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WRITING MY WAY "HOME"

traveling south asian bodies and diasporic journeys

Every voyage is the unfolding of a poetic. The departure, the cross-over, the fall, the wandering, the discovery, the return, the transformation... The complex experience of self and other (the alien within me and without me) is bound to forms that belong but are subject neither to "home" nor to "abroad"; and it is through them and through the cultural configurations they gather that the universe over there and over here can be named, accounted for, and become narrative.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha

If, as Trinh T. Minh-ha writes, "every voyage is the unfolding of a poetic," then this too is a departure of sorts, a journey of anamnesis, of traveling against the grain of forgetting, of recuperating lost memories while resisting the traps of nostalgia and sentimentalism. In this case writing is painful, a process to be feared and yet respected, a process within which the I/We confront the multiple (my/our) selves at every slight turn, every juncture, every discovery. For "writing my way "home," building narrative, storytelling entails writing the experiential as another performative act of traveling, embarking on the voyage again, a familiar yet new voyage, a rewriting, reliving of journeys. As conventionally constructed, the experien-
Diaspora can be contingent upon very specific static notions of these two terms, home and travel, utilizing a linear teleology from origin to Other, East to West, third world to first. This is one interpretation. Diaspora may also function as a threat to certain homes while becoming the construct of home for certain Others. Bringing the home into the "abroad" and vice versa, diaspora "makes the exotic an everyday affair," the "universe over here and over there," therefore, can no longer be "named and accounted for" as distinct, separate, distant Other worlds. As a postcolonial category, diaspora is depoliticized when it is rearticulated as a "natural" space; it is neither natural nor nation-friendly. If modernity can be understood as the moments of colonialism, diasporas are the ongoing results of collisions of capital (capitalism), and labor (postcolonialism) as capital is harnessed for the expansion of place, how do the diasporic construct their traveling selves through experiences of displacement and shifting notions of home? What then are the connections between diaspora and modernity? Are diasporic traveling subjectivities postmodern ones?

As a woman, and as a South Asian, and as a Sikh, and as what would be termed "second generation," and as a child of immigrant parents, and as a US citizen raised with some notion of being middle class, I hesitate to call myself a diasporic writer. Though I recognize a desire to trace some of my movements that configure home, I also acknowledge that I am a shifting and multiply positioned subject, one with ambiguous privileges of class and nation. As no one of the above-mentioned identifications can be consistently foregrounded, linearly, assumed by white liberal gazes and normative modern traveling subjects, must be preempted. In some sense a desire for a linear narrative, a universal one, and one that holds some truths, stems from a notion of the lost. A project of (re)constructing home is mitigated by loss and desires for affirmation; one undermines the other, and what is affirmed is what is understood experientially to be lost.

The following is part of an ongoing project to build an nonlinear chronology where no fixed origin and no final destination exist. As the longing for home and the dream of home must constantly be deferred, "writing my way home" is a process with no product, a journey that never ends.

If writing is thinking and discovery and selection and order and meaning, it is also owe and reverence and mystery and magic.

—Toni Morrison

Since I began with the premise that the experiential configures notions of home and travel, I also must note that the bulk of this essay consists of what would and could be called narrative, self-disclosure, autobiography, or anecdotes and modified by the adjectives interesting, enjoyable, easy to understand, self-reflective, powerful, personal, and so on. The bottom-line implication of these descriptions is that these forms are not theory. Thus, I would like to speak to some of the experience/theory divides within which this essay must be situated. I confess to having a very ambiguous understanding of what constitutes the aforementioned categories, and although I believe that one cannot exist without the other and that modes of theorizing are multiple, I also believe that the relationships between experience and theory are contingent, discontinuous, and contradictory.

It is perhaps unfortunate that an essay on my experiences of home, diaspora, and travel must be prefaced with such an extended sum-
many of experience/theory debates and divides. I present the following not as an attempt to control or preempt particular readings of this paper but rather to note the sociopolitical and linguistic mediations of the experiential that highlight reception issues. Just as readers are situated in multiple discursive geopolitical positionings, I too, as an author, can situate and resituate my self and thus my text as reflective of my selves.

Thus I believe it is important to briefly explain how this essay evolved into being, how it has been read, what I perceive to be its threats, and how these comments reflect upon the academy in general. Several drafts have been presented at conferences, including the National Women's Studies Graduate Student Conference in San Diego in 1994 and the Boundaries in Question Conference at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1995; additionally, I revised this essay in conjunction with a class I was taking on cultural studies at Berkeley. In response to this paper, people have asked me if I do any other "personal writing," if I consider myself antitheoretical, why I had not begun the essay with a critique of the white male traveling subject, why the structure of my writing was so "discursive," and finally, why, if I want to be a creative writer, am I in graduate school. These comments made me realize two things: first, attention called to certain structural problems often reflects the inconceivability of nonlinearity, as well as the inadequacy of current reading practices to engage with different forms; and second, nods toward the creative, nontheoretical, personal aspects of my writing indicate transparency placed upon constructed narratives. Through this assumption of transparency, Truth status is rendered via the appearance of unconstructedness, thus enabling a reading out of the possible complexity.

Responses to my essay have been highly instructive, and while my readings may of course be contested and leave out other dynamics involved, I recount the above to demonstrate my transformation within the academy as a graduate student, as a writing self, as an academic subject who is subject to the academic. As I mentioned, I have only vague ideas of what is meant by the categories of experience and theory, except, I will now add, as they are dictated by the acad-
begins with a critique of oneself. Therefore, epistemologies that obscure the epistemologist and his or her interests can leave the experience, in theory, invisible. Feminist epistemologies attempt to expose these erasures; as Donna Haraway states, “Women’s studies pedagogy is a theoretical practice through which ‘women’s experience’ is constructed and mobilized as an object of knowledge and action.” This is not to claim, however, that women’s studies methodologies do not sometimes pretend to render the experiential transparent. Revaluations of genres such as autobiography and testimonial by women of color often result in readings of the experiential truth of ethnicity, tokenizing and marginalizing certain voices rather than opening new ways of understanding how the experiential can reconfigure what is understood as theory. In recognizing the “flavor-of-the-month” commodification whereby experience = commodity in (white) women’s studies, women of color are often expected to provide “enlightenment without irritation, entertainment without confrontation.”

