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JASBIR K. PUAR
RESITUATING DISCOURSES OF "WHITENESS" AND "ASIANNES" IN NORTHERN ENGLAND
second-generation sikh women and constructions of identity

A South Asian friend of mine born in Guyana, raised in Canada, and living in England once said to me, "It always comes down to the same one question: Where do you come from?" The psychological impact of encountering this question for those of us who do not necessarily come from anywhere, or perhaps more precisely, come from many places, should not be underestimated. As a second-generation South Asian Sikh woman born and raised in the United States, I, along with many others, have struggled long and hard to answer this question satisfactorily—to no avail. In time I began to see that it is actually the question, not the answer, which is problematic. Exclusionary and ultimately racist through its

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Immigration is not a onetime movement; it is a complex shifting of physical, mental, and emotional states, which begins much before and extends far beyond the actual event.

We are denied these realities by Western society, yet constantly reminded of them. The actuality and validity of our displaced “outsider” identities are hence negated. Why else would this question be asked? It is to remind us that we do not really fit in: “When a white person asks a Black woman where she comes from, the implicit assumption is that she does not belong here. The implicit threat is that she should go back to where she belongs.”

As theoretical positions often stem from autobiographical history, I feel it is important to clarify my self and my influences. I write with a sense of urgency, fueled by painful definitions that I did not create, understand, or fulfill. This pain was exacerbated when I arrived in Britain, and my relationships to racial constructions shifted from what they had been in the US. My politicized identification against racism, imperialism, sexism, homophobia, and classism has remained clear; however, my positioning relative to the differing terms of struggle has undergone many changes. The necessity to relocate was eye-opening; the denial of self-definition was inevitably familiar.

I began this project to examine racism in the lives of second-generation Sikh women within the British context. I felt that my “outsider within” position as a Sikh woman raised in another Western country would provide me with an unusual combination of access and critical distance. It became more clear as my research progressed that notions of identity provide an important way to evaluate the binary constructs within which white, Western, and feminist thinking is still constructed, despite attempts to theorize otherwise. This essay attempts to illuminate why Western dichotomies of white/black, East/West, and oppressor/oppressed consistently rein-

scribe “identity” as a fixed, static, and boundaried state. Such an understanding of identity continues to define qualifiable “difference” in terms of “sameness,” as in “not the same as.” Such definitions remain fixed in comparative, never absolute constructs and maintain the focus on exclusionary politics by marginalizing those with multiple alliances.

WHAT IS “ASIANNESS?”: THE SOUTH ASIAN OTHER

The construction and maintenance of an oppositional South Asian stereotype that is mutually exclusive of white British society is facilitated by the reluctance of dominant white gazes to acknowledge some form of interdependence on the other. The use of the term white gaze is not to suggest that whiteness is a monolithic entity devoid of multiple ideologies and configurations. Rather, the concept of gaze acknowledges the power that voyeuristic positionings have to define modes of objectifications and delineate “difference” as the most different difference possible. The insistence upon oppositional boundaries clearly marked and upheld as mutually exclusive realities mythologizes a cohesive white identity. The privileging of the white side of the binary ensures that the other is consumed, assimilated, cannibalized, and left unable to claim subjectivity.

Dominant white gazes facilitate the discourse of the relational difference of Asianness in Britain in three ways. First, perceptions of “brownness” imbue South Asian communities with a false homogeneity—particularly compared to dominant white society. Second, extreme culturalist explanations deny “sameness” (vis-à-vis white society) by preempting the possibilities of drawing parallels, for example, along the lines of class, gender, and migratory experience. Finally, the second generation is constructed as “cultural conflict-bound.” Substantiated through theories of assimilation, supposed cultural conflict places this generation within an either/or framework.

The perception of a homogenous brownness leads to a reduction-
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ist "color equals culture" equation that denies specificity. Tariq Modood points to indications that South Asians are the most disliked "group" in Britain today because "they are insufficiently inclined to adopt English ways"; South Asians are associated with fear-based ideas of a unified and "alien" culture. In turn, the link between racial discrimination and socioeconomic disadvantage is fixed, ignoring vast economic distinctions between Muslims and other South Asians, for example. Modood points to the usage of the word "Paki" and the Salman Rushdie affair to illustrate how South Asians suffer from generalized discrimination. Through color equals culture, the Black woman becomes a victim of her own repressive, "sexist" culture. Chandra Talpade Mohanty refers to this construction as the "monolithic Third World Woman." For South Asian women this construction is manifest in stereotypes of passivity, docility, and helplessness. This image is signified by the wearing of the salwar kameez (the customary South Asian long blouse and legg g trousers) and veil, arranged marriages, domestic violence, female educational aspirations (or lack thereof), and sexism (seen as a wholly cultural phenomenon) in South Asian communities. The histories and nuances within each of these practices are ignored. For instance, an image of the "universal" arranged marriage, from the most traditional modes of partnership matching in working class communities, does not indicate the diversity of actual practice dictated primarily by class; this in turn is highly shaped by such factors as religion, migratory experiences, and regional settlements. A focus on cultural practices, in conjunction with an essentialized concept of culture, allows dominant white gazes to perceive Asianness as more patriarchal. Although this perception is problematic for many reasons, it specifically fixes culture outside the impact of immigration and racism. These factors influence the desire to reconstruct notions of home, to reaffirm religious and ethnic identities within communities that offer protection, as well as mediate the ways in which class disadvantage limits economic and hence life options of

