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Diaspora and Digital Media

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As global migration has boomed and identity has become less connected with place, the term "diaspora" has been taken up by a variety of populations making claims to many kinds of community (e.g., racial, ethnic, linguistic, religious) at many scales (e.g., regional, global). The word "diaspora" was coined over two thousand years ago. Combining *dia-* (across) and *-spora* (seed, to spread), early Greek translators of the Hebrew scriptures used the word to describe the forced exile and dispersed connection of the Israelites. Spread apart and carrying the seeds of their culture in their teachings and their sacred texts, many Jewish people today continue to claim that they are part of the Jewish diaspora and that their cultural inheritance is defined by their being spread apart yet connected. In this chapter, I analyze the increasing resonance of a solidarity-oriented diasporic consciousness for South Asian Americans in the United States and how multiple, sometimes competing versions of South Asian American identity are actively constituted through digital media. I do so to highlight how diasporic identifications are always constructed in relation to transnational migrations and imaginaries, as well as in relation to other racialized groups. This work is important to consider because transnational migrations, diasporic communities, and the strategic use of media have been crucial to the problematic maintenance of racial hierarchies in this nation since its founding.

First, I offer a brief history of South Asian migration to the United States and sketch the mainstream racialization of South Asian Americans. Next, I consider how South Asian Americans have used media and communication technologies to manage their relationship with identity, highlighting a shift over time from a diasporic consciousness focused on

longing for a distant homeland and its internal divisions, to imagining new identities and coalitions. As part of this, I consider the affordances and cultures of the web as a space for identity work. Finally, I use a blog called *Sepia Mutiny* and the South Asian American Digital Archive as examples of sites where some South Asian Americans, in spite of strong internal and external pressures, are forging new, social justice–oriented visions of being South Asian American. Unpacking the conflicting understandings of diaspora and identity at play in this complex set of communities and media reveals the processes by which racial categories get constructed, reconfigured, and stabilized, as well as the active role some marginalized and diasporic communities have taken up online to reconfigure race, solidarity, and belonging.

Coming to South Asian America

South Asian American is a coalitional identity label that encompasses people who live in the United States and Canada and trace their cultural heritage to the nations of the South Asian subcontinent: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives. Some consider Afghanistan part of South Asia as well. South Asians have been migrating to North America from as early as the sixteenth century (Priyadarshini 2014), with a notable population involved in agriculture, railroad construction, and lumber in the Pacific Northwest at the start of the twentieth century. However, at that time large-scale migration was blocked informally through acts of prejudice and violence, and formally through xenophobic immigration laws. South Asian America today is deeply shaped by a major influx of professional, educated, and highly skilled workers who came after the passing of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The policy shift favored highly skilled labor, as well as family members of those who had already immigrated. From 1965 to 1977, 83 percent of South Asian migrants to the United States entered with advanced degrees (Prashad 1999, 186) and from 1980 to 2013, the Indian immigrant population in the United States increased from 206,000 to 2.04 million, doubling every decade (Lee 2015). This new body of South Asian migrants, markedly different from the Asian (including South Asian) populations that had arrived before it, entered into an already complicated racial field.

By 1966, East Asian Americans had been recast by mainstream America as the "model minority" (Petersen 1966) whose success could be used as a weapon against other minority communities fighting for their civil rights (Osajima 1988). With smaller long-term South Asian populations in the United States than East Asian groups, the racial position of the post-1965 South Asian migrants was less stable. Stereotypes of South Asians as dangerous, dark-skinned hordes, sly colonial underlings, and mysterious spiritualists conflicted with the simultaneous fantasy of South Asian Americans as a "less troublesome" model minority. In some ways, the lack of stable categorization and the surplus of meanings projected by mainstream populations onto South Asian Americans became another reason to consider people of South Asian heritage suspicious. Even with such wide variation, the common understanding most often returned to for South Asian Americans for the last several decades has been that of the model minority—educated and skilled, politically pliant, and culturally insular.

