

Queering Solidarity: South Asian Diasporic Partnership with Black Liberation Movements in the US and the UK

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Abstract:

This article explores the linkages between queerness, racialisation, activism, and community care in the South Asian diaspora. It examines the organising work practiced by queer diasporic South Asians in the UK and the US. By understanding South Asian activist relationship to Black liberation activism, this article frames queer South Asian diasporic solidarity through contrasting articulations of joint struggle, allyship, and kinship in queer communities. To articulate this struggle, the article contrasts histories of South Asian racialisation, politicisation, and queerness in the UK and the US, and synthesises first-person activist accounts of modern-day queer South Asian activists in the diaspora. Finally, it argues that queer feminist South Asian activists are employing a model of queered solidarity with Black activists and Black liberation, though in differing forms in each country, that centres queer intimacies and anti-patriarchal modes of organising for liberation across queer communities of colour.

Introduction

What does it mean to write a revolutionary archive of South Asian diaspora? How does writing a counter-archive tell the story of the growing visibility of leftist South Asian politics in the diaspora and the disproportionate representation of queer South Asians in these spaces? How does this counter-archive trouble the narratives of rising Hindu fascism and diasporic aspirations to whiteness?

This article considers the possibility of multiracial solidarity that can transform systems, and the role of the varied, mult textured South Asian communities in the struggle for transformation and liberation in occupied Turtle Island (the currently bordered US) and the UK. These questions emerge from a series of conversations that I undertook with fourteen¹ diasporic and queer South Asian comrades, colleagues, and friends from 2019 to 2020. These conversations also built on a year of group participant observation conducted in over 10 multiracial, queer, and South Asian organising spaces in the US and the UK, where I was both researcher and member. I sought to document our activism and our hopes for transformation put into action. As mutual aid and direct action burgeoned in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and uprisings against police and state violence and for Black lives, many of my interlocutors were on the frontlines, in their communities and alongside Black organisers and other racialised communities fighting for justice. And so, these conversations are also framed with a hope for something different, for something better; they are laced with creativity and joy and exploration. We believe Black and Brown solidarity is possible, we believe anti-Blackness and casteism in the South Asian community and in our contexts can be dismantled, we can hear the dream of mutual liberation, and we act that dream into being.

These questions, and these reflections, also emerge from the past 10 years of my life as a queer Indian-American community organiser and activist. I am the child of South Indian immigrants with a history of leftist politics and family resistance to colonisation, but who also hold generational caste and class privilege. I am an organiser trained through the histories of Black excellence and visionary organising in Afrofuturist Detroit, in relationship with occupied and defiant Anishinaabe, Potawatomi, Odowa, and other indigenous freedom fighters; but I am also an outsider raised in its redlined and white-flight-birthered suburbs, far from South Asian and Black community both. I have been a transplant and an eager student seeking my queer, radical, and Brown lineage in Detroit, New York, Bombay, Delhi, London, and elsewhere, both an insider and outsider in these spaces. In my lifetime, I have seen the visibility of South Asian activists in the diaspora dramatically increase in the US, and have heard fabled stories of South Asian anti-racist activists working in collaboration with Afro-Caribbean and other racialised British communities in the UK for decades; but I have also seen the solidification of casteist, classist, anti-Black, and Islamophobic politics in many sectors of the South Asian (and particularly Indian) diasporas. These tensions in identity and belonging have been what pushed me to understand how queer South Asian ancestors and peers in diaspora were locating and defining themselves, in community and in struggle. This research comes from a desire for locating these counter-archives and counter-histories, for archiving our collective steps towards revolution, and most importantly, for connection: for building deep relationships across borders and nation-states and diasporas. This article seeks to reconcile

¹ See appendix for full table of interlocutors.

these stories and weave together these different contexts. It also seeks to address the presence of queer and trans diasporic South Asians at the heart of many of these fights. At its core, we asked together: how does solidarity between diasporic South Asian and Black communities in the US and UK manifest? How is queerness a central part of this solidarity? How does our queerness and our dreams for liberation link our struggles across our differing regional histories of racialisation and politicisation?

In weaving these stories together, it is clear that the margins must take the centre. Those leading organising for economic justice, prison and police industrial complex abolition, gender justice, and more are not just queer; they are from caste²-oppressed, working-class, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and/or other marginalised backgrounds. They often come from communities doubly excluded by the rise of Hindutva in the subcontinent, and the construction of “model” minorities in the diaspora. They are often women, non-binary, trans, and gender-expansive people. In diaspora, they are the margins of the margins. And the way that multiracial solidarity work emerges is informed by this marginality, though it takes different forms. But ultimately, a uniquely queer – and particularly queer femme and lesbian – model of South Asian diasporic solidarity does emerge. I argue that queer South Asian solidarities, in the US and the UK, combine elements of solidarity as joint struggle or comradeship, and contrasting modes of solidarity through allyship for Black liberation. This rise in racial justice organising and solidarity practices reflects increased leadership by queer, feminist, caste-oppressed, working-class, and otherwise marginalised diasporic SA. It shows an adoption of radical queer of colour politics in order to resist dominant constructions of queerness and South Asianness and instead open space for truly queering these identities and struggles.

These interviews also took place in the midst of crisis (Black-led uprisings against anti-Black state violence and police murder, and the COVID-19 pandemic). In these interviews, it was important to me to hold not only my positionality as a scholar, but also as a fellow activist and queer comrade. Many of my interlocutors were friends, comrades, or friends of friends, who knew me primarily as an activist and an organiser, or may have been wary of my role as a potentially extractive researcher commodifying the knowledge of organisers for publications and personal gain. Instead, I attempted to share my own analyses of the questions as well as my own experience with, history of, and questions about activism, South Asian identity, and queerness. Thara, one of my interlocutors, posed, “who is asking you these questions?” By sharing my own story, revealing the tensions I held about our shared organising and identities, and by posing questions not only from myself but that I had heard from other interlocutors, I sought to weave the interviews together by creating a wider conversation with multiple threads, where my interlocutors were asking me the questions as much as I was asking them.