Divisions between theory and experience point to the historical devaluations of the feminine, Doreen Massey notes, in which the “I” as local is read as the experiential and the personal, while the “We” as global refers then to theory and the political, to a transcendent entity which is seen to be infinitely more useful than the specific of the local. In a move to deny the complex and constructed retrieval of the experiential, women have historically been accorded authority only through our own experiences. Experience is contingent; it is unstable; it is invoked within a framework of memory, consciousness, context, its fictionality slipping through its fissures. Joan Scott writes:

Given the ubiquity of the term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyze its operations, and to redefine its meaning. This entails focusing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of “experience” and on the politics of its construction. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political.

I do not want to suggest a simple equation of experience = identity = political perspectives. Nor can I profess that my experiences...
as I (re)present them here are theory or are politicized, as this appears highly determined by audience reception issues. I suture this retelling of my narratives as an act of survival, as not only an emotional but also a political act, I claim no Truth with a capital T, but rather I locate this text within signifiers of political locations and ideologies. I do not offer my I-voice as an autobiographical I or a fictional I but as multiple I, as shifting, situated, constructed, discursive markers, reflecting that "each I carries with it many things, including a history that never started and never ends, she/we carry within us our own chronology and that chronology carries also the specifics of our personal, familial, tribal situation(s). In this way, every local is global . . . history is always multiple, I am always we." 11

EXPERIENCING "HOME": THE PHANTASMATIC OF DIASPORAS, THE HOME THAT IS NOT KNOWN

What is home? . . . Is home a geographical space, an historical space, an emotional, sensory space? . . . What interests me is the meaning of home for immigrants and migrants. I am convinced that this question—how one understands and defines home—is a profoundly political one.

—Chandra Talpade Mohanty

I spent my childhood in airports, it seems: waiting whole days sometimes for those delayed Air India flights, watching, through glass lounge walls at John F. Kennedy airport, for relatives coming through the immigration gates. The excitement of an arriving relative, whom I had usually not seen since our last voyage to India, was never lost on me, and I remember looking forward with happiness to our trips to the airport. These "arrivals" were complemented by numerous departures of my own, trips "back home" to Punjab with my family. Thus, movement has always functioned in stark ways in my psyche of Otherness. It's probably not surprising, then, that I would find myself in numerous airports and in various other types of terminals—markers of comings and goings—for a full six years, the first six years of my adult life. In that time I traveled to more than 45 countries to live,

work, study, and play. The excitement of JFK lingered long and propelled me insistently, fueling my passion to explore other worlds, to create my adventures, to transform the mundane into the insane, the crazy. I sought the ultimate travel experience, making each sojourn more daring than the last, each move more distant, further removed than the previous one. These journeys followed what I would read now as the pattern of the prototypical white male humanist traveler: junior year of college abroad (in West Germany), backpacking around the world after graduation, teaching English overseas (in Japan), and so on. At some point, however, I sensed that my journeys were enabled so I could run away, not from home, but from the notion of home. For arrival does not exist without departure.

Such a flight suggests dissatisfaction with fixed and immobile conceptualizations of discursive traveling theory. 14 James Clifford asks, "How is theory appropriated and resisted, located and displaced? How do theories travel among the uneven spaces of postcolonial confusion and contestation? ... How do theories travel and how do theorists travel?" 15 As a traveling theorist, I acknowledge that the very structures and privileges that grant me such a title also undermine it. In my quest to understand, perhaps even to possess, the Other, was my underlying pain of Outsiderness, my intense desire not to be the Other. And yet in the process of Otherizing I was simultaneously sanctioning my Otherness; I was the Other and the Otherer. Through travel, my Outsider status was sanctioned. As a "foreigner" I was of course an Outsider, and thus my displacement was acceptable, my discomfort comforting. I traveled to make my Other status acceptable and livable, forcing myself to relinquish a notion of home I simply could not comprehend. Being "home" hurt so much that I had to leave, yet "going away" is a way of masking that there is no where to go 16—and there was no place for me to go. An oversimplified understanding of home as birthplace and not-home as displacement 17 mocked the tensions I was feeling with my "Americaness" and the strong emotions I had about India. But India had rejected me too, had also cast me as Outsider. No matter how I tried, I never got it quite right. The incommensurabilities were hard to
explain: perhaps my sunglasses were just a little too trendy, perhaps my salwar kameez not trendy enough, perhaps my Punjabi just faintly accented—I could never figure it out. So there was nowhere, except everywhere else, to go.

Growing up as a Sikh girl in a middle-class, suburban (read white) community, class privilege deemed that my subjectivity be challenged in a consistent, though not necessarily always recognizable, way: the insidious whitewash. In an environment where any brown people—as interchangeable, “you-all-look-the-same” entities to the white gaze—were usually mistaken for each other, whitewash was expected via assimilation. Looking back at the white suburban experience, my two siblings and I survived with varying degrees of scarring; more interesting is that none of us really understood the depth and extent of our pains until we located elsewhere, differently, in environments where our subjectivities began to be challenged in unfamiliar and consequently confusing ways that demanded negotiation—negotiation not equal, as Homi K. Bhabha conceptualizes it, to compromise or pure negation, rather negotiation as resistance, in that it is a statement of nonunity with the Other.18