The place of East Asians and South Asians in the United States can also be understood within the larger context of U.S. racialization and what Claire Jean Kim (1999) calls the "racial triangulation of Asian Americans." Kim argues that the current categories of Asian, Black, and White in the United States were developed together, and can be understood only in relation to each other. For over two hundred years, essentialized notions of identity have been mobilized to produce and maintain a field of racial positions that reinforces White racial power as natural and inevitable, and excludes other categories from full civic, economic, or social participation in the American body politic. Asian Americans are relatively valorized as "dependable," "successful," "hard-working" laborers above Black communities, but are kept in check using civic ostracism, which positions Asian-heritage people as apolitical and permanently culturally foreign (Kim 1999, 107; Lowe 1996, 5).

Because Asians are perceived as industrious and controllable, the civic arrival of Asians as Americans is always deferred while their labor is consumed, even celebrated. Refusing Asian Americans full cultural citizenship while using their lauded and exploited economic performance as a tool to rebuke other minority communities, the racial structures of America are stabilized (Nishime 2014). Threats to this vision of U.S. race relations are met with confusion, and often hostility. For

example, no matter how many generations of family have lived in the United States, Asian Americans are still marked as indelibly alien—as is suggested by the intensity and repetition with which they are perpetually asked, "Where are you from?" The question implicitly asserts that they *cannot* be from *here*. Indeed, any answer that locates them as American is deemed insufficient, and the question is repeated, with increasing frustration and aggression, until an answer that locates them *elsewhere*, as foreign in their very essence, is obtained.

The Techie and the Terrorist

Over the last thirty years, two major developments reoriented the mainstream image of South Asian Americans. The rise of technology jobs starting in the 1980s called for a massive reorganization of national and global labor that some South Asian populations were poised to utilize. The potential for certain Asian Americans to access a more flexible, transnational, and economic citizenship (Ong 1999; Visweswaran 1997) owes a great deal to inequalities of migration and capital accumulation informed by centuries-long histories of colonization and commerce. Both on- and off-shore, South Asians came to represent the promise of skilled technology labor and the threat of outsourcing the American Dream (Hashmi 2006). From fictional characters like the sweet yet nerdy Raj Koothrappali (*The Big Bang Theory*) to successful foreign students decried by then-radio host Steven Bannon as taking American jobs (Fahrenthold and Sellers 2016), the mediated figure of the techie was competent but asocial and inhuman.

Separately, the aftermath of 9/11 caused an even greater seismic shift in popular understandings of South Asians and South Asian Americans. In a continuation of robust histories of Islamophobia, Orientalism, racism, and xenophobia, brown bodies at home and abroad became the playground of national insecurities, new surveillance technologies, and banal regimes of terror. While the trope of South Asians as invading hordes that must be stopped by vigilantes has a more than one-hundred-year pedigree in the United States (Lal 2007), the post-9/11 rise in hate crimes against South Asians and Muslims was stark. In the week after 9/11, for example, there were 645 bias incidents recorded in the United States, ranging from harassment to arson to murder, all directed against

Americans perceived to be of Middle Eastern or Muslim origin. Eighty-one of these attacks were conducted against people of South Asian heritage (Mishra 2001), and such incidents have persisted in the years that followed, growing particularly numerous in the charged atmosphere surrounding the 2016 presidential election.

In the wake of 9/11 and the tech boom, the images of the techie and the terrorist have become two enduring poles around which mainstream understandings of South Asians and South Asian Americans orbit. Their power draws many into an unproductive, binary conversation, where they feel they must argue for the (supposedly good, certainly better) image of the techie over the image of the terrorist. In truth, both misconstrue the internally diverse and complicated reality of South Asian American communities. Worse, both are based on and reinforce the mainstream American conception of South Asians as permanent foreigners. Some of the most problematic and enduring depictions include the brain-eating cultists from the movie *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and the caricatured, accented voice of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon on *The Simpsons*. Whether taking White hostages, eating brains, "taking" American jobs, or speaking in a mocking accent, these mainstream images implicitly and explicitly deny that those of South Asian heritage can ever be fully American.

