as hybridity - a blending of multiple cultures - by wearing both Western and Indian clothing together, integrating British fashion staples such as blouses, petticoats, and shoes to their traditional Indian wardrobes. These hybrid styles allowed Indian women to retain their traditional standards of modesty while still following international (European) fashions. However, these hybridised dress practices were soon discouraged by the Indian nation-state. Indian women were entrusted with the responsibility of retaining ‘pure’

Indian culture (Tarlo 1996, 46). Women embodied the ‘real’ India whereas men were able to use Western dress as a tool to illustrate their social mobility, especially when dealing with British imperial powers (Chatterjee 1993). This history foregrounds the contemporary relationship, and the sense of ownership South Asian women have to their traditional dress in the cultural appropriation debate online.

Indo chic 1.0 and 2.0: 1960s Hippies and 1990s Asian Chic

In the 1960s specific South Asian fashions were fragmented and absorbed into everyday Western fashions birthing what is now known as Indo chic. Born of bohemianism, the 1960s subculture of Hippiedom embraced South Asian fashion, culture, and spirituality. The bohemianism of this period is specific to the cultural and political context of the United States, as countercultural youth movements emerged in response to the Vietnam War. The Hippie subculture was associated with rock music, drug use, sexual freedom and linked to political movements including civil rights, women’s rights, and queer activisms. Anita Mannur and Pia Sahni (2011) argue that it is essential to contextualise the hippies use of South Asian fashion symbols within their broader ideological mission. Mannur and Sahni equate this time to the hippies’ exploration for a ‘real’, ‘authentic’ India through which they were able to find meaning in their lives. The so-called authentic India they pursued, however, was one forged through the Orientalist tropes already naturalised in the West (Prashad 2000: 53). Vijay Prashad (2000) attributes this search for spirituality to the impact of the consumer-driven culture of the West, particularly the United States, as a ‘tonic against the disaffection produced first by abundance and then by economic instability’ (55) where the imagined promise of India was once again placed in direct opposition to the alienating, dissatisfying, consumer culture of the West. South Asian spirituality, music and fashion became fetishised objects in this period, discursively framed as evoking a spiritual and mythical India that was

inherently and irrevocably different from the American culture from which many hippies came. Through wearing the Bindi, a paisley print or a Nehru jacket, Hippies were able to express their alternative philosophies to the broader American public.

Unlike the Indo chic of the 1960s, the Indo chic of the 1990s was consumed as a mass trend rather than a subcultural style. Bindi and Henna/Mehndi were staples of the 1990s club rave scene in North America; brought to the West by foreigners participating in the rave scene of Goa, India. The foreign Goa rave scene began in the mid-1970s and was so popular with tourists that a music genre emerged, one that semantically links the city with partying - Goan trance. In 1995, Goa trance music became available for consumption in most major European (especially British) music stores (Saldhana 2007, 4). The situating of Indo chic in this realm of music and partying links to previous Western consumption of the trend observable in both 20th century Oriental masquerade parties and the 1960s Hippie music festival scene.

Postcolonial scholar Sunaina Maira (2000) argues that the pervasiveness of 1990s Indo chic, especially amongst youth cultures, could be read as a nod to the 1960s dissatisfaction with Western consumer culture also experienced by 1990s North American youth (360). Alternatively, Jones and Leshkowich (2003) theorise that the popularity of the trend was a Western Orientalising trend that helped to emasculate the rising economic powers of Asian nations such as India, China, and Japan. In this way, they argue 1990s Indo chic functions as a spectacle of the commodity fetish, through which ideas of Western cultural superiority and neutrality are reinforced, and symbols of Asia are made strange.

Meanwhile, Durham (2001), Maira (2000), and Hamid (2015) attribute the overwhelming mainstream popularity of 1990s Indo chic to the pop icon Madonna. Madonna's 1998 album *Ray of Light* was inspired by her spiritual conversion to Hinduism after she had her first child. Wrapped up in her conversion was a subsequent taste for everything 'Indian'. By this

time Madonna had spearheaded many popular fashion trends, and her wearing of a hybrid South Asian, and Western Indo chic style was no exception. Through her championing of the trend, Madonna offered the audience of the 1990s a picture of South Asian culture, and a new, exciting, chic style to be consumed. No longer foreign, no longer Other, the Bindi and other Indo chic staples were made familiar to Western audiences who had previously little exposure to South Asian culture.

After Madonna, a litany of Western celebrities embraced the style as conceptual costumes for musical performances, as well as fashion pieces incorporated into everyday clothing. Durham (2003) lists celebrities: Madonna, Natalie Portman, Nicole Kidman, Gwen Stefani, Bjork, Liv Tyler, Winona Ryder, Jenifer Aniston, Lisa Kudrow and Kate Moss as having worn chicIndo chicIndo chic styles to events they were photographed at. For instance, Princess Diana was exalted for how fashionably she wore the Shalwar-kameez in Britain after returning from a royal trip to Pakistan in 1997 (Jones and Leshkowich 2003), and Gwen Stefani's Bindi outfits were hailed as an inventive and fresh punk, pop rock style in the early 2000s (Matlow 2007). This popular celebrity trend then trickled down to the level of everyday consumption as Indo chic items were designed, produced, and distributed by mainstream American fashion retailers such as GAP and American Eagle (Durham 2001).

Scholarship on Indo chic can be traced to analyses of the 1990s manifestation of the trend, with most work on the topic published in the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. It is also from this literature that the term Indo chic is derived. This iteration of Indo chic emerged within a wider fashion trend of 'Asian chic', which is a hybrid Western/Asian fashion trend including mainly Western style clothing with small elements of Asian signifiers. Popular clothing during this time included Chinese calligraphy, and Ganesh print T-shirts, cheongsam style silk shirts, and sarong style midi skirts. Scholarly work borne of the 1990s iteration of Indo

chic further explores the motivations for consumption of this trend through analysis of advertisements of the time (Maira 2000; Durham 2001; Leshkowich and Jones 2003; Leshkowich, Nissen 2003), which claim to sell the consumer not simply a fashion item, but an *experience*.

Sunaina Maira's (2000) study encapsulates this concept perfectly through her analysis of the 1990s Indo chic fashion catalogue advertisement that reads 'It's not a look, It's a feeling'. This text headlined an advertisement that featured a white model wearing Indo chic with Henna on her hands and feet and the Bindi on her forehead. Maira deduces that this advertisement succinctly describes what is so desirable about Indo chic to the North American, non-South Asian audience it targets. She states:

The question, why Indo chic, is perhaps easier to answer given the almost luridly Orientalist framing of Indian signifiers, but certainly India occupies a somewhat different niche in the [1990's] American cultural economy than it did in the 1960s. India may still be used to connote the counter-cultural ethos of 'chill out,' but the fashion catalog credo, 'It's not a look, it's a feeling,' gives away part of the answer (360).

Maira here is situating 1990s Indo chic as distinct from its 1960s counterpart, referencing the role that the latter plays in the manifestation of the former. She hints at the differing economic status of 1990s India, as India was undergoing strong economic growth, pioneering new industry (such as information technology and associated manufacturing), and growing its middle class. She also refers to a shift in the cultural imaginings of India in the United States that differs from the 1960s psychic imagining of India. In doing this, she alludes to the paradoxical consumption of Indo chic styles. Part of the desirability of Indo chic is that the South Asian items included in the trend refer to an untouched, undeveloped mystic Orient

through its ‘luridly orientalist’ (Maira 2000, 60) signifiers. However, this symbolic conjuring is at odds with the actual realities of contemporary South Asia and how the item is worn in its original culture. Arjun Appadurai (1990) has referred to this phenomenon through what he terms as a ‘cultural economy of distance’ in which foreign goods are valued as desirable and fashionable in the West because they exist at a cultural remove. Therefore, in the 1990s when a consumer consumes an Indo chic style, they do so thinking that they are consuming an authentic item from South Asia. However, as Western markets have determined the value of the item in the context in which they consume it, what they are really consuming is a physical token of the Western idea of South Asia, not an authentic South Asian item.

Another important element of 1990s Indo chic consumption is that Indo chic had been ‘out’ of style since at least the late 1960s. Indo chic returned as a part of a larger trend that included Hippie styles outside of Indo chic including flared pants, beading, embroidery, and crochet. In consuming 1990s Indo chic then, the consumer is similarly declaring their difference from ‘mainstream’ Western culture, rebelling through electing to wear items that fall outside of the Western cultural norm - wearing clothing items that may be considered unorthodox or even unfashionable/not stylish by a large segment of the population, especially older generations.

Western ‘Fashion’ v Non-Western ‘Clothing’

In 1978, Ted Polhemus and Lynn Procter developed the term ‘anti-fashion’ to describe systems of dress that sit outside of a Western context and therefore were ignored by traditional anthropological scholarship. To transform ‘anti-fashion’ into ‘fashion’, Polhemus and Procter propose that these anti-fashion items undergo a process of ‘Fashionisation’, which occurs when these clothing items begin to function relative to Western fashion. Either

by being adopted and absorbed by Western fashion powers, or, by engaging with the West through transnational trade, for example the hybridisation of the Kurta suit, as mentioned earlier. These power structures have direct ties to economic access and cultural capital but are also impacted by the nature of fashion as a performed practice (Polhemus and Procter 1978, 245). Therefore, who has and does not have access to fashion today is determined by privilege as much as it was in the period examined by Polhemus and Procter.

As fashion has developed as a medium for self-identity, self-articulation and social comparison, fashion also helps the wearer to find communities of visual belonging (Cannon 1998, 6). In a contemporary global setting, fashion consumers negotiate the choice of what to wear under the influence of major fashion players – designers, celebrities, fashion editors and the fashion media, who articulate the value of a particular item of clothing for the consumer market. Most of these major fashion powers are still situated in the West, with the European and American fashion industries still holding the most influence globally. However, that is not to say that there are not successful fashion industries elsewhere around the globe, with Asian fashion markets attracting large groups of consumers and prolific fashion production. Thuy Lin Nguyen Tu (2010) argues that even within the West, Asian American fashion designers (she names Vera Wang, Anna Sui, Alexander Wang, and Phillip Lim to name a few) are able to capitalise on the trendiness of Asia. When these designers were beginning their careers, in the 1990s, she points out that they were able to ‘access Asianness as a resource’ (8) during the peak of ‘Asian chic’. Tu notes that designers such as these have been able to translate their ethnic identity into connections with garment suppliers and producers from their ancestral states, while also receiving incentives provided by Asian states and corporations, to produce collections aimed at both Western and Asian markets.

While these designers have been able to use their ethnic identities to their advantage as fashion producers the same cannot be said for Asian fashion consumers. Beverly Skeggs (2004) has concluded that when engaging with fashion, the bodies of people of colour (POC) are always in a process of being located. Specific identities are projected onto them, requiring them to display their ‘origins’, arguing that these ‘identity politics are used to attribute locatedness to others in order to generate a means of fixing in place’ (30). If whiteness maintains hegemony through framing itself as neutral through an absence of race (Dyer 1997, 45) then a diasporic South Asian body wearing a culturally appropriated trend such as Indo chic changes the way in which that fashion is read.³ When a diasporic South Asian person wears an Indo chic trend the clothing signifies and marks their race, as opposed to their fashionability. They are read as wearing traditional dress, i.e., not ‘having fashion’, despite their direct engagement with, and performance of, a Western fashion trend. As Meenakshi Durham argues, ‘[it would be... naïve in the extreme to consider representation in fashion as a purely aesthetic site; its links to capital and identity render it an arena of power and politics’ (2001, 205), illustrating the difference with which white bodies and South Asian bodies engage with Indo chic. She argues that central to this trend is not South Asian-ness but whiteness, illustrating that images of Indo chic almost always feature white bodies over non-white or South Asian bodies which is a defining characteristic of Orientalism (2001, 221).

This inequity is what fuels the negative affect of the diasporic South Asian women who participate in online discussions to protest what they see as cultural appropriation of South Asian fashions. It is also in the same online spaces that the ‘cultural appropriation vs cultural appreciation’ debate occurs – where a specific trend is debated by people who think the trend is culturally appropriative (disrespectful to the original culture) or culturally appreciative (an

³ ‘Asian Chic’ is Jones and Leshkovich’s term to describe the mainstream 1990’s women’s fashion trend that incorporated styles such as sarong skirts, Ganesh-print T-shirts, Bindi, Chinese calligraphy printed shirts, cheongsam style silk shirts and kimonos.

homage, or respectful admiration of the original culture). Min-Ha Pham's (2017) work on fashion, plagiarism and legality theorises this debate in a way that is helpful in contextualising the responses from the contributors to movements such as #reclaimtheBindi. Pham starts by acknowledging that this debate is steeped in affect and argues that feelings are so fundamental to the issue of fashion plagiarism that even the copyright laws of intellectual property lawyers are framed and understood in terms of emotion. She notes that in a *Time* article titled 'When Native American Appropriation is Appropriate' legal scholar Susan Scafidi argues that the measure of a 'good' or 'bad' copy of a clothing item significant to a particular culture is the emotion it arouses in those who consume it (2016).

'Cultural Appreciation', Pham argues, puts too much weight on the designers' feelings – their intentions, their adoration, their good feelings – and no weight to the other feelings that fall outside of this. 'Cultural Appreciation' is used as a defence when accusations of cultural appropriation are levelled against a person or brand. The associated party will talk about their love for the original culture, and the item, and situate their copying as a kind of homage to the item and culture from which it originated. This kind of rhetoric is highly visible in comment sections of social media and news articles on the issue of cultural appropriation in fashion, and reproaches those who critique cultural appropriation for having 'misunderstood' or 'taken out of context' the intention of the designer who created the item. Furthering this logic are accusations of POC taking 'political correctness too far' in their critiques of designers (Pham 2016). This accusation reinforces the power of the supposed (aesthetic, apolitical) intent of the designer over the 'inappropriately politicised' emotions of those who point to the power dynamics underlying fashion production, as well as its reception.

Pham argues that focusing on feelings in this debate obscures the structural power inequalities that underlie the phenomenon. She suggests doing away with the appreciation/appropriation dichotomy for this very reason:

Cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation function as euphemisms that distort to the point of unintelligibility the very thing designers are doing when they ‘appropriate/appreciate’. Rather than continue to rely on these euphemisms, I suggest a different tack. A more precise formulation for these kinds of practices of unauthorized and uncredited fashion copying is what I call ‘Racial Plagiarism’ (2017, 71).

Pham proposes the term ‘Racial plagiarism’ as a more precise analytic framework for understanding and critiquing the kinds of ‘copying’ that happen in fashion and beauty contexts than either of the previous terms – cultural appropriation/appreciation. She prefers this term because it attends to the non-illegal, yet still problematic status of the type of copying being done when an outsider designer, or corporation, creates and sells fashion items that are ‘inspired’ by the cultures of POC, linking the term with other forms of racial and economic exclusions which are also not illegal but discriminatory to POC. Additionally, Pham (2017) argues that it demonstrates how non-legal constructions of authorship and copying produce racialised understandings of creativity and criminality.

Although I agree that this term is useful in the ways Pham intends to use it within a legal context, it does not provide a way to understand *why* this issue incites such profoundly divisive and intense emotion from those who engage with it. The emotions articulated by the ‘cultural appreciators’ can be an instructive site for examining how white creativity is linked to privilege and power in the Western fashion world. However, my interest here is

understanding the affectual response of the POC whose cultures are being ‘racially plagiarised’ — in this case, diasporic South Asians who are angered by the popularisation of Indo chic. Centring the perspectives of POC is crucial to understanding the mechanisms of racism, as the perspectives of minoritised racial and ethnic groups are often dismissed, misunderstood, or undervalued in the dominant culture (Smith et al. 2007). In this spirit I explore the perspectives of my diasporic South Asian respondents in the next section as they explain their complicated relationships to traditional dress, including the very items co-opted and re-branded as Indo chic.

Relationships to traditional dress: ‘It doesn’t come naturally to me, to wear Indian clothing in Australia’.

In the interviews I conducted all the millennial respondents spoke to me about traumatic racialised memories around the Bindi and South Asian dress more broadly. A consistent pattern across their responses was a feeling of being ‘othered’ further when wearing traditional dress in Australian society, beyond usual forms of racialisation based on physical attributes like skin colour and phenotype. Most respondents discussed wearing traditional dress to religious festivals, weddings, and other family events — and feeling comfortable wearing this dress in those settings. Some fought with their mothers about how to style the sari, Bindi, Salwar, and other traditional accoutrements, but in general, they believed in the propriety of wearing traditional dress during cultural and familial settings populated almost entirely by other South Asian people.

However, in majority of the White settler spaces they encountered, such as service stations or supermarkets, they felt surveyed, uncomfortable, and misread if they wore traditional clothing. While wearing a sari or salwar, they felt their capacity to assimilate as (mostly)

‘Australian’ disappeared. Participants related to me how their hybridised, Australian identities became literally cloaked by these symbolically loaded garments, and they became perceived as ‘fresh off the boat’ migrants (Asha) and targets of ridicule (Kela and Asha). For those who regularly used fashion as a form of self-expression, traditional dress signalled to the outside world that they were ‘too South Asian’, or ‘more South Asian’ than they felt they actually were. Visually appearing ‘too’ or ‘more’ South Asian exposed them as a racial other to the white gaze, making them more vulnerable to racialised violence.

Expanding on her work in ‘The Cultural Politics of Emotion’, Sara Ahmed in her 2005 article, ‘The Politics of Bad Feeling’ analyses how ‘bad feeling’ helps shape collective national identity. Focusing on emotions such as pain and shame, she illuminates the visceral characteristics of feelings which serve to reinforce particular ‘truths’ that have been buried:

Emotions are powerful as we experience the ‘truth’ of their judgements in the sensations of bodies: for example, in reading the other as bad, I might then be filled up with a bad feeling, which becomes a sign of the truth of the reading (72).

Bad feelings inform us what, and who, is bad. Bad feelings are felt, and in feeling them, they become true to us. She argues that affective ‘bad feeling’ works to align people with other people who share and feel the same ‘bad feeling’ and therefore act upon the ‘bad feeling’ as if it were objective ‘truth’. Ahmed suggests that the politics of bad feeling works in complex ways to align individuals with, and against, others, and that this process of alignment ‘shapes the very surface of collectives’ (2005, 73).

Ahmed begins her argument by emphasising the importance of considering the role emotion plays in our social world. She then argues for the importance of naming felt emotions as it is only by naming emotion that one can discern the subject and object of feeling, and therefore,

whose feelings matter, especially in matters of the state. To illustrate her argument, she uses the example of the 2007 national apology to the stolen generations of Indigenous Australians by the Kevin Rudd government. Ahmed focuses on the ‘bad feeling’ of colonial settler Australians as they grappled with the guilt of historical and present violence committed against Indigenous Australians by their ancestors, and members of their community. As an Australian migrant settler herself, Ahmed includes herself in this population and argues that the bad feeling shared by all non-Indigenous Australians plays into the us/them binary that, once again, privileges the settlers as their ‘bad feeling’ is explored and justified and publicised. She illustrates that, despite best intentions, bad feeling cannot be transformed into good feeling (settler guilt to settler absolution) through the act of saying sorry. However, acknowledging the bad feelings triggered by remembering, recognising, and learning about colonial and racist trauma exposes the violence of histories that have been buried.

Ahmed’s analysis of the political role and value of emotions, especially negative ones, clarifies my participants’ relationships to traditional dress. For millennial diasporic South Asians, Indo chic evoked negative emotions such as shame, anger, and internalised racism. This ‘bad feeling’ then fuelled their political interest and action. It forged and continues to forge communities of solidarity in which ‘bad feeling’ is alleviated through positive effects that are shared, learned, and practised collectively. I will expand on this final point further in Chapter Four of this thesis when I examine the political and cultural work of diasporic South Asian activist communities online, as they effect change, build community and experience feelings of reclamation. For the remainder of this chapter I will focus on the ‘bad feeling’ of shame to analyse participants’ responses to the question: ‘When do you wear traditional dress and how often?’ to examine how ‘bad feeling’ permeates the relationship many of my respondents have to traditional dress. An examination of this relationship helps contextualise

the diasporic South Asian response to Indo chic and the development of online activism that oppose the trend.

Instead of focusing on the shame of the oppressor in this content, I want to examine my participants' experiences of shame triggered by their traditional dress. Ahmed (2005) argues that naming emotion involves differentiating between the subject and object of feeling. Jean-Paul Sartre (1945) discussed shame as fundamental to selfhood, arguing that: '[shame] is the recognition of the fact that I am indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging. I can be ashamed only if my freedom escapes me in order to become an object... beyond any knowledge which I can have (350).

Certain themes emerged among respondents in discussions about traditional dress. I asked all of them how often they wore traditional dress; none wore it on a daily basis, only to cultural, religious, and familial occasions such as weddings, festivals or going to the temple. I then asked if they ever wore certain accessories/ornaments such as the Bindi, Henna, or Indian costume jewellery as part of their western outfits. None of the older respondents (aged 33-75) did, instead saving them for special occasions when they wore full traditional dress. Some of the millennial respondents mentioned that they had recently started wearing, or had considered wearing, the items with Western clothing as they began to feel more comfortable expressing their cultural heritage in this way. This will be explored further in the next chapter.

The level of comfort in wearing any form of traditional dress varied significantly across generations. While older respondents did not elaborate much on how they *felt* about wearing traditional dress, millennial respondents described a wide range of mostly negative feelings

that they associated with this practice, including ambivalence, acceptance, pride, shame, guilt, internalised racism, and fear. Most prominent among these emotions was shame.

Psychoanalytic scholar Melvin Lansky (1999) reaffirms that shame has such a profound psychological effect on people as it about a disruption of how one fits in the world. He argues that shame does not refer to one type of affect but to: ‘a complex emotional system regulating the social bond, that is, signalling disturbance to the status of the self within the social order: what one is before oneself and others; one's standing, importance, or lack of it; one's lovability, sense of acceptability, or imminent rejection, as seen before the eye of the other or the internal self-evaluative eye of the self’ (352). Ahmed also argues that shame is about how the subject appears ‘before and to others’ that is also ‘felt as a matter of being’ (2005, 73). In other words, shame is a negative emotion that is generated through an external gaze but felt so deeply that it affects one’s internal sense of self:

In experiences of shame, the ‘bad feeling’ is attributed to oneself, rather than to an object or another (although the other who witnesses may anger or hurt me), I cannot attribute the other as the cause of the bad feeling (Ahmed 2005, 73).

However, feeling shameful is only possible under the right conditions. According to Elspeth Probyn, one ‘can only be shamed in the presence of someone whose look matters to me, someone I am interested in or even someone who I love’ (2005, 330).

As my diasporic South Asian respondents are racialised subjects in a white majority nation, they must care about the ‘look’ of the mainstream white public as it is they who have influence, power, and control in our society. Indo chic is an issue that has conjured these feelings and thoughts in many diasporic South Asian women living in the West. For many, these conflicted feelings are tied up with experiences of racism and bullying while wearing

traditional dress. This has progressed to the embodiment of internalised racist beliefs about themselves in which the respondents began to feel ashamed of their own ethnic identity.

Ahmed explains that ‘shame certainly involves an impulse to ‘take cover’ and ‘to cover oneself’ but the desire to take cover and to be covered presupposes the failure of the cover; in shame, one desires cover precisely because one has already been exposed to others’ (2005, 75). Significantly, shame lies at the root of other emotions such as anger as Lansky discusses below:

Shame can be seen as latently operative behind other affective phenomena: vengeance, envy, resentment, and other forms of rage, all of which are found regularly to be instigated by an experience of shame or shame-producing self-conscious comparison that remains bypassed or unacknowledged (1999, 535).

The connection between anger and shame contributes to a better understanding of the strong negative emotional response that so many diasporic South Asian women have felt and expressed toward Indo chic. When responding to the question: ‘When do you wear traditional dress?’ Asha said:

When I go to India, I'll wear like a kurta and jeans and maybe a Bindi too if I feel like it, sometimes. I just feel really uncomfortable doing that here [in Australia]. All the power to people who do here but I feel really, yeah, I don't like it... I dunno [sic] it doesn't come naturally to me that I'd wear Indian clothing in Australia. Honestly, I feel like I'm very out of place when I do it [wear Indian clothing in Australia].

Here she articulates feeling a high level of discomfort wearing traditional dress in Australia

because it makes her feel out of place in contrast to how she feels in India. Asha continues:

When I'm wearing Western clothing, I don't think the thought comes naturally to me to wear a Bindi or something with it. Sometimes during a [diasporic South Asian] festival, I have to duck out and do an errand for my mum, and I feel so uncomfortable like everyone's looking at me, and I feel like I'm standing out. And, also, there's this issue where I think 'oh you look like such a fob', and I think that was always an issue for me like looking 'fresh off the boat'. Even though now I'm in a very different mindset I think, unconsciously, like in the back of my mind, I know it's not a good mindset to have but [I think] I look like a recent migrant. In my mind that's sort of what plays around, and I feel uncomfortable. I mean I want to be kind of seen as Australian because that's what I am, I mean that's what I feel like I grew up here that's all I know.

Asha here is reckoning with conflicting feelings of shame for her Indian-ness, guilt for feeling shameful of her Indian-ness and the feeling of being misidentified and understood. Her very identity as a hybridised diasporic South Asian-Australian person is linked to and formed through the shame that comes with this kind of racialisation. This back-and-forth, conflicted way of thinking, and talking, and feeling about diasporic South Asian cultural identity in Australia was echoed in various interviews with my millennial participants, and is a common experience of POC in white majority nations. Wearing Indian clothing in India juxtaposed to wearing Indian clothing in Australia are two different embodied and affective experiences, and this contributes to Asha's conflicted sense of her Indian/Australian identity.

When Asha dreads wearing traditional clothing to 'duck out and do an errand' for her mother, she fears being exposed as a racialised other to others. However, she is racialised as South

Asian (i.e., not ‘Australian’) regardless of what she wears. The experience of wearing traditional dress triggers those earlier repeated moments of racial violence and remind her that she is different, and that she does not belong in mainstream Australian society. Interestingly, Asha talks about being in public space prior to this excursion, but that public space is friendly, diasporic South Asian space where she doesn’t ‘stand out’ in her traditional dress as many of the other attendees are also diasporic South Asian and wearing traditional dress. She only feels shame when she comes into the path of the white Australian gaze. It is interesting to note that Asha aligns herself with Australian-ness rather than Indianness here. She wants to appear Australian as she feels Australian, and the opposite of that is to appear, or to be misread, as a recent migrant. The fear of being misread as a recent migrant speaks to the diasporic South Asian Australian experience of assimilation, discussed earlier in chapters 1 & 2. This belief is something many Australian-born diasporic South Asian women have heard being endorsed in their community as well as expected in Australian dominant culture.

Jasmine and Kela shared similar experiences, and feelings, as Asha. Jasmine shared that, for her, wearing traditional dress feels like a chore forced upon her by her mother. She explains:

I wear traditional dress just literally to family functions, and also when my mum makes me for the temple. And even then, it’s quite a struggle. I try and find the most western one [Sari/Salwar] and we always butt heads when we have to wear those things and my mum is always like ‘traditional’ and I’m like ‘no I don’t want to’ [laughs].

Jasmine mentions that she looks for the ‘most Western’ traditional dress (a determination defined by Jasmine’s own criteria) which signals her hybrid Australian/ diasporic South Asian identity and indicates her preference for Western-style clothing. Additionally, her

discomfort with wearing traditional dress extends to diasporic South Asian populated space as well. She begins her response by stating that her mother ‘makes her’ wear traditional dress to go to the temple, indicating that she wears traditional dress only by familial influence. Jasmine shared that the reason for this extreme discomfort may be because of the racialised bullying she experienced as a child while wearing traditional dress, the Bindi specifically:

I wear [Indian] jewellery and Henna but I don’t wear the Bindi because I have really bad experiences of wearing the Bindi. When I moved from India to New Zealand, the Bindi was something I wore every day in India growing up (she moved to New Zealand at age 7). Even if you’re not Hindu you wear the Bindi – it’s kind of lost all meaning to be honest, people just wear it out of habit. But in New Zealand I got bullied a lot for wearing it, and for a while I didn’t know what they were making fun of me for because I didn’t speak English at the beginning. Then one day I went to a friend’s house after school and they’re Indian, my dad was like ‘oh their family is really traditional why don’t you wear a Bindi?’ and so I said ‘okay’. I was planning to take it off once I left the house, but I forgot and I passed a bunch of these kids in my neighbourhood and they started chasing me down the street, calling me names and just being really mean so ever since then I just don’t wear it in public, even to this day I feel really self-conscious to wear it. This happened when I was ten.