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South Asian women. Culture is thus understood as only a source of oppression and the only source of oppression. If they are visible, South Asian women are seen only in Eurocentric ways, through the critique of problem areas like arranged marriages, clitoridectomy, and the veil. This in turn fixes these women as "naturally" passive because their modes of resistance are not understood within the economic, political, social, and ideological structures that shape their lives within Britain. Rarely are South Asian women portrayed in the context of their own self-agency, of resistance constructed and within specific social contexts.

THE SECOND GENERATION

How is the victim image altered, continued, reinforced, or dismissed for second-generation South Asian women? Much of the literature on second-generation South Asians either ignores or does not differentiate the experiences of girls and women. Additionally, there is little written by second-generation South Asians. Media representation and academic scholarship invariably return to the question of cultural conflict. Most portrayals characterize second-generation South Asians as involved in intense, soul-searching battles over their identities, loyalties, and feelings of belonging. Many representations locate them floundering between opposing definitions of white/black, East/West, South Asian/British. The assumption is that these polarized identities are mutually exclusive and that eventually anyone struggling with cultural conflict must choose either one side or the other, primarily for the sake of mental and emotional well-being. For the second-generation South Asian woman, her assumed identity conflict constructs her as a victim, this time not only of her oppressive, patriarchal, backward culture and "extended" family but also of her supposed longings to assimilate into white society and the racism she faces within it. This Eurocentric view is applied particularly to perceived restrictions on dating and relationships, suggesting that "it is a source of desperate frustration" that she is denied
the “intense experiences” her (white) friends are having. She is seen to crave all that the West has to offer, but according to dominant white gazes, her culture holds her back, and only the “rebels” succeed. Naturally, the rebels are perceived to be far more emancipated than their dutiful counterparts, who “lack the courage to face the risks and responsibilities that go with an independent existence.” Whereas the first-generation immigrant South Asian woman may identify primarily with her birthplace, the second-generation South Asian woman is completely and directly “identified” by relational discourses of difference—white/black, South Asian/British, East/West, and timid/independent and freedom/security.

Thus, the oppositional poles of white/black, East/West, South Asian/British acquire social significance and meaning through an assumed experience based on dominant representation, thus rendering the second-generation South Asian other without voice, space, or autonomy in terms of class, religion, culture, and history. She is either repressed by her patriarchal culture or co-opted by a racist white society into benefiting from the so-called freedom of the West, despite the loss of familial support and protection. The either/or equation freezes the South Asian other without political or social agency or the room to negotiate subjectivity. The South Asian other is thus the object, not the subject, of her own cultural identity. The South Asian other’s identity is thus defined as directly oppositional to white culture—defined not by the self but by the dominant white other.

Assuming that the experiences of the second-generation are inadequately reflected by the oppositional either/or constructs, how do second-generation South Asian women function strategically in the politics of everyday life? Recent literature points to a growing South Asian “subculture” that synthesizes South Asian and British culture. Bhangra music, a combination of Punjabi folk music and house/dance music, has arisen entirely from British-Asian culture. Parminder Bhachu points to another form of synthesis between “black” music, such as reggae and hip-hop, and Bengali lyrics to create another innovation of British-Asian culture, Bangla music. She also maintains that a constant “engagement with and transformation of cultural frameworks” results in internalization of material and regional cultures; some examples include new styles of salwar kameezes that mix Eastern and Western fashion trends, a growing population of Sikhs with yuppie consumption patterns, and the changing contents of the daaj—the gifts of the dowry.

Cultural conflict resolution through synthesis may not always be possible or desirable. The presumed preoccupation with conflict resolution for second-generation Sikh women overlooks the fact that generational conflict exists in all cultures. The emphasis on conflict resolution also assumes a final, fixed end—a finite solution—when the ability to transcend duality is actually facilitated by flexible and fluid notions of identity. Thus the tension of contradictions is neither resolved nor dissolved; instead, it is played with, manipulated (for empowerment and subversion), and enjoyed. Mutual and interdependence replace oppositional difference and exclusivity.

BARGAINING WITH RACISM: OPPONENTALLY ACTIVE “WHITENESS”

Racial and cultural identity that is not merely assimilatory must be strategically reactive. I term such identity formation “oppositionally active.” Such a notion of identity suggests a complete alliance with neither South Asian nor white society; rather, it resists both. It is oppositional in its unwillingness to be consumed by the white pole; activity in this arena results not from racism or rejection by white society. It is instead the product of critical evaluation and appreciation of one’s own culture. Furthermore, it entails a strategic comprehension of the fractures, disjunctions, and intersections of “whiteness,” as well as which constructions are predominating, and when.