Through this bidirectional practice, I hoped to open space for what Minai and Shroff (2019) call, in an earlier Kohl issue, “*yaariyan* (friendship), *gupshup* (a mode of speaking), and *baithak* (a mode of space)” (2019:np). Minai and Shroff describe these three methodological tools, all words deriving from South Asian languages, as “...queer feminist care as research practices...affective, conditional, and communal practices” (2019:np)

² A system of hierarchy and oppression, emerging from Hinduism in India but currently present throughout faith traditions in South Asia; see Zwick-Maitreyi et al (2018).

that allow for the development of queer and feminist intimacies through conversation. This also draws on the methodology of the one-on-one, a conversational tool used in community organising to share values, truths, and desires for a better world. Instead of a survey, or a unidirectional exchange of information from interlocutors (data) to interviewer (analyst), we batted questions back and forth, we mutually explored our own histories and identities, we laughed and snapped and sometimes sang and cried, and we revelled in being queer together. This was all part of an attempt to centre diverse queer diasporic women, non-binary, and trans voices, to displace the het-cis³ male gaze from diaspora studies, and to prioritise voices from the margin. I have particularly attempted to centre the voices of caste-oppressed, Muslim, working-class, and other marginalised queer diasporic Asians in order to reject casteist and colonial violence often perpetuated in Savarna explorations of subaltern activism (Soundararajan & Varatharajah 2015), and to push back against the homonormativity, casteism, and Hindutva of many South Asian diasporic queer spaces. This also included, in cases when requested by participants, retaining interlocutor names and organisations in the hopes that their work and the work of their organisations receive the visibility and respect they are due. Through the conversations detailed in this article, and through the participant observation spaces of organising meetings, protests, direct actions, trainings, events, concerts, art builds, and other community activities, my interlocutors and I co-produced knowledge and co-strategised our dreams and practices for liberation. We did so with the hopes that these conversations live outside of the page and outside of the isolation of Zoom calls and pandemic lockdowns, that instead these spaces would translate into in our actions in communities and on the streets.

Contextualising South Asian Diaspora

Expanding a counter-archive of current queer South Asian diasporic resistance requires a grounding in the history of South Asian diaspora in the US and the UK. As Raman (2003, np) puts it, “the ‘truths’ of any diasporic identity emerge for multiple historic reasons.” While histories in each country both overlap and diverge, there is a normative history of South Asian diaspora, and a counter-current, the counter-archive from which modern-day organising draws.

In both the national contexts I examined in this research, our histories of diaspora emerge from colonisation. The notion of South Asia itself emerged in large part from the conquest of European trade companies and the empire of the British Raj. In many ways, the growth of South Asian (or in the UK, “Asian”) political identity can be seen as a reflection of both a resistance to British partition and artificial borders, as well as a solidification of British views of the subcontinent as a homogenous Brown mass. South Asian diaspora members were racialised in the white North: they experienced “the attribution of meanings and values to different groups, based on physical appearance, skin colour, and other factors, both by formal institutional as well as social processes” (Mishra 2016:73-74). In diaspora, communities went from Tamil, Ugandan, Gujarati, and Guyanese (to name a few) to South Asian or Asian or Indian in the white public gaze, while in private they often reified caste and class oppression and geographic, regional, and faith hierarchies (Behera 2008,

³ Heterosexual and cissexual; see Butler 2011 and Pearce et al 2020.

Brah 1996). Simultaneous enforced homogenisation and internal subdivision within diaspora has had critical impacts on South Asian diaspora politics, internally and in relationship with other racialised communities. As community members shifted and redefined self-assigned identities in response to outside forces, they created what Brah calls “diaspora spaces” (1994:81) where they navigated culture and belonging both internally and in relationship to other racialised groups. In many ways, the political spaces that second generation South Asian communities today occupy epitomise these diaspora spaces, where they manoeuvre and contest identity, belonging, exclusion, and the possibilities of societal transformation through multiracial solidarity, in ways that are based on histories of relationships to whiteness, Blackness, internal subcontinental textures and differences, and shifting political views.

In the UK, large waves of South Asian immigrants in the 1950s were often working-class and often caste-oppressed, and were ghettoised into underfunded communities alongside Afro-Caribbean immigrants. As Hall (1994) describes, both Black and South Asian communities in diaspora in the UK experienced a sort of “creolisation” (1994:223) where identity and politics were both shaped through the experience of migration, the forces of white supremacy, and the development of community resistance to institutional and interpersonal racism and the oppression of racial capitalism. Gilroy (1993) describes how particularly South Asian, Black, and Indigenous communities were shifted by encounters with each other in diaspora to form entirely new cultures and ways of engaging with each other. One of the ramifications of these shifts included the emergence of Political Blackness, a movement with deep implications for modern-day British-Asian organising.

Political Blackness emerged in the 1970s as an early experiment in solidarity as shared struggle. It emphasised state violence and similar negative racialisations of Asian and Afro-Caribbean migrants (Sivanandan 1982). In *Cartographies of Diaspora*, Brah (1996) describes how her Gujarati-Indo-Ugandan identity shifted towards a militant Black political identity in response to both ghettoisation and demonisation, nurtured by a movement of united diasporic Black and Asian communities who supported each other and resisted white fascist violence. Through Political Blackness, second-generation Asian and Black youth waged varied campaigns and built diverse grassroots organisations challenging racialised policing, immigration, and labour systems from the 1970s-1990s, as Ramamurthy (2013) explores in *Black Star*. Feminist Political Blackness groups like AWAZ, Southall Black Sisters, and OWAAD articulated gendered theories of systems-change (Swaby 2014). Political Blackness movements embraced socialism and organised with decolonial Marxist movements globally (Ramamurthy 2013).