A society that values consistency above much else and cannot therefore allow complexity to exist further facilitates the demand to negotiate. I was, and still am, plagued by “the call of authenticity”; though I resist, I always fall into its traps, unveiling huge contradictions. This is hardly surprising when considering, as Lata Mani points out, “the politics of simultaneously negotiating [not only] multiple but discrepant audiences.”19 The Authentic seems to be an amorphous figure, constantly shifting, depending on geopolitical locations and categories, constructing the mutually exclusive, either/or nature of the paradigmatic figure. Thus, to be with a white partner and yet committed to my own ethnic identity is seen as a contradiction in terms; likewise, I cannot be with a South Asian partner and also be viewed as an independent woman not suffering from “denial” or “false consciousness.” My overall experience in women’s studies has been that to be South Asian and a feminist are understood as incompatible. Within South Asian communities, my feminist activities are viewed as agitation, as anti-Sikh. The list of calls of authenticity, depending upon situational and discursive social space, is endless and specifically impacted by competing relational white/black, East/West, traditional/modern discourses embedded in second-generation constructs. Though distinctions between generations are problematic, it is useful to point out that while immigrants can equate displacement with actual physical movements, subsequent generations must conceptualize displacement in metaphysical terms.20

Ultimately, the politics of loyalty predominate for the second generation in terms of loss, because of an inability to conceptualize “home” as previous generations do. Hence, I am not allowed to say or represent anything against my culture, because doing so implies internalized racism; I am not allowed to say anything in support of it, because doing so signals, in the context of Western supremacy, that I am deluding myself, that I am subjugated and oppressed by my heritage. Thus “outsider-within”21 constructs that contrast the notion of being fully inside or fully outside are materially and discursively fluid, in that imagined samenesses and imagined differences are the real; hence new strategies are always necessary. Therefore, while I comprehend the usefulness of Judith Butler’s conceptualization of the “phantasmatic”22 in the re-envisioning of home, of community, of borderlands, given that for some the material existence of daily life entails that very high prices may be paid for such negotiations, how far can the phantasmatic go to challenge the symbolic order? Or, as Norma Alarcón has asked, “When does the poetic imaginary become exhausted?”23

What becomes clear is that a fixed notion of home = warmth, security, intimacy, and Truth is closely tied to identity. Consider the connotations of the words/phrases homecoming, homesickness, homemade, make yourself at home, it really bit home, home is where the heart is.24 This home is expensive and relies on a pursuit of safe places, as if there were one safe place. It is worth reiterating that for many of us, there are no safe places, only safer ones. Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Biddy Martin note that “women of color cannot easily assume ‘home’ within feminist communities as they have been

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constructed.” Therefore, it must be asked, What kind of home does one talk about when one says the word homé? Can one think of a linguistic home, a familial home, a feminist home? House and property (with Woman inside) as home, lovers as home, friends as home?

Yet know that they had this condition which others called freedom... they knew it, first, as an absence.

—Raymond Williams

At age 19, I “ran away” from home. I won’t lie by saying I was conscious of my imperializing attitudes; I was not. India and America were both home and both not-home, and I had decided to occupy every other space I could, to live every culture through proximity, to know, and as an aftereffect, to consume the Other. I had a desire to map, a desire for everyplace to be home, inasmuch as no-place could be. Traveling functioned as pilgrimage, as the search for the unalienated self, and I reveled in its seduction.

Did I free myself only to imprison myself again?

I was largely unprepared for the shit: countries where immigration officers insisted my US passport was stolen, countries where I endured lengthy interrogations at airports because I was assumed to be a Sikh terrorist. My white traveling companions were usually the primary recipients of hospitality, solicitations, and sexual advances; when I was with a white male I was often coded as a prostitute; and particularly when I was alone, I was viewed as a betrayer of “tradition” and culture by the mere act of traveling in what might have appeared to be the unencumbered solitude of my mobility. A dichotomy of facing racism in the West and sexism in the so-called third world simply did not exist; in fact, I experienced all these things everywhere, simultaneously, contradictorily.

Clifford notes that the word travel must be thought of as a term of translation, for “no one term is uncontaminated.” In her critique of Clifford’s “playful” evocation of travel, bell hooks asserts that a certain “experience of travel is not about play, but is an encounter with terrorism... from certain standpoints, to travel is to encounter the terrorizing force of white supremacy.” She notes that the “hegemony of one experience of travel can make it impossible to articulate another.” To destabilize standard definitions of travel, one must pose the question, “What would it mean for women of color to be travelers?” The irony of this question is that although women of color are the most undertheorized as traveling subjects and are possibly the most immobile group in terms of conventional travel, they are as moving subjects the most vulnerable, the most exposed in terms of migration, displacement, exile, war, and so on. Middle-class people of color are also unknown as travelers: in Europe, Asia, and Northern Africa I was frequently called upon to explain how I could be both American and Indian. Such are the monolithic understandings of what an American is.

As my passport began filling up with colorful entrance and exit stamps, visas, and consulate markings, I clutched on to it as proof of my right to movement, seeing the American eagle on its front as a sign of democracy, the freedom to move—the facade of citizenship. “Look!” I would say silently, secretly defiant but outwardly respectful as I offered my passport to immigration control men, “all these other countries let me in, so too can yours!” But mobility was not to be mine; their eyes shouted: Where’s your husband? Where’s your brother, your uncle, your father, your children, your white boyfriend, your pimp, your homedebombyouveryourmother-in-lawyoursari...? Why are you not at home, with your family? Why are you standing here all by yourself, wearing a leather jacket, speaking perfect English, waving all your traveler’s checks at us? Mobility, particularly that of a nonwhite woman presumed to symbolize all the baggage of the maternal, familial, and communal, surfaced as the greatest threat. Though Woman is accorded the domain of home, only white women get to leave it.

I took these experiences in stride; after all, according to normative white liberal traveling subjects, I was invisible. But I began to look for more clues as to how to survive the travel game, and of course, found none. The white male as the traveling subject is solidified through the accessories to the popular culture of travel—guide books, articles, tours, travel agencies, and so on—which erase the
complexities of race and gender from travel. Other forms of movement, like migration, exile, nomadism and refugeem, are those of the disenfranchised and are primarily linked to the third world. But "travel" remains captured, by its historical legacy, as a concept within whiteness, of luxury, leisure, and privilege, embodied and embedded as an extension of empire, of imperialism, and of colonialism. The links between masculinity, penetration, and colonialism should not be left unstated: "The sessile condition of 'home boundedness' is gendered in most cultures as feminine; the male journey is equated with fathering and insemination. Historical travel has been closely associated with conquest—sexual and territorial."

