INTRODUCTION

The British musical environment during the late 18th and early 19th century, whether at home or in its colonies, was largely defined by contemporary music with origins outside Britain. During this time, the performance of music with German or Italian origins in the colonial site of Calcutta, India was popularly understood as contributing to the cultivation of British musical culture. Thus Britain has long established itself as a culture whose musical identity has often depended on the music of others. During the 1990s, some of the music that Britain and the British government most proudly cultivated and promoted abroad as its own once again arose from a group of people with uncertain claims to British cultural identity—British Asians.

During the mid to late 1990s, the mainstream style and entertainment press throughout London made regular references to British Asian music and musicians. This music, blending Indian influences with contemporary dance

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2 The use of the term “British Asians” within this dissertation is adopted from its common British usage, where it describes people who are settled in Britain and who claim ancestors in South Asia, which includes the present-day countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives. As Raminder Kaur and Virinder Kalra note, the usage of this term is problematic because it “essentializes both terms, as well as hierarchizing the former against the latter”; they also argue that the term obscures the existence of the multiple and “sliding subjectivities” through which most British Asians define their identities. Raminder Kaur and Virinder S. Kalra, "New Paths for South Asian Identity and Musical Creativity," in Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music, ed. Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma (London: Zed Books, 1996), 219. My usage of the term is historical and reflects its status as the most prevalent term used during the early 1990s and early 2000s; wherever possible, I acknowledge the contradictions evoked by the term.
music,³ was almost exclusively heard in London clubs organized by British Asian DJs and musicians. The relative inaccessibility of this music outside British Asian clubs prompted patrons from different ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds to visit these clubs and further their success. The result was a thriving local scene that was cited as an essential nightlife attraction in London tourist guides of the time. Two years later, a multitude of compilation albums from these clubs—Anokha, Outcaste, Swaraj, and others—had appeared on the racks of High Street music stores throughout Britain. Within a few months of their appearance in Britain, these recordings were selling in significant numbers throughout Europe, North America, and Asia as well.

The apex of British Asian music’s visibility in mainstream British popular culture occurred in 1999. On October 7 of that year, Talvin Singh, a young British Asian musician associated with the Anokha club, was presented with Britain’s most prestigious music award, the Mercury Prize, for his solo album, O.K.⁴ O.K. integrated Singh’s Indian classical training on the tabla with contemporary electronic dance music styles, and in doing so, made explicit references both to Singh’s South Asian heritage and prominent status in British club culture and dance music. O.K.’s ability to capture the Mercury

³ My use of the term “dance music” draws heavily on that of Kai Fikentscher, who describes “dance music” as a term that “was coined [in the early 1980s] and has been used since by the American music industry (especially its trade press) to replace the category of disco.” Fikentscher notes that the term was more vague and thus more neutral than disco, which distanced its association with homosexual and ethnic minority communities. Fikentscher claims that the label can best be defined by the medium on which it was first released—the 12-inch single. The 12-inch single itself was and remains linked to the rise of the DJ and DJ culture, including record pools, speciality shops that carry 12-inch singles, and the singles transmission via sophisticated sound systems within respective clubs. Kai Fikentscher, “You Better Work!”: Underground Dance Music in New York City, Music/Culture. (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press/ University Press of New England, 2000), 10-12.

Prize seemed to signify that British Asians had finally been accepted as legitimate citizens of Britain and its culture.

Meanwhile, another popular British Asian musician, Nitin Sawhney, released his own solo album, Beyond Skin, that same year; Beyond Skin made the shortlist for the 2000 Mercury Prize but did not win. Sawhney released his next album, Prophesy (2001), to great critical acclaim, but was taken aback after receiving two awards for that same album at the first ever BBC Radio 3 Awards for World Music, held in January 2002. While Sawhney recognized the awards as an honor, he was simultaneously hurt by what he interpreted the awards as signifying—namely, an exclusion from British culture. Given that the world music category has always been associated with non-British, international musicians, Sawhney interpreted his own award in this category as a judgment that neither he nor his music had much to do with British culture.