Jasmine was one of the respondents who was most involved in social media activism around cultural appropriation of the Bindi by people who were not South Asian, and this anecdote illustrates why she has such a negative affect associated with that particular part of her ethnic identity. The racial bullying, she experienced as a child growing up in New Zealand while wearing traditional dress has significantly impacted her relationship to traditional dress. She

asserts that today she would incorporate Indian jewellery and Henna into her daily style but still not the Bindi due to the trauma that is associated with this item. Kela also experienced racial bullying as a child centred around the Bindi:

I think it's more being aware that I'm different to everyone else. I remember my first mufti [plain clothes] day in primary school, I was so excited I was going to wear something Indian because my mum thought it'd be nice cause I was new to Australia and I could show everyone else my culture, and I remember this one boy was such an asshole, he was a little boy just being dumb. My relationship to it [traditional dress] has changed over time. I remember I used to actively stay away from it because I used to try to distance myself from it like I used to want to change my name because it sounded too Indian, and my name isn't really even that Indian, but I've realised there's nothing to be ashamed of just because some stupid kid said something stupid once. Today I don't wear traditional dress very often. Especially growing up, I didn't want to wear it and often didn't wear it which has probably got a lot to do with my internalised racism [laughs].

Kela, Jana and Asha have here all described embodying racist thoughts and beliefs about their own culture which developed in response to instances of childhood bullying.

Internalised racism is the 'individual inculcation of the racist stereotypes, images, values, ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one's racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for oneself and/or one's race' (Pyke 2010, 553).

Internalisation occurs when a person of colour accepts as true the dominant racist view of them, and their ethnicity which denigrates, ignores, discounts, misrepresents or eradicates the target groups' culture, language, and history (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). These accounts by my respondents demonstrate that internalised racism affects most people of colour,

particularly those who fit the ‘model minority’ stereotype such as diasporic South Asians. Ahmed explains that ‘in shame, I feel myself to be bad, and hence to expel the badness, I would have to expel myself from myself’ (2005, 73). The stories of young diasporic South Asian women such as Kela and Jasmine make it clear that much of the shame associated with wearing traditional dress stems from an internalised discomfort with their own ethnic identity, which is showcased when they wear traditional dress, particularly in white or non-diasporic South Asian spaces. From the perspective of my participants, traditional dress changes the way they are perceived by others in a way that they do not like.

However, Kela finished her response by stating:

[continued...] I think it wasn’t until this year or last year I realised I was just ignoring that aspect of myself and actually shunning away from it so now I make an effort to actually wear Indian earrings or something, obviously not with jeans and a hoodie, but if I’m going out I’ll wear something Indian, and it’s little things like that that make me feel more present in my culture. It’s so nice.

Kela here gestures toward a reclamation of her Indian culture and identity, away from feelings of shame and internalised racism. This is a common theme amongst millennial diasporic South Asian women who were upset by the cultural appropriation of the Bindi. As illustrated in this chapter, diasporic South Asian women have complicated ‘bad feelings’ about their traditional dress. Feelings of shame and guilt reveal internalised racist beliefs about their own culture and its people as being inferior, other, or simply different from the Australian society with which they identify. Therefore, wearing traditional South Asian clothing is a fashion choice that many diasporic South Asian people living in Australia feel uncomfortable making. Most of the responses from my participants followed a similar format – they began with bad feeling, past and present bad feeling about traditional dress, followed

by a small statement of reclamation. In this pattern I see them trying to convert that ‘bad feeling’ into something else, something radical and political.

Conclusion: Indo chic Fashion

This chapter has provided historical context for Indo chic as a cyclical Western fashion trend from the 1880’s to the present. This context is crucial for understanding the stakes at play in critiques of the trend. There are three distinct historical periods when Indo chic was worn:

19th century French masquerade parties which were attended by the French aristocracy, the 1960s subcultural style of the ‘hippies’, and as a part of the 90s trend ‘Asian chic’ which was a mainstream trend that included other Asian symbols, including those from East and Southeast Asia (Durham 2001; Leshkovich Jones and Nissen 2003). In each of these three periods, a constructed idea of India, or South Asia generally, came to signify an exotic ancient land filled with spirituality and mysticism. Indo chic can be recognised in these three key periods as the wearing of clothing and accessories that originate from South Asia.

Although the items of clothing and/or accessories in favour during each period differ slightly, the Indo chic aesthetic remains consistent, and the contexts in which Indo chic styles are appropriate attire are related to partying (e.g., music festivals, raves, house parties or clubs).

While Nehru jackets, paisley-print fabric, and Henna were most popular during the 1960s iteration of the trend, these styles were also popular in the 90s, in addition to Bindis, Tikkas, saris and fabrics printed with Hindu iconography (such as the Sanskrit ‘om’ or stylised images of Shiva or Ganesh). Present day Indo chic combines all these items but can be recognised through the popularity of the Bindi, and to a lesser extent, Henna, and tikka as ‘festival fashion’. The continued rebirthing of this trend throughout modern fashion history illustrates that the idea of an Orientalised India, or South Asia, remains appealing to the Western consumer. Through wearing an Indo chic item, disaffected Western youth distance

themselves from the everyday, and the banal (Jones and Leshkovich 2003; Durham 2001; Maira 2000).

Indo chic is a problematic fashion trend that decontextualises and dehumanises the cultures and people of South Asia, as they become objects of fantasy in the West. This Orientalising impact has affected the diasporic South Asian populations who live in the West as the trend forces them to confront their relationship to their diasporic, hybridised identities. Seeing this trend popularised in the world around them has been particularly hard for diasporic South Asian women living in the west, as most Indo chic items are derived from their traditional dress. Women have acted as the purveyors of culture in South Asia since the region was colonised by the British, and this still exists today with many diasporic South Asian women expected to wear traditional dress to familial and cultural events. As evidenced by my respondents, many diasporic South Asian women enjoy wearing traditional dress in such contexts. However, many feel uncomfortable wearing traditional dress in the context in which Indo chic is consumed and worn by non-South Asians – mainstream Western public space.

For many of my millennial respondents, traditional dress evokes ‘bad feelings’, such as shame and guilt. This is due to the internalised racism many of my respondents have experienced – believing that to be read by the external white Australian gaze as ‘diasporic South Asian’ or ‘fresh off the boat’ is a misrepresentation of their selfhood and an act that can expose themselves to racialised acts of hatred. However, due to the public debates occurring around Indo chic, and the sharing of diasporic South Asian ‘bad feeling’ vocally and publicly, many diasporic South Asian women are feeling more comfortable wearing aspects of their traditional dress with some even feeling a newfound sense of pride in their ethnic and cultural identity as a result. When theorising ‘feeling better’ about bad feeling,

Ahmed articulates:

The recognition of injury re-writes history, and it re-shapes the very ground on which we live. If the violence of what happened is recognised as a violence that shapes the present, that shames the skin of the bodies that shudder and breathe in the present, then the ‘truths’ of history are called into question (2005, 83).

‘Feeling better’ is precisely what diasporic South Asian social media activists attempt to do in their discussions around Indo chic, as I discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

youarenotdesi.tumblr.com: Indo chic Online

Introduction: Feeling bad online

In the years between 2013 and 2016, conversations emerged online in response to the popularisation of Indo chic fashion styles. The conversations often took the form of a debate and two sides developed — those who saw Indo chic as ‘appropriation’ of South Asian cultures and those who saw it as ‘appreciation’ of the same cultures. Numerous op-ed pieces were written with the author explaining and defending their opinion on the trend⁴.

Commenters on private and public posts on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr weighed in, expressing their opinion of the trend. The most publicised opinions about the trend were not expressed by diasporic South Asian people, but non-South Asian people — many of whom were white journalists with large readerships.

This debate was politicised, too. Right-wing commentators, and news sources, saw criticism of Indo chic as ‘political correctness gone mad’ and warned that those who accused others of ‘appropriation’ were attempting to infringe upon personal freedoms.⁵ Alternatively, centre and left leaning publications published opinion pieces by diasporic South Asian women who explained the impact Indo chic has had on diasporic South Asian women. Meanwhile, the debate raged on in the comment sections for these op-eds and other articles written about cultural appropriation in fashion, often concerning the clothing of celebrities.⁶ The celebrity effect will be explored in Chapter Five of this thesis, however for now I want to turn my

⁴ The dominant voices in conversations about cultural appropriation in the Western mainstream media are journalists and commentators with large audiences writing for publications such as those in the fashion press, but also traditional news media sources such as *Fox News (US)*, *The Daily Telegraph (Australia)*, *The Telegraph (UK)* *USA Today*, *News.com.au (Australia)* and *ABC* to name a few.

⁵ The term ‘political correctness’ has its origins as an ironic joke within communist communities to refer to a person who was repeating the official party line. It is a term that has since been adopted by the political right to refer to a sinister leftist social code in which free speech is suppressed in favour of censored speech that favours the interests of oversensitive minorities. Alvares et al (2016) argues that Political correctness (PC), in its current form, is just one of many stock terms and images (‘food stamp nation,’ ‘class warfare,’ ‘right to work,’ ‘pro-abortion,’ ‘welfare queen,’ ‘intelligent design’) that conservatives repeat in unison enough times that it sticks in political discourse, or reframes the discourse entirely... hence, the contemporary meaning of PC was not articulated “y” liberals, progressives, or “lefties;” rather the “r”p’posed ‘PC’ gr’e’ances” of the 1990’ culture wars “were molded by right-wing intellectuals and media blowhards” Alvarez et al 2016, 1) He is talking about this phenomenon in the United States, but this same discourse has been repeated by conservative political voices in other Western nations such as Australia.

⁶ Cultural appropriation here refers to ‘the taking- from a culture that is not one’s own - of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artefacts, history, and ways of knowledge’ (21) a legal definition provided by Susan Scafidi in her 2005 text *‘Who Owns Culture? Appropriation and authenticity in American Law.*

analysis to online activist spaces where diasporic South Asian women were able to talk about Indo chic with other diasporic South Asian women.

As explored in the last chapter, the political and emotional stakes are high for diasporic South Asian women who critique cultural appropriation. Women have acted as markers of history and tradition in South Asian cultures and clothing was one significant way women were expected to illustrate their national and cultural pride (Tarlo 1996). This history, along with everyday experiences of racism in white settler nations such as Australia, the United States, and Canada, coalesce to make cultural appropriation an issue that has compelled many diasporic South Asian women to engage with activist spaces online. This contextual assemblage articulates shared feelings amongst diasporic South Asian women in various parts of the Western world, which has led to a heightened connection to and ownership of South Asian fashion styles. Without an understanding of this experience these feelings may seem unjustifiably entitled. This chapter will illustrate and provide context for the diasporic South Asian perspective on Indo chic as illustrated by the groups of diasporic South Asian activists I will examine online who oppose the trend.

The following analysis of two diasporic South Asian-run spheres of online culture show that conversations about cultural appropriation and Indo chic have led to various forms of community-building for the diasporic South Asian participants of these sites. Through examining the mechanics of this ‘call out culture’⁷, I argue that Indo chic and cultural appropriation can be understood as something akin to a ‘racial ‘microaggression’, defined as racial slights that are offensive or hurtful but fall short of being perceived as ‘full-blown’

⁷ Call-out culture refers to the type of action taken amongst progressives, leftists, and activists to publicly name instances of, or patterns of oppressive behaviour by others. People and/or corporations are most often ‘called out’ for statements and actions that are sexist, racist, ableist, homophobic, ageist and so on. Lisa Nakamura is concerned with who is most likely to engage in call out culture. She states they are: ‘those who call out, educate, protest and design around toxic social environments in digital media’ (2015, 108) assuming that the labour of users who engage in ‘call out culture’ by protesting hateful speech online mirrors what they might normally do in everyday life offline.

racism (Sue et al 2007).⁸ Understanding Indo chic as a microaggression is helpful as it simultaneously accounts for diasporic South Asian perspectives of cultural appropriation as offensive and racist, while many wearers of Indo chic argue that they are *appreciating* South Asian cultures through their cultural appropriation. Many pro-cultural appropriation opinion pieces (Marcus 2017; Rangel 2019; Fraser 2020) have argued that cultural appropriation is a low-stakes, or superficial concern, illustrating widely held public sentiment that it is not as serious as other acts of racism generally condemned in the West. Or rather, that the practice is not racist at all.

In their paper chronicling a taxonomy of the term ‘racial microaggression’, Monica Williams, Matthew Skinta and Renee Martin-Willet (2021) argue that due to the categorisation of microaggressions as ‘subtle and shocking’ (Williams, Skinta & Martin-Willet 2021) moments of racism, they are sometimes minimised as ‘simple cultural missteps or racial faux pas’ (992) by the perpetrator of the offence and sometimes by Western societies at large.

Microaggressions are often committed with no conscious ill-will towards the minoritised group and/or individual the incident concerns and are often contested through the articulation of a positive effect, such as curiosity or appreciation for the minoritised group/individual (Williams 2020). Despite the intent of the perpetrator, microaggressions are not innocuous errors. Rather, they are ‘a form of oppression that reinforces unjust power differentials between groups, whether or not this was the conscious intention of the offender’ (Williams 2020). The reinforcement of these power differences, as well as the everyday nature of microaggressions, define the arduous nature of challenging microaggressions for POC.

⁸ Eschmann et al. extend this definition, adding that microaggressions can include ‘behaviours, speech, or environmental characteristics that are driven by stereotypes and indicate to Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) that they are second-class citizens’.

Derald Wing Sue and colleagues (2007) published the first major study into racial microaggressions and they proposed the following nine categories of racial microaggressions:

(a) assumptions that a person of colour is not a true American, (b) assumptions of lesser intelligence, (c) statements that convey colour-blindness or denial of the importance of race, (d) assumptions of criminality or dangerousness, (e) denials of individual racism, (f) promotion of the myth of meritocracy, (g) assumptions that one's cultural background and communication styles are pathological, (h) being treated as a second-class citizen, and (i) having to endure environmental messages of being unwelcome or devalued.

As this chapter develops it will become clear that my respondents have found Indo chic and the conversations about the trend with wearers of Indo chic to do many of these things, specifically points (a) (substituting 'Australian' for 'American') (c), (e) and (i). Although my respondents do not use the term 'microaggression' to describe their encounters with Indo chic they do continue to experience Indo chic as a form of daily, banal racism that is often denied or miscategorised as 'appreciation' and therefore, not racism. Their interactions with Indo chic were so frequent, and upsetting, that many formed and/or joined anti-racist communities online that were specifically created for the purpose of talking to other diasporic South Asians about the effect Indo chic was having on them.

In this chapter I will return to Sara Ahmed's concept of 'bad feeling' and how it can be used to understand this phenomenon. In both case studies explored here, 'bad feeling' or negative affect fuels the building of online worlds. These online worlds are diasporic South Asian created, visited, and run and function as 'subaltern counterpublics' (Fraser 1990) in which members of this group are able to challenge the mainstream perspective on Indo chic through

two different modes. The first case study ‘shame blogs’, use negative affect to practise ‘shaming’, or ‘calling out’. They contact wearers of Indo chic who have posted an image of themselves wearing the style on social media, and subsequently repost their image on their blog, alongside a blurb that educates the tagged wearer that ‘cultural appropriation is wrong’. Their aim is to educate non-diasporic South Asian wearers of Indo chic and convince them to stop wearing the style.

The second ‘counterpublic’ I examine is the multiplatform hashtag, *#reclaimtheBindi*, in which diasporic South Asian contributors post a photo of themselves in traditional dress, alongside a blurb, and ‘tag’ their photo with *#reclaimtheBindi*. The name of this movement relates again to the ‘bad feeling’ that Indo chic inspires within many diasporic South Asian women and alludes to experiences like those shared by my respondents. By ‘reclaiming’ the Bindi they are performing a two-fold recuperation of both the Bindi from non-South Asian appropriators, and also for themselves, as many of the accompanying blurbs reflect the feelings of shame and internalised racism expressed by my respondents. In this chapter I will examine the convergence of these two counterpublics and argue that their convergence works to educate their audiences about diasporic South Asian experiences of Indo chic. These online spaces provide an opportunity for diasporic South Asians to share their experiences, including bad feelings, with other diasporic South Asians and in doing so, build community.

The shame blogs and the hashtag movement *#reclaimthebindi* were both well-visited online in the years between 2012 and 2015, when Indo chic was at its most popular. Both were hosted on Tumblr but illustrated intermedia activity as the material for the shame blogs were commonly sourced on Instagram and *#reclaimthebindi* contributions were also posted on Instagram. When considering the affective motivations for engaging in these counterpublics,

the question arises: does shaming others and/or proclaiming pride in your traditional dress help turn ‘bad feeling’ into ‘good feeling’ for diasporic South Asian women? Does it make them ‘feel better’? On feeling better, Ahmed states:

Feeling better is not a sign that justice has been done, nor should it be reified as the goal of political struggle. But feeling better does still matter because it is about learning to live with the injuries that make life impossible (2005, 83).

In this chapter I argue that these online spaces provide diasporic South Asian women (including my respondents) a way to ‘live with the injuries that make life impossible’ through cathartic practices such as shaming, educating and acceptance as well as through community building. To do this, I first present a digital ethnography to the participants and administrators of the two online counterpublics, using textual analysis to examine choice contributions to both movements, focusing on the articulated affective responses to Indo chic. I then turn to my respondents, to ask them about their online engagement with the topic of Indo chic. If they have accessed online spheres such as shame blogs and/or *#reclaimtheBindi* in the past, I ask what effect it had on their feelings about Indo chic and their cultural identity. Examining the online activity of two groups of diasporic South Asian women (online via the sites, and in person with my respondents) around Indo chic allows for an instructive communication of diasporic South Asian affectual experiences of Indo chic as they act to mitigate the effects the trend has had on these women.

Being Diasporic South Asian Online: ‘South Asian Dreamboats’

About half of my respondents were recruited through personal connection while the other half were people recruited via the closed Facebook group ‘South Asian Dreamboats’. I posted my recruitment poster on the main feed of the page to the group’s 267 diasporic South Asian

members, and I interviewed six of these members. A strong sense of community has been fostered between the members of this group through the activities that take place on the page. These activities include sharing personal experiences (including instances of microaggressions and other racist experiences), sharing external cultural, historical, and religious resources and asking advice. The ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ Facebook page is a group comprised of 267 diasporic South Asian women (as of June 2022) most of whom live in Australia. From a cursory look at the members who are most active posting on the page most of the group members are young women within the 18 – 35 age range. The page is a closed group and members need to be invited to join the group. On the ‘about’ page of the group, administrators describe their page as follows:

This is a group created to be a safe space for South Asian women and non-binary people based mainly in Australia. In keeping this environment as one of support and solidarity, we have a few guidelines that need adherence (Administrators, South Asian Dreamboats Facebook page 2019).

These are spaces in which young diasporic South Asian women develop their antiracist and/or feminist activism, learning from others in that space, whether that is their intention in joining or visiting these sites. A diasporic South Asian observer does not need to engage with these spaces actively – they needn’t post or comment or reblog or share or tag – to be able to learn something and develop their perspective on whatever issue is being discussed. One simply needs to be an observer to the activity taking place in these online spheres of culture to find use from them.

Of my participants who engaged with online conversations around Indo chic and/or those on ‘South Asian Dreamboats’, none explicitly named the Tumblr shame blogs or the hashtag

movement *#reclaimthebindi* in their description of their online engagement with South Asian-run spaces and movements. Although my respondents did not engage in these specific sites of culture, their experiences mirror those of other diasporic South Asian women from around the world who did engage with these specific sites. In particular they also ‘called out’ or witnessed the ‘calling out’ of non-South Asian people wearing Indo chic; learnt about antiracist terms, ideas, and action; and reflected on their relationship to traditional dress, many reclaiming a sense of pride while wearing it. I will therefore start by examining the dynamic of the Facebook group ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ to illustrate the importance of online spaces for diasporic South Asian women when it comes to sharing stories, building community, and developing their antiracist activism before moving onto a discussion of the activity on the shame blogs and *#reclaimthebindi*.

One of my respondents, Rena, was the co-creator and an administrator of the group, and she explained its genesis as a way to make diasporic South Asian friends after she moved to Sydney. Rena wanted to make friends with those she could share in cultural, religious, and more traditional activities together. She articulated that she had been a part of various online diasporic South Asian groups in the past and had admired the camaraderie between diasporic South Asian women in the group who lived in the UK and USA. Her last point, however, most reflects the views and experiences of my other respondents. Rena explains:

I feel like it’s also been a good port of call to call myself out and recognise my own privileges and learn about other experiences from other parts of India and other parts of South Asia because that’s learning I did not grow up with (Rena, 25).

Rena explains that she feels that the group has been ‘a good port of call to ‘call myself out’ and recognise my own privileges’ which is a sentiment shared by many of my respondents who have accessed diasporic South Asian-run groups and websites. There is an implicit pedagogical function of groups such as ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ but also websites such as the *Tumblr* shame blogs and the hashtag movement #reclaimthebindi explored below.

When a new member has been invited, they need to answer a few questions to join the group and are encouraged to introduce themselves when they first join. The questions posed to prospective group members are ‘Do you identify as South Asian? Why?’ and ‘Why would you like to join this group?’ This gatekeeping ensures that the group includes only those who identify as being of ‘South Asian’ heritage, and although the page makes no explicit gender-based preferences, the members tend to be either cis women or non-binary folk. The administrators of the group promote transparency while performing their role, frequently seeking feedback from members in the form of votes to generate consensus when making decisions about the group (see figure 3 below)



Figure 3: via the South Asian Dreamboats Facebook page

One example of this democratic administration is an early post about the term ‘desi’ and whether all group members felt comfortable identifying as such. Rena told me that a Sri Lankan-Australian member expressed that they felt ‘desi’ was not inclusive of them and the administrators of the group changed the name of the page from ‘Desi Dreamboats’ to ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ in early 2017. The result is a page in which South Asian women from various parts of the world can meet, forge friendships, and learn more about South Asian cultures in a democratic space. The group rules are as stated below:

- ♥ We are strictly against any oppressive behaviour. This includes but is not limited to racism, misogyny, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia (as well as

other forms of discrimination against LGBTQIAP+ people), fat shaming and sex shaming. We require people to be open to information and willing to learn about these issues. ♥ Shadeism and colourism; Dreamboats is strictly against any language perpetuating these oppressions. Posts which relate to shadeism and colourism will not be derailed by light-skinned members in this group. The opinions of light skinned people on this topic are not valid to the oppressions faced by those who are not. ♥ We ask that all members use gender neutral terms when addressing the group and/or another member without the official knowledge of their gender identity. ♥ There is a necessity for trigger/ content warnings on posts with content people can be triggered by, and basic content summaries for other material that can still be upsetting. We ask members to consider the necessity of the content they are posting; will it enhance discussion in the group, or be an arbitrary post contributing to negativity around diaspora issues? Photos and videos must be posted in the comment section, and 3-4 comments must be posted below the content comment to avoid it being exposed. Trigger and content warnings must be posted in the following format: TW/CW - (brief description) * * * * * (Text) ♥ While this is a positive place, our priority is in the comfort and safety of our members. This means that we do not condone tone policing people who are justified in expressing their frustrations. However, this does not mean that hostility will be tolerated, and it's expected that everyone remains considerate of each other. If you see someone unjustified in their conduct, please report it to one of the admins and it will be dealt with accordingly (Administrators, South Asian Dreamboats Facebook page 2019).

These rules are relevant to this chapter as they elucidate the kind of political sentiment encouraged and shared amongst members of the group. The group endorses a culture in which minoritised voices are privileged and members are encouraged to engage modes of communication which acknowledge gender identity and trauma while encouraging open dialogue amongst the members. Therefore, this group attracts a certain type of participant – one who is diasporic South Asian and who is interested in engaging (or already has engaged) in antiracist thought and/or political action.

Respondents Rena, Jela, Asha, Ashley, Vina and Jana were recruited from this group. They all responded to my call out for participants in which I stated that the topic of the interview would be Indo chic, illustrating that these respondents still had interest in talking about the trend in 2018. Ashley, Jana and Vina all talked about the ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ group and its impact on them. Ashley said that she was one of the first members of the group and had enjoyed the pedagogical nature of the group:

I think I was one of the first members of the ‘South Asian Dreamboats’ group actually, it started about 2 years ago. I feel like I've learnt a lot as people share a lot of interesting articles on there. So, I feel like I've become more open minded, and I've learnt so much more that I'm interested in researching even more (Ashley, 21).

Vina was also one of the original members of the group and explains that she is a part of multiple Facebook groups that engage with anti-racist thought and political action:

I'm engaged with a couple POC [people of colour] groups online. Some are general POC groups and others are more focused on South Asians. They're on Facebook and some post info, some of them are more discourse-based, others

aren't – they want to get away from discourse and be more jokey. I have been in South Asian Dreamboats since the beginning, but it doesn't get a lot of traffic. But there's this bigger group with white people in it too and it's called 'it sounds white but okay' and it's a way to deal with white people while they are present you know? (Vina, 24)

Vina here mentions that South Asian Dreamboats 'doesn't get a lot of traffic' and that could be due to the relatively small group size of 267 members. She also explains that she alternates between a few different groups centred around the issue of race — groups with only POC, South-Asian specific groups (like South Asian Dreamboats) and groups that include white people too.

Jana recently joined the group after being invited by her friend. Jana is one of the mixed-race respondents and she has an Indian mother and a white Australian father. She mentions that her invitation to join this group at the behest of her friend was a 'nice recognition thing' in which she was being recognised as diasporic South Asian by another diasporic South Asian person. This feeling is common amongst the mixed-race respondents in my study beyond the 'South Asian Dreamboats' page to other parts of the internet that are run and occupied by diasporic South Asian-run and centre around the critique of Indo chic. The specifics of the mixed-race experience will be discussed more in detail later in this chapter. Jana describes her experience of the group in the following way:

On Instagram I follow all these rad WOC [women of colour] and also astrology [accounts], and I can't stop now. I'm in this site called 'South Asian Dreamboats' or something, diasporic, I think they're mainly in Australia and my friend added me to it which just felt like a nice recognition thing. People mostly post recipes

and things and I've never posted except asking for language resources to learn Tamil. I'm not very active in general on social media but it does feel nice to be in that group (Jana, 25).

Jana explains here that she finds little utility from the belonging to the group as she does not engage with the posts very often, only once asking for language resources. However, she talks about the *feeling* of belonging to a group like 'South Asian Dreamboats', a feeling of community that is even more significant to her because she is mixed-race. This feeling of belonging was also expressed by other members of the 'South Asian Dreamboats' group whose engagement with diasporic South Asian-run groups and sites extended beyond that Facebook group. Kela said:

There are a few Instagram pages that are like 'browngirlofficial', and they do little stories and stuff I love it, it makes me so happy and so proud to see Indian girls out there smashing it. And especially being queer, my group of queer, brown people is very small so I get to engage with people I've met online who are also queer, brown girls. I'm also on this page called 'Intersectional Pals' on Facebook. It's about racism pretty much, but also transphobia, and homophobia, and a whole lot of other things. It's this real tight group of people who all have our backs if anything happens (Kela, 20).

Kela talks about the feelings of happiness and pride that she has when she engages with diasporic South Asian run Instagram and Facebook pages. She specifically mentions that she has found a sense of community amongst queer diasporic South Asian folk who she has met online through the groups and pages she accesses. There is also an activist lean to her

engagement with these groups – they centre on ‘racism, transphobia, homophobia, and a whole lot of other things’.

Jasmine is another respondent who engages with a wide range of diasporic South Asian run as well as WOC run groups online and sees value in the community building function of the sites she accesses:

There’s a third year Women of Colour group I’m on; a ‘Sad and Asian’ Facebook group and there’s another one I joined recently called ‘Beige woman - Black and Asian Women in Academia’ or something like that. I wasn’t a part of any Tumblr groups or anything, but I did follow Black or Indian girls on Tumblr and that’s how I learnt about cultural appropriation. These kinds of groups definitely have a big place in my heart because I’ve learnt so much from them like when I think back to when I was 16, 17 I was so problematic [laughs] like I hated a lot about my own culture, I was pretty anti-Black and so I’ve learnt a lot and kind of learnt how bad I was before? (Jasmine, 21)

Jasmine here is explicitly drawing a link here between her online engagement with debates around Indo chic and cultural appropriation and her further antiracist thought and action. She reflects on how ‘problematic’ her politics used to be, to be claiming that ‘she used to hate a lot about her own culture’, and that she ‘was pretty anti-Black’ before engaging with these online sites of culture. It is directly through her engagement with communities hosted on sites like Tumblr and Facebook that she has been able to learn about antiracist political thought and action and that these online resources remain significant to her activism. My other millennial respondents had similar thoughts about the formative potential of these groups on their politics and expressed this sentiment in different ways throughout the interview.

Most of the respondents articulated a narrative about their online engagement with activist spaces that had a common chronological arc. First, they spoke about growing up diasporic South Asian in a white majority nation, experiencing racism, and racist bullying directed at them for wearing traditional dress specifically, which then led to the development of a complicated relationship to traditional dress and their culture more broadly. Second, they mentioned witnessing Indo chic in some capacity, but mostly in fashion culture between the years of 2012 and 2018. Third, they discussed how witnessing Indo chic made them feel confused, angry, or amused and often all three emotions at the same time.