One could unpack these assertions in many ways; for example, one could ask, Who is envisioned as the modal traveler in terms of tourism? For those of you who assume that, in our current postmodern multicultural world, blatantly racist images of the third world are a thing of the anthropological past, stop by a travel agency and check out the brochures. In ten minutes I found that a potential tourist on a package tour to Ghana might ask the following questions: "Will I find a fly in my soup?" ("A: Mosquitoes are rare in the resorts." Thus resorts equal safety, cleanliness, and civilization in the third world.) "Is Morocco clean? How safe is Morocco?" (The modal traveler is civilized and lives in no fear of danger in the first world.) "Don't they eat sheep's head?" (The natives are uncouth.) Further, "The staff at the resort know which side to pour your wine from." (The traveler has money and is sophisticated.) "What about outstretched hands ....?" (There is no poverty in the first world.) "Are the people friendly?" (In other words, are travelers treated with unconditional respect and hospitality, as "special"?) Thus the modal traveler is envisioned as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual.

A distinction between travelers and tourists is useful in one regard: the tourist industry structured my sense of myself as a traveling subject. In fact, tourist industries thoroughly fail to envision me as a potential traveler. On a package tour to Tunisia, there were not only no other people of color aside from me but also continual racist references to the Tunisians ("the darker ones, the ones with less Euro-

pean blood, the more Negroid ones are the laziest; they sit around all day and beg for money") during our "group orientations." Given the narrow definition of tourism, my only recourse was to be a white liberal traveling subject—What other kind of traveler could I be? In this context it is important to note that certain positions—being a missionary and/or a missionary's wife, an anthropologist's wife, a colonial administrator's wife, a travel writer—allowed, and still allow, (white) women to travel. With the fact of mobility very often being accessed through the white male traveling subject and with the emergence of gendered traveling subjects, the very problematic imperialist positionings of these subjects are further complicated.

My immersion in travel dictated that I participate in its varying forms of liberal humanism, in types of "responsible" travel that rely on very specific paradigms of authenticity. Language is central: a foreign language must become familiar, must be conquered for an authentic exchange. Living with a local host family as a restoration of home is another method of accessing Truth; complete separation of inside and outside is necessary for this to work. Liberal humanist travel includes "cross-cultural reality tours that offer more meaningful activities with less impact on the environment," assuming that "travel to remote, unspoiled areas is a privilege we must actively work to preserve." The authentic experience is also one that is captured in the past, frozen in a space unaffected by the modern world: "If you want to catch the real Costa Rica before it's taken over by consumerism, the time is now." Real exchanges are also accessed through reveling in the "lith" of the third world, in cheap places where getting ripped off by a taxi driver is a most humiliating testimony to one's iniquity as an authentic "insider" of the culture.

Volunteer workcamp projects are one strong facet of liberal humanist discourses of travel. Many of these projects take place in the so-called third world, and I did my share, from Israel to Thailand, from Guatemala to the Bronx. I spent one month in Nicaragua as a volunteer brigadista on a Sandinista farming cooperative with a group of US residents. As representatives of a white superpower, we were hailed by the images of prestige and wealth equated with the
US. The "rich American" is primarily a white construction, and those who exemplified it most were blue-eyed blondes. As my general coloring was similar to the local population's, I believe they often viewed me as no different and thus at times no "better" than themselves. This manifested itself in a variety of ways; for example, I was often called and referred to not by name, as the other brigadiastas were, but rather as "morena," "dark woman." I did get a sense of being "the bad apple in the lot" when, upon meeting me, my host father commented dryly, "You look just like all of the rest of us." Amidst the excitement of host families meeting volunteers, he was clearly disappointed. My host family also made it fairly clear to me that I was a means for them to access an additional food allowance, and they continuously asked me for newspapers, household items, and other gifts, despite being strictly forbidden to do so. This was something that happened with less frequency to the other volunteers.

Thus an acknowledgment of my group categorization as a "rich American" occurred via the individual treatment of me as "no better than them." I was a focal point, an embodiment of the fissures between discourses of race, ethnicity, nation, and class. This project in particular revealed to me the problematic nature of humanitarian aid work embedded in politically correct ideologies. In the name of embracing diversity and difference, we as a group saw ourselves as "do-gooders" transcending the exploitative nature of conventional travel and tourism. Inderpal Grewal notes:

This multiculturalism that is being embraced currently within liberal US circles..., attacks one kind of racism practiced by the white working class, while remaining oblivious to the more subtle and powerful racism of the upper classes.... It speaks of "difference" and "diversity" though it presents diversity in the normative language of the dominant classes.... This notion of diversity serves to formulate an image of the US as a nation of tolerance that is a model for democratic rights around the world.

The notion of a progressive, democratic US manifested itself in the culturally imperialistic manners in which we approached issues about health, women's empowerment, feminism, notions of produc-

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activity, and so on.31 Racism and the operation of racial constructions were issues unmentioned (much less addressed) before we left and coded in liberal "what-was-the-most-humane-thing-to-do" language in discussions after we returned. For many young westerners, traveling is a site of experiencing cultural diversity as well as a rite of passage to political activism. Though there are distinctions to be made between tourism and traveling, I question the motives and outcomes of so-called responsible travel—eco-tourism, green tourism. Is it really any less violent? How can the selling of a destination, linked so thoroughly to capital via the tourist industry and so tightly to imperialism via Western expansionism, be disconnected from the commodification of the Other?