However, Political Blackness’s unity also rested on tensions. Many Asians felt Blackness did not adequately describe their cultural experience: instead, it was “a political colour that could only exist in a white world” (Mehmood 2008:5), and an enforcement of a negative racial identity that was centred on whiteness (Modood 1994). Communities formed ties through segregated worksites, and racially-specific organisations like the Asian Youth Movements often claimed Political Blackness but worked with little relationship to Black communities (Ramamurthy 2013). This allowed instances of anti-Blackness by Asians to go unchecked, leading to fragmentation under state pressure (Mehri 2018, Sivanandan 1982). Swaby (2014) documents the rupturing of “utopic” racial solidarity in feminist Politically Black spaces in ways that contest Asian identity.

Some Afro-Caribbeans called including Asian women within OWAAD a “mistake” (ibid.:22), and Asian women called conversations around who was Black a “broken record” (Lockhart 2009) that inhibited organising and political discussion. Lesbianism created further fractures: queerness was relegated to the private, and heterosexual Politically Black feminists argued that women could organise around queerness “autonomously” (OWAAD Draft Constitution, nd). Lesbian identities were “pared down or silenced in the name of black unity” (Mason-John & Khambatta 1993). These fault-lines inhibited Cohen’s (1997) queer solidarity and heightened divisions within Political Blackness, contributing to the movement’s ultimate fracturing by the state as multiculturalism overtook shared identity and “shattered the broad Black political identity” (Sivanandan 1982). As I explore later, this has impacted how modern organisers and activists view solidarity, with many wanting to both recognise the divergences of South Asian and Black British experience and the unique machinations of anti-Blackness, while also committing to broader-based multiracial solidarity centred more around class, faith, and other forms of identity than race.

Conversely, in the US, the model minority myth’s construction of Asians as hard-working, palatable, and closer to whiteness than Blackness inhibited solidarity between Asian and Black communities. This has caused modern queer South-Asian-American organisers to parse history for examples of South-Asian-American activism and racial justice collaborations in order to dismantle the model minority myth (Prashad 2000). In this way, South-Asian-Americans – particularly those with class and caste privilege – colluded with a system of racial hierarchy that allowed them to profit off of anti-Blackness. This allowed South-Asian-Americans to argue their whiteness in order to gain rights, like in Bhagat Singh Thind’s seminal 1923 Supreme Court case for citizenship where he argued that upper-caste status made him Aryan and therefore white (Snow 2004). Though Thind lost his case, the enshrining of South Asianness as in proximity to whiteness has translated into modern right-wing movements in the diaspora that support both, as Prashad (2012) calls it, “Yankee Hindutva,” as well as a proximity to whiteness that invisibilises anti-Blackness and structural racism in the US. Thara, a queer Indian-American organiser, told me that “the model minority myth kept us safe in exchange for our dignity” where white American rhetoric and desires stripped Asian of history and culture. S, a queer Indian-American advocacy worker, artist, and disability justice organiser argued that the myth was “told BY the model minorities...to oppress each other.”

These machinations have both historically and currently overshadowed working-class South Asian – mostly Muslim and caste-oppressed communities – who found often homes in Black-American and Mexican-American communities and practiced solidarity not only through politics but in their personal lives and relationships as well. Bald (2013) uncovers histories of Muslim migrants who settled in Black communities in *Bengali Harlem*, and Slate (2012) details solidarities between Quit India organisers like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Ram Lohia, and Black Power and Civil Rights activists like Bayard Rustin and W.E.B. Du Bois. Not coincidentally, much of the current organising emerging from South-Asian-American communities comes from similarly marginalised groups. Sikh drivers lead within New York’s taxi workers alliance, caste-oppressed young people propel digital organising against corporate casteism in Silicon Valley, Muslim South Asians push back against Islamophobia from 9/11 to the present, and most of the queer South-Asian-Americans I spoke with held at least one other form of marginalised identity alongside their queerness as key to their journey to activism and multiracial solidarity.

Queering Desi Diaspora: Homonormativity or Radical Politics?

All of the activists I spoke with in the US and the UK referenced queerness as playing a role in their pathway to organising and multiracial solidarity work in social movements. As Har, a transfemme Sikh-American organiser said, “I think it’s wild how overrepresented queer South-Asian-American are in organising spaces and it’s brilliant.” And while there were overlaps in the worlds the activists I sought to talk to wanted to build, they approached their organising through multiple different vehicles.

But Nik, a British-Indo-Ugandan organiser, complicated the role of queerness in Desi politics. They told me a story about encountering rich queer Desis who “only learn about racism in college but have servants at home” and are more interested in a corporate form of queer Desi neoliberalism, what they called the “Hillary Clinton LGBT trademark gays.” So what role does queerness play in troubling and countering normative South Asian diaspora, and in opening space for movements?

Gopinath argues that queerness fundamentally shifts the racialisation and politicisation of diaspora space. In her work on queer Asian diasporas in the US and the UK, *Impossible Desires*, she writes:

Suturing “queer” to “diaspora”...becomes a way to challenge nationalist ideologies by restoring the impure, inauthentic, nonreproductive potential of the notion of diaspora. (2005:11).

Queerness can function as a tool in Asian diaspora to reject nationalism, particularly Hindu fascist nationalism, and to reject attempts to assimilate Asian into the white nation. Gopinath adds a gendered lens where queer diasporic femininity disrupts “heteronormative and patriarchal structures of kinship” (ibid.) alongside nationalism through feminist practices.

Similarly, Muñoz (1999) and Anzaldúa (1987) argue that queerness, and particularly lesbianism and queer femininity, open a liminal space across bordered cultural worlds. By disidentifying, as Muñoz says, with dominant Asian diaspora, and by operating in Anzaldúa’s nepantla (a Nahuatl word for in-betweenness), queer South Asian activists subvert dominant cultural norms, encode new meaning and identity through performance, and find home in the in-between of borders and cultures through mestizaje.