How did these musicians’ identities and music define them as being included or excluded from British cultural citizenship? This question serves as the motivation for my dissertation. British Asian dance music in the 1990s has been part of a decade-long debate over the relationships between South Asian ethnicity and contemporary British culture. The first book-length study on the subject, Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music, broke new ground in 1996 as it asserted the position that British Asian dance music constituted a serious topic of study, and that it was politically informed and relevant to a non-Asian audience. As co-editor Ashwani Sharma noted, “for this study, music provides an explicit example of the cultural arena in which transnational capitalism and racialized power relations are
embedded." The editors of the essays in *Dis-orienting Rhythms* sought to overcome a legacy of scholarship that persisted in “ethnicizing ethnic communities and continu[ing] remarkably to cast its anthro-gaze in total ignorance or disavowal of Said’s seminal critique of Orientalism.” They also sought
to interrogate and forge productive relationships and linkages across the formal sites of music and politics, and to generate alternative languages of cultural politics framed beyond the myopia of ethnic identity politics or the confines of the nation-state.

The editors’ understanding of music and politics as discrete topics of inquiry impacts their discussion of music throughout the book. They consider music as working to achieve a particular form of progressive politics, or more simply put, as a means to an end:

We are cautious not to celebrate the hyper-syncretic quality of the new Asian dance music naively as a ready-made vehicle for realizing a necessarily progressive kind of politics of difference... More critically, is music compromised by its imbrication with capitalism? [...] Crucial to what is at stake is a recognition that the site of popular culture is a place of struggle that not only can be won but also can redefine and rupture the institutional boundaries that separate artists, activists, and academics.

Elsewhere, Sanjay Sharma notes that he reads this music “strategically... to redefine and reclaim the category ‘Asian’ against hegemonic notions.”

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8 Ibid.
authors’ refusal to consider this music and these musicians in celebratory, postmodern contexts reflected their intent to highlight the social and political realities of British Asian identity—often through a predominantly Marxist framework that critiqued British Asians’ institutional oppression within the context of governmental politics, as well as within the prevailing academic climate. They strived to articulate what they considered to be a hybrid and fractured musical discourse within British Asian music; and in so doing, define their roles as scholar-activists.

Their position constituted a clear response to the scholarship that had so far addressed the topic of British Asian music. During the early to mid 1990s, cultural studies scholars identified in British Asian and other “fusion” musics a rich site for illustrating their theorizations of displacement, marginality, and the disruption of Western rationality; for the most part, these scholars were more interested in the British Asian condition as an illustration of theoretical possibilities than as a site of investigation on its own.  

Attempting to outline the musicians’ politics, many of the essays in Dis-Orienting Rhythms focused on particular musicians, including the groups Cornershop, Asian Dub Foundation, Fun’damental, and Hustlers HC. The

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10 In most cases, musicians’ aesthetics were governed by their efforts to work with limited means and/or to integrate a variety of cultural experiences. The musicians had little if any interest in subverting master narratives, but many of them admitted that they felt at least somewhat silenced. They also believed that music constituted a viable way in which to transmit their ideas and beliefs. On the confluence of postmodernist and postcolonial studies, historian Gyan Prakash has noted, “While the trace of modernism’s transgressive impulses may well be discerned in poststructuralism’s decentering methods, the current prominence of these theories is better understood as a moment in the postmodern valorization of blurred genres and off-centered identities. The poststructuralist disavowal of the essentialist categories and modes of thought in the “Western tradition”...overlaps with the third-world scholarship’s combative stance with respect to the legacies of the application of this tradition to non-European cultures.” Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” Comparative Studies in Society and History 32, no. 2 (1990): 394-95.
young men who comprise these groups have consciously adopted the visual and musical roles of punk and hip-hop musicians. These roles help them project an overt masculinity that embodies their intentions to not be silent, passive victims and to make a great deal of noise—musically and politically. As Asian Dub Foundation (ADF) itself declares in one of its songs, “We ain’t ethnic, exotic, or eclectic! The only “E” we are is electric!” The music of Asian Dub Foundation, Fun’damental, and Hustlers HC is associated with lyrics that espouse explicit political views, not coincidentally ones that concur with the editors’ own views. Asian Dub Foundation represented a particularly appropriate example for depicting the political potential of music, for their music was concretely tied to progressive political actions on the ground. Asian Dub Foundation’s repeated performances and recording of the song “Free Satpal Ram” mobilized audience members into protesting against Bangladeshi immigrant Satpal Ram’s unjust imprisonment; persistent protests and a letter


writing campaign helped pressure the British Court System into releasing him after fifteen years of imprisonment.\textsuperscript{13}