Whiteness travels well because of impressions of the West—because of perceptions of travelers' homes. White travelers are generally treated "well," viewed favorably, and seen as interesting, their company is sought after—in short, they have a "wonderful cross-cultural overseas experience." People of color—because they are not "as colorful" anymore—may experience "bad apple" status accorded to color. Suspended between familiar and Other—for people of color cannot be hailed as Other (as blondes are)—they may experience an ambivalent "going home," these slippages force other readings of travel to emerge. Legitimacy is most always accorded to white experiences, while the experiences of people of color are seen as anomalies. Normative "authentic" exchanges are established and romantic notions of travel experiences are maintained. Humanitarian visions of cross-cultural understanding and relating to one another because "we are all human beings" must be reexamined and interrogated to reveal the exploitative nature of, sexual exchange behind, and economic motivations of interactions between those who travel and those who are traveled upon, and to dislodge pure pleasure-seeking notions of traveling.

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my traveling is indeed about privilege but most certainly not about freedom (though I originally professed it as such). Undertaking such voluntary dislocation of the self illuminates the connections between alienation and travel, evidenced by the double movements—between pleasure and pain, privilege and constraints—that I find in movement.

To locate myself in my body means more than understanding what it has meant to me to have a vulva and clitoris and uterus and breasts. It means recognizing this white skin, the places it has taken me, the places it has not let me go.

—Adrienne Rich

Theorizing the movements of female bodies and travel must go beyond notions of danger and harassment. Where is the body in the travel narratives of Paul Theroux, Pico Iyer, Ruben Martinez? Largely invisible, unquestioned, unchallenged—the transcendence of the body suggests that limits are self-imposed. The protection inherent in male bodies is evidenced even more when one is surrounded by the masculinist cult of slumming-student travel. If “experience abroad” is not mediated in the same way as experience of home, and “travelled awareness implies a more physical and sensual relation to reality,” then for whom is this normative traveling body constructed? For those who do not fit this body, how is a “more physical and sensual relation to reality” about home, about traveling as an act of the everyday?

Along with rethinking travel in terms of different types of movement such as immigration, exile, and dislocation, an understanding of subjectivity, the body, and geopolitical locations decenters a traveler’s home-versus-body opposition that privileges physical over subjective movement. This geopolitical location involves the history of thousands of years of oppression, my comprehension of my own narrative, and an exact and specific immediacy of being and existence coming together in a moment of subjectivity, of confronting “what one is through . . . the intrusions of one’s history within History.” Thus the body as a vessel for subjectivity is not only one that travels but also a site that is traveled upon. The “elsewhere-within-here/there” is evidenced by daily negotiations, daily codings of the body, and “multiple apparatus which perform multiple hailings upon the same body.”

This notion of the discursive body, of bodies not only as the physically “real” but also as sites of multiple ambivalences, contestations, and clashes of ideological bodies, enables an understanding of traveling as part of the everyday. Some bodies, bodies read as brown, black, yellow, female, differently abled, queer, and so on, by necessity must always negotiate the discursive structures that render these bodies Other. If travel is repositioned as an act of home, the home-away binary loses distinct shape and form, placing home in the away and away in the home. Travel of the everyday functions as the performative of Home as Other in response to Self as Other. Therefore, the body is always attempting translation, trying to reconcile and disrupt demands upon it.

You say who you are but you begin to doubt.

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

I spent approximately 15 months studying in Northern England, living in Leeds while commuting to York to the Centre for Women’s Studies at the University of York. This daily 20-mile movement from a multietnic urban sprawl to a predominantly white tourist town captures, in essence, the multiplicity of subjective negotiations that faced me in England. Aside from university settings where I was most often assumed to be direct from India and exoticized as such (indicative of the belief that English people of color don’t go to university), my US-based model-minority class privilege often amounted to nothing in Leeds, where working-class South Asians and African Carolines live in ghettoized areas of the city. It was there I began to see what this privilege could possibly mean, back in the US; facing radically altered racialized and gendered class constructions initiated the emergence of a class consciousness that (re)articulated race, ethnicity, and racism differently. As the different gaze traveled upon, recreated, and recoded my body, the word “Paki” started to terrorize
me tremendously. This was quite the opposite of my reaction to the (white) “Dot Busters” in New Jersey, who launched a physical and psychological campaign of violence against working-class South Asians; in the US, the historical readings of South Asians in class terms rendered me unable to see myself as a part of this situation, as it would be more common in my socioeconomic setting to locate the fear of attack within discourses of rape and African American men. In England, however, fueled by weekly news reports of racist attacks and the rise of neo-Nazi groups and the British National Party, groups of young white adult males loomed as constant racist threats. An example: One day when I was walking home from the hospital after minor eye surgery, half my face swollen and bandaged, a South Asian boy of about six asked me if I was okay. “Gore marhetha, huhna,” he said in Punjabi, meaning, “A white person hit you, I see.” I do not think he quite believed me when I responded in the negative. I do not think I will ever forget my horror at his articulations of Otherness at such a young age, indicative of his training to name certain violations, nor will I forget the instantaneous community formed through the recognition of our individual yet connected pain.

Thus, the body, as a final site of judgment about gender, race, class, and sexuality, was foregrounded inasmuch as I feared for my safety. But I underwent continual processes not only of negotiating new social spaces of safety but also of physicality, of mere presence as well. Shopping became a nightmare, as store clerks insisted on following me around. In addition, city-centre nightclubs, restaurants, and bars were rarely frequented by people of color. Racism seemed to me to be in the air; it was out there, it was angry, it was always in my face. “This place,” I concluded, “is so racist.”

Interestingly, a white presence seemed to restore my class privilege, categorizing me into the “oreo” or “coconut” pigeonhole. This happened a great deal in city-centre pubs, where few people of color frequented. Walking into a pub in England was something I rarely did without “white protection,” for I would feel far too vulnerable: pubs seemed to be claimed as white social spaces, as nationalist spaces. People usually were fairly pleasant to me as soon as they

decided I was something they originally presumed I was not supposed to be: a lager-chugging, whiskey-downing, loud South Asian female rebel, a white wanna-be. With my “American” accent I could not fit the stereotypes anyway: reactions altered substantially the moment I spoke. Back in the protection of this exoticism, I realized the price I was paying for coverage: whitewash. I could not have fully understood the extent of this whitewash until I had left it and proclaimed something else “more racist.”