Of course, Nik’s statements on classism and casteism within Desi queer spaces are critical. As Puar (2006) argues, queers – including Desi queers – can still subscribe to the project of the nation-state, whether in service of Hindu fascism or the US’s and UK’s war on terror. Similarly, Dasgupta et al (2018) and Rao (2020) describe how upper-class and upper-caste South Asian queers in the UK reaffirm norms of consumption and classism, determining entry into friendship and even activist circles on class markers and cosmopolitanism. And Adur (2017) reveals how the rise and fall of several queer Desi organisations in the US are linked to internal continuations of class, caste, and other divisions, often pushing trans, caste-oppressed, and working-

class South-Asian-American activists to the periphery. But through this also emerged groups that have particularly centred those doubly marginalised in Desi and in queer communities. Lacking access to homonormative spaces due to faith, class, migration story, caste, or otherwise opened space for more radical political homes. Through activism, many have adopted Muñoz's (1999) form of queer disidentification from the state and from dominant cultures. Instead, they use queerness as Ahmed's (2006) anti-normative, destabilising, and hopeful way of seeing the world, pushing back against caste and class and Hindu and Indian dominance in normative Desi spaces. Thus, through marginality, queerness can still create, as Gopinath describes, ways of destabilising normative diaspora and politics.

Destabilising through queerness also draws from radical queer-of-colour and queer Black feminist politics. Resisting both homonationalism and homocapitalism, the queer diasporic activism I engage with mobilises "...a politics where nonnormative and marginal position[s]...[are] the basis for progressive transformative coalition work" (Cohen 1997:438), sparking racial solidarity amongst "all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics" (ibid.:440). Modern diasporic Asian activists also see struggles as interlinked. Echoing the Black feminist Combahee River Collective, activists "...struggl[e] against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking" (1983: 272). Priyanka told me that "it doesn't matter" which context she's in, that instead her fights for liberation in housing justice in the US, anti-Hindutva organising in India, or migrant justice in Hong Kong were linked both through her queer and Brown identities and through her organising's shared targets of racial capital and heteropatriarchy. For modern queer Asian activists, liberation is unattainable without racial, gender, class-based, and queer justice, meaning they must organise intersectionally across diverse identities (Crenshaw 1990).

Finally, queer South Asian activism can be viewed through a lens of queer erotics, or the pleasure in activist work, queer love, and sexuality that Lorde (1981) describes as fundamental to Black-American lesbian resistance. In describing her organising that centres queer and trans people of colour's mental health, Nik said, "in neoliberal organising, solidarity becomes this process, this thing, but really it's about I want to feel love, and I love you, and I want to feel intimacy." Preet, a queer femme Sikh-American political educator, told me about coming to activism through "a really queer space where we discussed things like gender, sexuality, and solidarity, and [it ended] with a big party where basically everyone hooked up with each other." Preet and Nik both spoke deeply about the importance of finding and building relationships of pleasure and joy with queer South Asians in these spaces, spaces that balanced time for political sharpening and activism alongside dancing, celebration, and community care. Kukké and Shah (1999) talk about the founding of SALGA, a queer South Asian collective in NYC, not only in opposition to straight Desi spaces but in cultivation of spaces of queer Desi laughter and joy as well, and Maira (2012) and Sharma (2010) describe the importance of queer Desi dance parties on the development of leftist politics and multiracial activism for second-generation South-Asian-Americans in the early 1990s. These ideas of melding joy alongside political struggle also figure heavily in Brown's (2019) *Pleasure Activism*, which many of my interlocutors referenced. Queerness in diasporic Asian resistance is both a sexuality, identity, and politics, shifting world-view (Ahmed 2006) and organising practices (Lorde 1981, Brown 2019) to embrace rage, joy, relationship, and healing together. Through building these relationships with other diasporic queers of colour in the UK and US, queer

diasporic Asian grow new politics through a solidarity of queer-of-colour kinship that recognises that gender, sexuality, race, and diasporic home go hand in hand.

Diasporic South Asian Solidarity in Theory and Practice

As these conversations took place in the midst of racial justice uprisings across the UK and the US under the banner of Black Lives Matter (BLM), most of the conversations I had with queer South Asian diaspora organisers turned to the theme of South Asian participation in multiracial solidarity and efforts against anti-Blackness. However, echoing the divergent themes between British-Asians participating in Political Blackness, versus the model minority myth firmly ensconcing South-Asian-Americans away from (and above) Blackness, the ways that activists described their multiracial solidarity work took divergent forms, sometimes in the same conversation but in different circumstances.

In the UK, most of my interlocutors emphasised that they did not identify with Political Blackness, and instead saw modern South Asians holding a different – and in some cases, privileged – history of racialisation. Samia, a queer British-Bangladeshi activist who organises in feminist and abolitionist spaces called political blackness “a minefield, a mess.” She reflected particularly on learning about OWAAD and its demise as an attempted queer and feminist Politically Black coalition: “it fell apart...it was super homophobic...these are not concepts that anyone is trying to revive in my organising today.” Similarly, Trisha, a queer British-Indo-Guyanese organiser active in prison abolition spaces said that political blackness, in her experience, was “something that comes up to cause problems.” In her work, she said, “abolition... is about white supremacy and specifically anti-Blackness so at the centre of the work is Black people and solidarity.” Samia and Trisha’s words emphasise a politics that echoes an Afropessimist world view, prominently articulated by Wilderson (2006), that sees anti-Blackness as a distinct and unique manifestation of racism that cannot be equated to institutional or interpersonal racism against South Asians or other racialised groups. Trisha’s specificity that her abolitionist work is about anti-Blackness shows a growth of solidarity as allyship (Erskine and Bilimoria 2016) in some British multiracial contexts. In a model of allyship, South Asians and other communities see themselves as holding privilege that Black British communities do not. They hence act as allied, but separate groups in movements. Amar, a queer and genderfluid British Sikh organiser went further to say that Asians had had “weaponised anti-Blackness” to be “closer to whiteness,” facilitating “wealth creation” by choosing “Apne (ours)” over “wider solidarity.” In Samia, Amar, and Trisha’s assessments, while histories of racial solidarity between Asian and Black communities existed, its fragmentation along identity lines, and rising depoliticisation and class mobility for Asian communities, meant that modern solidarity had to take radically different forms.