Even those mainstream depictions that avoid these tropes, such as many of actress Mindy Kaling's characters or the videos of YouTube stars like Liza Koshy, tend to sidestep deep cultural questions altogether. Such roles emphasize the troubling idea that it is better to treat racial difference as colorful adornment than to step into the quagmire of race relations and cultural authenticity, and thus have to fight against a set of well-worn, interrelated stereotypical tropes and roles. While for some these whitewashed stories read as universal and relatable, they are actually dependent on ignoring racial struggle. This stunted range of popular imagery, however, has always been supplemented by community media created by and for South Asians.

South Asian Diasporic Communication

As identifications within the South Asian American diaspora have become increasingly complex, so too have interpersonal relationships

with communication and technology use. Earlier South Asian migrants often identified themselves strongly in relation to nostalgia for a homeland left behind, whether national (e.g., Pakistan), religious (e.g., Sikh Khalistan), or linguistic (e.g., Tamil Eelam). This "lost" homeland was directly accessible only through long physical journeys, crackling phone wires, and worn airmail letters, all of which were cost- and time-prohibitive. More sociable and entertaining options included enjoying records and cassettes that had been lovingly carried across oceans, attending community film screenings, and listening to or watching public access radio and TV shows in metropolitan areas. Over time, technologies for personally keeping up with a distant homeland became faster and more accessible. By the 1990s, South Asians abroad discussed things like culture and classical music and organized meet-ups through Usenet forums, an early precursor to Internet bulletin boards.

Second-generation (and later) South Asian Americans increasingly understand themselves in relation to a constellation of interacting regional, national, and transnational identifications. Many South Asian Americans who were born in the United States come of age feeling distinctly both South Asian and American. Some describe this as not a desire for return, since a place like Nepal might never have been one's homeland, but a pull to meaningfully "re-turn" to one's cultural inheritance (Brah 1996)—to explore it, process it, and claim it. These feelings are often visible within digital discourse as South Asian Americans (like so many other communities) have taken to the web to produce, remix, curate, and discuss images of themselves. The most recent era of digital diaspora highlights a new potential relationship with identity, one based on connection-in-dispersion.[1] In this version, being spread apart may be generative of an entirely new, potentially positive experience, no longer marked by lack, but rather by an excess of meaning, new identities, and new cultural practices created through interaction. Combining neoliberal fantasies of self-empowerment with very real access to complex connection, each person is a site of interconnection and meaning-making (Massey 1994, 154). Although we cannot fully control all the meanings that collide in this intersection, there is opportunity for people to accept, prioritize, and strengthen some of these connections over others.

Yet the Internet is not, as it is so often depicted, a utopian space or a blank slate where everyone can freely articulate and spread new

visions of solidarity and identity. The potential of Internet technologies and digital media might be open-ended, but their creation and use are shaped by issues of access and culture as much as they are by technological innovation. Safiya Noble (2018) and André Brock (2011) argue that a normative Whiteness is implicitly and constantly reified in and through technoculture. For example, Noble (2018) systematically unpacks the centuries of racist and eugenicist "knowledge" and cultural baggage that undergird the Google search result, revealing how the Google search algorithm and apparatus are products and promoters of a racist society that masquerade as neutral technology. Sarah Florini (2017) further highlights how the inherent Whiteness of technoculture shapes and is shaped by an overwhelming belief in networked individualism as the new "social operating system" of society (Rainie and Wellman 2012).

Coalitional South Asian America

The state of contemporary popular and political culture in the United States—gripped by White angst, engaged in acrimonious immigration debates, and entering an era of computer-assisted global surveillance—combined with the colorblind, individualist bent of technoculture, provides fertile ground for the continued racial triangulation of South Asian Americans as permanently foreign techies or terrorists. In both cases, the ordinariness and possibility of simply being a brown American and enjoying a normal life are foreclosed. These dominant visions of South Asian Americans ignore the internal complexities of South Asian America, including its multitude of religious, linguistic, national, ethnic, classed, and caste-based communities. In addition, overly simplistic imaginaries of South Asian America work to foreclose meaningful solidarities with other marginalized racial and religious communities in the United States by placing them in hierarchies and oppositions, and by erasing the internal diversity that could be a bridge for cross-cultural understanding. For example, in 2014 nearly one in every twenty of the roughly 11.1 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States were from India (Passel and Cohn 2016). Yet national debates about immigration make it appear as if "undocumented" migrants only come from Mexico and Central and South America.