Out of necessity to ease the pain, I began to see subjectivity as a (sick sort of) game. In the working-class area of Chapeltown, Leeds, where I lived, many South Asian women wore salwar kameezes, and I too began to do this on occasion, to see what it would feel like to look the way I was supposed to. The most violent reaction I received to this was from a white flatmate, who exclaimed, “Why are you dressed like that?” When I raised an eyebrow he stated, “Well, you don’t normally look so traditional.” To test my protection further, I countered some racist statements being made about African Caribbeans one night in a pub, beginning an interesting game of symbolic interactionism. The two white males and white female to whom I had just been introduced by some other white friends seemed shocked I would even notice or care about such remarks; in other words, in this space of time, I moved from white to black. After realizing that I was American, one male asked me if I was from Harlem and then proceeded to utter confused gibberish when I told him that I was raised in a middle-class New Jersey suburb. “Of course you are middle class,” he stated and continued his racial diatribe against people of color, placing me in the white camp again. When I countered him again, I was back on the black side, and he apologized: “I’m sorry I offended you, but I’m really not racist, I just thought . . . .” His partner interjected, “Don’t pay any attention to him, he’s really a nice guy; the assumption being that nice people can’t be racist. I finished the game by professing my own racism, declaring that it was difficult, given the nature of the world we live in, for anyone to be wholly unracist. The three seemed incredibly relieved: I had just sanctioned their racism, and once again it was
okay to spew about African Caribbeans and now about South Asians as well—this time I was definitely white, no question about it. Imagine their surprise when I explained that it was toward whites, not other people of color, that I harbored the most intense discomfort in terms of racism. And with this, a multitude of interactive ideological traveling moments were completed.

THE COLOR OF IDENTITY

When South Asians in the US ask me if racism in England is as bad as they’ve heard, I tell them I cannot place racists into levels; I cannot believe in a hierarchy of racists. I cannot believe one form of racism is worse than another, for who is to say what causes more suffering? This is not to say that all societies are equally racist or equally not racist but that there is actually no basis for comparison. Those of us subject to color oppression are all working with trade-offs, we are all bargaining with racism. As Kristal Brent Zook writes in reference to colorism in African American communities, “Because the blows you have received may have been overt, physical and apparent, while mine were insidiously covert, psychological and internal, does not mean that the ground we stand on is not common.”

Further, I cannot succinctly and distinctly categorize racisms, for they flow into and support one another. Though in England I initially longed for the whitewashed protection enabled by class privilege, I eventually realized that there is power in being able to concretely name one’s enemies. Understanding more overt racism, with the adversity and hostility it often brought, meant first helping to deconstruct whitewash, to understand the psychological pain of “oore-ism.” It seems that if one form of racism is consolidated (for they always overlap) and privileged, one falls into the trap of a mind/body split. It may be hard to see this given that there were an estimated 200,000 racist attacks in Britain last year and given that violence against South Asians continues to increase, “ranging from people being attacked on the street, windows being broken, to cab drivers being asked to remote places to have their brains beaten out.” But how many of us are willing to acknowledge that our bodies—

the body as the mind, soul, and body—that we are ill? How many can say that our bodies are not sick? Sick of being exoticized, sick of being the model minority, sick of being the white male colonists’ Other, or maybe even sick because we pretend we are not any of these things, because we survive by denying the severity of our dictated privilege? In terms of psychic and material deaths, how important is this? Noting that illness is a language, how might this indicate the racialized gendered spaces of self-esteem, social esteem, mental health, as well as an expanded understanding of “violence” as a concept? Do we really have any idea of the toll of immigration?

Racisms facilitate vulnerability. I saw this so clearly one day in England when an educated, professional South Asian friend of mine from working-class roots came to me devastated that a coworker had made a racist comment that she claimed not to have recognized as such. “This is polished racism,” he said. “I would rather have people screaming ‘Paki’ at me; at least I know who my enemies are. But this ... I barely realized it was happening. I barely felt the pain, so barely that it overwhelmed me.” What was known and “easy” for me was his susceptibility, his hell. As with race, racism is a constantly shifting and manipulated construction, it is what we make it. More succinctly, different “configurations of meaning and power” enable “different modes of knowing.” Thus, racism as a concept travels, reconfigures, and dictates the terms of Otherness.

It is therefore critical to flesh out connections between the material and the phantasmatic as well as between model minority discourses and those of British Blackness; to what extent do not only class positionings but also immigration histories, nation-state formations, nationalisms, and racisms enable and disable different configurations of home, of belonging, of being? Given the cult of model-minority believers, the erasure of pre-1965 South Asian immigration, and the invisibility of working-class populations, most “South Asian Americans” have a great deal at stake in maintaining class-reductive analyses (supplemented by an understanding of the US as a place of greater racial tolerance) within a comparative Anglo/American framework, believing life is “better” in the US than in England. This is not

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the argument I am engaging with here; obviously such a judgment will always be debatable and situated in very specific circumstances—better for whom? Rather, my point is that decontextualizing nation-state creation is necessary in order to construct the US as a "better home." Belonging is achieved by being part of the American dream, one purchased through class status that the structures of racism in England appear to render impossible.

Hence, I am suspicious of the "American" increasingly added to the end of the term South Asian—the reasons for this addition do not seem similar to the ones behind the emergence of the political term Asian American. What is this notion of statehood, citizenship, and Americanness that is being aspired to? For example, a recent meeting of a major South Asian student group at Berkeley focused on the issues of model minorities. That is, the intent was to prove that South Asians are indeed a model minority, complete with income data (which surely did not account for the growing number of undocumented South Asians in the country, nor for the estimate that more than half of the taxi drivers in New York are South Asian). The income figures were attributed to inbred cultural traits; no mention was made of the creation of a professional class of immigrants through the 1965 laws (originally conceived to maintain the migration flow primarily for Europeans), through cold war demands for military and defense engineers (many of whom have been, ironically enough, unemployed since the dissolution of the former Soviet Union), as well as through a demand for doctors because of the shortage created by the Vietnam War. South Asians' low divorce rates were also pointed to as evidence of their American success story—good citizens maintaining near perfect nuclear families—that shutting down queer spaces through the reinforcement of heterosexual reproductive and sexual loyalty to South Asian communities. A related example is the almost complete lack of mobilization of South Asian communities around resistance to California's Proposition 187. Another disturbing development on the Berkeley campus is the formation of a South Asian nongraduate coed service fraternity, complete with Greek letters. A continuing alliance with whiteness, structured through colonial and postcolonial relations of elite populations in India, has been recast in the US diaspora through a focus on negotiating whiteness without forming coalitions with other people of color. I am not suggesting direct and absolute relationships here, but as Inderpal Grewal notes, one must ask "how . . . South Asians who belong to dominant communities within their nations of origins become politicized as minorities in the US?" To extend this statement, some South Asians, like Sikhs and Muslims in India, have always been the Other.