The essays in \textit{Dis-Orienting Rhythms}' focus on the lyrics and on these bands' political activities in particular has understandably shaped most studies that have followed.\textsuperscript{14} Yet the experience of this music does not reside only within lyrics, or even within the realm of politics. The music produced by popular British Asian artists exists and is consumed in the form of sound, and for most people including myself, the sound of this music is what has attracted us to it. Focusing only on lyrics overlooks the many musicians who do not regularly incorporate written texts into their work and their music. All musicians make conscious decisions in their choice of musical language, and this language constitutes an essential component of the music as it is experienced by those who make this music, as well as those who listen to it—


for the structures, syntaxes, and associations of this musical language guide our interpretations and construct a discourse of its own. Audiences’ consumption and indeed participation within this music is intricately tied to their engagement with this musical form of discourse.

Any attempt to understand how people make sense of this music must deal directly with the aesthetics of the music itself. While a few authors have specified what genres and styles are referenced and integrated into British Asian popular music, they rarely address how musical genres and styles interact with each other in any detail. We usually do not learn whether these musical interactions complement or contradict one another, or whether the interaction remains constant throughout a piece of music. In this dissertation I concentrate on drawing out the significance of aesthetic details that have so far not been examined. I will define conventions and departures from those conventions in respective styles and genres of music; the act of associating music with a predefined category changes our perception of it altogether, for it provides the verbal terms that structure all our communicable thoughts on music. In many cases, particularly in the case of electronic music, the lack of an established vocabulary has discouraged most people from attempting to translate these unnamable sounds into words. In my own descriptions of these sounds, I do not intend to establish their fixed definitions but rather tease out their possible relationships to other elements of sound, and naturally, of music.

15 Geographer Tariq Jazeel is one of the first to contemplate the need to acknowledge the presence of sound as a crucial means of defining the identity of particular spaces. See Tariq Jazeel, “The World Is Sound? Geography, Musicology and British-Asian Soundscapes,” *Area* 37, no. 3 (2005).
Very few scholars writing on British Asian popular music identify themselves as musicologists, and this has led to a scarcity of material that acknowledges this music as an aesthetic experience. The corpus of scholarship on British Asian popular music so far has largely developed within the school of British Cultural Studies, associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and Stuart Hall. British cultural studies’ frequent focus on the issue of class relations reveals its Marxist foundation; yet it should be noted that British Cultural Studies has always struggled to distinguish its approach from traditional Marxist studies by drawing special attention to issues related to race, ethnicity, and gender.\(^\text{16}\) Stuart Hall himself has also argued against Adorno’s view of popular culture as a tool of ideological manipulation.\(^\text{17}\) Rather, Hall notes how people who consume popular culture can—in their own reinterpretations and appropriations of that culture—also be considered the producers of that culture.\(^\text{18}\)

This blurring of boundaries between consumers and producers directly relates to the rise of digital music production techniques, which have facilitated people’s ability to compose and produce music of their own design. Before these techniques were developed, it was generally assumed that in order to create music of a professional standard, one needed formal training in composition, formal training in studio production techniques, regular access

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\(^{17}\) Adorno expresses this view in multiple essays, of which the following is representative: Theodor W. Adorno, "Perennial Fashion—Jazz," in \textit{Prisms} (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).

to professionally equipped production studios, or a combination of these factors; but more recently, many successful musicians have launched their careers working on their laptops in their bedrooms. As Brian Eno has commented, “What has become interesting is the idea that artists are people who specialize in judgement rather than skill. And this, of course, reopens the question of who can use that job description.”

How to define the work, and even its producers, are indeed thorny questions within the context of contemporary electronic music. The musicians involved with the physical performance of particular musical elements in other forms of music are readily identifiable as significant participants; however, within electronic music, they are more often considered secondary to the “producer” of the work, who quite literally, is the person most associated with bringing a piece of music into being. Paul Théberge has noted, during the 1960s, multi-track recording redefined the act of composition as “essentially a process of layering (an ‘additive approach.’”) During the 1980s and 1990s, the public recognized the merging of the traditionally discrete categories production and composition to the extent that producers tended to become as well known as the stars they recorded.