Seeking new ways of being South Asian American in the early 2000s, a generation of activists, authors, educators, and everyday citizens came together to build new connections within the community and outside. Rather than a convenient catchall name, South Asian America became, for them, a call to action, to build a community based on deep, politically conscious, internal and external solidarities.[2] Whereas other prominent ideas of South Asian American diaspora were and are based on holding on to something lost and far away, or divisions between those who trace their heritage to different South Asian nations or religious communities, this concept of identity considers both individuals and communities as generative sites of interconnection. At these interconnection points, activism, awareness, and belonging are consciously curated, created, and spread in spite of the dominant individualistic logics of technoculture. One way of viewing this vision of South Asian America is through digitally mediated communities like *Sepia Mutiny* and the South Asian American Digital Archive.

The multi-author blog and forum *Sepia Mutiny* (sepiamutiny.com) played a central role in this constellation of organizations and sites during its run from 2004 to 2012. With more than 60 bloggers, over 5,000 posts, substantive 100-comment discussions, and up to 16,000 daily visitors in the pre-Facebook and Twitter era, the *Sepia Mutiny* community advocated for a South Asian American perspective that was at once radically inclusive and ordinary. With heavy readership in North America and South Asia, its bloggers wrote on national and international topics ranging from the intellectual and political to the deeply personal and popular. This was a far cry from the many narrowly constituted, separate South Asian diasporas that were dominant a generation earlier.

Although started by Indian Americans, the Mutineers, as the bloggers called themselves, came to include people of Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, and European descent; Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians, and unaffiliated; straight and queer; Republicans and Democrats; novelists, DJs, tech entrepreneurs, journalists, activists, lawyers, academics, artists, and a rocket scientist. Some of them were indeed in technology-oriented fields, but unlike the stereotype, the techie Mutineers were anything but apolitical. The breadth of blogger backgrounds, moreover, was not by accident, but brought about through concerted effort. The founders actively sought out and supported bloggers with backgrounds

different from their own. Critical gaps were acknowledged, such as a lack of bloggers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and more bloggers sought. Bangladeshi-American electoral organizer and artist Tanzila "Taz" Ahmed (2012) articulated *Sepia Mutiny*'s formula most succinctly in her farewell post: "I always approached blogging on this site with three things in mind—1) write about the Desi-American experience, the narrative I was yearning for, 2) a 1:1 ratio of pop to politics posts, and 3) find the marginalized Desis and give them space."[3]

Through blogger selection, content choices, and elaborately moderated comment threads, *Sepia Mutiny* curated the complex, coalitional vision of South Asian America the Mutineers hungered for, piecing it together bit by bit. They filled their blog and its community with the images and voices that were so painfully missing from mainstream media and so frequently shunned at conservative cultural functions that kept different South Asian American communities separated by "nation of origin," religion, language, caste, and so on. Instead of asserting an essential identity, the blog cultivated a reflexive, conversational, politically oriented community. Accumulating more than 250,000 substantive comments in the pre-Twitter era, *Sepia Mutiny* fought against the closure of identities and meanings, and instead pushed for community participation, political engagement, and multidirectional solidarities. To make space for productive conversations in the face of dominant American technocultural trends such as trolling and bad-faith arguments, the bloggers and administrators spent countless hours meticulously moderating comment threads, paying special attention to the posts of women and Muslim contributors, who received the most vitriol. While sites like *Sepia Mutiny* heavily cultivated internal community formation and dialogue, others worked to capture and promote this vision more broadly.