Relationships with whiteness seem highly inflected by the state's role in regulating "home" vis-à-vis the fluctuating category Caucasian; however, not all South Asians are considered fit for honorary white status. People from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan were considered white/Caucasian until 1922, when a Sikh American contested the revocation of his naturalized citizenship status (granted to him in 1920) based on his categorization as Caucasian. This category, along with the category "Aryan," had still been used until very recently; in fact, in January 1993 Dale Sandhu, identified as an East Indian from Punjab, lost a race-based employment discrimination suit on the grounds that "a person who is in fact Caucasian may not complain of discrimination because of race." Contingent terms of inclusion have characterized the histories of some South Asians (Hindu middle-class postcolonial elite) in the US. Furthermore, this inclusion in the US is highly dependent upon a distinction from blackness, one which can be seen historically in the colonial and postcolonial formation of India as a nation-state. Hershini Bhana notes, for example, that Mahatma K. Gandhi used a collapsing of varied, diverse populations into the term "Indian" in the context of South Africa to persuade the white ruling class that the black "kaffirs" were the real danger. The rhetoric of inclusion, a scary multicultural signifier that focuses on belonging, leaves the paradigms of democracy and citizenship unquestioned; the terms of inclusion are dictated and remain unexamined. While a discussion of South Asians and British Blackness is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that in Britain no pretense of citizenship and belonging is proffered. Paul Gilroy

The rhetoric of inclusion, a scary multicultural signifier that focuses on belonging, leaves the paradigms of democracy and citizenship unquestioned; the terms of inclusion are dictated and remain unexamined.
reminds us that *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*; an essential condition for the hegemony of race in Britain is the mutual exclusivity of the terms *Black* and *British*. Tariq Modood notes that South Asians are the most hated group in England because of what is perceived as their foreign culture and nonassimilable nature as well as because of fallout from the Salman Rushdie affair and the Gulf War that poisons Muslims as the European community's new Other. While recognizing the problems of an absolute comparative model, it seems feasible to state that South Asians living in Britain claiming to be British are very different from South Asians in the US claiming a South Asian American identity. If exclusion in the British context signals hatred, and inclusion in the US signals racism in the form of desire, exoticization, and implicit approval/alliance of whiteness, it is possible that multiculturalism may progress in very different ways in Britain, because structures of racism may conceivably prevent its complete co-optation from certain vantage points. Stuart Hall notes that in the British context what is occurring is a shift from "a struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself"—a shift that is itself indicative of an awareness of the pitfalls of multiculturalism, and one that perhaps is still not quite in synch in certain US contexts.

**THE ABCDS AND THE FOBs**

Back in the US, as an American Born Confused Desi (ABCD—Desi is slang for Indian), I have stopped asking the question, "Is the US my home?" because "claiming" home as a continuous, undisrupted, stable place seems infeasible. My concerns revolve around India: Are there spaces in India that I can call home? And if so, what kind? Once again, the call of authenticity would posit me in opposition to the FOBs (Fresh Off the Boat), suggesting it is the "real" immigrant who can address the "mother country" as home and exist as its cultural authority in the West. The inverse is applicable for me, but not quite; though the movements are indeed opposite in direction, the begining referents are different.

Fragmentations and fracturings of these sorts are suspended through the romanticization of diaspora as a utopic state of loss, displacement, and exile. The South Asian Diaspora as it is consolidated flattens differences; though Mohanty notes its coalition basis in the US and the potential power gained through numbers, it entails a conflation of Indian with South Asian, establishing a middle-class Hindu subject as its normative referent. A collapsing of immigration histories not only effaces working-class South Asian histories but also presumes set migration patterns from India to the US, eliminating numerous other trajectories of movement: those of twice and thrice migrants, those of non-Western diasporic communities in Trinidad, Kenya, Saudi Arabia, Panama, Guyana, Thailand, Japan, and so on. However, it is not enough to simply include non-Western diasporic communities in the category South Asian. This name, as a contestation of the colonial term "Indian," is a Western construction of a "New Ethnicity." "South Asian is most useful in the West, as a way for us to organize, and to build communities—in the same way that Black works in Britain, or 'person of colour' does in North America. . . . We do require it, if for no other reason than as an antidote for 'Paki.'" This naming is connected to currently chic notions of diaspora as they are commonly invoked in ethnic studies and cultural studies, notions understood in frameworks of Western conceptualizations of resistance, community, and agency and in relation to specific histories of colonization and "race relations" in the West. Gyanendra Chitraverty Spivak notes that the conditions and histories of Indians in the West, particularly in the US, are fairly unique relative to those from the subcontinent in the third world. Acknowledging that any naming is a misnaming, new questions still need to be asked: (How) do the terms *South Asian* and *Indian* travel? People from South Asia in Africa, the Caribbean, Central America, and other parts of Asia (diasporic peoples who are still within the geographical boundaries of South Asia), how are they named and how do they name themselves? How are spaces of resistance conceived?

Notions of diaspora still seem to privilege the search for home through the resurrection of linear narratives from the "motherland"; the ties to India as controlled by the state and other institutions are
Given the persistence of longings for home(land), as nationalism is about nation as home, it appears urgent to theorize and practice spaces that address the current struggles of identity yet resist the easy binaries of nationalisms.