Such feelings led them to access a diasporic South Asian activist space online (through following people outspoken about Indo chic, incidentally, or through intentionally looking it up) and engaged with that space to varying degrees. They, then, emerged from this online engagement, having reflected on Indo chic, cultural appropriation, and their personal relationship to traditional dress, learning new terms and theories to explain their affectual gut reaction. And finally, they decided to reclaim their traditional dress in defiance of Indo chic, going on to further political thought and action not concerning cultural appropriation as a result of the exposure, learning, and reflection incited by accessing online resources that critique Indo chic/cultural appropriation. As I have explored step one and two in previous chapters, I will now focus on step three: the affectual gut reaction, the bad feeling, and the consequences of that bad feeling being expressed online.

Youarenotedesi.tumblr.com, Shame Blogs and ‘Calling Out’.

One way of tracking the effect of online spaces dedicated to Indo chic on diasporic South Asian women is through an examination of Tumblr ‘shame blogs’, where diasporic South

Asians discuss the trend amongst other diasporic South Asians through the sharing and discussion of online content created by non-diasporic South Asian wearers of Indo chic. Websites such as 'whitegirlswithbindis.tumblr.com', 'whitegirlsbadhenna.tumblr.com' and 'youarenotdesi.tumblr.com' were created to name and shame those who wore Indo chic during the peak of the Indo chic trend between the years of 2013 and 2016. Administrators of these blogs articulate that their motivation for creating the sites is pedagogical – they want to teach non-South Asians how Indo chic makes many diasporic South Asian people feel. The header for youarenotdesi.tumblr.com reads:

Cultural appropriation pisses us off, and if we see you appropriating our culture, we will make you aware of it. Because you need to know you are wrong. You cannot dissect a culture and pick out the parts you find 'stylish' or 'on trend for the sake of looking 'cute' (admin, youarenotdesi.tumblr.com 2013).

The dynamic present on these sites can be theorised by drawing again on Nancy Fraser's notion of 'subaltern counterpublics' (1990). She theorised that people belonging to marginalised groups may find the need to create alternative publics in response to exclusion from and/or derision within the dominant public sphere. These shame blogs are an example of this. They distort the racial dynamics of the mainstream through the public shaming of non-diasporic South Asian women by diasporic South Asian women. Fraser defines these alternative public spheres as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (1990, 67).

'Subaltern counterpublics' are formed as a response to a group's exclusion from dominant publics and can function both as spaces of withdrawal for members, as well as bases for alternative politics within wider publics. As these sites are publicly accessible, they widen the

field of discursive understanding, bringing to the mainstream issues that might have been overlooked, purposely ignored, or suppressed by dominant publics (Fraser 1990). Vrikki and Malik (2019) argue that Fraser's thinking extends Jurgen Habermas's 'ideal-type' of the 'bourgeois public sphere' (281). With her theory of counterpublics, Fraser diversifies and expands Habermas's view of a singular, all-embracing public sphere around which society revolves to potentially recognise a multiplicity of competing publics that provide space for the experiences and concerns of marginalised groups. In this way, online communities and movements that are made by, and for marginalised groups, become comprehensively intelligible and valued parts of a wider public sphere despite the counter narratives contained within them as these sites provide them with visibility in the wider public sphere. Vrikki and Malik (2019) are quick to note however, that scholarship on online groups has stopped at the 'euphoric celebration of this emergence of voice from marginalized groups' online and has not yet fully considered the effectiveness of their impact on existing power structures (Gajjala & Birzescu 2010).

Nonetheless, speaking to their research on POC podcasts, they identify the potential for marginalised communities to be regarded as 'bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics' (Vrikki and Malik 2019, 280). More specifically, they discuss the use of podcasts by Black and South Asian youth demographics in the UK. Vrikki and Malik examine how members from these socially marginalised groups use podcasts to circulate counter discourses about their everyday lives and how they build networks that produce strong connections and identification. These podcasts serve as a site for cultivating public politics in the same way the diasporic South Asian shame sites do.

These shame sites are run and visited by communities of young, diasporic South Asian women living in English speaking countries. However, they are not limited to this group; non-South Asian women who have questions about cultural appropriation also contact the admins via the 'Ask Me Anything' function on the sites, describing themselves and their positionality, then asking the administrators questions about when and where (if ever) it is appropriate to wear Indo chic. The questions from these non-South Asian women usually express a desire to learn more about the diasporic South Asian point of view on the issue, accessing the site to educate themselves and not to antagonise the administrators or critique their position. Take, for instance the following question posted by the anonymous user on the site whitegirlsbadhenna.tumblr.com:

I didn't know it was appropriation to wear Henna. I've only ever worn it when it's been offered by someone from a Henna-wearing culture, at a multicultural festival like 'Folklorama'. Is this still appropriation? I am Anishinaabe, is Henna akin to selling dreamcatchers to white people, like its appropriation if the white person made it but purchasing from an authentic source is, ok? I am very sorry if my language in the ask is uncomfortable feeling, I wasn't sure how to word it. Thank you. (User, whitegirlsbadhenna.tumblr.com 2014).

And the administrator's response:

Yeah, it's like that. If a diasporic South Asian person gives you Henna, that's cultural exchange. Otherwise, appropriation (admin, whitegirlsbadhenna.tumblr.com 2014).

The format of the shame blogs, and in particular the three sites examined here are as follows: first, administrators of the blog source a photo of a non-South Asian person wearing Indo chic and post it on the site. These photos are often sent to the administrator by diasporic South Asian people as they come across Indo chic in their daily social media consumption. The admin then contacts the person in the photo to let them know they have been put on the site and are being named and shamed via their social media handle. This invites the now-shamed wearer of Indo chic to converse with the site administrators and learn why they are against cultural appropriation. If the non-South Asian perpetrator reaches out in productive dialogue with the administrators, they remove the photo from the site. If they do not, the photo remains on the site. These conversations between the shamed Indo chic wearer and the administrators happen via the ‘Ask me Anything’ feature on the Tumblr platform and responses are posted on the blog.

The interactions are awkward, and the shamed party often defends their choices, communicating with the administrator publicly that they had no ill-intent. The administrator will then explain why Indo chic is a problematic trend theoretically, sometimes also adding a personal anecdote of their experiences of racism related to their wearing of traditional dress. Figure 4 (below) is a typical example of the type of interactions that took place on ‘whitegirlswithbindis.tumblr.com’ in the years between 2013 and 2015.



Figure 4: via whitegirlswithBindis.tumblr.com

The shamed wearer replies to the post:

I'm not trying to attack you and I'm hoping you are open for discussion. But your posts are actually really racist against white people. Saying 'white people this' 'white people that' is considered racism. Wearing feathers/ a Bindi may be considered a homage, experimentation, or flat-out ignorance, depending on who you ask. But wearing a Bindi isn't racism, because it does not imply that all Indians are stupid, ugly or anything of the sort. Do you get what I mean?

(Anonymous, whitegirlswithbindis.tumblr.com 2013)

To which the administrator replied:

White people cannot experience racism because racism happens between a group that has more power than another. And white people have always had more

power. Wearing a Bindi is racism because many actual Indian people are attacked for wearing a Bindi and called a 'dot Indian' or 'not American enough' but the second a pretty white girl puts on she is admired as a fashion icon. Take your white tears elsewhere gurl (sic.). You will never experience racism in your life you will never have someone tell you that you're subhuman or steal from your culture. Please don't try and (sic) people of colour what is or isn't racist because you don't fucking know (Admin, whitegirlswithbindis.tumblr.com 2013).

The pedagogical successes of this format are hard to track, as many of the people being shamed do not reply to the admins of the blog, and those who do often accuse the administrator of 'reverse racism' against white people or share that they wear the Bindi as they are Hindu. Despite the name of this particular blog, not all of those shamed on the blog appear phenotypically white, however, many of the conversations taking place between shamed wearer and admin include some discussion of whiteness, such as the conversation taking place in Figure 4. These discussions happen across the three sites I examine, however 'whitegirlswithbindis.tumblr.com' hosts the most conversations about whiteness and accusations of 'reverse racism'. Not all the conversations between shamed wearer and admin are as combative as Figure 4. A few of the shamed wearers of Indo chic do reply to tell the administrator that they have learnt something from the process. For example, a shamed poster on 'whitegirlswithbindis.tumblr.com' states:

All that matters is who you are, how you treat people, and how you treat yourself. I'll take what you said into consideration. I'll research this some more because no, I really don't understand everything about Hinduism. I can't learn everything in a year. And if Hindus don't accept converts, then I'll respect that and I'll see if

I agree with any other religions (Anonymous, whitegirlswithbindis.tumblr.com 2013).

Administrators of these blogs articulate that their motivations for posting and then engaging in these (often unpleasant) conversations is education. In blog mast heads, ‘about’ pages, and in posts they explicitly state that they want to educate non-diasporic South Asian wearers of Indo chic in the hope that this education will convince Indo chic wearers to stop wearing the style. The admins of these blogs articulate that they believe that shaming or as they understand it, ‘calling out’, performs the work of education, extending this idea further by engaging in conversation with the shamed beyond the initial post.

Sometimes, however, the admins halt their pedagogical attempts with the original shame post, choosing not to engage in dialogue with a shamed poster when they respond. One post from ‘youarenotdesi.tumblr.com’ reads:

This Tumblr is stupid and racist. You reblogged my friend’s photo and took it out of context, you ignorant fuck’ (Anonymous, youarenotdesi.tumblr.com 2014)

To which the administrator responds by posting a meme of a smiling South Asian woman (Figure 5, below).

sprout-cutie-deactivated2014101 asked:

This Tumblr is stupid and racist. You reblogged my friends photo and took it out of context, you ignorant fuck.



19 notes



Figure 5: via youarenotdesi.tumblr.com

These responses illustrate that the diasporic South Asian administrators of the sites know that the conversations they have with the shamed wearer are tense and combative, and that there is the possibility that they will be exposed to new racial aggressions while conversing with the shamed wearer.

However, the multiplicity of these sites and the prolific posting schedule (between 50 and 300 posts a month on each site) indicate that the admins believe in the potential of their shaming to educate offenders. These shame blogs are still accessible on Tumblr today, but the most recent posts on these sites feature content about South Asian culture, antiracist and feminist politics and re-blogged posts of other Tumblr sites that focus on these issues. They also post far less frequently and there are no recent shaming posts, which may reflect the

decline in the popularity of Indo chic styles. It may also indicate that non-diasporic South Asian wearers of the trend are less inclined to post a photo of themselves wearing Indo chic online, or that the administrators have decided to stop this practise. There is no post explaining the change in format on any of the three blogs, instead there is a gradual reduction of shaming posts, and posts more generally from the peak period of posting in 2014.

The shaming praxis present on diasporic South Asian-run shame blogs can be understood as a practise of calling out or cancelling, a digital discursive accountability practice with its roots in African American online culture (Clark 2020). Meredith D. Clark situates ‘cancel culture’ within the same Habermasean concept of the public sphere and credits the creation of discursive accountability practices such as ‘dragging, calling out and even cancelling’ (2020, 89) as the creation of Black counterpublics that are ‘conspicuously absent from the American public imaginary’ (2020, 89). In her essay, Clark examines the evolution of cancel culture and its associated practises on Black Twitter, a Meta network of culturally linked communities online. Clark (2020) argues that the term has been co-opted by the social elite and intentionally misinterpreted, neutralising its radical potential as a tool used by Black Americans against white people to shame them for their public instances of bigoted behaviour such as racism, sexism and/or homophobia.

Cancel culture, which has come to include accusations of cultural appropriation in recent years, has been criticised in the mainstream media. In Lisa Nakamura’s (2015) extensive work on online groups, she argues that this criticism feminises and silences the voices and labour of the marginalised. However, these shame blogs do not simply function as sites of cancellation. The blogs educate members of dominant culture to be more aware of the diasporic South Asian perspective, while functioning as a subaltern counterpublic – a space

where diasporic South Asians from around the globe can meet, share, and connect. Perhaps the wearers of Indo chic who argue with the blog administrators, or direct racist insults at them, are uncomfortable with how ‘coalitions of the Othered are now equipped to execute a responsive strategy for immediately identifying harms and demanding consequences’ (Clark 2020, 91) through shame blogs. Eschmann et al. argue that simply sharing experiences of microaggressions with one another is a form of resistance for POC, especially given that ‘letting microaggressions ‘slide’ can validate them as being legitimate and acceptable forms of speech and/or behavior’ (2020, 7).

The sharing of culturally appropriative Indo chic pictures to the site by diasporic South Asians from around the world can also be read as a way to bond and form connections with other diasporic South Asians who are having the same affectual response to this material. Eschmann et al. further argue that their POC participants suggest that ‘ignorance’ can be intentionally utilised by those who commit microaggressions to keep antiracist work from making significant strides (2020). The activity seen on the shame blogs lines up with their observations. The administrators of the shame blogs first highlight the microaggression (the wearing of Indo chic) and combat the ignorance that can be used by the perpetrator as an excuse for their choices, attempting to educate them through this harsh affectual practice of shaming. Many of my respondents told me that they were involved in ‘shaming’ practises either online or offline during the peak of the trend as well that were both rewarding and frustrating for them.

During this portion of the interviews, my respondents talked to me about their general practice and stance on ‘calling out’ Indo chic and many framed this activity as something they engaged with when they were younger. For many of my respondents, this ‘younger’ they

were referring to was when they were in their late teens or early twenties, which would have been between the years of 2013 and 2016 when the trend was most popular. I believe that the designation of ‘calling out’ as something they were heavily engaged with when they were ‘younger’, but not now, indicates two things. First, it indicates that their antiracist thought, and political action has extended beyond the debates around cultural appropriation and Indo chic, and second, it indicates that their ‘call outs’ did impact the behaviour of the non-South Asian people in their lives – to the extent that they respected the requests of my respondents and stopped (or never started) wearing Indo chic. This could also explain the change in content on the shame websites since 2015 as well. These findings will be elucidated by my analysis of their responses later in this chapter.

Neither my participants nor the administrators of the sites explicitly use the term ‘shame/shaming’ instead preferring to use the term ‘calling out’, however the two terms describe the same practice and can be used interchangeably in this context. As my respondents used the description ‘call/calling out’ I will use the term ‘call/calling out’ in this section to describe the same phenomena as ‘shaming’ above. Sabrina’s response to my question: ‘Have you ever asked anyone to stop wearing Indo chic before?’ described experiences that were typical for many of my respondents:

I think sometimes I would reply [to a social media post featuring Indo chic], when I was younger. And call them out, inform them. And now it’s one of those things where you take a screenshot and send it to your other South Asian friends and mock them. I’ve had the rule since I was sixteen - I tell you once and then if you do it again then I’m blocking you [laughs]. I ended up blocking so many people (Sabrina, 22).

Vina, Ashley, Asha, and Rena told me that they had similar responses to witnessing a non-diasporic South Asian friend or acquaintance wear Indo chic. Vina said that she does not think any of her friends have worn Indo chic because she ‘has probably drilled it into them by now, and they should know by now, and if they don’t know it’s because they don’t want to listen’ (Vina, 24), echoing the sentiment of shame blog admins who question the validity of those who claim to be ignorant of the diasporic South Asian perspective on Indo chic. Ashley interestingly used the same wording as Vina and said that ‘luckily none of my friends have worn Indo chic, I think I’ve drilled it into my friends’ brains not to wear it’ (Ashely, 21). Asha said that she has ‘spoken to people in person and asked them and said, like, this feels wrong please don’t do it. And mostly people have been quite respectful and have been like okay cool sorry I won’t do it’ (Asha, 21). She did add, however that the response she has received from some people is ‘why are you so sensitive? Which is like, ugh’.

This affectual sentiment of ‘ugh’ is imprecise in its expression as it can encapsulate feelings of anger, fatigue, amusement, despondence, and frustration all at once. This general feeling of ‘ugh’, and all it encapsulates, permeated the responses to this question. Rena articulated this sentiment more precisely in her response:

If it was a friend, I would call them out or I have called them out depending on our relationship and how much energy I have in that day. Now I don’t really bother contacting or calling out big Instagram pages or celebrities because I remember it being a lot of time and a lot of work when I was nineteen, and I’d like to draw my energies towards things that matter on a fundamental level and learning about things that effect people who are more marginalised than I am. But

yeah, if it was a friend, I'd call them out or message them and if they don't respond or they keep the photo up or whatever I'd just delete them (Rena, 25).

Rena's comments here illustrate that these conversations are emotionally laborious, and that diasporic South Asian women (both my respondents and those on the shame blogs) use tactics such as blocking or deleting in the online realm, or 'cutting off' friends offline as Indo chic affects these young diasporic South Asians in emotionally harmful ways. If we follow the logic that Indo chic has the effect of a racial microaggression then these 'call outs' are tiring – having to 'drill into' friends that Indo chic is harmful for diasporic South Asian women, is unpleasant (although voluntary) work that results in burn out and feelings of 'ugh' as these interactions accumulate over time. Some of my respondents turned to diasporic South Asian and POC run online communities such as the shame blogs for advice, or solidarity when calling out friends and acquaintances in their offline life and found them to be useful tools to enact the change they wished to see. Sabrina had one instance in which a friend of hers accepted a Bindi at a club, which upset her. She explained:

One time at a club, there was this moment where someone was putting Bindis on everyone and she put one on my friend and I was like 'what are you doing?' and my friend was like 'oh it doesn't matter its fine YOLO, its fine' and we had this conversation and I got really angry and left the club. Then I left a message to 'the Bindis not indie' or one of those anti cultural appropriation Tumblr blogs saying what had happened and they replied saying 'this is really messed up; this is fucked up'. Then I screenshotted it and posted it on my Facebook in this passive aggressive way [laughs] and she saw it and messaged me and was like 'I'm so sorry I didn't think about it I was drunk at the time and wasn't thinking but I'm

really taking on what you have to say’ and so I have reactions like that (Sabrina, 22).

This is an interesting instance where the pressure of being referenced on a Tumblr shame blog had more of an impact on the Indo chic wearer than a conversation with a South Asian friend. The initial conversation was not enough to convince her to not wear the Bindi, and it was only when Sabrina turned to a more public form of shaming (both by writing into a shame blog and then by posting their response on her Facebook) that her friend was open to listening to her perspective.

Sabrina was not alone in her use of social media communities to shame Indo chic wearers. Jana said that she ‘used to be one of those people who would comment and get into a fight over comments about it [Indo chic] but I don’t do it anymore because it just takes a lot of time and energy to do that, so I scroll past it [Indo chic images] now’ adding that ‘it’s not my job to tell them why it’s wrong, they could just google it but they don’t...’ (Jana, 25) indicating that she also reached the stage of burn-out articulated by Rena and referred to by Asha as the feeling of ‘ugh’. Jana also talked about ‘budgeting her energy’ when making the decision to call out a friend for wearing Indo chic. She explained that the Bindi, or gemstones placed on the forehead emulating a Bindi, was a popular accessory worn by attendees of queer parties and clubs she attended around Sydney. She said that she went to a Mardi gras party and met up with a close friend who was wearing ‘gemstones on the forehead that aren’t a Bindi but evoke a kind of Bindi-ness’ (Jana, 25) mentioning she ‘find[s] it difficult to see that’ explaining that she ‘just didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t stop looking at it’ (Jana, 25). She described it ‘as an interruption to a night that was supposed to be relaxing, and fun, and about pride’, concluding that:

I guess it [Indo chic] makes me feel traumatic in a really every day, banal way.

It's almost like being hailed as or realising that you're brown and then being ripped from the social fabric a little bit and I feel like I have to budget my energy in terms of whether I want to raise it. I usually don't because I don't have a great vocabulary to explain what's going on (Jana, 25).

The practice of wearing Indo chic in party and club settings is in no way limited to queer parties, however in this instance Jana was forced to privilege one part of her identity (her queerness) over another (her diasporic South Asian-ness). The wearing of Indo chic in what is meant to be this safe, friendly, celebratory space alienated her and presented her with the difficult experience of being reminded of her difference (her Brownness) in a space dedicated to celebrating the similarities of the attendees as queer people, bringing them together. As Ahmed explains: 'doing the emotional work of exposure is both political and emotional work and is not over in the moment of hearing' (2005, 84).

Rena was the most prolific with her 'calling out' practises on social media and she often targeted public figures and companies for wearing and promoting Indo chic alongside other culturally appropriated fashion trends. She too felt burnt out over time and moved on to activism about other topics beyond South Asian issues. She explained:

I think that in my early activisms when I was seventeen, eighteen, nineteen I used to spend a lot of time calling out celebrities and Instagram models and public figures on cultural appropriation and that was like the hot topic of feminism and now I'm like, yes, it's an issue and it sucks, and it feels awful, and I will still call people out where it matters. But if I were to partake in collective action, I would engage in something that effects people on a very fundamental level rather than affecting them just on an emotional level. For example, going to rallies or writing

an article about what Australia is doing to refugees for example. In the past I would comment on their [Indo chic] photo, message them, call it out. In some instances, I would take it to Facebook and do a post like ‘look at this Instagram user whose appropriating my culture’. There was some clothing brand I can’t remember what it was whether it be ‘*Boohoo*’ or ‘*Dolly Chic*’ or something, they had a model wearing the Bindi and I messaged them and threatened them to their HR if they didn’t take the photo down [laughs] and they took the photo down I was like ‘wow look at powerful nineteen-year-old me this is what political activism is all about’ [laughs]. Yeah, I peaked at nineteen (Rena, 24).

Rena’s response here indicates that she still thinks cultural appropriation is an important feminist issue, and that she finds it personally harmful describing witnessing it as ‘feel(ing) awful’. However, despite successes (with fashion companies *Boohoo* or *Dolly Chic*) Rena has not continued this type of activism. She mentioned earlier that, as of 2018, she is more likely to attend a rally or write an article about social justice issue to contribute to antiracist activism. She addresses antiracist circles with her activism now instead of addressing celebrities or public figures who culturally appropriate. She does not regret her early activist days when she focused on cultural appropriation, but also says that ‘I feel anger that it’s taken me so long to feel comfortable being, uh, posting about and showing the world my Indian culture and me participating in it’ (Rena, 25).

For my millennial respondents, and for many other diasporic South Asian women, Indo chic ‘call outs’ formed their first activist engagement online. In the process of ‘calling out’ and thus explaining the diasporic South Asian point of view on the topic, they ‘outed’ themselves as diasporic South Asian. Of course, their online social networks likely knew that they were

South Asian prior to this, however, their South Asian identity had never been articulated and aligned politically this way. For many diasporic South Asian women, conversations around Indo chic were the right setting to share about their experiences with racism being brown in white majority nations. It was the first time many shared personal traumas related to racism with their online networks, and this opened the door for sharing other proclamations of identity. Like Rena, many of my respondents decided to share more about their diasporic South Asian-ness online after Indo chic with many articulating a new sense of pride in their cultural identity as a result.

Reclamation and pride: *#reclaimthebindi*

The *#reclaimthebindi* movement is another online sphere of culture birthed out of the popularity of Indo chic. Birthed in April of 2015, *#reclaimthebindi* is an online resistance movement positioned against Indo chic, and specifically the wearing of Indo chic at the Coachella music festival. *#reclaimthebindi* attracted over 2,500 global contributors, with a multiplicity of news websites also publishing subsequent stories on the movement.

#Reclaimthebindi consists of a global community of diasporic South Asian people who engage with the movement through a number of online platforms: Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr. The multi-platform hashtags *#reclaimthebindi* and *#coachellashutdown* unite the content each user contributes to the movement.⁹ While concerning the same issue and occurring on the internet at the same time as the shame blogs (2015), this movement is significantly different in tone. The anonymous founder of the hashtag spoke to *Vice* Magazine as the hashtag started to trend on twitter in the United States:

We are able to share our stories and people are finally starting to listen. The stories of harassment based on cultural identity are sometimes kept under wraps

⁹ Riera describes hashtags as: ‘bits of metadata that users add to their posts so that they may be seen (or not seen) by other users looking at that tag (2015, 40). Tags are also often used as a less conspicuous way to add commentary to a post.

because people think that they and their experiences are unimportant. The campaign is a way for South Asians to show pride in their culture and relate why cultural appropriation is so harmful and disrespectful to their experiences as a South Asian. I'm so glad that people finally feel that they have a voice and a safe platform to speak on this! (Vice 2015)

As articulated by the founder of *#reclaimthebindi* above, the genesis of this movement is the same negative affect that fuels the shame blogs, but diasporic South Asian anger is used here as a catalyst for restitutive, public proclamations of diasporic South Asian pride in their ethnic and cultural identity, and their relationship to traditional items, that have been co-opted by those who wear Indo chic. Instead of contacting non-South Asian people to shame them, and then educate them about the harmfulness of the trend, this hashtag is directed at diasporic South Asian people. Diasporic South Asian participants created their own content to contribute to the hashtag and then shared it with their wider social media networks, which include diasporic South Asian and non-diasporic South Asian people. Non-South Asian people consuming a *#reclaimthebindi* contribution is inevitable, but the content is not directed at them. *#Reclaimthebindi* contributions, therefore, function as South Asian-to-South Asian affirmations, during a time a fashion trend has acted as a racist microaggression for many.

Social media scholars note that marginalised groups are often early adopters of emerging digital platforms to connect and create community. *#Reclaimthebindi* originally began on Tumblr (reclaimthebindi.tumblr.com), a blog site renowned for the communities of support available there for minority groups, as evidenced by its hosting of the shame blogs mentioned in the previous section. Tumblr has become an online 'utopia' for some, users can become a

part of meaningful communities of support, offering solace when daily marginalisation offline takes its toll (Rajani 2014). At the height of its popularity in 2014, Tumblr had more users than both Instagram and Pinterest and by February of that year there were more than 106 million daily posts and 240,000 new blogs created on the platform every day (Bronstein 2020). Tumblr experienced a significant dip in its' usership in 2018 when, in line with increasing commercialisation, the site banned pornographic content from being posted on its microblogs. In the years since, the site has decreased in popularity even more, and the *#reclaimthebindi* movement as it appears on Tumblr has also quietened.

In 2015, however, on Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr, contributors to the hashtag talked about a feeling of reclaiming their South Asian cultural identity, mentioning the significance of the Bindi to them, weaving cultural identity with familial history. In the text accompanying the contributors' images, many also pointed out the hypocrisy of traditional dress and cultural difference being a point of racism and discrimination for South Asian women, while the Bindi is seen as a mark of cool, festival fashion when adorning non-diasporic South Asian bodies (see figures 6 and 7).

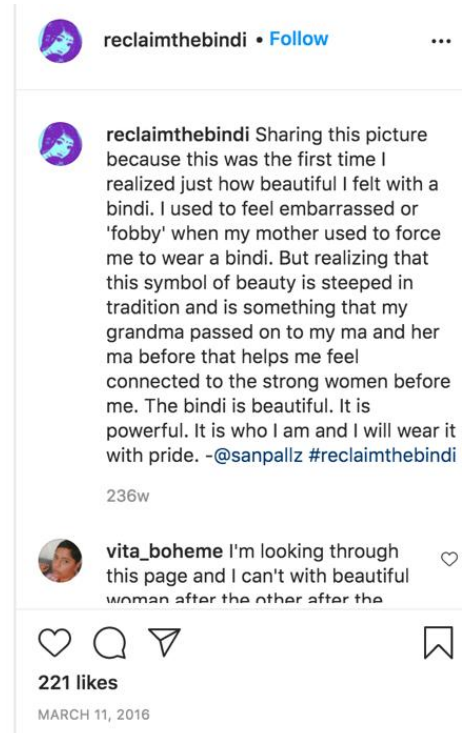


Figure 6 via @reclaimtheBindi on Instagram

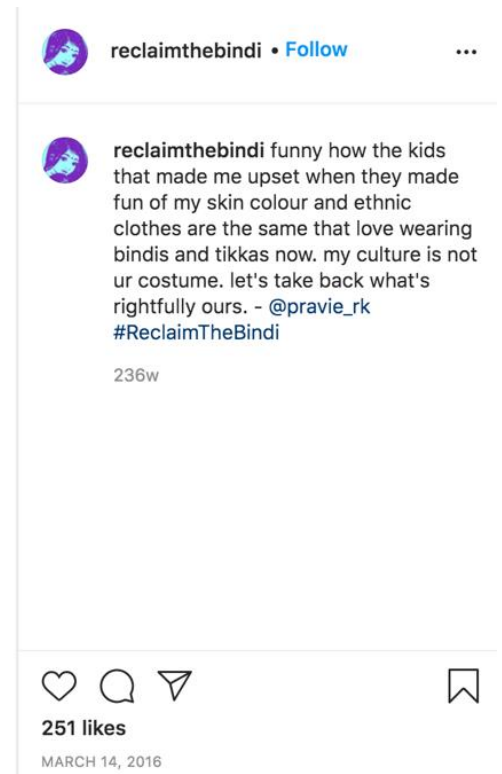


Figure 7 via @reclaimthebindi on Instagram

Figure 6 specifically refers to the significance of the Bindi within her family and that she

wears it to pay respects to her grandmother and mother, recalibrating the significance of the item away from a previous negative connotation when she felt uncomfortable wearing it to cultural events. There is a similar narrative of reclamation in the caption of figure 7. This contributor, too, talks about a previous shame around wearing the Bindi as it was a marker of difference growing up in a white majority nation, articulating previously held internalised racist beliefs about her own cultural background.