Since 2008, the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA, saada.org) has worked to collect and digitize artefacts of South Asian American history, contextualize them and make them accessible, and legitimize them as pieces of American history. Starting with its digital archive, it later activated interest, investment, and awareness through multiple practices and digital platforms. The digital archive, which boasts nearly 4,000 items as of this writing, specializes in uncovering, connecting, and sharing artefacts from overlooked aspects of South Asian American culture and history, such as political activism and organizing

against imperialism and bigotry stretching back to the early 1900s. In 2011 SAADA began producing engaging articles that combine archival materials with personal narratives and political insight in its slick online magazine *TIDES* (saada.org/tides). Some articles add historical depth to analysis of current events, such as Sherally Munshi's (2018) "Beyond the Muslim Ban," which connects current U.S. policy to a hundred years of xenophobic exclusionary immigration law. Others use personal stories to examine complex community issues, as with Jessica L. Namakkal's (2017) musings on her multiracial identity and contingent racialization, titled "Peanut Butter Dosas: Becoming Desi in the Midwest." Still others promote outward-facing solidarities, like Manan Desai's (2014) "What B. R. Ambedkar Wrote to W. E. B. Du Bois." Taken together, *TIDES* and the archive provide a specific kind of access to a history and reality long obscured. This history is both radical (surprising, different, politically progressive) and highly curated, leveraging the utopian promises of digital media for pro-social aims.

While accessible to a wide audience, the archive and *TIDES* centrally reach South Asian Americans. Projects like the forthcoming crowdfunded, multi-authored textbook *Our Stories: An Introduction to South Asian America* bring together a wide South Asian American community to contribute, ostensibly in the hopes of helping expand education about South Asians to American school children. Yet with 407 crowdfunding "backers" and over 65 author contributors, *Our Stories* mobilizes escalating digital and participatory practices to implicitly argue that this community must understand itself and be understood as internally diverse.

Even more outward-facing, SAADA's stand-alone site the First Days Project (firstdaysproject.org) invites any immigrant to the United States to record and share their experience of arrival. The stories then produce clickable pins on a timeline or world map visualization. This project reflects an active shift on the part of SAADA to argue for South Asian American history as American history *because* the experience of South Asians in America is part of and revealing of the commonly invoked "American immigrant experience" more generally. After the launch of the First Days Project in 2013, a discussion emerged about whether the project should be actively restricted only to the stories of immigrants of South Asian heritage. In response, the SAADA board of directors revised its mission and goals to read: "We envision

American and world histories that fully acknowledge the importance of immigrants and ethnic communities in the past, strengthen such communities in the present, and inspire discussion about their role in the future" (saada.org/mission). SAADA's various ventures offer sites of carefully curated participation in American history. Together they leverage techno-utopian hopes and discourses of American multiculturalism toward the pro-social end of reconceptualizing diaspora, minority identity, and the nation.

Taken together, *Sepia Mutiny*, SAADA, and similar sites work to produce and engage a specific vision of South Asian American diaspora—coalitional South Asian America—through community building and imaginative, digitally mediated labor. This conception of South Asian America is internally diverse, ordinary, fun, politically active in conjunction with other marginalized communities, and quintessentially American. Mobilizing a generative sense of diaspora as miraculous connection-in-dispersion, those invested in producing coalitional South Asian America work to enhance or build politically conscious yet everyday connections. Internally, they do so among South Asian America's diverse communities, and externally, they work to connect with other marginalized communities in the United States and around the world. They fight the racial triangulations that oversimplify South Asian American identity and isolate marginalized communities, setting them against each other when they have so much in common. The internal and external forces that push to simplify South Asian American identities and isolate communities of color, which facilitate racial hierarchies and intolerance, depend, at least in part, on ignoring the global and historical trajectories that have produced the specific racializations each minority community in the United States faces. Such regressive and isolating forces also depend on the unquestioned, implicit Whiteness of technoculture and mainstream media culture.