This framing of solidarity as allyship draws heavily from the legacy of white anti-racist organising, invoking the legacy of white privilege through constructs like McIntosh’s (1989) “invisible knapsack,” Steele’s (2006) “white guilt,” and DiAngelo’s (2018) “white fragility.” Importantly, while many caste-privileged Indian-Americans used these sort of formulations in posts about BLM and anti-Blackness on social media, and while the rhetoric of prominent Indian-American organisers like Iyer (2020) asked South Asians to confront their

own privilege first, the queer British-Asian activists didn't invoke their own privilege. Instead, through their on-the-ground activism, they described seeing themselves acting in a shared struggle for a shared cause, but staying cognizant of the different positionality they held in these struggles as mostly working-class South Asians. For Samia this took place in her work against detention centres for children deemed problematic at school, for Trisha this manifested in her work against locally slated prison developments, for Amar it was through bartender organising and queer mutual aid at BLM protests, and for Nik that solidarity originated in the queer and trans people of colour-focused mental health peer support gatherings that their collective organises monthly. In many ways these represent a form of meshing allyship with a solidarity of shared struggle. Their actions and words invoked the history of leftist Asian-American activism (Bae and Tseng-Putterman 2019): they honoured the legacy of Sivanandan (1981) and others' articulations of the revolutionary potential of political blackness, but in a more nuanced way that recognised the varied positionalities of British-Asians.

In a slightly different formulation of solidarity, Dalit and caste-oppressed, working-class, Muslim, and other marginalised South-Asian-American activists emphasised the histories of shared struggle that their communities held with Black liberation struggles. In describing how her Sikh and South Asian identity figured in youth organising and prison abolition organising work, Har told me, "I was taught history that was literally Black and white...[but] I now know the legacy of Asian participation in the racial justice movement." Similarly, when I spoke with Haleema, a popular educator with SA4BL (South Asians for Black Lives), she articulated the importance of uncovering hidden histories to find legacies of solidarity: "we had to shed our complexities to fit into the MMM, so [we]...focus on South-Asian-American history first. Then...institutional and interpersonal anti-Blackness, and finally solidarity." For both Har and Haleema, this process of uncovering history reveals moments of shared struggle, hence tracing the current spaces for working together in shared resistance to white supremacy.

Robin D.G. Kelley (2019) writes about uncovering shared or joint struggle as a process of making or building alternate worlds. Groups may struggle with one another, but they are linked through ideology, dialectics, and praxis (Kelley 2019). Gramsci's (2000) united and popular fronts also invoke this joint struggle, where varied groups have diverse identities and employ diverse tactics, yet collaborate through shared identity in struggle as "comrades" (Robinson 2000). Sasha, a Sri Lankan-American organiser with CAAAV, a pan-Asian group in New York, explicitly invoked this idea of comradeship, united front building, and world-making when discussing the solidarity that their group employed with the family and supporters of Akai Gurley after his murder by Peter Liang, a Chinese-American policeman:

Members publicly spoke out that [Peter Liang] killed Akai Gurley and should be held accountable and that was at huge cost to them. That's a consistent practice that we try to work on and keep building. In our solidarity work, it's about a power analysis, what it looks like to build power in a public housing complex where our folks' neighbors are black and brown most of the time.

Sharmin, a queer Bangladeshi-American organiser with caste abolitionist group Equality Labs, also invoked this notion of building power due to shared struggle. She articulated how the model minority myth allowed those with pre-existing class and caste privilege in the subcontinent to consolidate power and wealth due to immigration reform that privileged technically-skilled workers. Conversely, for Dalit Americans, she said,

Dalit leaders have always had deep relationships with Black leaders...from the Dalit Panthers, to Ambedkar, to collaborations between Black and Dalit feminists against police and caste violence...[these are] authentic relationships that weren't transactional but were rooted in transformative solidarity...they allowed us to jump into formation to do abolitionist solidarity work with M4BL and BLM when moments of atrocity arose.

In her analysis of Dalit and Black women's oppressions, Paik (2014) describes solidarity between these groups as margin to margin and therefore natural. Sharmin's words describe how this solidarity moves into action, from actions lifting up feminicides of Black and Dalit women under the banner of Say Her Name, to actions disrupting the status quo of caste oppression and police violence. Sharmin also echoed how these moments of solidarity through class and caste oppression similarly figured in the case of Asian worker-organisers splitting off from upper-caste-led domestic violence support organisation Sakhi (Das Gupta 2006), or upper-caste restaurateurs' abusive labour practices of Dalit and working-class Asian (ASATA 2009), where marginalised South Asian migrants found more solidarity with Black-Americans than with privileged South-Asian-Americans.⁴ While privileged South-Asian-Americans aligned themselves with whiteness and professed the importance of allyship in solidarity today (Iyer 2020), marginalised South-Asian-American trouble the model minority myth to create spaces for solidarity as joint struggle with Black-Americans against white and upper-caste supremacy alike. This joint struggle utilises political education as well to acknowledge and dismantle the model minority myth's roots in anti-Blackness, as Haleema noted. It also recognises, as Sharmin said, that when supporting Black-led struggle, South-Asian-American must also practice "solidarity as goodwill...following the leadership of Black organisers" where "ego has to take a step back." Like Samia and Trisha, Sharmin's words show the existence of South Asian solidarity that shifts through reflexivity on South Asian positionality in Black versus multiracial spaces. South Asian diasporic activists both recognise the importance of dismantling anti-Blackness, as well as their shared stake in the destruction of white supremacy and racial capitalism, and balance both in their practices of solidarity.