Moreover, the deconstruction of polarized identities allows a reexamination of traditional ideas of resistance—those equating con-
sciousness with activity. Because dominant, Western definitions are applied to the social construction of South Asian women, their resistance is rendered invisible and presuppositions are affirmed; the circle is thus complete. Rethinking the “consciousness equals activity” configuration would suggest that all resistance is not immediately and obviously apparent; compliance and resistance may coexist in the form of subversion. That is, oppressed peoples do not necessarily learn dominance. They learn about dominance from a position of inequality. Perhaps second-generation South Asians learn not about whiteness but about the different constructions of whiteness and their points of intersection. Being from a subordinate position necessitates strategizing to maximize the benefits of this knowledge. Oppositely active whiteness is about manipulating the “terror of whiteness,” changing the oppressive discourses of whiteness to discourses of subversion and power, and breaking down oppressor/oppressed dichotomies.22

I think of oppositely active whiteness as a process of “bargaining with racism.”23 It is understood that certain racist stereotypes that lead to assumptions of being a “coconut,” an “oreo,” a “sellout,” or “whitewashed” provide protection from the very same racism from which they originate. Meaning can be altered by shifting context and content; empowerment is obtained through subversively insisting upon culturally informed self-definition. Ultimately, oppositely active whiteness represents the self to one’s self; one stands in solidarity with, without assimilating to, the stereotypes of difference. Problems occur when, in recognizing the representation to one’s self, one becomes that representation.

RECEIVING AND RETURNING
THE “DOUBLE GAZE”

Recently I watched Mississippi Masala for the fourth time.24 I find this movie problematic in many ways. At first glance Mina, a second-generation South Asian woman raised in the US, transcends the docile/rebel oppositional definitions by being a strong-willed woman still on good terms with her parents. However, she is dissatisfied with her existence as a hotel cleaner and finds “freedom” only through a love affair with an African American man and the rejection of her family. The film, utilizing an unusual scenario—most South Asians involved in interracial relationships tend to have white partners—proposes a very dangerous and unrealistic solution for the identity “problems” of the South Asian woman. The message is “run away with your non-South Asian lover and you will be free and your problems will be solved.”

Even more disturbing is the fact that the film is directed by a South Asian woman, Mira Nair, and the leading actor, Sarita Choudhury, feels that she is providing South Asian women “trapped in their own cultures” with a strong role model.25 The movie stereotypes South Asians in the US as hotel-owning, bad-English-speaking, patriarchal communities.

I only view this movie in protected environments with non-South Asians who know my politics or South Asian friends because it invariably leads to long and complex discussions. With my South Asian friends, we can laugh, relish the accents and gestures, and recognize and share in the all-too-familiar scripting of our lives. The movie is funny and comforting, if highly exaggerated for humor’s sake.

However, in creating the forum for our enjoyment, this movie sanctions the amusement of other audiences by saying, “Look, this is the real story.”26 It is funny to hear South Asian migrants speaking English and so one must laugh. It is only natural according to white liberal interpretations of ideologies of Western love that Mina must “follow her heart” and run off with her unacceptable lover. With white people present, I cannot laugh and must analyze others’ laughter. It is difficult to decipher . . . . is one laughing at the parody of the stereotypes or actually laughing at the stereotypes themselves, because they lend themselves to ridicule so easily? And invariably I
ask the questions: Why are the stereotypes funny? Is it because the humor itself is constructed in a racist way? If they are funny to me, does that sanction the laughter of other audiences?27

These issues of reception imply a critical analysis of "who is comprehending this movie how and from what positioning." Many white, middle-class, politically correct ideologies would answer that we can all be part of the joke—we are all human beings regardless of our differences. This attitude seems to deny others' rights to exclusion through an assumption of automatic inclusion. It also assimilates difference into sameness. It attempts to capture the "double gaze" or "outsider within" position that simply cannot be mirrored by white people, for whom race can only be lived as white. The dominant white gaze is a metaphor for the means by which white society oppresses through its use of objectification as a voyeur. Politically correct ideologies sanction the voyeur. I don't what is funny and politically sound for some is simply not so for others. For example, when I use the word Paki, I make it clear that the usage is only for those who need to reclaim it to subvert and to escape its oppressiveness; I expect no others to appropriate this language. Similarly, when I imitate migrant English, I do so only in front of people who I know understand the political resonance. These acts are a form of comfort, solidarity, and remembrance. They are not for the voyeuristic pleasure of dominant white gazes and certainly not because I am making fun of or degrading my culture.

Mississippi Masala panders to the situated double gaze of white and South Asian societies, a gaze experienced by only a few—for example, second-generation Sikh women who have the knowledge and resources to critically view both South Asian and white societies yet who are objectified by these two poles also. The double gaze, a form of oppositionally active whiteness, can facilitate creative subjectivity as well as negotiate objectification, which in turn enable subject positioning by the self. Thus a second-generation Sikh woman simultaneously receives and returns the double gaze; they double

gaze as well as are double gazed at. The two processes are interdependent; objectification is a disembodied, visual experience that in specific moments of struggle necessitates an embodied, subjective experience.