While there is much inertia to overcome, new digitally mediated experiences of diaspora allow space for such communities to build or strengthen novel connections, imagining new configurations of identity, solidarity, and belonging. Many South Asian American activists are working to produce coalitional strategies of domestic solidarity, community sociality, and global decolonization. Identities are always experienced personally and locally, but they are forged out of the transnational

movement of people, ideas, capital, goods, and, increasingly, data. The proponents of coalitional South Asian America are mobilizing a generative model of diasporic identity alongside countercultural digital media practices, and in the process they are reframing their understandings of and engagements with race.

6 For more on the audiovisual "loudness" and performative "excess" associated with ratchetness, see Kristin J. Warner, "They Gon' Think You Loud Regardless: Ratchetness, Reality Television, and Black Womanhood" (2015).

CHAPTER 10. REMEDIATING TRANS VISUALITY

1 I prefer "trans*" when using a single term but use "trans" when modifying another term, such as "trans aesthetics."

2 I use "they/them/theirs" to refer to gender nonbinary and trans-identified performers.

CHAPTER 11. INTERSECTIONAL DISTRIBUTION

1 See the case study of "YouTube Black" in chapter 6 of *Open TV* (Christian 2018).

CHAPTER 12. PODCASTING BLACKNESS

1 This excludes many popular Black podcasts that are produced by media companies, such as Loud Speaker Network's *The Read*, Buzzfeed's *Another Round*, and the WNYC-produced *2 Dope Queens*. Of the podcasts included here, *The Black Guy Who Tips* is the only one to successfully monetize, though others generate some revenue that goes to offsetting their costs. However, they remain unaffiliated with any media company or entity.

CHAPTER 13. BLACK TWITTER AS SEMI-ENCLAVE

1 I follow scholars such as Racquel Gates (2018) to employ the term "Black" when referencing people (such as "Black users") and the lowercased "black" when indicating more abstract terms, such as "blackness" and "black cultures."

2 In consideration of the ethical guidelines of reproducing Twitter content, I have relied on public tweets in this paper and the names and Twitter handles have been de-identified. See Markham (2012) and Nissenbaum (2009) for further discussions on the ethical reproduction of Twitter data.

CHAPTER 15. DIASPORA AND DIGITAL MEDIA

1 This builds on John Durham Peters's (1999) coinage of "reconstitution-in-dispersion" (20).

2 For thoughtful discussions on the political possibilities and limitations of the term "South Asia," see Carsignol (2014) and Singh (2007). The term comes out of a U.S.-centric, Cold War-based vision of global "command and control," and is most frequently used by scholars and activists based in North America. Perhaps more than its clinical ring and associations with Western geopolitical hegemony, those who dislike the term within the communities it seeks to bring together see it as a euphemistic way to suggest solidarity while hiding the fact that most discussions about South Asia and South Asian America are dominated by Indian and Indian American concerns.

3 "Desi" is an identity term and adjective, derived from the Sanskrit-based word *desh* (country, homeland), which roughly translates as "someone or something of the homeland/country." It is most widely used as an inclusive term in the South Asian diaspora in North America, but some find it exclusionary as there are many South Asian languages that are not Sanskrit-based. When used in South Asia it carries more of a "country bumpkin" connotation.

CHAPTER 17. LATINX AUDIENCES AS MOSAIC

1 "Latinx" refers to communities of Latin American descent living in the United States. "Latinx" is sometimes preferred over the more widely used term "Latina/o" because it is gender-neutral and inclusive of nonconforming gender and transgender individuals. However, currently Latina/o studies is debating the widespread applicability of this term, especially because the term is less common among Spanish speakers and may reproduce language hierarchies that privilege English syntax. Given that "Latinx" is a highly contested label—though I find it more gender-inclusive than "Latina/o"—I oscillate between using the terms "Latinx" and "Latina/o" in this essay. It should be noted that the terms "Latinx" and "Latina/o" are rooted in experiences in the United States and are not synonymous with Latin American identities. See de Onis (2017) and R. Rodríguez (2017) for more extensive discussions on the term "Latinx."

2 See Cepeda (2016), Del Rio (2006), and Valdivia (2010, 2018) for overviews of the field.

3 The emphasis on Mexicans and Puerto Ricans is because these are the two largest Latinx groups in the United States.