#Reclaimthebindi functions similarly to the shame blogs, in that many of its contributors directly share their experiences with microaggressions publicly and with other diasporic South Asians. In this way *#reclaimthebindi* allows ‘folks who have been silenced in other settings—unable to respond to or critique microaggressions because of power dynamics—as having access to a public space in which their experiences with microaggressions are empathized with can be a powerful form of support’ (Eschmann et al 2020, 11). The narratives shared by the contributors to the hashtag mirror the stories of shame and internalised racism articulated by my respondents in the previous chapter, indicating that the fraught relationship many diasporic South Asian women have to traditional dress is not specific to an Australian context. *#Reclaimthebindi* participants live in various parts of the Western world, again illuminating that cultural appropriation and Indo chic are issues of concern to those living in the diaspora, and not as much to domestic South Asians. With *#reclaimthebindi* specifically, the contributors are reclaiming traditional dress from the white gaze and consumer, while at the same time reclaiming it for themselves after experiencing racialised bullying while wearing traditional dress.

Paul Byron argues that Tumblr microblogs are examples of ‘subaltern counterpublics’, noting that counterpublics are constituted in relation to their tension with a larger public (

2019, 337). Therefore, the value of the activity here on reclaimthebindi.tumblr.com (and on other platforms through the hashtag) does not just have potential benefit the diasporic South Asian community, they are taking part in this movement alongside one another and addressing one another, this counterpublic moves outward - as unsuspecting voyeurs come across this content through their networks. In this way *#reclaimthebindi* can diversify the narrative of cultural appropriation in the public sphere through the sharing of these highly personal experiences of microaggressions, internalised racism and reclamation incidentally, as they share with other diasporic South Asians. Furthermore, online movements such as *#reclaimthebindi* can be useful for diasporic South Asian people who don't directly contribute, as illustrated by my respondents.

Vina explained that 'I didn't know the language and terminology until I went online and joined [diasporic South Asian] groups. I always had an uncomfortable feeling [about Indo chic] because you know these are the kinds of people [wearing Indo chic] who would have teased you for wearing it [traditional dress] in the first place' (Vina, 24). Asha also mentioned having different feelings about cultural appropriation and Indo chic before accessing diasporic South Asian spheres of culture such as *#reclaimthebindi* where discussions about Indo chic were hosted. She said:

I think when I was younger, I didn't have that much of an issue with cultural appropriation and that is probably because I didn't identify as much as being Indian [laughs]. So, my feelings have changed a bit. And I think partly having a way of talking about it or having access to a discourse about cultural appropriation what it actually means and understanding the connection to being Indian is still there, even though you aren't born there? That's something I've learnt as I've gotten older because at the time, I don't think I thought I had a right

to feel uncomfortable about it [Indo chic] so I would have dismissed it early on (Asha, 23).

Asha and Vina both describe experiencing an instinctual ‘bad feeling’ about Indo chic upon encountering it and described it as feeling ‘uncomfortable’. However, they explain that they did not feel justified in their ‘bad feeling’ until they accessed online spheres of culture where other diasporic South Asians were posting their perspectives on the trend. Another way in which the experiences of my participants align with the contributors of *#reclaimthebindi* is through a newfound sense of pride in their diasporic South Asian cultural identity and a desire to share that feeling.

Rena explained to me that she previously felt tentative about posting about her diasporic South Asian cultural identity online. However, after accessing diasporic South Asian movements, websites, and groups, she considers other diasporic South Asian people to be the target audience of her online activity. She explained:

I post on Instagram almost every day. Actually, I’m going to do an Instagram post of me - I had a [Bharatanatyam] performance last night. I was wearing this blouse top, and a Bindi, and I just post photos of myself in traditional clothing, and going to traditional events, and I feel comfortable doing that because I know there are other South Asians in Australia doing that, and other women and non-binary folk who feel like they want to engage with that. I just do it to connect with South Asian people and to connect with POC. I don’t care whether white people see it because that’s not why I post. I think it’s really cool that a lot of young, Australian South Asian women are stepping out and calling other people out, and

learning that they don't have to be palatable to their white girlfriends and they can use their culture however which way they want. (Rena, 24)

Rena feels pride not only in her cultural identity, but in herself for overcoming her apprehension to post about her cultural heritage on social media. For Rena, like the *#reclaimthebindi* participants, pride manifests itself in the wearing of traditional dress, and the performing of traditional dance (*Bharatanatyam*) for her Instagram audience. Her pride also extends to include the actions of other Australian diasporic South Asian women as she observes them evolving their behaviour to no longer appear 'palatable' or shameful, learning instead to use their culture 'however which way they want'. Vina also articulated a particular moment in which she decided to reclaim traditional dress. She previously explained that she did not like to wear traditional dress, and that she and her mother would fight often when she was expected to wear it as she would refuse. After Indo chic became popular however, she attended a 'Bollywood' night at her university in Queensland. She recalls that:

We had a Bollywood night at uni (*sic*) and they hired an Indian person to come in and do the Henna. The organiser of the event was this hippie white girl so my way of showing her up was going in full traditional wear. I got my hands done [with Henna] all the way, professionally done. And I was the photographer too. So, it was obvious I showed her up. She had a sticker gem [on her forehead] it wasn't even a proper Bindi (Vina, 24).

Vina's reclaimed sense of pride manifested when she attended the Bollywood night at her university. Despite feeling uncomfortable in traditional dress, Vina was excited to wear it for this event because the organiser, who was not a South Asian person, but a white person, was using an Indian cultural product (Bollywood) as a theme for a party. Vina's cultural authenticity (as performed through traditional dress here) revealed the inauthenticity and

appropriative nature of the white female organiser. This could be categorised as one of the little moments of pride framed by Rena as ‘learning not to be palatable for your white girlfriends’.

My mixed-race respondents experienced profound feelings of pride after encountering Indo chic and then finding the online spaces like *#reclaimthebindi* that diasporic South Asian people created as a result. Sabrina spoke about this in the following way:

I have a drawer full of my grandmother’s silk saris, but I’ve never worn them because I didn’t know when to wear them or really *how*. I was going to wear them on a daily basis but then I remembered I go to art school and would destroy them [laughs] like I think I could wear them if I was working if I had like an office job, or something, I could wear them daily. So, for now it’s just accessories like earrings and sometimes Bindis to go with my outfit. I wore one to Mardi gras, just when I want to express my identity in that particular way. Like I’m fine with people who know me and know my politics but its more just feeling like an imposter? And I think that’s a product of colonialism and whiteness so it’s not necessarily anything that’s wrong with me, I think.

Sabrina would now wear the silk saris that were hand down by her grandmother on a daily basis, but does not do so due to practical reasons (attending art school where her clothes would be damaged). She considers these so precious that she does not want them destroyed by daily wear. She also wears a Bindi sometimes, to events such as Mardi Gras. She does mention feeling like an imposter, which is an experience reported to be felt by many mixed-race people like herself. Sabrina, who is half Indian and half white Australian decides that this feeling is due to colonialism and whiteness, two phenomena that have a direct impact on

Sabrina as an Anglo Indian person. Sabrina's whiteness, then, contributes to her feelings of inauthenticity when it comes to engagement with Indian culture. Jin Haritaworn argues that:

Far from 'abolishing' race or throwing it into crisis, 'mixed-race' bodies and minds continue to be evaluated as disparate, unwholesome, and non-belonging, and appear to invite dissective reading practices such as stares, intrusive questions and comments which are commonly treated as a 'normal reaction to abnormal bodies' (2009, 116).

This imposter feeling relates to mixed-race Jana's response earlier when she explained that belonging to diasporic South Asian groups online felt like a 'cool recognition thing' (Jana, 25). Many mixed-race people experience feeling like an imposter while engaging with the cultural groups of their parents. They describe feeling 'in between' two races and/or cultures while not truly belonging to either (Haritaworn 2009). Practises such as 'stares, intrusive questions and comments' contribute to this feeling of isolation amongst their own cultural and racial groups and keep them in a place where they feel they are not able to participate in their cultures the way other members of the cultures participate. However, Rebecca King-O'Riain argues that many 'mixed people are also racialized as non-white and positioned outside of the nation-state' (2014, 270). Jana, like Sabrina, has one parent who is Indian and one who is white Australian. She made a direct link between feeling more comfortable wearing elements of traditional dress daily as she has grown older, settled into her mixed-race identity, and engaged with debates around Indo chic online:

I think a big desi aesthetics thing is wearing gold hoops, and big earrings, and stuff, and that felt like a big deal feeling okay to look more ethnic, or more diasporic South Asian than I used to feel comfortable looking. When I was little, it was something I used to avoid because I didn't want to look more Indian or too

brown, so I used to play it down because I felt like it was something a bit gross or something I didn't want to be. And now I've cracked out these gold earrings I got in India when I was 10, and I wore once then packed away as this gross Indian part of my life. I feel like gold makes me look more Indian, so it was this massive thing of reclamation which I'm sure nobody noticed but I feel more at peace about wanting to look diasporic South Asian and not being repulsed by my Indian-ness (Jana, 25).

The 'repulsion' Jana is talking about here relates back to internalised racism. This internalised racism manifests in a more complex way for mixed-race POC who can be read as white. Jana, her sister Ashley, and Sabrina are three respondents who alluded to having certain privileges due to their ability to 'pass' or appear as white. The experience of being 'repulsed' by one's diasporic South Asian-ness as a child and taking steps (such as not wearing traditional dress, or as Jana describes anything that makes her look 'too ethnic') is a privilege only mixed-race diasporic South Asians with the ability to white-pass are able to access. Jenifer Patrice Sims articulates this in the following way:

One result of the social construction of race is cultural ideas of what members of each race physically 'look like'. These images are not based solely on actual physiological characteristics, however, but on the social *perception* of those features. From this understanding, much research into the role of appearance in mixed-race identity has examined whether a mixed-race individual's approximation to 'prototypical' images of given races influences his or her racial identity (2016, 571).

As a white appearing, mixed diasporic South Asian person, Jana was able to use perceptions about her phenotypical characteristics as being 'white' or at least, not Indian or 'too ethnic' to

avert racialised stigmatisation. Sims also mentions that ‘in addition to ambiguity, another reason why mixed-race people are often varyingly perceived is because routine daily changes to their phenotypes (e.g., body work such as hairstyling) can drastically alter others’ perceptions of their appearance’ (2016, 571) and both Jana and Sabrina seem to be acutely aware of this. For Jana and Sabrina electing to wear elements of traditional dress in mainstream white Australian society is as a radical reclamation of their Indian-ness in defiance of their previous efforts to assimilate or appear as white. In this way, the (aforementioned) assimilationist attitudes of many diasporic South Asian-Australian households are amplified when members of the family are half white, and/or can white pass. There is little incentive for such a family member to desire to appear more diasporic South Asian – if they do so, they open themselves up to the racialised acts of violence and bullying other diasporic South Asian people have experienced while living in Australia.

However, as Erica Lewin notes, many in diasporic South Asian/white families, such as those of the Anglo Indians still ‘experience life at the boundaries of what is described as ‘whiteness’ (2005, 632) as they are somewhat accepted by the Australian public due to their proximity to whiteness and the privileges that follow from this proximity. In this way, the white appearing, mixed diasporic South Asian subject can try to not engage with their diasporic South Asian side and its cultural artefacts (such as the Bindi) for fear of being ‘caught out’ or ‘exposed’ as diasporic South Asian, as not white, and therefore subject to the same instances of racism experienced by the wider diasporic South Asian population. When this subject has spent a lifetime concealing or supressing their diasporic South Asian-ness for fear of experiencing racial othering and violence, seeing a non-diasporic South Asian person wear the Bindi, or Henna, or a sari, is upsetting in a multifaceted way.

The ‘bad feeling’ is multiplied. They feel the sting of their choice to conceal their diasporic South Asian side, fearing being exposed as non-white while also feeling inauthentically ‘themselves’, as they have suppressed elements of their diasporic South Asian culture. When they encounter Indo chic, they are confronted with the labour of their denial, while the people they are trying to convince of their whiteness (white people) effortlessly and uncomplicatedly enjoy diasporic South Asian cultural items as ornaments. So, the mixed-race diasporic South Asian (like monoracial diasporic South Asians) feel that instinctual ‘bad feeling’ when encountering Indo chic although it appears in a different configuration, tapping into their insecurities around their cultural identities, and sense of belonging.

However, diasporic South Asian activism around Indo chic and cultural appropriation presented an inclusive opportunity for all diasporic South Asian people — including mixed-race diasporic South Asian people — to come together in their ‘bad feeling’ to try to stop the practice. For my mixed-race respondents, this also meant being fully included in diasporic South Asian communities (online), being validated, and acknowledged as ‘diasporic South Asian’ in those groups and therefore becoming more comfortable expressing their diasporic South Asian-ness in public. Sitting in the ‘bad feeling’ of Indo chic — calling out and then coming out — has therefore been productive for many diasporic South Asian women, including mixed-race diasporic South Asian women.

Conclusion: Feeling Better?

Sara Ahmed argues that to transform bad feeling into good feeling ‘(hatred into love, indifference into sympathy, shame into pride, despair into hope and so on) is not necessarily to repair the costs of injustice’ (2005, 81). Through an analysis of these diasporic South Asian-run online spaces, it is evident that the injury caused by the wearing of Indo chic

cannot be reversed. This is, however, not the point of the cultural sites examined here. The motivation for the diasporic South Asians who have started both the shame blogs and *#reclaimthebindi* was centring the diasporic South Asian experience of Indo chic.

The motivation for the women contributing to and accessing these sites was to share their experiences of the microaggression and learn and help the founders and admins on their mission. For my respondents, accessing these kinds of sites and exposing themselves to the ideologies contained within them has been rewarding. They learnt of other perspectives, other experiences, terms, and facts that helped them feel validated in their ‘bad feeling’ and equipped them to have conversations with the people around them. It also armed them with new language to have productive conversations that hopefully would help minimise the harm of this trend. My respondents were also recognised and welcomed into a community of people who have had similar experiences to them, and in doing so, found some solace in the connections they have made with other diasporic South Asians from around the world who understood their experiences intimately. Ahmed, too, sees value in the airing of bad feeling in public, which can be productive in forming community. She argues that:

recognition of injury is not simply about others becoming visible (although this can be important). Recognition is also about saying that injustices did happen; this retelling of history offers new insights into the present and how lives in the present have been shaped not only by past injustices but by the forgetting of those injuries (2005, 92).

The efforts of diasporic South Asian women from around the world to publicise their experiences and ‘call out’ those who wear Indo chic ‘retell history’ which would have a white, western consumer believe that the cultures of minority groups are commodifiable and

consumable. By sharing their traumatic experiences, these women challenge people who engage in this trend, with no understanding or respect for its cultural heritage, to think otherwise. I have illustrated that these online spaces provide diasporic South Asian women (including my respondents) a way to 'live with the injuries that make life impossible' through cathartic practises such as shaming, educating and proclaiming pride as well as through community building. As we move into the chapters that concern celebrity, but still circle around the effects of Indo chic fashion on my diasporic South Asian respondents, Ahmed reminds us that:

Feeling better, whatever form it might take, is not about the overcoming of bad feeling, which are effects of histories of violence, but of finding a different relationship them (2005, 84)

CHAPTER FIVE:
Performing the Indian Goddess: Gendered Indo chic
and the Western Gaze in Iggy Azalea's *Bounce*

Introduction: Why did they Laugh?

I'm sitting in a Sydney café in April of 2018. I'm beginning my ethnographic research and nervous to meet respondent Sabrina. After I run Sabrina through the structure of the interview, I explain we will begin by watching two music videos – *Hymn for The Weekend* by Coldplay and Beyoncé and Iggy Azalea's *Bounce*. 'Bounce?' she says at the same time as I do, instinctively knowing which video we are watching after hearing 'Iggy Azalea' in connection with a study on India. She's watched it before, when it was released in 2013, and she remembers it made her angry. I press play and we start to watch it. About thirty seconds into the video, we get our first glimpse of Azalea – sitting on an elephant in a shiny gold dress with a matching gold crown. Sabrina bursts out laughing, and she keeps laughing. I laugh along with her, partly out of politeness but also because I, too, have difficulty watching the video beginning to end with a straight face.

Every single respondent, all thirteen of them, laughed during *Bounce*. They smiled, smirked, chuckled, scoffed, giggled, or like Sabrina, plainly laughed out loud. My intention for this particular part of the interview was to gauge the different reactions to Beyoncé and Azalea as they perform the role of an Indo chic Goddess in their respective music videos.

Having previously researched the online reactions to both videos I was aware that large swathes of the diasporic South Asian community were enraged at both performers, and both clips, for what they called cultural appropriation and for the portrayal of India. I was therefore shocked when my respondents, both those who had seen it before and those with fresh eyes, were unable to watch *Bounce* without laughing. When I asked them about their feelings towards the clip immediately after watching it, most expressed some form of the anger I was expecting, but this anger was mixed with a strange kind of amusement. This distinct affectual response - amusement – surprised me. What was it about the clip that

elicited this response? After all, *Bounce* is not *supposed* to be funny.

When non South Asian viewers watch *Bounce*, they see Iggy Azalea wearing beautiful, colourful costumes in India amongst locals who are all dancing and celebrating in jubilation. They see familiar images of India – saris, temples, marigolds, elephants, slums, Holi, Varanasi, Vishnu. It is bright, colourful, and full of life. In contrast, when South Asian viewers watch *Bounce*, they see inaccuracies and ludicrous excess. They are watching the same performer, the same marigolds, the same elephants, but these images hold a different significance for them. Most do not feel that the music video or its protagonist represent them or their cultural identity, and so distance themselves from her through a resistant reading (Hall 1996).

In every other example of Indo chic explored in this thesis there was a strong intergenerational divide between responses. The first-generation diasporic South Asian women had more sympathetic opinions of Indo chic and were more likely to praise it, while their second-generation daughters and granddaughters were vocally critical about the trend. This chapter on *Bounce* and Iggy Azalea is the exception to the rule. Every respondent regardless of generation and experience had the same overall reaction – laughter.

Which brings us to the central question of this chapter – why did they laugh? To answer that question, I delve into the aspects of *Bounce* that stood out to respondents as well as Iggy Azalea's performance in the video within the context of the development of her transnational professional identity. In its portrayal of India, *Bounce* shares many of the same visual tropes as *Hymn for the Weekend*, however, the latter elicited complex and contradictory responses from my participants. The main difference between them for my participants was the presence of Iggy Azalea. For the respondents who had never heard of Azalea she was interpreted as a fool - a white girl rapping and twerking in a temple in Varanasi. For the

respondents acquainted with Azalea, her *Bounce* performance represented quintessential Iggy Azalea - camp, clueless and offensive. Whereas Beyoncé was admired by many of my respondents, especially those of the second-generation who have an interest in women-of-colour politics, comparatively Azalea was universally ridiculed.

I begin this chapter by exploring links between Azalea's celebrity identity and the strong visceral responses of my respondents to her performance in *Bounce*. I then provide some cultural context for Iggy Azalea's *Bounce* music video, focusing on how the clip's aesthetics are in line with Azalea's celebrity brand. In my analysis, I suggest that the reactions of my respondents are due in large part to most respondents' previous knowledge of Azalea's career, performance style and celebrity persona, all of which have been marked by constant accusations of cultural appropriation. To understand all of this however we must first account for Azalea's career trajectory on her journey to *Bounce*.

'First Thing's First, I'm The Realist': Iggy Azalea's Beginnings

Iggy Azalea was born Amethyst Amelia Kelly in 1990 in Mullumbimby, a rural town in New South Wales, Australia. She moved to Miami at the age of sixteen to pursue a career in hip hop. When asked why she decided to do this, Azalea often says that she felt like an outcast in Australia and identified emotionally with the US as the birthplace of hip hop (Light 1999). She describes Mullumbimby as a 'hippie town' laden with crystal shops, organic restaurants and situated in close proximity to Nimbin, home to 'MardiGrass' the biggest marijuana festival in the world. 'It's like dreadlocks, no shoes, lots of weed-smoking, hemp clothing, a lot of tie-dye shit going on, that kind of thing' said Azalea in 2012.

Azalea explains that she was lonely being a rapper in Mullumbimby 'everyone would laugh

at me and be like ‘You want to be American’ and I’m like ‘I don’t want to be American. I’m Australian but I like this stuff’. Most of her friends in Mullumbimby weren’t interested in rap music, preferring house, and electro. ‘Everyone just like, takes ecstasy and like gets a glowstick and a pair of gumboots and I was like ‘I don’t want to do that’’ says Azalea so she decided to take the hour-long bus ride to Lismore on the weekends where she connected with Sudanese refugees who she had met online. ‘Lismore had a refugee program, and all the people from Sudan liked hip hop and I liked hip hop, so we would all be at the cypher zone’ says Azalea, ‘I don’t think we ever knew who won [the cypher] but it certainly wasn’t me, I was shit’.

She moved to the US in 2006 on a travel visa with ambitions of becoming a rap star. She says, ‘I just knew I wanted to go to America and be a rapper and have a ponytail and a leopard skin jacket that went down to my feet and like, 20 white, fluffy dogs on one leash’ states Azalea. Capitalising on her appearance, Azalea was signed to Wilhelmina model management in Miami before moving to Atlanta to pursue rapping. Her background as a model was not appreciated by the people in the Miami rap scene she was trying to break into at the time, and they urged her to try singing instead ‘they’re like, ‘you’re white, you look like a model, you don’t look like you rap, nobody will get this. You need to be a little bit softer and more like ...pop,’ is what they said. And I was like, this kinda sucks’.

She continued to rap regardless, naming herself Iggy Azalea - a combination of her dog’s name and the name of the street on which she grew up – determined now to learn how to rap properly. Azalea refined her ‘dirty South’ style of rapping (Morrissey 2014) in Atlanta learning from underground rappers and producers who taught her how to structure a song. When critics questioned her use of a Southern accent in her songs, she attributed her distinct rapping voice to this time spent in Atlanta. Of these early critics she says ‘they were giving

me shit about rapping in an American accent. But I learned to rap over here, from people who live in the South so what would you expect it to sound like?'. She attempted success as a rapper in Atlanta to no avail, and eventually moved to Los Angeles in 2010.

Around this time Azalea made her most important contact in the music industry, established Southern rapper T.I., who saw potential in her and was instrumental in getting her signed to Interscope Records in 2010. In LA, Azalea began to get noticed by key players in the rap industry. Songs from her mixtape, *Ignorant Art*, and EP, *Glory*, earned her a place as supporting act for British RnB/Pop singer Rita Ora on her 2012 European tour. She joined renowned rapper NAS on his US tour in the same year. The following year Azalea signed with Grand Hustle Records in 2013 and released her first single, *Work* from her upcoming debut album, *The New Classic*. *Bounce* was released in 2013 as the second song pre-released from *The New Classic*. This album was supposed to debut in 2013 but was pushed back when she accepted an offer to tour with Beyoncé after the release of *Bounce*. She spent four months performing in Beyoncé's *Mrs. Carter Show World Tour*, then released her hit single, *Fancy*, featuring Charli XCX. *Fancy* became Azalea's biggest hit, topping the Billboard 100 chart in May 2014. She was also featured in Ariana Grande's hit song *Problem* which charted at number two at the same time, making Azalea the only act after the Beatles to rank numbers one and two simultaneously on the Billboard chart. Later that year she achieved another top-ten ranking with the release of *Black Widow*.

Along with her success came controversy as domestic rap fans questioned her legitimacy as a rapper due to her identity as a white Australian woman. Her gender, race, and national origins distanced her further from rap's origins as an art form associated with African American men (Light 1999). Azalea has been vocal about these criticisms levelled against her. She has said 'those people can fuck off, they're like 'oh she wants to be Black' or 'she doesn't give

Australia props' all that crap. What does that even mean?'. After the successes of 2014, Azalea suffered a drastic decrease in popularity, which resulted in Azalea's current reputation as a relative 'has-been' (at the time of writing in 2022). According to media outlets, this decrease in popularity was a result of the constant controversy that surrounded Azalea's success. These controversies all centre around her perceived inauthenticity as a legitimate rapper. She has been critiqued for a long list of social, cultural, and artistic transgressions including: her accent, race, gender, nationality, frequent attempts at cultural appropriation, dating only Black men, plastic surgeries, and use of controversial lyrics. In an American hip hop climate already oversaturated with aspiring rappers, the question hip hop aficionados and critics asked was: why her? Why did this blonde, white, Australian woman succeed with her brand of Dirty South rap, when so many Black men and women born and raised in Atlanta, pioneers, and practitioners of the style, had not?

Every song and album released by Azalea had elicited these questions such that by the time I showed my respondents the *Bounce* music video in early 2018, most were well acquainted with her controversial background. The overarching impression of the *Bounce* music video gave my respondents was that Azalea was culturally illiterate, both in her understanding of India, and in her obliviousness in producing what they unanimously agreed was a culturally appropriative music video.

The Politics of Place: Australia, America, and Iggy Azalea

Azalea complicates hip hop's investment in authenticity in a number of significant ways, but most saliently through her revisionist life history which effectively disconnects her rap identity from her place of origin, propelling her into a perpetual state of 'out of place-ness'. In her paper on Azalea, Tara Morrissey (2014) argues that a rapper's success is inextricably linked to how convincingly they perform their 'authenticity' to the hip hop world, and place

of origin is one of the most significant ways in which a rapper can legitimate themselves. The importance of authenticity to a rapper is rooted in the history of hip hop and rap as a neighbourhood art form and each neighbourhood has their own distinct culture, sound and struggles, which is also an overarching theme in rap (Forman 2002). Morrissey argues that Azalea's disinclination to identify as an Australian hip hop artist 'not only rejects essentialisms of selfhood and self-representation but also violates one of the mainstays of hip-hop authenticity, the declaration of allegiance to the rapper's particular 'hood'' (Morrissey 2014, 26) and places her in an uncertain space in which she relies on other aspects of her rap persona, and also other people, to validate her career.

Olivia Rines (2015) has also written about Azalea and her (in)authenticity through her analysis of Azalea's interviews with the hip hop press. She writes about the cultural practice of hip hop insiders trying to 'call out' an aspiring artist's authenticity through conversation in which the listener looks for specific criteria that would denote the aspirant as an imposter. These criteria relate to politics surrounding the importance of the place of origin but also lyrics, rapping style, and accent. In the case of Azalea, they also focus on race, gender, and sexuality. Rines' analysis of one of Azalea's early interviews with New York based hip hop radio station, Hot 97, in 2013, recounts one such interrogation of her rap authenticity by the host of the show, Ebro.

This interview is a valuable resource for understanding the way in which Azalea views herself as a rapper and how she justifies her position in this world in which her validity is constantly questioned. The interview covers four key topics: Azalea's use of the lyrics 'runaway slave' (from her 2011 song *D.R.U.G.S.*), her accent, her position in hip hop and her dating preferences. Accompanying her to this interview is T.I. who acted as her unofficial

mentor. As for the ‘runaway slave’¹⁰ line, she insists that she herself was sceptical about keeping it in the song, but the ‘Black guys’ who she was working with in the studio told her she should keep it in and so she did. In this exchange Azalea is relying on the wisdom of these ‘Black guys’ producing her album as if their race and experience makes them inherently qualified to approve a line like this in a rap song, regardless of the rapper’s subject position and works effectively to shift the blame away from her decision to keep it in. It also positions her as someone whose songs and career have been blessed by established powers in the rap world signifying her view that hip hop is a world in which she is welcome.

The interview then shifts to a discussion about Azalea’s rap accent. Ebro equates it to a ‘down-south accent’. His co-host K.Foxx agrees, saying Azalea sounds like she is from ‘somewhere in the A [Atlanta, Georgia]’. Azalea’s rap accent proved to be another controversial aspect of her performance identity to many, as it culturally appropriates a particular rapping style home to the Black rappers of Atlanta while still speaking (not rapping) with her natural Australian accent, confusing her origins. Her putting on of this Dirty South accent works to highlight how truly performative her rap persona is. This is a problem as this performativity sits in direct contrast to the validity, the ‘realness’ that is so central to hip hop culture.