Most of the musicians cited in the latter chapters of this dissertation do indeed work in this method with a layering or additive approach, with MIDI sequencing programs such as Cubase and Logic, to make their music. I quote Brian Eno’s comments that follow on how he approaches his own music at length because they to a large extent capture what I witnessed when watching

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19 Rapper Dizzee Rascal, winner of the 2003 Mercury Prize, is one of the most prominent musicians who fall in this category.


21 Ibid., 215, 16. Chapter 9, “Live” and Recorded,” is an especially helpful overview of these technologies and the tensions they generate between traditionally understood processes.
British Asian musicians State of Bengal and Asian Dub Foundation create music in their studios:22

[Y]ou can no longer come to the studio with a conception of the finished piece. Instead, you come with actually rather a bare skeleton of the piece, or perhaps with nothing at all. I often start working with no starting point. Once you become familiar with studio facilities, or even if you’re not, actually, you can begin to compose in relation to those facilities. You can begin to think in terms of putting something on, putting something else on, trying this on top of it, and so on, then taking some of the original things off, or taking a mixture of things off, and seeing what you’re left with—actually constructing a piece in the studio.”23

Eno’s “putting something on, putting something else on, trying this on top of it, and so on,” suggests a “vertical” approach, as opposed to a more linear, horizontal approach that develops a melodic idea through time. The producer often approaches music in the form of discrete motifs, which are then pieced together in any number of configurations.

Eno also notes that unlike the traditional composer, who is writing with an instrument in mind, the studio producer is “working directly with a material, working directly on a substance, and he always retains the options to chop and change, to paint a bit out, add a piece, etc.”24 They may or may not be responsible for producing the evocation of live performances on particular tracks; in many cases, after live tracks are recorded, performers of these tracks do not participate in the compositional process that incorporates their contributed tracks into a finished piece of music. The fact that most British Asian musicians conceive of the process of composition more in “vertical” terms than in “horizontal” terms at least partly results from these musicians’

24 Ibid.
relative distance from techniques associated with Western classical composition.

Thus these musicians are used to creating works, in a seemingly ad-hoc manner, from the materials around them—just as an artist would paint upon a canvas; those materials may include, for example, an excerpt from a spoken word sample, atmospheric effects generated on a synthesizer, and a live recording of a saxophone riff. We associate this type of compositional approach with contemporary musicians, but we also find example of this type of compositional approach in the 1920s work of Indian dancer Uday Shankar, who scored his dance performances in North America and Europe with music improvised to capture certain moods and expressions on whatever instruments and sound sources were available at the time.  

Previous studies have for the most part situated these British Asian popular musicians who surfaced during the 1990s as a singular phenomenon in themselves. The rise of these musicians is typically considered symptomatic of a number of political, economic, and technological factors. Some of these relevant political factors include Britain’s imperial past and the resulting history of South Asian immigration to Britain; Tony Blair’s election and the return of the Labor Party; and Britain’s weakening economy and general anxiety over its joining the European Economic Union. These factors coalesced to call Britain’s traditionally “English” notion of identity into

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25 Paul Gilroy describes this non-linear approach as one that relates to the European notion of “montage” and notes that this similarity tempts us to consider “montage” in European cultural terms as “an unprecedented type of realism, appropriate to the extreme historical conditions which form it.” But he warns that succumbing to this temptation reduces this music and other cultural works to historical artifacts and undermines our ability to consider them as aesthetic works. Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 104.
question—and at least momentarily—entertain the possibility of British Asians as British citizens. As David Morley and Kevin Robins have observed,

Evidently Mrs. Thatcher’s call for the story of empire to be taught in British schools without apology, as a story of the nation’s ‘civilizing’ mission in the world at large, would sit very uneasily with any concept of contemporary Britain as a genuinely multicultural society… The relations of power which have been responsible for the patterns of immigration and settlement that have laid the basis for Britain’s contemporary demographic profile cannot be so easily wished away.\textsuperscript{26}

This particular cultural ethos, as described by Morley and Robins, would suggest an environment particularly conducive to the emergence and establishment of British Asian diasporic musicians. In this dissertation, however, I situate the rise of the British Asian diasporic popular musician in a longer history that predates each of these categories. In particular, I identify how the circulation of music and South Asian musicians outside South Asia—particularly within the commercial sphere—has contributed to defining their national and cultural identities. The musicians discussed in this dissertation are all distinguished by their geographical distance from South Asia—a condition that defines them alternately as foreigners, cosmopolitans, citizens of South Asian culture, citizens of British culture, or a combination of those categories. As musicians who consistently make music that draws influences from a variety of genres, they provoke questions about how they and their music relate to established cultural identities. They cannot be located in any one specific tradition or any specific geographic locale.