Hybrid Solidarity: Joint Struggle and Allyship from the Margins

In abolitionist organising work in the UK, Samia, a queer Bangladeshi activist, noted that prison abolition was "led throughout its history by Black women" and hence felt that allyship through "taking a back seat, letting others lead" would be more appropriate. In practice, she described how Sisters Uncut, a multiracial group, centred the experiences of incarceration of Black women and other racialised women, and pointed to cases

⁴ Sharmin documents more of these moments of resistance in her article on Bangladeshi-American organising: <https://www.jamhoor.org/read/2021/5/9/a-tale-of-two-south-asian-americas>

like the death of Sarah Reed in Holloway Women's Prison as a key reason why the group was organising around the transformation of the prison site after its closing.

At the same time, both Samia and Laxmi, a lesbian British-Indo-Ugandan, noted their involvement in organising around the Grenfell⁵ housing fire in the UK as an example of joint struggle with Black communities and activists, but one that also brought in other communities who were implicated through class. Laxmi said, "In the ends, it's about class...Blacks and Asians work together, but there's Turkish, Algerian, others involved." Instead, class – the experience of growing up in ends – figured heavily for organisers from both countries as reasons for joint struggle with Black communities. Har, a trans-femme Punjabi-Sikh-American, said class "polarised me around the model minority myth." Nik, a trans-femme British-Indian agreed that "my mom not speaking English, not being integrated, being broke, I saw that as a class thing." Their words recall Cohen's emphasis on working-class Black and Brown queers in radical queer organising, of the centrality of welfare queens and punks to pushing agendas that were revolutionary rather than reformist. The intersections of class and race were what led Cohen's activists – "welfare queens and punks," sex workers, unhoused trans women and youth – as well as modern-day South Asian diasporic activists to multiracial solidarity. Nik described being agitated into organising by "falling into a house of QTPOC organisers" who were not Asian, and applying these learnings radical politics to her Desi community work later. Similarly, Sasha, a queer Sri-Lankan-American, described learning both from working-class Black and Desi organising in the US, like the Taxi Worker Alliance, and applying it to her solidarity work against prison expansion and in working-class pan-Asian communities. Trisha said intersecting race, class, and queer identities (Crenshaw 1990) moved her from "reformist to abolitionist" in her organising.

Many US-based groups also use political education to build joint struggle with Black liberation movements and to grow the capacity of their membership to dismantle anti-Blackness. DRUM-NYC, a working-class, largely Muslim-Asian group, connects South-Asian-American experiences of subcontinental state violence and Islamophobic surveillance to American institutional anti-Blackness. Like the AYMs, DRUM's director Fahd described needing "solidarity with our own" to create "solidarity with others" during a panel on Asian and Black grassroots solidarity. Solidarity led DRUM members to reject anti-bullying legislation that would increase policing in schools and thereby harm Black comrades. According to Sasha,

Transformative Solidarity from DRUM⁶ distinguishes between showing solidarity, in a transactional way, versus embodying it, versus whole communities making decisions at real material cost to them...at CAAAV, we build analysis and relationships such that our members are saying, we won't take this thing that's beneficial for us if it's harmful for other people.

⁵ See Bhandar, B., 2018. Organised state abandonment: The meaning of Grenfell. *Sociological Review Blog*.

⁶ DRUM's graphic on levels of solidarity: <https://dl.airtable.com/attachments/aba646c0ef2f002648a1e47153f191fd/940a0308/4LevelsofSolidarity.JPG>

Transformative solidarity represents a hybrid solidarity: in the levels of solidarity that DRUM articulates, from symbolic to transactional to embodied and finally to transformative, is the rejection of the “market exchange” (equal repayment for tactical support) that Kelley indicts in failed attempts at solidarity. But Sasha’s articulation of embodied and transformative solidarity including sacrifice or not taking what is beneficial also shows elements of allyship in its rejection of privilege or ill-begotten gains. Instead, these groups conceptualise South-Asian-American solidarity as an attempt to engage in worldmaking that rejects all of anti-Blackness, Asian profit from anti-Blackness, and Asian oppression from white supremacy.

In the US, 2020’s BLM movement politicised many privileged South-Asian-American who were silent during its 2013-2017 uprising, and yielded outpourings of “#SouthAsians4BlackLives” social media posts, artwork, and upper-caste-led trainings on the MMM. Upper-caste South-Asian-American leaders exhorted South-Asian-Americans to dismantle anti-Blackness (Iyer 2020) but disregarded caste. Thenmozhi Soundararajan (2020), the leader of Equality Labs, and other Dalit and Muslim South-Asian-Americans issued blistering rebuttals exposing privileged South-Asian-Americans’ silence on Hindutva, the Kashmiri occupation, caste-violence, and working-class South-Asian-American experiences. Har explained, “it’s easier...for South-Asian-American to stand in solidarity with Black Lives, because...the blame is on white supremacy,” whereas “caste involve[s] challenging family, customs.” These rebuttals reveal splits. Instead of allyship, queer, Dalit, Bahujan, Muslim, and working-class South-Asian-Americans practice “solidarity from the margins.” This often begins in Asian-specific groups but culminates in united front coalitions with Black-led organisations.