How do South Asian women negotiate the constant interplay of subject/object relations? Through oppositionally active whiteness—giving an appearance of conformity while maintaining identity through subversion of dominant white gazes—one can manipulate and empower subjectivity yet retain internal identity. To demonstrate these manipulations in practice, I shall use excerpts from in-depth interviews with six second-generation Sikh women living in Leeds, a city in Northern England. The interviews focused loosely on racism and culture to pursue the women's varied interests. The interviewees ranged in age from 20 to 33 and came primarily from working-class backgrounds; all have completed some higher education.

Before continuing I would like to emphasize that I do not equate Sikh identity with South Asian identity. The nature of oppression in India and subsequent South Asian diasporic hierarchies make the terms Indian and South Asian problematic. (Detailing Sikh history is beyond the scope of this essay.) Rather, I will present Sikh identities as the site of embodied subjectivity inscribed in disembodied, visual objectification vis-à-vis a monolithic interpretation of South Asian identity. Additionally, I will treat these women's words as neither generally representative of second-generation Sikh women nor representative of themselves; rather, I present their words as representations of my understanding of these specific women's lives. In doing so I present no facts or concrete conclusions. My intentions are to complicate issues of identity, suggest certain possibilities and trends, and offer these women's experiences to substantiate alternative methods of theorizing.28

I will briefly summarize my participants' identification with Sikhism (which influences the uses of oppositionally active whiteness) and then explore the subversion of external definitions (out-
ward appearance, language, and interracial relationships) that are incorporated into identity and subjectivity. Although I am focusing on the negotiation of different constructions of whiteness and their applications to second-generation South Asian women, I have introduced the concept of “double gaze” to demonstrate that the problematization of the privileged position is not possible without illuminating the interactive nature of oppressor/oppressed binaries.

THE POLITICIZATION OF SIKHISM

How is one to know and define oneself? From the inside—within a context that is self-defined, from a grounding in community and a connection with culture that are comfortably accepted? Or from the outside—in terms of messages received from the media and people who are often ignorant? Even as an adult I can still see two sides of my face and past. I can see from the inside out, in freedom. And I can see from the outside in, driven by old voices of childhood and lost in anger and fear.

—Kesey E. Noda

What are the relationships between a self-identity and a social, external, objectified identity that one struggles to subjectify? An internal identity must work in conjunction with racialized objectifications to negotiate the ground between identity and subjectivity. For second-generation Sikh women who may identify religiously, ethnically, and/or culturally as Sikh, this means navigating racialized objectifications of gender and class.

For the purposes of this essay, I shall provide a brief summary of Sikh immigration patterns to Britain; numerous sources provide further accounts. Mass migration of South Asians from India, primarily men, began in the mid-1950s and filled the postwar labor demands for unskilled and semiskilled workers. In the early 1960s South Asians employed in Kenya and Uganda to build the national railroads joined the migration to Britain. (They thus became “twice-
migrants.”) Though many came from East Africa, the vast majority of Sikhs immigrated from India. They made up about 20 percent of the South Asian population in 1984. By the late 1960s many families were reunited and settled in the urban areas of England, particularly London and the Midlands; the 1970s were characterized by the emergence of the second generation.

An overarching status as Sikh has developed as a universal awareness and identity in the face of opposition and adversity. Within Britain, Sikh identity developed through extending community networks, dissolving the “myth of return,” strengthening familial and generational ties, and reviving Sikh symbols such as the turban for men and the safa/vertical and uncut hair for women. This national identification with Sikhism was also part of an international Sikh movement precipitated by the 1984 attack by Indira Gandhi’s military on the holy Golden Temple at Amritsar, India. Resulting media coverage and popular discourse regarding the liberation struggle in Punjab incorrectly and one-sidedly represented the Sikhs as terrorists. Thus Sikh identity is highly politicized on the national level as an immigrant identity solidifying against and within hostile conditions. On an international level the politicization comes within the context of Khalistan, the movement for independence from India to establish a Sikh homeland.

According to the tenets of Sikhism, it is a casteless religion that accords equality to men and women. Ideology, however, is never fully replicated in practice, and in Britain the importance of caste within Sikh communities is monumental, in some cases determining which temple one attends, whom one can marry, and so on. Sikhism also functions to distinguish Sikhs from other South Asians and from white society. This appearance of unity can easily be undermined internally within caste contexts, whereby class and subclass become foregrounded.

Sikhism can be far more complex than simply a cultural or religious identification. In its stance against oppression by the Indian govern-
ment it is a unifying politicized movement, signaling a possible shift in communal identification with Sikhism. For the second-generation women of my research, identification with Sikhism is described in varied ways that point toward forms of symbolic ethnicity focused less on culture and traditions and more on maintaining a feeling of being. All interviewees identified themselves as Sikhs; Satinder, Harpreet, and Manpreet retained outward symbols of Sikhism—particularly uncut hair—and all of them still attend gurdwara (Sikh temple). Their attendance varied from occasional special functions to weekly. None of them, however, seemed particularly attached to Sikhism as a religious identity. Satinder stated that the only reason she went to gurdwara was to see people: “I don’t have any other reason to go really.” Rajinder was highly critical of what she perceived as the abuse of the socialist principles of Sikhism. She also disregarded traditions such as the caste system, the dowry, and the keeping of long hair; they “should be eradicated. . . . Why should one need an identity like that? If you believe in something, you believe in it inside; you don’t need an outward token to show other people what you are.”