In the interview, Azalea addresses her use of the Dirty South accent by recounting her misunderstood childhood in Australia and her longing to go to America and experience the hip hop world she admired. She explains that when she was developing as a rapper, her immediate social context encouraged her specific linguistic choices. She learnt to rap in the South, so why should she not rap in a distinctive Southern style paying her dues to those who taught her? Azalea here is establishing a narrative in which her spiritual place of origin is not

¹⁰ Azalea has been criticised for this line in the song, which reads “Tire marks, tire marks / Finish line with the fire marks / When the relay starts, I’m a runaway slave / Master” from “D.R.U.G.S (Azalea 2012)

her native Australia, but the Southern hip hop world where established rappers took her under their wing. She also justifies this position by referencing unnamed ‘other artists’ who do the same. This ‘adopted accent as performance’ argument is acknowledged by both Ebro and T.I., who bring up other examples of artists who use accents that aren’t their own in their performance such as Nicki Minaj or Amy Winehouse (Rines 2015); but her follow up question ‘does it really hurt anybody?’ indicates that she is aware of claims that she has appropriated a cultural identity that does not belong to her but doesn’t concede this as violence.

In this way Azalea is proposing a narrative of rap as evolutionary —an art form that has moved past its original racial and spatial politics — and establishing herself as a key player in this new space and the music industry. A little while after this exchange Azalea self-deprecatingly jokes that she is an imposter. This is followed by laughter on Azalea’s part and stunned silence on the part of Ebro and K.Foxx, which is perhaps why T.I quickly chimes in with the assurance that ‘she’s certified’, clearly unamused by Azalea’s attempt at tongue-in-cheek humour. This exchange demonstrates that Azalea is aware of the claims of cultural inauthenticity and appropriation that have been levelled against her. At the end of the interview, Azalea is asked if she is ‘really certified? or a gimmick, or character’ implying at once that Azalea’s rap persona is inauthentic, and that T. I’s assurance of her legitimacy is ultimately unconvincing.

Situating Azalea in the World of White Rappers: Comparisons with Eminem

As Azalea was becoming well known in the world of American music she was frequently compared to Eminem, a famously successful white rapper of the early 2000s who had ten number one hit songs on the Billboard 100 chart throughout his career. Azalea was not the first white woman to attempt a career at rap in the U.S.; both Britain’s Lady Sovereign and

California's Kreayshawn achieved hits on the Billboard 100 chart before fading into obscurity in the late 2000s. Critics stipulate that Azalea did not have the right formula and celebrity identity that Eminem did to succeed as a white musician in the rap world, leading to the subsequent demise of her rap career. In an interview with hip hop morning show 'The Breakfast Club' in April 2014, Azalea addressed these comparisons to Eminem and said that 'I know that in terms of journalism people that will write about my music, I'd never expect them to hail me like Eminem or something because I know that's not going to happen, so I kinda don't really look into that because it'll just be disappointing' (Morrissey 2015, 22).

Gender plays into Azalea's failure: as a woman, she is one more degree removed from the traditionally Black, male-dominated space of hip hop (Light 1999). Eminem's working-class background also legitimised him as a rapper when he first emerged on the scene with endorsements from established Black rappers in his local Detroit neighbourhood. As will be explored later on in this paper, Azalea's race and gender are both factors that worked to invalidate her authenticity as a rapper. However, the most salient factor in her failure was her lack of roots to a particular US 'hood' which Murray Forman describes as the '*extreme local* upon which rappers base their constructions of special imagery and self' (2002, 220).

As noted earlier, the rapper has discussed in numerous interviews her sense of alienation from her own cultural roots in rural Australia. The remoteness of Mullumbimby to the domestic US rap consumer means that most domestic fans could not relate to her roots in the way they could with Eminem, who wore his humble Detroit roots as a badge that secured him entry into the rap world. In contrast Azalea sees the US cities she has lived in as her true hometown(s). She references her upbringing in Australia in her songs, but always in a pejorative way. She raps about her US affiliations in her songs far more frequently, including in her 2014 song *Work* from *The New Classic* which opens with the line 'No Money, No

Family/ Sixteen in The Middle of Miami’. In this song Azalea talks about her struggle growing up in Australia, working three jobs to save money to move to America, and her passion to succeed in the rap world whence she arrives there. This brings us to *Bounce*. This tension of Azalea’s out-of-place-ness in the American rap scene was echoed by my respondents in their responses to watching her in India in *Bounce* where they felt she looked equally, if not more out of place.

‘All I Thought Was, What is *She* Doing There’? Iggy in India

Iggy Azalea’s *Bounce* opens with thirty seconds of city sounds — beeping and honking, cars whooshing by — getting the audience acclimated to the sounds of India. These sounds are followed by a montage of bustling Indian highways, children in the street, motorised rickshaws and finally Iggy Azalea, inexplicably riding an elephant in the middle of a modern Indian street, dressed in a sparkling gold dress and headpiece. The clip begins in an ethnographic format and could look familiar to a Western audience familiar with documentaries produced by those such as National Geographic using cliché images of an urban Indian city.

The beat starts and doors open. Out comes Azalea in a full red wedding sari complete with Bindi and tikka with four South Asian girls in magenta saris dancing at her side. The vibe of this section of the video clip evokes the film *Monsoon Wedding* with the colour, the dancing, and the large number of extras in the background of every shot. It looks chaotic, but fun and bright. Azalea starts rapping in the centre of the frame as natural light streams in behind her. The contrast between Azalea’s stark white complexion and silver blonde hair against her backup dancers is striking. The backup dancers dance in a recognisable ‘Bollywood’ style

while Azalea raps, performing rapping gestures as the scene cuts to slow motion shots of Indian people at the wedding partying and dancing.

The chorus starts and Azalea raps ‘shake it, break it, make it bounce’ as she and her backup dancers begin to dance in step to Bollywood style choreography, their hips bouncing in unison while Azalea raises her hands high above her hypnotically doing ‘Bollywood hands’. As the beat drops, the scene cuts to shots of her on the elephant and her rapping while speeding down the highway in a motorised rickshaw in a billowing, paisley-printed blouse with shika mirrors. We get our first ‘kaleidoscope’ scene where a postproduction effect is added to imagery of Azalea dancing — both in Bollywood style and twerking — evoking a 1960s psychedelic feel that has become inextricably linked to the consumption of India in the West as discussed in Chapter Three.

As the second verse starts, we are introduced to an outdoor temple with marigold strands hung off two trees which frame the shot creating an orange curtain at the back of the frame. Iggy stands in the middle in a stark white sari made of cotton. It is a funeral sari, but she does not seem to be at a funeral. She pairs this with an ornate headpiece of small white flowers that drapes over her shoulders and moves with her hips as she shakes them. She is also wearing a decorative gold Bindi that follows her eyebrows and a gold tikka. At her left is a small boy with messy hair and orange dhoti style garment that matches the marigold curtains behind him, and his face is painted with white and orange markings. At her right stands an emaciated old man also in an orange dhoti that matches the marigolds in the background as well as the child. Both the child and the old man seem sad and loom silently in the background as Azalea raps ‘the nights never end, and we party/ we party we kick it’. Azalea dances in a rap style in the middle of this tableau. She is the only one who moves. She

finishes this dance with her hands in 'namaste' prayer pose. Her background characters express a blank gaze to camera.

We return to the wedding as the camera zooms in on Azalea's hips shaking. Verse three opens with Azalea in another simple, white sari with the same elaborate headpiece from the second verse. Around her children with Holi paint loaded into water guns shooting at each other. The entire scene is vibrantly colourful and Azalea, white and in white, stands in the middle in stark contrast. A slow motion montage of the children playing with Holi powder follows, cut with close-ups of the kids covered in powder gazing at the camera with the same blank stare the little boy and old man had in the previous scene. They seem happy and full of life when playing amongst each other around Azalea, but their expressions drastically change when the camera zooms in for solo shots of the children who frown.

During the final breakdown of the song, we are again treated to the kaleidoscope effect with Azalea dancing with a photo of the Taj Mahal suddenly in the background as the image swirls and changes with the effect. A final rapid montage ensues of Azalea dancing at wedding, in the street and at the makeshift temple, close-ups of the dancers at the wedding, the sad children in the street, and finally her on the elephant. The song fades out as we see her in her red wedding sari on the back of a motorcycle with an Indian man driving. She looks coy as she glares back at the camera hiding half her face behind a piece of red fabric, a makeshift veil.

The first impression for many respondents after watching the video was that Azalea was indulging in Orientalist fantasies of the white woman exploring an exotic city. A few common themes emerged, illustrating certain parts of the visual imagery clearly resonated

with the diasporic South Asian women in my group. These themes included: the cultural illiteracy of Azalea and the music video producers; the romanticisation of poverty in India; the incompatibility of the song with the video's setting; the sexualisation of Indian culture; Azalea's performance as camp; and the glorification of Azalea's whiteness through the use of Indian extras in the clip. In the following section I discuss these themes in my analysis of responses to the video.

Cultural Illiteracy

23-year-old respondent Kela's statement typifies the type of response I received and is a fitting quote to start with as it illustrates the intensity of most of my respondents' reactions to *Bounce*. Immediately after watching the clip, she had this to say:

I hated it. Just hated it. She took something that is so culturally important and means something so much more than what she was singing and what she was trying to insinuate. I've seen it before and I've had the same reaction to it then, too. (Kela, 23)

This kind of response alludes to cultural illiteracy on the part of Azalea and producers of the video clip. The clip was made by Brooklyn-based music video makers BRTHR comprised of Alex Lee and Kyle Wightman, both white American men. Brendan Lynch and Geoff McLean helped produce the clip with BRTHR but hired an Indian film crew when they arrived in Mumbai to shoot the clip. Stratum Films in Mumbai scouted the locations and cast extras and hired Indian producer Avinash Shankar as a cultural consultant. His main concerns with the original plan for the clip concerned Azalea's use of profanity in the dialogue and making sure Azalea's costume was not 'too offensive'; however, in what way he meant this is unclear (Pell 2013). Choreographer Devang Desai assembled Indian dancers and worked with Azalea

on a Bollywood style dance routine unique to *Bounce* and Azalea's existing dancing style (Pell 2013). In an interview with MTV promoting the clip Azalea describes her creative input, stating that the idea to set it in India, as well as feature scenes of an Indian wedding were entirely hers:

My mother growing up was really, really close friends with an Indian woman. She ended up having an arranged marriage oddly enough and I remember going to her wedding and it was one of the only weddings that I've ever been to, besides my own mothers, and it was the biggest party, the most fun ever. So, when I was doing *Bounce*, you know I don't actually drink or smoke, so I thought I don't wanna do a video in a club like poppin' bottles and all this stuff, although the song's about partying. I [wanted to] do a celebration... and it made me think of that experience with my mother's friend going to an Indian wedding and having the most crazy and amazing time and I thought I wanna do an Indian wedding! And I wanna do it in India! And I wanna do it properly...and I put an elephant in there for good luck. (Iggy Azalea qtd in Pell 2013).

As a result, the stylistic direction was largely influenced by Azalea's wishes; however, there was input from domestic Indian creatives in the production and choreography. There was general consensus amongst my respondents that the creative direction of the clip was misguided and relied on established Western stereotypes about India, leading to a lazy reiteration of those stereotypes.

Romanticisation of Poverty

Poverty, Holi, Bollywood dancing and the elephant were four distinct visual cues respondents

commented on as stereotypical shots of India. Belle commented that Azalea herself was less offensive than these elements of the clip:

Iggy Azalea is just centred in the middle of a group of people who outdanced her.

I have no problem with her in a sari dancing, but it was more the poor children and the powder...my problem is when they romanticise poverty (Belle, 33).

This sentiment was also shared by Victoria:

In complete contrast [to Azalea] the kids were running around who were poverty stricken so there's that I don't know what you'd call it, a dichotomy? Where there's happy and there's sad. I really didn't think much about Iggy in India apart from 'what is she doing there?' (Victoria, 70).

Respondent Sabrina recited her own list that touched on these themes, mentioning her dissatisfaction that the clip fell into this well-established territory, questioning why Western productions set in India always rely on the same visual cues:

Some of the things I really hate about it is the children just standing around and staring its obviously using them as a prop and an aesthetic but [they] also gives her edge in this weird way... Both of them [the music videos] used Holi and they always use it, and I just don't get it. Like what have you got? Children, Holi, Varanasi it's just this weird uncertain spirituality (Sabrina, 24).

Sabrina's observations of certain recurring tropes of India in the video echo the Orientalist visual lexicon of India and other Third World countries that is consistently reproduced in the ethnographic gaze of magazines like *National Geographic*. Radhika Parameswaran (2002) analyses the ways in which the discursive strategies of the magazine are tied up with the

magazine's neo-colonial perspective of global cultures. *National Geographic* is a useful example of the kind of visual culture created to depict third world nations such as India. This is due to the cultural capital and long history of the magazine that lends a tacit understanding that its pages represent an authentic image of the 'foreign' cultures featured.

Parameswaran notes that the *National Geographic* covers of the last 40 years that depict India (and specifically images of Indian women) depict these subjects as harbingers of 'exotic' tradition, pastoral life, religion and 'the mystery of India's ancient past' (2002, 66). In the case of India, she argues that *National Geographic* has for the most part ignored the vibrant, cosmopolitan culture of urban India. Cecil, Pranav, and Takacs (1994) echo this sentiment in their study of American mainstream media coverage of India arguing that the Western news media recycles a routine catalogue of stories (and accompanying visual images) on 'exotic' customs, ancient traditions, caste, national disasters, poverty, and the oppression of Indian women at the hands of this tradition. So, for Azalea, and her American production team, the images seen in *Bounce* reflect the images of India they themselves consume. From their position, the images, and tableaux they create in *Bounce* are authentically Indian, even the elephant. According to Azalea, the elephant took a month to find and 'the Indian mafia' were required to shut down a street in Mumbai for the filming of her scene (Pell 2013).

Respondents remarked on the ridiculous inauthenticity of the elephant and questioned why Azalea was sitting on an elephant in a gold sparkly dress in the middle of a bustling Mumbai Street in the first place. Tami reflected on how the Indian extras and crew must have felt shooting such a scene:

Iggy Azalea sitting on an elephant was a bit weird, wearing what looked like a mermaid tail? I don't know I could be wrong but that was just weird. For the

Indian people in the video, they must've thought it was weird (Tami, 56).

This sentiment was echoed by Rena:

It [the music video] was very much, like, I would say it was even more intense, more vibrant than what Bollywood movies are I mean like no one in India rides around on an elephant and that crown she's wearing, I mean I'm not even sure if that [the crown] is south Asian as far as I know. (Rena, 24)

Incompatibility of Song with Setting

Another major concern the respondents had with the artistic direction of *Bounce* was the very idea of setting the music video in India for a rap song with such a distinctive Dirty South sound. They remarked on the discordant contrast between the visuals of the clip and the song itself as noted in Jana's first impression of the clip below:

What does India have to do with any of it? Like the culture generally, the people, the language, like, I don't get any reference to India in the lyrics...I'm mostly just confused (Jana, 25).

The subsequent impression *Bounce* left on respondents like Jana was a mix of confusion, anger, amusement, and a feeling that their senses had been assaulted through the rhythmic electronic beat of the song and the visuals of the clip. The lyrics of the chorus read 'make it bounce/make it bounce/ make it bounce/ shake it, break it/ make it bounce' which is repeated twice. The rap verses do not retell a narrative but instead recount Azalea's ability to party. 'Time to party, that's all I know/ Grab somebody, tell them, Baby, baby, baby, let's go/ Dancin' we dizzy, we spinnin' we spinnin'/ All about money, the night's never ending/ We party 'til morning, tomorrow we kick it' sings Azalea in one scene as she bounces her hips in her sparkling red wedding sari. Asha communicated that she felt confusion elicited by the combination of lyrics and the visual tableaux, with a focus on Azalea's wardrobe in the clip:

I don't know what her dressing up in Indian clothing had anything to do with the song, it was very unnecessary. Kind of made me feel like why are you using India as like a prop? Also, it was really inaccurate because half the time she wasn't even wearing a proper Indian outfit, but she was like pretending that she was (Asha, 24).

For many respondents, the combination of the clip's Indian setting and Azalea's wardrobe did not make sense. Jana describes the incomprehensibility of the clip with her response:

One of my initial reactions is I'm not sure what the scenes of mystical India are supposed to be connoting in terms of the lyrics? The song's just being about crazy partying and hot girls and so I'm not sure why India signifies that. Apart from I guess in both [clips] but particularly Iggy, is this very sexualised white woman who is dispersed with brown men who are staring and looking at her... (Jana, 25)

Azalea's choice of wardrobe was a constant point of conversation amongst respondents and contributed significantly to the recurring sentiment that Azalea and her production team are using India, and its people and cultural practices, as a prop in order to set Azalea apart from other musical acts and other music videos in which she stands in opposition. Despite criticisms levelled at Azalea for her cultural appropriation in this clip more generally, the specific way she is wearing the sari and other Indo chic outfits are considered offensive to many of the respondents.

Sexualisation of India

Viola took particular offense to Azalea's attempt at Indian-ness in this clip as it comes into contact with her sexualised, hedonistic raps and her attempt at 'Bollywood' style dancing:

It [the music video] is just sexualised lyrics with India as a backdrop. It's a bit, what's the word when you use something... it's exploitative. Of a beautiful culture, and country, and festivals, like religious festivals like Holi, and to bring it in with all these weird stupid hand dances and stuff, I mean get a life (Viola, 70).

'Dip it, spin it and watching my hips/ I see you watchin' my hips/ Crazy, move your body like Swayze' raps Azalea at one point in the clip with her Dirty South pronunciation while raising her hands in a prayer pose above her head and popping her hips towards the camera. Here she is double appropriating — aurally mimicking US Blackness and visually mimicking Indian 'spirituality'.

The sexualised nature of her dancing, lyrics and her dress were also common talking points amongst respondents. Asha saw the clip as sexualising and exoticising both India and Azalea and questioned her presence in the specific Mumbai locations:

With Iggy it's like she's dancing in a temple, and I didn't really hear the lyrics that much, but it's sounds like club, sexual stuff which is like maybe don't sing like that and dance like that in a temple because someone could easily get offended, you know, if they're very [religious]... (Asha, 25)

With Asha's comment we are brought back to the central tension of Azalea being out of place geographically and culturally and her attempt to escape that tension, paradoxically, by performing and appropriating difference.

Iggy in the Middle: Whiteness, Blackness, and South Asian-ness in *Bounce*

The interconnectedness of location, culture, and racialised embodied experience are crucial in hip hop in terms of both the content (lyrics, rapping voice, genre) but also as a way of legitimising performers within the scene. This means that Azalea could not and did not find

legitimacy in hip hop simply by moving to the US, and revising her personal narrative to focus on it rather than Australia. Her white privilege, dedication to rap, and the networks she cultivated initially gave her access to and success in the rap world. Ultimately, however, her inability to acknowledge this privilege led to the controversial media coverage that ended her career. As mentioned earlier, Azalea continually dodged claims that she ‘wants to be Black’ when fans interrogated her use of AAVE (African American vernacular English), claims of distant indigeneity, racially charged body manipulating surgeries, race-based sexual preferences, and fashion choices. In this section I will explore how all of these elements come together and might have contributed to my respondents’ unanimous reaction of laughter.

Azalea discusses many of these issues in a 2011 interview with *Complex* magazine. This interview is a useful resource for understanding how she positions herself in relation to Blackness while acknowledging that she sees Blackness as integral to hip hop. She frames her connection to Blackness in a distinctly Australian way in a segment of the interview titled ‘Growing up in Australia’. In this section she talks about her hometown, Mullumbimby, as predominantly Aboriginal and notes that the town even gets its name from an Aboriginal language. She makes her association with Indigeneity more direct when she states ‘My family came to Australia on the First Fleet. My family's been in that country for a long time, over 100 years. If your family has lived in Australia for a long time, everyone has a little bit of Indigenous blood. I know my family does because we have an eye condition that only Aborigine (sic) people have’ (Ahmed 2011). In this quote she confirms her settler origins and claims to have ‘a little bit of Indigenous blood’ while not going so far as to identify as Indigenous. Azalea mentioning this is interesting as it illuminates that, for Azalea, Australian Aboriginality and African American Blackness are the same, when in fact the experiences, histories and cultures of these groups are distinct.

Tara Morrissey (2014) analyses the ways Azalea talks about her Australian origins and argues that the particular anecdotes she chooses to share contribute to a logic in which Azalea uses her tentative gestures towards Indigenous ancestry to distance herself from her whiteness. In an industry where her race is constantly under scrutiny Morrissey argues that with this claim she ‘distances [herself] from whiteness as understood in the US context by association with an exoticized image of Australia and connection to non-white indigenusness’ (2014, 33). Despite her allusions to Blackness, Azalea’s phenotypical and cultural whiteness is undeniable, and in any other genre of music, it would not have become her defining feature.

Another way she aligns herself with Blackness is physically through the shape of her body. Azalea’s body becomes the signifier through which she can explicitly market herself as a woman in hip hop, typifying not only overt sexuality but Black female sexuality. Azalea’s butt is strategically placed front and centre in most of the choreography in her music videos and stage performances, presenting her as a white woman with the desired curves associated with Black women. Morrissey argues that Azalea’s particular body shape is something that helps legitimise her in the hip hop world as it aligns her with Blackness through the traditional look of a female rapper:

Focus on Azalea’s body shape typifies not only the way in which popular culture emphasizes female sexuality and sex appeal in its evaluation of female performance, but also the particular lens through which hip-hop scrutinizes and authenticates its female practitioners (2014, 45).

Morrissey states that the hip hop consumer is already primed for the type of ‘bootylicious’ imagery Azalea performs; however, this element of Azalea’s rap identity is controversial too as Azalea has confessed to getting plastic surgery to achieve this look. Azalea was a model

when she first moved to the U.S, qualified by her natural height and her slim, athletic body. When she turned her ambitions to seriously rapping, she invested in butt and breast implants as well as rhinoplasty. This gave Azalea her signature ‘thickness’ for which she has become known. Fellow female rapper Boss Lady has talked about Azalea’s ‘thickness’ and in doing so helped to sanction Azalea’s participation in hip hop alongside her peers, ‘endowing her with a dominant, interior Blackness’ (Morrissey 2014, 44). In this way Azalea demonstrates that Blackness is something that can be manufactured and manipulated cosmetically.

This phenomenon was examined by bell hooks (1992) in her seminal essay, ‘Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance’. hooks argues that Western commodity culture has utilised the bodies and cultures of the Other (African Americans in this case) to enhance the whiteness against which it is visually constructed— that ‘within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, a seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’ (1992, 25). This exploitative form of consumption, she argues, allows white consumers to believe they are rebelling against the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 1992) through their embrace and acceptance of the Other. However, this tokenistic use of the bodies and cultures of people of colour draws on, and reproduces, exotic and primitive fantasies of non-Western, non-white groups, in fact reinforcing systemic racism (hooks 1992, 38).

Whiteness, in hooks’ analysis, is simultaneously powerful in its invisible normality and its perceived lack (of culture, emotion, and sexuality) by white people who consume and commodify difference. Azalea’s perceptions of, and relationships with, people of colour, both by the Sudanese refugee community in Australia and African American rappers in the US, seem to exemplify this point.

Another significant way Azalea aligned herself with Blackness was through her choice of high-profile romances with Black celebrity men. In the 2013 Hot 97 interview discussed earlier, host Ebro brings up Azalea's choice in romantic partners. He asks if the line 'no money no family/ sixteen in the middle of Miami' from *Work* was true. He then asks her if she likes 'Black guys' and she answers yes, but not exclusively, as she also has a crush on Brad Pitt. Ebro's fixation on Azalea's dating preferences ties back to her positioning as a white woman in a predominately Black community.

On the one hand, having a Black boyfriend most likely gave her cultural access to the Black community in Atlanta. Being welcomed into this community would have helped to legitimise her claim to hip hop. On the other hand, her choice of Black partner could be interpreted as Azalea using the partner to legitimise herself, or to live out a preconceived fantasy of what it would be like to be a part of a Black community as a hip hop artist, something she has admitted to dreaming about as a child in Australia. Her dating history after 2013 seems to confirm Ebro's assertion that she prefers to date Black men as she went on to have two high profile romances with Black men. Azalea's first celebrity boyfriend was rapper A\$AP Rocky (2011-2012) followed by LA Lakers basketball player Nick Young (2014-2016). Both are African American men, and her relationships with them were highly publicised. Later in 2014, Azalea and then fiancée Nick Young were featured as a couple in a H&M advertisement campaign for Valentine's Day. Their breakup in late 2016 was newsworthy also. Azalea's dating history led to online accusations of her having a sexual fetish for Black men. Olivia Rines argues that the particularly racially charged nature of this exchange works to remind the Hot 97 audience that despite Azalea's financial success, the hip hop community still has a lot of questions for her before she can be accepted as a legitimised community member and until she answers these questions she will be continually interrogated (2014, 63).

Her relationships with established hip hop acts are another important way Azalea attempted to authenticate her position in the rap world. Few of these unions are as influential to Azalea than her relationship to Beyoncé. Olivia Rines (2014) analysed another Azalea interview with a hip hop morning show called *The Breakfast Club* with DJ Envy, Angela Yee and Charlamagne Tha God in 2014. This time Azalea is not accompanied by T.I., and her hit song *Fancy* had been released to commercial acclaim. The interview concerns her recent success and her ‘haters’. She directly addresses those who have accused her of cultural appropriation and tries to distance herself with the hosts attempts to compare her to Eminem, of whom she says she will never be as widely loved. When she talks about Australia as one of her ‘haters’ she discusses Beyoncé and the significance of Beyoncé’s power to influence Australians to become Azalea’s fans. Yee asks her if she’s treated better in Australia now that ‘Fancy’ had become a worldwide hit. She replies yes, it’s definitely better:

My song *Fancy* is doing really well there so I think it’s better. And Beyoncé really, really helped with that...she just helped me to have I think um, more acceptance when I went there [to Australia] and opened for her. It helped a lot and so I think when the next song that I put out after having that presence there with her was *Fancy* and so I think there was already an openness or willingness to like what I put out because they love her so much (Rines 2014, 60).

Azalea here is referring to her presence as the opening act for Beyoncé’s 2013 *Mrs. Carter Show World* in which she toured Australia. This astute response from Azalea aligns with the adoration expressed by my diasporic South Asian respondents who all had pre-existing positive opinions about Beyoncé, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. The relationship forged between Azalea and Beyoncé is a common one held by members of the hip hop community in which one established artist will take an emerging artist ‘under their wing’, exposing them to their fan base and therefore legitimising their music. In this

way Beyoncé's support for Azalea can be seen similarly to Dr Dre's endorsement of Eminem or Lil Wayne's mentorship of Nicki Minaj. By opening for Beyoncé, Azalea shows audiences that she is accepted by her fellow artists which encourages fans of the genre to accept her also.

Although her popularity in Australia was on the rise at the time of the interview, Azalea's comments indicate that she had previously struggled to be accepted in her Australian community, not just the hip hop community and that the endorsement by Beyoncé was of immeasurable value to her. The relationship between Azalea and Beyoncé was not mentioned by any of my respondents in the study, all of whom are Australian and many, like Azalea predicts, are fans of Beyoncé. Neither I nor any of my respondents were aware of this relationship at the time of the interviews. I question if Beyoncé's endorsement of Azalea would have softened my respondent's feelings towards Azalea or alternatively, changed their praise of Beyoncé in the *Hymn for the Weekend* music video explored in Chapter Three.

Tracking the Racial Other in *Bounce*

My respondent Jana saw Azalea's race as significant in how she is read in *Bounce* compared to Beyoncé in *Hymn for The Weekend*. She found Azalea's whiteness jarring, hinting that the perceived phenotype of a performer doing Indo chic is significant for the diasporic South Asian viewer:

I find it easier; I mean they both make me uncomfortable [*Hymn for the Weekend* and *Bounce*], but I find it easier to say, 'Iggy Azalea is fucked'. And also, Beyoncé's race is being used really differently here to Iggy Azalea who in her clip is like 'look I'm a pure white woman' (Jana, 25).

Azalea's whiteness grabs focus in the *Bounce* clip, aided by the framing of her in the centre of every scene surrounded by brown extras. Her hair is almost silver, and her skin is very pale. In addition to this however, she's rapping in AAVE and twerking, performing hip hop Blackness. The vibrant colours of the sari she wears in the clip, jewelled tones of red, green, and blue also accentuate the milky quality of her skin, which is laid bare as her arms and torso are exposed in almost every outfit she wears. She stands in such contrast with the other people in the clip that her accentuated whiteness here could almost be read as an exercise in camp, in and of itself, through the framing in almost all the shots where she is seen amongst Indian extras. It is clear that she is an outsider in the world of *Bounce*, but that the story also centres around her journey. The camera zooms in and out on Azalea but the Indian extras and backup dancers are shown only *en masse*, with the exception of two older men performing rituals in the temple scene, and a child in the Holi scene. It is significant that in their close-ups, the Indian characters stare at the camera with expressionless faces, looking somewhat forlorn. This works to situate Azalea as the bringer of joy to the masses of Brown extras who are later seen dancing, drinking, and singing in the wedding scene in her presence.