As musicians associated with a South Asian identity, they are also involuntarily bound to a binary logic that demands that they express their

South Asian heritage in terms of “tradition,” and their connections to the West in terms of “modernity.” These terms of “tradition” and “modernity” are by no means diametric opposites; rather, they are mutually dependent on one another—a legacy of South Asia’s colonial history. Naoki Sakai notes that it is historical precedents that have taken place in Western Europe that define the conventional view of modernity. These precedents include parliamentary politics, industrialization, the division of the public and private, popular governments, the development of the "nation-state," technological innovation, and so on. As Sakai notes, "the West" thus functions as the cartographic (and imaginary) origin of modernity, from which modernity is seen to emanate to other areas of the world. Within this conventional view of modernity, technology is considered a “Western” invention that is then exported to the rest of the world; even if we can cite countless real-life examples that go against this view, it is difficult for people to accept that India could be a source of technological innovation because it is not part of “the West.” These people continue to use this imaginary dualism between “the West” and “non-West” because it constructs the very essence of how they conceive of their own identities.

British people’s understanding of their own identities, as well as that of British culture, originates in Britain’s own attempts to define itself in the context of colonialism. For example, Britain’s ability to govern India as a colony heavily depended on their ability to distinguish themselves, from Indians, their inferior subjects. As Gyan Prakash has observed, the British upon first arriving in India were initially challenged by their encountering


\[28\] Ibid.
multiple languages, religions, loyalties, "authoritative texts and social memories ...[,] sophisticated philosophies and discourses of knowledge." These systems of order had to be displaced if the British were to enforce their own system of order—of rule, and of modernity—over their subjects; these pre-existing systems were displaced through the act of their being designated as "traditions," and Indians were commanded to perform these traditions. The establishing of "traditions" was intrinsic to the British authorities’ ability to retain control over their colonial subjects. As Bernard Cohn notes, once the British defined anything as an Indian tradition or custom, they reduced complex systems of meaning into discrete codes, from which "any deviation... was defined as rebellion and an act to be punished.\textsuperscript{30}

As they performed "tradition," Indians defined their own identities as colonial subjects and further distanced themselves from their British rulers, who claimed to embody the realm of modernity. However, as Nicholas Dirks has explained, the British at the same time attempted to define modernity as a goal for colonial subjects to aspire to:

The colonizer held out modernity as a promise but at the same time made it the limiting condition of coloniality: the promise that would never be kept. The colonized would be seduced by the siren of the modern but never quite get there, mired necessarily (if colonialism was to continue to legitimate itself) in a "traditional world.\textsuperscript{31}

Thus the notion of Indians as the "bearer of tradition" existed not in a static state, but rather in a constant state of flux because the British needed to confine India within the realm of "tradition" while at the same time defining


“modernity” as an Indian ideal. Ensuring that the colonized would never achieve modernity however helped maintain distinctions between the colonizer and its subjects.

The distinction between “modernity” and “tradition” remains relevant even outside the context of colonialism, though it is now most commonly defined as the distinction between “first-world” and “third-world” cultures. The conventional markers of industrial development and progress that indicate the onset of modernity—urbanization, industrialization, capitalist economies, and so forth—now define the “first-world,” in opposition to the “third-world,” characterized by rural lifestyles, an emphasis on agricultural production, communal or feudal economies, and so forth.