Other queer Asians join multiracial issue-oriented organisations in another form of hybrid solidarity that melds joint struggle and comradeship with indictments of symbolic, homogenising allyship. Priyanka, a queer Asian-American, said, “it doesn’t matter whether I’m in India fighting for my identity...or here doing Black solidarity work organising with renters...colonialism and empire are oppressing my people too.” Priyanka’s analysis of internationalism and class struggle through her work in multiracial organisations underlines what brings many queer South Asians to multiracial and BIPOC organising spaces: they see the tentacles of racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy in their lives as well. Unlike privileged Asian-American spaces replete with “toxic heteropatriarchy...elitism and Brahminism,” she found “transformative justice, queer leadership” in multiracial issue-organising. As queer and lesbian diasporic Asians describe, solidarity deriving from privileged allyship does not transform systems, whereas joint struggle solidarity from the margins does.

In the UK, activists described taking up differing spaces in organising based on their positionality in the space. At Sisters Uncut, Samia described “a vocal contingent of people of colour,” where she felt “solidarity [through] tackling whiteness in the group,” describing a sense of joint or shared struggle in attempts to shift Sisters’ multiracial space. At CAPE (Campaign Against Prison Expansion), however, Samia and Trisha felt Asian allyship was more appropriate. In practice, this meant CAPE chose campaigns that centred Black people’s experiences in the prison system, and non-Black allies, including both Asians and white activists, contributed labour but took less visibility in press or direct actions. Similarly, at LGSM, Amar said solidarity included “self-interest” and “smashing borders,” but in practice, LGSM took on allyship roles like logistics and fundraising to support Black-led organising. Unlike in Political Blackness, while Asians and Black activists work side-by-

side, Asians, like whites, are sometimes seen as allies against prisons and state violence – not equally-affected comrades.

Nik described her South Asianness as “coming out” of her queerness. Echoing Rao’s (2020) homocapitalism, she said “cynical” older Asian activists, “normativeness in South Asian culture,” and “queers in suits working for capitalism” disillusioned them from many Asian-specific spaces. Yet, Nik described Facebook groups like “Desis Organise,” “DesiQ,” and “Asian Solidarity – BLM,” which emerged after the murder of George Floyd, as being led by queer Asian friends. Nijor Manush, a British-Bangladeshi group, and Wretched of the Earth, a BIPOC-only climate justice collective, often employ queer and feminist politics. In organising against PREVENT, a British counter-terrorism system that disproportionately surveils British Muslims (Qureshi 2015), Laxmi said, “a lot of people involved are queer, of all racial backgrounds.” She said the “visible critique of the state” and “anti-colonial and anti-imperial organising” created a sense of “home,” echoing Gopinath’s (2005) articulation that normative Asian spaces lacked this. Instead, queer British-Asians find “home” in multiracial – and often queer – spaces that centre radical queer politics over Asianness.

Queer Kinship and Solidarity

Many of the activists I spoke with articulated a form of solidarity that draws explicitly from their queerness, supporting the existence of uniquely queered South Asian solidarity. Har posited that the model minority myth makes QT-South-Asian-Americans “relegated to the sidelines.” S said, “my queerness came before my South Asianness” and first led them to organising. For Thara, “being Queer and South Asian [includes] losing a feeling of belonging” that was connected to “carv[ing] my identity as POC on the heels of queer black feminism.” Particularly, Lorde’s (1981) queer solidarity offers an embodied struggle that mobilises shared anger and passions at shared targets. Thara’s articulation of finding political and cultural home outside of normative South Asian diasporic space due to her queerness echoes Gopinath’s indictment of heteronormative diasporic South-Asian-American space and Maira’s analysis of South-Asian-American relationships to Black culture. MH, a queer Pakistani-American advocacy worker and activist said, queer South-Asian-Americans being “more bold and visionary...comes from the demands of Black folks.” She referenced the growth of queer and trans South Asian groups like the South Asian Queer and Trans Collective and KhushDC alongside Black and queer activist groups like BYP100. MH and Thara’s words support that queer Asians are more likely to find intimacies in queer-of-colour spaces, out of which solidarity grows. As Preet, a queer Sikh-American activist said, “queer solidarity...[is] relationship-building.”

Many of these queer-of-colour spaces emphasise community care as solidarity. As Amar said, “We care for each other as a point of principle...that’s what we think of as activism.” Amar, Trisha, Nik, Har, and others mentioned healing justice, cultural organising, and care work as central to their activism. They described doing this alongside Black comrades and friends through a queer lens that centred care over destruction, invoking Lorde’s (1981) queer erotics and Brown’s (2019) pleasure activism. Amar said, “many of us have lost support networks,” and “the construction of found families” to guard against “dangers [like] homelessness, mental health” was also a way to “reject kinship systems in South Asia...modelled on heteronormative

structures.” Trisha agreed that “queer people have to build our own families,” which for her “was POC and usually queer.” The bonds that Amar and Trisha described forming with queer Black activists at groups like LGSM and Sisters were examples of building lesbian and queer-of-colour family as political acts and solidarity itself. For Nik, “finding care work” allowed her to be “revolutionary” because “trans survival is a radical act.” Practicing care with queer Black comrades is politics and solidarity itself for Asian activists, echoing Brown’s (2019) treatise on the politics of feeling good in political work. Through these QTPOC care spaces, queer Asians reimagine family and centre health as, as Amar said, the “liberation that we need.”

These spaces for lesbian and queer-of-colour care happen across activist issue-campaigns. In the US, Sharmin works in caste abolition, Har in anti-school-to-prison-pipeline youth organising, Thara in anti-oppression facilitation, Priyanka in housing, S. in disability justice. In the UK, Amar focuses on queer-led anti-deportation work, Trisha on prison abolition, Samia on abolition and survivor support work, Nik on arts and culture, care, mental health, and Laxmi on anti-surveillance and racial justice spaces. Speaking to this breadth, Sasha clarified, “being queer in non-queer spaces...doesn’t feel invisibilising,” but was “strategic” to prevent “utopian bubbles getting crushed.” Priyanka added, “queerness...informed how I practice solidarity...to break systems down, vision and dream.” As Gopinath (2018) articulates, these queer visions are at the heart of queer Asian solidarity. Har concurred:

Patriarchal organising treats the work like it is war. Queerness shows how organising is also a project of conceiving, creating, birthing a new transformative world...queer people always have had to do that. There is more camaraderie and intimacy to organising brought by queerness, more dreaming and visioning.