There are interesting and complex interplays of racial phenotype in the *Bounce* music video. As the respondents commented, Azalea stands out from the Indian extras in the clip, their varying skin tones starkly contrasted. Yet, Azalea stands there amongst them with her manufactured 'thick' booty, twerking and rapping in a Southern accent adopted from the Black men she learnt from in Atlanta. In *Bounce* we see layer upon layer of cultural appropriation – the white Azalea caricaturing Blackness while also caricaturing her version of Indian-ness – while the Indian extras stand as a racially homogenous group, from which Azalea is meant to stand as separate.

As argued above, Azalea has always positioned herself in relation to African American-ness through her music, voice, body, and romantic interests. Although Azalea has never claimed to be Black, her actions align her with Blackness in multiple and complex ways which she uses to legitimise her foothold in the rap world. In this way Azalea could be understood as a ‘transracial’ subject – a title which describes a person of one race who wish to become a member of another race. Most ‘transracial’ subjects are Caucasians who have made the choice to immerse themselves in the culture of the ‘other’ and manufacture their bodies to ‘pass’ as members of the culture of their choice, such as former NAACP chapter president and shamed African American impersonator Rachel Dolezal.

‘Transracial’ claimants have co-opted the ‘trans’ title from the transgender community, believing that the same logic that legitimises transgender subjects will legitimise their claims to ‘truly’ belonging to the race and culture of their choice. Many transracial subjects have taken similar steps to those of Azalea - such as body manipulation and sexual and romantic preferences- to ‘pass’ as Black. Rachel Dolezal is the most famous contemporary figure who claims to be ‘transracial’ and her path to her ‘transracialism’ has many similarities to Azalea’s path to rapping. Dolezal maintains that she is Black because she *feels* Black, a statement indicative of the privilege of having the luxury to choose how you want to be read racially by others, a luxury many mixed-race people, such as respondents in this study, will never have. Dolezal successfully passed as Black for many years, as an activist and African studies instructor, marrying a Black man and having children with him. She asserts that her choices are ‘misunderstood’ because ‘race as a construct has a fluid understanding’ (Orbe 2016, 22). Home-schooled for much of her life, Dolezal describes ‘drawing self-portraits with the brown crayon instead of the peach crayon, and Black curly hair’ at the age of five (Orbe 2016). While she asserts that her ‘self-identification with the Black experience’ began around this time, her parents describe this time differently. They point to the 1990s when they

adopted three African American children and one Haitian child as Dolezal's motivations for wanting to be Black. According to her biological father, Dolezal 'immediately was drawn to them [and] ever since then she's had a tremendous affinity with African Americans' (Orbe 2016, 22).

'Voluntary negro' was a term coined in the 1920s to honour the wishes of mixed-race Black people who looked white but insisted on being identified as Black and stayed within Black communities, wanting not to assimilate into white society. Carla Kaplan (2015) argues that the respect afforded to 'voluntary negroes' to 'choose' their racial signification gave whites the idea they too could volunteer for Blackness. A number of white women passed for Black or claimed Blackness in the 1920s under this policy claiming to feel 'isolated and alienated amongst other whites' (Kaplan 2015, 14). White British heiress Nancy Cunard for example wrote that 'I speak as if I were Negro myself', while she 'longed for a white friend with feelings such as mine' to race cross and become Black under this policy (Kaplan 2015, 17). This feeling of alienation within their own (white) community is consistent amongst both these historical 'transracial' subjects and Azalea's own story of isolation growing up in Australia. Of her hometown she says, 'I was always an outcast and didn't have many friends but once I connected with rap, I just went for it super hard'. While her (white) peers were dancing to electro music, Azalea travelled an hour away to meet (Black) Sudanese refugees with whom she could enjoy rap music and build community. Feeling misunderstood in Australia, she moved to the U.S where she promptly immersed herself in Black communities and started dating a Black man. Slowly she started manufacturing her body to fit in with stereotypes of ideal Black femininity such as a large backside and breasts, dressing the part with tight clothing and cornrows in her hair. These behaviours have not been interpreted as 'transracial' by the wider public but, as mentioned, they have been critiqued. This discussion

brings us to the central question of this section – what impact do these critiques of Azalea have on my respondents’ interpretations of *Bounce*?

Iggy as Meme: *Bounce* and Camp

The term ‘camp’ is derived from the French *se camper* which means ‘to pose in an exaggerated fashion’ (Sontag 1964). In the introduction to their 2017 edited collection *Sontag and the camp aesthetic: advancing new perspectives*, Brian Peters and Bruce Drushel (2017) explain that camp can be understood as a coded language in ‘bad taste’. They draw on Susan Sontag’s (1964) seminal book *Notes on Camp*, in which she argues that camp can be understood as a ‘low’ culture and in some ways a celebration of ‘bad taste’. She considers camp a powerful tool, as it can challenge and destabilise stigmatised standpoints and turn ‘the feminine’ into a laudable marker of subversion through ‘being-as-playing-a-role’ (Sontag 1964, 4). The role that Iggy is playing in *Bounce* is twofold. First, she plays the role of rapper, and more specifically, female rapper. As explored earlier in the chapter, Azalea has a rocky relationship to authenticity in her role as a rapper. To compensate for these accusations of inauthenticity she hams up her Dirty South rapping accent and gestures to camera. She also hams up her sex appeal through her dance moves, which highlight her curvaceous hips and butt, visually aligning her with the Black female rappers who came before her. Her second role in this clip is that of the Indian Goddess. Through the visual tableau in each scene it is clear to the viewer that she is the star. She stands out not only through her whiteness — highlighted further through the mass of Indian extras in each scene — but through her bright and elaborate costume, and her dance moves. In *Bounce* Azalea is the star of her very own Bollywood film. So, can we understand *Bounce* as a conscious, intentional camp performance?

Most academic work on camp chronicles it as an aesthetic form for gay men. However, in her essay on camp and female country stars, Lynn et al (2017) argues that this is often to the detriment of women who are subsequently erased as the producers of camp. Lynn argues that Dolly Parton performs camp intentionally with full understanding of her being read as excessive by audiences. Lynn argues that women, both queer and straight, have been excluded from discussions of camp due to limited access to the image and culture-making processes of society. Yet, women historically have been producers of camp, perhaps unknowingly. Her subject Dolly Parton maintains that ‘it costs a lot of money to look this cheap’ and she argues that such a declaration exposes Parton’s fondness for the hyperbolic, ‘low camp’ persona that has helped make her famous (Lynn 2017, 45). Sontag explains that ‘camp taste effaces nature, or else contradicts it outright’ because to be natural is ‘such a very difficult pose to keep up’ (Sontag 1964, 4) and in that way Azalea (and all her associated inauthenticities) could be likened to Parton as they both embrace their highly manufactured performance identities.

Azalea herself admits she is attracted to the camp-ness of Dolly Parton and would love to do a duet with her as ‘she’s larger than life, I love her’ (Azalea 2019). However, it is clear from Azalea’s comments to MTV that she feels the visual imagery in *Bounce* is authentic and that she was not aiming for a performance done in ‘bad taste’ like the respondents assumed. Her desire to ‘do it in India! And I wanna do it properly’ (Azalea 2013) as well as the decision to hire Indian consultants for choreography and producing illustrates that Azalea sees *Bounce* not as an exercise in camp, but a realistic portrayal of India, its culture, clothing, dance, and people. So, unlike Parton, Azalea slips into the territory of ‘bad taste’ in *Bounce* without knowing she is doing it. Pierre Bourdieu (1987) argues that taste is an ‘acquired disposition’ used to mark differences through a process of distinction. It is therefore not ‘a gift of nature’ but the constructed effects of systems of social organization (Bourdieu 1987, 466). A

person's standpoint therefore informs taste based on networks of history, culture, and society (Lynn 2017, 40). Thus 'taste functions as an important means for the production and legitimization of social distinction' (Bourdieu 1984, 465) meaning that one's taste can betray their origins and reveal their subject position. Azalea's positioning as an Australian white woman with little connection to Indian culture is revealed through her performance in *Bounce*.

Azalea used her long-time stylist Alejanda Hernandez for the music video. She first began working with Azalea in 2011, for her music video *Pu\$\$y* and quickly became her full-time stylist, dressing Azalea for all occasions from daily wear to red carpets. For *Bounce*, Hernandez named her inspirations to be the saris worn in 60s and 70s Bollywood films and the Indian actress Parveen Babi. She used boldly patterned, brightly coloured saris in the video, as well as tight fitting metallic separates paired with Salwar pants to actualise her vision on Azalea. She prepared the wardrobe for the clip in Los Angeles, but the custom saris were made in London and Mumbai, with Azalea's jewellery also being purchased in Mumbai. Viola took particular issue with the way Azalea was styled in saris in the music video:

And the sari worn in this low slung, sexy way, as in the first [Azalea] clip. I think they are sexualising this idea of the exotic (Viola, 77).

In contrast Belle had no issue with Azalea wearing sari or other Indo chic styles. Throughout our interview she mentioned many times that her positioning as a mixed-race Indian woman facilitated her belief that there is nothing wrong with cultural appropriation, belonging to two cultures herself. However, even Belle disapproved of Azalea's music video and especially her performance of Indian dress and dance:

I've got kind of a complicated relationship to Iggy Azalea because I know a lot of South Asians hate her but look, I don't think there's anything innately offensive about someone doing a video clip in India and wearing a sari and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. It's a music video, so it's shallow um, yeah. Iggy Azalea just doesn't look good in a sari. That's not a political thing she just didn't look good in it. I'm not innately offended by someone wearing a sari, for example [non-diasporic South Asian] women wore saris to my wedding. My white mother wore a sari. Was that cultural appropriation? No. Iggy Azalea just didn't look good (Belle, 33).

Another common theme amongst respondents was the idea that the clip is over the top and ridiculous in its desire to be 'authentically Indian' that it enters the territory of camp, with a few of the respondents referring to it as a 'meme'. Sabrina recounted her change in reaction to Azalea's clip. She said that she watched it in 2014 when it came out and as a teenager had an immediate reaction of anger towards Azalea's blatant cultural appropriation. But now she felt a complex mix of emotions, settling somewhere between anger and laughter due to the 'ridiculousness' of the clip:

Now [the clip] just makes me still angry but I kind of laugh – it's just ridiculous. When I was younger cultural appropriation was talked about and I didn't really understand it fully I just knew it made me angry and now I look at this and think it's ridiculous. I know what they're doing here, and I also have a validation that some of my friends from a non-South Asian or diasporic South Asian background also would be able to like see it and call it out in the same way (Sabrina, 23).

Rena had a similar reaction of toying this line between disgust and cringe humour. She, like Sabrina, laughed and scoffed while watching the clip feeling optimistic that even the non-diasporic South Asian viewer of the video clip would watch it and have the cultural literacy to read the clip as over the top and completely inauthentic in its portrayal of India and Indian culture:

Um, I'm sure as you can tell by my face, I'm pretty disgusted, and at the same time I found them pretty humorous by the way they so explicitly displayed Indian culture as (1) a monolith and (2) exotic. Yeah, it was just really like, it was really funny to me I don't know how someone can see that and not think that it's ridiculously exoticizing everything Indian (Rena, 22).

Jana had similar concerns with the clip. She felt Azalea's participation in the clip was telling of her personal opinions towards India and Indian people, and communicated that she has a lack of understanding of Indian culture. Jana's general impression of *Bounce* was that this particular song would have been better suited to a video clip set somewhere else with Azalea wearing something else, as *Bounce* is inaccurate and embarrassing:

Iggy Azalea, oh god. I mean I don't feel like she's appreciating the [Indian] culture at all it just makes me embarrassed for her. Yeah. That's about it really. Like she could literally sing that song in jeans, and it would make more sense, like, that would have been enough (Jana, 22).

Vina also commented that she found Azalea laughable:

Iggy Azalea was just booty popping and it was comical in not the greatest way. It just seemed excessive (Vina, 25).

In this way Vina hints at Azalea's performance of camp with her excessive 'booty popping'

and hip shaking. In *Bounce* Azalea overdoes her performance of both Bollywood dancing and of hip hop dancing. Everything about the music video is excessive – the beat, the colours, the lyrics, the extras, the costume, the dancing, and Azalea herself. Many respondents hinted that this over-the-top visual imagery denotes a cultural illiteracy of the producers and of Azalea, perceiving the video as done in bad taste. This is something Rena picked up on:

Iggy Azalea, um [laughs] [sighs]. Oh my god. I don't know if you saw my face, it was just so, funny. It was like a meme. I'm mean she's so obviously appropriating and exotifying Indian culture, her being the white woman at the front with backup dancers, being very Bollywood-ish. She's obviously coming from a place of being a majority culture appropriating a minority culture and using that to propel her career forward and potentially using her social capital to reach a wider audience. There was a very obvious sense of using darker skinned brown people as props like the uncles looking at her from the back of the wedding. And that she took this opportunity to basically like put her in the midst of this Bollywood music video is basically a meme and it's also demoralising and quite disgusting really (Rena, 22).

Rena is also touching on Azalea's cultural appropriation and making claims about the power she has as a white woman in this situation, as she uses Indian culture and people as the visual 'other' which she distances herself from. Despite this harsh critique of *Bounce* as 'disgusting' she still describes Azalea as someone laughable, a 'meme'. The use of 'meme' as a descriptor is a nod to the online spheres where Azalea has been debated.

This brings us back to Azalea's cultural appropriation of various cultures, her over-the-top performance identity which I argue is another exercise in 'camp'. As explored by Nathan Gunn (2019) in his article '5 Aussie Pop Musicians We're Sure You've Forgotten About',

many fans felt similarly to Asha, and went online to ‘call out’ Azalea. He recounts that the main criticism levelled at Azalea was her cultural appropriation of Black culture, ‘taking issue to the margin between her speaking and rapping voice’ while ‘some even compared her speaking voice to her rap voice to Blackface’ (Gunn 2019). Azalea has commented on this, insisting she is not trying to act Black ‘I’m not trying to sound Black; I just grew up in a country where on TV and in music and film, everyone was American or any Australian person in them put on an American accent. So, I never saw it as strange at all’ (Azalea 2019) equating Americanness with Blackness. In an interview in 2014 Black female rapper Azealia Banks discusses Iggy Azalea’s aspirational Blackness referring to her success as a ‘cultural smudging’ and accusing the institutions giving her career validity (including the Black men supporting her career) of exploiting Black culture. She said ‘Y’all at least owe me the right to my identity, and not to exploit that shit,’ she said (Gunn 2019). Journalist Jackson Langford (2019) for *Junkee* argues that Banks was right – Azalea and Def Jam were exploiting Blackness and giving it a glossy pop makeover. Instead of just signing a southern Black female rapper, Iggy was a caricature of what she and her label thought such an artist should sound like. Her ‘Blaccent’ is just one aspect of this aspirational Blackness Banks argues exploits Black artists and cultures.

Langford’s article attributes the decline of Azalea’s popularity as a result of ‘cancel culture’, a by-product of a cultural climate in which ‘netizens’ interested in social justice engaged in smear campaigns to ‘cancel’ Azalea’s career online because of her cultural appropriation. It is also important to note that the issue of cultural appropriation was first raised in these same online activist spaces in the years between 2012 and 2014, right when Azalea’s career was beginning. Azalea’s *Bounce* was one of central criticisms levelled against her by these netizens when Azalea hit her peak popularity, as one of many sins committed by the clueless star.

Conclusion: Azalea's *Ignorant Art*

In 2015 *Cosmopolitan* published an article titled 'how did Iggy Azalea become the world's most hated pop star?' that chronicles the moments that slowly eroded Azalea's popularity, reporting on her controversial rap lyrics; her whiteness and Australian-ness; her high-profile relationships with famous Black men and her public fight with African American rapper Azealia Banks who 'called out' Azalea for her cultural appropriation of Black culture in a moment in history in which Black art is 'cool', but Black people in America are not. The article also mentioned *Bounce*. For my respondents the stand-out response to *Bounce* was amusement, but how can we marry the anger, the confusion and the disgust also expressed by the respondents with their amusement? While my respondents critiqued the music video for its Orientalist view of India, its romanticisation of poverty and its lazy 'Nat-Geo' imagery, the presence of Azalea amongst all this eased something for them. It is as if her very presence rendered all these aspects silly, in and of themselves. I think the title of 'World's Most Hated Pop Star' is central to the question 'why did my respondents laugh'?

Through an examination of Azalea's celebrity identity, it is clear she failed at her to attempt to perform different kinds of cultural authenticity on many levels, and that my respondents either already knew about this, or were able to detect this failure when they watched *Bounce*. Her cluelessness, her out-of-placeness, her transracial aspirations and her camp-ness all render her ridiculous to these diasporic South Asian women. Simply put, my respondents could laugh at Azalea doing Indo chic because she was not seen as a threat to them. They do not have to worry about Azalea's representations of South Asians or South Asian culture(s) because she is not taken seriously, like Beyoncé is. Azalea's desperation for acceptance in a community to which she does not belong comes through the screen in *Bounce*, as does a need to distinguish herself from other acts in an over-saturated market, and India becomes the

stage for this to play out. For these diasporic South Asian women *Bounce* reads as a relic from a time only a few years ago when cultural appropriation was okay, and Azalea was cool.

CHAPTER SIX:
Performing the Indian Goddess Part Two: *A Hymn for
the Weekend*, or ‘Why is Chris Martin in India?’

Introduction: Beyoncé? No...

This chapter considers the dynamics of cultural tourism and Indo chic explored in the last chapter when these dynamics respectively are embodied by an Anglo British man and an African American woman in the music video for Coldplay's *Hymn for the Weekend* (hereafter, *HFTW*) featuring Beyoncé. Like *Bounce*, *HFTW* was critiqued online by the diasporic South Asian community for being culturally appropriative, glorifying the Western gaze and perpetuating ubiquitous images of India as exotic, poverty-stricken and colourful. The participation of Beyoncé in such a video drew particular contention online, with devoted Beyoncé fans unsure how to justify her involvement with an Indo Chic project. These online sentiments were, in many instances, echoed by the respondents in this study, pressing me to ask: how does Beyoncé's racially ambiguous Blackness in the video and her star persona (which has become aligned with Black feminism) complicate the simple narrative of cultural appropriation by Azalea in *Bounce*?

I showed my respondents this video clip immediately after *Bounce*. This led to the intended effect of many comparing the clips and calibrating their reactions to Martin and Beyoncé in relation to those they had had to Azalea. Unlike *Bounce*, which drew laughter, *HFTW* elicited more nuanced reactions, with many respondents unsure how to express their complicated feelings for the music video. *HFTW* features Beyoncé in mediated form as a Bollywood star, but focuses on Chris Martin, the front man of Coldplay, as he explores India. My original intention in showing respondents these music videos was to get them to discuss differences and similarities: in how Azalea and Beyoncé performed Indo chic as 'Indian Goddesses' based on their racial identities and celebrity profiles. However, the casting of Martin as the central protagonist in *HFTW* made it difficult for respondents to separate him, and the rest of Coldplay, from what they thought of Beyoncé in the video and of the clip overall.

Like *Bounce*, the first thirty seconds of 'HFTW' consist of a documentary-like montage of scenes and sounds in India. The music video begins at a dilapidated temple set in the mountains where Hindu priests, in striking orange robes, glide in slow motion to the ringing of temple bells. The scene then shifts to the bustling city where Chris Martin looks up from a taxicab at an image of Beyoncé on a billboard. This cuts to a medium-close up shot of Beyoncé in the flesh, wearing a lavish, sari-inspired printed dress and veil draped over the back of her head, as she walks gracefully up a mountain, looking down on Martin and the audience. The camera follows Martin in the next sequences as he sings on a rooftop at sunrise, walks through a suburban square as a hoard of children descent, throwing Holi paint in slow motion, and rides past two colourfully dressed young girls kneeling on the side of the road near a makeshift analogue projector. They watch Beyoncé dancing and singing in the projector machine, a scene that is replicated soon after on the big screen in a theatre.

The viewer then sits aside Martin in the movie theatre, watching Beyoncé on screen singing the chorus of the song while dancing in an elaborate outfit with veil, facial chain jewellery and Henna on her hands. Throughout this chorus we see scenes of India – the Ganges River, the city, traditional dancers, Hindu priests dressed as deities, and real-life Bollywood star Sonam Kapoor in an elaborate sari running through the same dilapidated temple shown at the beginning, throwing rose petals into the air. Coldplay perform at the Ganges with fireworks in the sky behind them. In the final scene the image of Beyoncé is projected but this time onto a boat docked in the sand on the banks of the Ganges. She sings, dances with Bollywood hand gestures. Then as 'Namaste' flashes on the screen in Hindi, she puts her hands together, seemingly in prayer, as the song and video, end.

I begin my analysis of this video by considering its production context, focusing on the creative input of Chris Martin and Beyoncé. I then go on to discuss their performances within the video and how my respondents reacted to them. In particular I examine the following key themes which recurred throughout the focus group discussions: Western depictions of India on screen; contrasting representations of white and brown masculinities, women of colour feminist politics, and Beyoncé as a global ambassador of these politics.

Production Context

When Chris Martin had the idea for *HFTW*, he originally wanted it to be a party song with the lyrics ‘drinks on me drinks on me,’ but his bandmates felt such a song would not align with their wholesome rock image or be well received by their fans. Martin describes the evolution of the idea for the song in the following way:

I thought I’d like to have a song called ‘Drinks on Me’ where you sit on the side of a club and buy everyone drinks because you’re so fucking cool. I was chuckling about that when this melody came ‘drinks on me, drinks on me’ and the rest of the song came out. I presented it to the band, and they said, ‘we love this song, but there’s no way you can sing ‘drinks on me’. So that changed into ‘drink from me’ and the idea of having an angelic person in your life. Then that turned into asking Beyoncé to sing on it (Platon 2015).

The song appears in the band’s seventh studio album, *A Head Full of Dreams*. Released in December 2015, it was a commercial success, peaking at number two in the US, Australia, Canada, and Italy. Martin describes the album as an experiment in ‘trying to make something colourful and uplifting’ and also something ‘to shuffle your feet to’ (Platon 2015). The music video was shot in October 2015, by music video director Ben Mor and released on 29th

January 2016. The video showcases various sites in India including Worli Village, Mumbai, and Kolkata during the festival of Holi. The clip had over 1.6 billion views on Youtube, as of June 2022.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Chris Martin described the lead up to his collaboration with Beyoncé. According to Martin, in 2014 he approached the singer to feature in his song, *Hook Up*. After playing her the demo for the song, she remarked ‘I really like you – but this [song] is awful’ — a comment that motivated Martin to write a better song for Beyoncé to sing with him (Sirota 2016). This became *HFTW*. Beyoncé took only five minutes to record her parts for the song with Coldplay member Guy Berryman describing her as ‘unbelievably professional ... we [Coldplay] are so blessed to have her sing on one of our songs’ (Sirota 2016). Beyoncé shot her scenes for the video in the US against a green screen, which was then superimposed onto the settings in India. She was scheduled to perform the song live only once with Coldplay, which was slotted to be the main event at the Super Bowl 50 half time show on the 7th of February 2016. However, Beyoncé quickly stole the show, performing her newly released song *Formation*, a song with an unapologetic message about the strength of Black women, positioning herself firmly as representative of the African American community she had long ignored throughout her career.

White and Indian masculinities

As a Coldplay song, *HFTW* is framed through Chris Martin’s experience of India. Martin, as Coldplay’s vocalist, and most famous member, stands in for the entire band in their journey throughout India, as the other Coldplay members feature in only one scene playing their instruments. Many respondents mentioned their judgement of Beyoncé and her role in the clip is muddled by the fact that Beyoncé likely had little say in the creative direction of her

scenes along with the entire video. Respondent Vina compared her feelings towards Iggy Azalea in *Bounce* and Beyoncé in *HFTW*:

It [the *Bounce* music video] just seemed excessive whereas with the Beyoncé video I just felt more annoyed with Chris Martin than Beyoncé because from what I gather it [the direction of the clip] was more of his creative decision (Vina, 24).

Asha felt similarly while also feeling that Beyoncé was more removed from the production process and therefore less confronting than that of Azalea:

It is a Coldplay song though, it's a collaboration. Also, I don't know but there's something about her being a Bollywood star on the screen it's a bit more removed than Iggy Azalea being like whatever she's supposed to be at a wedding in one scene, then on an elephant in a gold jumpsuit [laughs] (Asha, 21).

She also found Martin just as amusing as Azalea, joking about Martin in India and his character as fulfilling stereotypes held by white people about going to India to 'find themselves':

He's [Martin] just gone there to 'find himself' [laughs] likes he's gone to a Bollywood film to find himself. And then he's in a rickshaw...and now here I am on an elephant then here I am with a guitar [laughs] (Asha, 21).

Other respondents noticed the disparity in stories between the Martin character, the Beyoncé character, and the Indian supporting characters. They noticed how Martin was able to roam around all places in India, from the banks of the Ganges to central Mumbai, to a makeshift Bollywood movie theatre, to the streets of Varanasi where he dances with street children during Holi. Meanwhile, Beyoncé, the Bollywood star, is confined to screens and billboards

but is still an omnipresent goddess. In contrast, the Indian characters are purely decorative background. Except for a 12-second cameo by Bollywood star Sonam Kapoor, no other Indian character is given a close-up. Instead, Indians appear *en masse*. Children covered in Holi paint laugh and chase Martin down the street, while old holy men sit on the street in traditional orange garb, and another old man working as a projectionist in the movie theatre peers through a small lens at Beyoncé on the screen.

Three respondents who belonged to a family unit discussed the visual contrast between Martin and Indian men in the clip. They suggested that the Indian men that played supporting roles in the clip were chosen due to their age: they were either very young or very old. They observed the casting choices of which Indian (also referred to as ‘Brown’) men were featured in the music video. The men who received close up shots were either elderly or young children. The only men not of this demographic are standing around as a homogenous group on the street watching the band and the billboards and movie of Beyoncé. What they are alluding to here is the Western stereotype of young South Asian men as dangerous, alluding to the moral panic in the West of brown men as sexually and physically out of control, characterised by ‘outdated’ patriarchal cultural and/or religious views which they violently act upon. Ashley, Jasmine and Victoria all commented on this stereotype as it plays out in both videos:

Jasmine: In both but particularly Iggy [in *Bounce*] is this very sexualised white woman who is dispersed with brown men who are staring and looking at her. In the Beyoncé one too [*HFTW*], that man staring through the thing [the projectionist] was I dunno...

Ashley: Why do Indian men have to be such sleazebags? Like it’s so unfair, there’s no context for them they’re just standing around, leering.

Victoria: I think you're right like white men have choices, like they can do whatever they want to do but Indian men can't... I mean why do you have to have men all standing around staring at her [Beyoncé]? Whereas when he [Chris Martin] is staring at her [Beyoncé] it doesn't have that leering quality.

Jasmine and Ashley: Yeah, why is it always kids?

Victoria: And then they have the old man. So, it's taking away all the fear of sexualising. Cause when you think about Asia, the fear of young men staring at women is the most scary [sic] thing. Especially with all the rape protests and stuff. So, they take away the fear by using the old man and the young kids.

Peter Hopkins (2006) argues that stereotypes steeped in Islamophobia are projected onto diasporic South Asian men regardless of their faith as their ethnicity is read with built-in assumptions about their religion. Seen through the Western gaze, their Brownness can be read as holding two conflicting possibilities — either an asset to, or a threat to, western societies. According to Barnour Hesse, 'there are two main discourses about the masculinities of young Muslim men — one emphasizing patriarchy and aggression, the other effeminacy and academicism' (2000, 337).

In 'Imagining the Asian Gang: Masculinity and Youth After the Riots', Claire Alexander describes a 'a shift in the perception of Asian masculinities, traditionally visioned as passive and hyper-feminized, towards an association with violence and a highly visible hyper-masculinity' (2004, 16). In this article, Alexander explores the changing perceptions of South Asian men in Britain (referred to as 'Asians' in the article, as is commonplace in the UK) in

the early 2000s post-9/11. The effects of 9/11 were felt globally and resulted in increased Islamophobia for South Asian diasporas globally, the UK included. South Asian men, read as 'Muslim' regardless of their religion (Alexander 2004) were considered suspicious, and dangerous, and this led to a series of racial violence episodes in suburbs of London including Birmingham. This association of Brown men as dangerous is one that was specifically referred to by my respondents.

This stereotype also casts South Asian men as aggressive, patriarchal, and embodying all the irreconcilable cultural differences between South Asian cultures and the cultures of the West. Virinder Kalra (2009) posits that this phenomenon applies to all South Asian men living in the West as people try to decipher whether the Brown man standing before them are 'bad' Muslims, tapping into fears around home-grown terrorism or a 'good' South Asian man associated with the 'model minority' myth. Hopkins (2006) contends that stereotypes of Muslim men as 'violently patriarchal, unemployed and involved in crime' plague South Asian men living in the West as incidents of sexual violence (occurring both in the West, and in South Asia) feed the myth that Brown men are dangerous to women specifically, with news coverage of these incidents by further contributing to the moral panic around them. This fear that these 'dangerous' diasporic South Asian men will invade Western nations, endangering the lives and freedom of Western women is what the family refer to above.