While ruling powers consciously distinguished the terms “tradition” and “modernity” in colonial contexts, these terms’ meaning and relationship to one another of course shift within postcolonial contexts. “Tradition” cannot be discarded entirely as a newly decolonized country moves towards “modernity,” because doing so would negate respective countries’ claims to having distinct national cultures, and in turn, to sovereignty.32 Stuart Hall has noted how “tradition” functions in postcolonial (“third-world”) cultures:

“Colonized traditional cultures [have through their colonization by European cultures become] ‘conscripts of modernity’ [...] Tradition [in contemporary postcolonial contexts] functions less as doctrine than as repertoires of meaning. Increasingly individuals draw upon these frameworks and the attachments they inscribe to help them make sense

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32 Frantz Fanon describes the motivation to define national culture in the newly decolonized state as the second of three stages in a nation’s path to liberation. During the first stage, native artists demonstrate their competence in European forms; during the second stage, the native “decides to remember what he is” and recalls past customs in his own work. In the third stage, native artists “feel the need to speak to their nation” and instigate concrete social action against their oppressors. Frantz Fanon, “On National Culture,” in The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Présence Africaine and Grove Press, 1963), 16.
of the world, without being rigorously bound by and into them in every detail of existence.”33

As Hall points out, “tradition” continues to act as a crucial resource through which cultures distinguish their identity from that of other cultures. Our ability to recognize the presence of tradition depends on its nonconformity with practices that are associated with modernity; as such, it is—as it was in the British colonial context—anachronistic to the modern. Tradition’s transmission in the present is enabled through deliberate actions, which Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s has theorized as “heritage”:

Heritage … is the transvaluation of the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct. Heritage is created through a process of exhibition (as knowledge, as performance, as museum display); … Heritage is a mode of cultural production in the presence that has recourse to the past… Heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. 34

Following Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, one cannot reclaim “tradition”—despite many musicians’ claims to do so. Rather it is something that is actively produced in the present, but references what historian Partha Chatterjee has called “prior knowledges”—

knowledges that belong to an anachronistic present… [and] that one would have assumed had been overtaken by the history of scientific progress, except for the fact that they now have to be encountered horizontally, as adjacent formations that must be engaged in the process of translation.35

The “process of translation,” through which “prior knowledges” are made relevant to the present day, can be understood as referring to those processes previously outlined in Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s theorization of “heritage.” My own usage of the term “tradition” integrates this concept of active cultural production alongside the concept’s origin and function in a colonial context. In this manner, tradition does not connote an unchanging, fixed essence as much as it does a flexible sense of “difference,” defined by Homi Bhabha as the “mode of representation of otherness.”

This sense of “otherness” is integral to whether musicians are considered foreigners, cosmopolitans, active cultural citizens of a respective nation-state, or members of a national culture, and so forth. As Benedict Anderson has noted, the spread of modern nationalism is characterized by the ruling powers’ reactionary need to establish their power over their respective dominions, especially within the context of imperialism. Following Anderson, it may be argued that categories of national belonging are intrinsically linked to the nation’s control over its subjects, and in turn, its control over definitions of national culture.

While the terms “foreigner” and “cultural citizen” imply, respectively, exclusion and inclusion from the dominant culture of the nation-state, the term “cosmopolitan” is more difficult to locate with respect to the boundaries of the nation-state. Bruce Robbins has defined the term as follows:

“Beyond the adjectival sense of “belonging to all parts of the world; not restricted to any one country or its inhabitants,” the word cosmopolitan immediately evokes the image of a privileged person: someone who

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can claim to be a “citizen of the world” by virtue of independent means, expensive tastes, and a globe-trotting lifestyle... The gendered and classed privilege of mobile observation in a world of tight borders and limited visibility corresponds to a traditional self-image of criticism itself—criticism as disinterestedness, neutrality, objectivity.\textsuperscript{38}

As Robbins points out, it is widely accepted that to be a cosmopolitan is to have the social and economic agency to travel at will, and to imagine distinct cultures as “objects of artistic appreciation for [himself or herself,] the passing connoisseur.”\textsuperscript{39} The conventional view of the cosmopolitan thus renders it an elite category. Yet as James Clifford has noted, we should be suspicious of any declaration that “certain classes of people are cosmopolitan (travelers) while the rest are local (natives).”\textsuperscript{40}

People have, for many centuries, constructed their sense of belonging, their notions of home, of spiritual and bodily power and freedom, along a continuum of sociospatial attachments. These extend from local valleys and neighborhoods to denser urban sites of encounter and relative anonymity, from national communities tied to a territory to affiliations across borders and oceans. In these diverse contact zones, people sustain critical, non-absolutist strategies for survival and action in a world where space is always already invaded. These competences can be redeemed under a sign of hope as “discrepant cosmopolitanisms.”\textsuperscript{41}

My own use of the term “cosmopolitans” in the following chapters follows Clifford’s notion of “discrepant cosmopolitanism” to acknowledge that to be a cosmopolitan does not inherently mean that one is privileged.