Conceptualizations of diaspora also privilege hybridity; this "cosmopolitan embodiment of the postcolonial," so coveted in postmodernism, is of a very specific form only. It is built from two authentic sources rather than as an assumed, given precondition for everyone. The attraction of hybridity is that it initially appears to offer home. Though the flow of Bhangra music from Britain to South Asia and North America has broken the country-of-origin to country-of-displacement equation, it has done so through its (re)claiming of home(s) via its consolidation as authentic hybrid, as another call of authenticity for the second generation. Such approaches efface histories of Bhangra in India as well as minimize Bhangra sites of hyper-masculinization that recast patriarchy in the name of culture and tradition. The production and marketing of Bhangra music must be located in the context of Western cultural and economic supremacy; the two "origins" of the hybrid are not equal, as evidenced in some part by South Asian gang cultures formed around this music. Similar examples exist in terms of language, film, clothing, cultural knowledge, and so on.

Hybridity, when taken to its extreme theoretical abstraction, reduces the hybrid to a metaphor. Thus, there is resistance without pain, strength without struggle, utopia and counterhegemony without sacrifice. However, just as I must caution against privileging and romanticizing hybridity as resistance, I must also reject a notion of complete victimization and space without agency. To assess the material circumstances of a metaphorical hybridity, one must note that "the question which needs to be asked in our world of travellers, South Asians, slackers, zippers, squatters, wiggers, is whether any of these newly constructed social identities hold any political, ethical or moral weight, or whether they are simply the 'New' category for commodification."

"BODIES" THAT TRAVEL

In arguing for a multiplicity of travel, I have attempted to demonstrate not only how racialized, gendered bodies may travel but also how nations, racisms, theories, homes, narratives, names, categories,
diasporas, capital, and experiences travel and how these travels imply occupying another's space. As bodies of knowledge and theory travel between the local and the global, the interconnections between South Asian diasporas as bodies and South Asian diasporic bodies reflect such bodies as local and global. Just today, I heard that Britain is considering legislation that would regulate tourists' sexual activities in Thailand according to the age of consent laws "back home." The discursive body will thus be even more imbued and inscribed with dictated sexual mores and other behaviors prescriptive of nationhood. This is a poignant example of the implications of transnational forces that shape experiences of home, travel, and diaspora.

Many appear reluctant to accept the unmappability of liminal spaces, spaces that can be pointed to but not occupied, these spaces of home, travel, and diaspora that are not fully known. As I cannot valorize place, I likewise cannot valorize placelessness. If it is thus that I am suspended between the two, then I cannot retreat to either side or transcend all boundaries. The pain of giving up home is intense, but as home is configured against not-home and vice versa, home is neither absent nor present. Rather, the absence of presence and the presence of absence render home as a potential narrative of incommensurability, a narrative against order. Such narratives reflect what cannot be spoken, what cannot be measured, thus deferring to the impossibility of precise translation and opening up spaces of writing (home) as home.

She says to herself if she were able to write she could continue to live. Says to herself if she would write without ceasing. To herself by writing she could abolish real time. She would live, if she could display it before her and become its voyeur.

—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

NOTES

A big thanks to Amarpal Bhullar for her extremely incisive editorial comments. Thanks also to the following people for their critical thoughts and feedback in regard to this

article and my work in general: Henhui Bhana, Inderpal Grewal, Jeoy Yoon, Minoo Mowlam, and Teish T. Minha-ia.


6 Comment made at guest visit, University of California, Berkeley, Feb. 23, 1995; see also Assia Djebar, Fantasia: An Algerian Canticle (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1985).


16 Viswanathan, p. 105.


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22 For elaboration on processes of identification and the psychoanalytic discourses of the phallic matrix see Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter (New York: Routledge, 1993).


25 Martin and Mohanty, p. 192.


28 Curtis and Pajaczkowska, p. 201.


31 This is a summary of a much more developed argument which focuses on "feminist" ideas about development and Nicaraguan women; see Jasbir K. Puar, "Nicaraguan Women, Resistance, and the Politics of Aid," in Prom Queen to Margin: Women and Politics in the Third World, ed. Hilde Afluar (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).


33 Curtis and Pajaczkowska, p. 207.


36 Jo-yeun Lee, seminar, University of California, Berkeley, Nov. 21, 1994.


40 According to a report released on Oct. 25, 1994, by the US Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans, there are over 1 million Asian Indians in the US. The mean family income, $59,777, is the highest of any group; the average per capita income is 25 percent higher than the national average and second to Japanese Americans. Of Asian-Indian families, 4.5 percent have no husband present, and 1.5 percent are headed by an unmarried couple.


43 United States v Bhagat Singh Thind, 1925, 261 U.S. 204–1925.


HERSHINI BHANA

SPLITTING OPEN WIDE

letters of exile

Dear Ms. Cliff and Ms. Dargarembga,

In “Dangerous Knowledge,” Caroline Rooney states that traditional “critical discourse can be regarded as a colonizing or imperialist discourse: one which annexes its textual object in order to perpetuate itself, institutionalize itself and its attendant ideological assumptions, be they derived from the discipline or the particular critic in question.” Rooney thus warns me, as I undertake a reading of your texts, of the imperialist undertones of a project that often serves to critically enclose and “master” another in a relationship remarkably parallel to that between the analyst and the analysand.

The analyst in the situation of psychotherapy implicitly compels the analysand to repeat the “truth” of the analyst as the subject of knowledge. The analyst thus becomes authenticated and perpetuated by the self-sacrifice of the object of knowledge—the patient in the psychotherapeutic situation and the imaginative text in the instance of literary interpretation. However, both the patient and the imaginative text always manage to resist complete enclosure and appropriation. They achieve this in a variety of ways, such as withholding/silence.

My letter to both of you is thus my attempt to avoid any pretensions of “mastery” over the texts, to recognize the silences in the text, and to acknowledge the silences in mine. For “whatever I say can in

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