The respondents noticed that the director's choice to spotlight only Indian men who are not a sexual threat (very young and very old men) serves to differentiate Chris Martin from the type of dangerous, patriarchal masculinity prevalent in India. It creates an us/them dichotomy between the respectable British men of Coldplay, and the masses of potentially threatening brown men, pandering to their intended audience of the Western gaze.

‘Mystical India’ as backdrop

Another instance of the clip pandering to the Western gaze is simply through the selection of India as the location and ‘theme’ for the music video. As noted earlier, Martin wrote this song as a party song, which was then turned into a song about the reverence of falling in love with someone. The lyrics ‘drink from me, drink from me’ and ‘[you] got me feeling drunk and high/ so high/ so high’ in the chorus. The connection between these lyrics and India caused bemusement for many of my respondents. This was articulated well by Jana:

One of my initial reactions is I’m not sure what the scenes of mystical India are supposed to be connoting in terms of the lyrics. The songs just being about crazy partying and hot girls, and so I’m not sure why India signifies that? (Jana, 25)

Viola:

I really didn’t think much about Iggy and Beyoncé in India apart from ‘what is she doing there?’ and obviously somebody staged a video because there selling a song and they thought it would be a nice way to present it. But these videos that come out are meant to attract your attention and sell the song but for me I’m ambivalent I could take it or leave it (Viola, 77).

And Jasmine:

Well, they’re [the music videos] different but they’re the same to me in one thing I don’t understand is what does India have to do with any of them? Like the culture generally, the people, the language, like, I don’t get any reference to India in the lyrics...I’m mostly just confused (Jasmine, 23).

Other respondents thought that it was a cliché for Coldplay to use India as the backdrop for their song about drugs, partying, and transcendental love. These respondents were picking up

on the Western trope of ‘mystic India’ (Durham 2001, 205). Respondents noted that both videos sexualised the idea of the exotic and in the case of *HFTW* the lyrics as well as Beyoncé’s performance of a Bollywood Goddess. Victoria and Ashley discussed this in the following way:

Victoria: I think they have sexualised this idea of the exotic. And the second clip [*HFTW*] she’s [Beyoncé] just doing all this dancing and the big Namaste at the end. It’s just setting them [the music videos] in a different place really and I guess it’s this idea of India as intoxicating.

Ashley: Yeah, but it’s not intoxicating for Indian people. It’s only [for] white people.

Victoria and Ashley are touching on a tradition that originated with the hippie counterculture of the 1960s — the spiritual pilgrimage to India. Many British youth were inspired by The Beatles’ visit to Rishikesh in February of 1968, which Paul Oliver describes as ‘the ultimate trigger for the departure of many young people [to India]’ (2014, 69). He argues that these young people were also motivated by books they had read about the ‘mystic East’ such as Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and Mark Twain’s account of India in his book of travels, *Mark Twain in India*. In this clip Chris Martin could be read as playing the character of the young British tourist who has gone to India to experience its beauty and spirituality. In the following passage Oliver describes the mentality of the early Western tourists as ventured to India to explore its exoticism:

When young people travelled to India in the 1960s, they were often interested in developing an understanding of the spiritual life. They saw India as having a different view of religion, when compared to the West. The attitude of many Westerners was one of exploring India, rather than trying to change it. They

mingled with the poor, without passing judgement on the poverty, stayed in inexpensive rooms, ate the cheapest of food and did not attempt to separate themselves from India's masses (2014, 73).

This very much describes the journey Chris Martin takes in the video clip, inserting himself into the daily lives of Indians he encounters during his journey. Oliver also acknowledges the fact that travellers of this time were drawn to Hinduism, not only to its spiritual teachings of inclusion but also the use of hallucinogenic drugs, a practice which can be traced back to Vedic times. Oliver argues that the attraction of the use of substances, such as Soma (derived from tree sap) appears to be that the travellers could have religious-like experiences quickly, rather than relying on arduous prayer and meditation. This association between travel in India, Hinduism, and the use of hallucinogenic drugs while there, feeds back to the lyrics in the chorus 'got me feeling drunk and high/so high/so high'.

Also relating to this idea of India as spiritual/exotic is the prevalence of Holi. Holi was featured in both *Bounce* and *HFTW*, a parallel that respondents Jasmine and Victoria commented on:

Victoria: It's interesting that both of them are using Holi, which is this festival of harvest and joy as the anchor [of the clip]. I don't really know how much that festival is known across the world, if it's known as much as Divali, but it seems its more malleable with these exotic colours and that sort of things.

Jasmine: Right, because in those videos it doesn't look like a spiritual thing it just looks like 'crazy India'.

Holi is one aspect of Indian culture that is often featured in promotional material for tourism to India and has become a ubiquitous image of India as a colourful, happy, spiritual place. European engagement with the festival first began in the 17th century when traders and colonial British staff described it in letters recounting their time in India. Holi is an important annual festival for Hindus and is a national holiday in India and Nepal held in mid-March. It is observed by both Hindus and non-Hindus who see it as a playful cultural event to celebrate the beginning of spring. It is the festival to rid oneself of past errors, and to end conflicts by meeting other people, forgetting, and forgiving, while the non-secular approach is that it is a time to enjoy the colours of spring.

The religious significance of the holiday can be traced back to the legend of Holika, the sister of a demon god, who tried to trick her pious nephew, Prahlada, to burn to death in a fire. She sat with him in the fire but cloaked herself in a robe that would protect her. However, Vishnu protected Prahlada and Holika perished instead. The night before Holi, bonfires are lit in a ceremony known as Holika or Little Holi and people dance to celebrate the victory of Prahlada. The next day is the part of the Holi festival that is most famous – the time when people throw dry coloured powder on each other. Children fill water guns with colour and spray it at each other and the adults throw powder at other people (both people who they know, and strangers) and they eat Holi delicacies together (desserts and drinks). After which people clean up, put on clean clothes and visit friends and family.

Viola was confused by the incongruity between Holi as a festival and the song *HFTW*, and its lyrics. She attributed it to her age, but her feelings were shared by younger respondents, too:

I have very old-fashioned feelings because to me none of it made much sense.

Because they're dancing, and moving, and wriggling, and doing all the Indian dance moves with the hands, and then showing the festival of Holi where they

chuck coloured powder or coloured water and it's a very happy and big celebration and yet the song just sounded mournful. The second one [*HFTW*] I mean. First one [*Bounce*] was just someone shaking her booty dressed in Indian clothing (Viola, 77).

Beyoncé Ambivalence

Jana also questioned the use of Holi in *HFTW* and wondered what the connection was between Holi and Beyoncé as a Bollywood star:

With Beyoncé, her video was just confusing because they were in north India then south India and then they had people who were doing Holi with the colour powder everywhere and I don't even know if it was filmed during Holi but there wasn't much dancing really, but what Beyoncé was doing with sexy hand movements and stuff I don't know. Well, OK, I think it was maybe a bit Bollywood like what she thinks Bollywood dancing should look like? Like an overly sexual performance (Jana, 25).

There were respondents who were critical of Beyoncé for her involvement in the video and for *HFTW* and of the visual lexicon of *HFTW* more broadly. However, their primary concern was that the producers of the clip (as well as Coldplay, and Beyoncé) were representing India through the colonial gaze. Ashley, and Kela, were most outraged by the clip — Kela because she thought Beyoncé was not entitled to engage in a performance of Indian culture:

Beyoncé with her hands with Henna won't understand what Henna actually signifies and what Henna means to us [diasporic South Asian women] and at the end of the day if you don't understand it, you should not have an opinion. If you don't understand the culture don't have an opinion on it (Kela, 25).

Meanwhile, Ashley had a problem with the representation of India in the clip as stuck in the past:

They're [Beyoncé and Iggy] wearing it [Indo chic] in temples, and like with Beyoncé, in her music video, the bit in the movie theatre, it's like, do they really think that Indian people go to shady ass theatres to watch movies? I've been to India many times and I promise you all the movie theatres are in malls, like fancy malls like we have here [in Australia]. It's like this really white, privileged colonial view of what India is like. It's like do some research before you set your music video in India. Again, I don't really expect too much [from Western performers] anymore like the expectation is so low (Ashley, 25).

Their views were contrasted and complicated by the rest of the respondents. Tami and Vina were arguably the most in favour of the clip. Tami had nothing in particular to say about Beyoncé or the visual lexicon of *HFTW* apart from:

India is very colourful, so I can see how that would be very eye-catching and beautiful in a video (Tami, 57).

Vina, on the other hand, read Beyoncé's performance very differently. She thought that Beyoncé was being respectful in her performance, especially in contrast to Iggy Azalea in *Bounce*:

I felt like Beyoncé, as the Bollywood star, that whole thing translated well. I mean it's a bit weird seeing Iggy Azalea doing Indian dances in Indian clothes, but I don't think Beyoncé was really going for it. She wasn't doing that excessive trying to be Indian thing, she was being casual about it. I felt like Iggy Azalea's

was more of a mockery whereas Beyoncé seemed to understand and respect [Indian culture] (Vina, 24).

Belle thought that her pre-existing feelings for Beyoncé and Coldplay coloured her opinion. As a fan of them both she acknowledges that she found *HFTW* much less questionable than *Bounce* but generally felt that the medium dictated the message. She said she was not offended by either Azalea or Beyoncé wearing Indo chic styling. As for the representations of India, she attributed the imagery to the nature of music videos as ‘shallow’:

Look I don’t think there’s anything innately offensive about someone doing a video clip in India and wearing a sari and I don’t think there’s anything wrong with that. For example, I found the Beyoncé stuff much less objectionable [than *Bounce*] because I like her music and um, I don’t know. It’s not like it’s a movie or a novel, it’s a music video, and it’s innately shallow. It’s kind of if you saw a music video about Australia and it was all desert and kangaroos which is a part of who we are too but it’s very shallow. I’m not ready to petition and say shut her down. It’s a music video, its shallow um yeah (Bella, 33).

Kela was conflicted about the clip but ultimately decided that she was happy with the way *HFTW* approached representations of India. She praised the Indian cast and judged that the overall effect of the video was not manufactured or ‘shallow’ but as if the director had just happened upon a scene that was taking place naturally. This recalls previous discussions of the clips being shot in ‘documentary style’ with an ethnographic lens familiar to Western audiences when viewing non-Western cultures on screen:

Yeah, Beyoncé, I’m less offended by it but I still don’t think that it’s right. I was less upset by it I think [than *Bounce*]. I think the combination of the way it was

shot and the fact that it's Beyoncé. The thing that I liked about the second video [HFTW] is that they respected the culture and respected what it's about and it looked like they just happened to be filming something that was happening naturally. So less like using India as an aesthetic and more like, wow, respecting the culture and everyone else who was dancing there, apart from Beyoncé, seemed to be Indian (Kela, 25).

Kela's qualifier 'the fact that it's Beyoncé' is telling here, and hints at a sentiment shared by many of my respondents – that Beyoncé's participation renders the clip somehow above critique.

A recurring theme amongst respondents was that Beyoncé is exempt from the same bold criticisms levelled at Iggy Azalea, due to their personal definitions of cultural appropriation. Responses such as the one above suggests that for my respondents, accusations of cultural appropriation occur when the perpetrator does (1) does not belong to the culture(s) being appropriated and (2) does not have any tenable access to items or practises that could be interpreted as maybe belonging to the perpetrators culture(s) or a culture(s) adjacent to theirs. Beyoncé's actions were considered exceptional here, however, due to my respondents resonating with their shared experience of living as a person of colour amongst other people of colour in a majority white nation. They also mentioned a belief in a tacit hierarchy of racial prejudice in which diasporic South Asian people were metaphorically placed in closer proximity to whiteness, than Black people, an idea inherited from the antiracist politics of the United States. Many of my respondents mentioned the sentiment of 'punching up versus punching down', which Rena articulated most clearly:

They [the music videos] are definitely different because I consider the politics, like Beyoncé is a light skinned Black woman who comes from a culture that's

inherently anti-Black and it's not appropriate for me to criticise Beyoncé for the way she portrays her art, in a cultural sense. Appropriation comes when a majority culture or someone part of a majority group takes advantage of a minority group, and as a Black woman Beyoncé doesn't really have a stake in, um, there's no unfair power play here, but the unfair power play does come from the place that she's obviously rich, she has cultural capital and is light skinned, as well. She has a lot of reach and so, um, my issue was not with her dressing in traditionally South Asian clothes and accessories, it was more that she's used her social capital to collaborate with a white band that has a history of being super appropriative and build her own social capital from that and partake in a song and video that portrays Indian culture as exotic and a monolith (Rena, 22).

Like many other respondents, Rena felt uncomfortable by the Indo chic displayed in *HFTW*, and they chose to direct their feelings of unease towards Coldplay instead of Beyoncé. Here she assumes that Beyoncé had little creative stake in the decision to wear Indo chic and play a Bollywood star. She also placed herself in a position of someone who did not have the right to criticise Beyoncé as a Black woman living in an inherently anti-Black country who makes powerful art for Black women. This was the most important common theme raised in conversation with my respondents.

Beyoncé the Celebrity

At this stage it is imperative to provide an overview of Beyoncé's celebrity identity to contextualise the reverence shared by many of my respondents. Since her solo debut in 2003 Beyoncé has become the face of American pop music. As of 2015, her total reported annual income, according to Forbes.com, was \$78 million, which Weidhase equates to 'about the same as the profit of a petrochemical company such as Copesul and greater than the annual

profit of US Airways' (2015, 127). Beyoncé is an industry: her every move is potentially profitable. She has released albums, performed her own world tours, starred in films and commercials, co-created her own fashion lines (Ivy Park, House of Dereon) and endorses more products than any other living person. Additionally, Beyoncé has at one stage, or another, been involved in marketing soft drinks, cosmetics, accessories, perfume, children's products, apps, and more recently, a vegan cookbook. How did Beyoncé go from being this capitalist hero to someone that a 2018 poll declared 'the most politically divisive entertainer on the Forbes 100 list'? This section chronicles Beyoncé's evolution from hip hop starlet to an internationally known, politically charged mega star to help contextualise both her part in the music video, and my respondents' reactions to her Indo chic practices.

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter was born in an affluent area of Houston, Texas in 1981. At age 8 Beyoncé and her childhood friends Kelly Rowland and LaTavia Roberson formed a girl group called 'Girls Tyme' and the group performed a hip hop song on popular talent TV show *Star Search* to launch their careers. While Girls Tyme failed to win on the show, Beyoncé's father Matthew saw potential in the group and officially became their manager. In 1996 the girls recorded their debut album with Colombia records, and in 1997 the girls changed their group name to 'Destiny's Child' and released their debut song. Their 1999 album, *The Writing's on the Wall* was their first to reach the status of multi-platinum including songs such as *Jumpin' Jumpin* and *Say my Name* both of which remain iconic Destiny's Child songs today. They won two Grammy awards for this album and sold eight million copies worldwide. The group released *Independent Women Part 1* in 2000 which topped the US Billboard chart for 11 weeks, which was followed by the release of *Survivor* in 2001, which debuted at number one.

In early interviews, and in award show appearances, Beyoncé seldom spoke for the group

and, when she did, it was brief and appeared highly scripted. L. M. Gipson (2019) attributes both the images of Destiny's Child, the group, and Beyoncé, the performer, as mediated by Beyoncé's family and their traditional values. He says 'indeed, much of the Destiny's Child initial 'girls next door' persona was scrupulously cultivated from their presentational image by Beyoncé's mother, Célestine 'Tina' Knowles, and in their business and art by Beyoncé's father and long-time manager, Matthew Knowles' (Gipson 2019, 147). In 2002, the group announced it would be on hiatus for a while to allow time for the members to pursue solo activities and in 2003 Beyoncé released her debut album *Dangerously in Love*.

Beyoncé the Solo Artist

From the moment her first album earned five Grammy awards, Beyoncé's separation from Destiny's Child seemed inevitable. She was no longer a member of a group, but a stand-alone sensation. Her debut album sold four million copies and propelled her to superstardom. Beyoncé became a household name. Around this time, she made her relationship with rapper Jay-Z central to her celebrity identity through the release of collaboration hits '*03 Bonnie and Clyde* and *Crazy in Love*. She reunited with Destiny's Child in 2004 for their last studio album *Destiny Fulfilled*, which produced consecutive hits with *Lose My Breath*, *Solider* and *Girl*, and they embarked on a European tour to promote the album. In 2005, band member Kelly Rowland announced that Destiny's Child would disband at the end of their North American tour. The band members insisted that there was no feuding amongst the members, but rather a desire from all the members to pursue solo activities. Together *Destiny's Child* represented the respectability aspiration of their generation, as Gipson puts it 'the girl next door who was well paid and the ride or die survivor for— and of— her friends, but submissive and beautiful to the man they'd eventually land to be socially complete' (2019, 150). The same can be said of her early solo career up until the release of 2013's Beyoncé.

When she debuted as a solo act Beyoncé's light skin and straightened blonde hair made her look ethnically ambiguous. She no longer used the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) present in Destiny's Child albums and instead sung more generic lyrics that reached a wider audience. Her songs no longer referenced the 'independent women' girl power mantra championed by Destiny's Child and she, instead, sung about the love and sexual attraction she felt in her relationship. These choices informed her reputation as a crossover hit, as *Rolling Stone* columnist commented 'Beyoncé has become a crossover sex symbol . . . a Black girl who's not so overwhelmingly Nubian that white people don't appreciate her beauty' (Toure 2004) the term 'crossover' here referring to a Black artist who achieves success in the mainstream, rather than exclusively 'urban' market (Weidhase 2015, 126).

The racial neutrality this afforded her worked to her benefit, and her solo career began with a projection of her singular view of race and her place in America, a projection that appealed to white middle class America and a small part of Black America. During this period, she did her best to sideline her Blackness, and her music focused on universal themes like love. After this period, the ideological message propelling her music was a type of feminism, a latent theme that tacitly underlined her music dating back to Destiny's Child, that she decided to bring to the forefront. Finally, and currently, Beyoncé prescribes to a message of Black female empowerment, positioning herself firmly within the Black community that she distanced herself from for many years. I will now detail these three stages of her celebrity identity as tied to the defining ideology of the period which will help to contextualise my respondents' reactions to *HFTW* and Beyoncé later in the chapter.

Beyoncé the Crossover Hit

In 'Beyoncé's feminism and the contestation of the Black feminist body', Nathalie Weidhase argues that after the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York, Americans became preoccupied with emphasising their similarities rather than their differences, a sentiment Beyoncé capitalised on when she said in an interview in 2009 'I'm universal . . . no one's paying attention to what race I am. I've kind of proven myself. I'm past that' (2015, 129). This type of 'universality' seemed to be what Beyoncé was intending in the early phases of her career spanning between 2003 - 2009, at which point her songs became more political starting with the release of *Run the World (Girls)* in 2011. Her hits from this 2003 - 2009 period were mostly about love, with themes of new attraction (*Crazy in Love/Déjà vu*), breakups (*Irreplaceable*), eternal/ enduring love (*Halo*) and marriage (*Single Ladies*).

The style of her music veered further away from Destiny's Child's distinctive 90s RnB style and more into conventional pop songs sung with her recognisably powerful vocals. These vocals helped her songs stand out from other female solo acts of the time such as Britney Spears, P*nk, Christina Aguilera, Alicia Keys, Jenifer Lopez, and later Lady Gaga and Rihanna. She aligned herself with these other acts through her activities such as starring in commercials together, accepting acting roles in mainstream movies, and releasing collaborative tracks with them. Many of her hits also featured short rap verses by popular rappers of the time such as Jay-Z, Sean Paul, T.I, Lil Wayne, and Missy Elliot, which helped bolster her authenticity with Black audiences (Weidhase 2015). However, Beyoncé was careful to not align herself with these acts too much for fear of losing her widespread appeal and being confined to an 'urban' act.

At this time, she was in her early twenties and in a steady and stable relationship with Jay-Z, and her life lacked scandal and salacity earning her a warm, friendly, girl next door image

helped in part by her unthreatening light features and signature blonde hair. She talked about her wholesome upbringing as a part of a well to do, nuclear family in a good part of Houston, Texas, attributing her sweet, polite personality to her Southern upbringing, close relationships with her family and her Christian religion. ‘I’ve worked too hard and sacrificed too much to do something silly that would mess up the brand I’ve created all of these years’ she told Lacey Rose in 2009 (Weidhase 2015, 133). Beyoncé’s celebrity narrative, at this time, had no distinct Black identity, pitching herself only as an embodiment of the American dream: work hard, believe in yourself, be humble and your hard work will pay off. Her tactical silence on social or political issues of any kind ensured that she avoided controversy while endearing herself to both advertisers and a mainstream audience. Beyoncé was one of few Black celebrities who avoided being pigeon-holed and emerged victorious as a visibly successful Black person for whom racism and discrimination have presented neither impediment nor limitation. Her success represented the fallacy that anyone, regardless of one’s race, can make it big in America.

Ellis Cashmore argues that her reluctance to acknowledge her Blackness ‘assured her a reputation as a ‘safe’ figure: unlike some other African American celebrities in recent years, Beyoncé is prudent, unadventurous, and not prone to commenting on issues other than her own products or endorsements’ (2010, 144). Cashmore argues that Beyoncé has proved to be a prodigious marketer for commodities, and it is this same quality that allowed her to sell a moral project, to ‘persuade the world that, even if racism is not at an end, an end is surely in sight’ (2010, 145). Beyoncé was glamorous, ostentatiously rich, family-oriented, universally loved and had a steady husband in Jay Z (who she married in 2008). In many ways she was the actualisation of the American dream, embodying the spoils of the long struggle for equality, opportunity, material success and respect from the American public. Approached in this way Beyoncé became less of a person, and more of a brand, or an ideal come to life, an

advertisement for a new era in America when commerciality overpowers everything, including race and gender.

In 2009, Beyoncé sung soul singer Etta James *At Last* at Barak Obama's inauguration, aligning herself with the Black community publicly for the first time. However, President Obama was a safe choice for Beyoncé. He too, represented the American Dream and symbolised the promise of an altogether new world for Black people in America – one in which Black people not only harmoniously lived alongside white people as equals, but one in which they can become part of the ruling class. To reach the position of the person with the highest importance in the free world - Obama's face representing all of the United States. Beyoncé and her husband Jay Z aligned themselves with the Obamas throughout his presidency marking the first step towards Beyoncé's shift from sweet, unthreatening singer to an artist whose marketability is aligned with her political views and personal intersections.

In late 2008, Beyoncé introduced to the public her alter ego 'Sasha Fierce' with the release of her album *I am...Sasha Fierce*. Beyoncé told the world that Sasha Fierce was conceived during her first album *Dangerously in Love* as an effort to reconcile her naivety as a young 21-year-old woman and the powerhouse performer she aimed to be on stage. Beyoncé became Sasha when she was on stage, full of energy, charisma, and power. Assuming this alter ego served to disassociate Beyoncé to some extent from the racial trope of Black women as 'sassy' 'strong' 'controlling' and 'hypersexual' (Weidhase 2015, 422). For Beyoncé, a self-identified Christian, Sasha was a way for her to perform sexual dances on stage while avoiding the bad girl/ good girl dichotomy women (especially women of colour) find themselves placed in. Beyoncé has said that she originally created the alter ego to keep her stage persona separate from who she really is. She has described Sasha as being 'too aggressive, too strong, too sassy and too sexy' stating that 'I'm not like her in real life at all.'

(Toure 2004). She therefore has to ‘get into character’ and become Sasha Fierce to perform as Beyoncé, to dance on stage and sing about sex.

As well as a performance identity, Sasha Fierce became another branch of the Beyoncé brand. Inspired by Gwen Stefani’s cross promotion of her 2004 album *L.A.M.B.*, and its accompanying fashion, makeup, and fragrance line of the same name, Beyoncé embarked on a ‘Sasha Fierce’ tour, and released a collection of preteen clothes under the name as a branch of her existing Dereon brand. The collection, which was inspired by Beyoncé’s stage presence includes a full range of sportswear, outerwear, handbags, footwear, eyewear, lingerie and jewellery reported Julee Kaplan (2009, 3). The clothing line, tour and album were released simultaneously, and therefore acted to promote each other. She even included a reference to her clothing label in her mega hit *Single Ladies (Put a Ring on it)* with the line ‘A man on my hips holds me tighter than my Dereon jeans.’. Cashmore argues:

Sasha Fierce was Beyoncé’s most preposterous yet accomplished industrial innovation yet. It was a smart, perhaps brilliant diversification, like Toyota’s introduction of Lexus, a separate marque but one that carried the reputation of the established car manufacturer. Do icons grow organically, or can they be mechanically produced? (Cashmore 2010, 145).

In October 2008, Beyoncé declared in a *Marie Claire* interview: ‘I’m over being a pop star...I wanna be iconic’ and in 2010 she announced in an interview with *Allure* magazine that she was comfortable enough with herself to no longer need Sasha Fierce. She no longer uses the alter ego as a part of her brand and celebrity identity.

Beyoncé the feminist

In a career full of iconic moments, Beyoncé made her biggest statement yet at the 2014 MTV Music Video Awards. Not only did she earn 8 nominations (winning 3) but she was also due

to receive the Michael Jackson Video Vanguard Award also known as the MTV Lifetime Achievement Award. The award was presented to her by her husband and her daughter, Blue Ivy and she performed a medley of her most recent album *Beyoncé* (released in 2013). The most stand out moment of her performance was Beyoncé silhouetted in front of the world ‘FEMINIST’ in bold capital letters in the song ****Flawless*. Additionally, her *Beyoncé* album marked the introduction of her all-female back-up band *The Sugar Mamas*, which she formed to inspire young women of colour to learn, and stick with their instruments, having lacked such role models in her own childhood (Weidhase 2015, 130). Beyoncé released this album in 2013 with no prior announcement or promotion, and it was also a ‘visual album’ meaning every song had a music video to accompany it. The release of this album made Beyoncé the first woman in the Billboard chart’s history to have her first five studio albums debut at number one. For the first time Beyoncé addressed darker and more political themes in her music, such as bulimia, post-natal depression, fears and insecurities of motherhood, and marriage, female sexual agency, and feminism.

It could be argued that Beyoncé’s engagement with feminist issues predated the *Beyoncé* album. Although she never publicly identified herself as a feminist until 2013, songs such as *Independent Woman Part 1* with Destiny’s Child and *Run the World (Girls)* display basic, ‘girl power’, light feminist messaging. Her MTV Video Music Awards performance and her use of the word ‘feminist’ triggered debate on the internet, and amongst Beyoncé fans. People questioned if her adoption of the title was another marketing ploy in order to keep herself relevant in a time when feminism was gaining mainstream popularity. Others questioned Beyoncé’s understanding of feminism due to the highly sexualised nature of her performances, and her prominent championing of the importance of marriage, and the struggle for equal pay as their central issues. Cheryl Finley and Deborah Willis also links Destiny’s Child’s ‘girl power’ messages to Beyoncé’s solo feminism when she says:

Together, Destiny's Child represented the respectability aspiration for their generation, the girl next door who was well paid and the ride or die survivor for—and of—her friends, but submissive and beautiful to the man they'd eventually land to be socially complete. It was an image goal they'd maintain even into their solo careers, one few stars today under the social media glare could match or would even be expected to maintain (Finley and Willis 2019, 77).

Arguing that the respectable 'girl next door' image was hard for Beyoncé to sideline once she had started branding herself as a feminist. In the song ****Flawless*, Beyoncé samples parts of a speech from African author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2010 TED talk 'we should all be feminists. Many fans argued Beyoncé's sexually suggestive dancing and Ngozi Adichie's words 'we teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are' were a juxtaposition that challenges the dual suppression, and fetishisation, of Black female sexuality. This album is considered Beyoncé's 'intimacy project' and in addition to its feminist messages it is also a celebration of marriage, and sexuality within marriage. Critically acclaimed as her magnum opus at the time, it was the most pro-marriage centred album ever developed by a secular female artist in the American music canon. In summation, this album can be understood as introducing the world to Beyoncé's feminism and her sexuality. In her 2014 VMA performance she took a risk and declared to the world that she has an icon with political agency and ideological purpose, not just a songstress determined to sell albums. Her feminism in this era focused on female bodily agency and the embrace of sexuality, and female monetary control over one's own life, two themes Beyoncé has tacitly touched on at many points throughout her career. Her coming out as a feminist has been highly criticised as her particular brand of feminism is strictly capitalist and ignores intersections of class, sexuality, age and most saliently, race.