Similarly, Inderpal considers herself religious yet does not maintain Sikh traditions; she cuts her hair, smokes, and is also angered by the caste system: “I am religious but in a different way. Sikhism to me is not religion; it’s tradition.” Gurjeet also mentioned her belief in god but did not connect it to Sikhism. Only Harpreet expressed an interest in actually praying, “I just go to gurdwara whenever I feel like it, and I feel afterwards like I’ve really gotten something out of it. . . . I pray at home, when I feel like it—religion is important to me.” Collectively these women reflect religion as a concept that shifts to suit political and social needs. Each of them must navigate the spaces between subjective, lived experiences and discursive, applied definitions.

Appearance and sexual imagery are pivotal areas where manipulations of dominant white gazes occur. White and South Asian populations often interface in this arena. Since the amount of direct communication between dominant and minority societies may be minimal in comparison to the power to oppress, this interface is particularly important. Stereotypes are one primary force of objectification and operate as a potent method of maintaining exclusionary and inclusionary definitions. South Asian women’s sexuality is curiously stereotyped as passive, submissive, licentious, and available. Avtar Brah summarizes the three primary objectifications of South Asian women in Britain: (1) the “exotic, oriental woman—sensuous, seductive, full of Eastern promise” typically portrayed by airline advertisements showcasing compliant hostesses; (2) the “dirty, ugly” South Asian woman; and (3) the “sexually licentious” South Asian woman—on-the-rampage.

The exotic South Asian other is further manifested in the image of the westernized South Asian woman: ethnic, exotic. The subversion in such an image has been termed “Masala-itis” by Sayantani Das-Gupta. While she points to the very real pitfalls of Masala-itis via racist ideologies of exoticism, a subversion of such stereotypes means the joke is on the voyeur. Masala-itis can be a forum within which desire is used to project subjectivity through shifts of meaning and
context of objectified constructions. This may happen through either a subversion of certain stereotypes based on desire, a challenge to explicitly racist stereotypes, or a combination of both processes.

Racialized gender constructions operate differently in various class and generational contexts. The “dirty, ugly South Asian woman” is typically embodied as a working-class woman who wears the customary salwaar kameez and is often veiled. Interestingly, the salwaar kameez has undergone a revival of sorts in Britain, especially among second-generation Sikh women. The popularity of the salwaar kameez cannot be entirely attributed to Sikh societal imposition. Satinder, who used to wear mostly skirts and dresses, explained, “I feel more comfortable in Asian suits, you see a lot of girls wearing them now, so it’s okay, you don’t feel like an outcast.”

Satinder actually prefers to wear salwaar kameezes. Others might accord her attire as a restriction imposed on her by her father and/or husband. The popularization of indigenous clothing can also be explained by the value placed on ethnicity in today’s fashion industry. The ability to capitalize on ethnicity has been sustained by market demand. White investment in and desire to be the exotic South Asian other allows for commodification, consumption and possession of the other; dominance is maintained through appropriation and assimilation. Manpreet noted this shift, saying that when she was younger, “You’d get your friends saying, ‘Oh, you look like a Paki.’ . . . But now the trends have changed so much, everybody’s prepared to wear multi-coloured clothes, Jamaican clothes, Chinese clothes, Asian clothes.”

The popularity of salwaar kameezes has been further enhanced by the fashionable and expensive ones worn primarily for weddings and special occasions. When asked, “Do you ever notice any adverse reactions when you wear a salwaar kameez?” Rajinder answers, “No, because all my Indian clothing is beautiful.” Using the word “beautiful” (meaning fashionable and expensive), Rajinder implies that wearing an unbeautiful salwaar kameez can leave one open to adverse reactions. The stereotype of the dirty, ugly South Asian woman thus becomes exoticized through middle-class consumption. Thus Masala-itis can act as a strategic way to minimize the daily impact of racian, through refuting the ugly South Asian woman stereotype and subverting, for example, “politically correct” interest in “exotic” and “ethnic” clothing.

Masala-itis also challenges images of assimilation and westernization. South Asian women are aware that they present a different image—a reminder and a jolt to dominant white gazes. Gurjeet, who is very light-skinned, expressed annoyance that white friends often forget that she is Indian. “They say ‘when she wears a salwaar kameez I didn’t realize . . . you look really nice, I’m really glad you did that.”” Rajinder says, “My non-Asian friends like (the salwaar kameez) . . . they make silly comments, like ‘You look like a little Indian girl, you look like you’re about to get married.’ I find it amusing.” Her use of the words ‘silly’ and ‘amusing’ indicates a certain amount of condescension toward her non-Asian friends.