This visioning lends itself to solidarity with a Black liberation movement that is unapologetically queer and femme, and also oriented around QTPOC activism as pleasure rather than martyrdom. As Thara said, “I exist because my ancestors had the audacity to exist...remembering [that is] integral to being a queer Asian because we were queer before we were colonised.” Queerness is the vehicle for solidarity between South-Asian-American and Black activists through a tapping into Asian history, an acknowledgement of shared marginality, and a centring of visions of transformative queer liberation.

Conclusion

Racial justice activism and solidarity by diasporic queer South Asians differ between the US and the UK. While Political Blackness first yielded joint struggle and then devolved into multiculturalist splits, triggering modern movements that often avoid Asianness as a central identity, the model minority myth privileged South Asians but is being troubled by modern-day Dalit, Muslim, working-class, and queer South Asians. Beyond these differences, there exists a queer diasporic South Asian solidarity, centred on kinship, shared struggle, and care.

Through the process of intimate conversations with comrades and friends, held in the midst of dual crisis, my interlocutors and I were able to delve into the ways that queerness, racialisation, and dreams for societal transformation hold together in our lives. Whether through the political education work in groups that activists such as Sasha and Haleema work in, the abolitionist organising that Trisha, Har, and Samia support, or the spaces for queer South Asian and Black joy and visions that Nik, Thara, and Preet nurture, modern-day queer South Asians are choosing racial solidarity over aspirational whiteness. Through their activism and their queerness both, they chart paths outside of both normative diaspora and the demands of the white and Western nation-state. They embrace and lead with their marginalities, mobilising solidarity through class, faith, and caste to find common experiences with Black communities in diaspora. But they simultaneously recognise and challenge anti-Blackness – and its linkages to casteism – in South Asia and its constructions in the diaspora, finding moments to act as comrades while also employing allyship and dismantling racial hierarchies. And through experiences of exclusion and ostracisation, they discover alternate political homes and chosen families, built by bringing the legacy of radical Black and marginalised South Asian activists and scholars to the centre. This work of activism, which takes many forms and shifts in multiple contexts, holds kinship, intimacies, and relationship-building at the centre. This means solidarity emerges out of deep care, rather than transactional exchanges; across contexts, it emphasises the possibility of transformation from heteropatriarchy and racial patriarchy through building alternate worlds in the present. Ultimately, this activism “queers” South Asian solidarity and identity both – by expanding the space for South Asian radical politics, and highlighting the histories of radicalism throughout South Asian diasporic and subcontinental political history, this queered solidarity builds space for multiple stories. Queering South Asian solidarity through multiracial grassroots activism represents a shifting of Asian politicisation and racialisation away from Hindutva, white supremacy, and fascism, towards an emergent queer and feminist Asian politics of anti-normativity, kinship, abolition, and joy.

Appendix

Full list of interlocutors and stated identities and organisational affiliations

Name	Country	Identities Voiced	Types of Activism Mentioned	Organizational Affiliations Shared
Amar	UK	Genderfluid, queer, Sikh, Punjabi	Worker / labour, queer, Sikh	LGSMigrants, Sikh Socialists, South London Bartenders Union
Nik	UK	Trans-femme, queer, Indo-Ugandan	Healing justice, mental health, arts & culture, QTPOC	Misery, DesiQ, Arts organising, UK QTPOC Hardship Fund
Samia	UK	Cis-femme, queer, Muslim	Anti-state and domestic violence, prison abolition	Sisters Uncut, Campaign Against Prison Expansion (CAPE)
Laxmi	UK	Lesbian, Indo-Ugandan and Indian	Anti-racism, anti-fascism, anti-Islamophobia, anti-state and domestic violence	Sisters Uncut, anti-PREVENT, other anti-racist and anti-fascist spaces
Trisha	UK	Cis-femme, queer, Indo-Guyanese	Prison abolition, anti-state and domestic violence, anti-oppressive facilitation	CAPE, Sisters Uncut, Cradle Collective
Har	US	Trans-femme, queer, Sikh	Prison & police abolition, queer & trans justice, South Asian, arts & culture	South Asian Solidarity Initiative, YKR
MH	US	Cis-femme, queer, Pakistani, Muslim	South Asian, advocacy, anti-Islamophobia	SAALT, Justice for Muslims Collective
S	US	Non-binary, queer, Tamil	South Asian, advocacy, arts & culture, disability, queer & trans	SAALT, various queer & arts spaces
Preet	US	Cis-femme, queer, Sikh	Political education, South Asian, BLM solidarity	South Asians 4 Black Lives, Bay Area Solidarity Summer
Thara	US	Cis-femme, queer, Christian	Anti-oppressive facilitation, pan-Asian, arts & culture, BLM solidarity, queer & trans	The Wildfire Project, 18 Million Rising, Ohio Students Union, YKR
Sasha	US	Non-binary, queer, Sri Lankan	Housing justice, police & prison abolition, queer SAA spaces	CAAAV, Queer South Asian Network, National Queer API Alliance
Sharmin	US	Queer, Muslim, Bangladeshi	Anti-caste, anti-Hindutva, South Asian, gender justice, queer & trans, BLM solidarity	Equality Labs, Black Brunch, Bangladeshi Feminist Collective, Audre Lorde Project NYC
Haleema	US	Muslim	Gender justice, anti-Islamophobia, BLM solidarity, political ed, South Asian	Gender justice, anti-Islamophobia, BLM solidarity, political ed, South Asian
Priyanka	US	Queer	Housing justice, political education, South Asian	Right to the City, Bay Area Solidarity Summer, Alliance of South Asians Taking Action (Bay Area)

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