Beyoncé the Black Rights Icon

In her paper *What do we want from Beyoncé?* Maiysha Kai (2019) asks ‘how did Beyoncé become such a divisive entertainer in 2013?’ she says:

Obvious signs point to 2016. It was a pivotal year for America, and an equally pivotal one for Beyoncé. After years of sustaining her own seemingly blessed neutrality (save a close relationship with the Obamas), the debut of her *Formation* video—and subsequent Black Panther-inspired Super Bowl performance—displayed an unexpected streak of activism in a woman better known for her performances than her politics. As 2016 exposed more of the darkness lurking just beneath the surface of our country’s well-polished veneer, so did Beyoncé (Kai 2019, 7).

‘You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation / Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper’ chants Beyoncé as she closes the epic story of self-celebration and Black female pride captured in her song, *Formation*. The chorus of the song features lyrics such as ‘My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana/ You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma/I like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros/I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils/Earned all this money, but they never take the country out me’ illustrating that for the first time Beyoncé puts her Blackness front and centre. This was a radical change from Beyoncé’s previous branding and celebrity identity which was race-neutral at best and race suppressive at worst. Both the song and video are simultaneously about Beyoncé the icon speaking back to her critics, and more importantly about ‘honouring legacies of Black resilience and creative expression, set against a backdrop of contemporary police violence and institutional oppression’ (Arzumanova 2016, 416). The video references the devastation of Hurricane Katrina on the South, Southern colonial history and the resulting oppression of Black women and the contemporary epidemic of police murdering

young Black men. Arzumanova argues that Beyoncé's ultimate project is about positioning Black communities, Black activism, and Black art as 'enduring weapons against racial violence, reincarnating Black paths to rearticulate and strengthen Black futures' (Arzumanova 2016, 415). Despite the inclusion of a small promotional lyric referencing Jay-Z's jewellery line, Roc ('I'm so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces') Beyoncé has taken a sharp turn away here from her usual branding focus. For the first time in her career Beyoncé produced a song, and video, speaking directly to Black audiences. She married her Blackness with parts of the Beyoncé brand familiar to her fans such as capitalist drive with lines such as 'I just may be a Black Bill Gates in the making'. Jenna Wortham describes the video as 'the Blackest of Black ... it's a dab in a video form, playing on loop' (Caramanica and Wortham 2016, 65). In *Formation* Beyoncé not only centralises Black fans, and the diversity of Black lives, but she also makes herself unavailable to white fans, white pleasure, and whiteness through its specific themes, language and imagery. As Arzumanova surmises:

'This isn't for you', Beyoncé seems to say – what is more: 'you couldn't appropriate it if you tried because the source-code – the affective racial literacies and their representative bodies and symbols – is neither yours to use nor yours to understand'. 'Formation', as a sonic and visual experience, will not play along (Arzumanova 2016, 420).

The song was released on Saturday 6 February 2016, the day before Beyoncé performed it at the 2016 Super Bowl alongside Coldplay. Two months later Beyoncé released her latest album, *Lemonade* which included *Formation*. *Lemonade* was to be another visual album and by May 1 it hit No.1 on the Billboard chart. *Lemonade* touched on all of the Black power themes previewed by *Formation*, tied in with Beyoncé's emotional pain at Jay-Z's public infidelity as she comes to terms with the fissures in her marriage, and in herself. Gipson argues that with *Lemonade*, Beyoncé staked her claim as a member of the 'unapologetically

Black' side of American racial politics rather than the assimilationist side whose sentiments informed her early career. He explains:

Lemonade would go on to be rightly seen as an album explicitly speaking to Black women by a Black woman who understood the layered, conflicted, political, and personal experience of living as a Black woman who had been betrayed by husband, country, and too often even community. An album that represented the experience of Black women making lemonade, #BlackGirlMagic, and impossible advances less than sixty years out of Jim Crow out of the lemons of this American life (Gipson 2019, 153).

By June, feminist scholars and social commentators weighed in on *Lemonade*. bell hooks discerned *Formation* to be a glamorisation of pain but not a resolution of it (hooks 2016). Alternatively, Roxane Gay identified Beyoncé's album as a monumental moment. She identified this period as 'a new temporal reality we are in: 'AL' after Lemonade'. Writers who were pro-*Lemonade* praised Beyoncé's deliberate refusal to render Blackness, and Black pain, as palatable and consumable for white audiences. Not only is *Formation* not speaking to white audiences, it is inaccessible to white audiences who engage with Blackness through the mechanics of cultural appropriation, loving Black culture but not the Black people who live it. Daphne Brooks and Martin (2019) understands *Formation* as part of a long history of 'Black sonic dissent', where Beyoncé is using 'Black pop radicalism and her own global stage to capture and grapple with racial catastrophe in the 21st century' (Brooks 2019).

Sceptics of the album such as Anna Baraka, view Beyoncé's performance as nothing more than 'brazen, commodified Blackness' (Baraka 2016). Beyoncé is undeniably a pop brand, complete with a model of female empowerment that mistakes capitalist success for gender equality, her dissent here from her successful race-neutral model of pop stardom however is

worth commending. After the release of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé and Jay-Z spoke out against police brutality against Black Americans and attended a rally in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting of Trayvon Martin. She made sure to honour this position in *Lemonade* by including the mothers of slain men Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, who were all murdered by police, holding pictures of their sons in the video for *Freedom*.

Beyoncé also spoke out on the Colin Kaepernick controversy in 2017 in an issue with *Sports Illustrated*. To Colin Kaepernick she said ‘thank you for your selfless heart and your conviction, thank you for your personal sacrifice. Colin acted with no fear of consequence...to change perception and to change the way we treat each other especially people of colour. We’re still waiting for the world to catch up’ (Mullan 2017). Later in 2016, Beyoncé responded to the controversy surrounding *Formation* and addressed her critics, especially those who misinterpreted the song and her album as anti-police. She said ‘I am against police brutality and injustice. Those are two separate things. If celebrating my roots and culture during Black History Month made anyone uncomfortable those feelings were there long before a [music] video and long before me’ (Mullan 2017).

Read optimistically, Roxane Gay’s ‘AL’ period of Beyoncé’s celebrity identity is as much about her life as it is about the lives and shared experiences, trauma, and joy of Black women, situating herself firmly within the Black community she so long sidelined. Read cynically, Beyoncé has once again tapped into the market of the moment, keeping herself relevant by feeding sentiments professed in online political movements run by people of colour and wider social movements such as Black Lives Matter. Seen more optimistically, *Formation*, *Lemonade* and Beyoncé’s April 2018 ‘Beychella’ performance at Coachella delivers a Black audience resistance song from a powerful and adored figure who they felt understood their

pain. Either way, Beyoncé remains a beloved figure not only because of her music but because she acutely represents the intersections of celebrity, capitalism, gender politics, race politics and the complex negotiations of self-image, branding, and self-acceptance. In this way Beyoncé with all her symbolic complexities is the perfect figure through which to discuss the nuances, binaries, and dualities of cultural appropriation.

Colourism, India, and Blackness

As mentioned earlier, Rena is just one of my respondents who admired Beyoncé's contribution to the visibility of Black women in the United States and who believes she is an important figure in WOC feminism. However, she does acknowledge that Beyoncé has other privileges that inform her decision to appear in *Hymn for the Weekend* and wear Indo chic. She talked about her massive cultural and financial capital as well as her being 'light skinned'. Beyoncé's light skin and anti-Black sentiment was a common theme amongst respondents as well. Many respondents spoke of anti-Blackness as being an issue that affects Beyoncé as an African American, but Belle directly spoke about the problem of anti-Blackness and colourism in Indian society. She said:

It's versus punching down. Untouchables are treated very badly, dark skinned Indians are treated very badly, Tamils also are treated differently. So, I feel differently about Beyoncé whose African American and Iggy Azalea who's a very white Australian girl (Belle, 33).

Elvira Prusaczyk and Becky Choma (2018) attribute India's anti-Blackness and colourism to a complex mix of ancient Indian cultures; colonial-era India; and contemporary global influences. India's Hindu caste system hierarchises Indian society into four distinct strata, with the untouchables Belle refers to, being at the very bottom, considered to be so low that they are almost outside of the caste system itself. Colourism goes hand-in-hand with this

caste system as Brahmins, the highest class, are generally lighter skinned and the lower labourer classes are stereotypically darker skinned. British colonial rule solidified the preferencing of light skin tones as those groups with lighter skin, such as the mixed-race Anglo Indians, were trusted by the British to oversee important positions in government and infrastructure, as discussed in Chapters One and Two.

In the United States, the ‘jezebel’ stereotype, historically rooted in the slavery era, portrays darker-skinned African American women as promiscuous, seductive, and animalistic; characteristics also ascribed to darker-skinned Indian or Anglo Indian women by the British during their occupation of India (Paul 2016, 111). In contemporary India, media representations of lighter skinned Indian women as not only sexually attractive but also more feminine, gentler, more pious, and more professional in comparison to their darker-skinned counterparts. Annie Paul (2016) asserts that in both the Indian television and film industries the diasporic South desirable faces such as those of newsreaders, actors and models are almost exclusively light-skinned, a truth which speaks back to my respondents seeing Beyoncé as a realistic Bollywood star due her light skinned, ethnically ambiguous appearance.

This goes back before British colonialism. The fetishisation of lighter skin can even be seen in India’s Hindu mythology where gods and the ‘good’ Indian figures are light skinned while dark skin is reserved for villains, servants and other ‘bad’ or ‘unworthy’ Indians. Paul asserts that ‘fair skin is virtually the single most highly prized attribute a bride can command’ and ‘achieving the diasporic desired skin colour and tone starts in the foetal stage when Indian mothers-to-be are urged to consume white coloured foods in an effort to lighten the complexion of their babies’ (2016, 134).

The subject of India's colourism was acknowledged as a problem in 1947 during the lead up to independence when India's leaders were debating the fundamental rights that should be afforded to every Indian citizen after British colonial rule. However, freedom from discrimination based on colour was not included in the non-discrimination clauses of the Fundamental Charter of Rights. Because colourism was not legally sanctioned, Paul argues, discrimination against Indians of darker skin colours remains a deeply ingrained social prejudice today.

The social capital that goes along with 'fair' skin in India can be seen in the popularity of skin bleaching products. Brands such as 'fair and lovely' advertise light skin as the ticket to romantic relationships and promotions, indicating that skin colour is an important indicator of the Indian woman's worth, her sexual attractiveness and even her professional competence (Paul 2016, 138). The precise shades of 'fair' skin advertised by these types of skin bleaching product advertisements ranges from 'the white skin colour associated with Northern European Caucasians to the olive skin colour associated with Southern European Caucasians and the North-Indian Punjabi community' (Parameswaran and Cardoza 2009, 215). Elvira Prusacyk and Becky Choma argue that the promise indicted by skin-bleaching creams is whiteness, proven by the popularity of such creams in the Indian market:

Whiteness is being sold as a new cosmetic product, an 'effect' you can buy and put on. It is a product which, on the one hand, seems to reduce the original value of whiteness (since now everyone can be 'white') but on the other, reifies the dichotomy and hierarchy between 'white' and 'non-white' and 'white' and 'Black/coloured' (2018, 189).

They assert that in contemporary Indian society, a 'colour-blind racial ideology' has started to become popular which in turn perpetuates the colourism in their society. They argue that the

proliferation of this mindset denies the impact of systemic and racial inequality in India, effectively justifying and maintaining colourism as a fair system.

Cultural appropriation and POC politics

This discussion brings us to the major point of contention amongst my respondents - can Beyoncé be considered to be culturally appropriating in *Hymn for the Weekend*? This was complicated in large part due to her race. This was articulated well by Jasmine and her sister Asha who thought of *HFTW* and Beyoncé's role within it in comparison to Iggy Azalea's *Bounce*. They agreed that Azalea's whiteness created a different impact on screen and that Beyoncé's decision to partake in *HFTW* is incongruous with her recent albums and their focus on Black womanhood:

Jasmine: Also, I find it easier, I mean they both make me uncomfortable, but I find it easier to say, 'Iggy Azalea is fucked' and then Beyoncé I'm like sigh, what are you thinking? I trusted you.

Asha: It is a Coldplay song though.

Jasmine: Yeah, true.

Asha: It's a collaboration, it's not her. She's just accredited to it.

Jasmine: But I feel like all her recent ones [songs/albums] are so deliberate, her recent ones, like tracing this Black genealogy so like this is weird for her. I've never seen it before. But also, her race is being used really differently here [in *HFTW*] to Iggy Azalea who in her clip is like 'look I'm a pure white woman'

whereas Beyoncé, racially, does resemble some Bollywood stars as she's being presented as this flexible mixed aesthetic or whatever.

It was a lot easier for my respondents to articulate their feelings about *Bounce* than it was for them to talk about *Hymn for the Weekend*. While reactions to Azalea were overwhelmingly negative, Beyoncé's identity as a woman of colour, and her particular history as a Black pop icon complicated their emotional and intellectual responses to the video. Chris Martin's presence as the clip's main protagonist also complicated their responses.

Beyoncé's performance of a Bollywood star, shot on green screen (in contrast to Azalea's centre stage performance running around the streets of India) was received well, as it alluded to Beyoncé being one step removed from the decision process, and one step removed from treading into the murky waters of cultural appropriation. Unlike Martin, she does not walk the streets of India as a part of the plot of the clip. Her role as a Bollywood star meant that she could shoot her scenes in L.A. with the use of a green screen, speaking to Beyoncé's massive cultural and monetary capital as an icon – it would have been a large cost to fly Beyoncé out to India to shoot the video clip. As a result of this, Beyoncé appears as a fantasy figure in the clip and is transparent about her being one step removed from the Indian context in which Martin and Azalea exist in.

The respondents qualified Beyoncé's wearing of Indo chic in this way, directing their anger more towards Martin, and Coldplay, as they interpreted them as having more of a say in the decision for Beyoncé wear Indo chic than Beyoncé herself. Another common remark was about Beyoncé's particular choice of Indian clothes and accessories. Many respondents argued that her outfits, designed by Indian designers Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, were more respectful than Azalea's embellished wedding sari. They also noticed that her main

Indian cultural marker was the Henna on her hands, which many noted is also practised in areas of North Africa. With Beyoncé's African American heritage, the fact that Henna has a specific African history lead some respondents to feel as if Beyoncé had access to Henna in much the same way as diasporic South Asian people despite the clip being shot in India. Sabrina touched on all these points in her statements about *Bounce* and *Hymn for the Weekend*:

Well, I've seen both of them before [laughs]. And I have two very distinct reactions to them because they're not doing the exact same thing in my eyes, um. Obviously Iggy Azalea, she's...they're both culturally appropriating but there's different circumstances where one is being perpetrated by a Black woman working with a white artist [Coldplay] so when you look at the dynamics that are at place in that space [the music videos] also anti-Blackness and how India and North Africa share a lot of the same cultural items and signifiers like Henna and head adornment like the tikka and stuff too but obviously that [the clip] is supposed to be India not Africa (Sabrina, 23).

Ashley had similar concerns and likewise compared her feelings about Beyoncé to Iggy Azalea:

With Beyoncé, I don't know, I'm more conflicted about that one because she's African American and with the Henna it's like that's in African cultures too so I couldn't be upset about that really. I also don't know, how do I put it, what the boundaries are for her? Maybe because she's quite privileged herself and the kind of light she was shown in was like maybe a bit insensitive...I dunno. Iggy Azalea is already problematic and I'm like, it doesn't even surprise me to be honest. I've never seen it [*Bounce* music video] before but I was like, yeah, of course she's

doing that. The whole videos were just so stupid because they were so inaccurate so yeah that's mostly my feelings (Ashley, 21).

Jasmine echoed this kind of sentiment:

I would say that Iggy's video is a bit more offensive to me than Beyoncé's, and Beyoncé is just wearing the headpiece and also, she's a person of colour so I'm willing to let it go, but also her accessories are kind of worn in Middle East and North Africa as well so I'm not too fussed about the jewellery. But Iggy Azalea, oh god, I mean I don't feel like she's appreciating the culture, it just makes me embarrassed for her (Jasmine, 25).

As alluded to above, when respondents refer to colourism and anti-Blackness, they refer to it in both a U.S. and South Asian context, demonstrating the complex mix of cultural assemblages that make up their identities as diasporic South Asians. Despite being Australian, the respondents who commented on colourism were influenced by U.S racial politics, and refer to it in their statements. They were also familiar with 'call out' culture present in social activist spaces both online and in real life. Sabrina was one such respondent who typified this type of positioning as her outrage was directed at the criticism Beyoncé received for *HFTW* over the clip itself. She said:

I think for me, so many people attacked Beyoncé or called out Beyoncé, or informed Beyoncé, and I just didn't see that with Iggy... it was like they wanted to tear a Black woman down, and with Iggy Azalea it was more like people laughed it off. Whereas, we came for, yes, a highly commercialised and successful but, still, a Black woman and we just attacked her and I didn't see any

nuanced discussion about the power structures at play when thinking about these kinds of things (Sabrina, 23).

The ‘we’ Sabrina is referring to here was people on social media and even people within her own friend group and community. She tied the reaction to the clips to the clip itself and decided that she would not criticise Beyoncé for her involvement (nor would she praise it) due to the power structures at play in that dynamic.

Conclusion

Maiysha Kai in her contribution to *The Lemonade Reader* (2019) asks ‘What Do We Want from Beyoncé?’ She argues that Black women:

Admire her—and resent her. We laud her as a beacon of Black excellence; yet we doubt her capacity to fully love and understand our Blackness. We criticize her well-curated image; yet, when she reveals herself, we question what we see, because her pain too closely resembles our own. We do not trust her bloneness, her bronze-ness, her beauty, or her well-guarded boundaries. We don’t trust her access—to fame, to love, or to happiness. We don’t trust that her privilege could allow her to comprehend our pain (2019, 7).

But what about the diasporic South Asian women who were so disappointed in her participation in *Hymn for the Weekend*? What do they want of Beyoncé, and of American artists more broadly? Using the *HFTW* music video as a case study, this chapter has complicated the binary of cultural appropriation versus homage through looking at how Indo chic affects diasporic South Asian women when embodied by white men and a Black woman, respectively. Through my analysis, this chapter has offered empirical insights into how groups of diasporic South Asian women relate to POC politics and how Indo chic is one

powerful way in which these women make interjections into such discussions. It has demonstrated that diasporic South Asian women view the engagement of Chris Martin and Beyoncé in India differently – and how those differing responses are coloured by their preconceived opinions of each artist, but also how they engage with Indo chic. Few of my respondents were Coldplay fans, and they found Chris Martin in the role of a white British man exploring spiritual India as the cultural tourist to be unoriginal, fetishistic, and irresponsible.

As for Beyoncé, my respondents expressed confusion and disappointment, but also rationalised her involvement in the clip through focusing on the particular nature of her (detached) role in the clip, and her race. Although my respondents' reactions were varied, there was a shared admiration of Beyoncé as an icon of Black women's rights, the politics of which many of my respondents deeply resonated with as women of colour in a majority white nation such as Australia. *Hymn for the Weekend* complicates the same critiques of cultural appropriation voiced by respondents in *Bounce*, while simultaneously upholding some of those critiques, illustrating the nuances in diasporic South Asian arguments around Indo chic.

CONCLUSION:
**Moving on from Indo chic, Moving Beyond Cultural
Appropriation**

My Motherland is a Mouthful Part 2

My dad tells me that when people ask what my PhD thesis is about, he doesn't really know what to say -- 'something about white people not being allowed to wear clothes from another culture, I don't know, I don't really understand'. Despite having many conversations with him about the questions raised in this thesis, he doesn't get it. I wish he did get it, but it's okay that he doesn't because this thesis is not for him - it's for my mum.

When I started researching Indo chic back in 2015 as an honours student my mum didn't really get what all the fuss was about. She told me that non-South Asian people wearing South Asian cultural items just looked weird, or dumb. It wasn't political for her. She was my age when 1990s Indo chic was in style in its second major manifestation, and all she said was that she thought it was weird then and it's weird now. The lack of precision in the word 'weird' bothered me at the time. 'But *why* is it weird?' I asked her, hoping she would say something like 'it's weird because even I wouldn't wear Indian clothing in public' which would lead to a grand unifying moment between us where I would say 'me too'. Then, in my fantasy, we would have a long conversation about race and racism, and her experiences growing up in Australia, and my experiences growing up in Australia, and we would bond over our shared trauma. We never had that conversation back then; all she would give me was 'I don't know it's just *strange*'.

However, writing this in 2022, I can say I have had many conversations with my mother about race and racism, and our experiences as Anglo Indian Australian women. We talk about it often. I sometimes worry that by doing this research — by talking about my findings and my feelings about those findings with her constantly — I have dredged up bad feelings and memories my mother has tried to suppress. In the years since starting this research she has shared with our family her feelings of being othered, of experiencing racism growing up

being Brown in 1970s Australia, and of *almost* being accepted in White Australian spaces.

She now thinks cultural appropriation is racist, and understands why diasporic South Asian women of my generation are upset by it.

Furthermore, she has become more outspoken about race and racism in her social circles, calling out white friends when they say something with racist overtones, and she confidently positions herself in those conversations. ‘What about me, Shane, am I Australian to you? I’m an immigrant, born in India...am I not allowed to be Australian too?’ I heard her say this to a white Australian family friend last year after he expressed how nobody in Australia is *Australian* anymore, complaining about migration from China and India. This was shocking for me to hear. My mum is no pushover, but she has spent her life politely tolerating racism, and assimilating into the mainly White spaces she has inhabited. I was both proud and impressed.

Even though the focus of this thesis is how millennial South Asian diasporic women have used Indo chic to speak out against racism, I witnessed my mother use Indo chic the same way. Indo chic and cultural appropriation are easily dismissed as a superficial issue as they concern aesthetics and consumption. However, thinking about Indo chic has had a profound effect for some diasporic South Asian women like my mother, myself, and many of my participants.

Indo chic is an instance of a racial microaggression (as opposed to an overtly violent racist act) and, therefore, it is more contestable, deniable, or debatable. Engaging in these debates force self-reflection into one’s beliefs and one’s feelings. The popularity of contemporary Indo chic, as well as the public discourse around the cultural appropriation debate, prompted many diasporic South Asian women to interrogate their feelings of belonging and not belonging as minoritised people in a white majority nation. As this thesis has explored, this

inward reflection led my millennial participants to outward political action as they joined WOC activist groups and led conversations about cultural appropriation with people in their daily lives, as well as online.

In Chapter Four I focused on Indo chic and social media, I ended the chapter by using this quote from Sarah Ahmed, a mixed-race, South Asian Australian woman herself. She argues that:

Feeling better, whatever form it might take, is not about the overcoming of bad feeling, which are effects of histories of violence, but of finding a different relationship them (2005, 84).

And this thesis has illustrated how my participants, and myself, have found a different relationship to the bad feelings Indo chic has elicited within us.

This thesis began with an examination of the character of the Anglophone South Asian diaspora, exploring the diversity of the diaspora, while tracing certain similarities. I provided a survey of relevant scholarly work written about Australia's South Asian diasporas, focusing on the Indian diaspora and Anglo Indian diaspora in Australia to reflect the national backgrounds of my respondents. The South Asian Australian response to the 2009 hate crimes against Indian international students in Melbourne was one significant moment explored in Chapter One. This moment pointed to a shift in the nature of South Asian Australian diasporas from model minorities to politically vocal communities of people of colour who were no longer timid about sharing their experiences of racism with the wider Australian public. This moment paved the way for many of my respondents who would then speak out against the racist microaggression Indo chic in the years after 2012 .

I introduced my respondents and my research design in Chapter Two, contributing to existing literature on both cultural appropriation and also how minoritised groups consume popular media texts. I outlined my mixed methodology of ethnographic interviews, auto-ethnography, and textual analysis, positioning myself as an insider/outsider researcher. As an Anglo Indian Australian woman, I illustrated how I was able to access South Asian Australian spaces and make connections with my participants who, like me, have had their cultural identity disrupted by the popularisation of Indo chic, sharing biographical narratives about our cultural identity with one another.

In Chapter Three I examined the most prolific manifestation of Indo chic – Indo chic in fashion. I discovered that Indo chic in fashion was the first form of Indo chic most of my participants came into contact with and they had immediate ‘bad feelings’ about it, associated with shame they had embodied in their childhood. I provided historical context for Indo chic as a cyclical Western fashion trend from the 1880’s to the present, noting the distinct historical periods when Indo chic was worn: 19th Century French masquerade parties, the 1960s subcultural style of the ‘hippies’ and the 1990s trend ‘Asian chic’. In each of these three periods, a constructed idea of India, or South Asia generally, came to signify an exotic ancient land filled with spirituality and mysticism. The Orientalising impact of the trend has affected Anglophone South Asian diasporas as the trend forced members of these communities, especially women, to confront their relationship to their diasporic, hybridised identities. My respondents shared that they enjoyed wearing traditional dress in South Asian cultural and religious contexts. However, many felt uncomfortable wearing traditional dress in the context in which Indo chic is consumed and worn by non-South Asians – mainstream western public space.

However, due to the public debates occurring around Indo chic, and the sharing of diasporic South Asians ‘bad feeling’ vocally and publicly, most of my participants expressed feeling more comfortable wearing aspects of their traditional dress with some even feeling a newfound sense of pride in their ethnic and cultural identity as a result.

In Chapter Four, I examined how this shift in feeling came about as Indo chic was debated online. I examined the public efforts of diasporic South Asian women from around the world to publicise their experiences and ‘call out’ those who wear the trend and who try to ‘retell history’ through the sharing of personal traumas and their experiences with the trend. I explored how cathartic practices such as shaming, educating and proclaiming pride helped build activist communities online where diasporic South Asian women, including my respondents, felt safe about sharing their ‘bad feelings’ and experiences of racism.

The final two chapters used the responses from the media reaction section of my ethnographic study to analyse how diasporic South Asian Australian women feel about the portrayal of Indo chic in music videos. The two music videos chosen – Iggy Azalea’s *Bounce* and Coldplay ft. Beyoncé *Hymn for the Weekend* were both criticised for the cultural appropriation inherent within them, and are reasonably well known examples of Indo chic. Both music videos were shot in India and feature famous Western recording artists in the role of an Indian Goddess. Both performers – Iggy and Beyoncé- wear Indo chic and appear in India, dancing in a stereotypical Bollywood style. Both songs are not about India or South Asia, and instead are about dancing, drinking, and partying

In Chapters Five and Six I examined the difference in response to the music videos and illustrate why diasporic South Asian women may read the two clips – and performers – so

differently. Starting with Iggy Azalea in Chapter Five, I explore her rise to fame – a white Australian rapper, who in *Bounce*, raps in an ‘Dirty South’ style in a sari on an elephant. All of respondents, regardless of age or feelings about cultural appropriation, reacted to *Bounce* with laughter and ridicule. In my analysis, I suggested that the reactions of my respondents are due in large part to most respondents’ previous knowledge of Azalea’s career trajectory, performance style and celebrity persona, all of which have been marked by constant accusations of inauthenticity. Whereas Beyoncé is admired by many of my respondents, especially those of the second-generation who have an interest in WOC politics, Azalea is universally unpopular as her image is bound to her white privilege and her history of cultural appropriation.

In the final chapter I turned to *Hymn for the Weekend*, a Coldplay song featuring Beyoncé and I posed the question - what happens when these dynamics are split and embodied by an Anglo British man and an African American woman, respectively? Like *Bounce*, *Hymn for the Weekend* was critiqued online by South Asian diasporic communities for being culturally appropriative, glorifying the Western gaze and for perpetuating ubiquitous images of India as exotic, poverty-stricken and colourful. These online sentiments were in many instances echoed by my respondents in this study, pressing me to ask, how does Beyoncé’s racially ambiguous Blackness and her star persona (which has become aligned with Black feminism) complicate the narrative of cultural appropriation that Azalea perpetuated so easily in *Bounce*? Through my analysis of the responses of my participants, I offered insights into how South Asian diasporic women of varying generations feel about Western representations of India on screen; white masculinities in contrast with brown masculinities; women of colour feminist politics and Beyoncé as a representative of these politics.

This thesis attempts to address an impasse in Australian studies of South Asian women and their engagement with contemporary antiracist activism. Through examining diasporic South Asian responses to various instances of Indo chic, I have explored how contemporary forms of the trend make younger generations of diasporic South Asian women *feel* about their cultural identities. Affect has been an underlying current throughout the chapters in this thesis as my respondents shared their feelings about Indo chic in its various manifestations.

In conclusion, this thesis provides multifaceted perspectives about how Indo chic has affected the cultural and political identities of young, South Asian Australian women. Concerning the most recent iteration of Indo chic in visual media from 2012 to 2018 – specifically in fashion, social media, and music videos – it has considered how these images and narratives have affected South Asian women across the digital diaspora. Born from my own interest in this topic as an Anglo Indian Australian woman, this thesis has also centred perspectives of mixed South Asian Australian women as they grapple with these complexities through their relationship to Indo chic.

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