Rajinder explained that in white-dominated workplaces, people assume she is very westernized. She feels no need to refute this: “I could be really Indian. I could put on Indian clothes and an Indian accent and seem Indian for their benefit, but I’m not interested. . . . It’s a certain mentality that it’s based on—it doesn’t impress me. I’m more Indian than I look. I don’t mean having Indian friends or listening to Indian music; I don’t think that makes you Indian. . . . I’m aware. I know where my roots are.”

Masala-itis also challenges stereotypes of the “downtrodden South Asian woman” through confident, assertive, and sexual self-presentation. Gurjeet explained, “If I’m going to a real big evening with my English friends, I’ll wear it then, because it’s quite stunning for people who don’t normally see it, just to look a bit different when I go out with my friends . . . not to a pub, but to a private party maybe. I always like to wear my national dress.” Satinder states, “If I go for a job interview I like to wear a skirt or a dress . . . sometimes, you
The South Asian women I interviewed all expressed disdain and pity toward white friends and colleagues who insisted on "comparing tans" after a holiday. The popularity of tanning can be seen as another attempt by the dominant white gaze to appropriate the qualities of and therefore "normalize" or define the nonwhite other. Interviewees mentioned that a stereotypic rebel or an exotic party girl image—as one who rejects and has been rejected by her own community—was another effective way of combating stereotypes of South Asian female passivity. Several participants pointed to the frequent use of the word Paki in their presence as an indication of white coworkers' assumptions that westernized dress or behavior indicated whiteness, yet another attempt to assimilate sameness into difference. The other, however, was not subsumed as subject. The women always made a point of confronting such assimilative behavior, "often much to people's surprise" (Gurjeet).

Strategic appearances of compliance and challenges to racist stereotypes can thus help to create and to maintain one's own subjectivity. Masala-its may function as oppositionally active whiteness through the process of reception and response. Whiteness is received and distinguished, then altered to recapture a subjectivity that contradicts, synthesizes with, or remains ambivalent to one's identity. It is important to note that all women, regardless of culture and race, often find themselves negotiating with manipulations of image. These negotiations not only exist within the realm of visual interpretation but permeate the realm of language.

**LANGUAGE AS RESISTANCE**

At first I did not speak because of her order; later I found not speaking to be a useful form of resistance. I would stand mute before her, even when being questioned, which added to her rage and frustration.

—Kartar Dillon

Language retention has been a highly emotive issue for ethnic minorities; it is one of the most visible and powerful (exclusionary) symbols of a distinctive identity.
Language retention has been a highly emotive issue for ethnic minorities; it is one of the most visible and powerful (exclusive) symbols of a distinctive identity. As a form of solidarity, it also openly threatens the dominant society. (Note the heated debates over multilingual education.) Knowledge of the mother tongue facilitates retention of other forms of cultural identity and practice; for South Asians, this means reading gurbani (Sikh prayers), singing shabads (religious hymns), watching Punjabi films, and so forth.

All my participants considered themselves bilingual in English and Punjabi; all were ashamed of speaking Punjabi when they were younger but now view it as extremely positive. (This change is probably due to maturation and the resurgence of Sikhism as an ethnic identity.) All six women were raised in families that encouraged them to speak Punjabi. All had access to Punjabi classes at gurdwaras and night schools. Three of the women used Punjabi at their workplaces anywhere from very occasionally to everyday. All of the women I interviewed switched back and forth from one language to the other, often with no immediate recollection of doing so. Rama Kant Agnihotri refers to this as a "Mixed Code" that randomly interchanges English and Punjabi.

Diglossia and the use of a Mixed Code could reflect the subconscious ambivalence of the second generation. Language retention and an appearance of assimilation are not necessarily at odds. Language can function as a means not only of exclusion but also of subversion. The women I interviewed use language as strategic resistance (oppositionally active whiteness): "Sometimes when you go into a shop and you know they're really snobby—they're really short with you... they're just chatting away to each other as if you're not even there and somewhere in the middle of it you say something and they just kind of jump up and think 'God, she speaks English, she must've been listening to what we were saying'" (Gurjeet). This is clearly a manipulation of the "dumb" South Asian stereotype—that is, the woman who is unable to speak English. When asked about the advantages of being bilingual, many brought up the ability to manipulate dominant white gazes through exclusion: "The advantages? When you're with English people you can swear and they don't know what you're talking about" (Rajinder). Bilingualism is a form of protection. Upon hearing racist comments, for example, some people are "able to put up a front that you don't understand something but you know you can" (Gurjeet).

When asked how non-South Asians reacted to Punjabi, an element of disdain characterized the responses: "Well, they can either find it very amusing, or they can find it offensive because they might think you're talking about them" (Rajinder). A coworker overheard Gurjeet on the phone with her mother: "He said, 'God, I didn't know you could speak Punjabi' and I said to him, 'Well, what do you think I speak at home then?'... I don't know whether it's surprise. I always think like what do they expect me to speak when I'm at home? I don't know if it's maybe a bit of jealousy that they can't do it." Two participants who felt that speaking Punjabi was an asset at work also discussed jealousy; their skills were called upon in situations involving other Punjabi-speakers. They were often positively singled out when white coworkers were at a loss.