All of the musicians discussed within this dissertation may be considered as at least partly embodying a diasporic experience, another


\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 254.


category of identity. To evoke the experience of diaspora is to describe respective people’s dispersal and separation from an “original” culture. Diasporic cultures were in the past seen as distanced from the cultures of their respective homelands and therefore tending to produce inauthentic, adulterated versions of homeland traditions; recent scholarship however has established that diasporic cultures are not only influenced by the homeland culture but, in many cases, help constitute the “homeland” culture itself.\textsuperscript{42} In my dissertation, I examine both contexts in which Indian and Bangladeshi identity has helped constitute the identity of their respective diasporic communities in Britain, as well as contexts in which cultural production outside India and Bangladesh has actively influenced those countries’ own concepts of their national cultures.

These musicians’ diasporic locations, coupled with their integration of South Asian elements with technological innovations, are almost universally interpreted as a merging of “Eastern” (South Asian) and “Western” cultures. As a legacy from colonial discourse, any “Eastern” element is construed to signify the articulation of “tradition,” in opposition to all else, which is designated as “Western,” and “modern.” The merging of these apparently distinct realms of East and West in this music is unsettling because the realms are ordinarily considered irreconcilable. This music’s ability to be marketed thus requires that this merging be framed in positive terms—leading to the vague and neutral term, “fusion music,” which usually implies that all potential conflicts between contradictory elements have been resolved.

My own use of the term alludes to its frequent application to the music described in this dissertation, but is also intended to preserve the possibility for conflict in a manner akin to Bhabha’s notion of the “Third Space”:

[where] the transformational value of change lies in the re-articulation, or translation, of elements that are *neither the One...nor the Other...but something else besides* which contests the terms and territories of both.⁴³

In my usage, “fusion” denotes contradiction and contestation—for juxtaposition of these distinct elements within the same musical space complicates conventional attempts to distinguish South Asia and tradition, from Britain and modernity, respectively. As shown in the chapters that follow, these musicians’ conscious integration of technological innovations and South Asian elements coupled with their diasporic location call their and their music’s identities into question, for the conventional view cannot reconcile South Asian identity and modernity.

Chapter 1 of my dissertation surveys the career of the Indian modern dancer Uday Shankar, a dancer who spent a great deal of his life outside India. Shankar was originally trained as a painter, but he improvised new forms of dance and music that he designated as representing Indian culture; launching his career in Europe and the United States, Shankar adopted his ideas to the availability of local resources including musicians, instruments, and set and lighting design. Shankar’s innovations in set design, music, choreography, and even film directing establish him as a modernist in the 1930s-1940s; his efforts define him as an “early” innovator *in India*, but if we consider him within an international space, he emerges at the forefront of European—as well as Indian—experiments in modernism.

Many scholars have recently pointed out that the actual origin of modernity was a product of the interaction between what is known as the West and non-West.⁴⁴ Timothy Mitchell notes however that this understanding still assumes the existence of the West and non-West, and suggests that we need to question not only where modernity first occurs, but also when it occurs.⁴⁵ Mitchell cites numerous examples in which conventional historians have overlooked events that would ordinarily signify the onset of modernity—if they were not located outside the traditional boundaries of “the West.” These events in a sense occur too early; they cannot be enfolded within a traditional understanding of modernity because they suggest that modernity may originate and emanate from locations outside the West.⁴⁶

I argue that Shankar’s role in creating new forms of music, especially while he was abroad, led to a particular conflict in his relationship to previously defined categories of national identity; this conflict was created by Shankar’s attempt to define Indian culture in a manner that fell outside officially sanctioned terms of “Indian tradition” and “Indian culture”—as they were understood in India, as well as abroad. The conflict between his music and an emergent Indian national culture reemerges in quite similar