During one interview we discussed the use of a South Asian accent while speaking English. I asked Rajinder what she thought her parents wanted and expected for her future. In accented English she responded: "Be a good little Indian girl, marry an Indian boy." This parody of migrant English is common among many South Asians whom I have met. It seems to be an act of solidarity and exclusion; dominant white gazes are unable to participate in the parody. Reclaiming this "language" renders the objectifiers impotent. We were sharing in the solidarity of the double gaze; she used this accent primarily to express resistance to the perceived social restrictions of her family and the Sikh community.

As with Masala-tatis, language can be used as a navigational tool between identity and subjectivity. Clearly, language openly threatens
dominant society and is a subversive, hidden provocation. Stereotypes of South Asian women based on clothing and other visual indicators are complicated by acts of silence (such as pretending one does not understand English), open displays of language as signs of cultural pride, and the usage of Punjabi for exclusionary purposes.

**INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND CULTURAL AUTONOMY**

Interpersonal relationships are often used to suggest that cultural identity can be measured by the color of one’s primary contacts. Interracial marriages have symbolized a final assimilation into white society. The strict, inflexible, patriarchal, extended South Asian family is seen by the white gaze as the scapegoat; westernized daughters are rebelling against their own culture. At the time of my research two of the interviewees were involved with white partners. Gurjeet is married; Harpreet is unmarried but living with her partner. Interracial relationships raise questions about access to privilege and protection from racism. Does this, however, automatically imply assimilation? Clichés found within popular white discourses describing relationships between white British males and South Asian females (which are different from discourses on South Asian men and white women) demonstrate contexts within which autonomous cultural and racial identities complement without subsuming each other.

Women engaged in interracial relationships are widely understood to be rebels; they seek out white partners as acts of rebellion against their families and view white men as more desirable and “better” catches. It follows that these women, along with their less “liberated” counterparts, view arranged marriages as horrifically debilitating and oppressive. Consequently, the rebels are either thrown out of their family or run away, never to return, and are completely ostracized from their community. Ultimately, South Asian rebels are frozen into assimilated white wanna-bes who have abandoned their religious, cultural and racial identities. If this categorization does not fit neatly within the assumptions, her partner is ultimately conceptualized as a “Paki-lover.”

These clichés about second-generation South Asian women are substantiated, reinforced, and reproduced through a complex process. External Masala-itis-type indicators compose the rebel imagery and reflect essentialized notions of identity constructions: “modern” dress, cut hair, and “western” appearance. Despite having such indicators, Gurjeet and Harpreet’s statements do not reflect rebellious seeking of white partners: “It wouldn’t have mattered whether he was white, black, Indian or what, I don’t think it would’ve mattered, not to me anyway. . . . I didn’t go out looking for a partner. I just fell in love with him” (Gurjeet). “Before I met him, it was something that happened to other girls, though I didn’t have anything against it. . . . then I found myself in the situation” (Harpreet).

These comments do not support the common assumption that South Asian women who work and live in predominantly white environments search for and desire only white partners. Harpreet was involved in arranged marriage proceedings at the time she met her partner. Additionally, these conclusions are based on the incorrect premise that South Asian partners and arranged marriages are not viable options—that any free, independent, and progressive thinker would not participate in such a process. Again, the attitudes of the respondents do not reflect the assumptions. Harpreet and Gurjeet had ambivalent feelings about arranged marriages, citing both positive and negative aspects. Harpreet said that although at times, when being introduced to potential partners, she felt like she was on a “conveyor belt,” she had no urge to break out of it and had no problems with the system.

The notion that these rebels eventually leave or are expelled by their family gains currency from the proliferation of South Asian women’s shelters in Britain. The mainstream media and tabloid press propagate the stereotype by sensationalizing rare cases to be the norm. This is not to say that familial relationships remain
maintain contact with several people from her former networks, which she no longer attends because of her parents. In her own family that was walking past and ignoring her, and all of a sudden, she says that Harpreet was willing to compromise in almost any way before us.

"I've believed that Harpreet's negotiations within the Sikh community contradict the assumptions of dominant white gaze. When asked how she feels about her identity within her relationship with her partner, the objec-

Interestingly, through Harpreet has maintained certain concepts
Assimilationist beliefs about interracial relationships presume differences between the two cultures to be so great that the minority culture must submit to the dominant. Cultural capital does not necessarily detract from a Sikh identity; cultural capital can enhance identity—providing tools with which to better negotiate British society and forging the common ground within interracial relationships for autonomy.

Similar to and intersected by processes of Masala-itis and language, clichés objectify in a way open to reinterpretation and manipulation. Those attempting to maintain subjectivity are in some ways protected from racism by white partners (as well as friends, contacts, etc.). Negotiating one’s subjectivity with a white partner may not necessarily be opposing, contradictory, or vastly differing from negotiating subjectivity with a South Asian/Sikh partner; they are both forms of insulation against racism.

**CONCLUSION**

There is no monolithic experience for second-generation Sikh women in Britain. In presenting a sampling of the intersections of struggle and their possible meanings, I hope to have demonstrated
The application of such a colonialist notion of cultural conflict is inherently racist. These discourses are based on the assumption that the desired and ultimate goal is to be as westernized as possible. If that westernization does not occur, it is the fault of "culture." Inadequacies stem from expectations based on relational differences (e.g., East/West, white/black) rather than from individual identity. My participants generally expressed an ability to function quite "normally" in worlds which perhaps do not seem so incredibly distinct, or simply are not because contradictions have been negotiated through conscious and necessary thinking.

Oppositionally active whiteness reevaluates fixed difference/sameness and oppressor/oppressed categories; the oppressed, forced to be flexible, create new ways of subverting, challenging, and resisting. I am not suggesting that these second-generation Sikh women are free from oppression. Rather, I believe they manipulate and maximize the (potential) power of their powerless subversiveness. There is no clearer demonstration of the flexibility of an emerging generation adept at the usage of marginalized positions than the double gaze. The double gaze allows for amazing creativity; in its supposed curse it can be a blessing in disguise. Dominant white gazes that see through monolithic eyes have no access to the double gaze and perceive no need for it.

Oppositionally active whiteness is a process of fluctuating and reciprocating the subject/object positionings that are in constant negotiation. To successfully navigate between the binaries of identity and objectivity and maintain subjectivity, oppositionally active whiteness must be paired with an internalized Sikh identity. Masala-itis rede-

fines the meanings imposed by objectifying voyeuristic gazes through manipulating desire and exoticism; language is similarly used in exclusionary resistance to interrupt the visual and disembodied act of objectifying. A white partner entails that negotiation of the Sikh pole is subversive to dominant white gazes; popular discourses accord whiteness where there may be none and assume assimilation where the opposite may be happening.

The skills with which one manipulates subjectivity in the particular ways that I have described increase as knowledge of and contact with different parts of white society expand. These skills utilise shifts of racial and class constructions. What is oppositionally active for some arenas may not be so for others; different spaces of whiteness sometimes co-opt the same positioning. For example, a politically correct position influenced by ideologies of multiculturalism might support the wearing of salwaar kameezes as an embracing of diversity; a liberal position might object to what is perceived as a lack of "freedom of choice"; a conservative position may ambivalently agree as it supports racialized constructions of South Asian women as passive victims. Despite the varied rationalizations, all three positions converge at the point at which the South Asian woman is "otherized."

Ultimately, the complexities of identity must not be reduced, deified, or transcended. In today's world of transition, of transnational mass migration, and displacement, differing ideas of home, identity, and self-definition must emerge. Along with this emergence must follow alternative modes of knowing, conceptualizing, and theorizing.

NOTES
2 For this essay I define "second generation" as children of immigrant families born in Britain or children who moved to Britain before the age of five—those "socialized" by the British educational system.
3 See Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Sig-
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4 An extended analysis of the points summarized in the next three sections can be found in Jasbir K. Puar, "Rethinking Identity: Racism, Whiteness, and the South Asian Other," diathesis 3 (summer 1994), pp. 39–58.

The precedent of colonialism is important in historicizing these boundaries. See, for example, Ana Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth-Century Colonial Cultures," in Imperial Monkey Business, ed. J. Brennan et al. (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1990), pp. 35–70.


8 Modood, p. 180.

9 Modood, p. 185.

10 The term Black has a particularly poignant significance in Britain, as it refers to a political coalition of people of color, primarily African Caribbeans and South Asians. The relationships that South Asians have with this term and with Blackness are varied and complex and subsequently beyond the scope of this paper, though these configurations should be kept in mind.


16 For more work based on the "either/or" approach see S.S. Kalra, Daughters of Tradition: Adolescent Sikh Girls and Their Accommodation to Life in British Soci-

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19 Bhachu, p. 408.


24 This film stars Sarita Choudhury as a second-generation South Asian woman living in Mississippi. She has an affair with an African American man (Denzel Washington), which neither the black nor the South Asian community accepts.


27 A more recent example of such racist humor is the Philles Pogg Punjab Puri Crpes television commercial featuring "Punjabi Airways."

28 See the work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Trinh T. Minh-ha—to name but a few who look at feminist theoretical approaches to identity and subjectivity.

resisting discourses
**SPECIAL SECTION**

**Arranging Identities**
Construction of Race, Ethnicity, and Nation

**Socialist Review Collective**

**Arranging Identities: Framing the Issue/s**

Jasbir K. Puar

**Resituating Discourses of “Whiteness” and “Asianness” in Northern England: Second-Generation Sikh Women and Constructions of Identity**
Western dichotomies of white/black, East/West, and oppressor/oppressed continue to inscribe “identity” as a fixed, static, and bounded state—especially as it is applied to South Asian women in British society.

Lisa Tressman

**Beyond Communitarian Unity in the Politics of Identity**
Identity politics has frequently depended upon premises of ontological exclusion. Tressman examines several models through which collectivity is forged through forms of overlapping, fragmented, or multiple subjectivity.

Ma. Josefina Soldevila Portillo

**Re-guarding Myself: Menchú’s Autobiographical Renderings of the Authentic Other**

The autobiography of Guatemalan revolutionary Rigoberta Menchú