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⁴⁶ Ibid., 7-8. Dilip Gaonkar has provocatively suggested that the difficulty associated with defining modernity elsewhere may be very much related to what he considers to be two opposing visions within Western modernity itself—namely, a Weberian societal/cultural modernity and a Baudelairian cultural/artistic modernity. Gaonkar notes, “In the Weberian vision, societal modernization fragments cultural meaning and unity. The Baudelairian vision seeks to redeem modern culture by aestheticizing it.” Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, “On Alternative Modernities,” Public Culture 11, no. 1 “Alter/Native Modernities” (1999): 8.
terms during the 1990s. Shankar’s performances projected his vision of Indian culture to the West, whereas more recent British Asian diasporic musicians alternately project their visions of South Asian culture, British culture, and British Asian diasporic culture, depending on the context. But British audiences most often consider them as projecting South Asian culture—just as Shankar did. That we can speak of diasporic musicians from India in the 1920s and in Britain in the 1990s in similar terms points to the persistence of particular categories—namely those of national identity, the effect of colonial history, and the racial categories that accompany it.

In Chapter 2, I move to Britain during the 1990s to trace another instance in which South Asian musicians are alternately included and excluded from certain categories of national culture. I expand upon the previous chapter’s discussion of tradition and innovation to examine how British Asian musicians were at times excluded from British national identity through their association with the category of world music. Particular confluences and disjunctions in political and commercial trends led British Asian musicians’ being posited as the exemplars of contemporary British society during one year, only to be excluded from that category the following year. Within this chapter I introduce how their use of technology and fluency in British popular music traditions was often considered paradoxical alongside their South Asian ethnicity—for anything Asian could not be reconciled with British modernity. Later I survey how their coverage in the media gradually proceeded to define them as British cultural citizens, cosmopolitans, or both. These musicians’ fluency with other cultures defined them positively in the contexts of the British government’s own attempts to define itself as a global economy, and contemporary fashions that fetishized
Asian culture. Yet when the political climate and fashion trends shifted, British Asian musicians’ cosmopolitanism became a liability as it came to signify their distance from a more inclusive notion of British culture, and British culture as a whole.

In Chapter 3, I examine the tensions between the positive construction of cosmopolitan “British Asian” identity, as defined in the previous chapter, and the reality of the British Bangladeshi communities in East London; the social problems in these communities were often interpreted as British Bangladeshis’ being burdened by their continuing ties to the culture of an “undeveloped” country. Like those included under the “British Asian” category, the indigent British Bangladeshi communities in London could also be seen to occupy a hybridized existence; yet their experiences of navigating multiple cultures were more rooted in modes of survival than privilege—following Clifford’s notion of “discrepant cosmopolitanism.” Two concurrent cultural events during July 1999—the Bangladesh Festival and the 000 exhibition of British Asian contemporary art at the Whitechapel Gallery—highlighted these differences, despite their attempts to use British Asian musicians to resolve them. The disconnect between the celebration of certain British Asian musicians, as discussed in Chapter 2, and the everyday experience of British Bangladeshi residents reveals the artificiality of British Asian identity, especially in its most marketable formulation.

In the last chapter, I explore the gradual disintegration of British Asian identity within the context of British Asian musicians’ participation on various music compilation recordings. I chart the first articulation of British Asian identity in early compilations and its progressive disappearance as a meaningful category. While British Asians themselves were hailed as
cosmopolitans themselves in early compilations, their sound and cultural identity have eventually come to function as an accessory to the marketing of “exotica” music—music that satisfies its listeners’ own desires to occupy the aesthetic position of the disinterested cosmopolitan.

In summary, this dissertation explores how music has participated in the defining of cultural citizenship over the last century. In doing so, I reveal how the seemingly contemporary experience of the South Asian diasporic musician in Britain is implicated in a longer history that complicates conventionally accepted divisions between cultures of the so-called “homeland,” and that of diasporic contexts, respectively. While these musicians’ biographical circumstances allude to these different contexts, their music presents yet another discursive space through which these musicians’ identities are constructed. A consideration of these musicians’ music offers additional layers of contradictions and tensions that are crucial to understanding how music itself acts upon the political and social construction of citizenship. As I trace how this additional discursive space of music interacts with biographical circumstances, I offer a more nuanced narration of these musicians’ circulation in public culture, which cannot be divorced from the sounds that they produce.